

Riding to Hounds

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My grandparents lived in a modest, slab and weatherboard cottage, which was located on the top of the hill next to the Riverstone Catholic church. In pride of place above the sideboard in their sitting room was a large, hand coloured photograph of the Sydney Hunt Club. The photograph, which was taken at Box Hill Farm in about 1903, shows George Terry - the Master of the Hunt Club; Frank Mason - my grandfather and Hunt Club Whip, my grandfather's cousin, Austin Smith and the Hunt Club hounds. The photograph originally came from Box Hill House and had been purchased by a Riverstone resident named Brookes at a clearance sale following George Terry's bankruptcy.¹ This was in about 1924.

I had always thought that the photograph was an interesting oddity. My understanding of hunting was that it was the somewhat dubious pastime of toffs. In the words of Oscar Wilde it was *the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable*.² Why were ordinary people of modest means involved and more particularly what was its connection with the Riverstone district?

The simple answer is that the Hunt Club's most enduring patrons were the Terry family. However, as with most things there are other dimensions to the explanation.

Hunting in the English tradition, dates back to the early days of the Colony when Sir Charles Fitzroy was governor. Fitzroy kept his own pack of foxhounds and hunted dingos in the areas west of Parramatta as far as Windsor and Penrith.³

In about 1864, Major Airey got together a pack of mixed hounds, which ultimately formed the origins of the Sydney Hunt Club. Later, Edward Terry took control of the Club and although its fortunes waxed and waned, his enthusiasm remained undaunted. Terry lived at Eastwood and until 1890 the Hunt Club was based there.

From about 1890 until 1907, the focus for the Hunt Club became the Riverstone, Box Hill and Rouse Hill area. This was largely because Edward Terry's nephew, George Terry, had become an ardent participant and also because the club had ready access to the Box Hill and Rouse Hill Estates.⁴ In 1894, George Terry became Master of the Hunt Club.⁵

At this time, hunts were held weekly during the cooler autumn and winter months and although the number of locals who took part was not great, the hunts were nonetheless important social and sporting events. They brought significant numbers of influential people to the district and were of great interest to the residents of the town and surrounding farms.

Hunting Sydney style was mostly about horses and horsemanship and although the participants adopted the traditional English style of dress, very few of the Club's meetings were in fact hunts. A more accurate description of their outings would be *riding to hounds*. They were commonly known as drag hunts. In modern parlance this conjures up quite a different image from the late 19th century reality. Drag hunting involved the laying of a scent trail for the hounds. This trail was laid by a rider – referred to as the *runner*, who dragged a bag of red herring and aniseed across the country. This allowed the *runner* to determine the difficulty and duration of the hunt. It also allowed for *checks* or breaks to be made at convenient locations like Box Hill House or Rouse Hill House where refreshments could be provided. More practically, the outing could be programmed to coincide with the train timetable.

In 1898 Harry “Breaker” Morant wrote to the Windsor and Richmond Gazette: *though you don't get a 'kill' when hunting with the drag hounds - which perhaps, from a humanitarian point of view, makes the sport better and cleaner - one does get a rattling gallop across country.* ⁶

Drag hunts, steeplechases and jumping contests became popular features of the Hawkesbury Show. Here the Hunt Club was able to commence and finish the hunt in the main arena.

In 1905 the *Gazette* described a typical meeting:

The Sydney Hunt Club met at Riverstone on the arrival of 1.30 pm train from Sydney last Saturday. Amongst those present were the Master of the hounds (Mr G.A. Terry) on Transvaal, Messrs D.G. Peel on Quondong, Lucas on Kildare, Eric Terry on Bon Ton, Dunlop on Trooper, W. Hilly on Vengeance, Lord on Red Bess, C. Terry on Daisy Bell, Bailey on My Jock, W. (Bill) Mason on Norman, Trevor Terry on Tatta, A. (Austin) Mason on O'Brien, W. Lacey on Jumbo, Brown on Quick Set, F. (Frank) Mason (Huntsman) on Larry, and A. (Austin) Smith (Whip) on Peter. There were many others both mounted and on wheels, who viewed the run from numerous points of vantage. Some time was lost at Riverstone Railway Station in unloading the horses, this station having bad facilities for such purposes. However, as soon as possible, the Master made a move in the direction of Box Hill where huntsmen and hounds were found in waiting. The pack was cast at once and quickly struck the line, which led the field over some beautiful hunting ground, across Messrs Rumery Bros Estate, whose courtesy in allowing the hunt to cross their land had been much appreciated, thence over the Windsor Road double in the Box Hill paddock, in the direction of the homestead, where a short halt was called. At 4.15 the hounds were again laid on the trail and hitting off the scent in the flat below the house, led the field over further excellent hunting country back to Riverstone, just in time to catch the return train for Sydney. The pace in both runs was severe and tried all the horses that were not in the best condition. It was a pleasant afternoon's hunting, members enjoying the gallop immensely. ⁷

