

"HUNTING has got nothing to do with farming." This is one of two statements about our sport which have stuck in my mind over recent months. It came from the mouth of the CEO of the Lake District National Park (LDNP) at a meeting last summer with local hunting representatives. Whether it was said out of pure ignorance or simple prejudice, I haven't been able to decide, probably a fair slice of both, but it does highlight issues that both hunting and farming are facing up here in fell land.

Despite the ignorance shown in this statement, the fact is that hunting and farming have been interlinked since the dawn of time, they have shared highs and lows throughout history, and the unique relationship continues to the present day as both activities are under threat like never before.

The Lake District has become a playground for millions of visitors each year. The culture and traditions of this once proud country are quickly becoming tourist attractions themselves. Where once our country shows, traditional sports and events were the meeting places for locals

and, very much like hunt meets, were the social lifeblood of the hardy local inhabitants, Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling, guide races, sheepdog trials, hound trailing are all are becoming quaint attractions for the tourists in the living museum which is the Lake District.

An announcement was made in the summer of 2022 that all legal forms of hound activity would be banned from LDNP land due to the large number of complaints, mostly spurious, that are received each year. This decision was made by the aforementioned CEO without any

consultation with either the hunting bodies or even his own board of trustees. How ironic then that at the same time, the LDNP should name the restaurant at its visitor centre at Brockhole, on Windermere, after the family who built the house and who built the house and happened to be one of the foremost hunting families in the Lake District.

The Gaddum family supported all local packs and one of their number owned the Windermere Harriers for many years between the World Wars and was Master and Huntsman. I bet there are not too many pictures of Jim Gaddum's hounds on display, there's certainly no mention of his

"Hunting predates any religion in the world"

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Irony and hypocrisy are alive and well in the Lake District

beloved passion in the family history on the restaurant website!

The National Trust, the main land-owning organisation in the national park is not immune to such hypocrisy either. Several years ago, they renovated, at considerable expense, the old purpose-built Hunt Kennels of the Coniston Foxhounds and are happy to inform visitors to the structure of its history, though not describing it in too much detail.

Little is made by the trust of the fact that one of their great influential founders, Beatrix Potter, was an avid supporter of foxhunting, as both a hound walker and subscriber to the Coniston Foxhounds. Indeed, lovers of children's literature from across the world have a reason to be thankful for foxhunting, as it was only the quick actions of the heroic hounds of the Coniston pack that prevented poor Jemima Puddleduck from ending her story as a pile of feathers and bones in the corner of the farmyard in Sawrey.

While on the subject of Miss Potter, more irony can also be seen with the trust's current attitude to farming. While Beatrix was instrumental in saving the Herdwick sheep breed from oblivion, the present day organisation seem perfectly happy to send it back to its former state.



The fells are being de-stocked with huge numbers of sheep being taken off the hillsides, and generational families of tenant farmers are being forced out of their traditional homes by policies inflicted on them by faceless bureaucrats seemingly hell-bent on returning the area to its natural state, little acknowledging the Lake District is what it is as a result of human activities such as farming, mining etc.

The area was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) in 2017 for its 'cultural landscape', based entirely on its unique agricultural land use, solely down to sheep farming which has shaped the land. The WHS status also granted protection for the social and cultural traditions linked to farming of which hunting is a major part. How ironic that the organisations charged with protecting WHS status are actually the ones who are driving a coach and horses through it with their current policies.

