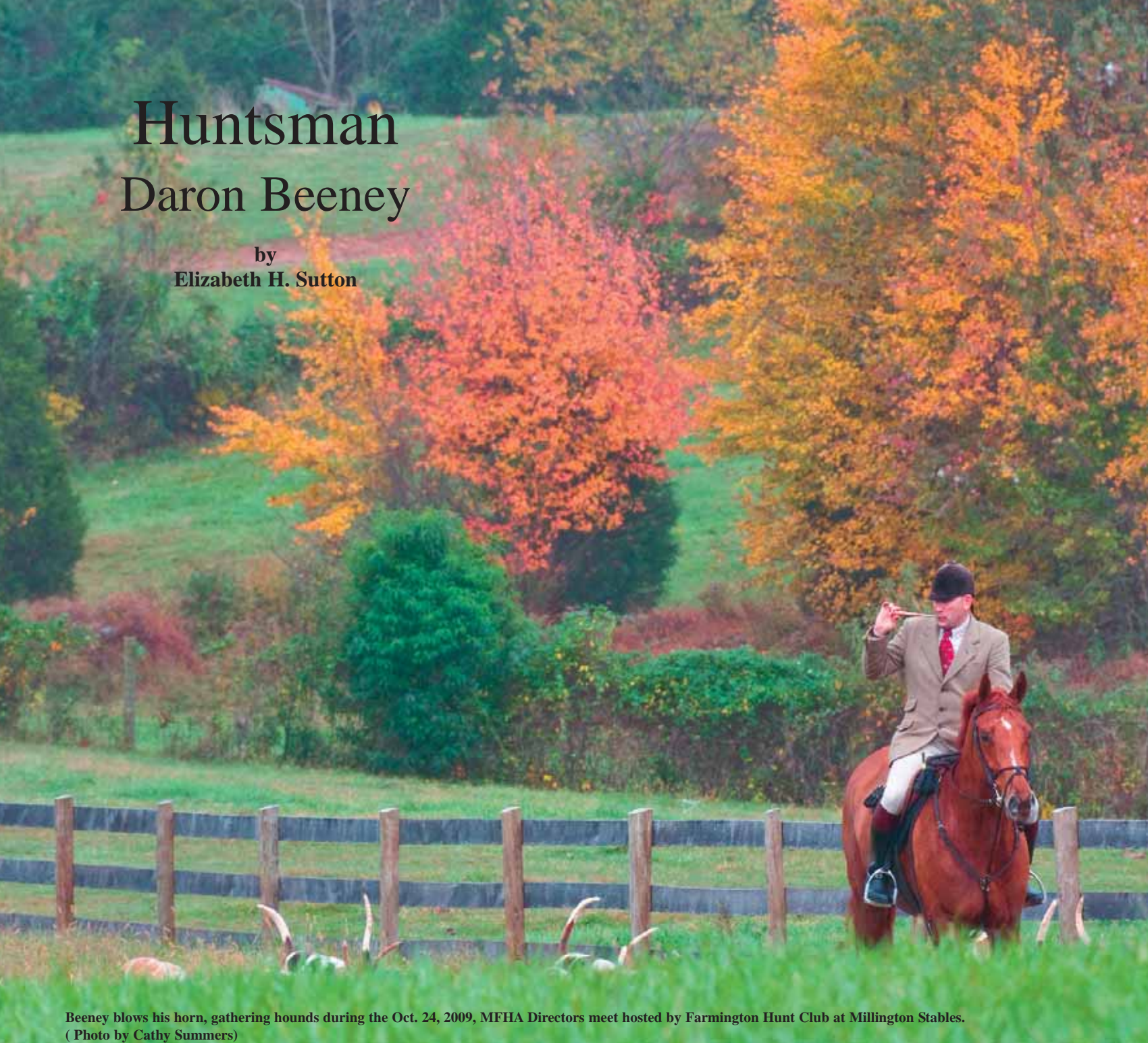


Huntsman Daron Beeney

by
Elizabeth H. Sutton



Beeney blows his horn, gathering hounds during the Oct. 24, 2009, MFHA Directors meet hosted by Farmington Hunt Club at Millington Stables.
(Photo by Cathy Summers)

In 2001 the Farmington Hunt Club in Albemarle County, Virginia, launched a search for a new huntsman through the international hunt-association network. In Scotland, Daron Beeney was looking for a new position and a secure place to pursue his foxhunting career outside of the U.K. The sport there had become so threatened by anti-hunters that he often was in fear of bodily harm for his horses, his hounds and

himself. His job quest ended with a trip to the U.S. and an interview with Jill Summers, Farmington Hunt Club master of foxhounds, whose legendary career spanned 40 years until her death in 2008.

When Beeney stepped off the plane at the Charlottesville Albemarle Airport, he immediately felt comfortable. The fields and wooded foothills of central Virginia reminded him of his home ground,

the rolling land near Surrey Union in southeastern England. It seemed like a good fit for both the hunt club and for Beeney and his wife, Alison. They decided to leave home and families behind in Great Britain and move to Virginia.

