

Putting the 'fun' in fund-raising

Hunts are under more economic pressure than ever and are having to work hard to improve their bank balances. William Cursham discovers some innovative ways to raise cash

THERE was a time when, come the end of the season, hunting folk would simply put their boots away, throw the horses in the field and pretty much forget about hunting. True, there was always the point-to-point, the puppy show and perhaps a terrier or horse show to attend. Yet activities were infrequent and summer was very much a closed season.

Nowadays, things are different. Hunts are putting on an array of activities, including charity balls, hunt rides, barbecues, rounders matches, quizzes, curry nights, 70s evenings, auctions, duck races and twilight steeplechases. These activities have a dual purpose. First, they keep the hunting community together during the summer. Second, they raise critical cash for the coffers.

The effect of the big freeze

It goes without saying that hunts have had an exceedingly tough time over the past decade. On top of foot-and-mouth and the ban, last season saw the coldest winter for many years, with hunts losing weeks of hunting.

"After mid-December, you could more or less write off the season in our part of the world," says Jennifer Pole, hon secretary of the Jed Forest in Scotland.

This was a common experience throughout the UK.

"We had a large amount of snow, and we lost weeks and weeks," recalls Peta Mellors, hon secretary of the Brecon and Talybont. The same was true in England — for example, the South Notts lost a total of nine days. Worse still, this was around Christmas and New Year, when hunts expect higher funds through visitors' caps.

This loss of income accelerated a process that was already underway. Hunts realised that it was crucial to keep up a flow of income during

the summer. Wages, insurance, fuel bills and feed bills still have to be paid, but the winter's income simply couldn't cover these spiralling costs. So they decided to find ways of raising cash during the summer, while making use of the energy and commitment of their supporters. The result is a multitude of innovative and interesting summer activities.

May I borrow 3,000 plastic ducks?

MANY hunts continue equestrian activities throughout the summer to raise cash. Hunt rides have become increasingly popular. The South Notts hold hunt rides every Thursday evening between June and August.

"Thirty people come out on average, and we make a couple of hundred pounds each time. This helps pay some of the bills. We also pick up a few new people, who might take a five-day sub in the next season," says Jane Brazier, hon secretary of the South Notts.

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It doesn't have to be every week, either. The Brecon and Talybont have two hunt rides, one in May and one in September.

"We are lucky to have a lot of open common land and this is ideal for rides. People come from Newport, Carmarthen and Gloucester," explains Peta Mellors.

The Brecon and Talybont also hold a more unusual equestrian event — a Twilight Steeplechase. They set up a mini steeplechase course with 18in fences and have a range of races.

"There are six or seven ponies in each race and an entry fee for each. There are races for little ones on leading reins, up to an open, and a novelty class where the adults ride the kids' ponies. We raise cash from the entry fees, gate fees and catering," says Peta.

Getting families involved is key. The Quorn hold a rounders and barbecue evening every June. Eighty to 100 people attend, with adults and children playing together.

"If you can get children to come, then the parents have to come too. There's a great age range and it is very good fun," says David Cotton, chairman of the Quorn Saturday country fund-raising committee. Money is raised through

ticket sales, a bar and a raffle. Another family-friendly

event that has caught on is duck racing. The East Sussex and Romney Marsh have the "Great Socknersh Duck Race", where 100 plastic ducks race down a river. To enter a duck, you have to pay £20.

"There is a healthy amount of cheating, with people jumping in," says joint-master and

huntsman Andrew Sallis. "It was a great day and we raised a couple of thousand pounds."

The Brecon and Talybont also have a duck race, with one kind soul lending them 3,000 plastic ducks.

'Fence funds'

FUND-RAISING activities are not just fun, they can also be extremely practical. Keeping the country open is a big financial undertaking, and some hunts have adopted "fence funds". The Jed Forest has set up such a fund, where subscribers and supporters can "subscribe" to a new gate or hunt jump.

"It costs about £300 to put up a fence, but people can donate as much as they want," says Jennifer Pole. "The fence can be named after someone and have a plaque on it showing

