



Diary of a Farmer's Wife

Anna MacCurrach on facing adversity, moving forward and finding the best living arrangements for feathered friends

SUMMER

Local readers will know that since my last summer article I have closed my lovely farm shop. 2014 was a very difficult year for my family as, coupled with the stresses of opening and then closing the shop, our young son had a serious hip condition to contend with.

One of the knock-on effects of the combination of all of this was that I had neither the time nor the inclination for anything beyond life's daily rituals. Just getting through the day was as much as I could ask of myself. The surest sign that things are getting back on an even keel, however, came when I put my name down for some ex-cage hens from the British Hen Welfare Trust...and surely hens are the most obvious accessories for any self-respecting farmer's wife?

Whilst battery farming has been illegal since 2012, the current 'worst-best' option really doesn't sound like a brilliant alternative to me. The birds are kept 40-90 to a cage, with a perching area, a scratch pad and space to nest but they are denied fresh air, sunshine and the all-important dust baths. At eighteen months old and already past 'peak production' they are then sent to slaughter.

I am aware that the need to keep laying hens in these conditions is entirely consumer driven and I have no argument with the farmers. On this farm, though, we take pride in ensuring our animals enjoy a rich life before they are sent to slaughter and now's our chance to make a difference for some hens – six out of the almost half a million that the BHWT has re-homed since it began. I am not sure how many of these subsequently got eaten by a fox (possibly whilst enjoying the dust bath), one of the major perils of free-range living.

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Collection was (organised with military precision by a team of volunteers) made from a gorgeous farm in Wiltshire. We handed over our donation in exchange for six birds, so devoid of feathers you could almost call them 'oven ready,' and took them home to the freshly spruced up hen house.

By night two things were looking promising when we found three had taken themselves upstairs to bed. Perhaps they will be easier to train than the children after all! This afternoon, day three, four of the six were happily scratching about for food and two were upstairs fighting – presumably getting the pecking order established. Either that or they were yet to work out how to get down again...

For more information on the British Hen Welfare Trust visit www.bhwt.org.uk



SUPPORT THE HEN WELFARE TRUST TOO!



Celebrating 10 years!

Currently celebrating its tenth year, The British Hen Welfare Trust was originally set up to educate the British public about laying hen welfare. Widely applauded for its re-homing initiative, the BHWT has already found pet homes for over 463,000 commercial laying hens otherwise destined for slaughter.

Television has proved a major factor in changing public opinion from the very outset. Jane Howorth, the Trust's Founder, was moved by a Panorama documentary in 1977, illustrating the stark conditions inside battery cages. The remit from the outset was to be pragmatic – using consumer clout whilst supporting the British egg industry by encouraging people to check food labels. Increased consumer awareness has led to big name companies switching to free range eggs, including Hellmann's Mayonnaise in 2011, and such policy changes have improved the quality of life for tens of thousands of hens. The charity has also contributed



social creatures. With Jamie Oliver, Jimmy Doherty, Amanda Holden and Kate Humble as important patrons, the trust also enjoys the support of many other TV celebrities including Deborah Meaden, Caroline Quentin, Alistair Stewart and Alan Titchmarsh.

The trust runs regular re-homing days at pop-up points across the country. As well as assisting with hens on the day, the charity is always keen to hear from people who can provide towing facilities for hen transport and/or have facilities such as a covered barn or stables with a parking area, as well as carers who are able to help with the occasional hen not fit enough to be re-homed immediately.

Even if you can't re-home a hen, simply by making informed choices about what you eat at home, and when out and about can still make a huge difference to thousands of hens' lives. Better still – spread the word! Display a poster; distribute leaflets and subscribe to the BHWT magazine. It all helps to get people who don't keep hens to think about the products in their weekly shop and to increase awareness of the work of this wonderful charity. 91

ABOUT 80% OF US NOW BUY FREE-RANGE OR ORGANIC EGGS BUT 66% OF EGGS IN THIS COUNTRY STILL COME FROM BATTERY FARMS. WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT ALL THE PROCESSED FOODS - QUICHES, BISCUITS, CAKES, MAYONNAISE, CHEAP ICE CREAM ETC. SOME SUPERMARKETS HAVE PHASED OUT BATTERY EGGS COMPLETELY AND IF THIS CONTINUES WE MIGHT SEE THE 66% COMING DOWN TO ABOUT 30% AND THEN DISAPPEARING COMPLETELY,

SAYS JAMIE OLIVER.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO FIND OUT MORE PLEASE PHONE THE TRUST ON 01884 860084 OR EMAIL INFO@BHWT.ORG.UK.

to improving veterinary diagnosis and treatment of backyard hens, helping to facilitate the training of vets across the country as demand for better hen care has escalated in tandem with the trust's profile.

Re-homing increased exponentially in 2008 after Jamie Oliver presented a Channel 4 programme, Jamie's Fowl Dinners. This caused a huge surge in interest and a rapidly expanding national network of volunteers. The same impact was felt again in 2010 following a BBC2 documentary presented by Jimmy Doherty - The Private Life of Chickens - filmed at the trust's Devon HQ, demonstrating the behaviour and psychology of chickens as complex