

A dream come true

→ The Woolaston Bassets were only founded in 2014, but as **HENRIETTA RUTGERS** discovers, there is already solid support for hunting's newest pack.

Imagine forming a new pack of hounds. What a daunting task and where would you start? This is exactly what the committee that make up the Woolaston Bassets did and they now proudly hold the accolade of the first new hunt to be formed and registered in the UK since the Hunting Act came into force in 2005. This pack is by no means a one season wonder, and with a vast registered country – comprising much of South Monmouthshire right down to the Bristol Channel plus a swathe of new country in West Gloucestershire between the Rivers Wye and Severn which hasn't seen working hounds for over a century – they are certainly not short of places to lay trails and work hounds. Trails are laid over open countryside, not in coverts, to mimic the quarry that bassets hunted before the introduction of the Hunting Act (the hare) and therefore not only do followers get an uninterrupted view of hounds working, it enables both the hunting and shooting fraternities to operate, which is vital for the survival of both.

Joint Masters are husband and wife team, Norman and Hannah Matthews who founded the pack in 2014, describing it as "a dream come true". Norman has been involved in hunt service all his life from the age of 15 when he left school and went to Ireland to work for the North Down Harriers. He has since worked for other packs such as the Cotswold, North Staffordshire, Tivyside and five seasons as



Henrietta Rutgers is part of the Countryside Alliance hunting team. While her local pack is the Golden Valley she has stated an ambition to get out with the Woolaston as soon as she can.



Fabio

Joint Master at the Curre and Llangibby. Hannah has also hunted all of her life and was once secretary to the Curre and Llangibby, so between them they have a wealth of experience which they are clearly putting to good use passing on knowledge to young hunting enthusiasts. Hannah tells me that they already have a core of young whippers-in learning the necessary skills and developing a passion to keep the pack going.

Describing setting up a new pack of hounds as "analogous to creating a new regiment in the Army," in so far as Hunts and Regiments have "always been there" and therefore setting up a new one is unheard of, treasurer and secretary John Carter steered the committee through the administrative process. This involved registering the pack with the Masters of Basset Hounds Association and improving the old kennels at Woolaston. It took about nine months to get probationary



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registration and once the kennels were inspected in November, 2013, the Woolaston Bassets were granted full registration in April, 2014.

Whilst John handled the paperwork, Norman got on with forming the pack from hounds that some of the other registered basset packs in England generously drafted to get this one started. Hannah says: "This involved a lot of hard work trying to convince people – you cannot be a registered pack without hounds, and other packs loathe to give hounds away to unregistered packs – a chicken and egg situation!" The Four Shires drafted one couple of hounds and then two and a half couple of whelps which started the ball rolling. The Westerby gave an older hound called Teacher, and the Leadon Vale gave a bitch called Fable to whelp – she had four couple of pups – and then the East Lincolnshire drafted three entered hounds. The pack was formed!

The inaugural opening meet was held

at The Old Rectory, Woolaston in October, 2014, and over a hundred people turned out to follow this embryonic pack of three and a half couple which amazed and delighted the committee.

In July, 2015, the Woolaston attended their first ever hound show at the Festival of Hunting in Peterborough. Anyone who has ever been to the Festival of Hunting will know that it is a very correct affair – men in suits, women in dresses and hats – where hunting's elite come together to judge the champion dog and bitch hounds. The prestige of winning here is great, as are the picnics that adorn the car park at lunch time and the atmosphere I would describe as daunting for any first-timer showing hounds. Nothing was expected of this new pack against the seasoned professionals, with Norman describing the day as a "show our face" exercise. The hounds stole the show with Falco placed third in the Unentered Doghounds class and Olive winning the Best Entered Bitch class and going onto

stand Reserve Champion Bitch. Quite a performance! Their success continued again this year, with Nando winning Best Under Fifteen Inch Doghound and Teacher winning Best Single Entered Doghound, as well as receiving prizes in most other classes they entered.

John is rightly proud when he talks of this season, their third, "with 15 couple in kennels including two and a half of our own new entry". With three and a half couple of Woolaston-bred puppies also at walk this winter the pack is still growing and laying solid foundations for the future. Not to mention the 21 subscribing family members and 32 single subscribing

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members who John is very quick to thank as "their support and generosity keeps us financially viable". The Woolaston also have a very active Facebook group with over 350 members and have recently created a small and enthusiastic hunt supporters' group.

So what is the secret to their success? When I put this question to both Norman and John there was one parallel in both of their answers and that is the stars of the show, the hounds themselves. Having spent a day with them on our stand at Countryfile Live this year I can quite see why; approachable, endearing, enthusiastic and quite frankly enchanting. They are just the right height for children to cuddle and for the rather more aged of those amongst us to follow at a slightly reduced pace and safely on terra firma! John also mentions the social reward and satisfaction of joining together for a common purpose and to have fun in our beautiful countryside, which is common ground shared by all people that follow a pack of hounds.

It is a testament to their success that 30 per cent of their members had never hunted or even supported hunting prior to a day following the bassets and with a highly ambitious committee plus these diminutive hounds they are sure to continue to thrive and fulfil Norman's dream of teaching young people how to care for and hunt hounds long into the future. ●