



The group follow Harry Meade's lead over a variety of hunt jumps

Hands up who hasn't jumped a fence since March? A pre-hunt course could be just what you need to set you up for the season, says hunting editor Catherine Austen

# Start as you mean to go on!

**P**ICTURE the scene. It's the opening meet. A field of fit, fresh horses dances sideways through a gateway, their riders, puffing a little already from trying to hold on to their excited mounts, eye up the field master nervously. Ahead lies the biggest line of intimidating hedges in the hunting country.

The field master rams his hat down, kicks his big blood horse on — and they're off. A hundred horses thunder towards the first. The bold and beautiful skip over like birds; behind them it's like the charge of the Light Brigade and with a similar level of chaos.

This might be a traditional British hunting scene, but it's precisely what many people dread about the opening meet. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be like that.

As levels of awareness about riding standards rise, people are flocking to pre-hunting courses to improve their riding and prepare for the season ahead. Some courses take the form of fairly traditional riding lessons; others involve a canter and jump round a cross-country course. But some focus on improving the hunting rider and his ability to cope on the hunting field.

The courses Harry Meade runs are the latter. Well-known as an eventer, Harry and his family are long-time members of the Beaufort field. Throughout the autumn he runs two-day courses (and occasional one-day ones) for hunting people, from beginners to field masters.

## 'Improvement, not jollying'

BEFORE I turned up at Harry's yard at Church Farm, just a few minutes from junction 18 of

the M4, I had no idea what to expect. I have hunted all my life, class myself as a distinctly average jockey and have fairly regular lessons during the summer. Would this course be much too sophisticated for me and Molly, or would it contain nothing I hadn't heard before?

"The emphasis is on improvement, not just jollying," says Harry — and he's right.

I haven't suddenly turned into Lucinda Green — you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear — but I do now know what I do wrong and how to stop it happening.

Our group of five spent the first morning in the outdoor school. We went through a series of exercises, first on the flat and then over poles and eventually a grid, some of which were quite weird and wonderful. Harry is keen for me not to reveal exactly what they are but you are unlikely to get by without taking away your stirrups at some point.

"Each of these tests will reveal a particular problem," says Harry. "You'll find certain ones



Catherine Austen and Molly jump a line of hedges

very easy and others more difficult, depending on your particular strengths and weaknesses. Each exercise can seem quite random, but by the end of the course when they are all combined, you'll have covered every aspect of the co-ordination of cross-country riding."

Many who attend these courses haven't had a riding lesson, or any lesson for that matter, for 20 years, so the style of teaching is critical. The idea of the course, he says, is self-discovery — rather than just telling people what is wrong with their riding. It soon becomes blindingly obvious what we are doing wrong and what we each need to work on.

## Replacing old habits with new

"ADULTS need to be persuaded that their 'default' method is not necessarily correct and, since we all instinctively resist change, the willingness to drop old habits and adopt new ones has to come from them. By understanding what it is that causes the problems, only then do people want to change and become open to learning," says Harry.

"There's no point in saying something in the hope they'll believe me and change because I've asked them to. Instead, doing the exercises highlights bad habits and it soon becomes obvious to them that changing one small thing makes it far easier. They then believe that that change is necessary.

"I'm not throwing the whole book of how to ride at people, but to give them two or three specific points that will fundamentally change their riding and the way horses go for them."

In sports psychology terms, it is moving from

unconscious incompetence — being unaware of what you do wrong — through conscious incompetence to conscious competence and, the Holy Grail, unconscious competence.

## Three steps towards the Holy Grail

BY the end of the first morning I have learnt three things: to keep my shoulders back (I have an unattractive tendency to creep up the horse's neck — as Harry puts it — like a monkey up a stick), to push my hands forward rather than snatch back into my stomach over a fence, and to turn my heel in and kick at the girth to get a more instant response. He also shortens my stirrups by two holes, explaining that they would be too long when galloping and jumping. It sounds quite serious, but it's a lot of fun.

