What links a hen charity and dinosaurs?

Meet the new BHWT patron, Professor **Ben Garrod** to get the answer

Meet , Professor Ben Garrod, BHWT Patron

The BHWT are immensely proud to introduce our new BHWT patron, Professor Ben Garrod, who we are delighted to have on board. Ben is an author and award-winning broadcaster as well as a Professor of Evolutionary Biology and Science Engagement at the University of East Anglia. You'll have no doubt seen him on your screens on various shows such as Attenborough and the Mammoth Graveyard, The Day the Dinosaurs Died and Secrets of Bones. Prof Garrod has adopted several flocks of BHWT hens and regularly promotes us to anyone who'll listen; we're even included in his latest Jack-Jack book which is out this month. We hope you'll enjoy this catch up with our latest member of the BHWT flock.

Q Ben, thanks so much for agreeing to an interview with us – we know you're a very busy man. First up, please tell us where your love of chickens comes from?

A Some of my very earliest memories are being out with my grandparents and visiting friends on farms. I distinctly remember being surrounded by chickens and that wonderful sense of being overwhelmed by the noise, movement and energy. On top of that, my mum read me a story before bed every night and like many of us I think, the story of

Jack the dog and adopted BHWT hens

Chicken Licken and that falling acorn had a special place in my heart. I thought my hen appreciation was a recent thing but you've made me realise it's been a lifelong love affair.

Q The link between dinosaurs and chickens has been well documented. Do you notice the similarities when watching your own flock?

A Haha oh yes! A lot of people are surprised at just how 'animal-like' their hens are, which on one hand sounds a little silly maybe, but equally, is completely understandable. We've sanitised nature so much that we think all animals love us (try hugging a shark to find out if that's true) and that all nature is like some sort of fairytale get-together where everything lives harmoniously just getting along ... so when your favourite hen beats up another girl, or the flock chase a mouse and devour it, we're almost shocked and surprised. But we shouldn't be. Our happy-go-lucky backyard hens have evolved to tough it out in jungles alongside tigers and cobras, and are the descendants of dinosaurs. They're intelligent and social predatory birds, with

A cute little 'dinosaur' credit Ben Garrod

Some feather-focus time

a dagger-like beak and feet evolved to both walk miles and defend themselves. It's not a case of whether I see similarities between my girls and dinosaurs, my girls ARE dinosaurs. We class birds as living dinosaurs, so your cute little Mable, Bella, or Rosie are all as much a dinosaur as any *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

Q We know you're a super keen runner, and that you love the mental benefits it comes with. Would you say keeping chickens brings about a similar feel-good factor (albeit without the need to raise your heart rate so much!)?

A I'm a big advocate for looking after our physical and mental health and chickens are great at helping promote both. Whether you are a morning person or not, your chickens won't let you miss a breakfast, come rain or shine, so there's definitely a physicality with keeping hens. But the mental benefits are immense. We have tonnes of research now supporting the idea that being out in nature or spending time with animals is good for us, and I really do feel that with my flock, I have to be present with them, so for a few minutes each day, they are my entire focus. Deadlines, bills, stresses all go out the window and it's a feather-based focus instead for a bit. I think it's rewarding too, taking these birds who have been through so much and seeing them recover, develop and eventually thrive. It nurtures our sense of nurturing, and that's never a bad thing.

Q It's a huge honour to have you join the BHWT as patron. What is it that you love so much about the charity and what we do?

A The BHWT is a microcosm of all that's good in the world. To be honest, there's so much going on right now, from political instability on the world stage, rampant climate change, humanitarian disasters, and an unprecedented biodiversity crisis, it's easy to think 'ah, come on, do we need a chicken charity?' but I'd argue we do, and that it's more important now than ever before. We need these small, close-to-home wins, and the BHWT allows so many of us to learn more about a massive industry and ultimately, to get involved in improving the lives and welfare of literally millions of animals. If we want to change world politics, help displaced people, or save a species, we have to be able to start somewhere and that tangibility of making a massive difference in a very small life may not change the whole world but can change the world for that one life.

Q Please tell our readers a little bit about your community chicken project – what was the thinking behind it, and how many hens live there at present?

A Our community project is in a big, shared communal garden in Bristol. Some of the residents have been here for decades and the idea of a chicken project had been floated before, but no-one quite knew what to do, or where to start. So, in lockdown in 2020, we decided to get together (albeit socially distanced) and set aside some of the overgrown parts of the garden, salvage some materials from skips etc, and make a coop and run for some hens. Right from the start, I was set on rescue hens, to help give the community an insight into the care and welfare needs for ex-industry girls. I trained the volunteers up how to inspect the hens and check for everything from bumble foot to egg impaction and then had to find volunteers. So many of the neighbours volunteered their time to building and construction and others eagerly signed up for regular shifts, either morning or night duties. I contacted the BHWT for the first time and the rest is

Hens enjoy their well planned housing

The mental benefits of chicken keeping are immense

history. We took 12 girls that first time and over the last few years, the number has fluctuated between a dozen and just under twenty hens. We did have a little cockerel for a time, but it became apparent these girls really didn't need a man in their lives, so he got rehomed to somewhere with more receptive girls.

Q Finally, and this is the most important question – what's your favourite way to eat eggs?

A That's an easy one. I go down in the morning, find the warmest egg I can and thank the girls for their gift (we must always thank them because every egg truly is a little marvel of nature), then have it poached, on some sourdough with a little piece of halloumi and maybe some spicy, roasted homegrown tomatoes. There are few things tastier than a fresh runny poached egg straight from the coop.

Jack-Jack Return of the Chickens by Professor Ben Garrod is published by Zephyr Books, price £7.99 paperback original – out now.

ABOUT THE BHWT

There are many ways to get involved with the British Hen Welfare Trust's work. From rehoming to fundraising, volunteering and donating, every single gesture helps – the smallest of things can have a huge impact. We really do 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 *bhwt.org.uk*