

# HUNTING FROM MELTON.

BY HENRY H. S. PEARSE.

*Illustrated by J. and C. TEMPLE.*



THREE quarters of a century ago the *Quarterly* reviewer, whose inflated panegyrics were cleverly parodied by Surtees, gave to Meltonians a character for snobbishness which they do not deserve. Many writers on Leicester-

But there were doubtless old Meltonians of that time who would have shrunk from showing the slightest discourtesy to a stranger whether he came among them with a troop of horses and a dozen grooms or set up a modest establishment sufficient only for hunting three days a week.



HOUNDS COMING THROUGH CHEAPSIDE, MELTON MOWBRAY.

shire sport and sportsmen since that day have fostered the erroneous idea, and even Mr. Bromley Davenport—unconsciously perhaps—gave fresh currency to it by adopting the views of those who are supposed to “count the swell provincial lower than the Melton muff.”

Some members of the Old Club, when that institution flourished, may have fallen into the habit of contemptuous reference to every outsider as a snob. Inconsiderate youth is prone to use such epithets without thought that they may be taken literally.

A cynic once said indeed that the passport to Melton's favour must be a very simple affair if we may judge by the sort of people who seem to possess it. That however is even less just than the charge of supercilious exclusiveness.

The fact is that nobody at Melton worth thinking about cares very much what form a man's credentials may take so that he proves himself a sportsman and conforms to the first principles of hunting with a subscription pack. He need not be like Lord Plymouth and Sir Francis Burdett, who



*From a photo by]*

THE EARL OF LONSDALE.  
*(Master of the Quorn Hunt.)*

*[Mayall & Co.*

each subscribed £400 a year to the Quorn Hunt, and he will not be ostracised though his means may limit him to less sport than others can revel in.

To be at Melton and not to hunt every

capital. There he will find himself among the choicest spirits of his age—whatever that may mean—and if he can hold his own with them across any country within hacking distance north, south, east or west of Melton Mowbray, when Tom Furr, Frank Gillard, Charles Isaacs or George Gillson has got hounds away on the scent of a good fox, he will be as near the heights of perfect bliss as a human being can hope to reach in this world. But to attain that one must ride with as much judgment as nerve, and be mounted on horses that no practicable fence can stop so long as they have a jump left in them.

Some counties have more formidable fences of their kind than any to be found in Leicestershire. In many the hills are steeper, in a few there are pastures that take more out of horses than do the ridges and furrows of

Twyford Vale, but in none will one meet with all these difficulties so frequently combined, or with a greater variety of impediments to smooth progress, or realise more fully how little time there is for hesitation when the pack is skimming like a flock of sea-birds far ahead and hundreds of hoofs are thundering close behind one.

A fixture of the Quorn at Kirby Gate or Great Dalby may mean a good fox from Gartree Hill, who, if he does not run as the dark-coloured rover of Osbaldeston's day did, a long ten miles through Leesthorpe to Oakham pastures, will perhaps take you over Sharplands and Twyford Brook and Marfield Brook to John-o'-Gaunt's, the line of the great Clinker and Clasher steeplechase, in which Dick Christian and "the Squire" got fairly to the bottom of their horses so that Clinker fell beaten at the last fence and Clasher only managed to struggle in a winner after cold water had been dashed over his head. Whether fortune may take you among the "swingers" or the regular "stitchers"—to use the expressive terms by which Dick Christian was wont to distinguish between the fair fences of Twyford Vale and the bullfinches about Barkby Holt and Ashby pastures—you will be as near the seventh heaven of a fox-hunter's bliss as you can hope to get if the scent serves.



THE "HARBORO'."

day is an experience that few men are philosophic enough to contemplate with equanimity, and there are obvious reasons why the man of slender resources should rather select Leicester or Loughborough than Melton Mowbray as his headquarters for hunting in the shires; but among these reasons let him not count as important the fanciful picture which scribes ancient and modern have drawn of Meltonian manners. Let him rather trust to the experience that proves how little the characteristics of true sportsmen are dependent on circumstances, and he will find in Leicestershire as elsewhere that very few fox-hunters whose opinions are worth a moment's consideration really care whether a man rides good horses or bad ones, two or twenty, so long as he rides them straight and can take his own line.

