Class war on the hoof

Foxhunting is a remnant of feudal society – and that is why we have to ban it

There is one thing on which both sides agree: hunting is not a class issue. The hunters claim that it's no longer the preserve of the aristocracy. Labour MPs insist that their determination to ban it has nothing to do with the social order: it's about animals. Both sides are wrong. This is class war.

The Countryside Alliance, the Telegraph, the Field, and Horse and Hound magazine maintain that opposition to foxhunting is the newfangled concern of the dilettantes of Islington, who know nothing of the countryside. The hunters plainly know nothing of history.

To the Normans, England was one big hunting ground. By the time of Henry II's reign, according to the author Marion Shoard, almost a quarter of the country was royal forest. A forest is not a place where trees grow. It is land set aside for the king's game, in which the nourishment of deer, wild swine and hares took precedence over the nourishment of human beings. Much of the rest of England was classified as "chase": the hunting grounds of the nobility.

These lands were governed by a brutal set of forest laws. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that William I "set up great protection for deer and legislated to that intent, that whosoever should slay hart or hind should be blinded". In 1293, the historian Andrew McCall tells us, "the English parliament decreed that no proceedings were to be taken against foresters, parkers or warreners if they killed poachers who resisted arrest". A poacher, subsequent laws determined, was anyone who wasn't a nob. In 1390, parliament "passed an act limiting the right to hunt to the 40-shilling freeholder for

laymen, and to the cleric with an annual income of over £10".

These laws, Shoard says, "helped establish two basic principles of land management that ... persist to this day. The first was that facilitating the private pleasure of the privileged few was a legitimate basis for determining the allocation of Britain's land. The second was that the landowner possessed the right to do whatever he liked with his land irrespective of the impact ... on other members of the community."

Not everyone who hunts today is a member of the aristocracy - far from it. But this is the way in which you aspire to become one. To look posh you buy a Land Rover, green wellies, a tweed hat and a waxed jacket: the livery of field sports. You buy a house in the country. You get yourself a horse and you join the hunt.

The residual power of the landed class arises from other people's aspirations. The British remain mesmerised by our pre-democratic rulers. Their version of the past is still widely accepted, thanks to costume dramas, the National Trust, and our balmoralised popular histories. It is encapsulated in the justifying myth of landed power we call chivalry.

Chivalry embodied five romantic virtues, of which perhaps the most important was "franchise". Franchise is defined by the historian Maurice Keen as "the free and frank bearing that is visible testimony to the combination of good birth with virtue". It can also be translated as freedom from democratic restraint.

"Chivalry" is derived from chevalerie, or horse soldiery. It was designed to instil in young noblemen the qualities required to conquer new lands and subjugate their people on behalf of the king and the church. These men, according to Ramon Lull, author of the 13th-century Libre del Ordre de Cavayleria, should exercise by hunting the hart, the boar and the wolf. This enabled them to refine the art of killing from the saddle with the bow and couched lance.

In the thunder of the hunt today we hear echoes of the joust, the tourney and the cavalry charge. As if to remind us of its military associations, the hunters wear the uniform of the 18th-century soldier. And though not all redcoats are aristocrats, it is the noblesse and the classes abutting it who still run the show.

You doubt this? Then read the letter sent to his old school magazine by the financial director of the Countryside Alliance, a man called RS Loodmer. Loodmer is an Old Stoic, which means he attended an expensive public school in Buckinghamshire called Stowe. "In the build up to the Countryside March in London last year," he writes, "there were five people present in our operations room at Kennington Road early one morning – I realised that we were ALL Old Stoics! ... I developed my feeling for the countryside at Stowe, and it is great that others share the same commitment and passions."

I read this because I am also an Old Stoic. I too "developed my feeling for the countryside at Stowe", and for the kind of people who run it. The school, which occupies the magnificent Palladian home of Lord Cobham, was obsessed by bloodsports. It had its own pack of beagles. There were lakes in which many of us fished. Several of the boys owned ferrets, and quite a few had guns hidden in their studies.

I remember being astonished by the arsenal of shotguns, rifles, pistols and air rifles which appeared one frozen dawn when we gathered by the lakes to flick bottles across the ice and shoot them. One boy used to delight in releasing a squirrel and two ferrets in the squash courts. He later became master of one of Britain's most famous hunts, which is inconvenient for those who claim that hunting has nothing to do with sadism.

I saw it from both sides: as a member of the chivalric order and as one excluded from it. At home, I used to join the local boys in "running down" the hunt. This is the only traditionally working-class component of foxhunting: the fit young men of the village work out where the horses are going and, taking short cuts, try to get there before them. This way you could enjoy the thrill of the chase without the expense of owning a horse. The hunters tolerated us, but that was all. At the meet they would remain in the saddle, drinking from their stirrup-cups, talking only to each other. If we asked one of them a question, he would ignore us, or address us as if a worm had spoken, or walk his horse straight through us, so that we had to step out of the way.

The Norman lords' superiority, Shoard writes, was established by two features of feudal society: the castle and their "association ... with the horse, which enabled them literally to look down on the serfs, who walked".

As an animal welfare issue, foxhunting comes in at about number 155. It probably ranks below the last of the great working-class bloodsports, coarse fishing. It's insignificant beside intensive pig farming, chicken keeping or even the rearing of pheasants for driven shoots. But as a class issue, it ranks behind private schooling at number two. This isn't about animal welfare. It's about human welfare. By taking on the hunt, our MPs are taking on those who ran the country for 800 years, and still run the countryside today. This class war began with the Norman conquest. It still needs to be fought.