LADIES *IN* WAITING

Simone Stanbrook-Byrne hears about the eggceptional achievements, with a regal twist, of a much-loved West Country charity

What starts with a carful, then becomes four thousand, passes through twenty-five thousand.....and arrives at a million? It sounds like a bit of a mathematical riddle, but to supporters of the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) these numbers represent stages in an achievement that started with one woman back in 1993.

Those of us of a certain age may well remember the *Panorama* documentary of the late 1970s, *Down on the Factory Farm*. It left a lasting impression on so many, none more so than a friend of mine, Jane Howorth. It was at this point she decided that if she ever found herself in a position to make a difference, she would.

Fourteen years later she moved to the West Country. It was a pivotal moment in Jane's life. Deciding to source some battery hens from a local farmer, I well remember her telling me that 'the few' she'd arranged to collect turned into a carful as she found it so difficult to leave any behind.

Her first, very special hen was called Vicky, and she was to be the initial feathered step on a path that led to the development of the BHWT as it is today. After Vicky came home in Jane's car, her next ambition was to save a lorryload of about 4,000. That was back in 2003 and led to the foundation of the BHWT in 2005, the first charity of its kind in the UK, possibly in the world. Jane still works as its CEO and for this work she was awarded an MBE in 2016.

'I've always seen laying hens as the underdogs of the animal world,' says Jane. 'There are more of them than any other domesticated animal. From the moment >

right: Jane Howorth is the founder and CEO of the British Hen Welfare Trust. Photo: Simon Moore

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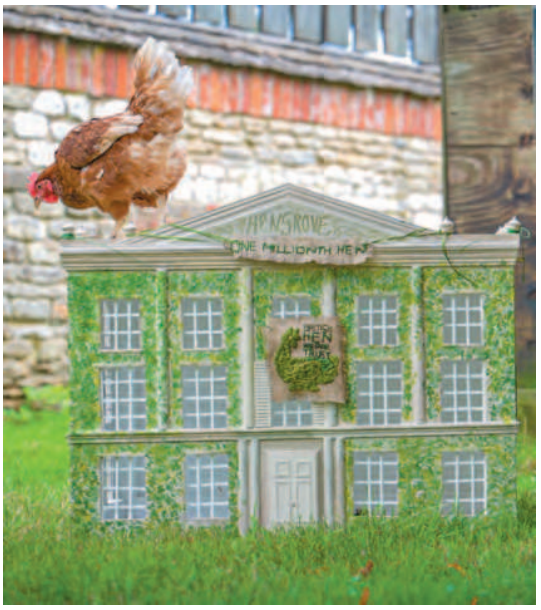
I realised that millions were simply never given the chance to enjoy grass under their feet or the sun on their back, I wanted to change hearts and minds and to show people what wonderful pets hens make. I am passionate about these birds and the more we’ve found homes for, the more apparent it is that they give back so much in enriching the lives of those who adopt them.’

Over the years, the charity has expanded to cover 46 hubs throughout the UK, and its work is now reaching abroad. By the time you read this more that 25,000 of these endearing little beings will have been homed in Somerset. Some of these hens now live with successful businesswoman and TV personality, Deborah Meaden, where they share her Somerset home with a variety of cats, dogs, horses, pigs and sheep. She started off with eight BHWT ‘girls’.

‘It’s hard to think of the life my wonderful girls had before the brilliant British Hen Welfare Trust helped bring them into our home,’ says Deborah. ‘To watch them when they arrive, fearful of the outside world, often in really poor condition, pale, pecked and featherless, start living the life of a chicken and thriving, is incredibly rewarding. We are so lucky to have them and we are all lucky to have the BHWT.’

Somerset has two collection hubs: one at Locking, near Weston-super-Mare, and the other at Oakhill in the Mendips. Hayley Spencer lives in Bath with her partner, two children and Bonnie the sprocker. For her ‘day job’ she works with teenagers and adults with learning disabilities, but Hayley spends her weekends working as coordinator for the BHWT’s Oakhill collection point, alongside her team of dedicated volunteers. ‘I really enjoy rehoming days,’ she says. ‘They are such happy days, it’s pure pleasure to work alongside the lovely people in the team for such a very worthwhile purpose. In the mornings you take hens that are just part of a flock of a few thousand – they are not even a number – and by the afternoon, because of the work of the team, they have names and people to look after them who will notice their personalities and feed them treats and try to make them happy. Adopting ex-commercial hens is such a joyful thing to do and I frequently hear stories from “rehomers” of how they have improved mental health and wellbeing for vulnerable people. The 25,000 hens we have rehomed [in Somerset] are all ambassadors for their fellow hens, each spreading the joy of hen keeping far and wide.’

