

# It could only happen to... a hunting person

It's frequently said that the hunting field is a great leveller. Moments of mortification — in front of an audience of so-called friends — are rarely lived down. And if you are young, and they involve the master, you can never quite get over it, says **Janet Menzies**

**J**ULIA MCKEIVOR'S most embarrassing moment as a child was also her finest hour.

"I was only eight and snuck off on my Exmoor pony to a meet of the Mendip Farmers' without my parents knowing," she says. "We had a fantastic, adrenalin-fuelled day with the most amazing run that took us all the way to Cheddar Gorge. I was proud to see there were only four of us left!

"Then I saw our formidable field master, Mrs Firbank, approaching — I assumed to congratulate me — but she boomed out, 'Do you know your girth is on back to front?' I was mortified."

Fellow Mendip supporter Venetia Kenney-Herbert was also just a youngster when she suddenly came across the master.

"I don't know how, but there he was wedged into this hedge, bottom-first, with his arms and legs sticking straight out into the air. I had to pull him out, of course, but it was so embarrassing — I didn't know where to grab."

Jack Wingfield Digby remembers his mother venturing hunting in the Midlands when she was master of the Blackmore and Sparkford Vale.

"They were thinking of employing the huntsman so she went to check him out, but the ghastly horse she had been lent deposited her face first on a post-and-rail, knocking out her front teeth," he says. "The weird thing was, the hunt staff must have gone back the day after, because she then received a little package in the mail containing her front teeth!"

It comes as a relief to realise masters are fallible (or should that be fall-able) as well. Gems McCormick has joined the mastership of the Cottesmore this season, with an immediate effect on her riding ability.

"At the meet where my mastership was announced I was chatting to everybody, especially the landowners, and the field had moved off and popped over a small hunt jump," says Gems. "So I hurried off to jump it,

only for my horse, Reg, suddenly to drop his shoulder and deposit me in front of everyone.

"I stood up, took a bow, and said, 'Welcome to your new master! What else could I do?'"

Tom Kingston, a new joint-master of the Belvoir, was similarly distracted.

"It was rather a special meet given

by Lord Daresbury's mother Lady Greenall," he recalls. "As we left her garden I spotted someone I hadn't met for a while, so I was saying hello over my shoulder and didn't see this low branch, which knocked me clean off my horse and straight out the back door, in front of the whole meet."

At least it wasn't the Heythrop, who delight in reproducing every moment of madness in their hunt magazine, *The Hack*.

Too often your nearest and dearest have captured your blushes on their phone, video, blog or website. In the categories of moments we'd most like to forget — but sadly can't — that of involuntary stardom must be among the worst.

## Ready for your close-up?

DAVID PARKER, secretary to the North Cotswold, should have realised more than his coat would be red when he agreed to perform a Full Monty with other members at a hunt fundraiser.

"We were the cabaret, and it really was the Full Monty, starting in our red coats and ending up in our boxer shorts — and now it has got on to YouTube," he sighs.

To date it has had 3,356 views. Just put North Cotswold Hunt Full Monty into a YouTube search to add to David's embarrassment, several years after the original event.

Speedster motoring journalist Jeremy

Clarkson's embarrassing hunting moment came at the Heythrop's country fair, where he was jocked up in the camel race. Keen not to spare anyone's blushes, Heythrop joint-master Nessie

Lambert has reported the whole thing on the hunt website. She thinks Clarkson may have thought "camel" referred to a cigarette brand, as when the flag went up he was to be found sitting bemusedly on the stationary beast smoking a quiet cigarette. Warwickshire master Sam Butler's camel loped ahead to victory — with British dressage team chef d'equipe Major Richard Waygood's mount disappearing equally fast, but backwards.

According to hunt secretary Keith Arnold,

male members of the Warwickshire suffer their most embarrassing moments in outfits that are not quite ratcatcher.

He fingers his friends: "Simon Jackson and Ian McConnel have been in more productions than anyone, and always in dresses.

"And Anthony Wallington has been in some outrageous outfits. We don't have any shame! When we did *The Rocky Horror Show* there was not a lot left to the

imagination from either side."

But the cringe factor hits everyone when it all pops up on YouTube — search for Warwickshire Hunt and you'll see what we mean.

