

Ruling the ROOST



Hen keeping has become one of our fastest growing hobbies, so just what is going on in Kent's back gardens? *Kent Life* visited Churchman's Farm in Faversham to find out

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as seen in
KENT LIFE

Andrew Bruce holds up a White Sussex for the camera

Mary Bruce, aided by husband Andrew, has been rearing point-of-lay chickens for more than 15 years at Churchman's Farm, their home on the outskirts of Faversham.

What makes the enterprise unique is that they raise 2,000-plus chickens every quarter from day-old chicks (sourced mainly from Belgium or Holland), which basically means they all grow up together and become happy, healthy, sociable hens who produce lots of eggs.

It's one of the many reasons so many first-time, would-be chicken keepers flock to the farm, and why very few come away empty handed – believe me, had I not been heading straight for the Kent coast after my Faversham visit, I would have popped three little beauties into my car there and then.

Andrew says: "We get the whole family coming down and the children pick out the hens they like best – so instead of selling 100 at a time, more and more we are selling them in threes, which makes more work for us of course and we can't discount at that price, but it seems to be the way things are going these days."

Mary adds: "I get asked, what do you do with the ones you don't sell? But that doesn't happen, we sell all of them, we have to because we need to make room for the next 2,000 chicks coming in!"

So after 15 years of basically selling all their stock every three months, isn't there a danger of saturation point eventually being reached? Mary laughs: "Interest is just growing and growing – I think it's tied in with the whole resurgence in allotments and people's growing awareness that there is more to life than just walking around a shopping mall! There's also an enormous amount of repeat business, of course.

"The neighbour effect is phenomenal!" she adds. "You can have a row of terraced

Top 10 tips

- 1 When buying hens, check their history, how they've been raised and how old they are
- 2 Buy at least two, if not three; hens are not solitary animals and a 'pair plus one' is ideal
- 3 They don't require a lot of space – but don't overcrowd them (or have too many)
- 4 You can expect an egg a day
- 5 Hens will become very friendly and are happy to be picked up and stroked
- 6 Hens enjoy being talked to and will soon recognise



the sound of your voice

- 7 Make sure there is always somewhere for them to shelter when the weather is bad; if they're wet and cold it puts them off laying good eggs
- 8 If a hen pecks at her own feathers she may draw blood and the red patch(es) may attract other hens (they can't resist the colour red). If possible, separate the hen until she has healed
- 9 The average lifespan of a hen is three to four years, but you won't be getting many eggs by the end, although they will be very large
- 10 Expect to pay from £199 for a starter hen house and two H&N Nicks up to £799 for a top-of-the-range Eglu Cube which can house up to 10 chickens



Above: Mary Bruce with a basket of freshly picked eggs from the farm, including some highly-prized blue varieties

houses and you look over the fence at the family next door having such fun with their chickens, and you go out and get some. And so it goes on down the street.

"More and more people are working from home as well, so you can get let the hens out when the children come home from school, for example, or if you're sitting outside in the garden on a summer evening. We get feedback like 'we've moved our bench up to the end of the garden so we can watch the hens', which is lovely

"As long as they've got food and things to occupy them, they won't worry about wandering off – they're a bit like humans really."

Mary introduced beginners' workshops four years ago and now most first-timers will spend around one and a half hours with her learning just what is involved in keeping chickens – from what ground space they need to feeding and holding them.

"Then people can decide for themselves if it's right for them or not," says Mary. "They can ask all the questions they want. People seem to find the workshops very reassuring and useful."

To make life even easier, you can drive away with your hen house, feed, accessories – and hand-picked hens, of course – all on the same day.

"Joe Public doesn't want to make an effort, so we have everything here from the feed, grit and oyster shell to the feeders and hen houses. You don't really need a lot of kit," says Mary.

Churchman's is run by Andrew and Mary with help from their invaluable farm manager Ian Hann, who attends to the day-to-day rearing, vaccinations and worming side of the business.

There are several different varieties to choose from and you'll pay £15 for a brown hen and £17.50 for a coloured one – varieties include H&N Brown Nicks, producing 350-360 dark-brown eggs a year, the Light Sussex, a traditional white Beatrix Potter sort of hen, and the very pretty, speckled Marans Coucou.

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One thing noticeable for its absence is any smell – which photographer Manu comments on with appreciation as he clambers around the impeccable hen house filled with around 1,000 spotless but inquisitive hens.

But then it is cleaned and fumigated from top to bottom every three months for every batch of new chicks, as one thing the Bruces can't afford is the risk of contamination or infection spreading.

Plans for the future include sourcing a variety that can lay blue eggs all year round,

as blue eggs have suddenly become very popular among customers.

A van goes out on deliveries two or three times a week and barn eggs are bought in for those customers who don't necessarily want free range, but of the 8,000 eggs a week the Bruces sell, some 3,000-4,000 are free range – and that figure is increasing all the time.

And you can drive in and buy eggs fresh from the farm (the honesty box has only disappeared twice in 14 years), for apart from having a new family pet, you've also got a rather useful one.

"So many people will never now go back to supermarket eggs – everything is different with a fresh egg, the colour, the feel, how they sit there when you break them into the pan," says Andrew.

"We have some friends in London who if they don't have any of our eggs will just go without."

Right, just off to measure up my back garden for a hen house ... ■

GET IN TOUCH

Churchman's Farm, near Faversham
ME13 0HA 01795 531124

Next beginner's workshop:
13 October, from 9.30am
£5 per adult, children free

www.churchmans.co.uk

