

## The War Of The Foxes

### With more protests, Parliament looks at banning the hunts

By Caitlin Randall  
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Wheely Down, England — In the heart of English hunt country, it is the fox that is supposed to be afraid. But it was 61-year-old John Corps who earlier this month got the fright of his life.

A foot follower of the Hursley Hambledon Hunt, Corps stood helpless as nearly 100 animal-welfare activists, wielding crowbars and baseball bats, ambushed the club's Saturday fox hunt.

"The hunt was just about to leave when seven vans pulled up. As they stopped literally every door burst open and out piled about 10 masked men from each . . . attacking every parked car," Corps said of the attack in which he suffered head and face injuries. "It was the most frightening experience of my life."

Hampshire police said the attack, in which 41 people were arrested and three hunt followers hospitalized with broken ribs and gashed faces, was the worst against a hunt club in this part of southern England. And it counts as one of the more violent to take place in Britain, where efforts to end the hunt are growing.

On Nov. 28, the House of Commons voted to ban hunting with dogs, though it is unclear whether the measure will become law. On the day after Christmas, usually the busiest hunt day on the social calendar, hundreds of protesters tried to block hunts. Commonly, saboteurs disrupt fox hunts by laying false scents to confuse the hounds or blowing bugles to send the riders on a dummy chase, the police said.

Fox hunting sets at odds two great English obsessions: a love of tradition and a passion for furry animals. But the 500-year-old sport also draws a dividing line in society between the haves and the have-nots, a line that modern Britain no longer easily tolerates.

The sport has become a focal point for country dwellers, worried that the new Labor government is bent on ending their way of life.

Fox hunting is unpopular among voters — animal-welfare activists claim 73 percent of Britons want to ban the sport — but it has strong support in pockets of the country.

"For country people, the issue isn't just about fox hunting," said Alison Hawes, huntswoman and southern area coordinator for the British Field Sports Society. She rides on the Hursley Hambledon Hunt and witnessed the attack.

"Farmers and landowners, who are already angry with the government for how they've handled the beef scare, see this government as anti-country, elected with an urban mandate." Many British farmers, unable to export beef because of the perils of "mad cow" disease are now facing financial ruin.

There are by rough estimates 300 fox hunt groups in Britain, about twice the number in all of the United States, animal-welfare activists say. With each club hunting two to four times a week, an estimated 20,000 foxes are killed by such hunts each year in Britain.

Animal-welfare advocates insist they are challenging neither a tradition nor a way of life. They say they



Members from seven hunt clubs in England gather to protest a proposed bill which would ban fox hunting in Melton Mowbray. AP Photos

are trying only to protect innocent animals from a savage death, torn to pieces by a pack of baying hounds.

"It's a barbaric sport, no different in that sense from cockfighting or bear baiting, and has no place in modern Britain," said Simon Pope at the Campaign for the Protection of Hunted Animals.

But hunters and many country dwellers argue that the pleasure of the hunters is far more worrying to fox hunt opponents than the suffering of the fox.

"If they get rid of fox hunting, foxes certainly aren't going to be left to lead some kind of life out of Beatrix Potter. They will be killed by farmers," Hawes said.

"In any case, that isn't the point for antihunt activists who want to take away what amounts to a big chunk of some country people's lives," Hawes added. She said she expects strong reaction among farmers to a fox hunt ban. Underscoring that view, a recent ban on stag hunting in one of England's national forests provoked a local slaughter in which 36 stags were shot in one week as a protest.

With opposing camps digging in for a parliamentary battle over fox hunting — the Commons bill now goes before committee and then on to the House of

Lords — some say it could require changing another, even older, British institution, the House of Lords, before fox hunting is made illegal.

It is in the House of Lords, most of whose members are titled gentry who inherit their seats, where hunt activists can count on hundreds of votes to help kill the fox hunt ban. Already Home Office Minister George Howarth has warned the Lords that slaying the ban could hasten the end of legislative voting rights for hereditary peers.

"When you look at the broader picture, animal experimentation and vivisection involve far more animals," said Kevin Saunders with the League Against Cruel Sports. "But in Britain a lot of people see fox hunting as a class issue, as some kind of social disease."

Pope agrees: "It may not be true that the sport is about a bunch of bloodthirsty toffs killing foxes, but that is the image."

How far either side will take the debate is yet to be seen, but both have promised acts of civil disobedience.

Even Prince Charles, the most high-profile huntsman in Britain, who recently defied the pressure for a ban on fox hunting by riding with the Beaufort Hunt near his Highgate estate, is a possible target.

"The question is where do you go from here," said Paul Gammon, spokesman for the Hunt Saboteurs Association, which has been linked to the Hampshire attack. "We are looking to do more high profile actions, possibly when Prince Charles is out hunting."

If hunters and activists in Britain can agree on one thing, it is that the emotional debate over fox hunting is far out of proportion to the number of animals killed. Scientific testing and the production of cosmetics kill thousands more creatures than hunters could in their wildest dreams — last year around 2.7 million animals in Britain were reportedly involved in experiments — but the fox still grabs the headlines.



Police hold back protesters as local hunt group rides through Maldon, England.