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*As Cunning as a Fox*





The cerulean sky set everything off the day I travelled to Great Missenden, the little country village in the Chilterns made famous by its erstwhile resident Roald Dahl, to visit his archives. Trees were slightly burnished by the beginning of autumn and leaves browned like the top of an apple crumble. The houses became quaint and pretty as the train whizzed out of London.

Dahl was born in Cardiff in 1916 to Norwegian parents. He started writing during the Second World War and, in 1943, *The Gremlins* was published, the first of a run of funny and imaginative stories published in hundreds of languages. Unlike other children's books, Dahl's writing was never didactic or moralising; he revelled in high jinks and naughtiness. 'I am passionately obsessed with making the young readers laugh and squirm and love the story. They know it's not true. They know from the start it's a fairy tale, so the content is never going to influence their minds one way or another,' he once said.

The author's writing hut has been replicated exactly in the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre. His ashtray, complete with cigarette butts, sat on the makeshift desk that

rests on an armchair made specially to accommodate his back problems. Spectacles and other personal items were nearby: family photos, drawings, trinkets, lighters, mementoes. The lino is as it was: blue, red and yellow diamonds on a green background. It's the same lino filmmaker Wes Anderson gave to the study floor of his Mr Fox in the popular film based on the book. Dahl sat in his hut from ten in the morning until twelve, even when stuck, to write. 'It is my little nest, my womb,' he said. From there he could see down to an ancient beech called the Witches' Tree – the very one where he imagined a certain Mr Fox and his family lived.

The most famous fox in British literature today emerged in 1970. Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox* was a complete transformation in the way foxes are perceived in this country – traditionally seen as a wicked trickster, he now became the first unequivocal fox hero. The very fact that a new vision of the fox had appeared provides fascinating insights into the tensions around the fox's place in Britain.

The plot of *Fantastic Mr Fox* sees our hero as a predator to be admired. With the fox family being relentlessly hunted by three nasty farmers, Mr Fox comes up with the idea of taking food from each of their farms through a series of underground tunnels. He gathers a vast feast for all the other families trapped by the farmers' determination to kill the crafty fox, and for that he is dubbed fantastic. Dahl

created characters and a plot that make us delight, cheer and punch the air when the foxes outfox the repulsive farmers and feast on livestock and poultry to their hearts' content.

In the archives I discovered that the first draft was different from the story we know today. The foxes – and Dahl's original drawings of them are charming – dig up into the Main Street supermarket and fill their trolleys with cake and eggs and pie and candy and toys. Mr Fox is still the provider, but the family is essentially stealing from faceless shopkeepers. 'The cops are still looking for the robbers,' reads the final line.

The American publishers were concerned that this 'glorification of theft', as Roald Dahl's biographer Donald Sturrock put it, would put off libraries and schoolteachers from promoting the book. Editor Fabio Coen wrote to Dahl with a suggestion. Instead of stealing from the supermarkets, the foxes should steal from the horrible farmers. 'It would also hold something of a moral,' he wrote. 'Namely that you cannot prevent others from securing sustenance without yourself paying a penalty.' Dahl was thrilled with his editor's ingenuity. 'I'll grab them with both hands and get to work at once on an entirely new version,' he wrote. Later, there were conversations about whether the fox really needed to kill the three chickens in the coop, and a suggestion was made that the fox should just collect a huge basket of eggs instead. Dahl insisted that this would not be right.

‘Foxes are foxes and as you’re right to say they are killers,’ he explained. The decision was made that it wouldn’t distress children and the foxes’ natural activity was kept in. Fox is a hero in spite of his natural carnivorous behaviour. He is cunning, and he is celebrated for it.

I wandered to the field near Gipsy House, where Dahl and his family once lived, to see the beech trees under which the real Mr Fox built his den. Hedgerows covered in clots of red hawthorn berries and blackberries the colour of dried blood bordered the footpath. Summer was over and the honeysuckle looked ropey. The late-afternoon September light made the foliage glow green and dappled the damp forest floor. It was quiet and seemed a fitting place for a fox family to make its home.

Dahl would have been well aware as he was writing that he had chosen an animal whose image was starting to be fiercely contested, that perhaps it was now ready for a more sympathetic portrayal. Although he never spoke publicly about fox hunting during his life, when he was sixteen and boarding at Repton School in the Midlands, he wrote an essay about hunting. The archivist at the Roald Dahl Museum dug it out during my visit. It is a forcible argument for why Dahl believed hunting to be ‘foolish, pointless and cruel’. He concedes that riding a horse is enjoyable but questions the need to have ‘something to chase, something at which to shout and blow trumpets . . . and finally

to satisfy their bloodthirsty minds'. The red fox is described as 'small', 'valiant' and 'little'; he 'tires' and 'takes shelter'. Dahl recounts what happens if the animal is found: 'Slaughter takes place, after which certain young and usually too well-nourished members step forward to have the blood of sacrifice smeared on their faces.' Dahl's visceral and imaginative wit shows early: the huntsman has the appearance of 'having been grown in the dark'.

Dahl then draws a comparison between the killing of the fox and the lady who cries when her Pekinese gets a thorn in its paw. It is 'incredible', he writes, that the same lady should gloat at a fox being 'torn to pieces'. The piece ends with the assertion that the most humane method of killing foxes is surely to shoot them. Although views do, of course, change, it is still an interesting insight. We know Dahl was an animal-lover: he owned dogs, cats, goats and even 200 budgerigars at one point, and in his book *The Magic Finger*, published in 1966, a young girl who abhors hunting uses her magic to turn a local hunting family into the ducks they shoot.



Compare Dahl's portrayal of the fox, a noble and sympathetic creature, with another: licking his lips, eyes narrowed and thickly kohled beneath comic, angry eyebrows, often surrounded by a cloud of feathers, the fox is unequivocally dangerous, but also clever, and therefore a worthy

opponent for sport. He even has a name: Charlie. This is the fox of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and if you read the classic hunting literature, you'd believe this fox is more attractive than the average town fox you might see today: richer in hue, it could be mistaken for a flame if you caught a glimpse of it across a field. He was distinguished from other animals by his cunning – he could roll in manure so that the hounds would lose his scent or run across bridges or swim across lakes. In a way, he was master of his own destiny. Some sources even suggested Charlie enjoyed being hunted, looking back at the hounds with a smile and a chuckle.

When I see a fox, I'm aware that I am utterly influenced by the stories I've been told, the pictures I've absorbed, the rumours I've heard. Foxes have a rich history in this country, as a creature we have used for our own physical needs, as fur, food or medicine, but also as one that has captured our collective imagination, at various times a rogue, a villain, a trickster, a character to be admired or reviled.

But what, fundamentally, is the fox? Above all, it is a brilliant opportunist, capable of exploiting a huge range of ecological habitats and environments, and this is one of the reasons why it is so widespread around the world. It has colonised most of the northern hemisphere with a greater geographical range and concentration than any other carnivore on earth. Altogether, there are twelve distinct species of

fox, each adapted to its environment, from the tiny, delightfully big-eared fennec (*Vulpes zerda*) of the Sahara desert to the snow-white, fluffy-bodied Arctic fox (*Vulpes lagopus*), found in colder climates such as Iceland. But it is the red fox that is indigenous to Britain.

The most instantly striking characteristic of this animal is its colour. The red fox is, as its name suggests, a vivid, bright shade of reddish orange, a startlingly eye-catching hue that varies in intensity from pale apricot via ruddy red to the fiery orange of volcanic lava. The fur on the neck and chest is softer, fluffy and white as is, usually, the bob on the end of the brush. Its legs, brush and the hairs on its ears will also be tinted with black. Occasionally 'black' red foxes have been spotted, as the amount of darker fur varies from animal to animal. The red fox is long, thin and surprisingly small, on average only between 46 and 86 centimetres long, excluding the tail which can be another 30 to 55 centimetres.

The face of a fox is mesmerising – handsome, even. The ears are prominent, triangular, adorable, with soft black or white hair tufts inside. The eyes are an extraordinary gold colour, quite light and shaped like a cat's, and its expression is naturally alert, conscious – even clever, especially when it narrows its eyes.



Animals cannot speak and so we speak for them. Across Europe, one of the enduring perceptions of the fox lies in the idea of vulpine intelligence. It has existed for centuries, millennia even, and has been one of the animal's defining characteristics, from the human point of view, although with varying interpretations and ramifications over the years.