And just like a Pony Club rally, Angela Meade brings round elevenses — although we have graduated from squash to sloe gin.

We finish the morning with an extraordinary exercise involving poles, a plank and a water tray — brilliantly replicating jumping a ditch from a standstill — that you approach at a walk and turn into from one stride. It perfectly illustrates the importance of staying behind the horse's movement across country. Molly, rather a swot at the grid exercises, is horrified and refuses to contemplate it until Harry says that if I don't jump it, I'll have to give him £50. I sat up and rode — and she bounded over.

A very useful tip I picked up was to hold my reins in my left hand and neckstrap in my right over this sort of obstacle to be safe and yet give the horse as much freedom as possible to jump. Previously I would have tucked both hands in the neckstrap, but this would possibly restrict a big-jumping horse's movement by catching him in the mouth.

After a really delicious lunch in the Meades' dining room, complete with wine for those who wanted it, we moved into a showjumping field where a course of small fences awaited us. We each jumped several rounds, working on our three points and acquiring other tips.

On the second day, we spent the first hour in the school, repeating some exercises and learning others on the flat and down a grid. We then went back to the showjumping field, and it was interesting to see how much everyone had improved from the day before.

"Things sink in overnight, and people arrive with an understanding and a belief in what they need to correct," says Harry.

## Ready for the hedges

REBECCA JORDAN tries Taunton Vale joint-field master Richard Mitford-Slade's course at Pontispool Equine Sports Centre in Somerset.

"I had an inexperienced horse that had only hunted across Dartmoor and I wanted to visit hedge-jumping countries.

"In the all-weather arena we learnt to jump gates, wire, hedges, post and rails, ditches and banks, and all levels were catered for.

"That afternoon we gathered for a mock meet to experience the speed involved, jumping beside other horses and how to behave in gateways and tight corners.

"The following day the course concluded with a morning's hunting where everything we had practised was put into play."

For more information visit [www.pontispool.co.uk](http://www.pontispool.co.uk) or tel: 01823 461196



One exercise simulates jumping a ditch from a single stride

## Harry Meade's courses

- ▶ Courses run from mid-September to mid-November
- ▶ Cost: £210 per person for a two-day course which includes lunch both days; £155 for a one-day course. Discount rates are offered to anyone who brings a full group
- ▶ Stabling can be provided if required and B&B organised
- ▶ To book: contact Harry's wife, Rosie. Tel: 07966 021536 or email [rosie@harrymeade.com](mailto:rosie@harrymeade.com)
- ▶ For more information, visit [www.harrymeade.com](http://www.harrymeade.com)

## Putting it all into practice

BUT the highlight of the two days was to come. After another of Angela Meade's splendid lunches, we all boxed up and drove to Luckington, a couple of miles from Badminton. There, round Michael Pike's dairy farm in the middle of the Beaufort Saturday country, we put into practice what we had learnt.

Harry took the lead, and we spent a couple of hours jumping round a variety of hunt jumps small and large, walls and hedges. We started small and built up — quite quickly — to some pretty big hedges, jumping five or six fences and then stopping to regroup and talk about it.

Perhaps the most interesting thing we did was something I've done masses of times out hunting but never had the chance to practise. We trotted, one by one, down a lane, turned off

