Jane Howorth with one of the hens
saved by her charity British Hen Welfare Trust.
Photo smgdc.co.uk Simon Moore

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS *OF THE BIRD KIND*

A Devon-based charity has reached a remarkable milestone – and marked it in right royal style

WORDS: Simone Stanbrook-Byrne

It was a bright summer morning when Trekkie died. Named for the alien glint in her eye, Trekkie, coincidentally, shuffled off on the anniversary of the demise of the late *Star Trek* actor who played Scottie. But, unlike Scottie, Trekkie's ashes were not fired into space. Trekkie, in fact, was never very airborne. For dear old Trek was a rescued battery hen, homed to me several years ago from the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT).

I first met Jane Howorth, founder of this Devon-based charity, shortly after its inception in 2005. Hers is an extraordinary story.

Back in the 1970s, deeply moved by the *Panorama* documentary, *Down on the Factory Farm*, Jane knew that one day, if she ever had the opportunity to make a difference, she would do so.

Fast forward to the 1990s and Jane found herself living in rural Devon with space around her, so she arranged to collect a few ex-commercial hens from a local farm to keep as egg-laying pets in her garden. The 'few' turned into far more – as many as she could get in the car, which necessitated finding homes for all these extras in friends' gardens.

It was the start of an idea that would spread throughout the UK – there are now 46 hubs nationwide – and it's beginning to take hold overseas.

Throughout the years Jane and her teams have educated, advised and influenced across the spectrum of a hen's world, working with farmers, vets, food producers, celebrity chefs, policymakers and, above all, the buying and animal-loving public. And, as a result of Jane's efforts, thousands of people are now >

delightfully aware of what fabulous little pets these characterful, sentient beings can be and just how much hens deserve to be treated with respect.

Having worked alongside Jane and her team on farm collections, I can vouch for the immense energy of these heart-warming days, the rapport she has with the farmers who agree to let the BHWT rehome their 'spent' hens rather than sending them for slaughter (their commercial life lasts about 18 months), and the sheer emotion and devotion of the people who turn up at the hubs with assorted containers, to take away these often-bald and bemused hens to start their new free-range lives.

Over the past two decades hundreds of hens have passed through my own hen house. They quickly adapt to free-range 'retirement', growing their feathers back to become beautiful, bumptious girls. Some live for many years – I still have Mainwaring from my *Dad's Army* intake (my arrivals are theme-named) and she's nearly eight. Others, like Elizabeth, may be too exhausted to last more than a few weeks.

All leave their mark and make a difference to the lives of those who live with them: Winifred, who would mug anyone for a biscuit; Myrtle, who carried on laying eggs even after surgery; and adorable Tatiana with her one eye who, just as I was about to take home the half-dozen I'd booked, was handed to me by Jane with a 'You don't mind the tatty ones, do you?' She didn't stay Tatty for long! Over the years, and with input from the BHWT, veterinary medicine has evolved to regard hens in a different light – as pets, not commercial commodities – and hens who are still farmed in UK cages now have more space and improved conditions.

And because of Jane, people now know what to consider when buying eggs and the products that contain them.

She's had notable successes within the food industry, persuading manufacturers to switch to using free-range eggs in their products and teaching us all to buy smaller free-range eggs, as the large sizes are not good news for the hens who have to lay them, being extremely uncomfortable on those poor little avian bottoms.

Jane and I have been friends now for almost 20 years and I've watched this amazing journey. I well-remember the occasion back in 2016 when Jane, who still works as CEO for the charity, had to scrape off the mud, feathers and other unmentionables to don a very elegant dress and hat to receive her MBE at Buckingham Palace.

And now the most superb milestone has been reached: 2024 sees the BHWT home its one millionth hen. I have to say that again: one million lives saved, a million hens who have gone on to feel the sun on their feathers, to stand on grass instead of wire, to dust

'The feeling of saving lives and watching these little birds grow into confident, precocious and endearing family members is priceless'

Jane Howorth with the millionth hen, destined for a palatial new home

Some of Simone's flock free-ranging, led by Cockerel Bradley.

Photo: Simone Stanbrook-Byrne

Just rescued hens. Photo: Tim Bates

HENS AT HOME – AND ABROAD

Jane's energy is unflagging; she plans to grow the charity even more. 'We want to point out to all those who don't know the joys of hen-keeping exactly what they are missing out on! We have been active in France now for a few years and almost 100,000 lucky French hens are living their retirement out in back gardens across the channel.'

And for those of us living in the UK, somewhere near you, you will find a BHWT hub. If you have a garden, have a look round and see what space you have and think: wouldn't it look even lovelier with a few feathered girls wandering about in it?

bathe. Such is the strength of a hen's instinct, thwarted in a caged life, that I have watched a liberated hen start rearranging straw into a nest within two minutes of putting her onto straw for the very first time in her life.

I ask a very exuberant Jane how it feels to have reached this point.

'Your question makes me smile,' she says. 'I have to pinch myself! I sometimes shake my head in disbelief that we really are rehoming our ONE MILLIONTH hen; my ambition was initially to save a lorry load (around 4,000 back in 2003) which I thought was ambitious enough.

'Little did I know how deeply the British public would take these dear little birds to their hearts. I am over the moon, thrilled to bits and more than tickled pink that I happened to be the lucky one to come up with the idea of rehoming these amazing pets that have the USP of showing their gratitude by popping out a tasty breakfast.

'No other pet can match that and be soft and cuddly too!'

Jane extols the enormous benefits to all concerned of living with hens. She tells me that, homing on average 50,000 a year, through recessions, a pandemic and even avian flu, 'speaks volumes about the benefits of keeping hens as pets.

'The most common phrase we hear from our kind-hearted adopters is how 'life enriching' they are and I would recommend to anyone who hasn't tried hen-keeping to give it a go. The feeling of saving lives and watching these little birds grow into confident, precocious and endearing family members is priceless. Just be warned: they are addictive!'

So, what of this much-celebrated millionth hen? Where will she see out her days?

The answer to that question is the astonishing crowning glory of the story so far. Over to Jane again, who can barely contain herself: 'Can you imagine the excitement when I opened the letter from Sandringham House and read that King Charles would be happy to adopt my one millionth hen and her two friends?

'In fact, he was actually happy to have more than the three I originally suggested! It made my little dog, Tish, leap from her bed, so loud was my squeal of delight.

'These humble underdogs of the animal world, who work so diligently on our behalf and often come out of their workplace a little tatty, are good enough, and wanted enough, to live with our King and Queen in their home garden at Highgrove. I really couldn't wish for more could I? She, and her friends, will live a royal life and I wish them all a long and happy retirement.'

And if I may be so bold as to make a suggestion... I do hope the King decides to call this very special hen, Queen Camillion!

Learn more about the charity and how to adopt a hen at *bhwt.org.uk*