And the fastidiousness of Meltonians in matters of dress has been a good deal exaggerated. Though no one who has a proper respect for himself or a sense of what is due to the master of hounds would encourage slovenliness, a good deal of latitude is allowed for individual peculiarities among followers of the Quorn. With ample means and the capacity to embrace every opportunity for sport that offers in "the cream of the shires," a man need not hesitate to set up his quarters in Leicestershire's hunting

It is a merit of Quorn foxes in these days that they do not break at the same corner of a cover, nor make the same point so often that the line of their run almost to a field may be foretold directly they get away. Hereditary instinct does not take that form with them probably because none among their progenitors has beaten Tom Firr and the Quorn pack often enough to have fallen into the habit that is second nature.

It is just as likely therefore that you may cross the glorious Vale of Twyford with a fox, from Cream Gorse, Thorpe Trussels or Ashby pastures, as with one from Gartree or Burrow Hill, and all are coverts dear to the hearts of Meltonians.

The Cottesmore hounds come so close to Melton at Wyld's Lodge and Stapleford Park that you may give your covert hack a rest for the day when they meet at either. A second horse, sent some miles along the Oakham Road with a man on him, who will not disgrace you by heading a hunted fox, would probably be more useful. One of the stout race that frequents Mr. Hornsby's home coverts or far-famed Laxton Gorse may set his neck straight for the dreaded Whissendine, and if the pace be as good as it often is across those leagues of grass, all who get so far without a fall at oxer or brook will be glad of fresh mounts by the time they have breasted the slopes of Ranksborough Hill.

Where every fixture is good who shall say which is best? Assheton Smith would one day declare that there were no foxes like those bred in Shankton Holt, and another time he would swear by the wild rovers of Staunton Wood or Langton Caudle—haunted by a somewhat degenerate race now; but of all runs he ever had in Leicestershire none pleased him so much as the blissful hour and a half with a Widmerspool fox straight across the Vale of Belvoir to Blackberry Hill. But there is more plough about Widmerspool now than in those days.

Brooksby was a favourite fixture with

followers of Hugo Meynell's hounds, as it is with Meltonians still. Mr. Greene, of Rolleston, liked nothing so well as a Thorpe Trussels day; "the Squire" never wavered in his preference for Barkby Holt, Dalby and Gartree Hill; and Sir Richard Sutton was more for the Six Hills country. Billesdon Coplow has lost little of the fame that came to it through the great run celebrated in picture and in song by Loraine Smith. It is long since a fox ran from the Coplow to Melton Spinney, on the Belvoir side, without crossing a ploughed field all the way, but when Mr. Fernie's hounds draw in this direction there is sure to be a strong contingent from Melton ready to take their share of the fun that rarely fails them in this country of big fences and deep ravines. Northward, where Quorn and Belvoir boundaries join, the best fixtures are all within easy reach of Melton, though those who stay to see the end of a day with the Duke's in that quarter will probably have a long ride home; and the chances are that a Quorn fox from Cossington or Walton Thorns, by Six Hills, or even from Shoby Scholes or Lord Aylesford's covert hard by Melton, may lead pursuers a merry chase over the fosse way to Hoby and Thrusington lordships, or across



A MEET AT SIX HILLS: PASSING THE BEDE HOUSE.

the light plough of Widmerspool, where fences are blind, and so into the heart of Belvoir Vale, where in old days Lords Forester, Jersey and Delamere, Lords Robert and Charles Manners, Assheton Smith and



MUIR'S STABLES.

Anstruther Thomson, Colonel Fellowes of Shottisham ("perhaps the best of his day"), Mr. Gilmour (for so long foremost among heavy weights), and the present Lord Spencer with a felicity that makes us regret his distaste for circumstantial elaboration. If he had been like other writers of "Recollections" we might have learned that there were men riding to hounds in Leicestershire forty years ago who could have rivalled the greatest of Assheton Smith's recorded feats. Some things we do know which tend to prove that if there are no such mighty Nimrods now

Colonel Mellish "all rode like devils against each other."

In the years that have passed since then the fame of two at least among these bold horsemen has never been eclipsed, though Lord Cardigan rode as straight from end to end of a Leicestershire run as he did at the head of his "noble Six Hundred," when Russian guns were belching a storm of shell on the plains of Balaclava, and three Lords Wilton have held their own in succession against the hardest riders of Melton. Possibly celebrities of the Old Club, whom Ferneley painted in the great Quorn picture, were more fortunate in finding worthy chroniclers of their deeds than any who came after them.

