

A DEERHOUND'S DAY

Heritage in Motion



BY STACEY HAYNES

In 2025 the Deerhound once again proved its timeless qualities — from [Beardswood Xanthe's Best in Field](#) at the UK Sighthound Sport Spring Championship at West Ilsley to [Claonaiglen Affric's qualification for Team UK](#) at the 2026 World Championship. Set against centuries of history, guided by the stewardship of the Deerhound Club, and showcased through UKSS competition, the breed continues to embody dignity, courage, and enduring legacy — both on the field and at home.

A Field Alive with History and Heart

The morning wind swept across the fields of West Ilsley, where the UKSS Spring Championship was about to begin. It was the kind of day that seemed to belong to sighthounds: cool air, forgiving ground, and a restless breeze tugging at gazebos and rattling canvas like a drumroll before the chase. Beneath those wind-shaken shelters, small villages of friendship formed: dogs drowsing at their owners' feet, flasks passed from hand to hand, and stories flowing as freely as the laughter they carried.

ABOVE

Beardswood Xanthe in full stride at West Ilsley – the first Deerhound to win the Best in Field title at a UKSS Championship.
© Photographer
Credit: Liljeros Design

Some reminisced about coursing before the ban, recalling the thrill of the slip and the thunder of paws across heather. Others spoke of champions of the show ring – Whippet, Saluki, Borzoi, or Deerhound – or of companions whose greatest athletic feat was stealing the warmest place on the sofa. Conversations crossed breeds with ease, for while every enthusiast cherished their own hound, all were gathered in the same spirit: to celebrate the shared heritage, instinct, and joy of the sighthound.

“The Deerhound, so often thought of as a relic of the Highlands, still commands its rightful place among modern sighthounds.”



LEFT
Beardswood Xanthe — the first Scottish Deerhound to win Best in Field at a UKSS Championship. Pictured with international judges Per Nordahl (Sweden) and Christina Dahl Alfast (Denmark), alongside her owner, Sarah Helps. Photographer credit / Liljeros Design

The Brilliance of Xanthe

When **Beardswood Xanthe** entered the field at West Ilsley, there was no drama, no posturing — just stillness, composure, intent. Almost taking her handler with her, as so many keen sighthounds do, she surged forward when the lure sprang into view, and stillness broke into powerful stride.

She was visibly fast, her stride long and driving, yet there was no waste in her effort. Each turn was deliberate and true, each line unwavering. To watch her was to glimpse the Deerhound's essence: not reckless speed, but the balance of strength, stamina, and instinct flowing as one.

At the end of the competition, once the scores were collected from international judges Christina Dahl Alfast (Denmark) and Per Nordahl (Sweden), a remarkable piece of history unfolded. For the first time at a UKSS Championship, a Deerhound had taken Best in Field.

“Xanthe was participating in her first lure coursing competition when she made UKSS history by winning Best in Field,” recalls her owner, Sarah Helps.

“She is rather unusual as she is quite highly strung for a Deerhound – very keen, eagle-eyed, fast, and determined. I was immensely proud of her achievement.”

From the judge's perspective, the performance was not merely notable, but exemplary — a Deerhound running with truth of purpose. As Per Nordahl reflected:

“My Best in Field was a Deerhound who ran as if the lure were a real hare. She was on it throughout, taking the curves hard and strong, maintaining excellent balance, and always keeping her eyes fixed on the lure — exactly what I would hope to see in a top lure coursing performance.”

Xanthe's win at West Ilsley was not just a milestone in sport; it was a reminder that the Deerhound, so often thought of as a relic of the Highlands, still commands its rightful place among modern sighthounds.

The Keeper of Beardswood

For Sarah Helps, Xanthe's victory was deeply personal — the culmination of decades with the breed. Her journey with the Deerhound began in the 1970s in Virginia, where she first encountered the hounds. "I was captivated by the wonderful friendly temperament of the Deerhound combined with their gentle dignity, grace, elegance, and courage," she recalls. On returning home, Sarah and her late mother Heather founded the Beardswood kennel, producing twenty-four champions across twenty-five litters, many of them tested both in the ring and on the field.

