

➤➤➤ “If you break your neck, this will hold it together,” Robin Muir says as he ties a hunting stock around my neck.

They are hardly words to calm the nerves as, self-consciously kitted out in breeches, boots, jacket and that stock (merely a strip of cotton), I swing my leg over a big chestnut horse and prepare for my first hunt. Muir, joint master of the Chiddingfold, Leconfield and Cowdray Hunt in West Sussex, has lent me his reliable hunter, Chester, with the briefest of instructions: “Just kick him on and you’ll be fine”.

I’m more used to riding polo-style in jeans, and I haven’t taken a horse over a jump for years. But more worrying than the solid fences is the prospect of negotiating fox hunting etiquette and attire. “Don’t worry, we’re not a posh hunt,” says Muir, which I take as encouragement rather than insult.

Not that we will be hunting foxes, of course. Since the Hunting Act of 2004, hunts have been forced to lay scent trails for the hounds to follow. The route is not revealed to the huntsman and followers, to replicate a wild fox-chase as closely as possible without the bloody conclusion.

We hack up the lanes from the hunt yard to the meet in the car park of the Welldigger’s Arms pub, near Petworth. Pork pies, sausages, sandwiches and glasses of mulled wine are pressed on us. Already the social difficulties are clear as I try to juggle a piece of pie, stop Chester from careering into other horses, and avoid spilling wine on my clean stock, all the while chatting with welcoming riders.

About 40 of us have turned out for this midweek meet. Twice as many would be expected on a Saturday and more again on Boxing day, when hunts across the country will be out in force. (In 2004, according to the Countryside Alliance, more than 300,000 people attended Boxing day hunts.)

Given the emotions and rhetoric that riding to hounds stirs among



Joint master of the hunt
Robin Muir
(right) with
Bob Sherwood

A guide to hunting jargon

The language of the hunt can be impenetrable to outsiders. Here is a beginner’s guide to hunting terms:

- CAP** Daily fee for hunt visitors
- FIELD** The mounted followers
- FIELD MASTER** The person in charge of controlling the field
- GOOD MORNING** It is essential to greet the master at the meet
- GOOD NIGHT** The correct farewell, regardless of time of day
- HOLD HARD** Master’s call to stop and stand still
- HOUNDS** Never called dogs and always counted in “couples”
- HUNTSMAN** Person in control of the hounds; has right of way
- LINE** The scent of the quarry
- RAT CATCHER** A tweed jacket
- RED RIBBON** Worn on the tail of a horse that kicks
- SPEAKING** Hounds never bark, they speak
- WARE HOLE/WIRE ETC** The shouted warning of a hazard, often pronounced “war”
- WHIPS/WHIPPERS-IN** Hunt members who help control hounds



THE DETAILS

The Chiddingfold, Leconfield and Cowdray Hunt is very welcoming to hunting novices: www.clandhunt.co.uk For more information on hunting go to: www.countryside-alliance.org.uk

both supporters and opponents, I am curious to discover the reality of modern hunting under the ban.

Politics is never far from the surface. Paul Lyon-Maris, the day’s field master, who is in charge of marshalling the mounted hunt followers, gives a rousing speech reminding the riders of the coming general election and the need to keep hunting on the agenda. (David Cameron has criticised the ban, but campaigners want firm promises that a Tory government would repeal the Hunting Act.)

We start to hunt for the scent around a rough field and then move on through thick woodland. Huntsman Adrian Thompson, known to everyone as “Sage”, controls the hounds with the help of four “whips”, riders who stop them straying too far. It is Thompson’s job (he is a full-time employee) to do the hunting. The rest of us just try to keep up.

Suddenly the hounds are in full flight, streaming across a crop field. With the sound of the hunting horn carried on the wind, we gallop in their wake. There’s no time for

nerves now as Chester picks up the pace, the hooves of the horses in front kicking mud up into my face.

Abruptly, we come to a halt. In the windy conditions, the hounds have lost the scent. We canter around the same block of woodland three times, repeatedly stopping and waiting as the hounds work.

Hunting has changed since the ban, says Muir, who has pulled up alongside me on an almost identical chestnut. “It’s become more of an equestrian sport, now. There is less emphasis on the hunting and hound work,” he laments.

Before I can reply, the hounds pick up a scent and head off. Is the natural urge of the animals about to overcome Westminster legislation? But no: Thompson swiftly calls them back. Not a single horse has moved in pursuit.

I am a little surprised, but Muir explains: “Sage cannot afford to take any chances. It’s his livelihood. As it is, he goes to work every morning not knowing if he’s going to be arrested.”

We push on and a fallen tree gives Chester his first chance of

a jump, which he takes as if it wasn’t there. We plough on, cantering through heavy mud and then working down a steep wooded hill. With just one stumble as we navigate a ditch, I am grateful for Chester’s sure-footedness.

