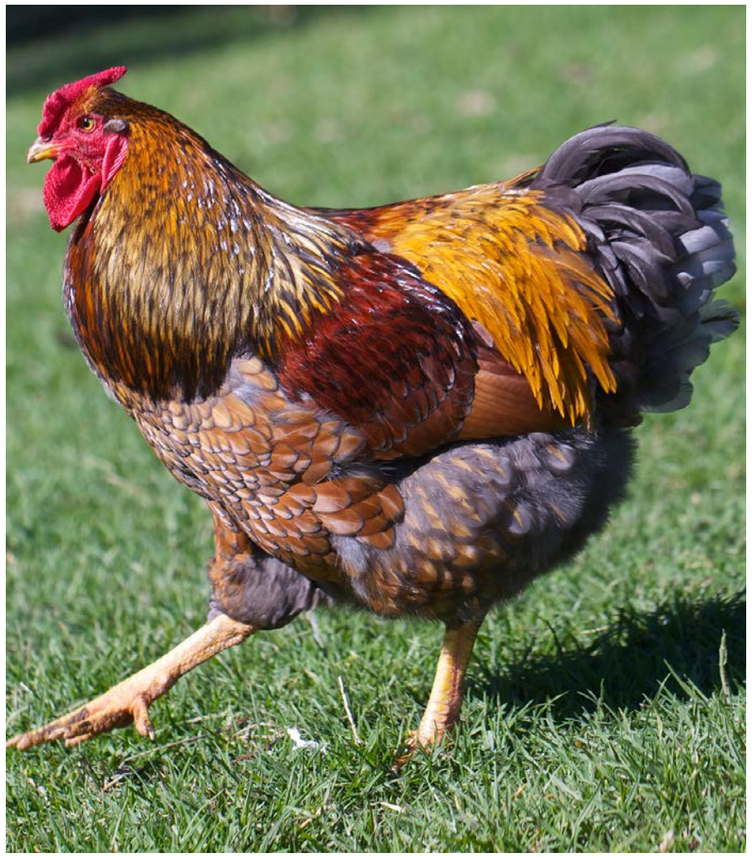

Cockerels are a largely unwanted by product both within the commercial industry and as a result of chick hatching programmes.

# What uses are their for cockerels?

**In this issue we want to touch on a subject that may ruffle a few feathers, but as a national charity helping 60,000 hens year in and year out we believe the topic merits some hard facts and an appeal for your support as readers of a popular poultry magazine.**

Let's take a look at the few instances where cockerels are considered useful first :

## BROILER BOYS

Unlike the egg industry, the broiler industry can make use of both males and female birds. A typical broiler will take between 6-8 weeks to reach a weight deemed financially viable, and in the UK approximately one billion birds are slaughtered annually for their meat in an industry worth £4.6 billion to the sector.

If you're a cockerel being used not for rapid growth but for the purpose of broiler breeding then your lifespan will be longer but there will be welfare complexities around feeding. Broiler breeder cockerels are initially allowed to gain weight naturally (and thus rapidly as their genetics dictate), but in some cases will then have a 75% reduction in their feed ration to ensure they are fit enough to complete their role as breeders within a flock. Toe amputations and spur removals, once commonplace, are thankfully now considered unnecessary and not within acceptable welfare boundaries.

## FIGHTING FOR THEIR LIVES

Hopefully all readers of Country Smallholding are firmly in the camp that agrees with UK law that the practice of cockfighting is illegal. Cockfighting is tantamount to abject cruelty for pleasure, and as such should be assigned to the annals of history as one of mankind's numerous unpleasant creations. Sadly, however, cockfighting is still prevalent especially in the north of the country and despite the law being clear about its illegality under the Animal Welfare Act 1999, it continues. The possession, training and breeding of birds for fighting is also illegal.

A shout out at this point to the RSPCA which has a Special Operations Unit working hard to get under the skin of the perpetrators and bring them to justice where possible. In September 2023 a Bradford farmer was sentenced to nine months, suspended for 18 months for breeding and training cockerels, as well as conducting cockerel fights. He was also banned from keeping birds for one year. The RSPCA received 350 reports of cockfighting between 2012 and 2020; a shameful number and who knows how many went undetected.