More than 2,500 years ago, in Ancient Greece, a slave called Aesop created what would become a long-enduring representation of the fox. Aesop supposedly came up with hundreds of fables, which were short and to the point, sometimes just a couple of sentences long, mostly about animals, and often including a moral lesson about human behaviour. For a number of them, his authorship is debatable: some have roots in Indian, Talmud and various folkloric traditions. In any case, the fox is a recurring character in his stories, and a clear picture of the fox's characteristics quickly appears.

In one tale, the fox leads the newly crowned king ape to a baited trap; the ape accuses him of treachery. In another, a crow has found a piece of cheese and retires to a branch to eat it; the fox flatters her by asking if her voice is as beautiful as her looks; the bird sings and drops the cheese into the fox's mouth. A lion is pretending to be sick to lure animals into his cave; the fox hangs back – he can see paw prints only going in, not coming out; he survives. A lion and a bear fight each other for a young fawn; the fox waits until they

fall asleep from exhaustion and sneaks in to snaffle their prey. A fox enters the hollow of a tree to eat food left there by a shepherd; he eats so much, he is too fat to escape. A fox tries to reach grapes but he's not tall enough. A fox tries to eat soup from a stork's bowl but it's too narrow.

Aesop's stories reveal a couple of common threads. First, the fox was perceived to have an appetite, and he is prepared to step into other animals' spaces to get a meal. Second, he is able to get this food through trickery. He can think ahead and use his wits to protect himself. And, crafty and elusive, he is often successful. The fox's wits are referred to using the Greek word *poikilos*, which means something difficult to define, varied, manifold, of different colours and shades. A shape-shifter, in a way. The fox, according to the earliest fables, was smart.

It is worth taking a moment to examine what is understood by 'intelligence' in a fox, and whether there is truth to the reputation that the fox is cleverer than other animals. Canids have high levels of cognitive ability, as many social animals do. The fox is an adept hunter, successfully resourceful, opportunistic and adaptable to different environments. Evolutionary pressure has made the species adept at assessing and exploiting availability. 'The fox can make decisions quickly and solve problems to get food,' explained Dr Dawn Scott of the University of Brighton, who has studied canids for decades, and the red fox in particular. 'That

ability to exploit and adapt means that natural selection has driven it to be able to solve problems. And that's how we assess intelligence: ability to solve problems.'

There are certainly examples of what we might consider clever behaviour. Aelian, the Roman author writing around 200 AD, gives an early account of a fox's ability to trick. A fox could sneak up on a bustard, a large terrestrial bird common on the steppes of the Old World, by raising its tail and pressing the front of its body to the ground, it could artfully change itself into a persuasive silhouette of the bird.

One of the most famous tactics the fox is said to deploy is that of playing dead, either to escape capture or to outwit prey, and there have been many examples of this in literature and art over the centuries. The *Physiologus*, a second-century Christian text, tells of the fox feigning death: 'When he is hungry and nothing turns up for him to devour, he rolls himself in red mud so that he looks as if he were stained with blood. Then he throws himself on the ground and holds his breath, so that he positively does not seem to breathe. The birds, seeing that he is not breathing, and that he looks as if he were covered with blood with his tongue hanging out, think that he is dead and come down to sit on him. Well, thus he grabs them and gobbles them up.'

In January 2016 the ruse was actually caught on film. Siberian hunters came across what appeared to be a dead Arctic fox, trapped in one of their snares. The video shows

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the fox being manhandled as they remove the snare; it never flinches, its eyes remain closed and face motionless. It looks utterly dead. But almost as soon as the men place the body in a cardboard box, the fox bursts out, leaps high into the air and scrambles across the snow for its life, soon to be joined by a group of Arctic fox pals. It is a stunning sequence of supposed thought, ingenuity and wits.

Another folkloric tale of the fox's intelligence is that the fox, if troubled by fleas, takes a piece of wool in his mouth and trots to the nearest river for a cooling swim. The fleas, desperate to avoid drowning in the water, congregate on the strip of wool. Once they're all in one place, the fox releases the wool into the river, thus getting rid of his unwelcome guests. It is a common tale in different parts of the world and we don't know the exact origin: it was popular in Celtic communities but there's a similar version about a jackal in India. Even though it's unlikely to be true, the tale still exists today; it was recounted to me as fact by a man in the Lake District in 2015.



Partly as a result of its supposed intelligence, the fox has often been seen as a threat to human interests. While it would not have been in direct competition with humans for food in the remote past, a major change for the fox, and for other wild mammals, occurred when domestic livestock

was introduced – in Britain, the earliest sheep are dated to over 5,000 years ago.

The fox had been around for many thousands of years – the oldest fox remains in Britain date back to the Wolstonian period (between 130,000 and 352,000 years ago) from Tornewton Cave in South Devon. Remains of wolf, lion, badger, bear, horse, reindeer, clawless otter, rhino and bison were also found in the same stratum so we can imagine a countryside teeming with mammals of all shapes and sizes, alongside the fox. With other such predators around, the fox would have found itself in competition for food, and it would even occasionally have become prey to an opportunistic bear, wolf or lion. But it also would have posed only a secondary threat to humans.

As the ice sheets melted at the end of Europe's final glaciation, around 12,000 years ago, vegetation gradually became more abundant across Britain as the land began to blossom into a scene more familiar to us now, allowing the wildlife, including foxes, to flourish.

But it was with the shift to a farming culture that foxes started to cause a problem for human settlements. An animal with an omnivorous diet, the fox would have been partial to a grape or two, so in direct competition with early farmers for the food they were cultivating, as well as to their livestock.

At first, the fox might have benefited from its new

barnyard neighbours. It was much easier for people to eat their domestic animals than go hunting with snares, traps or spears, and the fox wasn't as much of a threat to sheep, cattle, goats and pigs as were bears and wolves. While the bigger mammals were still roaming the countryside, the fox could keep a low profile, even though its population was widespread across Britain.

The earliest and clearest account of the fox troubling livestock is from Pliny the Elder. A Roman naturalist and scholar writing in the first century AD, he suggested practical methods for farmers to keep foxes at bay. One simple solution, for example, was to feed chickens the fried liver of a fox, which would prevent them from being attacked. A slightly more complicated way of protecting one's hen involved cutting a collar of skin from the neck of the fox and affixing it to a cockerel's neck. The hens that mated with the cock thus adorned were immune from being hunted and killed by the local fox. Presumably there is some logic to this: foxes are territorial and mark their territories with scent from their various glands. Foxes observed in areas of Britain by the eminent Scottish biologist and zoologist Professor David Macdonald of Oxford University would very rarely cross boundaries laid down by another fox group even if food was available. A fox might have been so put off by the smell of the makeshift necklace that the poultry was given wide berth.

Fear and apparent threats to human lives or settlements – such as wild animals – are powerful. They have a way of gripping our collective imagination, entering our storytelling traditions and gradually becoming increasingly magnified to the point where they can transform into an enemy of mythic proportions.

And the fox is indeed presented as menacing in early European myths and stories. In Greek mythology, for example, the Teumessian fox, also known as the Cadmean vixen, was an enormous fox that could never be caught. The vixen, which had been sent by the gods as punishment for an unrecorded crime, plagued the population of Thebes by eating people's babies. Eventually, the beast was stopped when the dog Laelaps, who could always catch its prey, was brought in to pursue the fox. Faced with an impossible paradox, Zeus turned both creatures into stone and flung them into the skies – where they remain to this day as the constellations *Canis major* and *Canis minor*.\*



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\* *Canis major* is not the only fox in our skies. In the northern skies, there is a faint constellation that was discovered in the seventeenth century by Johannes Hevelius. He originally called it *Vulpecula et Anser*, meaning 'little fox and goose', and he depicted it as a fox carrying a goose in its jaws. These days it is just known as *Vulpecula*, although the brightest star is called *Anser* in reference to the goose.

The fox's perceived intelligence, when exercised in competition for food, might be interpreted as devious rather than smart. Between admiration for that cunning and dislike for the fox's thieving tendencies, the ambiguous relationship humans have developed with the fox emerged fully in the popular culture of the Middle Ages. The hugely popular and influential stories of Reynard the Fox acknowledged his sneaky habits, but also seem to display a grudging respect and admiration for the animal.

