A Million Hens Rescued by Love

British Hen Welfare Trust Celebrates 20 Years

When Jane Howorth rescued her first hens from slaughter over 20 years ago, she never imagined she'd rehome a million more!

This year the British Hen Welfare Trust celebrates 20 years of rescuing laying hens from slaughter at the end of their commercial lives. Their work began when founder Jane Howorth MBE, watched an episode of *Panorama* uncovering the awful conditions in which some of our farm animals are kept. She felt a particular affinity to the hens, trapped in battery cages for their short lives, before being sent to slaughter.

Impassioned, she wanted to save them. She lobbied her MP to improve welfare standards, and a few years later, when she moved to Devon, she sought out a chicken farmer and asked if she could take some of his hens home as pets, to save them from slaughter. She went along to collect 12 hens in her Mini Metro and returned home with 34 hens, which was as many as she could get in the car. She didn't want to leave any behind!

"When I got home, one hen was standing bolt upright and the other hens were picking on her," explained Jane. "She walked over to me, looking out, asking for help, and we built her a special space all of her own." Jane called the hen Vicky.

Her husband created a separate space in the hen house for Vicky and they gave her lots of attention. Vicky and Jane formed a strong bond and as she grew in strength, Vicky thrived, made friends in the hen house, and became very close to Jane. As time went on, the couple rescued more hens until they had a flock of 200. She always took the scruffiest hens who looked like they'd had the hardest time.

"When my mother and father died in 2001-2, I realised how short life is. You have to do what you want when you can," she explained. "I contacted a chicken farmer with a flock destined for slaughter and advertised to find all 400 of his hens homes as pets."

She asked people to consider giving an ex-battery hen a new life. "People were very supportive and said they wanted to help. They were pleased I was doing something about it". She found homes for all the birds, and was amazed by what she'd been able to achieve.

Then she sought out more farmers raising battery hens and reached out to them. In her first year, she rehomed 5,000 ex-battery hens to people who wanted to keep them as pets in their gardens or on smallholdings.

It was her first endeavour at rehoming these 5,000 ex-battery hens that led to her forming the British Hen Welfare Trust just a year later in 2005. She forged relationships with farmers and rehomed hens in ever increasing numbers.

Jane runs the charity by building positive relationships with farmers, not blaming them for supplying consumer demand for cheap eggs. "I want to have a positive impact, changing hearts and minds," she said.

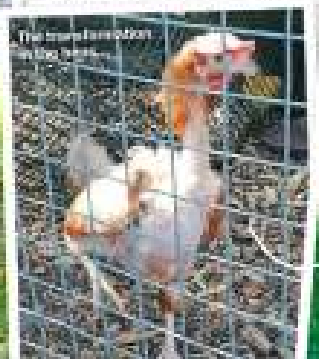
Last year, the British Hen Welfare Trust rehomed their millionth hen to King Charles himself. He said he would take 30 hens, and one of them, Henrietta, was their millionth hen rehomed. The hens now live at Highgrove Gardens with the rest of the King's flock. They had a special hen carrier made for the publicity, in the style of a castle!

In addition to rehoming their millionth hen, recent highlights include a free course on hen husbandry, delivered through the online platform *Futurelearn*. Over 4,000 people have taken the course so far, from over 100 countries.

They've founded a sister charity in France to rescue hens there, and have an education programme where hens are taken into schools in the UK, to teach children about animal welfare. All of this requires funding, so they are continually appealing for donations from kind-hearted animal lovers.

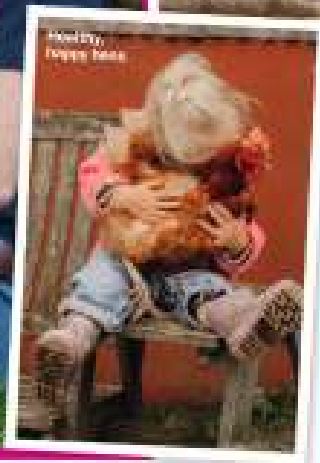
"We also want to formalise our farm advisory service and help hens who we can't take for adoption," said Jane. "This involves giving farmers advice on how to overcome problems within their flock, so the birds are healthier and happier. We had one farmer who had a high level of injuries among his flock, and by working with us, he was able to change his approach so that the injuries among his birds were much reduced. We want to work with farmers in a non-judgemental and supportive way. It's a partnership."

www.bhwt.org.uk



Jane set up the British Hen Welfare Trust two decades ago

Feathered – and furry – friends!


Healthy, happy hens

Consumer Advice

What advice do they give to consumers? Jane says, "The Trust's slogan is 'for a free range future' and we've always emphasised the importance of buying British organic or free range eggs to ensure the hens that laid them had the best welfare conditions possible. However, this is the easy part; it is less well known that a large percentage of caged eggs are hidden within processed foods such as cakes, quiches, pasta and even ready meals. Therefore the charity encourages shoppers to read ingredients lists carefully if they want to ensure that only free range eggs were used in the products they buy."