Another ill-advised venture into women's clothing saw James Froggatt, possibly hunting's best sport, dressed up in a pink tutu as the Sugar Plum Fairy on the Heythrop hunt website. There is also a photo of him in midair during the point-to-point, attached to the horse only by the reins, wittily captioned:

“I was knocked clean off my horse and straight out the back door in front of the whole meet”

Tom Kingston on not looking where he was going

"Defying his heavyweight classification."

Which leads us to another heavyweight, Mark Astall of the High Peak. When asked about his wonderfully successful fitness campaign, he explained: "I saw myself on the video of the point-to-point and you could hear the commentator saying, 'Here is Mr Mark Astall, putting up 28lb overweight...' and I was already in the heavyweight division!"

Mark suffered an even more embarrassing discomfort a few years later. This involved a really enjoyable hunt ball, a call of nature, a low wall concealing a bramble-filled crevasse and a few pals who'd also enjoyed the ball — but any more detail would be too much information.

## Bottoms up

PERHAPS the only thing more embarrassing than having the whole ghastly moment popping up on YouTube is being caught red-cheeked, and for lady riders this is definitely the number one nightmare.

Mendip Farmers' member Liz Blair remembers with mortification: "I was out with [former master] Jo Durie and we needed a comfort break, so we hung back and let the field get out of sight. We'd just settled when unknown to us, the fox had turned and suddenly the whole hunt reappeared."

Emma Hockenhill of Shade Oak Stud in Shropshire tells of a similar moment out with the Wynnstay before the Hunting Act.

"It was a Thursday, which tends to have a lot of ladies out. We wanted to go to the loo, so we were mooching along and we were round the back of a little cross-country course when we found a portable loo. My husband Peter



# Hunting Embarrassing moments

saw it and let out a tremendous shout of, 'There you go, ladies, there's your loo.' Of course, the rest of the hunt thought he was hollaoing a fox and all came crashing over."

## Royal blushes

BUT the degree of embarrassment does depend on who's looking. Having disentangled layers of breeches, vests etc, I was just assuming the position behind a hedge at Sandringham, when two very serious-looking guys came sweeping round the corner. Despite their estate tweeds it was clear that they were Her Majesty's personal protection detail, and not amused.

But they did give me just enough warning to be dressed in time to attempt a curtsy when The Queen duly appeared. I like to think it was a case of the Royal Wee.

Although a lifelong hunting man, Anthony Kenny-Herbert's royal embarrassment came when he was shooting at Sandringham in a gundog field trial. With Her Majesty standing beside him, he was so discomfited that he missed and, wanting

to hit a bird for the competitor whose dog was on trial, immediately went for his second barrel. Sadly, he forgot to move to the second trigger, which resulted in nothing more than a click.

The Queen reassured him: "Don't worry, that seems to happen quite often."

The most embarrassingly famous royal flush of all is probably just a rural myth. I have been unable to track down the lady member of the Beaufort field

who was knocked unconscious in a fall and came round to find her Prince had come and was anxiously enquiring if she was all right.

In those days Prince Charles was still the world's most eligible bachelor, and there are tales of Beaufort ladies swooning whenever

he was seen in the field.

## Horse and hound mishaps

THE embarrassment of horse failures rather depends on the level of public expectations.

As a breeder of some of the country's top National Hunt horses, Emma Hockenhull hasn't quite forgiven her husband Peter's recent misunderstanding.

"We were out with the children and Peter



was on my precious little three-year-old grey and was going to stay at the back.

Then I noticed someone had had a whoopsie over a hedge and that there was a grey in the ditch.

"My horse, who is the grey's half-brother, started whinnying, and yes, it was Peter, and the grey was in deep. But mine whinnied again as if to say, 'Get on with it' and the horse did and has been fantastic ever since. But this is just typical of Peter!"

One of the most terminal embarrassments of all happened to Jack Wingfield Digby when he was serving in Germany.

"We set up our own bloodhound pack called the Weser Vale and had been invited to meet at this very grand German schloss, which was quite a long way away," he remembers.

"Eventually we arrived at the castle. My fellow officer, William, was the huntsman, with a trooper as kennelman.

"William threw open the trailer to find... not a hound in sight! The kennelman thought William had loaded them and he thought the kennelman had." **H&H**

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Mark Astall on what prompted an urgent fitness campaign

