

Feathered friends

There's far more to be gained from keeping hens than fresh eggs of a morning. These curious, captivating and – intentionally or otherwise – funny creatures connect us with nature and the seasons while their gentle clucking soothes the mind and lifts the most downcast of spirits

'I'm just going out to spend some time with the girls!' I declare, pulling on my wellies. My husband smiles a knowing smile. He realises that 'spending some time' in this case means whiling away at least the next hour or so at the bottom of the garden, and that 'the girls' in question are my beloved hens. Sitting with them is guaranteed to lift my mood and, if ever I'm feeling sad or perplexed or anxious, I can rely on my girls to bring the sort of perspective that only a feathered friend can provide.

That's not to belittle the role of human friends, of course – nor, indeed, the generosity of my cat. It's just that chickens display a particular attitude, a Zen-like pragmatism, that's superbly uplifting, and yet largely unrecognised. I mean, when was the last time you looked a chicken in the eye and asked her advice? Exactly! Fastening my jacket and tucking a couple of treats into my pocket, I close the back door and head down to the enclosure. Settling myself on the grass, I take a long, deep breath and relax. The sound of clucking provides a soothing soundtrack, a worthy, if somewhat less exotic, alternative to whale song.

It's been a couple of years now since I got my first lot of hens – a flock of three, who I named Christabel, Emmeline and Sylvia (after the Pankhursts). As with my two subsequent hens (Linda

and Yoko), I rescued them through the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT), a charity that aims to save birds from slaughter by rehoming them as pets when they reach the end of their commercial careers. As I'd been warned, they arrived looking pretty sorry for themselves. Their feathers were thin, their beaks had been clipped, and they cut fairly scrawny, and surprisingly pale, figures. As they sat in a dog crate in the back of my car, I tried to reassure them that I meant them no harm. It was an entirely unwarranted and rather embarrassing gesture that they did their best to politely ignore, preferring to chat conspiratorially among themselves for the entire journey home. I may not have realised it at the time, but I was already being taught my first lesson in hen keeping – however hard you try, you'll never quite be one of the flock, and you'll certainly never be the boss.

That role, as it turned out, would fall to Sylvia. A bristling, maternal hen whose exacting standards meant that she would never allow me to clean out the coop unsupervised. Sylvia had an air of authority that has always eluded me. Perhaps it was this no-nonsense approach that led the other girls to defer to her without argument. Emmeline (Emmie) was content to be her faithful sidekick from the off, and Christabel (Tibbs) was far too independent to be bothered about climbing up the pecking order. Within weeks of knowing them, it was clear these were three entirely unique individuals and that, far from being bird-brained, they were feathered philosophers: curious, captivating and interested in life. It seemed they held no grudges regarding their earlier experiences, and their ability to accept and enjoy the present was not only admirable but, I would suggest, exemplary.

Over the next few months, the girls blossomed. Feathers regrew, combs perked up and they began to remember their inherent 'hen-ness'. They started to scratch at the earth, forage for food and spread their wings in a way that they'd not been able to in the commercial environment. And as they grew used to their free-range living, I grew used to their company. Like many hen-keepers before me, I began to cherish it.

In a recent independent study exploring the effects of keeping ex-commercial hens on mental health, occupational therapist Lianne Peters found that 94 per cent of respondents cited seeing their hens flourish as the most common positive aspect to wellbeing and, as someone who has witnessed this process first-hand, I can understand why. There's a grace and resilience to these birds that inspires, rather than demands, respect and,

