



Left: spirits and enthusiasm are at a high, as some of the 60-strong field enjoys a brief interlude. Below: Oliver Townend (left) up front with Henry Bailey MFH and huntsman, whose horse Oliver describes as "one of the best horses at his job that I have ever seen in any discipline"

A fresh feel and high spirits

Oliver Townend gets a taste of what it's like at the sharp end of hunting when he visits his local pack, the Wynnstay

Wynnstay, Pickhill Bridge Farm, Wrexham

If you'd asked me whether I wanted to jump an upright, hanging metal gate off an angle onto the road on a horse I'd never sat on before, at the end of January in an Olympic year with the start of the eventing season just five weeks away, the short answer would have been, 'Obviously not'.

But Henry Bailey, joint-master and huntsman of the Wynnstay had done so – and I was up front with him, hounds were hunting, so over we went. It wasn't the first or last gate we'd jump that day; He seems to like jumping gates nearly as much as he loves his hounds.

He explained that, as he likes his field master to have the field as close as possible, if he stopped to undo the gates, it would interrupt the flow of the day and slow things up.

It's a fair point, and to me it says two things: one, that confidence, enthusiasm and spirits are at a real high here, as everyone follows him over. And two, that his grey horse, which he had first, is one of the best horses at his job that I have ever seen in any discipline.

I've ridden horses with less ability round Badminton and Burghley and I was impressed to hear that he's now 16 and

Henry bought him as a four-year-old in Ireland. "I couldn't ride one side of him for the first year, but he's my boy; I'd do anything for that horse," he told me.

IN THE BACKGROUND

HUNTING has been in the background of my life at various points, but never at the forefront. I was based in Leicestershire at the start of my career at Kenneth Clawson's in the Atherstone country. When I set up on my own, I lived at Lubenham Lodge in the middle of the Fernie country, next to the hunt's most famous coverts, John Ball and Jane Ball.

I can remember being on top of John Ball and looking over, thinking, 'I've never

seen anything like this'. It was literally take your own line, hedge after hedge after hedge.

I've been spoilt, hunting in Leicestershire and also in Tipperary as a youngster, and I was brought up with the Rockwood Harriers at home in Yorkshire. Dad was keen on hunting – we used to go as a treat, on New Year's Day, with the Readyfield Bloodhounds.

For Dad, it was more about horsemanship and producing horses than hunting. So when I was asked to see how another rider at the top of their game does their job, I was interested to see it from the other side.

READY FOR THE OFF

THE evening before my day, I went to the hunt kennels to see



Field master Chris Stockton makes light work of a hedge



Oliver Townend talks to Jet Williams-Wynn, who lent him a horse for the day, at the meet

the hounds – and to borrow a hunting coat from Henry. The entire place was immaculate, just as I like my own Gadlas Farm to be, with beautiful old buildings, and rather like stepping back in time, in the best possible way.

Henry's kennel-huntsman, Hartley Crouch, showed us around, and he is clearly so proud and respectful of the hounds and of his job. They started this season with a largely new, young, team. Henry and his joint-master Harry Williams-Wynn – who also owns the hounds – are in their early 30s. Hartley is in his early 20s, and there is definitely a fresh, fun and very welcoming feel about the whole thing.

The meet was at the Owen family's Pickhill Bridge Farm, between Bangor-on-Dee and Wrexham. Henry says the Owens are "amazing hunting people who would do anything

for us". Like the vast majority of the 900 farmers in the Wynnstay country, they haven't turned a hair about the hunt crossing their land during this ridiculously rainy winter.

This is dairy farm country – wet-ground fences with big, stock-proof hedges and ditches. With its varied terrain, I think it would have everything to offer that a mad hunting person would like to see.

A friend who used to supply horses to hunt this part of the country, said the Wynnstay were renowned for needing to be well-mounted, and that's still very much the case.

Jet Williams-Wynn, Harry's wife, kindly lent me her horse, a lovely type and a good jumper that came from Keith Shore. Granted he did try to run out at the first fence of the day – a decent rail at an angle off the lane, which Henry had jumped and then the two lads between

him and me had run out at.