## HARRY'S TOP TIPS:

- 1 Shorten your stirrups. If they're comfortable hacking to the meet, they'll be too long when you get galloping and jumping. It will feel strange for the first hour, but bear with it!
- 2 Keep the revs up into a fence, but remember that speed and revs are totally different.
- 3 There's nothing wrong with a good Pony Club kick. Use the back of the heel, not the ankle, at the girth. This is the only part of you that will create energy.
- 4 Don't drive with your seat; this flattens a horse out, making it difficult for him to jump.
- 5 If you have to jump a ditch or bank from a standstill, then hold on to a neckstrap and be totally loose with the rein hand.
- 6 Being in front of the movement is the worst sin across country. Keep your shoulders back over a fence. When did you last see someone fall off the back of a horse?
- 7 Try not to hold on to your horse's head coming into a fence or he will be unable to judge his own stride and he may well rush his fences. Bridge your reins if you find yourself interfering, or you're riding a strong horse.
- 8 Don't over-complicate things. It is up to the horse to judge the distance to a fence; it is the rider's responsibility to show the horse where to go, create the right amount of power, and then not interfere. Horses are better at judging distances than we are, so don't make life harder for yourself by trying to take over.

on to a verge and jumped an upright set of rails into a field.

Harry reminded us to sit up, not to interfere and to push our right thumb towards the horse's ear to turn, rather than to pull back and round — exercises we had practised in the school made "real". We all resisted our old habits and each of the horses jumped it perfectly.

We later did something similar in reverse, this time on to a verge by a road, turning and stopping quickly.

We finished with a series of big hedges, horses with ears pricked and riders grinning from ear to ear.

Where some had found the jumping exercises quite difficult at Church Farm, here — with Harry's three specific tips ringing in their ears — everyone went brilliantly. Those small



'Things sink in overnight': the group review their progress on the second day

## Cross-country special

but significant adjustments were enough to improve their riding and therefore their horses' ways of going, and should go quite some way to making their hunting seasons happier for both.

"What they learn here should equip people for the future, so that when things go wrong, as they inevitably do for any of us, instead of having a crisis of confidence, they will hopefully

be able to identify the reason and know exactly what to do to correct it," says Harry.

I loved it. Jumping some decent hedges did wonders for my confidence, which rushes away during the summer like the tide, and my fairth in my horse's ability. And if you see me tipping forward coming down to a hedge this season, shout at me! [H&H](#)

CCI four-star event rider **BEANIE STURGIS:**

"I tend not to clip the heels, because the feathers act like a drainpipe and help prevent mud fever."

### 'In safe hands' with Lucinda Green

HAVING gone from an old schoolmaster, who allowed me to be a lazy passenger, to a much younger pony that requires the odd aid, a hunting clinic was ideal, writes Charlotte Mackaness.

Hen McCall, a Pytchley master, organised a day with Lucinda at Milton Keynes Eventing Centre. Participants ranged from veteran Pytchley subscribers in their 60s to people with just a couple of days autumn hunting under their belts.

"We were split into groups of six of similar abilities for our two-hour sessions. From the start Lucinda's enthusiasm was contagious and I felt confident I was in safe hands.

"We spent a good hour tackling small but super-skinny fences, which underlined the importance of accuracy over speed. The session was about building confidence and learning to look after ourselves, which, in turn, gives our horses the best chance of jumping safely.

"To end we linked six fences of our choice, finishing with an inviting brush. Seeing what my pony could jump from a slow trot and walk filled me with confidence."

For more information, visit [www.petplanequine.co.uk/events/lucindagreen-dates.asp](http://www.petplanequine.co.uk/events/lucindagreen-dates.asp)

### More hunting courses

**South Notts hunt, Nottingham**  
Tel: 07968 603246

**Cindy Sims for Tedworth Hunt, Hampshire**  
Tel: 07765 145888

**Les Smith/Claire Dunn for Border Riding Club, Todburn EC, Northumberland**  
Tel: 07973 333183

**Eleanor Mercer Equestrian, North Yorks**  
Tel: 01845 567935/07525 908371

**Robert Stevens, North Wiltshire**  
Tel: 01666 861245/07973 428201

**Bill Levett, Gloucestershire**  
Tel : Bill Levett: 07703 439427

**Jonty Evans, Gloucestershire**  
Tel: 07970 859699

**Chloe Newton, Leicestershire**  
Tel: 07748 981961

## Winter cross-country schooling

The cross-country schooling facilities listed below are open now and most are open through the winter. Weather does occasionally force closure, so do phone ahead.

