

What Hunting Means To Us



Now that the season for most natural hunting has closed and we are into the so-called quiet time of year, which those of you involved in breeding, whelping, Hound shows, puppy judging, fund raising and parties might dispute, a pause for reflection on what really matters and what hunting means to us. Why we feel it is such a strongly held constituent of our core beliefs. Against a backdrop of political shenanigans leading up to the next General Election, with various plans, strategies and concepts being endlessly thrashed around to counter the threat of Labour eradicating any vestige of natural hunting, time for our way of life might fast be running out.

The underpinning belief that what we choose to do by hunting is so strongly felt among us, might require some examination to explain why. Whether one terms it a way of life, pastime, ritual, custom, tradition or dare I say sport, it is certainly not the pleasure in the suffering or death of an animal that draws us repeatedly, season by season, year on year when the weather changes and tells us 'it's time' to re-enact a primeval stirring within some of us. It is something buried deep down in our soul and an echo of man's first try at survival all those years ago... hunting.

In 2022 I was asked to submit a mini thesis, peer reviewed by a Professor of Social Anthropology as well as a scientist specialising in wildlife management on what hunting means to us, how much we value it, how much of our lives it constituted and why we hunt. Naturally I chose my local hunt country as the basis for the fieldwork and interviews and included the wider sphere of natural hunting beyond just foxhound packs. The submission was assessed from a legal perspective with the view that our core beliefs and characteristics could be identified as worthy of minority protections under the Equality Act 2010 with a view to being established as a distinct ethnic subgroup of society. I have not managed, despite all that, to produce a snappy term that encapsulates that. Rural Brit? Rustic Paysan? Hunter? Maybe you might suggest some appropriate title?

The end being, much like when a Roma or travelling community family is denied a booking at a hotel for some wedding because of their intrinsic beliefs and characteristics as a protectable group. The hotel or body responsible for that denial, is sued for discrimination

against an ethnic group and the Roma have their rights respected, upheld and protected. Not an exact analogy but you get the drift.

Along my trail of trying to absorb as much research as there is available on this human condition, I recently stumbled across the term 'Collective Effervescence' and it struck me that this is a very strong cornerstone of why we hunt. Research into social behaviour at Europe's biggest party, the Roskilde Festival in Denmark, studied ritual gatherings of tens of thousands of people over a five day warm-up to the event, based around their tented camp whilst copious quantities of booze were consumed. Like an enormous laboratory to study human interaction, sounds quite fun! Almost as much fun as

Below: William and Ellenor below the carving of Cocidius, god of hunting





Above: **Cocidius**

a pub gathering in North Yorkshire recently, where the wider world of minkhounds, terrier men and foxhound packs sang north country hunting songs and recited ballads until the early hours. If that is not cultural heritage, I wonder what is?

Results suggested that 'collective effervescence' is a highly spatially clustered phenomenon, associated with the social-morphological feature of being in a crowd of people. That social emotions are the 'glue' of solidarity and the energy mobilizing change and conflict. People being gathered into a physically demarcated place, sharing a common mood and focus of attention leads to an intensification of shared experience, where the interacting participants influence and intensify each other's emotional state. Right up to the point where the field-master yells across the field at you for not concentrating!

Anyway, I am losing myself, but you will know how collectively effervescent things become when you are gathered together, with some winter cheer working its way through the bloodstream and then hounds start to speak? It has been like that for millennia and it is hard to shake.

Carved into a rock on a craggy hillside in Northumberland is a small image of an old god, adopted from the Brythonic people of Northern Britain by the Romans. He appears in Cumbria also. He was known as Cocidius and morphed in northern Britain to equate with Mars, the god of war and, you guessed it, hunting. He was also

Below: **Enjoying a "breather"**



Above: **Colonel William Anderson Swales OBE, MC, TD at Otterburn**

equated with Silvanus, god of forests, groves and wild fields. That really resonates with me. Knowing that our ancestors revered and worshipped this god in this wild and beautiful place where I hunt today, accompanied by my children, over land where my grandfather also rode to hounds in Redesdale, gets the old collective effervescence a bubbling. Whether it is with foxhounds in Cheviot hill country, on horseback with falcons hunting crows on the rough expanses around Hadrian's Wall with our great friends from Wales or out with the lurchers wherever we may roam, that is Cocidius country.

There are few mentions of Cocidius in literature, but it is believed that he is represented by 'the Brown Man of the Moor', a fairy dwarf-like creature, in 'The Cout (Colt) o' Keeldar' written in 1802, a few lines of which below. It opens as follows:

*"The eiry blood-hound howl'd by night, the streamers flaunted red,
Till broken streaks of flaky light, O'er Keeldar's mountains spread
The lady sigh'd as Keeldar rose: "Come tell me, dear love mine,
Go you to hunt where Keeldar flows, Or on the banks of Tyne?"*

And ends:

*And the hunters bold, of Keeldar's train, within your castle's wall,
In a deadly sleep must aye remain, till the ruin'd towers down fall.
Each in his hunter's garb array'd, each holds his bugle horn;
Their keen hounds at their feet are laid, that ne'er shall wake the morn.*

Here is to a great summer, much collective effervescence and Cocidius.

Happy Hunting
ED SWALES

Below: **With falcons on the moor**