I didn't let him run out, but I did fall off, which necessitated a sprint in full view of the 60-strong field to catch him. We won't dwell further on that!

It was good to see all sorts of people I know at the meet, such as Edward Matson, Nicole Woodward, who was my PA when I first moved to Gadlas Farm, and Annie Dalton.

Of course there was a crowd of Clarks – former master Sir Jonathan, his daughter Polly Stockton, whose husband Chris is a field master, and their boys, who are going to go as well as their parents and grandfather.

It was a nice surprise to see my former British team-mate Nicola Wilson and her husband

Alastair, who was flying over the Wynnstay hedges on his great horse Hector.

A "PREMIER LEAGUE"

AFTER the meet, I didn't really spend any time with the field, but went up with Henry, who spoke to me about what he was doing and what he was looking for. He talked about the fact that, in his first season with them, he wasn't entirely tuned in to these hounds yet and that he had to trust them to draw a covert properly and give them enough time to do it.

I guess it isn't that different to getting on a five-star horse that's been ridden by Andrew Nicholson – you know it's going to do the job, but you don't yet know its idiosyncrasies.

I've been autumn hunting with the Wynnstay a few times and have been struck by how different the hounds look to how I expected old English hounds to be. They are lighter-framed, smaller and more athletic; agile, tough stayers.

From a horse perspective, they'd be Badminton and Burghley horses. Henry explained how former master and huntsman Richard Tyacke had developed a hybrid with the deep-scented, determined nature of the old English combined with the sharper, lighter modern English hound to suit this country perfectly.

As someone who's interested in horses' breeding, it was fascinating to learn about how

carefully a "premier league" pack such as the Wynnstay has been bred. And I loved seeing Henry's relationship with his hounds and how much he clearly loves them.

There is a parallel in what Henry and I do in that many people hunt or event as their hobby; they do it for pleasure. For us, it is our job. We need to keep a variety of people happy, and we need to be able to focus on our job and doing it well. That is how we earn our living, and I think it is easy for those

"There is a parallel in what Henry and I do"

who do it for fun to forget that. Henry is under pressure to succeed, as am I.

He said: "Lots of hunts put on a day akin to a team chase; we don't. But when the magic does happen, and it will do at some point during the day, if my field master has the field close behind me then they are right there and can see and hear it."

"The hounds are in front of you and your senses are on fire."

A REAL BUZZ

HE made it clear he's relishing the Wynnstay hounds, country and hard-riding field – and the support of Harry and Jet, saying: 'I've never been so happy. The Wynnstay is full of proper, worldly hunting

people who appreciate a good hunt and can ride well. I think it was fortuitous for both the Wynnstay and me that we came together at the right time."

Henry talked about how many elements there are to his day's hunting that he has to get right, and that one small thing he hates is making the speech at the meet and that it's so easy to forget to say something.

I can understand that. I'm naturally very shy, so when you stick a camera in my face at an event when emotions are running high, I don't always come across as I would like to.

Henry agrees: "When you're dealing with a pack of hounds, staff and a load of people and your day hasn't gone right, then if you let your disappointment and frustration show, it rubs off on them. I used to nitpick and be negative when things hadn't worked out, but I've learnt not to. This can be a lonely job and it helps if you have someone to share it with and lean on a bit."

There is a real air of rejuvenation and a buzz about the Wynnstay, which is great to see. Henry says: "If the sport is good, the punters will come."

He wants the performance of his hounds to do the talking; I want the performance, consistency and durability of my horses to do the talking. And when Ballaghmor Class does eventually retire from eventing, I'd say he might give Henry's grey horse a run for his money over the Wynnstay hedges. **H&H**



Above: hounds lead the field through floodwaters. Left: Hartley Crouch, kennel-huntsman, is "clearly so proud and respectful of the hounds," says Oliver



Joint-master Harry Williams-Wynn sails over a Wynnstay hedge