

“Every Body Does Not Hunt”

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The pursuit of the fox represents to many the quintessential activity of the English upper class. A pack of hounds in chase followed by riders in pink coats, all galloping across a stubble field, is a familiar image, but not one to be found in Jane Austen’s novels. Given her devotion to the gentry and the gentry’s devotion to hunting,¹ one might expect the sport to form at least a bit of the background scene. To be sure, hunting is mentioned in three of the novels and two of the minor works but in connection with such particular characters as give one pause. Only one of her superior characters hunts, the field being dominated by less reputable ones. A short examination of the history of hunting can throw some light on Jane Austen’s attitude toward the “great” English sport.

By the early 1700s, the thrill of the chase had dwindled with the population of wild deer.² Hunters reduced to the pursuit of rabbits noted that, while inedible, the swift fox provided a good run and took up the chase of reynard in a haphazard fashion. Their harriers, bred to patiently track the devious hare by its scent, could not match the fox’s speed and often lost it. Naturally, hunters turned to selecting and breeding their hounds for speed. In 1753, the wealthy young gentleman Hugo Meynell rented Quorn Hall in Leicestershire and applied himself to organized breeding and hunting. That county was mainly laid down to grass and unfenced, ideal for exciting chase. While previously hunters had to rise before dawn, the speed of Meynell’s hounds allowed a start in late morning, and fashionable young gentlemen began to take up the sport.

In foxhunting, the pack of hounds guided by the huntsman draws a covert, that is, sniffs around a likely bit of woodland, gorse, or other undergrowth until a fox is scared into running. Often, to ensure a run,

burrows in the area are blocked, so that foxes returning from the night's foraging must take cover on the surface. The riders—called the field—wait for the hounds to draw and, when the fox breaks covert, follow behind the pack. If they do not lose the scent, the hounds may overtake and kill the fox. The sport for the field consists mainly in trying to take the lead and in the skill and daring needed to ride over difficult terrain.

By 1775, when Jane Austen was born, Meynell was the famous leader of the Quorn Hunt. The sport spread, and other packs were founded in the grassy Midlands. In the 1790s, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, became the fashionable—and in season overcrowded—center of hunting in the Shires. By 1800, the Meltonians were the elite of foxhunting, written up in the new sporting press and famed for hard, often daring riding. As knowledge of Meynell's methods spread, harrier packs were converted and hunts organized in more distant counties less suited to the chase than were the open, grassy Midlands. With travel possibilities curtailed by the French wars, hunting offered amusement during the otherwise dreary winter months to gentlemen of leisure in the countryside.

In Jane Austen's youth, four packs shared the country of northeast Hampshire.³ These were privately owned, slow, mainly harrier hounds whose masters would draw foxes when they could. As the sport became more popular and organized and breeding and maintenance of hounds became more expensive, formal hunts supported by members appeared: the Hampshire Hunt (HH), so named in 1784, and the Vine Hunt, begun privately in 1790. Members were gentlemen neighbors well-known to the



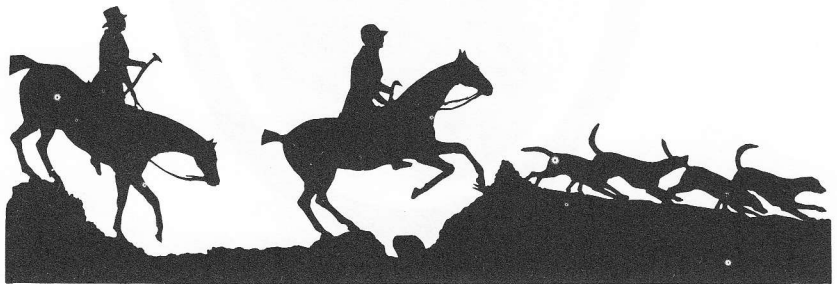
Mr. Chute of The Vine

male Austens: James Holder of Ashe Park; J. C. Middleton, the Knights' tenant at Chawton Park; J. C. Jervoise of Herriard House. Founder of the Vine was William John Chute of The Vine, near Basingstoke. Jane Austen could hardly have escaped knowledge or sight of hunting at Steventon. The HH actually met just down the road at The Wheatsheaf, Popham.