It is unclear who invented the character of Reynard, but versions of the story were certainly popular around Europe. In the preface to German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's epic poem *Reineke Fuchs* (1794), he suggests that the first account was by Nivardus, a Flemish ecclesiastic attached to the monastery of St Peter at Ghent in 1148. Different accounts of Reynard spread through Europe, following Pierre de Saint-Cloud's *Roman de Renart* during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with *Die Hystorie van Reynaert die Vos* published in Dutch in 1479, from which William Caxton took his first English translation of 1481. In an early illumination from the manuscript of *Roman de Renart*, in the thirteenth century, a fox sits upright on a horse, wearing armour and an orange cape. His eyes look slightly upwards as he plunges his sword into the heart of Ysengrim the wolf. In another image from later in the same century, a large fox, with a goose in its mouth, leaps away

from a woman. The goose's head flops out of the fox's jaws; his claws look sharp and dangerous. You can almost see the bubbling white saliva dripping from his teeth. The eyes are narrowed and elongated, seeming to denote wickedness.

The general plot of *Reynard* is quite simple. It begins in the court of King Noble, a lion, where locals have turned up to complain about Reynard's anti-social behaviour. He blinded my cubs, says Isegrim the wolf. He nicked my pudding, says Courtuys the dog. He ate my chicks, weeps Chanticleer the cock. The King summons Bruin the bear to bring Reynard in. Reynard agrees to go with Bruin to court, but, before they leave, he wonders whether the bear might like a taste of honey? Bruin sticks his head in a log, where it gets stuck, and rips off half his face and his ears trying to get free. Reynard I, King O. Then, Tybalt the cat is sent to get Reynard. He returns with one eye. Reynard 2, King O.

Reynard eventually relents and goes to the King, and the rest of the story is a dialogue between the two in which Reynard's dirty work is discovered but wriggled out of with an imaginative lie. He succeeds by outwitting the other animals with cunning tricks that play on their weaknesses. He bullies, he kills, he wins.

Reynard was a bestseller in the Middle Ages and has been rewritten and translated a number of times since. Its popularity may have been due to it fulfilling a need: medieval beast fables were usually not about animals, but about

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humans and human relations, using animal characters to satirise human society as well as personifying certain traits and emotions. As Joan Acocella wrote in a *New Yorker* essay, ‘Animals are fun – they have feathers and fangs, they live in trees and holes – and they seem to us simpler than we are, so that, by using them, we can make our points cleaner and faster.’ Creating a story around animal characters engaged people, while also carrying a moral or deeper meaning.

The character has gone on to inspire tales in different art forms, from Stravinsky’s opera-ballet *Renard* to Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*, from the stories of Chicken Licken to Janáček’s *Cunning Little Vixen*. In the nineteenth century Reynard was the basis for the ballad of Reynardine, a werefox who lured beautiful women to his castle, to an undisclosed fate. He’s even been immortalised in British hunting songs – and, indeed, ‘Reynard’ is still a name for a male fox in the UK:

*On the first day of Spring in the year ninety-three  
the first recreation was in this country,  
the King’s County gentleman o’er hills, dales and rocks,  
they rode out so jovially in search of a fox.*

*Chorus: Tally-ho, hark away, tally-ho, hark away,  
tally ho, hark away, boys, away.*

*When Reynard first started he faced Tullamore,*

*Foxes Unearthed*

*Arklow and Wicklow along the seashore,  
he kept his brush in view every yard of the way,  
and it's straight he took his course through the streets of Roscrea.*

*Chorus*

*But Reynard, sly Reynard, he lay hid that night,  
they swore they would watch him until the daylight,  
early the next morning the woods they did resound,  
with the echo of horns and the sweet cry of hounds.*

*Chorus*

*When Reynard was started he faced to the hollow,  
where none but the hounds and footmen could follow,  
the gentlemen cried: 'Watch him, watch him, what shall we do?  
If he makes it to the rocks then he will cross Killatoe!'*

*Chorus*

*Bur Reynard, sly Reynard, away he did run,  
away from the huntsman, away from the gun,  
the gentleman cried: 'Home, boys, there's nothing we can do,  
for Reynard is away and our hunting is through.'*

*Chorus*

In 2014, the first series of *Bosch*, a noir detective TV drama set in Los Angeles, had as its villain one ‘Raynard Waits’, a pseudonym devised by the character. Michael Connelly, from whose novel the TV show was adapted, made his Raynard crafty and apt to change his appearance, a direct reference to the character traits of the Flemish tale. Both have the same *raison d’être*: to prey and outwit. Waits, now on the run, calls Bosch (King Lion) to confess, to trick, to wind up, delighting in the fact he has one up on the police as he goes around murdering prostitutes and adding to his skull shrine. Reynard lives on in human form.

Mostly, Reynard is a villain we cheer for. The Caxton translation is written with a delight at the character’s Machiavellian quality: we enjoy watching the play of intelligence in contrast with the stupidity and gullibility of the other animals. It is inconsistent, though. On the one hand, the reader is invited to enjoy Reynard’s outrageous lies and one-upmanship over his boorish peers. ‘An ass is an ass,’ says Reynard. ‘Yet many have risen in the world. What a pity.’ And we can’t help but agree. On the other, his activity is violent: he rapes the wolf’s wife and causes many a gory injury. Caxton, towards the end of the epic, warns against such behaviour and suggests we weed out character defects similar to the ones the fox displays. Yet, it all ends happily ever after for Reynard, which suggests he is, if not the hero,

at least an anti-hero. He is charismatic, and, to use Colin Willock's phrase, 'splendidly nefarious'.

Reynard was not the only fox story of the times. Chaucer wrote a cunning fox, Russell, into his *Canterbury Tales*. His was a retelling of Aesop's 'The Fox and the Crow', which further popularised the story in Britain. This was in the 1390s, when Britain was experiencing harsh weather, with savage winters and wet summers, which would have put increasing pressure on food production, and people were badly malnourished. The country was also still recovering from the Black Death epidemic in 1348, which had wiped out half of the population. Any predatory mammal would have been seen as a threat to human sustenance. It was at this time that Chaucer's Russell, in the Nun's Priest's Tale, is 'full of sly iniquity' and lurks in a bed of cabbage with the intention of taking Chanticleer the rooster. He manages to make off with the bird after convincing him to close his eyes and sing, although the rooster escapes in the end.

In a practical sense, tales about pilfering foxes gave instruction to farmers about protecting their livestock. But the fox had also become a clear symbol for a variety of moral failings. As most people were illiterate, such a message could be communicated quickly and clearly through imagery, which more often than not would be conveyed through the Church, the main source of information for many.

The Church already had a long history of portraying

the fox as a villain, going back to early descriptions in the Bible. It appears as a thief: the author of Song of Songs, thought to have been written around 200 BC, accuses the fox of ruining vines. And in the Gospel of Luke from the New Testament, Jesus refers to Herod Antipas as 'that fox' after he is warned of Herod's plot to kill him, painting the king as a crafty enemy intent on entrapment. The fox's reputation as cunning and deceptive is also equated with false prophets in the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel: 'O Israel, your prophets are like the foxes in the deserts.' In John Gill's *Exposition of the Old Testament*, from the eighteenth century, he explains that these false prophets are 'comparable to foxes, for their craftiness and cunning, and lying in wait to deceive, as these seduced the Lord's people; and such are false teachers, who walk in craftiness, and handle the word of God deceitfully, and are deceitful workers; and to foxes in the deserts, which are hungry and ravenous, and make a prey of whatsoever comes within their reach, as these prophets did of the people.'

These early biblical references to the fox inform the Church's representations of the fox in the Middle Ages, which also tie in with the popular portrayals of the sneaky Reynard character, a familiar image that people would recognise and understand.

There are various examples of the way the fox was depicted in ecclesiastical iconography throughout the

Middle Ages. Firstly, as a simple thief – possibly as a cautionary tale to the local community. In Wells Cathedral, a carving that dates to 1190 shows a fox stealing a goose, inspired by early versions of *Renard the Fox* and *Chanticleer*. Sometimes the fox was shown as slinging the goose over its back, a common image in wood carvings across Britain. Although there is anecdotal evidence of people witnessing a fox carrying a goose on its back, this seems extremely unlikely – a fox tends to carry prey in its mouth, often clamped to the head or neck. It is a depiction based on myth rather than observation.