The Hunt Club members saw themselves as being egalitarian. In 1907, a magazine called *The Lone Hand* published an article about hunting in New South Wales in which it was claimed: *It is a characteristic, I am proud to think, of Australia, where almost everybody is keen to encourage good sport, and where there is no class distinctions to surround hunting with any fence of snobbery.*⁸

These sentiments most probably had some truth to them. However, the cost of the sport would have excluded most people. The same article explained that the expense of hunting was *surprisingly small*. The cost of fodder was between 7 shillings and 10 shillings a week, while 12 horses could be transported by railway to an outing and returned for 29 shillings. In addition to this, there were other incidental expenses. This resulted in an actual cost of between 12 shillings and 15 shillings per week to maintain a horse. This amount may have seemed small to the well-to-do, but for others, it would have been a substantial sum.

Notwithstanding this, the Hunt Club meetings were an incongruous mixture of Sydney society people, locals from Riverstone and surrounding districts, men, a few women and the occasional child. Regular participants included the Terry family – George, Trevor, Charley, Edward, Claude and Eric, the Governor Sir R.W. Duff, numerous army officers, A. B. (*Banjo*) Paterson and Harry (*The Breaker*) Morant. Locals included Austin Smith, Jack Fitzsimmons (son of the owner of the Royal Hotel), the Mason brothers - Bill, Mick, Austin, Sam, Frank and Pat, Chris Hills, S. Hunter, M. O'Callaghan (Hawkesbury Agricultural College), McQuade from Windsor and Mrs Stace. Mrs Stace was an accomplished rider who despite the handicap of having to ride side-saddle still outclassed many of the other riders.

The *Lone Hand* also painted an idyllic picture of the relationship between the hunters and the local landowners: *Some praise is due the people over whose country the hunting is done. The farmers and settlers have exhibited the best of good nature in allowing hunting over their properties. All they want is that the fences, if broken, should be restored, and this no hunting man would think of neglecting to do. Unlike the farmer in the English hunting counties, who sells his horses and produce to the hunting men, our people have nothing to gain from hunting, but from pure love of the sport they throw their lands open for it.*⁹

Again, these views are in the main true - but not totally. There is evidence that the Hunt Club activities were a source of income for the locals.

Both my grandfather and Austin Smith worked on George Terry's Box Hill Estate and both regularly rode horses owned by Terry at Hunt Club Meetings. I have no doubt that their participation was in part because of their love of horses but equally because of their employment on the Estate. I also suspect that the reason that they gained employment on the Estate was because of their horse skills.

There is also evidence that the locals sold horses to members of the Club. It has always been a recollection within my family that the Mason boys used their skills to select and train untried horses which they subsequently showed at Hunt Club meetings and then sold to wealthier members. Notable examples are Sam Mason's *CY*, a brown gelding that George Terry purchased and then shipped to India. Sam also sold him a hunter called *McGinty* while Bill Mason sold him *Bryan O'Lynn* and *Larry*. All three horses became successful jumpers at Hunt Club meetings and at local agricultural shows. Ironically my grandfather subsequently rode *Larry* on behalf of George Terry for at least six years. Another of the Mason brothers – Austin, sold a blue roan pony to R.W. Duff, son of the Governor. The Gazette reported: “(the pony) *is now located at Government House with its mane hogged and its tail cut square*”.¹⁰

