





Country Courting

The sparsity of potential partners in rural areas makes Cupid's task tough. Instead of sending Valentine cards to yourself this month, turn to the internet for a match made in cyberspace. By **Charlotte Reather**

AFTER the demise of a four-year relationship, I was thrown back on to the singles mounting-block ready to jump on a new steed. Yet the mounts that have trotted by over the past few months have resembled a line-up ready for the knacker's yard rather than a steeplechase. They've all been elderly or unwanted (most for good reason).

One chap in his mid-thirties took me to a local pub in Gloucestershire and spent the evening comparing his fake tan application with mine. "You get streaks around your wrists too, I get that!" he exclaimed excitedly. He said he applied fake bake ritually ever since he'd given up the sunbeds. My eyes popped out on stalks. This was not one of my gay luvvie friends from the West End; this was a born and bred countryman and farmer. And he shaved his chest. When I found his hair-straighteners and discovered that his bathroom looked as though he ram-raided Boots, I turned tail and legged it for the hills. Personal hygiene's one thing but you don't want to be fighting over the light-reflecting foundation in the morning.

I've also been pursued by a handsome South American polo player whom I met at my local polo club. Recently he asked me out for a drink in a thoroughly modern way – via Facebook. The subject box read: 'Hello Sweaty!' Rather insulted, I opened the message and read on. "I really think that you deserve some soft and fresh meat, ja, so think if you want to see me. And if the answer is yes, you will have to help with what to do. Remember that I am playing this weekend."

After my terse reply he phoned to explain he meant "hello sweetie" and that he was trying to say in his broken English that I needed to date a young, red-blooded male like him. He wasn't being sexually predatory. No, "it just came out all wrong in translation".

A girlfriend, Sarah, has experienced far more harrowing dating nightmares than mine, especially through the internet. At 35, after her marriage had gone south, she took the decision to join a dating website, www.match.com, and try her luck. She met her first date at a gastro pub in Oxfordshire. "All my friends were standing

ready by their phones in case I needed a quick escape. The only problem was there was no signal, so I had to stay the distance through an interminable three-course dinner. I knew I was in trouble when the guy walked in dressed in burgundy cords. The meal was pleasant enough, but he had a speech impediment so I couldn't understand a word he was saying, and he was deaf so he couldn't understand anything I was saying either. It was a total disaster."

EYE-OPENING BLIND DATES

Sarah found her next date from hell on television presenter Sarah Beeny's www.mysinglefriend.com. "I woke up the next morning in an alcoholic fug and found the bloke I'd been on a date with fast asleep on my sofa. I decided to leave him there and crept upstairs to run a bath. There was no lock on the door. Suddenly, blind-date-man barged in wearing only his Y-fronts, sat down on the loo (with the lid down – which is something) and started chatting while I was in the bath. I gathered the bubbles to protect my modesty and hinted for him to go away but he gabbed on for ages. The water started to go cold and the bubbles dissolved – I had to turn the hot tap on with my toe to generate more foam.

"I finally managed to get rid of him by saying I had a terrible headache and would he mind driving to the shop to get me some Nurofen. After he had gone, I got dried and changed like the wind, ran out the front door and drove off at break-neck speed. I ignored all of his calls. He turned up a few days later with a bunch of lilies and a DVD. I jumped in my car again and raced off, leaving him standing there. Fortunately he got the message and I haven't heard from him since."

After a little research, I discovered that there are very specific dating websites. For example, military personnel can find love at www.uniformdating.com, while country folk have sites such as www.lovehorse.co.uk and www.justwoodlandfriends.com to choose from. The former has cheesy pictures of couples holding hands as they ride into the sunset and an old farmer and his wife posing happily, loved up, next to a John Deere tractor. I signed >



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up immediately. Well, I’m a keen rider in many equine disciplines. However, all I ever received from the horsy chaps, with user IDs such as “sausage king” and “rough-rider”, were massive red lipstick kisses; no messages. I’m not sure whether it was their level of subscription or education which enabled them only to communicate in this manner.

Luckily help was at hand at www.muddymatches.co.uk, run by Emma and Lucy Reeves. “Muddy Matches was born after a conversation with friends in the pub. We realised there were no dating websites out there that we wanted to join,” explains Emma. “Our site is free to join, so you can put your profile up and search for people but if you want to message someone you need to buy a subscription.”

I bought a month’s subscription (£10) and looked around the site. Within minutes I found two people I knew. I contacted Tom, a ruggedly attractive estate agent from Malmesbury, and suggested we met for a drink. I explained I wasn’t trying to pull him but had seen he’d been a member of the site since its inception, so he’d probably have some tales to tell.

