



(l-r) Rob Williams, Ed Swales, Claire Bellamy, Frank Houghton-Brown, Jim Barrington, Lord Mancroft, Leslie Christian (Hungarian liaison).

ONE WITH NATURE... World of Hunting and Nature Exhibition

I'VE just returned home from an amazing week in Budapest, Hungary, as part of a delegation from the Robert Smith Surtees Society, representing British foxhunting at the 'One with Nature' exhibition (September 25-October 14).

What the Hungarians did in naming it was smart, completely genuine, and quite unusual for a bunch of visiting Brits to experience. As country folk in Britain know full well, it is those of us who take part in fieldsports as part of a balanced, sustainable and effective wildlife management strategy who are at one with nature and best understand its sometimes complex issues.

A happy band of the rural brotherhood from across the world, united by hunting and its passion and respect for the natural world, numbering in the tens of thousands, many of them schoolchildren, celebrated hunting in all its forms in the most spectacular fashion in Budapest.

We were a mix of speakers, on all matters related to foxhunting in the UK. Among us were four current or former Masters of Foxhounds, one former director of the League Against Cruel Sports, and me, who is nobody other than someone for which foxhunting with hounds has been my life and that of my family for four generations who cannot bear to think that it might end by some twist of a dull man's pen supported by a fairly small but vocal, prejudiced and ignorant group of people.



I was joined by Rob Williams, Frank Houghton-Brown, Claire Bellamy, Lord Mancroft and Jim Barrington.

Amazing displays covered Hungary's stunning national parks, their wildlife, biodiversity and ecology, as well as modern-day stalking, game shooting, fishing, hunting with hounds, falconry, in fact anything rural that you could imagine.

The aisles sizzled with the smells of game of all types cooking; traditional music played on a type of bagpipe by men dressed in traditional garb; and school kids spontaneously linked hands and danced their old dances to the tunes. Cleverly linked as a central theme was the heritage of the Hungarian people and their culture relating to their equestrian and nomadic past, surviving and hunting over the central Eurasian steppes.

Just like at home, the skill, knowledge and understanding of man's place in the natural world,



selecting and breeding exactly the right horse and hound for the job of hunting was clear to see.

These things come down to us through generations of knowledge, passed down with adaptations along the millennia, since man and dog first teamed up for survival. It is still unbelievable to think that in our country, our cultural heritage and our way of life is so under threat from those who understand so little of our world.

We were welcomed by Dr Zoltan Kovacs, Government Commissioner for the exhibition. He'd spent five years planning and developing this event, running to the cost of several million pounds. With COVID dominating the last two years, it was touch and go, but he held his nerve, a bold countryman and keen Shot, and saw it through to the spectacle that it was. It was an inspiration.

We also met the representatives of the CIC, the Budapest based

International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation, who strive on a global scale with a network of 30 million people to secure protections for hunting and rural life and whose work is impressive. It struck me that there might well be some room for collaboration.

Out of a population of nearly 10 million, Dr Kovacs can rely on 2.4 million rural and hunting votes. You can do the math, but that is clearly a Government-changing figure and of course, politicians are keen to accommodate that and genuinely listen to the rural vote. Wouldn't that be nice?

So why did we go? Well, apart from the fact that we are all keen country folk with hunting in our DNA who wouldn't have missed it for the world, we are sufficiently concerned that no one else from UK would see fit to be there and represent British foxhunting and our cherished rural way of life on such an important international stage.

We are feeling ever more strongly that our hunting way of life is not being properly represented and that without standing up and doing something about it, the chances of our sport being sold down the river in some quiet corridor of Westminster are too high for us to continue to sit at home, bemoaning the situation.

If the Hungarians can put 25 per cent of the population on a rural ticket, I wonder what we might do? The quiet folk of Britain might need to be encouraged to realise that, with the click of a button on a petition, with your plus one (or 10) doing the same, we might put several million on our ticket and secure our minority values, our cultural heritage, our way of life and importantly, the red fox population in the UK.

Since the farce that is the *Hunting Act 2004* came into play, it is estimated that our fox population has reduced to between 40 and 60 per cent of what it was in 2004. Animal welfare indeed? The antis have blood on their hands.

We were hugely encouraged by the Hungarian's efforts in pulling this off and will take inspiration from their stance. The 'Rural Brit' needs to stand up and be counted and preserve our legacy for future generations.

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