**Blackwater Farm Equestrian Centre,** Blackwater Lane, Great Witchingham, Norwich, Norfolk NR9 5PH

[www.blackwaterfarm.co.uk](http://www.blackwaterfarm.co.uk);  
tel: 01603 873187 or 01362 688227;  
£15 per horse, £10 for riders 18 years old and under

**Boomerang Stables,** Chilton Foliat, Hungerford, Berks RG17 0TW  
[www.boomerangstables.co.uk](http://www.boomerangstables.co.uk);  
tel: 07711 499596/ 07771 900537;  
£20 per horse

**Burnham Market Eventing Centre,** Sussex Farm, Burnham Market, Norfolk PE31 8AG  
[www.bm-ec.com](http://www.bm-ec.com); tel: 07767 420357,  
£20 per horse

**Cambrian Cross Country,** Rhiwlas Isaf, Cilcennin, Lampeter, Ceredigion SA48 8RS  
[www.cambriancrosscountry.co.uk](http://www.cambriancrosscountry.co.uk);  
tel: 01570 470310; £20 per horse, £16 for groups of four or more

**Chilham Park,** Chilham Castle Estate, Chilham, Canterbury, Kent CT4 8DB  
[www.chilhampark.co.uk](http://www.chilhampark.co.uk); tel: 01227 730811; £25 per rider, discounts for groups or clubs

**Deer Park Cross Country,** Park Lane, Brockhampton, Glos GL54 5SR  
[www.deerparkcrosscountry.co.uk](http://www.deerparkcrosscountry.co.uk);  
tel: 01242 820881; £20 per horse

**Ely Eventing Centre,** Downham Common, Little Downham, Ely, Cambs, CB6 2TY  
[www.elyeventing.co.uk](http://www.elyeventing.co.uk);  
tel: 01353 698839; £20 per horse

**Everleigh Equestrian,** Quickset Stables, Everleigh, Marlborough, Wilts SN8 3EU

[www.everleighquestrian.co.uk](http://www.everleighquestrian.co.uk);  
tel: 07990 571463/01264 852674;  
£15 per horse

**Field Farm Cross Country,** Field Farm, East Road, Wymeswold, Leics LE12 6ST

[www.fieldfarmcrosscountry.co.uk/course.htm](http://www.fieldfarmcrosscountry.co.uk/course.htm); tel: 01509 880251;  
£20 per horse, £15 for Pony Club members and under-16s, reductions for groups

**Foxberry Chasers,** Foxberry, Caldwell, Richmond, North Yorks DL11 7QL  
[www.foxberry.co.uk](http://www.foxberry.co.uk);  
tel: 01325 718792/07793 444247;  
£20 per horse

**Gloucester Lodge Farm,** Blyth, Northumbs NE24 3PH  
[www.gloucesterlodgefarm.co.uk](http://www.gloucesterlodgefarm.co.uk);  
tel: 01670 353633; £10 per horse

**Grange Farm Cross Country,** Swalcliffe, Banbury, Oxon OX15 5EX  
[www.swalcliffegrange.com](http://www.swalcliffegrange.com); tel: 01295 780206 or 07712 895677;  
£20 per horse

**The Hallington Ride and XC Course,** Home Farm, Hallington, Louth, Lincs LN11 9QX  
[www.canter-hallington.co.uk](http://www.canter-hallington.co.uk);  
tel 07767 440828 or 01507 605864;  
£15 per horse

**Heath Farm, Heath Lane,** Godalming, Surrey GU7 1UN  
[www.munsteadhorsetrials.com](http://www.munsteadhorsetrials.com); tel: 01483 418271; £20 per horse