Every time we stop, someone presses a saddle flask of sloe gin upon me. Often the field seem more interested in chatting than in the work of the hounds. One member tells me the spotlight on hunting has proved inadvertently beneficial, forcing hunts to become more courteous about land use and more approachable to newcomers. There is certainly nothing stuffy about the Chiddingfold hunt, whose numbers have doubled in the past year.

A stray hound marches up past the riders, to screeched shouts of “ware hound on left”. The hounds clearly have right of way. “It’s the one real sin,” says Muir. “Kicking a hound is the worst you can do.”

We come to a series of wooden rail fences and some of the riders take a non-jumping detour, but Muir won’t let me duck out.

Heading downhill to the first rail, I forget the earlier instructions to kick on and Chester refuses.

With the rest of the field shouting encouragement from the far side, I have little choice but to try again and this time I land around Chester’s neck as he bounds downhill. A smiling Lyon-Maris shouts some friendly advice: “When you jump onto a downhill slope, don’t look down.” It works, and Chester, now in full flight, clears the remaining fences with ease.

Not everyone follows. One pony is refusing to jump, but Lyon-Maris is unperturbed. “Oh, she’ll be fine,” he says as he moves the field on. When the rider resurfaces later, the field master asks how she got out. “Wire cutters. But don’t worry, we re-fixed the fence.”

The adrenaline is still coursing through me as the horn sounds for home. I thank the master and the huntsman. “Did you have a good day, Sir?” asks Thompson. “I saw you take some jumps. You didn’t look too stable up there.” ■

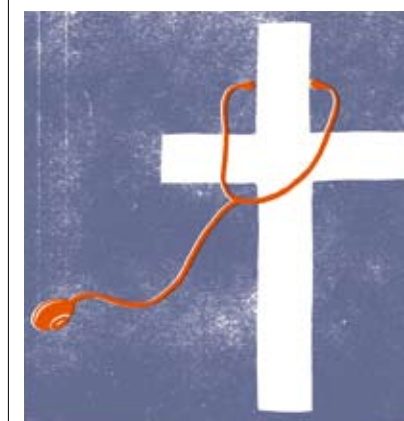
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Second opinion Magical medicine

By Margaret McCartney

“Miracles and medics are unlikely bedfellows, especially when the mattress is hard, unforgiving and demands a weight of evidence. Doctors witness unlikely things all the time in the normal swing of medical life, and it is usually difficult to seduce them into the opinion that unseen hands were at work.

The Roman Catholic Church itself imposes strict liturgical standards before it declares a miracle. Take, for example, the case of Jack Sullivan, a 71-year-old American deacon who had spinal surgery in 2001, in a bid to stop his vertebrae impinging on his spinal cord. His condition had been deteriorating towards paralysis, but at operation, his case was



discovered to be hopeless. The fault in the spine was much worse than thought. Sullivan prayed to Cardinal John Henry Newman, a 19th century convert to Roman Catholicism – and recovered. Sullivan’s surgeon told him: “Jack, there’s no medical explanation for what happened to you: if you want an answer, ask God!”

To get a “miracle” such as this officially recognised, information from primary sources is sent to the Consulta Medica at the Congregation of Saints in Rome.

Sullivan’s case was heard there in 2002. The Consulta committee of seven doctors decided his recovery was indeed miraculous. This verdict was passed to a theological committee, which in turn passed the case to the Congregation of the Causes of Saints in Rome to advise the Pope on whether it constituted a miracle. In July this year, Pope Benedict XVI decreed that Sullivan’s pain had been cured via Cardinal Newman’s intercession, which means that Newman has now been beatified. (Sainthood requires two miracles.)

In Lourdes in 1859, a special process was set up to help determine miracles. Under this protocol, a doctor suspecting saintly activity summons other doctors, before passing their discussions on to the International Medical Committee of Lourdes, which votes on whether a miracle has occurred. A two-thirds majority is required, and a bishop may override the verdict. Since 1883, more than 7,000 cases have been examined, and less than 100 declared miracles. The criteria are so strict that Bishop Jacques Perrier recently proposed categories which would allow “authentic healings” to be noted if they did not satisfy the requirements of “miracle”.

I like the idea. I’ve never forgotten the man who walked happily home after being in cardiac arrest for over an hour, or the woman who didn’t bleed to death despite having every possible complication during an emergency operation.

Randomness can work in our favour. Calling things miracles may help to bring our respectful attention to it.

“Margaret McCartney is a GP in Glasgow. margaret.mccartney@ft.com



For lively discussion of the latest medical issues go to Margaret McCartney’s blog at www.ft.com/healthblog