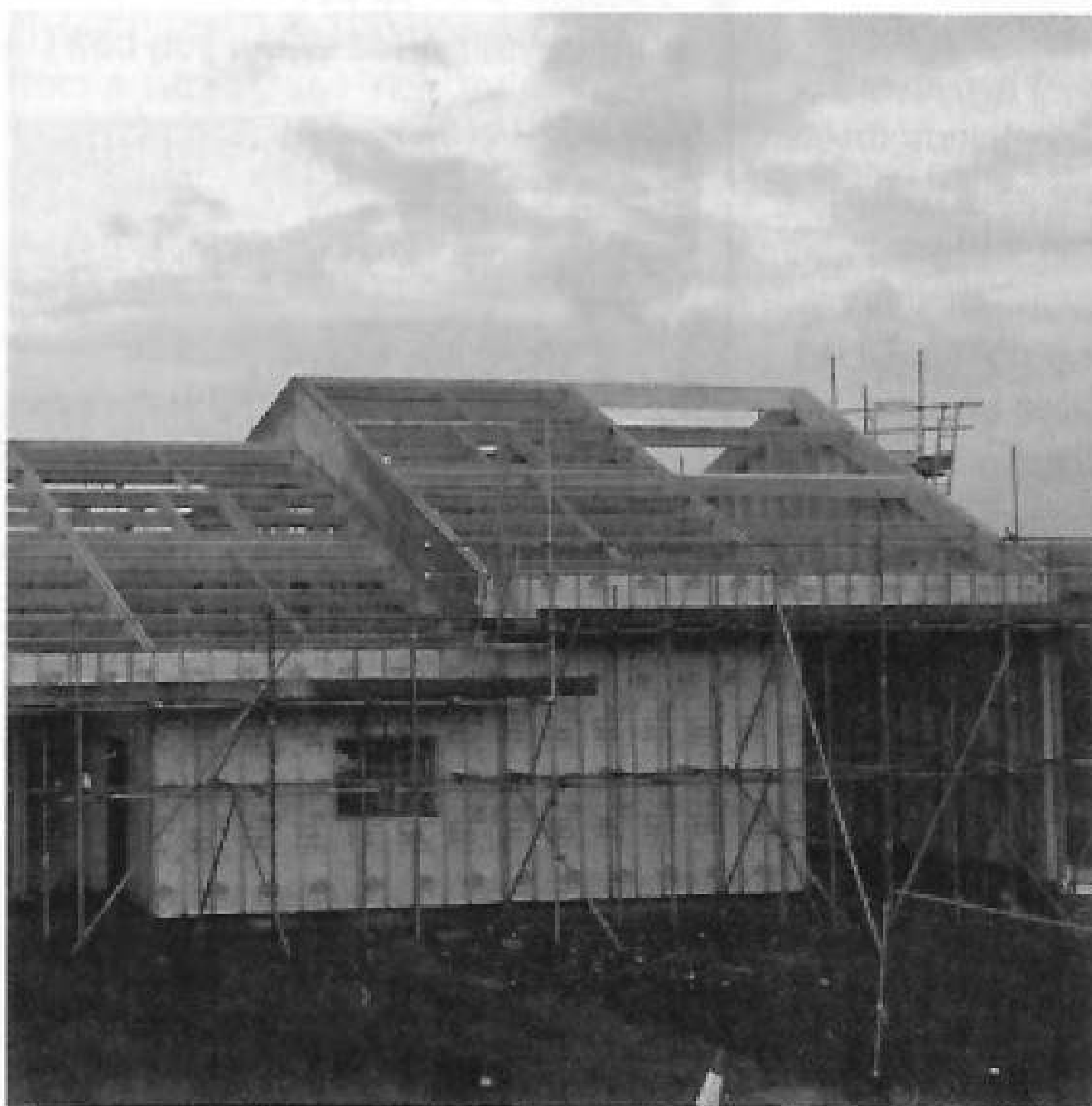


Challenging Times for the British Hen Welfare Trust

BY SUSIE KEARLEY



The front of the new building.



The building during construction.

JUST BEFORE THE pandemic, the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) built a brand-new Visitor Center in North Devon, England. COVID scuppered their plans to hold courses and events on the site, but it's worked very well for socially-distanced rehoming.

The Trust's founder, Jane Howorth, has a passion for rehoming hens. She's giving birds who've had a rough start in life a second chance of happiness. The bewildered and scruffy-looking chickens come from farms where they've reached the end of their commercial lives and are destined for slaughter. The charity saves over 60,000 birds from slaughter every year by stepping in to rescue and rehome the hens. They try to find new homes with people who can offer plenty of space for the birds to forage and, ideally, enjoy a free-range lifestyle.

Jane founded the BHWT in 2005, and they've gone from strength to strength, growing in geographic reach and rehoming even more hens. They've now rehomed a total of 860,000 hens.

