

## MAIL SPOTLIGHT ON BOTH SIDES IN THE BLOOD SPORT DEBATE

FOX-HUNTERS clashed with animal rights campaigners yesterday in angry scenes almost as traditional as the Boxing Day meets themselves.

Banner-waving hunt saboteurs gathered in town squares to jeer those who turned out to answer a call to defend the sport.

In an attempt to restore its tarnished image, the Campaign for Hunting spent thousands on newspaper advertisements inviting the public to attend one of 400 meets across the country. The animal activists reacted by pouring scorn on hunt followers, particularly Prince and Princess

Michael of Kent, who rode with the Beaufort in Gloucestershire. League Against Cruel Sports official Ian Rodgerson said: 'It's disgraceful that the royals should have anything to do with the hunt. There's a growing public awareness that they shouldn't be involved with this kind of thing.'

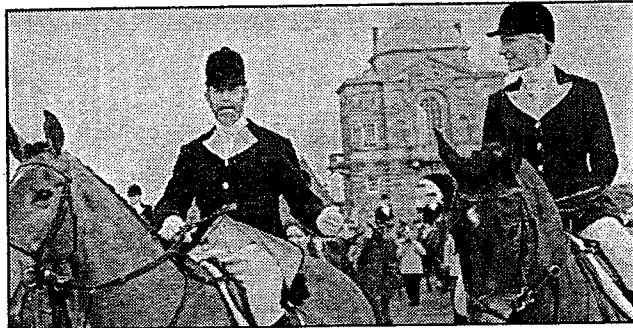
A woman of 69 had her black riding coat torn when two woman protesters tried unsuccessfully to drag her from her horse at a meeting of Prince Charles's favourite hunt, the Quorn, in Leicestershire. Mrs Barbara Symington said later: 'I suppose it was the equivalent of being mugged. But it won't deter me.'

The Quorn — at the centre of recent controversy after opponents filmed a fox being dug out then thrown to hounds — was forced to break with tradition when

councillors banned it from meeting in Loughborough's town square. Instead, the 150 riders met at a farm owned by a member.

The Hunt Saboteurs Association denied its members were involved in the attack on Mrs Symington. National secretary Cameron Evans, who led three vanloads of protesters from Nottingham, said: 'We're only out to disrupt the killing of foxes and have no animosity towards the riders.' A saboteur was taken to hospital after being kicked by a horse during a meet of the Surrey Union Hunt near Guildford.

With fox-hunting likely to remain hotly-debated in 1992, the Daily Mail yesterday sent writers to look at both sides of the argument. One joined the Avon Vale Hunt, while the other met up with saboteurs trying to spoil its sport.



Scorn: Prince and Princess Michael of Kent with the Beaufort yesterday

# Hunts' tally of hate



SANDRA PARSONS  
with the Avon  
Vale saboteurs

IT IS still dark when the three thin figures gather in the church car park, blowing on icy fingers.

In their torn jeans and ripped jumpers, they look like the people Santa forgot. Refugees, perhaps, from some unspeakable disaster. They are, in fact, the first arrivals from the Bristol and Bath hunt saboteurs groups. And they see themselves not as refugees from disaster but as agents hoping to avert one.

The rest of Bristol was still sleeping off the effects of Christmas Day, when the sabs — as they are commonly known — set out to save foxes from the Boxing Day meet of the Avon Vale Hunt.

By 8.30am their numbers have swelled to a sleepy-eyed 13. On a bleak hillside, they meet up with their leader, 25-year-old microbiology graduate Mark Freeman, spokesman for the Bath Hunt Saboteurs Association.

## Burning

With an Army officer's blend of expertise and easy authority, he begins his briefing for this pre-meet, a pre-emptive strike designed to flush out any foxes, which might be threatened by the forthcoming day's sport.

There are four woods within a five mile area which the hunt might go through. Mr Freeman points them out on an Ordnance Survey map, assigning a different group to each. 'You've each got a plastic bag with a map, rook scarers, padlock and chain. Chain any gates, light the rook scarers, and for God's sake, don't hang around any longer than you need.'

Twenty minutes later, Mr Freeman and his group are pounding across muddy fields to put rook scarers — six or seven firecrackers attached to slow burning rope — in the trees around an electricity sub-station.

Two hours and many miles of jogging later, the sabs regroup. By now it is 10.30am and they drive the few miles to the tiny village of Lacock, near Bath, where the hunt is meeting.

Outside the pub they find it. Men and women in black or scarlet jackets sip port as their steaming hunters stamp impatiently, tossing snoring heads.

The sabs, eyes glinting with rage, produce their banners and hold them in silence. Murder is a crime, not a sport, says one. Ban blood sports now, says another. Hunting is murder. Fox hunts kill. 'Fox hunts kill!' says an aristocratic-looking man on a chestnut horse. 'Who cares?'

'This is just like the movies,' gushes an American woman. 'Isn't it fun?'

Not for the sabs it isn't. To them, the whole thing is deadly serious.

It's good there's a lot of police here today because it means we'll probably be quite safe,' says Andrew, using time off from his job as a trainee radio producer in Germany to do his bit for the cause. 'We respect our

## The sleepy-eyed 13 with a map, a padlock and a serious mission

policy of non-violence but the hunt doesn't always.'

At 11am the hunt is off, sabs in hot pursuit. Supporters outnumber them 100 to one and hunt insults as the sabs stop by a field, yelling in triumph as the first rook scarers go off, forcing the huntsman to call off his hounds.