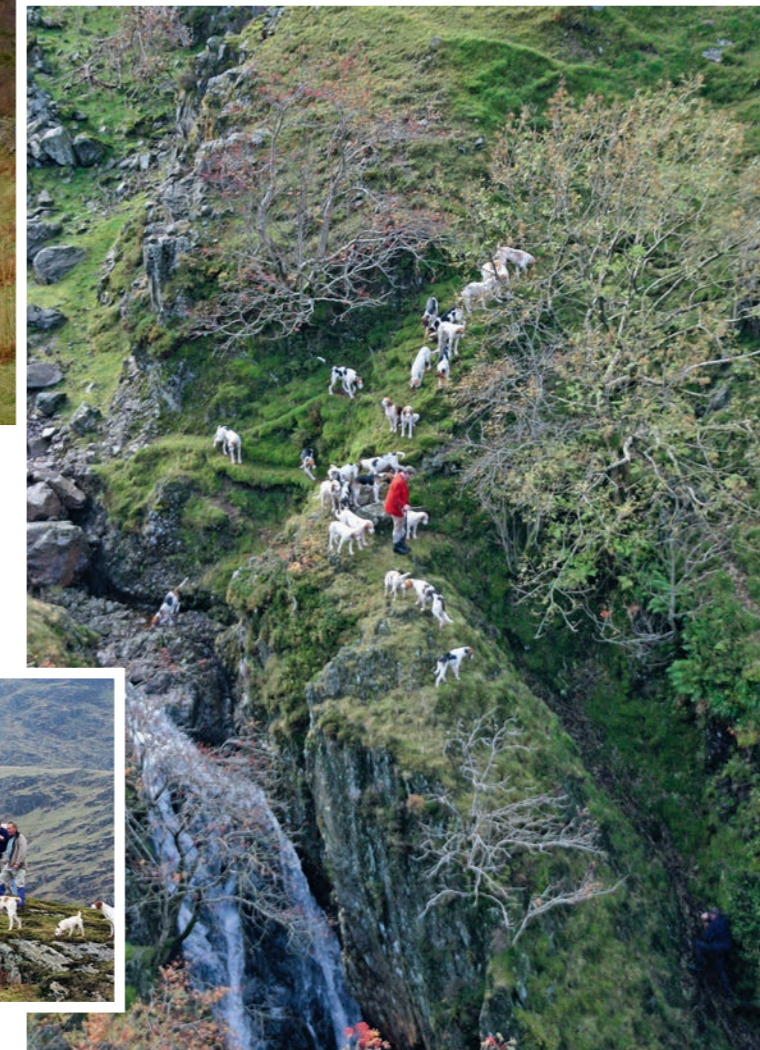


The aforementioned LDNP are currently the guardians of a scheme called Farming in Protected Landscapes, designed to give grants to help local farmers sustain their businesses. The scheme is overseen by a committee of 12 who decide who is worthy to receive such funds. Apparently, only one member of the committee has any real farming experience, which possibly explains the fact that the majority of grants go, not to traditional farmers, but to smallholders or hobby farmers, often people who have moved into the area to enjoy the 'good life'.

"Sport in the Lake District remained very much the sport of the common man"

The second statement came at a recent meeting organised by Hunting Kind (www.huntingkind.com), when wildlife conservationist, falconer and hunter, Dr Nick Fox, stated in a presentation that: "Hunting predates any religion in the world."

To me, as a hunting historian actively involved in charting the important role of our sport in the history of the Lake District, that statement perfectly illustrates the need to establish hunting's place in society, with our traditions and unique culture being recognised and



protected. Such status would then be well and truly planted into the mindset of not only our opponents, politicians and general public, who may or may not have preconceived views, but also into the minds of many of our own supporters who, I feel, constantly need to be reminded of where we come from.

Records show that hunting has been an important part of the development of the Lake District for millennia, from the hunter/gatherers of the prehistoric age to parish records through the centuries showing bounties paid to local hunters as rewards for the destruction of vermin. Fox heads were nailed to the gates of most of the parish churches as proof that officials were taking their roles as protectors of these communities seriously.

The monks of Furness Abbey kept huntsmen on the fells to protect their vast flocks. Over a 250-year period between the mid-1700s to the early 1900s, over 110 packs of hounds existed in the Lake counties, hunting was vital to the social and economic make-up of the area.

While hunting in the rest of the country became pretty much the preserve of the land-owning

On the outer fringes of the Lake District, mounted hunts followed the more traditional approach, but even these attracted great support from the populations of the developing urban industrial centres such as Workington, Whitehaven and Carlisle. Perhaps these urbanites were not so far removed from their agrarian roots in those days, and a day following the hounds was a welcome release from the daily grind. The Carlisle Otter Hounds, for example, were formed by a group of local butchers and were followed by the weavers and other workers of the city.

In the present day, millions flock to the playground that the modern Lake District has become, most totally unaware of its history. They are unable to see that the whitewashed picture-perfect postcard holiday homes in the beautiful valleys were once farms so remote that inhabitants would spend their lives scraping a living, probably never travelling more than a few miles in their lifetimes.

Hunting was one of their main escapes and also vital for their existence in ensuring that their livestock survived long enough to be able to feed their families. Marauding vermin could destroy entire poultry stocks and the famers most important weapon in this bid for survival were the local hunters and their hounds.

For our unique culture to survive it is vital that we are recognised for our place in the social and cultural heritage of Cumbria and that our traditions, our language, our music live on. Religions are 'protected beliefs', why not hunting?

• Neil Salisbury is a lifelong supporter of the Coniston Foxhounds, Secretary of the Central Committee of Fell Packs, hunting photographer and writer. His latest book, *The Merriest Little Pack – The Sawrey Hounds of Braithwaite Hodgson Esq., of Colthouse*, is available to order on his website www.bettyfold.co.uk

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