Beyond her kennel achievements, Sarah also serves as Vice President of the Deerhound Club, supports its committees, and acts as the Breed Health Co-ordinator — ensuring that health and welfare remain at the heart of the breed's future. She has also lived the sport itself: from the wild hillsides of Scotland before the ban to the measured courses of today.

"Between 1980 and 2001 I travelled to Scotland with my Deerhounds to participate in coursing meetings. Seeing them gallop across such rugged terrain took my breath away. It was like being transported back centuries to experience an ancient hunt before the gun was available. Today lure coursing is the closest we can get, though of course it is quite different: when hunting live quarry, the hound works the quarry, whereas in lure coursing, it is the lure that works the hound."

Her perspective underlines both continuity and change: "Not all Deerhounds, even keen hunting hounds, will chase a lure. But when they do and see it as game, or even as a game, they very much enjoy it."

"Their gentleness, courage, and timeless dignity remain unchanged, whether resting by a hearth, stepping into the show ring, or flying across a lure coursing field."



Echoes from the Highlands

On 11 August 1835, two Deerhounds of the McNeill family — Bran (sometimes recorded as Braan) and Buskar — brought down a stag over three hundred pounds on the island of Jura. William Scrope recorded the event in *The Art of Deer-Stalking* (1838), securing their place in the breed's story. Bran coursed his first stag at just nine months and his last at nine years, while Buskar's build still mirrors today's Kennel Club standard. Nearly two centuries later, they could step into a modern ring, or onto a lure coursing field, and still look perfectly at home.

Their gentleness, courage, and timeless dignity remain unchanged, whether resting by a hearth, stepping into the show ring, or flying across a lure coursing field. In Xanthe's run at West Ilsley — and in the lives of Deerhounds still cherished in homes and fields alike — we see living proof that the breed has not only survived but continues to embody the very qualities that inspired Hartley's tribute - reprinted in full at the end of this feature.

Beardswood Xanthe's run at West Ilsley was not simply a sporting triumph, but a reminder of that timeless essence. A Deerhound is never just chasing a lure. She runs with centuries behind her, every stride carrying the weight of history, instinct, and purpose. And when truth moves like that — steady, strong, and sure-footed — it does more than win a title. It becomes unforgettable.

ABOVE
Braan, a celebrated Scottish Deerhound, painted by Thomas Duncan. Photograph by Antonia Reeve. Courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland.



A New Chapter at Stratford

That truth was borne out again at Stratford this September, where **Claonaiglen Affric** topped a strong Deerhound field, earning the title of UKSS British Champion 2025 and victory in the class — the result that has secured his qualification for the 2026 World Lure Coursing Championship in Denmark, one of six places available for Scottish Deerhounds on Team UK. Behind him on the podium that day came Beardwood Xcalibur, Beardwood Xanthe, Penherald Polka at Calbraid, and Eryri Fraser, proving the depth of quality within today's lines.



**UKSS NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP
JUDGE 2025**

**Miska-Alexander
Argillander**
Finnish FCI Judge

Judges' Perspective

At the UKSS National Championship, widely regarded as the highlight of the lure coursing calendar, Finnish judge Miska-Alexander Argillander described the Deerhounds as the finest he had ever seen compete. He has built his FCI judging career through perseverance — working alongside eighteen different judges, shadowing hundreds of international courses, and studying every aspect of the role. His career has since taken him across Europe, with the UK becoming the eighth country where he has had the honour of standing in the field..

His words following the UKSS National competition carried the weight of that experience:

“The dog’s appearance embodies the unique combination of speed, strength and endurance needed to bring down a full-grown red deer. When I was judging the Scottish Deerhounds’ performance, I thought how beautiful it was to see these large yet agile dogs truly hunting the lure — not just following it. I remember thinking that this must have been what it was like centuries ago on the moors when hunting red deer. My skin was covered in goosebumps and shivers ran through my body. I have never seen such skilled Deerhounds.”

ABOVE

Claonaiglen Affric striding out at the UKSS National Championship 2025 —carrying centuries of instinct and history across the field. Photographer credit Liljeros design

OVERLEAF

The Deerhound line-up at the UKSS National Championship 2025, with Claonaiglen Affric taking first place and qualifying for Team UK at the 2026 FCI Lure Coursing World Championship in Denmark. Photographer credit Liljeros Design

A Shared Legacy

The story of this season belongs not only to individual hounds, but to the fellowship that surrounds them. Claonaiglen Affric's triumph, and Xanthe's history-making run before her, are milestones woven from many threads — breeders who guard type and instinct, owners and handlers who give their all in preparation, and the circle of judges, officials, and fellow competitors who keep the field alive.

