

## The Pony Club Hunting Exchange 2013

### Report: Peter Richards

**Between 31<sup>st</sup> January and 10<sup>th</sup> February 2013 myself and 11 other Pony Club Members from all over the UK, Ireland and the USA enjoyed a week and a half of hunting and horse-related visits; with the first week was spent around Buckinghamshire while the last few days were in Herefordshire.**

Over the period, the four Members from each country had around five days' excellent foxhunting with a variety of hunts including, a day beagling and two days visiting the Kimblewick Hunt kennels, Cheltenham racecourse, Tweenhills Stud and Woodway Farm racing yard, as well as a variety of evening entertainment including the Kimblewick Hunt pantomime and several supper parties.

Despite the best laid plans for arrival, the exchange started in chaos with Americans missing flights due to connection and weather problems, and flying in to alternative airports or flying via Frankfurt! Eventually, Helen (the organiser for the Buckinghamshire week) managed to get everyone to her farm. After the commotion and with everything back in order, the Members staying in Kimblewick country were keen to start as we meant to go on: on horseback! Everyone was glad to loosen up exercising Helen's horses and for the Americans it was the first opportunity to see the English countryside from horseback. Tired, the group headed off to their respective host families for supper and sleep.

With 11 Members having arrived, Friday morning was spent admiring the point-to-pointers and racers at Woodway Farm and getting to know everyone. In the afternoon we visited the Kimblewick Hunt kennels and the Huntsman and Joint Master, Gerald Sumner (also to be seen in the panto later!) We were told all about the pack and the way the kennels work, the highlight for many being the two ten day old puppies that were quite oblivious to being passed around the group! In the evening we were treated to the Kimblewick Hunt pantomime, a concept entirely new to the American contingent, which everyone enjoyed immensely. The show was Aladdin and set in a Chinese launderette with notable appearance by hunt staff and masters!

Saturday was the first hunting day, with the group split between the Kimblewick and the Bicester with Whaddon Chase. My day was with the Kimblewick, and following what seemed to me to be an unusually calm morning plaiting and grooming a small herd of horses, the group of around 12 riders left the farm on a mixture of Helen's horses and hirelings, hacking to the meet a few miles away. After a pleasant meet, hounds found first thing with a nice run around the farm and an introduction to jumping when hunting for some members, most of us learning where to find the controls for our mounts! We then moved on to draw a large area of woodland with several runs, before ending the day in the fading light. Everyone was pleased with their horses and tired after seven hours of riding, and satisfied with a good day's hunting.

On Sunday everyone was due to go point-to-pointing en masse, but the general mood was one of tiredness, and since the fixture was a long drive away it was agreed that it should be a day of rest instead. Horses were exercised while some members visited Windsor for shopping and tourism, cumulating in an expensive but quintessentially English tea in the castle tearoom.

Monday's hunting was to be found some distance from home: five members hunted with the Duke of Beaufort's while six including myself hunted with the Vale of White Horse, both meeting near Cirencester. My day was highly exciting: scent was very good and there were

many runs with plenty of walls to jump. Hounds were very active all day and country varied from open fields to fairly dense woodland. Helen delegated the organisation of this part of the trip to Mrs Liza Dibble, DC and Hunt Secretary who supplied horses from herself and several hunt supporters and masters, and most performed admirably throughout the day. I volunteered for a "skitty" mare that had my arms aching before we arrived at the meet but thereafter behaved beautifully, looking after me wonderfully. A small meal of stew and cake in one of the horseboxes was extremely well received before our return to Buckinghamshire for a very friendly supper party for all of the Members, chaperones, hosts and other friends. Supper was followed by a very interesting, informative and witty talk by Patrick Martin, huntsman of the Bicester with Whaddon Chase. It was a privilege to listen, and the talk included a horn-blowing contest, the source of much laughter.

Again, Tuesday's hunting was split between the Kimblewick and the Bicester, with the same members going with each hunt. The Kimblewick's meet was hosted by one of the host families, the Quesnels, some distance from Saturday's, and the country was vastly different. Almost all of the day was spent in large open fields with small coverts dotted around. Hounds took to this country quite differently and again the field were kept entertained with a variety of hunt jumps. Scent didn't seem so good today, but a few good runs were had. Again, hunting continued until dark and everyone was pleased to have a drink and a bite to eat with the hosts of the meet, who were also looking after two members. Like Saturday, some horses came from Helen while some were hired. My horse was a little less experienced than the others I'd had, but nevertheless behaved superbly, as did all of our horses. A quick clean-up was in order before a delicious supper for the Members, hosts and more friends, hosted by Rosemary and Mark Barlow, owners of Burghley's 2012 winner Avebury. After supper, everyone was split into teams for a fiercely contended and very well written quiz, thanks to a local farmer, Roger Goodchild.

