



Hunting as corporate entertainment?

Shooting and fishing have long been popular ways for businesses to entertain and network, but would it work in the hunting field? After a day with the Hursley Hambledon, Caroline Bankes thinks so

THE countryside's no stranger to corporate entertainment. Every smart trout river sees hedgefundlers flailing their rods merrily and City money is the lifeblood of many commercial shoots. But hunting days specifically for the pinstriped brigade? Unheard of – until now. “I didn’t really know what to expect,” admits Chris Jowett, a partner at chartered surveyors Smiths Gore. Mounted on his wife’s coloured former intermediate eventer, he was among a dozen land agents, accountants, asset managers and estate agents to be invited by law firm Clarke Willmott to a private hunting day. Guy Hurst, a partner at Clarke Willmott, has taken guests hunting with the firm’s local pack, the Hursley Hambledon, for the past three years, providing a horse if needed and paying the cap. “Last year, I took a couple of guests who had only ridden, but never hunted, and they had a

great time. This year, I thought it would be more fun to actually have a private date for the use of Clarke Willmott clients and contacts and the masters of the Hursley Hambledon were very kind in allowing me to do this,” he says.

Most of Guy’s work comes from land agents, estate agents and buying agents, who refer clients, and this was a good way of saying thank you, as well as being a brilliant means of introducing influential people to the pleasures of hunting.

“Probably about 95 per cent of my clients and referrers are involved in country pursuits in one form or another, and it seemed an obvious activity to organise,” he says.

Does it interfere with the season?

THE day was organised for 4 March, at Woodside Stud, Grimstead, on the borders of the Hursley’s country. The hunt’s Hampshire country is huge, stretching from Petersfield to Salisbury, and

holding a meet here would normally only attract a handful of followers.

“If we’d had a meet at Grimstead, the field wouldn’t have been more than 10-20 strong because it is right on the borders of our country,” says Julie Butler, one of the hunt’s four masters and the organiser of the Clarke Willmott day.

The Hursley Hambledon is a two-day-a-week pack, although they can go out more often after 31 January when the shooting season is over. That week, the hunt had met on Wednesday and were meeting at Bury Lodge, Hambledon, on the Saturday.

“We’re still providing subscribers with the same number of days,” points out Julie.

The hunt took 12½ couple out on the private day to ensure the hounds were not put under too much pressure.

“We limit the day to 10-12 riders and held it on a Friday as this suited the business professionals who were out. The idea is they can see how hounds work,” says Julie.

Huntsman Stephen Burton was very supportive of the day and, without a big field behind him, was able to talk informally to the invited guests.

The formula is not new to the hunt, but this was the first time it had been approached by a



Clarke Willmott partner Guy Hurst with Hursley Hambledon joint-masters Nicky Williams and Julie Butler and Smiths Gore partner Chris Jowett

“We have to look at fresh ways to introduce people to hunting”

Julie Butler



Hursley Hambledon huntsman Stephen Burton with hounds

company to buy a day. Since the ban, the Hursley Hambledon have offered a private hunting day in the auction of promises every year at their point-to-point at Hackwood Park. It has proved a popular fund-raiser and effective means of enabling potential hunt supporters, who don't subscribe, to give something back. Neighbouring pack the HH has also auctioned private hunting days.

“In these difficult times post the ban, we have to look at fresh ways to introduce people to hunting and to raise additional revenue,” says Julie.

Clarke Willmott has an office in the Hursley Hambledon's country and the firm acts for the Countryside Alliance and the Masters of Foxhounds Association, so has strong affiliations with hunting, albeit usually from behind a desk, not the back of a horse.

Did it work?

THE trails were laid at a sedate pace through the beautiful woods of the 5,500-acre Clarendon Estate, to take into account the mixed riding abilities of all those out. Kevin Allen, an associate director of estate agents John D Wood, looking immaculate on his 18.2hh warmblood Max, had hunted as a child and for the past 20 seasons went out with the New Forest, was an MFH and now sits on the hunt's executive committee. He bought Max as a dressage horse, but at 15 has retired him to the hunting field “which he finds far more enjoyable”.

Looking slightly less confident was Sholto

Moger, an associate director at Strutt & Parker in Salisbury. He had dashed into the office that morning, polished off his emails, borrowed some jodhpurs from a colleague and leapt aboard one of Julie's reliable hirelings. Shooting and fishing are his more usual sporting pursuits and he hadn't ridden since this time last year, on the last hunting day with Clarke Willmott. That day he'd had a tumble, but this year he remained firmly on board, apart from a slight wobble when the horse slipped.

“The meet was fantastic. Accidental hunting is something I seem to have developed a taste for,” he enthuses.

“Providing the jumping is tempered and the horses are handpicked from the carthouse stables, I would love to go again,” he adds.

Lovely weather, lots of port and no fallers — the day proved a massive success.

“It was an unusual but very enjoyable outing and provided a great opportunity to be able to meet new people from a range of businesses that complement our work,” says Sarah Butler, a senior surveyor at Smiths Gore, out on her 17-year-old roan, a former Pony Club and intermediate eventer and riding club team horse at championship level.

And would it work for other hunts?

“I could see it working in other countries,” says Julie.

Future plans are being made for a hunt breakfast and tea afterwards, so the company's non-riding clients can come along and hear more about hunting.

“It's really a variation of a newcomers' day,” explains Julie.

Judging by the level of support among the field for spending a Friday afternoon galloping in the sunshine, rather than being glued to a computer, it's no surprise Clarke Willmott has already booked a day next year. And the invitations will definitely take pride of place on their recipients' mantelpieces. **H&H**



Barrister and judge Francis Chamberlain (left) talks to Guy Hurst and Sholto Moger

HUNT APPOINTMENTS

STAGHOUNDS

Devon & Somerset (exempt hunting).— 21 April, Copletham Cross; 23, Colland Cross, Hawkridge; 26, Liscombe; 28, Wellshead; 30, Landacre (to finish), 11am.

BLOODHOUNDS

Coakham.— 25 April, The Bull at Benenden, 12 noon.

HUNT SECRETARIES

WE are happy to continue to publish hunt appointments. Please send your meet cards to Catherine Austen at our editorial address, or email to catherine_austen@ipcmedia.com. We publish meets from the Thursday of publication through to the Saturday of the following week. Please get meets in promptly.