James Edward Austen-Leigh gives a charming portrait of his friend William Chute, who died in 1824. A Tory member of Parliament and inheritor of an estate, The Vine, held by the family since Cromwell's day, Chute won affection with his friendly good nature. His hunting costume was powdered hair in a pigtail, frilled shirt under a red coat flapping open, and very short knee breeches. However, he was not a particularly good rider nor a proper master of the hunt, at least by later standards. Although educated at Harrow and Cambridge, he was not a good man of business nor an accomplished public speaker and politician. Chute's great strengths were his uprightness, humor, good temper, and kindness in providing sport for his neighbors. Austen-Leigh says he cherishes the memory of Mrs. Chute, the former Elizabeth Smith,⁴ too much to more than mention her in his "light memoirs" but does call her a woman of rare excellence and countless secret good deeds.

Among these Hampshire hunters were a number of clergymen. Austen-Leigh writes that his father, Jane's brother James, hunted, and that he himself rode with the Vine from 1814 to 1834. In very nearly the same years, Edmund Yalden White, curate-son of the Austens' friend and neighbor Vicar Edmund White of Newton Valence, rode with the HH when he could.⁵ Another neighbor, the Rev. Sir Thomas Coombe Miller of Froyle, not only hunted but also, to insure his sport, had his tenant farmers preserve foxes, that is, protect their burrows and not destroy them for stealing livestock.

Austen-Leigh makes the interesting observation that by the 1860s the clergy had almost totally given over hunting. "In Mr. Chute's field they chanced to form almost a majority of the gentlemen who regularly hunted with him, because there happened to be several unbeneficed clergymen, of private fortune, residing in the country, who were fond of hunting. But in those days, any country clergyman was expected to hunt, if he liked it, just as much as he was expected to dine out with his neighbours; nor was he supposed to derogate from his character, or to impair his influence with



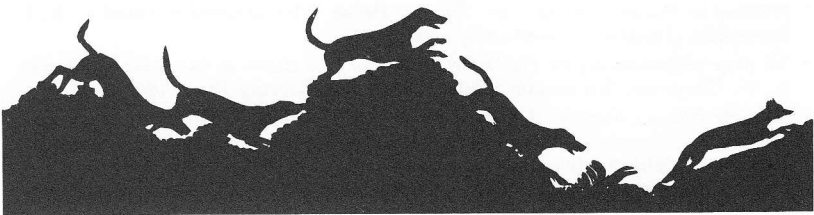
his parishioners, by the one indulgence more than by the other" (p. 68).

Evidently, hunting was highly respectable in northeast Hampshire. Jane's nephews Edward and George Knight rode with the HH while at Chawton, probably during her lifetime, and Edward later became master of the HH. Yet, when we turn to her fiction, in all but one instance, hunting is associated with characters who behave improperly. In *Lady Susan*, the headstrong Reginald de Courcy uses hunting as an excuse to spend time with the unprincipled Susan (254).⁶ In *The Watsons*, only the dilettante Lord Osborne and Tom Musgrave speak of hunting (347, 357). In *Northanger Abbey*, the rattlepate John Thorpe longs for a "real good hunter" (76). In *Sense and Sensibility*, the vacuous Sir John Middleton fills his time with field sports (32).

These characters are minor. Only three main characters hunt, two being young men with intelligence, charm, good looks, and bad morals—those seducers of young women, Henry Crawford and John Willoughby. In *Mansfield Park*, Edmund Bertram owns hunters (37), discusses hunting with Crawford (223), and even hunts with him (241) but seems to take no more interest in the sport than is suitable to his station. When he took up his clerical duties, he probably would, like White and Austen-Leigh, leave off hunting. Henry, on the other hand, has his hunters brought all the way from Norfolk to Northamptonshire (223) and proposes renting Thornton Lacey as a hunting box (246).

