



Jane Howorth

Jane Howorth is the Founder of the British Hen Welfare Trust, which has been awarded the BVNA Charity of the Year 2015/6. Jane was inspired to help battery hens in the 1970s after watching a Panorama documentary highlighting modern farming practices. In 2005 the British Hen Welfare Trust was formed. It now has more than 30 teams across the UK and over 470 volunteers. Over 480,000 hens have been saved from slaughter in the past 10 years and the charity hopes to rehome its 500,000th hen very soon. Jane is keen to challenge veterinary views on hen keeping.
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Gallus gallus domesticus – our new best feathered friend?

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Sam Morgan writes...

It was my honour as BVNA president to choose our charity of the year. The British Hen Welfare Trust is a very worthy charity. It is amazing to read what the volunteers do for the charity and certainly rehoming nearly 500,000 hens is an amazing achievement! I hope you enjoy this small series of articles from the BHWT.

According to statistics from the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association, in 2014 there were nine million dogs, eight million cats, one million rabbits and one million domestic fowl kept as pets in the UK. My remit, when I set up the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) in 2005, was to tinker with those statistics to give *Gallus gallus domesticus*, specifically the commercial hybrid laying hen, the credit I believe it deserved.

In the same year, 2014, Battersea Dogs Home cared for 8,000 dogs and cats; the Dogs Trust rehomed more than 14,000 dogs and Cats Protection catered for over 4,000 cats. I'm sometimes overwhelmed when I consider that our charity rehomes approximately 50,000 hens each year.

However, before becoming too pleased with our achievements, let me put the figures into perspective: there are currently around 36 million laying hens in the UK and we save the lives of less than 1%. So, given that sobering statistic, why undertake the complex logistics of rehoming 50,000 birds each year when it's merely scratching the surface?

The power of positive campaigning

Working with an industry long deemed controversial by the fact that it keeps a large percentage (currently 45%) of laying hens in cages during their entire lifespan posed a tricky problem when deciding how best to promote the endearing

characteristics and therapeutic benefits of commercial laying hens. Despite obvious sensitivities, through our rehoming initiative we have been able to engage with the British egg industry, building trust and developing a pragmatic approach to every aspect of our work whilst at the same time educating the public about how they can influence the way in which all 36 million laying hens are kept. It is this positive educational approach that makes the relatively small number of hens we save from slaughter absolutely vital to the end goal, which is seeing all laying hens enjoy a free-range environment with the ability to express natural behaviours through their working lives. During 2014, 52% of the UK laying flock enjoyed a free-range environment, increased from 32% in 2004.

Hens as pets

We all accept that generally the more cuddly and cute the pet, the greater its appeal. That leaves the commercial laying hen in a relatively precarious position; she is after all a distant relative of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, not known for its looks or temperament. However, a hen has many hidden qualities and of course produces one of the most nutritious foods in rather neat packaging. Its unique selling point is that it's a pet that can give something back in return for the hospitality of its keeper. Throw in the fact that many people have a strong empathy for an animal that originated from the jungle and enjoyed entire freedom of movement, yet now only knows the confines of a colony cage,

and the humble commercial laying hen suddenly has strong appeal.

Moreover, the allure of the ex-commercial laying hen as a pet has soared since the charity began, not only because *Gallus gallus domesticus* makes a great pet, but also because chefs such as Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver (to name but two) have advocated the benefits of knowing where your food comes from; keeping your own hens for egg production fits the provenance ambition nicely. Then there are the therapeutic benefits of keeping a pet: a dog wags its tail, a cat meows and a happy hen will chatter. She will also

jump on your lap, scrounge dreadfully for grapes (and other treats) and go crazy for mealworms (**Figure 1**). Our postbag regularly verifies the view that our best educational tool in raising the profile of hens as pets is in fact the hens themselves. In addition, growth in the free-range egg sector reflects the fact that consumers are beginning to change their view that chickens are not simply bird-brained.

Spreading our wings

What began as an idea rolled out from a desk in my spare bedroom has developed into a charity run by a core staff of ten,

and facilitated by a team of nearly 500 volunteers working from over 30 pop-up sites across the UK. These pop-up sites are largely facilities provided by our volunteers although we do also rehome through some commercial sites such as farm shops and animal rescue centres. Key rules from the outset were to:

- treat everyone within the egg industry with respect
- learn what influences impacted their decisions on commercial hen keeping
- maintain a positive campaign at all times

Knowing the hens had powerful attributes to turn the coldest critic gave us the confidence that we could in turn influence consumers through our rehoming initiative. The realisation that hens are sentient creatures, capable of interaction with people in the same way as cats and dogs, is enough to persuade them to change their shopping habits from a welfare perspective.