As a myth – as a symbol – the fox had already come to represent the devil in medieval bestiary accounts – those tales with a moral message that usually described animals and their characteristics. ‘The fox signifies the Devil in this life,’ wrote Philippe de Thaun in the twelfth century. ‘To people living carnally he shows pretence of death, till they are entered into evil, caught in his mouth. Then he takes them by a jump and slays and devours them, as the fox does the bird when he has allured it.’

Gradually, the early biblical comparisons of the fox with false prophets also started to become increasingly popular as visual representations, with the fox portrayed as a devil preacher. ‘When the fox preaches, beware your geese,’ says the proverb. The commonly occurring theme of the fox preaching to geese is partly a satire on false preachers and

partly advice to avoid them, with the advent of the Lollards, a rebellious group that appeared in the 1330s, calling for reform of the Church.

In a scene from a French manuscript from the end of the thirteenth century or the first quarter of the fourteenth century, a fox stands on its hind legs, propped up by a bishop's crozier. His long brush trails behind him and his chest is typically whiter, or at least paler, than the rest of his orange body. He wears a bishop's mitre and his tongue is lolling out, which gives the impression he is hungry, predatory, salivating and out of control. He is standing before a group of birds: a falcon, chicken, geese, a stork and a swan, his 'congregation'.

The Stained Glass Museum of Ely Cathedral has a couple of 'devil preacher' scenes in its collection. One, from the late fourteenth century, shows a fox wearing a mitre and dressed up in priest's robes, preaching from a pulpit. The fox has his mouth open with his teeth bared. He looks as if he's smiling and has a slightly psychotic air. The eyebrows are low and deviously angled. He lifts up his clawed hands; one is already clutching a dead goose, his 'fingers' gripping tightly around its neck. He looks out onto a rural scene with a couple of gormless-looking geese, the implication being that they won't be around for much longer. The fox looks frightening, in control and definitely an enemy. The roundel was from Holy Cross in Byfield, discovered in the rectory but probably its original location was in the church.

A similar scene is found on an Ely Cathedral misericord: a fox in a preacher's gown gets close enough to the birds in his congregation to make off with one of them. He is on his hind legs, facing four geese who look enraptured by his sermon. It is a common image in medieval art, found in tapestries, stained glass, drawings, paintings, manuscripts and wood carvings across Europe and in the cathedrals of Bristol, Worcester and Leicester, as well as many parish churches including Ludlow, Beverley and Yorkshire, and at St George's in Windsor. The fox is depicted most often as a bishop but also as a pilgrim, priest, friar, monk or abbot. He always looks sly, crafty and cunning.



The fox remained a beguiling and mysterious animal, a competitor, a predator, a creature little understood and approached with wariness and reluctant admiration. It loomed large in the medieval imagination as a symbol for many of society's ills. Gradually, that started to become expressed through our language.

The first example of the word 'fox' being used to denote artfulness or craftiness is from the late twelfth century, from verse in *The Ormulum* by a monk known as Ormin ('Þatt mann iss fox and hinnderrzæp and full off ille wiless'). By then, 'foxyly' was used to mean crafty or cunning. The verb 'to fox', meaning to trick by craft, appeared in 1250, and there

was also 'to smell a fox' (to be suspicious) and 'to play the fox' (to act cunningly) – it is possible that the Irish word for 'I play the fox', *sionnachuighim*, is where the word 'shenanigans' comes from. In recognition of its thieving tendencies, there's even the word 'vulpeculated', which specifically means to be robbed by a fox.

There are many other related phrases in English dialect, mostly picking up on the animal's negative connotations in popular tradition: to 'box the fox' means 'to rob an orchard', while a 'fox-sleep' is a 'feigned sleep'. But there are some that are neutral, and even quite charming: 'foxes brewings' means 'a mist which rolls among the trees on the escarpment of the Downs in unsettled weather'.

Around Tudor times, a new connotation arose in the phrases 'to hunt or catch the fox' (to get drunk). There is even a connection between drunkenness and the crafty nature of the fox, based on a prose satire written by Thomas Nashe, an Elizabethan poet and playwright. In his *Pierce Penniless, His supplication to the Divell* (1592), he described the types of drunkenness you might encounter, comparing their characteristics with animals, finishing with the eighth type of drunkard, who is 'fox-drunk when crafty-drunk, as many of the Dutchmen be, that will never bargain but when they are drunk'. The association with drunkenness lasted into the Regency period, with 'to get foxed', but has become a less common phrase in modern times. The fox as 'cunning',

however, is now firmly set in our language. ‘Cunning as a fox’, the ‘crafty fox’, ‘sly as a fox’ are metaphors used so often that they have become clichés that appear all over the place. ‘Outfoxed’ is commonly used to mean getting one up on someone in a crafty way. In a memorable scene from *Blackadder Goes Forth*, Baldrick, typically, has a plan. ‘A cunning and subtle one?’ draws Blackadder. ‘Yes, sir’. ‘As cunning as a fox who’s just been appointed professor of cunning at Oxford University?’

As well as craftiness, the fox started to become associated with sexuality – possibly going back to Reynard’s rape of the wolf’s wife. A pilgrim’s badge dating from the fourteenth or fifteenth century shows a fox standing on the back of another fox playing an organ. Another has a fox with an erect penis being led by a chained goose. Experts suggest these might have been a comment on the lust of certain preachers, with the organ representing an actual sexual organ. In other carvings and woodcuts, Brother Reynard stands trial for adultery and rape.

In the early sixteenth century, ‘foxy’ is found to mean ‘foxlike’, but it became slang in twentieth-century North America to mean a sexy woman. The first example of that meaning is from 1964 in J. H. Clarke’s story *Harlem*. ‘Daddy, she was a real fox!’ a character says.

The etymology of ‘vixen’ can be traced back to the Old English word ‘fyxen’. The meaning of the vixen as an

'ill-tempered, quarrelsome woman' was first recorded in 1575, according to *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*. The etymology of the word 'fox' itself can be traced back to Old English, before 830. It is of Germanic origin, and related to the Dutch *vos* and German *Fuchs*. Its exact beginnings are hard to ascertain, but the leading etymologist Anatoly Liberman suggests that the word 'fox' may be related to words meaning 'tail' or 'hairy skin', 'sheen', 'secrecy' or 'offensive smell'.

'Tod' was also a proverbial word for fox, first appearing in the twelfth century in the writings of the Benedictine monk Reginald of Durham. It is found again in the Scottish poem *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie* in 1508. A 'tod's bairns', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means 'an evil brood, or children or persons of bad stock'.

And it's not just in Britain that the fox has entered the language for its questionable qualities; in Finland, for example, if someone has a hidden agenda, they are said 'to have a fox under their arm'. The Finns also have a rather lovely word for the aurora borealis: *revontulet*, which translates as 'foxfire'. The origins are supposedly in a Finnish fable, in which an Arctic fox, running through snow, sprayed up crystals with his tail, causing sparks to fly off into the night sky.

In Tudor times, in Britain, we can still see admiration for the fox's cunning expressed in our language: Shakespeare celebrated it with all but two of thirty-three

references to foxes in his plays, paying tribute to their guile. 'If thou were the lion, the fox would beguile thee,' Timon says to Apemantus in *Timon of Athens*. 'No more truth in thee than in a drawn fox,' says Falstaff in *Henry IV Part I* to Mistress Quickly, referring to the trickery played by a fox while it is hunted. In *King Lear*, Edgar refers to the fox as 'sneaky' and 'in stealth'.

It's not just our language in which the fox has clearly left its mark, but also in place names all over Britain: Todmorden, Todwick, Todber and Toddington; Foxcombe Hill, Foxton, Foxearth, Foxholes and Foxfields. In fact, a study conducted by Claire Marriage found that 'fox' was the most popular animal-related place name in England, with 206 named for the fox, 141 for the badger and 37 for the otter. Similarly, taverns and ale houses springing up in the Middle Ages were often named after foxes. There remain 143 pubs called the Fox and Hounds and, among others, the Fox (120), the Fox and Goose (16), the Snooty Fox (10) and more than a handful of pubs called the Fox and Grapes, the Fox and Pheasant, or the Fox and Duck. This may, in part, have been due to the popularity of fox hunting across the country, particularly in the case of names such as the Fox and Hound, but many of these names predate that by some way. Perhaps it's a sign of how widespread the fox was in Britain; perhaps it's an indication of affection for the animal; perhaps it's an indication

of the animal's usefulness, having coexisted with us side by side for centuries.