There is no evidence to dispute the assertion that the local landowners willingly made their land available for the hunts. In fact there are reports of the hunts crossing Wilkie's Flat as well as the Rumery's, Skinner's, Seargent's and Mason's paddocks. The only report of any objection came from a writer who called himself *Democrat*. *Democrat* wrote to the Gazette suggesting that the Hunt Club member's should: *go farther afield than poking about among orchards and cultivated paddocks – to the disgust, and frequently, injury of the hard-working bread winner*.¹¹ This letter prompted a rambling response from Harry Morant attacking *Democrat* and citing Banjo Paterson as an example of one of those *best fellows, keenest sportsmen* that are *keen on hunting*.¹² However, *Democrat* had the last word. He made two observations. The first was that the hunting fraternity were horse-mad and that just because they worshipped the horse, it was not necessary to expect others to do the same. The second and more insightful, was his concern about the introduction and breeding of animals such as foxes and rabbits, for the chase.¹³

Interest in the Hunt Club seems to have waned in the period leading up to the 1914-1918 War. This may have been partly due to the fact that George Terry had over extended himself financially and was strapped for cash. He was subsequently made bankrupt and had to sell his Box Hill Estate.

Many of the Hunt Club members were also serving Army officers and were required for duty in South Africa and later Europe.

Whatever the reason, Hunt Club meetings ceased to be a feature of the Riverstone-Box Hill district.

The subsequent fortunes of the Hunt Club members varied greatly. However, horses and horsemanship continued to be central to their lives.

Harry Morant joined the Australian Boer War contingent and was promoted to Lieutenant after the relief of Kimberley. In 1901 an English Court Marshall found him guilty of murdering Boer prisoners and he was executed by a British firing squad. Banjo Paterson wrote a personal sketch of

his former friend, which concluded: *His death was consistent with his life, for though he died as a criminal he died a brave man facing the rifles with his eyes unbandaged.* It would seem that the manner of his death, exemplified those characteristics that he most valued.¹⁴

Austin Smith enlisted in the 12th Regiment of the Australian Light Horse and took part in the last, great cavalry charge at Beersheba. He was subsequently wounded in the head by a sniper's shot and although he recovered he did not return to the district.

My grandfather did not go to war. He had only one arm. In 1922 Smith's Weekly reported:

*When the Sydney Hunt Club used to hold its outings at Box Hill one of the personalities of the 'meets' was the whip Frank Mason, mounted on a 14.2. He cut a striking figure in the pink coat, peaked cap, and white breeches. Although he had lost an arm in a gun accident he had a perfect seat with reins wound round his arm and whip in hand he was always at the Kill. Any fence that Mason would not navigate was left alone by the rest. He was also a regular competitor at the Hawkesbury Show Jumping Competition. He still lives at Riverstone. As though to show his versatility, he knocked up 60 runs one day last season.*¹⁵

At the time my grandfather was supporting his family by casual farm work and by buying and selling livestock. The article impressed the manager of the Riverstone Meatworks who consequently offered him the job of company watchman. This brought with it security, award wages and a much improved standard of living.

Mrs Stace continued to compete at jumping events and was a regular competitor at the Hawkesbury Show. In 1915 she won the Ladies High Jump Championship of the World.¹⁶

The Sydney Hunt Club still exists but is now located in the MacArthur Region.

¹ Oral information given to me in 1999 by my uncle, Denis Mason.

² Oscar Wilde, "A Woman of No Importance", Act 1, 1893.

³ First Check, "Hunting in N.S.W", The Lone Hand, 2nd September 1907, p504.

⁴ Ibid, pp504, 505.

⁵ Windsor and Richmond Gazette, 25th August 1894, p4.

⁶ Ibid, 24th September 1898, p4.

⁷ Ibid, 15th July 1905, p7.

⁸ First Check, "Hunting in N.S.W", The Lone Hand, 2nd September, 1907, p510

⁹ loc cit.

¹⁰ Windsor and Richmond Gazette, 27th October 1894, p4.

¹¹ Windsor and Richmond Gazette, 10th September 1898. P10.

¹² Ibid, 24th September 1898, p9.

¹³ Ibid, 1st October 1898, p7.

¹⁴ The Sydney Mail, 12th April 1902.

¹⁵ Bluey, Smith's Weekly, 22nd July 1922.

¹⁶ Hawkesbury District Agricultural Association, "The Hawkesbury on Show", 1986, p35.