

The spirit of 2006 needs to return

IN 2006, the Today programme on BBC Radio 4 carried an item called *The Christmas Repeal* in which listeners could suggest laws that should be 'tossed into the dustbin of British history'.

The 'Today Christmas Repeal Vote' invited listeners to choose a law from a list which included the *Dangerous Dogs Act*, the *Serious Organised Crime and Police Act*, the *Human Rights Act*, the *European Communities Act* and the *Act of Settlement*. There was another piece of legislation included in the list: the *Hunting Act*.



Ann Widdecombe.

Each law had an advocate who was given the opportunity to broadcast a short monologue as to why listeners should vote to repeal their particular choice of legislation and I was asked to speak regarding the *Hunting Act*.

When the result of the vote was announced just before Christmas 2006, it came as a reassuring surprise to learn that the *Hunting Act* had been picked, but more than that, it was the size of the vote that was astounding. Over half the participants had voted to repeal this law – 52.8 per cent to be precise – more than all the votes for the various other issues put together.

That was then, but what about now? Could that strength of feeling be repeated today? Some would say not and perhaps that is to be expected given the constant war of attrition waged against Hunts over the years.

Added to this pressure is a mainly hostile media and just as the means of communication have changed dramatically for individuals as well as organisations, so has journalism. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that some sections of the media have become lazy, feeding off each other's stories. In some cases, press releases from campaigners are simply reproduced, amplifying what is essentially nothing more

than a one-sided opinion of a particular group.

A few years ago, an animal rights group held a press conference at Westminster. The theme was the manner in which anti-hunt 'monitors' were badly treated by supporters of hunting. One of the few Conservative MPs at the time who favoured a hunting ban was Ann Widdecombe – a speaker at the event. She sympathised with these 'monitors', stating she knew how it must feel given that when she was a Minister an intimidating crowd had once surrounded and blocked her car.

It was made perfectly clear at this meeting that this was a totally separate issue and had nothing to do with hunting. A journalist from the *Daily Mirror*, however, saw an opportunity to use this incident for his own story, which then appeared the following day claiming Ms Widdecombe had been harassed by hunt supporters. Despite numerous complaints from the Countryside Alliance, the story was not retracted or corrected.

Clearly, animal stories like this are newsworthy especially if they can whip up emotion, while explaining the complex, sometimes uncomfortable process of wildlife management is less so. All this matters, because politicians are extremely sensitive when it comes to media stories and the phrase 'perception is reality in politics' has never been truer than in cases of accusations of animal cruelty.

Note the controversy surrounding trophy hunting and the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill currently in Parliament. Like most people, I find the idea of killing a magnificent lion or elephant abhorrent and can't imagine what is in the head of this type of hunter, but I also know that a simple ban on such hunting is likely to make matters far worse for the animals concerned.

There's a parallel here with the *Hunting Act* – a law that makes some people feel good, yet one that instead of improving animal welfare does the exact opposite; the fact that the public will probably never witness the alternatives that fill the vacuum is no consolation.

The strong arguments in favour of hunting with hounds are there to be used, but more importantly that spirit of 2006 needs to return.

6 Lurchers by Ed Swales

Lurchers and Longdogs –

Natural Hunting

THIS week it's about hunting with lurchers and longdogs and we're delighted to introduce two stalwarts of the lurcher world, Johnny and Mitch.

Hunting Kind (www.huntingkind.com) seeks to represent the case for natural hunting. Hounds, lurchers, terriers, falcons, ferrets, rural politics, culture, ritual, tradition, minority rights, anthropology, science, wildlife management, all feature as elements of our entire way of life at its unashamedly raw core.

probably as many lurchers of one sort or another in the country as there were terriers. And not just here – worldwide; anywhere where devotees of natural hunting with dogs needed an animal with the speed of a Greyhound and the intelligence of a pastoral cross. After I left school and was jackerooing in Australia, the station owner kept a leash of kangaroo dogs – big Deerhound cross lurchers for coursing kangeroos.

"In the mid-nineties, when the threat of a vengeful socialist government was creeping

"Lurchers were as much a part of my childhood as the terriers and hound pups we walked for the local Hunt"

First up is Sir Johnny Scott Bt. MFH. He's been right all along. Superb prop of *Clarissa & the Countryman* (YouTube, watch now) and that's just it...Countryman. An oft forgotten font of knowledge on all matters natural and rural. An icon, if I might say, although he would cringe at any further accolade. Johnny Scott, rural champion...

"Lurchers were as much a part of my childhood as the terriers and hound pups we walked for the local Hunt. These were mid-sized lurchers; Greyhound, Whippet, collie crosses with probably a dash of Bedlington, strong enough to run down a hare and 'needle sharp' on rats and rabbits, bolted from ferrets. Before the 2004 *Hunting Act*, that monument to ignorance and prejudice, there were

inexorably closer, Alan Tyer formed the Association of Lurcher Clubs (ALC), the governing body for lurcher/longdog work, bringing together all lurcher and longdog owners, both to form clubs, work together under a code of good practice and unite together to fight the increasing attacks by the uninformed. Alan worked tirelessly for the working lurcher and lurchermen, particularly during the run up to the ban and the ALC were always prominent at all the marches.

