

Badly bitten by the ban

The Lake District has been hit hardest by the Hunting Act of 2004, says **Johnny Scott**, tracing the history of the region's fell packs – once the first line of defence against predation for farmers

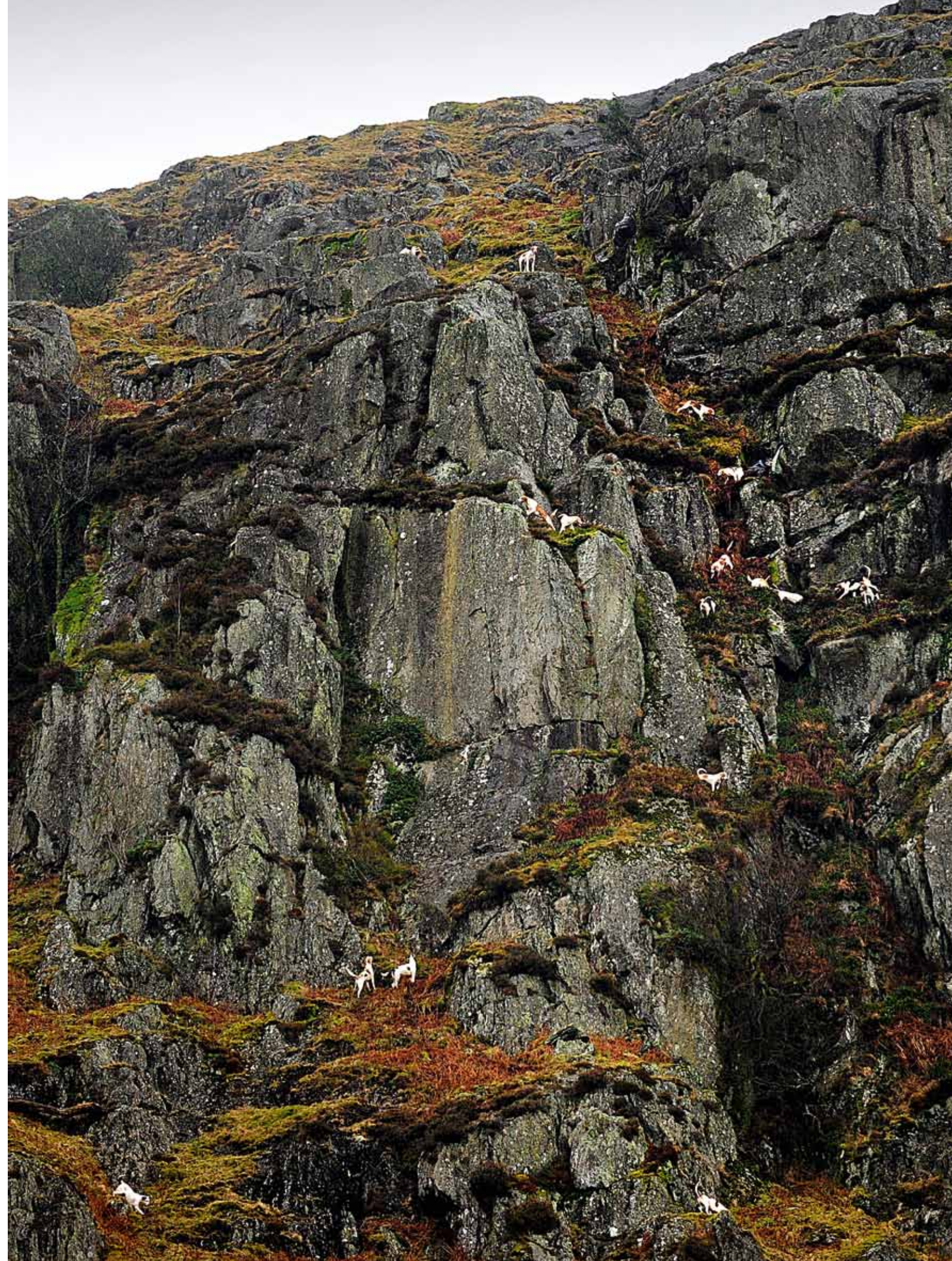
THE Lake District, with its spectacular, soaring peaks, wild open fell sides, lakes, tarns, becks, hidden valleys and ancient woodland is, without doubt, the jewel in the British landscape. Stunning to look at in summer and autumn, it is a harsh and unforgiving environment to scrape an agricultural living from at any time of year and in no other part of the country is hunting so deeply entrenched in the social and cultural heritage of the people who live there.