CAST YOUR NET WIDE

Tom invited me over (he wanted to show me his laptop – it’s not modern speak for “etchings”, he really did). He said he’d been contacted by scores of filthy country wenches aged from 21 to 55. He showed me a picture of a Dawn, 55 (she looked nearer 70). “We have exchanged some filthy banter,” grinned Tom. “She was really keen. I say good for her. She’s getting out there and having a go. She, like a lot of the women on the site, takes the approach that if she throws enough muck against the wall some of it’ll stick. And she’s right. You have to cast your net wide, rather than stay in the same old pond. I wouldn’t seriously date any of these forward women. I like fun girls with bags of personality but not ones who say ‘Hey big boy, I want to ride you like Seabiscuit!’”

Tom then tells me the story of two nurses he met on Muddy Matches. He arranged to meet the first at Cheltenham racecourse. When he saw her from afar dressed as Ivor the Engine in a big hat, tweed shooting jacket, tight leggings, polo boots and a luminous green bag, he did what any country gentleman would do – bolted.

He intended to meet the next nurse near her home town. They spoke on the phone several times. “She seemed fun and sassy – there was no shortage of conversation. We confirmed on the Thursday that we would meet on the Tuesday evening. But when I returned from a long weekend on the Monday night I had eight voice messages from her starting with “Where are you, Tom?” to “Turn your phone on you b****d! Don’t you dare ignore me!” Having been looking forward to our date, I sent her a text to cancel it. She was a psycho!”

After two weeks on Muddy Matches, my experience had been a positive one. I had more than 250 profile views, 10 messages and been “favourited” eight times. Get in! Perhaps it was my naughty profile blurb which helped me gain popularity on the site, which read: *Charlotte Reather, 27* (I shaved a year off my age – it would be rude not to.) “I’m looking for a

Look for love over the internet or try old-fashioned prowling (right)





man with big hands, bad ways and filthy amounts of wonga. I'm joking.... and a good sense of humour, obviously."

Messages such as these came in: *Terry (20)*: "I've got a good sense of humour, big hands, not so many bad ways but with size 18 feet, I've got boots for shoes! It would be great to hear from you so get in touch"; *Michael (28)*: "Well I've got the big hands, a little bit of wonga, and had plenty of compliments about what's downstairs" – does this mean he's got an excellent cellar? – "so if you fancy a drink one evening let me know"; *Dave (31)*: "I have big hands – that means big gloves, size 10 to be exact, so more like shovels. Oh, and big feet, 14, which means big shoes. If I had small feet I'd fall over!"

FERTILE HUNTING GROUND

There are more traditional means to find a partner in the country, too. You can actually go out on the prowl. One of the best ways is through a hobby, the more social the better – bird-watching may have a smaller hit count than hunting or polo, for example. Then there are dinner-parties, weddings, hunt balls and point-to-points, all of which are fertile hunting ground but can be rather hit and miss. Plus, the local flock of single birds tends to swoop in fast on any new prey.

Then there are the married friends who say: "You must meet Julian Woodcock, he's to die for and he's a land agent. Darling, don't you think Charlotte and Julian would get on like an absolute house on fire?" The husband agrees wholeheartedly. "Oh my God Camilla, it's fate! Julian and Charlotte, why didn't we think of it earlier?" Of course, you never end up meeting Julian until about five years later when he's married with his first child on the way and yes, you would have got on well and yes, he is gorgeous but thanks to your rubbish friends that ship has sailed. Then there are the friends who do actually set you up but with someone so wrong for you they must have made an extra special effort.

Country girls don't tend to go out "on the pull" as urban ones do. But despair not. With the advances in modern technology it's easy to connect with people. In the past year I've met two male friends through www.facebook.com and although they weren't romantically right for me they are now part of my social circle and new blood for others. And I know of several girls who have gone on www.asmallworld.net and been taken to great parties, hooked up with a fun crowd and have now settled down with Mr Right.

The future's bright if you're proactive, so I'm staying on Muddy Matches for now. OK, I might meet some oddballs, but as they say you've got to date a few wrong'uns before you meet the right one. ■

LOVE AT FIRST SITE

UK websites

www.muddymatches.co.uk
www.lovehorse.co.uk
www.justwoodlandfriends.com
www.countrysidelove.co.uk
www.rurallove.com
www.country-couples.co.uk
www.thecountyregister.com

And to find country love worldwide

www.asmallworld.net
www.farmeronly.com
www.horseandcountrylovers.com