"In 2001, the Council of Hunting Associations (CHA) was founded to 'promote and protect the interests of those who hunt with dogs'. Members of the CHA were the Masters of Foxhound, Minkhound, Deerhound, Harriers, Beagles

and Basset Hound Associations. The Central Committee of Fell Packs, National Federation of Working Terriers, Association of Welsh Hill Packs, National Coursing Club, Whippet, Saluki and Deerhound Coursing Association with affiliated members, Masters of Drag and Blood Hounds Associations, Union of Country Sports Workers and the Hawk Board.

"In 2014, it was recognised that lurchermen were an alliance of people who work many types of different sighthounds, both pure and crossbred and all needed the support and representation of the governing body. To that end, the ALC became the Association of Working Longdog/Lurchers, with me as president, to include working Whippets, Saluki crosses, Bull crosses and every other permutation of sighthound cross.

"Regrettably, since 2015 the inertia which has strangled the defence of venary and natural hunting with dogs, gradually led to the Council of Hunting Associations becoming moribund and with it, the Association of Working Longdogs/Lurchers. But the passion to perpetuate our historic culture and heritage is still there. Let us now do something about it."

By chance, Johnny met Mitch when discussing some roadworks near Johnny's house a few years back. Their mutual passion for all

to catch mainly rabbits, and out of say 100 houses in the village where I grew up, 25 per cent of them would have kept lurchers. My great-grandfather was an Irish traveller, of the sort who kept pigs, if you know what I mean. Once I'd proved I could look after and keep ferrets from the age of eight, I was given my first lurcher bitch when I was 12-years-old. So hunting is part of my DNA, as it has been for man since the Stone Age.

"Everybody knew how to set a snare by the age of 10, everybody knew how to go ferreting, catch finches, set a net, how to look after a dog. There wasn't any lamping in those days, it was all daytime hunting, lamping didn't really start until the early 80s.

"There were very few deer around as they'd all been taken for the pot. Times were hard, you've only got to go back to 1984, the miners' strike, my father was on strike the full year. I was 16-years-old and just starting

Mitch, close to retirement, simply cannot afford to take the risk anymore

work. There was no money coming in. I was never fetched up with a computer, or these fancy things that these young 'uns have got now; I had a lurcher, a catapult, a sheath knife and a fishing rod and we went out in the morning and came back at night.

"I was a member of the Northumberland and Durham Working Lurcher Club, you had to have permission to hunt on land. I got my licence to control moles, so I'd go to the farmers and say, 'I'll do your moles for you' and they'd say 'you can hunt', so we had something to barter."

With the changes in legislation now being up to six months in prison and an unlimited fine, as well as any associated vehicles impounded, Mitch, close to retirement, simply cannot afford to take the risk anymore.

He feels that the split in the lurcher community by a minority, away from proper hunting and towards unofficial coursing, with money bets, associated rural crime and damage to farmers' livelihoods, has destroyed his entire way of life.

He's personally never stolen any red diesel or farm equipment, driven a vehicle over crops or smashed gates, but feels the majority of responsible lurcher hunting folk are all tarred with the same brush, in a misunderstood and prejudiced manner, from all sides.

"You can't shoot around here because it's too flat, dangerous, with bus routes, schools, the A1068 and the roadsides are littered with dead deer and bits of smashed

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Who needed an iPhone, when you had a catapult!

up cars. Man and dog formed an alliance thousands of years ago and that still happens today, or it still should be allowed to happen today. Once you're born, whether you're a man or a horse or a dog, you have the God-given right to work and I've got the God-given right to go out and hunt with a dog that has the right to work for me and have a partnership with me."

Mitch's last dog was put down a year ago and for the first time in decades he's without one. Going for a walk without one at heel just seems wrong. He's not yet decided if he'll take another on. His three kennels in the yard are still there but he's thinking of taking them down. It is almost unimaginable the effect this appallingly bad law has had on his way of life and that of his hunting community. It is all just so wrong.

It is high time to consider a renewed approach to the representation at national level of hunting with lurchers and longdogs and to state its case in the context of natural hunting, wildlife management, cultural heritage and our rights as individuals and communities. We all need to support each other and to go forward with other national hunting organisations to seek review and replacement of these ineffective

and prejudiced laws. No-one should be thrown under the bus, there's space on it for all and we'll go forward at the pace of the slowest man, unified in our common cause.

The last shift of miners walked home from the pit in 1988. The old wheelhouse still stands tall as the symbol of what was the beating heart of Ashington, now part of a museum display of its community mining heritage.

Across town from there stands Mitch with his empty kennels, arguably, the living symbol of the unique cultural and hunting heritage of that same community. I wonder which symbol will best stand the test of time. One without the other is only half of the story.

And if you ever want a proper running dog, you know where to go!



The author grew up with generations of lurcher men.

things hunting was just one of those happy coincidences that are so typical of the threads of the tapestry of rural community life here in Northumberland.

Mitch is one of a long line of Ashington lurchermen, whose knowledge and skill, along with their great running dogs, is prized throughout the north of England at least. His lifetime of hunting with lurchers, as opposed to the oft misunderstood term 'coursing', is a treasured gem of our hunting cultural heritage.

"I was born in 1967 in a mining community pit village. My grandfather and father both kept lurchers, mainly collie x Greyhounds, with Whippet and Bedlington (five miles away) crosses. They were used



Sir Johnny Scott.

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