We've given a million hens HAPPY HOMES!

Upset by hearing how factory-farmed hens are kept, one woman set up a special charity that's about to reach an incredible milestone

Jane Howorth started a charity dedicated to re-homing hens

It all started when Jane Howorth, then a PA living in Devon, took out an advert in her local paper. It read: 'We're battery chickens who have never seen the sunshine or tasted grass. Is there anyone out there who can offer us a better life?'

After watching a documentary about factory farming, Jane wanted to do something to help and had the idea of re-homing ex-battery hens that were otherwise destined for slaughter. The response to the ad was so great that it led her to set up the British Hen Welfare Trust.

Fast forward nearly 20 years, and the charity is about to re-home its one millionth hen (to a high-profile – although at the time of going to press, confidential – adopter).

'I feel like I've taken one of the humblest creatures on the planet and I'm showcasing her in the most heartwarming way,' says Jane. 'What I hadn't foreseen is how much hens would do for the humans who adopt them. They have transformed the lives of people with PTSD, serious illness and learning difficulties, and some people have said their hens gave them a reason to live. The hens have even been put into prisons, where they've helped long-term prisoners.'

'Hens have transformed the lives of people with PTSD'

More than half of the charity's re-homers come back for more hens, reveals Jane: 'The most common feedback we get is, "We had no idea hens were so life-enriching." I feel like it's the hens' way of saying thank you to us for giving them a second chance.'

The Oxford re-homing team are just one British Hen Welfare Trust group saving lives

'Hens have brought such joy to our garden'

Rachel Barclay, 37, from near Redhill, Surrey, didn't realise how much some feathered friends would change her life.

'I'll always remember collecting our first ever ex-battery hens. I'd wanted to re-home hens since I was a little girl when I'd gone on a school trip to a farm and couldn't understand why they were all in cages rather than frolicking in a field. That image stayed with me and I'd vowed to rescue some one day.

So, eight years ago, when my partner Tom and I moved out of London to a home with a garden, I immediately signed up to the British Hen Welfare Trust to rescue three little souls.

In truth, I didn't have much of an idea about what to do with hens – all I knew was that I wanted to give them a happy home. So I started by reading every book I could find on chicken-keeping, then bought a second-hand coop and run.

We counted down the days until we could get them and on chicken collection day, Tom and I drove to one of the trust's nearby re-homing sites in Biggin Hill, south east London. We weren't sure what to expect, but a volunteer at the centre gave me a quick lesson on how to hold a hen. Unfortunately, Tom missed this as he had to pop back to the car, so when a scrappy, featherless bird was thrust into his arms, it immediately tried to break free. Luckily, help was on hand and we carefully got the three hens into the back of our car, using the crate we had for our dog, Dylan, to keep them safe.

Driving home, the hens were completely silent – probably confused by the turn of events. Tom and I looked at each other: "What have we let ourselves into?" I thought.

NEW HOME

We'd been told that our hens had spent the first 18 months of their lives cooped up in a barn with hundreds of other chickens; they'd had no access to grass, no natural light and had needed to scramble over one another to get food.

It felt so good when we arrived home and were able to carefully lift them out

It's a hen (and dog) party: Rachel's pooch, Dylan, is also fond of the chickens

of the car on to our lush green lawn. At first, they just stood there, squinting at the sunshine, unsure what was going on. Slowly, however, they stretched their wings like they couldn't quite believe they had so much space.

Over the coming days, their confidence grew, and I watched, fascinated, as they relished dust baths like it was the best feeling in the world. Having only eaten chicken pellets, bringing them vegetable treats became my favourite thing to do. Their delighted squawks upon discovering sweetcorn were so loud that they could have been alerting our neighbours to a break-in!

