The British Hen Welfare Trust is still basking in the glow of having found homes for ONE MILLION ex-commercial hens

Birthday to celebrate

How the humble hen rose to being the Uks fourth most popular pet

Rewind back to 2005 and it's likely that if you mentioned 'rehoming ex-commercial hens' in conversation you'd be looked at as though you were speaking double Dutch.

Fast forward to the present day and the British Hen Welfare Trust is still basking in the glow of having found homes for ONE MILLION ex-commercial hens, not least of all because His Majesty the King found a space in his coop for the extra special millionth.

If the fact the King himself rehoming hens doesn't give the charity's work enough endorsement, you only have to speak to a few of the thousands of families, couples, schools, universities and even prisons who have taken on some of these little creatures to realise that they are, actually, quite worthy of a space in your back garden.

The charity's journey from inception to 20th birthday has been underpinned by the belief that the humble hen is under-appreciated, under-valued and over-used by society in general; however, the tide has most definitely turned over that time as proven by the fact there are now 1.6 million domestic fowl kept as pets in the UK alone.

This has pushed hens up to fourth spot in the list of most popular pets in the UK and, while their status has grown, the number of them kept in commercial cages has dwindled, much to the charity's delight. Free range eggs made up just 35% of the overall market in 2005 compared to 73.5% in 2024, meaning millions more hens now have access to the outdoors thanks in no small part to the BHWT's campaigning to raise awareness of the joy rehomed hens bring.

KEY MOMENTS

From gently 'cramming' hens into a Mini Metro ahead of her first rehoming to sending the charity's one millionth hen off to live with King Charles, BHWT founder Jane Howorth has encountered many pivotal moments over the past 20 years.

In 2008 chickens were thrust into the spotlight when Jane appeared on Channel 4's Jamie's Fowl Dinners alongside Jamie Oliver and, with the internet not being utilised to its full potential at that point, the phone lines were red hot with people wanting to know more about these feathered creatures and, indeed, offer some a home.

The momentum continued until the last battery hen was taken out of her cage on 31st December 2011, followed by the misconception that cages were a thing of the past – one day, we hope they will be! Two memorable moments took place in 2016 when, firstly, the charity rehomed its 500,000th hen, shortly before Jane was awarded an MBE for her services to commercial laying hens.

Jumping ahead to 2018 and the charity enjoyed one of its best years to date with 70,000 hens winging their way to a free-range retirement, as well being named JustGiving's Charity of the Year – a huge accolade for one small charity among thousands.

Then, of course, comes the biggie. In 2024 the wheels were set in motion for the rehoming of the charity's one millionth ex-commercial laying hen in what would be a world first. What started as a dream soon snowballed into reality once His Majesty the King so kindly agreed to adopt not only the special lady herself, but 30 others, into his orchard fit for royalty.

It was a momentous year and one which will go down in history, not least because of the sheer work involved but also because it means one million hens have now enjoyed a second chance to sunbathe, stand on soft grass and feel the wind ruffle their feathers.

PICTURE CREDIT: OLIVER DIXON

The charity was named JustGiving Charity of the Year in 2018.

Giving hens a second chance at a free-range retirement has always been at the core of the charity

A COMMUNITY OF HEN LOVERS

It goes without saying that none of the above would have been possible without a phenomenal amount of hard work by so many people, not least of all the core BHWT staff, some of whom have been with the charity for over a decade. Length of service, however, is not a marker of dedication, and as the team continues to grow so does the list of things that can be achieved in the name of hen welfare.

Looking beyond the office walls the web of hen lovers spreads far and wide across the UK thanks to the charity's 1,400-strong volunteer network, all of whom are unwavering in their passion for saving lives. Many are up at the crack of dawn on a Saturday or Sunday while the rest of us snooze in bed, all so they can take hens from farms and wave them off with their new families. When they've washed off the chicken poop and feathers before climbing into bed at the end of the day, they know hundreds of hens will be doing the same, but in a cosy coop instead of on a farm among thousands. The charity's gratitude to its volunteers is endless.

Then come the rehomers and supporters themselves. Tens of thousands of them have come forward over the past 20 years to welcome hens into their homes, knowing the joy and reward they'll get from seeing them transform. Not only that, many of them have gone on to hold bake sales, run marathons or become regular givers all in the name of hen welfare.

A 1,400-strong network of volunteers is vital to the charity's success

CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS

The charity's core activity remains to rehome ex-commercial laying hens, meanwhile improving hen welfare for those adopted, and those left behind.

Part of that saw the launch of its Hen Helpline, a service available to hen keepers all over the UK, and in some cases beyond, in need of support. The helpline receives hundreds of calls each month and has become a vital source of information for many, especially in areas where there's no vet available with suitable avian experience.

The charity's wider Improving Pet Hen Health project is longstanding and includes the development of an online course for vets plus a diagnostic and treatment subscription service for vets to use in practice when faced with a poorly chicken.

Inspiring and educating the next generation of hen keepers is also high up on the BHWT's agenda, and its resources for schools including primary school workshops, activities and games plus information on chick hatching is accessed regularly online. Many schools have adopted hens not only to save lives and experience the joy of hen keeping, but to teach children about responsibility, the farming industry and where their food comes from.

A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Looking forward to the future, and the charity is already well on the way to rehoming its next millionth hen even faster, meanwhile sowing the seeds for global growth – the BHWT's sister charity in France is already ahead of the UK when it comes to hens rehomed in 2025.

The charity will continue to work with stakeholders including DEFRA, veterinarians and the farming industry as well as informing the wider public so that hen welfare can be influenced from the supermarket shelves all the way back down to our feathered friends who so dutifully lay eggs for us day in, day out.

A huge thank you goes to each and every person who has believed in the charity and supported it in whatever way they are able to, from rehoming hens to simply sharing a social media post – every action spreads the word that these hens are worthy of a second chance.

ABOUT THE BHWT

The British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) was established in 2005 by Jane Howorth MBE. We are Britain's first registered charity concerned with rehoming laying hens while improving hen welfare across commercial and domestic sectors. We believe that pet hens matter; everything we do is to improve the welfare of our feathered friends and introduce more people to the joys of hen-keeping.