From the time of the earliest farming communities, hounds have been used to control the vermin that preyed on the sheep and poultry of remote upland farms: polecats, pine martens and foxes. At least from the Tudor period until the end of the 19th century, parish church wardens paid a bounty for vermin while large estates kept hounds and employed a huntsman to safeguard their tenant's livelihoods, for which they were expected to make a payment in kind.

The service provided by estates seems to have lapsed in the early 1700s and this, combined with an expanding population, led to a rapid increase in predators across the county. Farmers now began keeping one or two cross-bred hounds in an effort to protect their livestock and a few terriers bold enough to bolt a fox from a rock den, the ancestors of the fell, lakeland and patterdale. Before long, hounds and terriers from various farms in a district were brought together to form a "bobbery" pack. Someone was delegated to carry the horn and hunt them, collecting hounds from each farm as he walked to the meet and dropping them off on his way back at the end of the day's hunting. Although highly entertaining, these heterogeneous scratch packs were not efficient as hounds were not used to hunting together and lacked discipline.

Through necessity, hunting gradually became more organised with countries loosely established, hounds kennelled through the season, hunted by regular huntsmen and sent back to different farms to be trencher-fed through the summer. The oldest of these packs was probably Squire Sandys' Hounds, kennelled at High Graythwaite Hall on the southern end of Lake Windermere in 1733, but during the latter part of the 18th century and early in the 19th, numerous packs were formed and disbanded or reabsorbed into other packs. Among them were the Under-Barrow Foxhounds, the Newby Bridge Hounds, Mr Scholes Birch's Foxhounds, the Sawrey Hounds, the Dalemain Hounds, Squire Crozier's Hounds, the Patterdale Hounds, the Matterdale and Baldhow Foxhounds, the Troutbeck Foxhounds, the Loweswater Foxhounds, the Broughton Foxhounds and Sir Frederick Fletcher Vane's Hounds, which were hunted by John Peel when he was not hunting his own pack, to name only a few. On low ground, hounds might be followed on ponies but as soon as a fox took to the fell, they were hunted on foot as they traditionally were until the Hunting Act of 2004.

“ When hounds hit off on the fresh line their cry changed from the music of the drag to the wild, full-throated clamour that told us their fox was away and they were on to him ”



Fell packs such as the Ullswater (left) and Coniston (above, on Helm Crag before the ban), have hare feet for grip and dexterity

The seven fell packs registered with the Central Committee of Fell Packs, the regulatory body in association with the MFHA, all trace their history to one or other of these original packs. The Blencathra dates to the Keswick Hounds owned by Squire John Crozier of Threlkeld, in 1826. It's sometimes referred to as the "John Peel Hunt" as the ancestry of the hounds can be traced to two couple of Peel's best hounds bought by John Crozier after Peel died in 1854. The Ullswater was formed in 1873 following the amalgamation of two smaller packs, the old Matterdale and the Patterdale, and has a long association with the Lowther family, a number of whom have been Masters, including Lady Jane Benson, daughter of the seventh Earl of Lonsdale, who was Master for 30 years from 1979 to 2009. The Melbreak traces its origins to the Loweswater Foxhounds put together by William Pearson in 1807. The Eskdale and Ennerdale was formed in 1897 from an amalgamation of the Eskdale – in existence since 1785 – the Ennerdale and the Wasdale Head. The Lunesdale was formed in 1936, incorporating country originally hunted by the Ullswater, the old Sedbergh Hunt and, after the First World War, the Sedbergh and Lunesdale. The Coniston was founded in 1825 by Mr Gaskarth and became a subscription pack in 1908, when it amalgamated with a pack belonging to John and Bruce Logan. The North Lonsdale was started by Major Ulf Machell, a descendant of James Machell who owned the old Newby Bridge Hounds, in 1947 at the request of local farmers.

Fell packs have always existed in the interest of farmers and until the Act of 2004, >

“ Hunting is fundamental to the lives and cultural heritage of Cumbrian people ”

provided the only effective, humane method of fox control, particularly during lambing when farmers relied on the local huntsman to turn out at daybreak if they were losing lambs. The season was from September to May, with hounds hunting in the old-fashioned way, questing for the drag (cold scent) of a fox that had gone back to the rocks, crags, borran and scree banks of the high fell after a night's feeding expedition on the low ground. He might have lain close in some crag or among the boulders of a borran as hounds worked up to him, or stolen away when he heard hounds speaking on the drag but, either way, when hounds hit off on the fresh line their cry changed from the music of the drag to the glorious, wild, full-throated clamour that told us their fox was away and they were on to him.