In Ancient Britain, foxes would have been hunted by humans for both their meat and their fur. The fox has never been a popular national dish; it is generally considered inedible. The meat is said to have a strong smell and flavour, and tends to be gamey and dry because there is little fat on the animal. However, in the past it was eaten occasionally, likely due to a lack of any alternative. Predators have rarely featured much in our diet, possibly because of an instinct related to the higher risk of a predator contracting diseases through the consumption of other animals. If the early hunter-gatherers ate fox meat out of desperation, the need to do so would have decreased as soon as farming took off. Soon foxes no longer formed a part of the human diet, and these days their meat is very rarely eaten. There is a recipe for fox casserole from the late celebrity chef Clarissa Dickson Wright that calls for hanging the fox in running water for three days (to combat the dryness of the meat) before stewing it in onion, garlic and tomato for a couple of hours and serving with chestnut pasta. On the whole, though, it is viewed as distasteful, which might explain the repulsed reaction on social media when TV presenter Phillip Schofield ate roadkill fox meat live on air in 2013.

However, an enthusiastic roadkill connoisseur I spoke with protested that fox in lasagne or stir fry, especially if it's the meat of a cub, is delicious.

The fur of the fox would have been much more important, worn to keep warm during harsh winters. Although there is little evidence about fur in ancient times, fox remains turn up in a great deal of archaeological digs from the Anglo-Saxon period onwards. Bones recovered from Saxo-Norman (tenth to twelfth century) deposits recovered at Millbridge, Hertford, were mainly foot and tail bones, which implies that the rest of the body was removed for its pelt, and that the use of fox fur was an established practice. It may have been a popular choice as foxes were relatively numerous and their fur is warm, protective and soft. The individual guard hairs can grow to 5 centimetres, and even longer in colder climates. In a 1986 paper in the *Canadian Journal of Zoology*, Daniel Maurel and a team at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in France compared the hair of the red fox, badger and mink. As well as the guard hairs and fine hairs, they wrote, 'the fox has a third, intermediate, hair type; these correspond to guard hairs but are smaller in size and diameter. In this species, the hairs are grouped in triads: each triad is formed by one guard hair (with its fine hairs) and two intermediate hairs, each having a certain number of fine hairs.' They also found that this affected the overall density of the pelage: 'It is 10 times

denser in the fox than in the badger and 10 times denser in the mink than in the fox,' they found, which perhaps suggests why mink has traditionally been a more popular fur than fox.

In the Middle Ages, the fox continued to be useful to humans, possibly still for its meat at this point, but almost certainly for its fur. London became a hive of the fur trade around the thirteenth century, and the 'skinners' – as the fur merchants were called – often had connections with royalty, aristocracy and the Church, which boosted the industry economically. Through the Middle Ages, fur turned from being an essential and practical warming garment to a luxury item, an important signal of hierarchy and upper-class status. Medieval demands for fur were extensive: in one year alone (1344–5), the royal household commissioned 79,220 skins of trimmed miniver (plain white fur used for trimming). Just one of Henry VI's robes required a whopping 12,000 squirrel and 80 ermine skins.

Luckily for the fox, its fur wasn't considered truly luxurious in the early centuries of the fur trade – not compared with ermine, sable or beaver, which were warmer and silkier, and thus more desirable. An essay on the fur trade in the early medieval Mediterranean by James Howard-Johnston suggests that Vikings from the north trading fur with the Caliphate in the ninth and tenth centuries did not value fox pelts highly. He says that the pelts of foxes, along with those

of squirrels and tree-martens, were considered 'relatively humdrum', while ermine, sable and miniver were 'prized', as they were more delicate and soft. However, as fur became more of a fashion item, the brilliant hue of fox fur made it increasingly popular, especially for trimmings. The first known mention of 'fox-furred' to mean trimmed with fox fur is from 1501: 'my tawney gown furryd w' ffoxe'. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, fox pelts exported for the European markets were fetching up to 40 shillings each, and the fox-fur trade continued into the twentieth century.

By the Tudor period, the fox had also become an established element of medical practice, its various body parts being used to treat all manner of ailments. This was not a new trend: animal-based remedies had been common for some time, and cures involving parts of the fox had existed since at least the Middle Ages. 'And though he be right guileful in himself and malicious, yet he is good and profitable in use of medicine,' wrote Bartholomaeus Anglicus, a teacher and scholar in the thirteenth century.

We can see a more complete account emerging from Edward Topsell, an Anglican priest, who records the fox's many medical uses in his *History of Four-Footed Beasts* of 1607. (The book also claims that weasels give birth through their ears and lemmings graze in the clouds, but still, it is highly valuable as one of a few historical sources that mention foxes from the time.) The ashes of fox flesh burnt and dunked in

wine were said to cure shortness of breath and liver problems. Fox blood was prescribed for bladder stones. Brains fed to infants warded off epilepsy. Fat was used to cure gout and rubbed onto bald heads as a cure for alopecia. Adults were encouraged to tie the penis of a fox around their aching heads to relieve the pain of migraine. Leprosy? Fox poo and vinegar. Blindness? Get a fox's tongue and hang it around your neck. Struggling to breathe? Powder some liver and lungs for assured relief. The testicles were tied around the neck of a child suffering from toothache in what might be considered the least charming necklace in British history.



A useful and admired creature it may have been, but the Tudor period also saw a distinct shift in attitude, and not just towards foxes; in 1532 a death knell sounded for most of Britain's mammals. The Vermin Acts, passed by Henry VIII, introduced statutory legislation with financial reward for killing animals seen as a threat to grain, crops, livestock and eggs. The laws were a response to the struggles of a growing population following the Black Death, the Great Famine, and years of bad harvests caused by excessive rainfall and outbreaks of disease, hunger and poverty. Unwilling to tolerate any competition for resources, the Acts declared that predatory mammals such as foxes, polecats, pine martens and wildcats as well as hedgehogs, rats and birds must

be exterminated. In fact, very few animals were exempt: hedgehogs were killed because they were thought to eat eggs and suck the milk from cow's udders; moles for damaging grassland and crops; otters for taking fish; and foxes for preying on piglets, poultry and lambs. It was vital to protect the recovering population from anything that was perceived as a threat, no matter how small it appeared.

The Act decreed that churchwardens painstakingly record the number of different animals killed. They were also in charge of paying out a bounty for the head of each animal. The head of a fox or badger could fetch 12 pence, which was considerably more than the average daily wage of 4 pence. It was a much higher price than for the other wildlife. Before the development of shotguns, foxes were trapped with nets and then beaten to death with sticks or poisoned. The legislation was strengthened by Queen Elizabeth I and would be a profound influence on attitudes towards the control of predatory mammals and carnivores over the ensuing centuries.

People had different attitudes towards the natural world at this time. Animals were seen as expendable objects, creatures that were given to humans by God, and were on the planet only to serve mankind in whatever way human beings saw fit – whether that was food, clothing, labour, sport or entertainment. For example, it was customary to release a fox and a cat in Inner Temple on St Stephen's Day and set

the hounds on them as part of the Christmas revelry in the seventeenth century. 'A Huntsman cometh into the Hall, with a fox and a purse-net; with a cat, both bound at the end of a staff; and with them nine or ten couple of hounds, with the blowing of hunting horns. And the fox and cat are by the hounds set upon, and killed beneath the fire. This sport finished, the Marshal placeth them in the several appointed places,' wrote the scholar William Dugdale of the recreational spectators' event, which took place between two courses of food. It is unlikely many in the modern day would be able to eat after witnessing such an episode.

Fox tossing was a much loved pastime for aristocratic couples in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. The game took place in squares of lawn or courtyard and involved tossing the animal as high as possible from strips of material taut as a tightrope. A good effort was tossing the fox 24 feet high into the air. Usually the animal died, as you'd expect, and large events were sometimes staged involving hundreds of animals: in his book *Hunting Weapons*, Howard Blackmore recounts how 'at a famous contest held at Dresden by the Elector of Saxony, Augustus the Strong (1694-1733), 687 foxes, 533 hares, 34 badgers and 21 wild-cats were tossed to their deaths.' Occasionally the sport would take place during a masquerade ball when the players as well as the vulpine participants would be dressed up in masks and costumes.