## KIDS AND COCKERELS

Who doesn't like the association of Easter with fluffy chicks and cute bunnies to help celebrate the religious celebration of the resurrection of Christ? We all do because the images they present go hand in hand with chocolate eggs and Easter bunnies.

However, there is a far more serious message to be associated with hatching chicks, particularly in schools, for children to experience the thrill of watching the process and having a tiny, cheeping chick placed on their small and inquisitive hands.

Because as anyone who understands probabilities will know, the chances of hatching six eggs and not ending with at least one or more cockerels is unlikely. This results in hatching programme companies having to find homes for these unwanted chicks once they have passed their cute sell by date. But the number of unwanted cockerels really find homes is unknown.

Surely, too, the educational message given to children that animals are great whilst they are young and cute, is not sound. Would we use kittens and puppies for the same purpose of illustrative education? No, for the simple reason we would not accept it as the animal-loving nation we mostly are.

Cute as they may be, little regard is given for the male chicks hatched in schools.

At the charity we firmly believe there is a better way to educate young minds. The British Hen Welfare Trust has a series of curriculum-linked workshops for teachers to download, free of charge, no chicks involved. The children get the opportunity to learn and have fun at the same time. *https://www.bhwt.org.uk/fun-learning/chick-hatching-in-schools/*

## ABANDONMENT IS ABHORRENT

The subject of cockerels is a particular bugbear of mine. As Founder of a charity that helps ex-commercial hens and now better understands the disregard we have for creatures deemed less lovable than, for example again, cats and dogs, here is why:

- ***Bullying tactics*** – we routinely receive calls from the members of the public who have unwanted cockerels and who expect us as a charity to take on the 'problem' they have likely created. The caring team at Hen Central are not able to help anyone wanting to dump their unwanted birds on the charity, but are upset at the bullying threats of chicks being killed as a result of our being unable to help. We do, however, have a positive potential solution; more on that in a bit.
- ***Letting go*** – and by letting go, we mean literally letting the cockerels go. As Founder I was recently invited to talk on national radio about 100+ cockerels that had been abandoned in a village in the South East which was being plagued by crack of dawn crowing, raids on bins, unwanted poop and more. That episode did not just happen by accident and was a callous calculation by someone with a lot of cockerels to offload.

The BHWT has a range of free-to-download resources

Similarly I recently came across three young abandoned cockerels whilst out walking my dogs; clearly left by someone who knew how to sex a bird. They were in a car park with no food, no water, no shelter, no predator protection. Luckily with the aid of some corn and two walkers, who had never before handled birds, the ravenous trio were caught and rehomed separately. They even got names : Lancelot, Dave and Sweep.

To add to my own experiences of this problem, a hatching whim by a young man eager to impress his fiancée led to three pure breed cockerels facing having their necks wrung by the local farmer at just five weeks old. Never mind they were as cute as kittens. Distraught the young man managed to find homes for them, including one to me – a little frizzle lavender pekin – so no ordinary bird. Luckily for beautiful Bertie he now enjoys the high life, with Sweep abandoned in the car park, and they have learnt thus far to tolerate each other – perhaps they understand their fate could have been so different and are happy with their lot.

## HOPE FOR COCKERELS

Now for some good news : first on the large scale as the egg industry has taken huge strides towards removing the need to destroy billions of unwanted male chicks annually. In ovo-sexing, whereby the sex of a bird can be determined within the egg, is growing rapidly. Hurrah. Maceration for newly hatched cockerels will hopefully be completely obliterated from existence.

Secondly, whilst we are unable to rehome cockerels, we do offer anyone who cares about them the chance to rehome them through our Cockerel Rehoming service. You can find out more about it on our website; for a small administration fee of £6 (the approximate cost of saving the life of a commercial laying hen) you can advertise and find a home where your cockerel could be wanted, and happy. For his natural life.

## IN CONCLUSION FOR COCKERELS

Please think before you hatch. Simple.

### 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.**