## Disgust

At a word from Mr Freeman, the sabs suddenly run across a field to a public footpath, blowing hunting horns and doing the hunting holler. To their delight they succeed in drawing off the hounds.

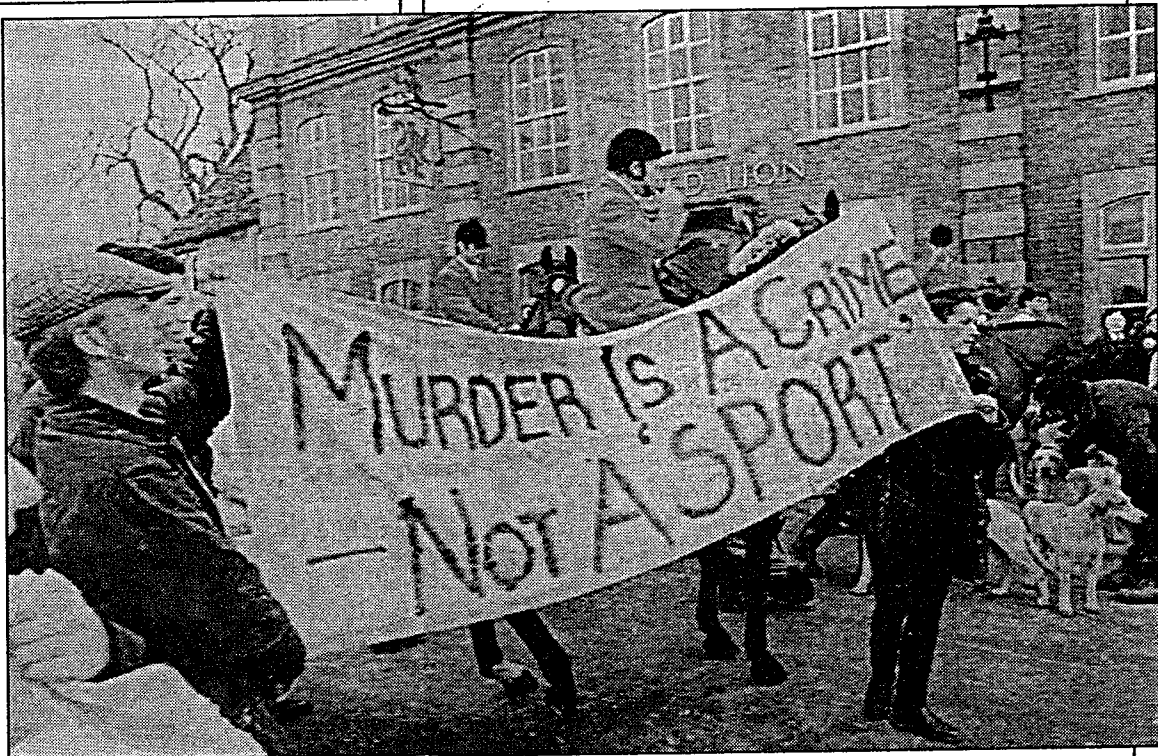
For a moment it looks as if there might be fighting as enraged supporters pull the sabs off the field. But the

police are not far away and the supporters resort to sarcasm instead. One climbs back into her Range Rover, snorting in disgust: 'Why don't you just go back to your towns?'

Mr Freeman responded: 'People who support hunting always make out it's something only country people understand. But it's just not true.'

Nearly five hours after starting, the sabs are ready to move on to their next mission — sabotaging a beagle hunt for hares a few miles away.

The Avon Vale sab, they conclude, was a success. 'We've given the foxes a chance,' says Mr Freeman, 'although we may never find out whether they got a kill or not.'



Protest: Hunt opponents in the village of Lacock

Picture: HUGH PINNEY



DAVID JACK with  
the Avon Vale Hunt

THE hunt follower was enraged as the loud crack of a rook scarer shattered the calm of the countryside.

'It's bloody dangerous setting off fireworks near to horses,' he fumed as a thick plume of smoke rose in the distance. 'And these people call themselves animal lovers.'

Eighty horses and riders from the Avon Vale Hunt were thundering into the countryside around Lacock, as they had for more Boxing Days than anyone cared to remember.

Hunt secretary Major Malcolm Firth watched as the speeding horses left the hunt saboteurs in their wake. He was not riding but eagerly followed the hunt along with his son Richard, a serving major in the 4th Royal Dragoon Guards.

They agreed the huntsmen's failure to fully explain the nature of their sport over the years had confused the public.

'There's a great deal of mumbo jumbo spoken on both sides of the fence,' said Major Firth Jnr.

'I would say nine out of ten people come hunting for a jolly good run across the countryside,' added his 71-year-old father. 'They don't give a damn whether they catch a fox.'

It's the glorious uncertainty of the whole day that attracts people. You just don't know what's going to happen next.'

It's a jolly good run. Who cares if we don't catch a thing?

One hour into the hunt the fox was spotted dashing across a field. But he ran rings round his pursuers. Janet Fitzjohn, 53-year-old joint master of the hunt for the past two seasons, wasn't too bothered.

'I'm very queasy and I hate the killing,' she admitted. 'I hunt because it's a fantastic sport and it's great for releasing tensions.'

Two hours into the hunt, with the fox still in the driving seat, Major Firth Sr decided to call it a day. Taking a final look at the riders, he said: 'The perception the antis have of the fox is of a cuddly Basil Brush type. But they're really indiscriminate killers.'

As dusk fell, the hunt returned to Lacock with one kill under its belt. It had defied the saboteurs by pursuing some six foxes during the day. But five of them escaped.