It was as quarry, however, that animals were increasingly used, as hunting grew ever more popular. For the upper classes, obtaining food was no longer the prime objective – hunting was becoming more about sport and entertainment. And hunting foxes was nothing new: Alexander the Great is one of the earliest known fox hunters; the Romans also engaged in the sport, though with not nearly as much ceremony and import as what would come later; and in the tenth century, King Canute classed foxes as ‘Beasts of the Chase’ (any animal deemed suitable for hunting). Thanks to the longstanding zeal for hunting of all kinds in Britain, a series of laws was put into place that gradually made the British landscape particularly well suited for hunting. It was the Normans who were the first people so enthusiastic about hunting that they created areas of parkland where game or quarry could be protected. In the eleventh century, William the Conqueror, a keen hunter looking to protect his own interests, set up the Forest Laws, which protected both quarry animals from being killed and their habitats from being destroyed, benefiting wildlife populations and creating an ideal countryside for hunting. The hunting of all animals remained a hobby of the royals, but by the late thirteenth century Edward I had a pack of hounds and a huntsman specifically for foxes, and during the reign of Richard II in the fourteenth century, official public permission was given to hunt the fox.

A significant boon for hunting came about with the Enclosure Acts, from 1604, which converted public land to privately owned land. Large areas, including plenty of ancient woodland, were now fenced off, and a patchwork quilt of green fields bordered by hedgerows began to emerge and spread instead. In terms of hunting, this provided a greater expanse of grassland, which was easier to gallop across, and a network of obstacles, in the form of hedgerows, for jumping, while previously boggy fields were drained, so the ground was dryer and safer to ride rapidly over. The changes had a profound effect on farmers, who had relied on the common land, but also on the deer population, as those lands had formed their habitat.

Foxes were still not the main target of the hunt at this time. In his *Book of Sports*, Pierce Egan wrote that, until the late seventeenth century, 'the fox was considered an inferior animal of the chase, the stag, buck, and even hare, ranking before him'. As the deer population declined, however, hunters turned their attention to other quarry. The fox was really the only mammal left that was worth hunting, now that the main motive was recreation and sport. It was Britain's last remaining large native mammal, alongside the badger: the wolves (last seen in 1680), bears (1000) and beavers (1526) had all vanished as a result of intensive hunting and habitat decline. Smaller mammals such as the pine marten, polecat and wild cat had also mostly disappeared,

either driven to near-extinction for their fur or exterminated to protect game birds. And so fox hunting started to take off.



In the mid-eighteenth century, the Vermin Acts were finally repealed. By that time, Britain was a much easier place to live in than in medieval and Tudor times: the country was relatively prosperous, more politically and socially stable, and healthcare was much improved. Because there was more food to go round, people were not in competition with foxes in the same way they had been, so there wasn't as much of a need to protect grain, crops or people by slaughtering hedgehogs and other animals. It is impossible to quantify how successful the Acts had been in keeping human populations alive and fed, but certainly Britain's wildlife populations paid a heavy and irreversible price, with many disappearing completely. Fox populations were hit hard: records before hunting took off are scarce, but we know numbers were wiped out in some areas by the Vermin Laws, and didn't recover for many years. In surviving parish accounts of the animals killed, it is the fox that appears most consistently – between six and twelve foxes a year in English parishes considered places of 'high control'.

Fox control certainly didn't stop overnight. The animal was still considered vermin by farmers and the shooting

community. The last record of a fox killed and recorded by a parish was in Bedfordshire in 1820. However, that too was about to change as it started to become the favourite quarry of a countryside sport that was rapidly growing in popularity.

The catalyst that had caused fox hunting to lurch into a national sport was a change in the way it was organised in the 1750s. Aristocrats introduced rules, regulations, funding and, crucially, the breeding of faster hounds and horses. It took a few committed leaders to catapult fox hunting into the mainstream. Hugo Meynell, described by fellow hunter Dick Christian as a ‘regular little apple dumpling on horse-back’, was one of them; he was the Master of the Quorn hunt in Leicestershire, the county with the most legendary ‘hunting country’. Known as the ‘father of fox hunting’, he bred foxhounds and thoroughbred horses for greater speed and stamina. The hunt soon became fast and exciting, with a new element of high-octane riding. Men in smart red coats and top hats would gallop freely on the finest horses across the most exquisite stretches of British countryside, unfettered by roads or railways, pursuing foxhounds with beautifully dappled coats in cream, brown and black and vertical tails. It was a raucous scene: the yearning note of the hunting horn, the cries of the hounds and the developing language of the hunting men. Most people would never see a hunt, as they took place on private land, but for anyone

who did, it would pass in a flash, such was the speed of the chase. A common spectacle was the hunt meet, which might take place at a public landmark. It was moved from dawn to the much more reasonable hour of 11 a.m., giving time to hobnob and socialise together. This also meant that people could travel from other regions of the country to take part.

The 'golden age' of fox hunting (roughly from 1800 to 1870) was in full swing. It was a time when the countryside was still relatively unspoilt by barbed wire and motorways, and the hunt had a greater freedom of movement. The sport had evolved into something fast, furious and exciting for its proponents, and took place on a regular basis all around the country – the aristocracy often had six days a week free to dedicate to the sport. And there were fewer opponents and conflicting interests to interfere with their activities, whether in the shape of animal rights advocates, farmers or gamekeepers.

As hunting took off, the fox's position was elevated in country circles. He became a shining example of a worthy foe, not just vermin to be killed without ceremony, and the focus was very much back on his intelligence and cunning. As this view became more widespread, the fox depicted in books and pictures started to change. Instead of being part of a long European tradition of the fox as trickster, devil preacher or chicken-pincher, the fox was now the top quarry, illustrated in the hunting literature as 'Charlie'.

Just as hunting changed the way foxes were treated and perceived in Britain by enhancing their recreational value, so, too, did it influence the way they were written about. No longer solely depicted as the villain, they were increasingly portrayed as an admirable creature and a worthy foe. As the painter J. C. Dollman of *The Fox O' One Tree Hill* put it, 'an the beautiful creetur, worth pounds an pounds, A specially made to be killed by hounds'.

There is an argument, in fact, that the popularity of fox hunting is responsible for keeping the fox alive as a species in Britain. As we've seen, the Vermin Acts, other population controls and the fur trade had all taken a terrible toll on fox populations. Foxes sometimes had to be caught and released in the right place for hunting, which suggests numbers were dwindling, although this practice was scorned by certain hunt circles who felt hunting a 'bagged' fox was bad sport. But as the fox was now seen as something useful – a noble quarry – there was a push to boost numbers, even importing them from Europe. Imported foxes were sold for 10 shillings at Leadenhall market in 1845, and DNA analysis suggests that foxes in the South of England are much more closely related to French foxes than those from the North of England. Cubs were also preserved and coverts managed to encourage the fox population. So it is possible that without the need to protect the fox for man's pleasure and as a sporting incentive, it would have gone the same way as

the wolf, bear and lynx. That argument existed as early as Tudor times: 'If foxes were not preserved for the pleasure of gentlemen they would be utterly destroyed manie years ago,' wrote chronicler Raphael Holinshead to Elizabeth I.

It would be somewhat ironic if the survival of the species was largely thanks to the desire to hunt it. But arguably, although the population was probably enhanced by hunting, the fox might have survived in any case, owing to its relative size, making it far less of a threat to humans than, for example, the wolf, and its resilience and adaptability as a species.

Hunting not only had an effect on fox populations; it also became a key architect of the British countryside landscape alongside agriculture. Spinneys were encouraged and gorse coverts were planted to provide habitats that would be easy to drive foxes out of, as opposed to large woods – between 1800 and 1850 the amount of gorse in Leicestershire is said to have doubled in an effort to give foxes habitat. Many of these areas still stand, and it is possible that the modern British landscape would have even less woodland than it does today without hunting.

The popularity of fox hunting also created tension between proponents of the sport and farmers, who still saw the fox as a pest. By the late 1800s, it was frowned on to shoot foxes. Sporting magazines would even publish the names of known fox-murderers. The split between those

who saw the fox as something that needed to be conserved so that it could be hunted and those who wanted to exterminate it in order to protect their livestock or game became even more pronounced through the nineteenth century as farming intensified. More land was taken up by agriculture and the hunt had to persuade the farmers, who loathed foxes and wanted them dead, to keep them alive. It is a paradoxical conundrum and a sometimes strained pact that exists to this day.

