

The Stories A Hunt Coat Could Tell

If hunt coats were to talk, here's what they might say.

Marc Patoile

IT'S NOT EASY to pin down the origin of scarlet coats for foxhunting. Old photographs show many of the men in red coats, and E. Cobham Brewer's 1894 version of *Dictionary Of Phrase And Fable* said, "The red coat in fox-hunting (or scarlet) is a badge of royal livery, hunting being ordained by [King] Henry II, a royal sport."

Today, at many of the foxhunts in Europe and North America, the scarlet or pinque coat is worn by hunt staff, masters and men who have been awarded the hunt's colors, though some hunts have different colored coats for their traditional livery, such as the Duke of Beaufort's famous green or the Berkley Hunt's canary.

Whatever the color of the hunt's formal gentleman's frock, these coats go hand in hand with the black frocks, or Meltons, which are traditionally worn by ladies, other members of the field and visitors. Some American hunts

have also adopted scarlet for ladies who are staff or masters.

Hunt coats serve their sportsmen well. One day hunting is always different from the next; hardly any weather will keep the dogs and horses from hunting, and never is a day too long for the coat one wears on his back.

A French Frock

French hunter Laurent Sainsot wore a navy frock. The coat said, "As a visitor to our country, you will certainly notice our distinctive flair for style. I am made of wool, with a silk and velvet collar, and though the number of buttons does not matter in France, I have plenty to adorn both my front, back and cuffs. I hold two outside pockets for gloves and one inside, the right size for a hunting license."



Arapahoe Hunt MFH and Huntsman Dr. G. Marvin Beeman (left) and Lt. Col. Dennis Foster probably don't know just how chatty their hunt coats are.

(Zina Balash Photography Photo)

Laurent Sainsot's navy hunting frock versed
Marc Patoile's coat in the history of
French hunt coat tailoring.

"I am longer in the skirt than my English or American counterparts, as I am meant to protect my rider from rain and brush, fully down to the boots. But we have visitor's coats here as well, and I hang in the closet next to the black coat that gets to do all the traveling while I stay home. So while my navy color is more distinctive, I most liken myself to Cinderella. My brother has been in France to 20 different stag hunts, four roe deer hunts, a couple of hare and rabbit hunts, seven foxhunts in England and two in America. He has also been to a drag hunt in the Netherlands."

**"The stag spiked me in the sleeve
before being killed. I still
have the hole today."**

—Laurent Sainsot's navy hunt frock

The navy French frock continued, "Since I do not belong to a master (and masters may always wear their colors while visiting other hunts in France), I have rarely traveled far during my six years, spending most of my time at home to the Rallye Etoile stag hunt in Normandy, France. However, I was once invited to hunt with the Arapahoe Hunt (Colo.), and I have also visited the Goldens Bridge kennels, outside of New York City. I also got to go to Portugal a few times, where they appreciate French colors in their fields, and I rode first flight next to the coat worn by the heir of the Lancaster family, whose owner could claim the crown of England."

Speaking of its least favorite day hunting, the navy frock commented, "Just after the 2009 tornado in western France, trees were down everywhere, and I found myself stuck in a 'mole hole' pocket spot with some hounds and a stag at bay. The stag spiked me in the sleeve before being killed. I still have the hole today."

An English Lady

While in Ireland with the Galway Blazers, I overheard my black frock speaking to the blue coat of Jane Hall, who hunts there as well as in her home country of England. Ms. Hall is a proper rider, one you can trust for a lead over the largest of obstacles in the hunting field, so it was no surprise when the cutaway coat raised an eyebrow at mine after a fence where my horse was less than stellar and kicked up mud towards them both.

My coat said, "Sorry for that, we are not used to this Irish sod, the old sod, as you call it."

Her cutaway replied, "Well please keep an eye out, as I cannot just be dry cleaned like you, for if I am, I need to be reproofed. So, usually, I am just brushed off to remove the mud and then brushed with a damp brush until all the stains are gone. This takes a long time you know."



(Jean Jacques Martin Photo)

My coat inquired of her unique cut, and the navy frock explained, "I was made by a tailor and represent the top half of a side-saddle habit, as my owner used to hunt side-saddle, so she got used to this pattern. This requires that I always go with a proper waistcoat. But I fear that my predecessor and I may be the last of these cuts for Ms. Hall, as there is a difficulty here now getting the wonderful old cloth that we used to have, like mine, which is impervious to rain and wind. So she takes good care of us, as we would be difficult to replace."

The coats exchanged comments about buttons, and the cutaway explained, "I have the Zetland Hunt button now, but I have worn about four different buttons in my time with Ms. Hall. At first, as a member of the Raby Hunt Club who own the hounds and kennels of the



(Louisa Davidson Photo)

Ms. Jane Hall and her well-traveled navy cutaway enjoy a day out with the Woody Creek Hounds.

I am well traveled. I spent about 10 or 12 seasons hunting with the hounds of Sir Watkins Williams Wynn on the Welsh borders, jumping enormous hedges and having the time of my life. I have been with a private pack in Staffordshire/Derbyshire borders belonging to Mr. Edward Upton and now go out regularly with Warwickshire, North Cotswolds and Heythrop. I also had a trip to the Arapahoe Hunt and Woody Creek Hounds, both in Colorado."