Beeney adapted quickly to his new job as huntsman at the Farmington kennels in Free Union, where the workload requires long hours, strict discipline and

protocol steeped in tradition. He joined staff member Tom McCauley, who had worked as kennelman for 30 years. Alison went to work managing the stable and training and exercising the six staff hunting horses owned by the hunt. She also began to ride as first whipper-in, the primary professional who assists the huntsman with keeping the hounds together in a working pack.

As huntsman, Beeney is responsible for the training and management of Farmington's pack of 45 hounds, overseeing the breeding program and hunting them at meets that convene two or three days a week during the hunting season from September through mid-March. In the off season, Beeney directs the daily training and exercise of the hounds, including the introduction of young hounds to the business of hunting with the pack.

Beeney's style is to teach his hounds to trust rather than fear him. The process includes many hours of close personal contact walking them on foot, handling them in the kennel yard and ultimately leading and directing them in the field on horseback. His control over the pack of powerful hunting hounds is calm and low-key, but his authority over each hound is absolute. Rewards in the form of



Beeney on one of his favorite horses with the FHC pack (Photo by Cathy Summers)

praise and dog biscuits are given freely. Beeney encourages hunt club members to visit the kennels and help socialize the puppies.

Beeney began fox hunting as a teenager. "I entered hunt service at the age of 16. I had hunted as a 14-year-old kid, following the hunt on foot with my grandfather. My father was huntsman for the Dulverton West.

"We were trained almost like being in the military – everything had to be

kept just so." Beeney began riding at 16, and apprenticed for a hunt near his home in Devon, near Exeter.

Alison was born and raised in Wales, where both parents were avid fox-hunters and dedicated horse people. "I rode in my first hunt at the age of two, on a lead line—my parents took me to the meet on a pony." Alison's expertise with horses is a valuable asset for keeping a horse well trained for her husband to use in his work

Beeney walking hounds at the Farmington Hunt Club Kennels during the off season (Photos by Elizabeth H. Sutton)





Kennelman Tom McCauley and first whipper-in Alison Beeney assist Daron exhibiting young hounds at the annual FHC puppy show at the kennels in Free Union, Virginia, June 2009. (Photo courtesy of Stephanie Guerlain)

with the hounds in the field.

They both have worked their entire lives as professional hunt staff. Beeney worked his way up through the ranks starting at the bottom as an assistant kennelman in his first job near home. He

worked for a number of hunts in England and Wales before attaining the rank of huntsman at Surrey Union.

The basic customs and traditions of foxhunting in Virginia have not changed since the sport was introduced by the first

settlers, yet both Beeney and Alison noted differences between hunting in the Old Dominion and in England. “England is just more horsy in general,” said Alison. In England, foxhunting has an established and well recognized historical and social significance where fox hunters provide a service to the community. “Here, catching the fox is not as much the goal of the hunt as is the sport of chasing,” added Beeney. Alison noted differences in the riding styles and trail maintenance. “When I was a kid, we’d jump anything and everything that got in the way.” She said that liability-release forms and potential lawsuits are more common here.

Every hunt has its own character and style, usually influenced by landscape in the hunt territory. The Farmington Hunt is defined by hilly countryside and smallish farms within a 14-square-mile area which is increasingly being divided and constrained by development. The staff is forced to restrict the area the hounds are allowed to hunt. Cross-breeding American with English hounds makes for a somewhat

Beeney with the Farmington pack fording the Moormans River (Photo by Cathy Summers)



slower pack that can tolerate being disciplined when the boundaries of the territory require that they be kept in check.

Beeney has worked diligently to continue a well-established breeding program that provides hounds suited to the needs of the Farmington Hunt Club. Unlike some hunts in Northern Virginia and Maryland where there are great expanses of open fields that lend themselves to a faster galloping pace, Farmington's territory offers ample opportunity to focus on hound work. This suits Beeney's primary interest—the working of the hounds, in keeping with the legacy of his former MFH, Jill Summers. In contrast to many of their former employers in England, "she was completely hands on," said Beeney. "She came here to the kennels every single day. She knew each hound and was interested in everything we did."

The Beeney's left the United Kingdom behind to dedicate their lives to a demanding, rigorous and risky profession "for the love of hound work – the breeding, the training, watching them do their job." They also enjoy the informality of the social customs between staff and members of the hunt. It was hard to adjust to at first – in England hunt members and staff are in different social ranks. If they were to return to the U.K. it would take some adjustment to revert to the old social hierarchy once accepted without question. For now the fate of mounted foxhunting in the British Isles remains unsettled, but Beeney's huntsman's job is safe in Virginia as long as the right to hunt remains intact.

Elizabeth H. Sutton lives, works and rides in Albemarle County, Virginia. She is a member of the Farmington Hunt Club.

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