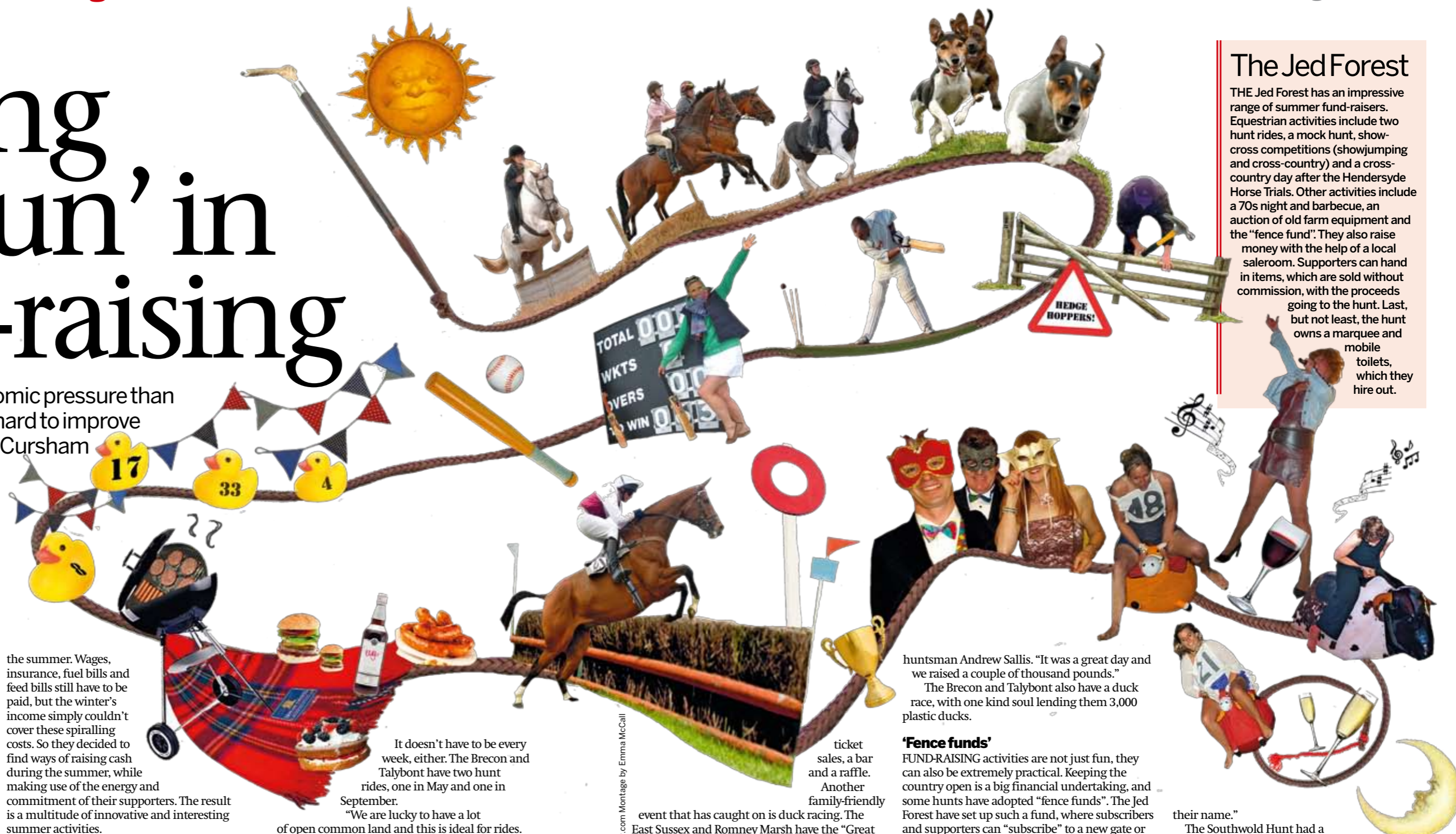
their name."

The Southwold Hunt had a similar scheme, where subscribers and supporters would go out in gangs and build fences. They put in around 350 in three years.

Balls, dances and discos are also an important part of the summer calendar. These range from grand events such as the East Sussex and Romney Marsh's Brightling Ball, or the North Cotswold's Back to the Raj summer ball, to barbecues and Elvis nights. Whatever the size or scale, the important thing from a fund-raising point of view is to keep costs down.

"This year, we did our own catering for our annual dinner, which was hard work, but made it much more profitable," says Peta Mellors.

There are a host of other summer activities going on around the UK, too many to mention. What is clear is that hunts are now channelling a new income stream — and are having a lot of fun in the process. **H&H**



The Jed Forest

THE Jed Forest has an impressive range of summer fund-raisers. Equestrian activities include two hunt rides, a mock hunt, show-cross competitions (showjumping and cross-country) and a cross-country day after the Hendersyde Horse Trials. Other activities include a 70s night and barbecue, an auction of old farm equipment and the "fence fund". They also raise money with the help of a local saleroom. Supporters can hand in items, which are sold without commission, with the proceeds going to the hunt. Last, but not least, the hunt owns a marquee and mobile toilets, which they hire out.

Pictures by www.sarahfarnsworth.co.uk and www.markwestwoodphotography.com Montage by Emma McCall

BACK FROM THE BRINK

THE Berks and Bucks Draghounds have had an altogether different sort of fund-raising to undertake this summer. They have had to find buyers for £325,000-worth of shares.

"Our kennels at Lambourn are held on trust for the hunt by shareholders," explains joint-master Jeffrey Hobby. "There are a total of 100 shares, each worth £5,000. Some of our shareholders have been involved for the thick end of 30 years and they finally decided to pass the baton on in the spring."

In all, around 60 of the 100 shares were put up for sale. If they had not been taken up, then the kennels would have had to be sold.

Luckily, the hunt found enough purchasers. "It was a mountain to climb, but we managed to do it. The hunt took out a mortgage, and we found purchasers for the remaining £175,000. Local farmers, supporters and even a vets' practice bought shares. It was amazing who does and who doesn't contribute, and it certainly made people value the hunt," says Jeffrey.