Pheasant shooting began in the same period, which added another human interest: the development of the shooting estate. The gamekeepers who looked after the land and the shoot didn't want foxes around to take their birds. In an issue of *Sporting Review* magazine published in 1869, the clash between fox hunting and shooting is explored and a sportsman called Captain Percy Williams is quoted as saying, 'Pheasants have brought in their train envy, hatred and malice, have dispossessed the fox and demoralised the country.' All these conflicting interests meant that emotions were running high.

The hunt and the tensions it inspires are unique to Britain. British huntsmen did introduce their practice of hunting on horseback around the world, and hunting groups sprang up in North America, Ireland, Italy, France, Canada and Australia (the red fox was introduced there in 1833 for the sole purpose of hunting). But hunting in other

countries never quite took off as it had in the UK, in terms of the number of hunts and packs per area, for various reasons. In France, for example, farmers were not amenable to allowing their land to be used for sport. 'The farmers have no idea of people riding over their land, or what they call "chase à cheval",' wrote Colonel John Cook in his book *Observations on Fox-Hunting*, published in 1826, adding that the country would be 'up in arms' if one attempted partridge shooting. The French people he knew didn't believe you could train a hound to kill only foxes.

Hunting was popular in the United States, but really it was a different sport altogether. The focus was – and is – on the chase, not the kill. The fox doesn't face death at all, and it is often called 'fox chasing'. 'A successful hunt ends when the fox is accounted for by entering a hole in the ground, called an earth. Once there, hounds are rewarded with praise from their huntsman. The fox gets away and is chased another day,' says the Masters of Foxhounds Association of America's website. Often the hunt chases coyotes or bobcats instead of foxes.

There have been hunts across Europe, but not to the same extent as in Britain, where there were scores of hunts in every area of the country. Currently there are 186 packs of foxhounds in England, Wales and Scotland and 41 in Ireland. Elsewhere the numbers are lower: France and Italy (3 each), Portugal (1) and Australia (19). In Britain the hunt

became part of the countryside economy and cultural fabric, embedded in rural identity.

The landscape played a key part in hunting's popularity, but there were other factors. Perhaps it was a result of horse breeding in Britain that led to hunts taking place at breakneck speed. After the near-invasion by the Spanish Armada in 1588, Elizabeth I was determined to improve her cavalry, particularly focusing on the quality and speed of the horses themselves. Three Eastern stallions – the Darley Arabian, the Godolphin Barb and the Byerley Turk – were imported, and, soon, the great English thoroughbred was reared, 'the supreme horse of the world in speed, courage and quality', according to Wilson Stephens' essay 'How We Inherited Hunting'. These magnificent new breeds meant that fox hunting could evolve from a slow, standard plod to a high-speed national obsession. The thrill element was born.

Hound breeding also took place specifically in Britain, and greatly improved as the eighteenth century drew on. This pattern of evolution might have carried over even to the fox and fox hunters, wrote Stephens, suggesting that 'foxes that could not run and think fast enough to outwit the ever quicker foxhounds did not live to hand on their failings to another generation' and that the hunting man had to evolve 'to sustain conditions in which they could remain happy in their sport'.

The manners and etiquette of early hunting chimed perfectly with Victorian society and the idea of the ‘manly’ ‘gentleman’ and ideals of courage and courtesy. ‘The hunting field acquired what it had previously lacked, that element of daredevilry and decision which the Elizabethan sailors had shown in the war against Spain, which the men of Marlborough and Wellington were soon to show, which came out again generations later in the Battle of Britain, and which will always come out in time of challenge so long as Britons remain Britons,’ wrote Stephens.

Perhaps fox hunting remained and prospered because it supported a prevailing idea of British identity: that of the gallant but dominating survivor.

The ‘Golden Age of Hunting’ waned as farming and industry spread through the nineteenth century, reducing expanses of open country and limiting how far the hunts could ride. Canals, railways and, later, an increase in roads and motorways also truncated hunting country. Hunters at the time thought the Industrial Revolution would be the death of hunting, but it did manage to evolve. It took another hit when life in Europe was ruptured by the First World War and many British huntsmen left to serve and did not return. However, those who made it back were eager to take part again. Stephens writes that the 1920s ‘saw a regeneration in all aspects of the sport’, because young men who had had war-time adventures returned keen to broaden

their horizons. There were fears that the Second World War would rupture the hunting world, but again, according to Stephens, the link between the 'fearlessness' of the hunting code and the necessary fearlessness of war kept the sport alive in the minds of those at home and away. The fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain called out 'Tally Ho!' – the sound a huntsman makes when he see a fox – as they faced the Germans. When the war ended, hunting in Britain was maintained by new and old fans.



Of course, not everyone was pleased that hunting endured. The animal welfare movement had showed signs of starting as early as 1740, when protesting voices began to be heard regarding hunting in general, including such high-profile figures as Jeremy Bentham speaking out for animals: 'The question is not, Can they *reason*? Nor, Can they *talk*? but Can they *suffer*?' And it had finally become a political issue in 1800 when the first Bill – against bear baiting – was submitted. The animal rights movement and anti-hunting groups were gathering strength, fuelled by respected and influential voices such as Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Henry Salt, central figures in many of the intellectual debates of their day. They agitated, wrote, published and posed questions to the public and members of parliament that no one had done before. In 1824, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to

Animals was formed (later, the RSPCA – it was given royal support through patronage in 1840 from Queen Victoria) and soon after, bear baiting (1825), badger baiting (1835) and cock fighting (1849) were banned.

So far, the fox hunt had not been affected, but in 1869, a controversial essay, written by the historian E. A. Freeman, looked at the fox in a new way, questioning the morality of fox hunting specifically for the first time. Freeman didn't hold back in his attack on the 'savage' sport, calling it cowardly and foolhardy. The novelist Anthony Trollope replied to Freeman that hunting was a bearer of 'national efficiency', making Englishmen 'what they are' and keeping them that way. He denounced Freeman as a milksop and bookworm and argued that there was no comparison between fox hunting and bear baiting: very few huntsmen watch the actual death of the fox, which for him was inconsequential. A storm of opinion, emotion and response erupted, played out in the pages of the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian*, much as it does today. The spotlight had finally settled on the issue of fox hunting, and it began to be discussed seriously for the first time.

By no means did any of this happen overnight: the treatment of animals continued during the nineteenth century much as it always had. There is a carpet of green lawn called Weston's Yard in the middle of Eton College, where I used to play as a child with other teachers' families. I remember

a game where we'd roll each other up in rugs like sausage rolls amid gleeful hysterics. A very different type of sport took place in the buildings nearby during the nineteenth century. The college butcher provided a ram that would be hunted and beaten to death by the pupils. Then, on Shrove Tuesday, the college cook would pin a crow to a pancake and hang it on a door to serve as a target. 'Even in the nineteenth century such sports as bull-baiting, badger-baits, dog fights, and cat and duck hunts were organised for the special edification of the Eton boys,' wrote Henry Salt, a master at the school in the 1890s.

Salt was a compelling advocate for animal rights and welfare. It is interesting that such an unconventional, counter-cultural mind could arise from one of the most traditional institutions in the country (he studied there before returning to teach). Eton's history of blood sports disgusted Salt. He believed the services of hunting were no longer required and that blood sports were an anachronism, a 'relic of savagery', which time would gradually remove. He campaigned against the Royal Buckhounds – a stag-hunt pack – and the Eton Beagles, and was, in effect, the first saboteur, although the methods he used were very different from those employed today, consisting mainly of writing treatises and petitioning the headmaster. The published accounts of spectators at the time are forerunners to the updates written on the Facebook walls and forums

of the Hunt Saboteurs Association and the HSA magazine *Howl* in the present day. They read similarly: highly detailed and exact, with an undercurrent of revulsion. On a hare hunt near Upton Park and Slough Road, a witness wrote in 1899, 'Its condition of terror and exhaustion was painful to behold.' Then follows graphic descriptions of the hare being dismembered, her feet handed around for trophies, before her stomach was split open and the corpse thrown to the hounds. It was called the 'breaking up' of the hare.

Salt's decade-long campaign against the Royal Buckhounds was successful, but it would take longer for hare hunts to stop at Eton. At the same time as Salt's work and writings were published, the Protection of Animals Act in 1911 was passed, to protect domestic and captive wild animals from harm and abuse.