As Sophie Bigland, owner of Claonaiglen Affric, reflected: "We were over the moon with Oban's (Claonaiglen Affric, bred by Sally and the late Alan McKinnon) win and qualifying for WCC next year in Denmark. It really is a dream come true, and we are planning to make the trip. We have been re-living the presentation ceremony repeatedly and watching a video of his second run on repeat. Thank you to everyone at UKSS — we are just so grateful."

Her joy is not hers alone, but a reflection of what so many feel: that every victory is shared. The Deerhound Club remains the guardian of health, history, conformation and character. UK Sighthound Sport, through careful trialling and licensing, provides a stage where Deerhounds can test instinct against form. The Kennel Club facilitates the British entry and ensures that when a Deerhound steps onto the world stage, it carries more than a name — it carries the heritage of a nation.

And most of all, it is the members who bring their hounds with open hearts and willing hands, proving that the Deerhound's essence is not bound to paintings or poetry, but still alive, running strong across the fields today. When a Deerhound runs, she does not run alone — she runs with centuries at her back, and with a fellowship beside her that ensures she will always have a place to run tomorrow.



A Word from the Deerhound Club

With pride in the breed's continuing presence on the field, the Deerhound Club offered the following message of support from its President, Mary Girling:

"We are always delighted when our lovely Deerhounds prove themselves to be such enthusiastic participants. We hope that some hounds from this year's winners will be able to attend the 2026 FCI World Championship in Denmark.

There is a wealth of literature on the Deerhound covering several centuries, including some modern works and reprints of early classics. Miss Hartley's book remains an easy and informative read—though a word of warning, the feeding recommendations are now very dated!

Several members of our Club committee have taken part in lure chasing over many years, but it is mostly the young hounds who truly enjoy the chase. As a UK-wide Club, we find that locating suitable and safe grounds for running is often challenging.

We have a very informative website at **www.deerhound.co.uk**

Our Club Secretary is Miss Vanessa Lucas—currently recovering from shoulder surgery—and our Chairman of Committee is Mr Julian Faircloth.

As President of the Deerhound Club, I am delighted to offer our support."

— Mary Girling, President, The Deerhound Club

Miss Hartley on the Deerhound (1955)

EDITORS NOTE: The following article by A.N. Hartley is considered one of the most eloquent descriptions of the Deerhound ever written. First published in Dog World and later reprinted in Our Dogs in 1955, it is reproduced here in full by kind permission from Our Dogs.

THE DEERHOUND

by A. N. HARTLEY

Some breeds have an inborn flair for advertisement. They have grasped the familiar slogan that the dog show is the shop window of the canine world, and they see to it that their display develops the maximum pulling power. With pricked ears, wagging tails and outstretched paws they inveigle the passing visitor into a chat and often ensnare him for life.

But the hardy spirit who tracks the Deerhound to his show bench lair is all too often rewarded by a row of closed eyes and rhythmically heaving flanks. Here and there a head is raised, and dark wistful eyes look out from under shaggy brows; perhaps a tail stirs so unemphatically that the effort does not quite release it from an imprisoning leg then no further demonstration is forthcoming.

It is hard to visualise what a picture of life grace and power this same hound will present as he stands on a rocky hillside, head up, neck arched, tail just raised, and quarters bent for a spring, his eyes and ears alert to catch the slightest rustle or stir.

The breed has its roots in the past, and more than once Deerhounds have left their mark on the pages of history.

A 15th century historian tells us of a quarrel between the Scots and the Picts over a greatly valued hound which the Picts stole from the Scots, and he adds that many men perished in the battle that ensued.

Mary Queen of Scots loved hunting, and in 1563 the Earl of Athol arranged a tainchell or deer-drive in her honour at which "the Queen ordered one of the best dogs to be let loose on the deer."

