

# Hunting across the States



## Belinda Sillars's journey of a lifetime - Part One

Visiting different hunts is nothing new unless, that is, you travel halfway round the world complete with a 14.0hh pony, trap and three dogs. Belinda Sillars has never been one to conform; a bright, bubbly, personality brimming over with enthusiasm and a zest for life combined with an adventurous streak - all came together to produce a series of hunt visits on a journey that many of us can only dream about.

A native of Suffolk, Belinda has spent a lifetime with horses, ponies and dogs; she rode and drove from an early age and made such an impression on the late Tony Harvey during his tenure as huntsman of the Easton Harriers that he mentioned her attendance at a meet in the 1980s in his book, *Not a Penny in the Post*. 'At Eye White Hart on Monday 2nd February I thought I was going to hunt with no field but at the last minute Bibi Smith [Belinda Sillars] arrived driving her cob and exchanged the harness for a saddle'. Belinda spent many a happy hour out hunting before furthering her ridden career in eventing, dressage, show jumping and racing. With her own, much beloved Brambledown, Belinda was a regular on the amateur steeplechase

circuit, the pair qualifying for and competing in the Foxhunter Chase at Cheltenham.

Belinda makes her living creating bronze sculptures; anyone visiting race meetings or the eventing circuit will have seen her exhibition stand with its many interpretations of equines, hounds and wildlife. Her work has been a familiar sight on both sides of the Atlantic for many years with pieces inspired over the years by Belinda's animals and lifestyle. In the past two decades Brambledown has enriched the passion so recognisable in Belinda's work.

The mare's talent and resulting achievements carved a remarkable niche in the memory banks of those who know and saw them, long after the event. In 2002, Brambledown joined Belinda and her four dogs in America, exchanging the racetrack for a career in hunting. They travelled widely across the United States, visiting many of the foxhound packs to be found - from the cotton fields of Georgia to the mountains back in Virginia and the rolling grasslands of Kentucky, during which time Belinda made many good friends. On her retirement Brambledown returned to Suffolk to live with Scout, a

tri-coloured cross-bred weanling. Scout was so-named after the character in the book *To Kill a Mocking Bird* as, like her name-sake, Scout was very smart and always asking questions!

After Brambledown sadly passed away Belinda returned to the USA, this time with Scout who was, by now, broken to ride and drive. This new generation of pony and three dogs - the veteran terrier Sprout being the only canine from the original pack - continued Belinda's nomadic lifestyle from her base in Virginia. Living in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Belinda took Scout and the dogs up and down the mountains, regularly following the dirt roads of the Shenandoah Valley.

Scout soon learned to take everything in her stride, whether meeting bears, coyotes or any of the other wildlife not normally encountered in the UK, and each outing gave Belinda the opportunity to observe these wild animals in their own environ, encapsulating the images in her photographic memory and endowing her work with her deep passion

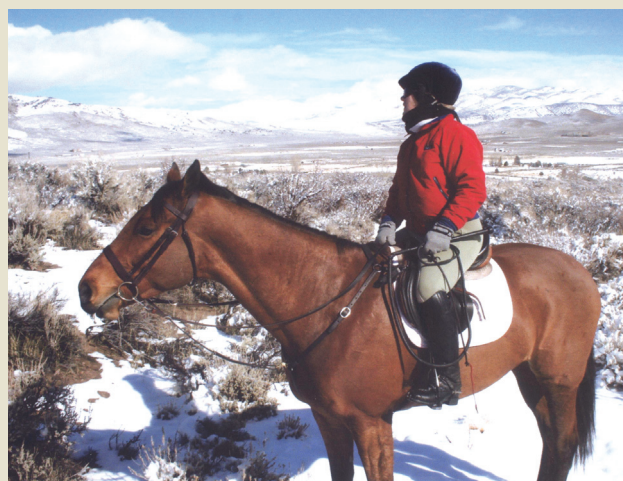
### Hunting in the Fall

While out driving Scout, the pony and Belinda would often meet the Blue Ridge hounds on exercise and before leaving Virginia they went cub-hunting in the Fall, an activity that Scout took in her stride. Huntsman at the Blue Ridge is Guy Allman, who was previously in hunt service with the Chiddingfold, Leconfield & Cowdray before moving to work under Nigel Peel MFH at the North Cotswold and taking the horn at the Mid Devon for some years. Guy was appointed to the Blue Ridge in the 2012-2013 season and the hunt's current Mastership is Linda J Armbrust, Anne W McIntosh and Brian E Ferrell.

The Blue Ridge territory encompasses Clarke County with parts of Warren County, Shenandoah County and Frederick County in Virginia, plus



Gerald Keel, huntsman of the Los Altos, with hounds.



Red Rock Hounds hunt terrain in Nevada - at high altitude and very cold!

Jefferson County in West Virginia. Followers enjoy farmland across rolling hills that contain open pasture and orchards with jumps that include chicken coops – some are quite large – tiger traps, post and rails and a few stone walls. “The Blue Ridge hounds are very traditional English and Guy has an innate love of all things canine; he has total rapport with his hounds,” says Belinda. “It was very hot still so we were allowed to hunt without jackets, thank goodness”.

