



With hounds baying at his heels, Matthew Parris struggles manfully, and sweatily, to finish ahead of the pack. As foxhunting wanes, this sport is growing in popularity

or horses, hounds and runners. It has introduced a new word into the countryman's vocabulary. "We cross John's et-aside," I heard one huntsman explain.

The hunt starts with agreement all round as to where huntsmen and followers will ramble, and where they will not. Everybody — horsemen, peccators and human prey — knows in advance the route he hunt will take.

Everyone, that is, except the hounds. Each course is different and they have only their noses to guide them. They hunt like a pack of animated hoovers. "They hardly use their eyes," Jonathan exclaimed. "Flaps of skin get in the way, anyway. If you run in zig-zag, so will they, unless he scent drifts. These have only two seasons' experience, but as they get cleverer, we're going to try loops, and figures of eight, to test their skill."

No doubt. But having found, it is possible almost to lick to death. My turn soon came. Mischievously, Roger Clark tossed a bagful of little bits of sausage in my direction. I was pawed to the ground within seconds then lovingly slobbered over until rescued. Those who have suffered from the attentions of an over-friendly family Labrador might like, in their mind's eye, to try multiplying the recollection by 12 and adding a pint of canine saliva. The smell was overpowering. For a pheromone-fed tribe, these

hounds are no slouches at producing pheromones of their own.

But I had fallen for them. We joined the hunt and its followers in the farmyard afterwards for mulled wine, and the chase had been preceded by sherry, ginger biscuits and horse manure. Though I'm not wild about killing animals for fun, I have nothing against huntsmen and this was a jolly crowd, a friendly mix of squires, farmers, gamekeepers, labourers and the inevitable horsey types with their daughters.

I liked them well enough, but it's all a bit — how shall I say? — hyper. Wherever you have horses in Britain, you have the most almighty song and dance, and everyone starts dressing up. It seems that when Englishman meets horse, a great deal of prancing around ensues, and not by the horse. Speaking, if I may, as these people's prey, I must confess that I felt more in common with the hounds.

Sipping the mulled wine afterwards in the four-wheel drive, as riders in funny clothes attempted three-point

turns on horseback to refill their glasses, and mothers proudly watched their daughters on ponies, I could hear, above the Sunday pleasures of Suffolk woman and Suffolk man, a muffled bark and bay from the kennels whither the bloodhounds had been taken.

I experienced at that moment a feeling any other serious long-distance runner would share. I felt I would prefer to join the bounds in their kennel for a post-race drink. I know I would have been made welcome.