I would spend every spare minute watching them explore our garden. I'm a natural worrier and it became a way to calm my busy mind. I particularly loved taking my morning coffee into the ↪

Fresh eggs, a home-made coop and peaceful pals for son Arlo, Rachel's hens are part of the family

garden to sit with the girls. We named them Mrs L, CJ and Debs – after characters in the TV series *The West Wing*. CJ (the scrappy, featherless hen Tom had first held) had arrived angry with the world, and understandably so. But over the next few months, she mellowed into the biggest softie. One evening, when I went to close the coop for the night, she flew into my arms and settled down to sleep. I was smitten.

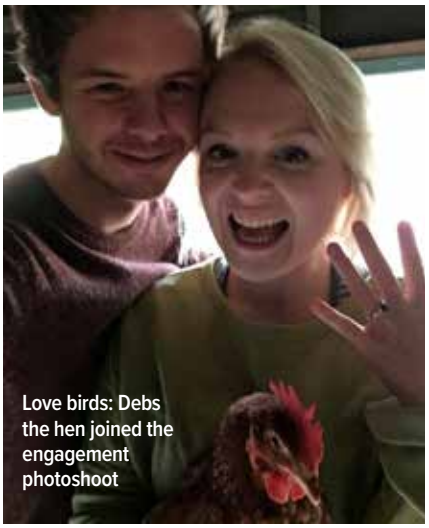
I was surprised at how each of the hens had their own distinct personality – some brave, some affectionate, some constantly trying to sneak into the house.

Tom, a sports journalist, adored the hens, too, and we were all heartbroken when, sadly, Mrs L passed away less than a month after adopting her. CJ and Debs, however, continued to thrive. I'd feed them each morning at around 7am, collect the eggs and let them out into the garden. Then they would go back into their henhouse filled with comfy straw at dusk. Even Dylan the dog loved them, too, and I would often find them napping together.

SURPRISE, SURPRISE!

But then one morning, after we'd had the hens for about three months, I went to check on them, as I do every morning, and I noticed something was wrong with Debs. We took her straight to the vet, who reassured us she was fine and would bounce back, but I still couldn't help worrying, so later that day, I went down to check on her again. Searching in the henhouse, I spotted what I thought was an egg, but turned out to be a small black box. Opening it up, I saw a sapphire ring. I turned around and Tom was on one knee, grinning. "I'd planned to propose this morning," he said. "But Debs looking ill scuppered my plans." I burst out laughing and after saying "yes" to Tom's proposal, we made sure our engagement photos included Debs in them, too!

We loved the hens so much that we soon adopted more. And our own family grew, too, with the arrival of our sons, Arlo in 2019 and Rowan in 2021. While, sadly, CJ and Debs are no longer with us, we currently have three other rescue hens – Parsley, Hedwig and Bramble.



Love birds: Debs the hen joined the engagement photoshoot

The hens make me smile every day and are my rock through all the ups and downs of life. The children love helping me with them and we all enjoy having fresh eggs for breakfast. Hens are great for reminding you to slow down in life. They make me laugh, too, when I watch them run around excitedly after food or follow the sunshine to find the best place to sprawl out in the garden for a sleep. And nothing beats a chicken cuddle; when you sit on the grass and a hen jumps into your lap and purrs as you stroke her – well, it's pure joy.

The garden, and our family, just wouldn't feel right without them.'

Rachel's top tips on hen-keeping

Five things you need to know...

1 **Equipment** You'll need a sturdy coop that's easy to clean, a run, feeders, drinkers, food and bedding.

2 **Cost** A 20kg bag of pellets (£18) feeds five hens for a month, bedding is £10 a month for a small coop and there may be vet bills.

3 **Predators** A secure run prevents rats and foxes getting in. We dug under ours and put a layer of mesh in so animals that dig can't gain access, then cemented around the edges of it. Our hens range free every day, but only when we are watching them.

4 **Space** Recommendations are to have one square metre of outside space for each ex-caged hen and two square metres for each ex-free-range hen. Start with at least three hens, as they're happiest in a flock.

5 **Noise** No cockerel means no crowing, but morning egg songs can be loud. I wasn't prepared for the range of vocal abilities; shrieks of excitement, warning sounds, happy chitchat... it's a delight. I consider myself fluent in basic chicken!