

# Q&A

*Lesley Austin loves chickens – so much so that she has just set up her own henschool! She lives in Barking, near Needham Market, with her husband Steve and has a grown-up son Michael and two stepsons, Oliver and Jack*

**What came first the chicken or the egg? Or, in other words, when did you first get interested in hens?**

Dad's job as a farm worker moved us to a small village called Welwick, about 20 miles from Hull. We moved into North Farm when I was five, and I can remember starting at Welwick school. It only had 11 pupils in total, five infants and six juniors but I enjoyed learning there. I had to cycle to school as mum could not drive then. The journey was only a mile or so but for a five-year-old it seemed like a long way. In winter the teacher had to put me near the radiator to 'thaw out' for a while.

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North Farm was very isolated so the many animals that we had became good friends. I had a pet pheasant called Tot and a chicken called Matilda as well as dogs and cats. I loved helping dad with the many pigs that arrived to be fattened. I remember feeling sad when the lorry came to take them to market. One night the fox attacked and killed many of our hens. He attacked Matilda, but by some miracle she survived. The fox had ripped open her chest and blinded her in one eye. I cleaned her wounds and kept her in a straw-filled rabbit hutch until she was strong enough to join her flock again. She would follow me around and loved to sit on the swing with me, the gentle swaying sending her off to sleep. I have loved chickens ever since! I met Steve in 2000, fell in love and moved down to Suffolk within eight weeks of meeting him. Michael, my son, also moved with me and we love living in the county. I have worked in veterinary nursing since 1992 and work part-time at Smith, Ryder-Davies in Ipswich. Both Steve and I are vegetarians; we think all animals should have a decent quality of life, even if it has to be eaten at the end of the day.

**What is it about hens that fascinates?**

I think most people think of hens as 'just chickens', when in fact they are quite bright little creatures. They

know their names when called, they know where the grated cheese is kept in my kitchen, and they have set little routines. Take a little time to watch one of your hens when she has laid an egg. You will see her pick up strands of straw and gently place it on to her back; she will then announce that she has laid an egg with a call which can last for several minutes. Nobody can explain why this happens, but it is fascinating to watch.

**Is there a breed you particularly like?**

My favourite breed is the Naked Neck Bantam. They are quite rare and most people are shocked at their appearance. They resemble miniature vultures, but are endearing little hens and are surprisingly hardy. If you own this breed it is tempting to knit little scarves to keep their bare necks warm in winter!

**You are heavily involved with the Battery Hen Welfare Trust, tell us more about that?**

My love of chickens led me to enquire about rescuing some ex-battery hens. I spoke to Jean Gill of the BHWT, explaining that I had vet-nursing knowledge. A couple of days later I was on my way to Essex to collect four of her 'oven readies'. These are battery hens with little or no feathers left after living in the most stressful and unnatural conditions for hens. I loved them on sight and from then on I was hooked with the fantastic work of the



Battery Hen Welfare Trust. We try to have collections of hens as often as we can, usually bringing out 500 hens from their cages. Our work is not to condemn the battery farmer; if we all stopped using battery eggs and were more aware of food products that contain battery-hen eggs, then the farmer would not keep hens in this way.

I am now one of the voluntary support coordinators for the

Essex, Suffolk and Cambs areas and log calls from eager re-homers for the hens. It takes up a lot of my time but it is very rewarding work. Rescue days are very long and tiring. I normally come home covered in chicken poo and scratches but who cares, the knowledge that the hens have gone to new lives instead of being sent to slaughter makes it all worthwhile.

**It's early days but how is the Henschool coming on?**

Whilst talking to potential re-homers of ex battery hens, I became aware of the need for a training course for people who have not kept hens before. The interest in hen-keeping is growing as animal welfare awareness increases and people want to know where their food has come from.

I have a good knowledge of keeping hens and can advise on most aspects of health, illness, behaviour etc. I like the idea of people coming to my home in small friendly groups, enjoying a home-cooked vegetarian lunch, meeting my hens, then going home filled with knowledge and enthusiasm of how to keep hens at home. Steve built me a website

[www.henschool.com](http://www.henschool.com) and it took off from there. I have quite a few courses booked already and places are filling very quickly. I am based in Barking, near Needham Market. The cost of a place at Henschool is £40 per person to include lunch and refreshments. I also make a donation to the BHWT from each course booked. I am very excited about Henschool and can see a healthy future for lots of hens because of these courses. If you wish to book a place, please contact me on 01473 657493 or through the website.

**Are they easy to keep?**

Hens are quite easy to keep as long as you follow some golden rules and keep them safe from fox visits. Keep them in as natural surroundings as you can, feed them the correct foods, keep their housing clean and you won't go far wrong. It is worth checking with your local council to see if they object to you keeping hens, which most don't. If you wish to keep a rooster, make sure you are on friendly terms with your neighbours as they may not appreciate the rooster's early morning call. A few fresh eggs however, will usually keep even the grumpiest of



Lesley Austin at home in Barking with two of her pet hens.  
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neighbours sweet.

**Any amusing tales to tell about your hens?**

When I lived at North Farm, we had a cockerel called Rodney. He was a massive Rhode Island rooster and would attack the back of your legs as soon as your back was turned. We kept a small shovel at the entrance to the chicken run to push him away with if he launched an attack.

One day, my mum went to collect the eggs from the coop and sure enough, Rodney launched his attack on the back of mum's legs, drawing blood. She whacked a little harder than she intended knocking him out cold for a few minutes. She ran into the kitchen shrieking "Bloody hell I've killed Rodney." Dad ran to check if she really had killed the feisty bird, but there was Rodney ready to launch an attack again. He never did learn his lesson after that day. Strangely, Rodney was rehomed soon after that awful day.

**Which are your favourite places in the county and why?**

I adore living in Suffolk, and love to visit the historic villages of Lavenham and Kersey. I never tire of going there, especially the Tickled Pink tearooms in Lavenham for a delicious cream tea. I hope my Weightwatchers leader Bev is not reading this!

**Your favourite film, book and song? And why have you chosen them?**

My favourite film is *Whistle down the Wind*. It is an old black and white film featuring Hayley Mills. The storyline is about a group of children who think that they have found Jesus in their dad's barn, when in fact he is a wanted criminal. It is an incredibly emotional, innocent film. I can highly recommend it, makes me weep every time I watch it.

My favourite song is *Happy Radio* by Edwin Starr. It reminds me of being a teenager again. If I hear it when I am driving my car, I can feel the 'girl racer' stirring within me.

My favourite book is called *Five Chimneys* and recalls the horrors of the holocaust. Let's hope we never let this atrocity happen again to humankind.

**Best piece of advice you have been given?**

The best piece of advice I have ever been given was to love all animals, as their love is unconditional to us. My wonderful husband Steve also gave me a gentle nudge to start my Henschool business, and it looks like it might be the best piece of advice that he could give, lets hope so...