A hunted fox would generally go out to the high fell tops, some of which – Scafell Pike, Skiddaw or Helvellyn, for example – are more than 3,000ft and a “stiff necked ‘un” might travel the rough, rocky ground for several dales, providing the most wonderful viewing for those in the right place. The grandeur of the Lakes, the music and spectacular sight of hounds hunting, coupled with the tradition of singing in the evenings afterwards has always attracted a devoted following. Fields of several hundred were not unknown – at the Boxing Day meet of the Coniston in 1910, more than 500 turned out despite the weather.

Fell hounds are unique; they have been bred for generations to suit the topography of

the Cumbrian fells and are different to their lowland cousins. On average, a fell hound stands 22in at the shoulder, is light framed with hare feet for grip and dexterity, sloping pasterns to absorb shock making him “stand back at the knee”, well let down in the hind-quarters and short coupled. He needs good shoulders and properly developed dew claws to help him descend slopes at speed or climb a crag, but it is the mentality of fell hounds that really sets them apart. They must hunt independently as the huntsmen may be miles behind them and if they lose the line, cast themselves to find it again – characteristics that are critical in getting hounds home to kennels if they get separated from the pack. Old hounds, in particular, retain the geography of their hunt country and will find their way many miles through the fells back to the meet or to kennels, following the “footings” of the huntsman many hours after he has left the area. These qualities, plus nose, plenty of tongue, courage, pace, hardiness, stamina and trustworthiness, have meant fell hound bloodlines are in demand. Blencathra hounds have been drafted to America, Canada, South Africa, France, Finland, Trinidad and Ireland; since Barry Todhunter became huntsmen in 1988, 24 packs in England and Wales have used his stallion hounds.

The Blencathra (below left); the Ullswater, with huntsman Joe Bowman (bottom left); George Chapman with the Coniston, early 1900s (below)



BLENCATHRA FOXHOUNDS



CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF FELL PACKS

Hunting is fundamental to the lives and cultural heritage of Cumbrian people and strong local support has always been a pivotal part of fell-hunting, with huntsmen working hand in hand with graziers and shepherds. Most fell huntsmen are Cumbrian bred and have a reputation for long service: the legendary Joe Bowman, who served the Ullswater for 42 years; Johnny Richardson, who hunted the Blencathra for 36 seasons; Barry Todhunter, now in his 40th year with them (15 years as whipper-in and in his 25th as huntsman); George and Anthony Chapman, father and son, who between them notched up 56 years with the Coniston; or Edmund Porter, who, like his grandfather, was huntsman of the Eskdale and Ennerdale, for 50 years.

It has always been the custom for hounds to be trencher-fed in the summer, returning to the people who walked them as puppies, often generations of the same family, and this system is still largely the practice. Walkers

take immense pride in watching their hounds on a hunting day and showing them at the summer hound shows, culminating in the Rydal Show, held since 1901 and attended by hound enthusiasts from all over Britain.

The Hunting Act has had a far greater impact on the Lake District than on any other area of Britain. Since the only humane and selective method of fox control became illegal, lamb predation has rocketed – as has the number of old and ill foxes that might otherwise have been culled by hounds and animals suffering lingering deaths from shotgun wounds, as farmers resort to any method to prevent lamb losses. The fell packs have held together for the past nine years by trail hunting, in the hope that common sense would prevail and the Conservative party would honour its pledge to repeal the Act. It has, however, taken enormous courage and determination for individual huntsmen and the Masterships to do so in the face of escalating

Edmund Porter (above, at Moss Rigg Quarries) has been Master and huntsman of the Eskdale and Ennerdale Foxhounds since 1963

pressure. Meets are a soft target for hunt saboteurs and although hounds now hunt a trail, there is constant harassment from vigilantes positioned on fell tops with long-range cameras, hoping to film hounds switching scent if a fox has crossed the trail line.

Sadly, everyone now accepts that repeal isn't going to happen under this coalition government, but a cross-party group of MPs is urgently pressing for an amendment to the Act that would allow a full pack of hounds to flush a fox to marksmen, bringing England and Wales in line with the legislation in Scotland. This small concession towards our ultimate aim of the full repeal of an odious and undemocratic law would make an enormous difference to Lakeland farmers and give hope to that beleaguered community. ■