As we flew a bullfinch, the cutaway continued, "Be careful to sit

Zetland Hunt, I was also entitled to wear a velvet collar of the club. I hear that I have an appointment at the end of the season with my tailor, as I have now been given the yellow collar and button for North Cotswold hunt, so I think we might have a change coming. My brother is also going in for an appointment to take the Warwickshire button."

My coat asked, "So, what's an English coat doing in Ireland?"

To which the English habit replied, "Well, modesty aside, as you Americans like to do, I have to confess that

well back jumping over here. I have been lucky, with small falls, not big ones. I had a very lucky escape when Ms. Hall went to the Heythrop and forgot me in the closet, so she rode in an anorak from the lorry.

That day her horse slipped on the road, and the resulting crash made a hole in the elbow of the anorak. Think if it had been me! Most of all, I blush when I think back over all the years, as I have shared some of the best and happiest days of Ms. Hall, together with wonderful hounds and people. For that, she owes me nothing for risking it all each day afield, I am happy to serve!"

The Award Of Buttons And Colors

The hunt button is awarded by the mastership of a hunt to members deserving of such honor. Traditionally, the criteria may have included factors such as helping in the field and for assisting with activities critical to the running of the hunt, such as point-to-point competitions and other events.

Before being awarded the button, both men and women may wear a plain black coat with black buttons. Usually, upon receiving the button, a man is entitled to wear a red coat with brass buttons, and ladies continue to wear a black coat with the hunt button and the hunt collar. Some hunts have now adopted a two-part process, first for the awarding of just the button and later awarding the colors.

With full honors, the buttons and the collars tell of the honor, on a black coat for women and a scarlet coat for men. Some hunts still award these honors purely at the pleasure of the mastership, while others have a more democratic process with requirements of a number of years worth of full-paid membership. Check with your hunt's mastership, as traditions vary—no one rule prevails—and the traditions of each hunt should be respected.

American Attire

Back at home in the States, my scarlet frock overheard Dr. G. Marvin Beeman's scarlet coat talking with that of the Master of Foxhounds Association's Executive Director, Lt. Col. Dennis Foster. The Colonel was visiting the Arapahoe Hunt that winter for the MFHA annual meeting (which is typically held in the location of the outgoing president's hunt, after which the board is invited to hunt with the outgoing president). As he generally is honored, Lt. Col. Foster was invited to ride up with the huntsman.

Riding side by side, Beeman's coat asked Foster's, "So I know you travel a lot, but just how many hunts have you been to now?"

The black frock replied, "Well, the Colonel has been to 396 different hunts now, but I have only seen active duty with the Colonel for some 10 years now, as I spent the first five years in his reserves. I believe I have been deployed to 11 different countries and the majority of the hunts aforementioned."

He solemnly added, "As you may know, all of my predecessors have been wounded, except for a few scarlets, which are mostly retired now, just hanging about for long periods on end. I enjoy serving in these tours of duty and couldn't lie about all day like they do."

Beeman's coat inquired as to how the black frock

had been holding up, and the frock replied, "Well, the last time I was with you, as you know, my horse fell in a hole, broke my shoulder, rolled on me, and I landed in cactus which created a double indemnity. It took the Colonel several months to get all of the cactus spines out of me (and him, for that matter). The Colonel apologized a lot, interspersed with cussing. Each time he found another cactus embedded in me, he said he should have known better, as he had found that horse's name three times on your Honor Roll, which I later discovered, attests every fall since the hunt's founding in 1907. The Colonel broke his shoulder again, three weeks later elsewhere, so it's been an interesting year. I'm just glad to be in one piece."

Foster's coat exchanged pleasantries with Beeman's, and they spoke of times gone by. Beeman's coat made light of the many years of service since his father had handed the horn over to him, as well as all the travels it had seen over the past years serving as the MFHA President.

The Colonel's coat said that it also revered some of the days gone by, such as being thanked by Mrs. Jackie Kennedy Onassis, following a hunt where it had been whipping-in to Randy Waterman at the Piedmont Hunt (Va.) and having been in the same field as Prince Charles at a Duke of Beaufort's hunt.

And as hounds were hacked back to the kennels in the bright winter sun, the Colonel's coat needed

Beeman's and said, "Being from an Army background, I enjoy the ease of walking into a room and being able to quickly identify each of the ranks. As the Colonel was a master that hunted his own hounds, I wear five buttons, and I see you do too."

"The Colonel gets all of these damn calls each year at the office, and I hear him say a lot, 'The short answer is you should wear what your mastership tells you to wear.'"

—Lt. Col. Dennis Foster's coat

"And your other masters wear four. While you know that I have never been much of a busy body, the Colonel gets all of these damn calls each year at the office, and I hear him say a lot, 'The short answer is you should wear what your mastership tells you to wear.'"

The Colonel's frock continued, "But I have to ask you, why does your staff wear five buttons instead of four, which is the traditional number?"

Beeman's coat replied, "Well, that is a long story, a tradition that predates me, but the next time you come back to visit I'll explain it all to you, as we have hounds and horses to look after now." 🐾



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