

The Telegraph

At their peck and call

Linda Turvey with one of her rescued hens

By Nicholas Roe

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Nicholas Roe on the self-sacrificing work of the birdwoman of Henfield

With their cold eyes and strutting manners, chickens may be the most despised of all the creatures that end up on our plates. But in the quieter reaches of West Sussex - in the village of Henfield, would you believe - a lone martyr is showing us not just how to respect these sorely put-upon birds, but how to love them.

It is a story that adds humanity to the campaign against battery farming, an issue addressed as much on culinary grounds as welfare ones.

The trouble is that, however much you hate the treatment of chickens, it is hard to feel for them.

Yet Linda Turvey has looked after 700 battery hens for 12 years in a fashion that speaks of true emotion.

This is obvious as I drive up her rutted lane and enter the cluttered, two-acre muddy field she calls Hen Heaven.

"Chickens are the bottom of the heap," Linda says, closing gates that try (but fail) to keep out foxes. "People may think they're stupid, but they're not. I'm their slave, there's no doubt about that."

Linda takes in unloved, unwanted and "rescued" hens (no questions asked), making pets of them and giving many of them names: GI, Scratt, Peggy-Sue, Scamper Dan, NotLil, NotSal - the last two being replacements for hens that have passed on.

Living in a chilly caravan on site next to a huge, stinky barn, with little more than an electric blanket and a fan heater for comfort, Linda devotes 18 hours a day, seven days a week to her task, scraping by on benefits and the sale of eggs. She feeds her birds on corn and left-over cake from a confectioner friend, while she survives on, at times, a lesser diet. At Christmas, the birds ate pasta; Linda had bread and jam.

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Linda has lung disease, is in her fifties and divorced. She has no children - "These are my children," she says of her charges - and (for 12 years at least) no holiday. It's both humbling and perplexing.

"I was partly brought up on a farm," she explains. "I remember the time, when I was a little girl, my aunt and uncle opened the door of the chicken house and I stood there and looked up at a great wall of dung and muck - and with chickens up on the top. I just thought this was wrong. I've always thought that chickens have a rotten deal."

Living on a boyfriend's family farm later tweaked this defining moment. So when this field came on the market a dozen years ago, she started moving in her clucky loved ones. More proof of love comes through when an account of her war with foxes reduces her to weeping frustration.

The tale of her favourite chicken, Lavender Lil, almost brings tears to my eyes, and I don't even like chickens - I usually only think of nuggets and Kiev. But Linda goes on: "Lil's body was lying half way up the drive, her head some distance away. In total, the fox had taken 18.

"I just screamed. I went mad. It was just awful. These were birds I knew and had given names to. And Lavender Lil was precious. She was so tiny."

Although Linda cries a lot for her hens, more often they cheer her up. She recalls one that perched on a water bowl only to have it overturn and trap her underneath. "You could see the bowl moving across the floor," Linda laughs. "When I picked it up, there was this irate chicken - indignant, imperious."

Her hens are fed three times a day, an hour per feed. Then, as it gets dark, Linda traipses across the field to lock them in the barn (she needs a new anti-fox fence, but lacks the money). In the evening, she sits cuddling sick birds and giving them medicine provided by a vet.

She says her work will go on no matter what the Government does post-2012, when controls on battery farming are planned, because mistreatment won't stop. "I'm lumbered," she says. "I can't walk away from them."

Linda knows her facts, too: 60 million chickens born each year; 30 million (males) immediately killed; battery hens live 72 weeks...

But it is the emotion, rather than cold facts, that stays with me as I leave. According to Linda, chickens have

a large vocabulary; they are characters; they have feathers shot through with beautiful colour; and they start life with wonderfully smooth skins that only wrinkle with age.

It seems there's nothing we can't love if we try. Even chickens.

For more information on the work of Linda Turvey, see www.henheaven.org .

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