Excited new hen keepers feel a tremendous sense of satisfaction and well-being knowing they have saved a life whilst adopting a new pet, and they share their experience (and eggs) with family, friends and work colleagues, indirectly spreading the message that there is much more to chickens than a cheap meal (**Figure 2**). Free-range egg sales have increased from 32% of market share in 2004 to 52% in 2014, rising steadily, even through the recession. Whilst we would not dare to claim full responsibility for this growth, we like to think the hens we have rehomed have had a gentle but powerful influence.

Traceability and biosecurity

Our 500 wonderful volunteers all share a common affection for laying hens, but they also understand that in order for us to be able to work within a commercial sector, a thorough and rational approach is vital.

They are aware that arriving at a farm where millions of pounds has been invested in new colony units, means arriving 'farm clean', and we take our bio-security extremely seriously. We provide detailed guidance on what we expect in terms of scrupulous cleanliness, including what to wear, vehicle presentation and even the minutiae of crate cleaning and disinfection. The threat of avian flu constantly hangs over commercial



Figure 1. Hens love to interact just like cats and dogs (Image used by kind permission of Simon Shaw)



Figure 2. Rehomed commercial hens go on to enjoy a free-range life style with relish (Image used by kind permission of Tracie Emerson)



Figure 3. A typical rehoming day involves the careful loading and unloading of hens before they are rehomed as pets

farmers, and secondary clean-up following disease is rigorous and costly, so it is of paramount importance that we are seen to be taking our responsibility in this matter very seriously.

In the event of a notifiable disease outbreak, it is essential that we can provide accurate information on the traceability of all our hens and this we do through a bespoke, Cloud-based database. This safeguard in turn gives us credibility within the egg industry.

Helping hands

Given the risks involved in our field operations, we are proud that we now regularly work with over 50 commercial units around the UK, and send in teams well practised in depopulation (removal of the hens from commercial premises). Individual members of the team usually focus on one aspect of the 'depopulation'

process: namely catchers, runners and packers.

At all times we endeavour to use best practice, not always easy when dealing with around 2000 uncooperative birds who have no idea why their day's routine has suddenly changed. Typically it may take us two hours to depopulate 2000 birds and we have strict protocols regarding transportation, ensuring that those birds whose onward journey is longest from the farm leave first, to ensure time spent in crates is minimised for all.

The success of our volunteer teams relies heavily on those willing to get up at the crack of dawn to travel to farms, and then transport hundreds of hens back to a pop-up rehoming point; it's a long day, but the resultant feel-good factor lasts longer. Back at the pop-up point, more helping hands are there to unload birds and identify those unsuitable for re-homing such as hens that are underweight or presenting

signs of injury, bruising and abnormalities (if not already discovered at the farm). It also gives time for the hens to adjust to solid ground under their feet – a first for them – as well as allowing access to food and water, before the final leg of their rehoming journey (**Figure 3**).

More volunteers are assigned to welcome our lovely rehomers, without whom none of the above would be happening. The administrative details are dealt with, last-minute advice proffered (this follows lengthy adoption guidance and bespoke advice for each rehomer) and hens placed in varying approved receptacles for a second time in the day. Hens have a higher metabolic rate than we do, average body temperature is 40.6–43° Celcius, compared to our average body temperature of 37° and stress levels are already higher than normal due to the change in activity so we are careful to ensure that birds are transported in well-ventilated, cool accommodation.

The outcome of a good day is one in which all hens have gone to their new homes, equipment has been cleaned, disinfected and stored for the next hen collection, and the team has enjoyed a camaraderie that comes with helping animals who, without intervention, would have ended their journey in a slaughter house.

Our new best feathered friends?

There's no doubt that commercial hens provide us with one of the most efficient food sources available and yet most of us don't really know very much about them at all. With the support of veterinary nurses across the country who are prepared to raise awareness of the charity and its aims, one day, yes, I hope our gorgeous hens will be ranked alongside cats and dogs in popularity. And as a result will become our new best feathered friends.

DELVING DEEPER INTO WOUNDS

BVNA Certificate in association with VWL
www.bvna.org.uk/cpd/intro