The new Welfare, Education, and Visitor Center will eventually become the Trust's new headquarters. However, the pandemic has delayed the staff's move into the offices

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Jane with hens.

because, since March 2020, most staff have been working from home.

Jane explains: "COVID has played havoc with our plans. The new Visitor Center is not fully functional because we abandoned plans to open in Easter 2020. We have, however, been using the center for hen rehoming since the end of 2020, and it's working very well as a drive-through chicken takeaway.

"People don't have to get out of their cars to collect their hens. We open their car boots (trunks), take out the boxes (pet carriers), and put their hens inside. Then they drive home with their new pet hens."

The new rehoming center is a 250 square meter building, with a large hen coop in the middle and a walkway around the outside. People can wander around and peer inside through

one-way glass. The hens can't see people looking at them; that could be stressful.

"We're hoping to open up, get the office staff moved into the building, and run some courses, but we're not rushing into anything," says Jane. "It's not worth taking the risk of it all going wrong because of the pandemic. So, we're focusing on what we can do. We're having some landscaping done, and one of our outdoor chicken coops is up, but progress has been slower than we'd hoped.

"We've got the big indoor area for the hens and another smaller coop with access to the outside. This is useful because it gives us flexibility and means if we have two different flocks, we can keep them separate.

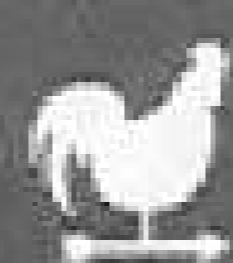
"Also, the bigger indoor space enables us to have bales of straw inside,

so people can sit on them and get close to the hens. It's a good way to learn how to handle the birds. We only allow a few people in at a time, and it depends on how nervous the hens are, as to whether that's appropriate.

"When we're able to open up for educational courses, it'll be nice to invite local groups and new audiences to visit. I suspect the Women's Institute (older ladies' social club) might enjoy wandering around and learning about what we do."

The BHWT doesn't keep hens at the facility all the time. The staff aims to rehome the hens the same day they're collected from the farms. The accommodation in Devon is a short-term holding center.

Jane explains: "We go to the farm, and every single bird that we collect has been booked out — someone has



The veterinarian with a hen.

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agreed to adopt the hen and give her a new home. It's a big upheaval for the hens for one day, but they get collected from the farm, delivered to our center in Devon, and collected by their new owners on the same day. By the end of the day, they should all be in their new homes. They only stay a bit longer if the adopter doesn't arrive.

"During the pandemic, we've been using the outdoor coop for rehoming. The different enclosures give us some flexibility. So, in the future, if we have a Saturday delivery, we might keep a couple of dozen hens overnight. Then we can run a course on chicken keeping on Sunday, and the adopters will take their hens home with them after the course.

"Our work has been hampered by avian flu as well as COVID. We had to stop operating from January to March 2021 because of avian flu, and it started impacting our work when there was a resurgence in December. We're just focusing on rehoming as best we can."

LOOKING AHEAD

Plans for the future include delivering talks, presentations, courses, and workshops at the center, enabling educational institutions, businesses, vets, and other professionals to visit and learn more about the charity and its work. Courses on hen care will give new adopters all the information they need to ensure they're doing their best for their pets.

In due course, a veterinary surgery on site will enable the charity to undertake pioneering work and train others in their techniques. Specialist

veterinary surgeons will come in to treat any chicken that requires extra care and attention. The plan is to train veterinary students around the country, both online and by offering practical workshops at the new facility.

There's a drive-through drop-off point, so hens arriving at the center for rehoming are dropped off directly into sheltered accommodation. Jane says, "We can take our van in under-cover and decant them without being blasted by the wind and the rain." This makes the whole experience more pleasant for both the people and the hens. The new arrivals are usually nervous enough without battling with the elements.

There will be lots of information about the charity and its aims in the new center when it is finally open to the public. Jane has plans for a second coop outdoors, a cafe, and a garden, but at the moment, the planters are empty, and a lot of things are on hold because of COVID. The new building has additional office space upstairs, which will help the charity to grow and achieve its goals.

"We do plan to keep a permanent flock of hens on-site," she says, "but not until we know exactly what our staffing is going to be. At the moment, we've got some people working from home and some coming into the office regularly, but it's quite changeable and erratic because of the changing nature of COVID."

Find out more about the work of the charity here: bhwt.org.uk ●

SUSIE KEARLEY is a freelance writer and journalist who lives in Great Britain along with two young guinea pigs and an aging husband! In Britain she has been published in *Your Chickens*, *Cage & Aviary Birds*, *Small Furry Pets*, and *Kitchen Garden* magazines.

facebook.com/susie.kearley.
writer
twitter.com/susiekearley

