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THE CHICKEN-KEEPING REVOLUTION

As the new millennium got under way a proliferation of books on the subject of the bucolic delights of keeping chickens in an urban garden suddenly flooded the publishing world. The author and broadcaster Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall appeared on TV and interrupted his squirrel stew to show off henhouses that were raised on stilts and accessed by precipitous looking ramps.

This avian loft living wasn't everyone's idea of chicken nirvana, but there were plenty of people who were good with wood who began selling cute, bijou chicken coops that resembled everything from country cottages to bungalows. By this stage lifestyle magazines with glossy paper and glossy contributors were filled with small ads for these birdy mansions, often being sold for mansion-sized prices.

Then there was the 'Omlet Eglu', which was the apex

up from around 50,000 in the late 1990s. How those figures were arrived at isn't clear, as the British Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) doesn't record flocks of less than 40 birds. But they don't sound unreasonable – even if there doesn't seem to be any more recent data. So any self-respecting chicken bluffer can claim that little has changed, since there hasn't been an obvious fall-off of people who give their chickens names and take them to the vet when they're ill.

HOW EASY IS IT TO JOIN IN?

Some of the billions of chickens in the world could be living in your garden (or what's left of it, see below). If not, the idea of them doing so might appeal.

However, the question that needs to be asked is whether the reality lives up to the fluffy-bottomed, egg-rich, contentedly clucking image of a happy hen that's probably drifting around in the aspiring chicken keeper's head? Probably not, and this book will reveal the reasons why the reality can sometimes be somewhat bleak. This doesn't mean, however, that you should necessarily ignore the hen-keeping urge. People get broody too.

Human beings are by nature hunter-gatherers, yet for many of us the thought of active hunting doesn't appeal, whereas gathering eggs is an altogether more attractive and rewarding prospect. What could be simpler? Well, how about not keeping chickens and going to the shops

wrong with them – and although chickens blur the line between pets and livestock, owners may find it difficult to ignore problems if one of their flock starts feeling off colour. The wise bluffer will aver that when confronted with the statement ‘but it’s only a chicken’, it is a fact that although chickens rarely bond with people, the reverse is often true. A sick chicken is not ‘only a chicken’. For many chicken keepers the birds can arouse sympathy and concern in an owner in much the same way as a cat or dog can. Or, dare say it, a member of the human family.

DEMANDING GUESTS

Chickens should have their water changed regularly and ideally be fed a couple of times a day. This does not always sit comfortably with owners accustomed to going away for the weekend, or taking regular holidays. You wouldn’t leave a dog or a cat in the garden for an extended period, you might politely point out, and you can’t do the same with a chicken.

Ask aspiring hen owners if they are able to entice or bully a relative, friend, neighbour, or offspring of the above, to look after their birds if they are away. If not you can let them know, with only the smallest hint of gloating that they will never be able to leave their homes again.

The offer of fresh eggs is an excellent incentive to stand-in keepers for stepping into the breach and taking temporary charge, assuming that their birds can be bothered to lay any. However, bluffers should point out that during periods of moulting feathers and growing

new ones, broodiness, or if it’s cold, or they just don’t feel like it, chickens will pack up laying for weeks or months at a time.

KEEPING REGULAR

Then there is the general day in, day out slog of looking after the birds.

A useful way of gauging the level of chicken-keeping commitment is to wait until the weather turns nasty and objects such as dustbins, pensioners and small cars are being blown past a newby hen keeper’s window, and they *still* have to dress up like a trawler fisherman and fling themselves into the meteorological melee to get the chickens up, feed and water them. Is this what they actually had in mind?

Come rain, shine, monsoon or the hangover from hell, filling drinkers, shovelling food into bowls and opening henhouses so that their occupants can peer out at their owners in a disbelieving ‘do you really expect me to go out in *that?*’ sort of way will be a chicken keeper’s lot. So will regularly cleaning out the henhouse from which the birds are refusing to budge. In the summer this can be a malodorous, itchy and sweaty process. On an Arctic afternoon in November it can have a Gulag work party quality. Pointing this out can be highly entertaining for a chicken bluffer.

Perhaps you might now be thinking, ‘I’ve bought this book to find out about how to pretend to be an expert on the joys of keeping chickens and it’s full of warnings designed to put people off them.’