Just this half of the trip alone took 40 horses and 34 beds to be found!

Bags were packed, presents given and goodbyes said as we left Buckinghamshire on Wednesday morning. Although the final few days were to be spent in Herefordshire, we stopped en route for an afternoon of beagling with the Royal Agricultural College pack. After a meet on the college lawn we drove to the first draw, a few miles away. Hounds found almost immediately and despite the well-known fact that beagles hunt in circles, the quarry ran for several miles in a straight line, leaving the followers far behind and only the hunt staff close to keeping up! We later watched a superb circular run before returning to the cars and moving on to the arranged meeting point with Audrey, one of the DCs of the Herefordshire Branches, and Jo from The Pony Club office. Arriving at Audrey's house having lost only one car while travelling (it arrived eventually!), we had a delicious tea before moving on to a pub for supper, where everyone met their new hosts and recounted various tales of hilarity from the first part of the trip. I was staying with Jane, another local DC, along with four others.

On Thursday, after mucking out and breakfast, we piled into the cars and Jo's hired people carrier/minibus (christened the party bus) and moved off to Cheltenham Racecourse where we had a fascinating behind the scenes tour including a look around the changing rooms, weighing room and royal box. Before lunch we also had time for a tour of Tweenhills Stud, which has two racing stallions and a seemingly endless number of mares at various stages in the breeding programme. Everyone learnt a lot about bloodstock and large-scale commercial breeding. After lunch we enjoyed an afternoon shopping in Ledbury before spending several hours removing a lot of Oxfordshire mud from coats, hats and boots in preparation for the following day's hunting with the Ledbury.

Friday dawned in a state of high anticipation: most were looking forward to a chance to jump Ledbury's famous hedges. For the first time, all 12 Members were hunting together: an opportunity for a large number of photographs at the meet! Most members were on

hirelings, all of which seemed to be experienced hunters, and well-behaved, although some horses were lent by supporters. The day was fast with plenty of jumping, although mainly rails with the occasional metal gate, a scary prospect for us on strange horses! In order to satisfy the group, the field were eventually led over a large hedge, although I had left by that point due to a lost shoe. Everything was cleaned again when we arrived back home with most of the members coming round to Jane's for the evening.

Saturday was the final hunting day and we were split between the North Ledbury and South Herefordshire Hunts, while some Members chose to visit a veterinary clinic before following the Leadon Vale Basset Hounds. I chose to hunt with the North Ledbury along with two others. Following a large and tasty hunt breakfast we mounted and had barely left the meet before hounds started running, the excitement lasting for the first hour. Unfortunately there was little scent for a while after that, with just one or two short runs after drawing several coverts. However, hounds picked up a good line of scent just after two o'clock, following it for a good distance with the field in pursuit. After losing the line around a herd of sheep and the ever-present mist thickening, it was decided to end it on a high and call it a day. Our horses had been keen all day and well-behaved, coming from Jane and the master, who was also hosting two Members. We were treated to hot dogs and biscuits in the master's lorry before heading home to clean-up ready for dinner in the Green Dragon with all of the Members, hosts and supporters from the second part of the trip. Everyone was in high spirits and eager to enjoy the last evening together with a general feeling of satisfaction at the end of a long but exciting week.

Bags were packed, goodbyes were said and promises to keep in touch were made. Horses and accommodation were offered in Ireland, the USA and various parts of the UK for a day's hunting. People began drifting off to ferries and airports on Sunday morning, while I and the Americans who were due to leave on Monday morning agreed to help with a local mounted games introductory day at Hartpury College. Eventually, my lift home arrived and the next morning, life as a student began again, but not before hearing that the Irish had missed their ferry and consequently had a three hour tour of Holyhead - the week ended as it began in travel chaos!

The other Members and I would like to thank everyone who made the week a success: all of the hunts: their masters, staff, supporters and other field members who looked after us; all of the people who lent or loaned us horses, almost all of which were incredibly well-behaved and fun; all of the hosts who from the goodness of their hearts took in, fed and looked after a group of tired, hungry and above all grateful members for up to a week, especially Jane Vowles MFH and Polly Portwin MFH who also spent a lot of the week driving us around the country; all of the organisers of the trip: Jo Hayward from the The Pony Club office (who says she did nothing at all – but we don't believe her!), Jane Sale who housed five people, gave two supper parties and provided horses for two consecutive days' hunting, and especially Helen Jackson who single-handedly co-ordinated the first week without once losing control, her temper or her sanity; and anyone else who helped in any way whatsoever! Everyone had a thoroughly good time and it was due to all of the people who worked tirelessly to ensure that our exchange was absolutely fantastic.