Louise Cobham is one of the Somerset volunteers who helps out on collection days. She explains that, having grown up in a town environment before moving to and working in London, the pull of country life was always there, and ‘for me, owning chickens was part of that dream. As a veterinary nurse, I am a big believer in “Adopt, don’t shop”, so I was delighted when I learnt about the work of BHWT. Being able to own chickens, knowing they have been rescued from slaughter after a life of service, being able to provide a home where they can live out their lives without stress, in a natural environment, is so fulfilling.’



above: An ex-commercial hen, now living her retirement at Highgrove. Photo: Simon Moore
left: Deborah Meaden at home with one of her ‘girls’. Photo: Deborah Meaden

Louise says that, in today’s society of so many stresses, being a pet owner is great for mental well-being. ‘Walking the dog, spending time with my cat, whiling away the time in the chicken run each day – it’s very therapeutic. They are all such comical characters and within 24 hours of being rescued, they behave as if this has always been their lifestyle. Such is the enjoyment of hens in my life, I also joined up with BHWT as a volunteer on rescue days, either going to the farms and collecting the hens or being part of the rehoming team [back at the hub]. Knowing the wonderful change in fortune for these little lives, is just extremely rewarding.’

Having myself worked alongside some of the teams on farm collections, I can vouch for the immense energy of these heart-warming days, the rapport the charity has with the farmers who agree to rehome their ‘spent’ hens (their commercial life lasts about 18 months), and the sheer emotion and devotion of the people who turn up at the hubs to take away these bemused hens to start their new free-range lives.

Beyond rehoming hens Jane’s mission has always been to educate the buying public about how they can encourage growth in the free-range sector through their shopping basket, and to work in partnership, where possible, to support the UK egg industry through positive campaigning. There are numerous successful >

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examples of BHWT’s persuasive and influential reach: one involved Hellmann’s mayonnaise, which used to contain eggs from caged hens, but now uses eggs from free-range hens, a policy change which resulted in millions of hens being given the opportunity to enjoy a life with access outdoors.

Another was the highly successful campaign in 2022, when Jane was able to promote the call for mixed-weight eggs, achieving national coverage across both main TV channels and securing the support of the President of the Guild of Food Writers. This campaign influenced key food writers and magazines who now regularly refer to medium or mixed-weight eggs in recipes, rather than large or extra-large – which are far more likely to present welfare problems for birds.

Since I first met Jane, umpteen hens have passed through my own chicken run – not forgetting my two cockerels, Bradley and Cooper, who came from Exmoor via the RSPCA at West Hatch. And now the BHWT has achieved something Jane could never have imagined back in 2005: this year the charity celebrates the rehoming of its ONE MILLIONTH hen.

above: Bradley, Cooper and some of their wives in Simone’s garden. Photo:Simone Stanbrook-Byrne.

Think about that. One million lives saved, a million hens who have learned what it is to feel the sun on their feathers, to stand on solid ground, to be able to dust bathe and to snuggle down in a nest. Such is the strength of a hen’s instinct, thwarted in a caged life, that I have watched a liberated hen start rearranging straw within two minutes of putting her onto it for the very first time in her life.

So, what of this much-anticipated millionth hen?

Well, that’s the jewel in the crown of the story so far, and I happened to be meeting Jane for lunch just after she’d received The Letter. ‘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?’ Jane was beside herself with excitement! ‘In fact, he would actually like more than the three I originally suggested! These humble underdogs of the animal world 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?’

And just in case the King is reading this..... wouldn’t it be wonderful if he called this special girl Queen Camillion?! ●

If you are keen to learn more about adopting hens then head to *bhwt.org.uk* or telephone 01884 860084