Two scenes tell heavily against Henry. As he listens to William Price narrate his adventures at sea, Henry finds "his own habits of selfish indulgence appear in shameful contrast" (236-37). The good thought passes quickly, and Henry "found it was as well to be a man of fortune at once with horses and grooms at his command." He then loans a hunter to William, terrifying Fanny until her brother returns safe. The second scene contains barely concealed implications of sexual violence. Henry tells his sister Mary that he has thought of a plan to amuse him on the days he cannot hunt (229). He "cannot be satisfied without . . . making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart." The ensuing dialogue reveals Henry to be an egotistical trifler.

Of John Willoughby it is said that "there is not a bolder rider in England" (43). His visits to Allenham are mainly for the sake of sport. When Marianne speculates on the cost of an establishment, she naively includes hunters with Willoughby in mind, prompting the more austere Edward Ferrers to ask, "But why must you have hunters? Every body



does not hunt" (91). After Willoughby is exposed as a seducer and fortune hunter, Mrs. Jenkins offers her judgment: "They say he is all to pieces. No wonder! dashing about with his curricle and hunters!" (194). Hunting was indeed an extravagance. Three horses were needed for a man to hunt four days a week. A dedicated Meltonian might keep seven or eight and pay as much as a 1000 guineas for an animal. The average hunter costs £75 to £150. The horse's keep was at least £25 per year, and a hunt subscription averaged another £25.

What may have been most damaging to hunting in Jane Austen's eyes was the bad reputation of the Meltonians during the years in which she was writing. In season, Melton Mowbray was full of affluent bachelors and men who had left their wives at home. (Few women hunted at this time.) The little town offered no amusements for evening but drinking, gambling, and, inevitably, prostitutes attracted by the concentration of money. Two well-known habitués were Richard Meyler and Sir Harry Mildmay, members of Parliament for Winchester. Aesop says these young men lived in Melton each winter. Both men were involved with a famous courtesan of the day, Harriette Wilson, who visited them at Melton in 1812 and noted "wretched, squalid prostitutes" tapping at windows to attract customers.⁷

Mildmay belonged to an old Hampshire family, and Meyler was the son of a wealthy sugar planter who had bought an estate at Crawley, near Winchester. Their activities would be no secret in Hampshire and would exemplify the national reputation of hunting. It is possible that Jane Austen separated the hunting of her relatives and respectable neighbors from that at Melton, yet felt it fitting to make Crawford and Willoughby foxhunters.

NOTES

- ¹ The term "hunting" is applied only to pursuit on horseback and with the aid of hounds. Pursuit of game on foot and with guns is called "shooting."
- ² Unless otherwise noted, information is summarized from *Peculiar Privilege: A Social History of English Foxhunting 1753-1885* by David Itzkowitz (Hassocks, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1977).
- ³ Two books—both of which include the recollections of Jane's old dancing partner Stephen Terry of Dummer—give complementary information on hunting in Hampshire: *Sporting Reminiscences of Hampshire from 1745 to 1862* by Aesop [W. N. Heysham] (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864) and *Recollections of the Early Days of the Vine Hunt* by a Sexagenarian [James Edward Austen-Leigh] (London: Spottiswoode & Co., 1865). The information on the early days of hunting in the *Victoria County History of Hampshire* seems to be taken directly from Aesop.
- ⁴ Mrs. Chute was aunt to JEAL's wife, Emma Smith.
- ⁵ *Ordnained in Powder: The Life and Times of Parson White of Crondall* edited by R. P. Butterfield (Farnham: Landham's, 1966).
- ⁶ All page references are to *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen* in six volumes edited by R. W. Chapman, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
- ⁷ *Harriette Wilson's Memoirs* (London: Peter Davies, 1929), p. 516. Harriette gives a detailed and discreetly erotic account of her stormy affair with Meyler. Ironically, he died in the field at Melton in 1818, perhaps from a stroke. Since she was a near contemporary of Jane Austen, Harriette's memoirs are a fascinating counterpoint to the novels.