

Cakes, creosote, cycling and carnage

While your hunter is stuffing himself in the field and you're lazing by the pool, what's going on behind the scenes in your local hunt kennels? Charlotte Lycett Green explains why there's no peace for the wicked

Summer jobs

THE last day of the season has been and gone, hounds are lazing in their kennels, horses are out at grass, the huntsman is drinking daiquiris on a bright white Bajan beach — all is quiet in hunt kennels across the land, right?

Well, not exactly. The summer months are when the hard work really goes on behind the scenes. First there's the puppy show, for which everything must be seen in its best bib and tucker. Hunt kennels and stables are painted, creosoted and whitewashed to sparkling perfection, cakes baked by the hundreds, sandwiches made — and no master's wife should forget the sugar lumps for the tea. After an enormous tea and a look at the old hounds, the kennel huntsman's house is usually the place to be for the after-party.

However, this and the hound parades that take place at county shows throughout the summer are but the public face of what is going on at home. The summer is the time for much labour and learning, both for hounds and humans.

Hungry or hot? Who cares!

MOST amateur huntsmen and masters have at some time in their career been put through the mill by a professional huntsman or older, more experienced, MFH. He might have kindly offered them a hovel to live in return for working every day of the week — and when they're at this pond-life level of hunt service, they swiftly discover that there are actually nine days in that week, not seven. No task is too hard, nor can take too long, whatever their view on it.

Take ride cutting. This is the perfect task for a young pupil who can be deposited, slash hook in hand, at a wicket gate with the instruction: "There's another gate in a straight line through there [a jungle] and don't come back till it's finished."

Claims of hunger or heat exhaustion won't wash, as one young aspiring amateur huntsman once discovered after returning to the kennels at 2.30pm after several hours of jungle bashing, declaring he was starving and worn out. He was immediately driven back to the covert and told to

stay there until 6pm, when someone would come to collect him.

Inspecting the tarmac or stubble

BEFORE long, it's time to climb aboard the rusty bicycles and hit the road for the start of hound exercise. If you thought that crashing falls could only occur during the hunting season, think again. Never underestimate the dangers of bicycles. Most hunt bikes are bald of tyre and hard of saddle. And as for brakes? They're never great.

Add to this some totally impractical footwear, such as a pair of hot rubber wellies, your whip's thong dangling perilously close to the front wheel, hounds everywhere, particularly those on couples that will do their best to straddle your wheels, and a moderate to heavy sweat depending on the gradient of the road, and there is much potential for disaster — or, at the least, a close inspection of the tarmac or a nearby hedge.

In the stables, meanwhile, tubby hunters will be bribed with a scoop of nuts and dragged in from the field, bottom lips drooping, tummies sagging. Show them a saddle and bridle, however, and their eyes will stick out on stalks. After a summer of binge-eating, nothing will fit them. The longest girth in your possession will barely reach the girth straps, let alone do up.

When you have finally wrestled the horse

“After a summer of binge-eating, your longest girth will barely reach your hunter's girth straps”

into its tack, then comes the moment when you must climb aboard, which is, frankly, terrifying. The saddle threatens to do an around-the-world under the usually well-behaved horse's rotund belly as it lets rip with the first buck, barely a pace away from the mounting block. This is all made even worse by the fact that we humans have also inevitably summered well and have forgotten how to ride.

Boots, saddle, to horse and away

SOON enough, however, the fat horses are a little trimmer, the bicycles can be cast aside, and hounds, horse and huntsman can be brought together in happy union for hound exercise — or, at least, that's what you might think.

The previously mentioned aspiring amateur huntsman, during his apprenticeship under head kennelman Tom Bailey, was told he must report at the kennels at 6am for the first morning's mounted hound exercise. Living some 15 miles away, however, he was a few minutes late. With what appeared to be great delight, Mr Bailey loosed the entire pack, whereupon the second whipper-in was immediately bucked off beside the kennels and our pupil followed suit at the bottom of the first field.

On the second morning, he was late again.

Hounds had gone and he was caught by Mr Bailey, a man of some presence, emerging from the kennels covered in sweat and steam from making the porridge for the hounds, who said: "You're late again. Stand facing that wall until Mr Collins [the huntsman] gets back."

He stood facing the kennels' wall for an hour and a half. When Mr Collins got back from hound exercise, he just laughed — and our hopeful huntsman wasn't late again.

This wasn't the end of his hound-exercise-related anguish, though. Having eventually progressed to being a young MFH, he



was out on hound exercise one morning when the girth parted company with his still rather fat hunter. They were 12 miles from home and the kennel-huntsman and first whipper-in had a smile (or was it a sneer?) on his face. Playing it cool, the MFH threw his saddle over the hedge and rode home bareback at a steady hound jog.

A dab hand with a lasso

VISITING farmers is an important summertime job and can be an unnerving experience for a young or new MFH. The aforementioned MFH



How to survive the summer

- Rough off your horse as soon as possible after the end of the hunting season — you'll be pleased to see the back of it for a few weeks.
- Invest in a very long girth because your horse will be very fat when it comes in from grass.
- Go on hound exercise if you can (ask first).
- It's a great way to learn about the hounds and to introduce a young horse to them.
- Support your hunt when it is on parade at local shows.
- Enjoy the long days and good weather — you'll be mucking out again in the rain and snow before you know it.

and his kennel-huntsman arrived at a farm in Herefordshire to pick up a dead calf one morning. The message on the kennels' answerphone simply stated that: "It's in the barn."

When they arrived, they looked around and couldn't find it until they looked up into the hayloft and there it was, sitting, propped up like a dog, on some straw. There was no ladder or other obvious means of retrieval, so the resourceful kennel-huntsman got hold of a rope and, within a few minutes, it was lassoed to the ground and put in the flesh truck, whereupon the entire family appeared.

"Just thought we'd see if you was any good," they laughed.



Illustration by Emma McCall