What a history of the brilliant horsemen of the generation just passed away Whyte-Melville might have given us if he had been as garrulous as he was discriminating! But he only favours us now and then with a glimpse of the people whose performances in the hunting field he had watched with keen appreciation, as, when writing of Colonel Wyndham—who "possessed with a giant's stature the pliant agility of a harlequin"—he says: "A finer rider never got into a saddle. Weighing 19 stone, I have seen him in a burst across Leicestershire go for twenty minutes with the best of the light-weights, occasionally relieving his horse by throwing himself off, leaping a fence alongside of it, and vaulting on again without checking the animal sufficiently to break its stride."

And he hits off the merits of such horsemen as the late Lord Wilton, Colonel

as then there are certainly not fewer bold riders than those who hunted from Melton when the Old Club was in its heyday. I have never heard of any other than Assheton Smith who cared to jump the ravine between Billesdon Coplow and Ashby pastures, where its perpendicular sides are 12 feet deep; nor do the annals of sport in Leicestershire furnish many parallels to Dick Christian's great leap, spanning 35½ feet through a bullfinch "into the field as comes to the road that leads from Great to Little Dalby," after a quick thing from the Punchbowl.

But these were rather unexpected incidents to the riders themselves. Some feats, like those attributed to Lord Scarborough, Captain White and others of the old rough-rider's heroes, do not seem so very wonderful. We may fairly assume that the Whissendine and the Smite, with its slimy waters screened by a tough bullfinch, are jumped as often in a season now as they were then. Perhaps the bullfinches and oxers round about Melton are not so forbidding as they seemed fifty years ago. Certainly very few are so bad as they were then described. But discretion is not now, any more than it ever has been or ever will be, esteemed as the better part of valour by Meltonians young or old.

A story told of Lord Mayo and an Irishman who used to run with the Kildare pack would seem pointless to men who ride as if they valued neither neck, nor limb, nor life, as against the glorious rapture of being first in a run. Said his lordship: "What a fool you must be, Mick, to neglect your business and lose half your potatoes that you may

come out with my hounds!" There was a sly twinkle in Mick's blue eyes as he replied, with an obvious reference to the noble master's reputation for reckless riding: "Ah! me lord, it's truth your lordship's spakin' this night: av there was no fools there'd be sorra few fox-hunters."

The folly however is a noble one that has helped to make our tough island race what it is; and distant may the day be when Melton will no longer boast its squadrons of bold pursuers in whose eyes valour and nerve are cardinal virtues to be cultivated by courting danger whenever the chance offers—and it comes often enough to those who seek it.

There is hunting to be got with one pack or another close to Melton Mowbray every day of the week. The Quorn come that way on Mondays and Fridays; Tuesday brings the Cottesmore to Stapleford Park, or some fixture within easy reach; on Wednesday the Belvoir meet somewhere north or east of Melton to draw such famous covers as Holwell Mouth, Clawson Thorns, Scaford Gorse, or Melton Spinney; Thursday gives choice between one of Mr. Fernie's fixtures, some distance off, or a by-day with the Quorn; and if the Belvoir are not close

at hand again on Saturday the Cottesmore are sure to be, as the fixtures of these two packs alternately are made for the convenience of Melton sportsmen, or at any rate Melton lays that flattering unction to its soul. With all these opportunities brought to them the people who dwell for a season or less in this fox-hunter's paradise have no reason to complain—until a long frost comes to stop sport—of hunters eating their heads off in idleness. One would need a good stud to hold his own with Lord Lonsdale and Tom Furr, even if the Quorn only came within reach of Melton twice or thrice a week; add the chance of a long run with the Cottesmore, Belvoir or Mr. Fernie's on other days and you will find that second horses for everyday, and something in reserve to replace the lame ones, are essential for full enjoyment of all that fortune brings.

But a month of Melton is worth a cycle of Cathay, and the youth with neither cares nor responsibilities to hamper him will be wise to make the most of such pleasures while he may, for alas! the day must come when the best and boldest rider of us all will have to confess that he is no longer the man for Melton.



A HUNTING MORNING AT LADY WILTON'S.



A HARD CASE IN HUNTING:

A star-gazing, head-strong brute, with no mouth; a stake and bound in front; and two mischievous girls waiting for a lead.