**Helen Bell Equestrian,** The Paddocks, Breckenbrough, Thirsk, Yorks YO7 4EL  
[www.helenbellequestrian.co.uk](http://www.helenbellequestrian.co.uk);  
tel: 07708708967; £25 per horse,

discounts for groups  
**Hillocks Farm,** Cleobury Morimer, Shrops DY14 0EB  
[www.hillocksfarm.org.uk](http://www.hillocksfarm.org.uk); tel: 01299 270710 or 07970 278839;  
£18 per horse

**Littleton Manor Equestrian,** Littleton Manor Farm, Littleton Lane, Reigate, Surrey, Reigate, RH2 8LB, access via Littleton Manor Farm, Flanchford Road, Reigate Heath, RH2 8QZ  
[www.lmeq.com](http://www.lmeq.com); tel: 07771 600033;  
£25 per horse

**Kelsall Hill Equestrian Centre,** Organsdale Farm, Middlewich Road, Kelsall, Tarporley, Cheshire CW6 0SR  
[www.kelsallhill.co.uk](http://www.kelsallhill.co.uk); tel: 07809 689972; £20 per horse, group discounts for three or more

**Lincomb Equestrian,** Lincomb Farm, Lincomb, Nr Stourport on Severn, Worcs, DY13 9RB  
[www.crosscountrycourse.co.uk](http://www.crosscountrycourse.co.uk);  
tel: 07811 382 533; £20 per horse, £15 per horse for six or more horses, special rates for Pony/Riding Clubs

**Lyneham Heath XC,** Lyneham Heath Farm, Lyneham, Nr Chipping Norton, Oxon OX7 6QQ  
[www.lynehamheathequestrian.co.uk](http://www.lynehamheathequestrian.co.uk); tel: 01993 832 585/07836 657 395; £25 per horse

**MK Event Centre,** Castletorpe Road, Hanslope, Milton Keynes MK19 7HQ  
[www.mkec.co.uk](http://www.mkec.co.uk); tel: 01908 511329, £25 per horse

**Mostyn Farm Ride and Cross Country,** Wern Home Farm, Tre Mostyn, Whitford, Holywell, Flintshire CH8 9AR

[www.mostynfarmride.co.uk](http://www.mostynfarmride.co.uk); tel: 07711 016301; £15 per horse  
**Parwood Equestrian Centre,** Great Westwood, Westwood Lane, Normandy, Guildford, Surrey GU3 2JE

[www.parwood.co.uk](http://www.parwood.co.uk);  
tel: 01483 813860; £25 per horse  
**Rabson Manor,** Winterbourne Bassett, Swindon, Wilts SN4 9QF  
[www.rabsonmanor.co.uk](http://www.rabsonmanor.co.uk);  
tel: 01793 731202/07765 924252;  
£20 per horse

**Rosamund Green Farm,** Shepton Mallet, Somerset BA4 4JG  
[www.rosamundgreenfarm.co.uk](http://www.rosamundgreenfarm.co.uk);  
tel: 01749 343384/07511 078285;  
£25 per horse

**Somerford Park Farm,** Holmes Chapel Rd, Somerford, Congleton, Cheshire CW12 4SW  
[www.somerfordpark.co.uk](http://www.somerfordpark.co.uk); tel: 01260 299888; £20-£25 per horse depending on day and numbers

**Thornton Lodge Country Sports,** Thornton Lodge Farm, Easingwold, York YO61 3QA  
[www.thorntonlodgefarm.co.uk](http://www.thorntonlodgefarm.co.uk); tel: 01347 821306 or 07968 268835;  
£20 per horse

**Todburn Equestrian Centre,** Longhorsley, Morpeth, Northumbs NE65 8QZ  
[www.todburnequestriancentre.co.uk](http://www.todburnequestriancentre.co.uk);  
tel: 07815 297024; £15 per horse

**Tweseldown Racecourse,** Bourley Road, Church Crookham, Fleet, Hants, GU52 8DY  
[www.tweseldown.co.uk](http://www.tweseldown.co.uk); tel: 01252 850628; rates vary but start at £22.91+VAT