Belinda also went cubbing with the Iroquois Hunt Club in Kentucky, where she and Brambledown used to live, giving Belinda a chance to renew her friendships with huntsman Jerry Miller and Lilla Mason who is now a Master.

The Iroquois is not named after a tribe of Red Indians as might be presumed, but after the first American horse to win the English Derby. The hunt club was formed in 1880 by General Roger D Williams and was recognised by the Masters of Foxhounds Association of America (MFHAA) in 1929. The year before, the hunt had purchased Grimes Mill, sited on the bank of Boone Creek near the Kentucky River. The mill was converted into a clubhouse with kennels and stables, while the huntsman’s house was conveniently just over the road.

Although referred to as foxhounds, the pack normally hunts coyote across its ten square mile territory of varied farmland in southern Fayette. Belinda explains: “Iroquois hounds are English in the main and, similar to the Blue Ridge, have traditional English bloodlines. At the Iroquois these include Cottesmore, Bicester with Whaddon Chase and North Cotswold lines. As well as the main pack the hunt retains a number of retired hounds sponsored by the Hound Welfare Fund. The fund’s mission statement reads ‘The Hound Welfare Fund was established to provide for retired Iroquois hounds in appreciation of their value on the hunt field. The program’s primary focus is to take injured and retired hounds and give them food and medical attention.’” Jerry uses his hounds to give blood transfusions should it be needed, such as if another hound has suffered a collision with a vehicle. The Iroquois was the first hunt to put tracking collars on hounds when hunting to ensure any that were lost during the day could be quickly recovered and returned to kennels.

Belinda returned to Virginia for a short while and, towards the end of 2013, she and the animals set off across the lower parts of the USA, over the Great Smoky Mountains, through ice storms into Texas and on to Flagstaff in Arizona, across the Mojave Desert to the outskirts of San Francisco – a journey of several months and many thousands of miles - stopping as and when she pleased to visit a number of hunts or take off into the hills and mountains or across deserts with Scout and her dogs.



**Belinda and Scout against one of the many rocky outcrops in Nevada.**

Belinda drove a truck with a typical American horse trailer in tow and her little trap tied on the back. Scout travelled loose in the trailer and at night she would eat up before lying down to sleep.

## Coyotes, bob cats and elk

Belinda headed to Hollister, California, and the Los Altos Hunt where the kennels are located on the amusingly-named Whisky Flats Road at Dinosaur Point, a huge national park, and it was while out driving with the trap that Belinda, Scout and the dogs encountered packs of coyotes, bob cats and herds of elk. “The coyotes were watching the dogs and calling to each other across the valley,” says Belinda. “It was so important that Scout could see all around her but, as she showed time and time again on this trip, she was completely unfazed”.

Belinda based herself at the kennels and Scout adored the hounds, often putting her muzzle to their fence and allowing them to give her a friendly lick. The pony also enjoyed showing off to the hunt horses, rearing up and kicking her heels in the paddock. Scout was extremely fit as, by now, she and Belinda could be hunting three or four days a week and driving with the trap on non-hunting days, the pony having time off when travelling in the trailer.

Hounds at Los Altos are the responsibility of Gerald Keel, another expatriot who spent seventeen years with the Old Dominion, and Claire Palmer and consist of English and cross-bred foxhounds. The hunt was established in 1953, originally being a pack of pet beagles hunting a drag scent. It was a move to a spacious site known as the ‘Play Pen’ that enabled foxhounds to be drafted in from other packs. Los Altos was formally recognised by the MFHAA in September 1958.

Says Belinda: “My friendship with Gerald and Claire goes back years; I used

to hunt with them when I had Brambledown. Parts of California have suffered a drought for over two years and horses are banned from some farms for fear of a shoe striking a flint and causing a spark in the tinder dry grass.

“One of the areas is mostly very flat and dry – and huge. What constitutes the whole of the Fens would be just one farm here. Like the Fens, the land is watered using irrigation ditches, huge dykes running alongside windbreak hedges and lining the farm tracks. The irrigation pipes themselves are located underground.

“A cattle ranch that I didn’t visit is up in the hills near San Francisco. Here coops are put over wire fencing to create hunt jumps. It was really hot and riders chose to wear sunglasses all the time as the light is very bright; most days we hunted in our shirts without jackets”.

In mid-January Belinda was invited by members of the Los Altos Hunt to accompany them at a joint meet held in the middle of the Mojave Desert. Taking part in the meet was Lynn Lloyd with her privately owned pack of Red Rock Hounds, she and Belinda soon became friends. The Mojave Desert is a significant area of South California situated between Las Vegas and Los Angeles and, despite the time of year when in the UK hunting days can be lost through sharp frosts or deep snow, it was very warm. The joint meet, which included beagles, harriers and draghounds, was a grand affair and held on an army base with people accommodated in hotels and the horses stabled on a fairground.

There is very little natural water in the desert, it is mostly piped in and Scout quickly learned to drink at any time that water was offered; her bond with Belinda grew very strong in such an extreme environment. Following the joint meet, and at Lynn’s invitation, Belinda made her way across the Sierra Nevada Mountains to visit Lynn at her base in Reno.

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