Concurrently, children's literature began to evolve into stories with a newly compassionate purpose, containing lessons about cruelty, kindness, conservation, natural history and social morality. No longer were stories about animals simply a metaphor for human behaviour; people were interested in the animals themselves, not just as objects to be used in whatever manner humans saw fit, but as individual creatures. By the nineteenth century animal autobiographies such as *Black Beauty* (1877, about a horse) and *Beautiful Joe* (1893, about a dog) had become highly popular.

Foxes as central characters, though, were scarce. They

crop up in Beatrix Potter, although there's certainly still a whiff of Reynard in her characters – when reaching for a villain, she often cast a fox. In *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, a revision of 'Little Red Riding Hood', the fox is suave, civil and handsome. He is reading the newspaper when we first meet him. He lures his new friend Jemima to his house, and she enters, although she's a little surprised at the amount of feathers. He offers her a safe and dry place to lay her eggs and suggests a dinner party, for a treat. We are told that Jemima is a simpleton, that she doesn't realise that he plans to kill and eat her. She tells Kep, a collie on the farm, about the plan and he arrives with a couple of foxhounds. The foxy-whiskered gentleman is no more.

*The Tale of Mr Tod* was one of Potter's later books and it arose from a fatigue she felt in writing 'goody goody books about nice people'. Instead, she wanted to write about two disagreeable people, called Tommy Brock and Mr Tod, one a badger, the other a fox. Tommy is actually the worse scoundrel of the two, stealing rabbit babies from old Mr Bouncer. The fox isn't cunning or wily in the same way as Reynard, and Potter portrays him almost sympathetically (even though his house is a filthy cave filled with horrible things like rabbit skulls). Reynard may lurk in Potter's representation, but he is less of a terrifying carnivore.

The great French children's book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (1943), provides one of the

first occasions on which a fox emerges as a good character in its own right. It gives wisdom and knowledge to the little alien boy who's fallen to earth from a tiny asteroid. The fox also says this: 'Men. They have guns, and they hunt. It is very disturbing. They also raise chickens. These are their only interests.' It is striking that the fox was the creature chosen to preach a moral message and to teach the boy the book's crucial lessons about human existence, friendship, loneliness and contentment – certainly a change from the traditional Reynard character.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, drawing on the work of thinkers such as Henry Salt, animal rights movements gained momentum with the formation of various organisations, from the Oxford Group, a cabal of intellectuals who furthered the concept of animal rights, to the Hunt Saboteurs Association, PETA and multiple animal rescue centres. Their first victory was over the fur trade, which had had a major resurgence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fox fur as a fashion item reached the height of its popularity in the 1930s, when fur stoles and collars were popular with women. Fox stoles complete with the head and paws were often worn in Hollywood films. Marilyn Monroe was a fan of the fur, as were Lana Turner and Grace Kelly.

Fur farms had sprung up to support the trade, breeding animals specifically for their pelts. Such farms were based

mainly in other European countries and in Canada – there are records of hunting for fur and fur farms in Britain, too, but most concerned mink rather than fox. The *Daily Mail* did report, in April 1923, a proposal for a ranch of fur-bearing animals, including blue and white foxes, and skunks. The Arctic fox was much more popular with trappers in Alaska, who culled populations of red fox to keep the more expensive Arctic fox thriving. Another report in the *Daily Mail*, from July 1921, offers a breakdown of the animals bred in captivity on Canada's fur farms. Out of 8,000 fur-bearing animals, 7,000 were silver black foxes, 850 were patch foxes and nearly 300 were red foxes.

In 2000, farming wild animals for fur was banned in Britain. As public opinion about fur has soured, genuine farmed fox pelts are now often sold as fake fur. Compared with other animals, *Vulpes vulpes* has survived its trade as an item of clothing – many animals haven't.

But where the animal rights debate has raged most fiercely around foxes is with regard to hunting. The twentieth century was a time of a rancorous split in the feeling towards both fox hunting and foxes, fuelled by the modern animal rights movement, which led to hunt sabotage and animal activism. The fox in modern times is a story of fierce emotional warfare, conservation politics and animal rights. It is a bitterly fought war. Often those supporting a hunting ban or animal rights are criticised by association. The

Countryside Alliance, for example, compared Tony Blair with Hitler during the furore over the hunting ban in the early years of the present century: 'Hitler banned fox hunting partly because he wanted to attack the aristocracy's way of life and further his own ambitions. It would appear that Tony Blair's reasons for banning fox hunting are not dissimilar – a curious mixture of class envy, spite and a curious understanding of animal welfare,' said a spokesperson for the Countryside Alliance.

While opinion is still firmly divided on that subject, the way foxes are portrayed and perceived in popular culture has certainly undergone a change. In *Mary Poppins* (1964), Bert, Mary and the children jump into one of Bert's chalk drawings of the countryside and find themselves in a kind of benign acid trip featuring dancing penguins, escaped carousel horses and a fox hunt. The hunters are characterised as snooty and posh, their noses upturned in disapproval beneath their top hats, and their horses all silly and ignoble. The Cockney one-man-band Bert spots the fox – 'Poor little bloke, let's give him a hand' – and sweeps in, tooting an imaginary horn and scooping up the humorous canid. Bert was essentially a hunt saboteur, using one of the strategies (blowing a hunting horn) to disrupt the hunt that is still used to this day. Disney, it seems, was firmly pro-fox: the unequivocal hero in Disney's *Robin Hood* (1973) is played by a fox, as is Maid Marian, the prettiest vixen on film, while

*The Fox and the Hound* (1981) is about the unlikely friendship between two would-be adversaries.

No longer is Reynard the archetypal fox – occasionally he might crop up in a children’s story or a fox might be referred to as ‘Reynard’ in the letters pages of traditional British newspapers; but it is no longer the go-to fox in British culture – that distinction now belongs to Fantastic Mr Fox, the first of many friendly fox heroes.



These days our environment is so depleted that seeing a fox is a lucky thrill for many and most people are more likely to seek out nature than want to destroy it. A significant part of the population is interested in animals and nature, seen clearly in the enduring popularity of David Attenborough documentaries and the BBC’s ‘Watches’ franchise (*Springwatch*, *Autumnwatch* and *Winterwatch*).

From high-street shops selling Lush and Body Shop products through the 1980s and 1990s to clothes and accessory shops stocking tea towels, necklaces and jumpers emblazoned with foxes, the fox is an increasingly popular symbol. The people of Britain are known for their relationship with and fondness for animals and pets. The RSPCA was, after all, the world’s first animal welfare charity. It is not surprising then that, as consumerism grew in post-war Britain, the number of shops selling animal-themed items

would increase. The fox has become a bit of a cult icon in establishments such as Oliver Bonas and Joy; perhaps that's partly a result of the pro-fox movement, and sympathy for a perceived victim; perhaps it's simply because people find it a striking and beautiful creature. Whatever the reason, it seems that the traditional cultural depictions of the fox as villain or vermin are increasingly behind us.

Nowadays, we would be surprised to see the publication of a children's book in the Reynard form. Instead, *The Fox and the Star* by Coralie Bickford-Smith is about a fox who lives in a deep, dark forest and has only one friend, Star. One night Star disappears, and Fox has to face the forest alone. It is a tale of grief and coming to terms with loss and was named Waterstones Book of the Year in 2015. *Pax*, by Sara Pennypacker, tells the story of a boy and his pet fox. His father enters military service and the boy has to return the fox to the wild. The fox in these popular modern tales is a benign force, a friend, a support; it could not be more different from the lip-smacking Mr Tod or even Fantastic Mr Fox. The fox is a creature worthy of our love – and capable of reciprocating it.



The fox has always been a topic of controversy, dividing opinion between those who admire its wily nature and those who revile it for its carnivorous tendencies. The story

became increasingly complicated as the popularity of hunting took off, creating very distinct rural and class identities, and adding an extra dimension to the divide in opinion. All of this has combined to make modern British attitudes towards the fox unique. Despite the fact that the fox now has a more positive image in our culture, it is still a highly controversial creature, often heavily vilified in the media, and the hunting dispute rages as fiercely as ever.

But despite all the many strongly held opinions and ferociously argued debates, ultimately not that much is widely known about the fox itself. A great deal of our ideas, perceptions and attitudes are based on myth, folklore, hearsay and literature, which over the years have frequently been distorted and exaggerated, and often accepted as truth. Many of our ideas, then, are a complete fiction. By looking at some of the fox's habits and behaviours, perhaps we can reclaim some of the facts.

