

Top brass

→ From coronets and curlicues, to foxes and hares in full flight, hunt button designs are varied and many. But one thing never changes, the pride and honour attached to being awarded your button. **CHARLOTTE COOPER** takes a look at the history of these links to hunting's past and their place in the field today.



We do it without thinking, sneaking a look at the buttons of those around us on the hunting field and thinking how much better our own coats would look with the addition of three black or brass buttons with our hunt's emblem upon them. But how do you go about doing this and what do buttons mean?

Hunt buttons hark back to the liveries worn by servants of aristocratic houses and mark the difference between merely being a subscriber to a hunt and a member. At some hunts they entitle you to wear a coloured hunt collar on your jacket, and for a man, gaining your button also means you may wear a red coat.

However, you cannot apply for hunt buttons, they are awarded to you at the discretion of the masters and what you need to do to get your button varies from hunt to hunt and master to master. Some hunts seem to shower them on everyone who has subscribed for a certain number of years or allowed the use of their land, others recognise acts of courage or selflessness, but most buttons are earned by making yourself very helpful, both on and off the field - so a campaign of gate-opening, trail-laying and helping out at every event and fundraiser could potentially pay off.

Though still in her early 20s, Grove and Rufford supporter Faye Wilson could be said to have gone beyond the call of duty - having managed to walk nine couple of hound puppies in the brief four years she



Faye Wilson wearing her Grove and Rufford hunt buttons

has ridden with the hunt.

"The Grove and Rufford whelps a lot of litters each year and I walked three couple last year alone," said Faye. "I enjoy helping the hunt in this way and also help out with the supporters' club and the hunter trials."

"The hunt is like a big family and receiving my button was exciting and a real privilege. I really feel part of things."

Grove and Rufford senior master Jane Strawson added: "Who gets buttons can

"HUNT BUTTONS... MARK THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MERELY BEING A SUBSCRIBER TO A HUNT AND A MEMBER."

be quite a contentious issue. I don't give many out - maybe one or two each season - but Faye is a good example of someone who really supports the hunt."

Hunting artist Tania Still admits to being slightly obsessed by hunt buttons, ever →



Charlotte Cooper wrote for *Horse & Hound* for many years and more recently has worked at the Countryside Alliance. She lives in Derbyshire and hunts with the Burton.



Photo: Angie Lock

Former Bicester and Whaddon Chase huntsman Patrick Martin displays his huntsman's buttons

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her wrists and the part they play in her chosen profession - and her interest in hunt buttons has continued. For the past three or four years all her hunt paintings have featured the button of the pack featured alongside her signature and last year she amalgamated all those buttons into a design she had printed as material and made into a dress.

"I wore it to Ascot, but nobody twigged what the design was - I was a little miffed!" she said. She also displays her Zetland hunt buttons on the black coat she wears for exhibitions with a red waistcoat to which she has added the hunt's cuff buttons.

"It means I get to wear them regularly. I was so excited to receive them - it really makes you feel part of the community of the hunt and you sit a little bit prouder."

Another artist whose work regularly involves hunt buttons is the photographer Nico Morgan. Nico said: "It's never planned, but if the light falls on them in a certain way and they catch my eye I can't resist photographing them. The combination of new, brass buttons on a red coat is very special." The cover of this magazine is proof.

Flying instructor Chris Childs could not wait for the opening meet of the Ashford Valley Tickham this year as it was his first opportunity to wear his new red coat

with buttons and collar.

Chris has been a staunch supporter of the Ashford Valley Tickham for the past six years. He is on the hunt committee, helps organise the Christmas party, hunter trials, point-to-point and is generally always available to help the hunt. But he is also a master in all but name, with responsibility for his own bit of the hunt country for which he organises 23 meets each year and liaises with farmers and landowners.

"It is a real honour and privilege to be awarded your button and I can't wait to start wearing them," he said, prior to the new season. "I value the part the hunt plays in the countryside and having my button means I am a part of that." ●

Hunting buttons - the lowdown

Hunt buttons are relics of the livery of noble families from the 19th century. Each hunt has its own distinctive button and there may be different designs for those worn on hunt coats and (evening) dress coats.

Hunt buttons may only be worn by those who have been awarded them by the masters of a hunt. It is an honour to be awarded the button and is a visible recognition of service to the hunt.

It is seen as rude to wear the buttons of one hunt when following another, except as a visitor.

On receiving the button a man is entitled to wear a red coat with brass buttons, and ladies continue to wear a black coat with (usually) black, vulcanite or plastic hunt buttons and the hunt collar.

The number of buttons you wear is also proscribed. These are the normal rules - but there are of course exceptions!

- Three buttons - hunt subscribers;
- Four buttons - masters;
- Five buttons - hunt staff, huntsman and whippers-in;
- Six buttons - the whip and huntsman of some hunts, with links to old aristocratic families - like the North Cotswold, which is linked to the Earls of Coventry.

A collection of more than 900 hunt buttons amassed by the late Neil McShane, an avid hunting man and amateur jockey, and covering most packs in the UK and Ireland, sold for more than £5,000 in 2013.

since receiving hers from the Zetland on her 21st birthday.

"I'd hunted with them since I was about 12 and it was a sort of birthday present from the hunt. I'd also recently donated a painting which had made some money for them. Sadly I never got to hunt wearing them, but I did used to have an old brass hunt button of my grandfather's sewn under the lapel of my hunting jacket, where no-one could see it!"

Tania still follows the Zetland - on foot now in deference to the welfare of



Celebrated artist Tania Still (left) wears a dress in a hunt button print of her own design