Like all sporting breeds the Deerhound was originally evolved for a specific purpose: to chase the wild deer that were found in the hills and glens of the Highlands. A stag is nearly twice the height and more than twice the weight of a deerhound, so it follows that a hound must be brave and fast and strong if it is to be any use against such a formidable adversary. Moreover, the deer possesses deadly weapons – only let a rash and over-eager young hound venture within reach of his horns and a quick slash will end the hounds hunting forever.

So, the early sportsmen who fixed the breeds type sought for speed, staying power, strength, agility and, above all, for indomitable courage. What foundation stock they had and what crosses they added we cannot now tell, for they left no records, but we do know that as early as the 15th century the hunting dogs of North Britain were already famous.

The invention of the sporting gun and the consequent division of the deer forests for letting purposes finally killed the older sport of deer coursing with dogs, because these smaller areas did not give enough scope to a hound which could follow his quarry for forty miles.

Nevertheless, the points that are sought in the show ring to-day are those that would fit the dog to do his work on the hills. The Greyhound conformation, the ample heart room, strong loin, sloping quarters, strong dense bone and well-padded and knuckled feet are the breed essentials, and all make for the needed speed, stamina and agility. And owners who, in recent times have used Deerhounds for hunting assure us that he has not lost the powers that made him once renowned.

When the opportunities for their legitimate work dwindled to vanishing point, Deerhounds became very scarce, and about 1830 the breed was in danger of extinction. It was saved by the efforts of Mr. Archibald McNeill and his brother, Lord Colonsay, who gathered all the best specimens remaining in the Highlands and established the Colonsay strain which was kept by the McNeill family until 1914. The McNeill's hunted with their Deerhounds in the old manner on the island of Jura, and their dogs showed grand sport without any help from guns.

BUT circumstances were against the resumption of deer chasing in the British Isles, except in a few isolated instances, and the Deerhound would soon have perished if he had not been strikingly endowed with the qualities that make a good companion.

His appearance is commanding and beautiful, with the graceful outline and lithe movement of his Greyhound forebears, and he appeals irresistibly to those who like a big dog. Yet is never clumsy and can stow himself neatly into the corner of a small room or handily share the back seat of a car.

His height from the ground and his smooth legs enable him to come into the house on a wet day without bringing half the mud of the street in, too, and his harsh, dense, grey coat keeps him warm and does not show dirt even in the smokiest town. His clean lips never slobber, and he moves with a deftness that preserves the smallest ornaments.

Deerhounds are one of the longest-lived of the big breeds, and they seldom grow fat as they grow old. At eleven or twelve they often have eyesight, teeth and hearing still perfect, and some can even chase hares. But handsome is as handsome does, and it is the Deerhounds lovely character more than any other single factor that has preserved him from extinction. He is gentle, fearless and candid: there is nothing mean about him. He is pleasant to all human beings because he neither expects harm from them nor intends harm to them. To say that he is safe with children is to say too little. He is safe with all reasonable people, but he adores children and soon becomes their playmate and guardian. He is obedient, not from a rigid sense of discipline, but because he so loves to please.

MR. GEORGE CUPPLES, the author of "Scotch Deerhounds and Their Masters," paid this golden tribute to the breed more than 50 years ago. It is equally well deserved to-day.

"How perfectly docile is the thoroughbred Deerhound of our own Scottish forests and stalking ranges! His master - if not always his keeper can at a word force him from the very throat of the stag he has gripped, has pulled down and has worried like a wolf, so that he comes quietly to heel. His inveterate keenness, no less than his strength, renders him about as bad a foe as mortal creature need wish to face. Yet how gentle and familiar a housemate is he; of all dumb favourites the most decorous by the hearth and table, a marvel of patience with the little dogs; and among the children a plaything that can be handled as they will".

The Deerhound is a part of our national heritage. He is a living link with the spacious past of big log smouldering on heaps of flaked ashes, of flames glinting on armour, of flaring torches and heralds and minstrels and all the pageantry that has faded from the world we know. He is ours to cherish, not for the work that he might do, but for the pleasure that his gentle dignity, his pleasant companionship and his loyal love can give us.

This article by A.N. Hartley was first published in Dog World and later reprinted in Our Dogs in 1955. We are grateful to Our Dogs for kindly granting permission to reproduce it here.