The Battle of the Battery Cage

In the aftermath of the Second World War, becoming self-sufficient in food production and keeping food prices low in order to assist with domestic economic recovery were important national goals. A drive to maximise production whilst minimising costs spawned 'factory farming', an intensive system of agriculture in which efficiency and economy are the motivating factors.

Devised in the 1940s, battery cages were initially designed to improve hygiene standards and curb the spread of infectious diseases. The sloped floors and waste-carrying conveyor belts underneath meant eggs could be collected easily and contamination reduced. The early incarnations of battery cages housed only one bird each, and were larger than those of more modern times.

In order to boost output, traditional farming techniques started to be replaced with mechanised systems, such as controlled access to food and water, and artificial lighting (which, in the case of hens, stimulates egg production). These processes, coupled with the use of medication and selective breeding techniques, meant farmers could manipulate their animals into producing more and consuming less.

Over time, this meant that the number of birds per cage went up, and the amount of space per bird went down. Battery farms (a 'battery' being a large group of identical objects e.g. cells – or cages) sprung up around the countryside. With rows of cages stacked several tiers high, each barn could hold up to 30,000 birds.

As far back as the 1960s, pioneers of the environmental and animal welfare movements voiced concern over the growth of factory farming. Battery cages were criticised in Ruth Harrison's landmark 1964 book, *Animal Machines*. From its inception in 1967, campaign group Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) focused on the cruelty of battery cages, and the RSPCA was soon to follow with the launch of its own public awareness campaign on the suffering of battery hens.

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UK lagging behind other countries in the EU

2012 was the deadline by which conventional battery cages were banned under the EU Laying Hens Directive, but some countries acted under their own volition to make more far-reaching, and swifter, changes:

- Switzerland got rid of the conventional battery cage in 2002 and is considering banning the 'enriched' cage.[1]
- Germany banned conventional cages in 2007, and enriched cages from 2012.[2]
- Austria banned battery cages as of 2009, and is also planning to phase out the enriched cage by 2020.[3]
- Sweden phased out conventional cages between 2001 and 2005.[4]
- Belgium proposes to ban enriched cages by 2024.[5]

By the 1980s, campaigns against factory farming had taken root with an increased awareness of how much farming had changed. Food safety scares also gained national attention, most memorably the salmonella scandal. Health Minister Edwina Currie claimed: '*Most of the egg production in this country, sadly, is now infected with salmonella*',[6] a statement that led to her resignation in December 1988. In 2001, news leaked[7] that a Whitehall report written shortly after Ms Currie's resignation had indeed found '*a salmonella epidemic of considerable proportions*' – but it had been covered up. '*I was obliged to resign because the egg producers were threatening writs*,' said Ms Currie in 2001.[8]

Ms Currie's resignation and the deliberate covering up of the government report were early examples of the force of the egg industry.

By the '90s, the battery cage had made its way onto the political agenda. In 1996, the European Commission's Scientific Veterinary Committee stated: '*It is clear that because of its small size and its barrenness, the battery cage as used at present has inherent severe disadvantages for the welfare of hens.*'[9] In 1999, the Council of the European Union decreed that battery cages were so cruel that they should be banned across the EU. Council Directive 1999/74/EC required that, as of January 1st 2003, no new 'conventional' battery cages be installed, and that they be phased out completely by January 1st 2012 and replaced with larger, so-called 'enriched' cages.[10] Although the ban marked a significant victory in one respect, the proposed alternative was unsatisfactory in terms of animal welfare, and gave the egg industry a generous 13 years to change from one type of cage to another.

Gearing up for the first stage of the EU legislation to take effect, campaigners, and the public – who had become increasingly aware of the cruelty of cages – were presented with a glimmer of hope in 2002 that real, meaningful change could be achieved. '*The UK government has worked hard to push for barren battery cages to be banned and I welcome the directive and the new implementing regulations*,' announced Animal Welfare Minister, Elliot Morley, '*but I am not convinced enriched cages have any real advantages.*'[11] Calling a three-month public consultation on whether all cages should be banned, an opportunity opened up to submit evidence that it was hoped would end the imprisonment of hens.

Ever keen to protect its members' interests by putting profit before animal welfare, the NFU waged a campaign **against** an outright cage ban. It argued that it had met scientists, industry representatives and the RSPCA to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of different egg production systems, with no conclusive evidence having yet been produced on hen welfare. Its chief poultry adviser, Peter King, stated: '*What we find disappointing is that there is research going on at the moment, paid for by DEFRA, yet Mr Morley seems to be pressing for an immediate decision… It appears they want to base this consultation on emotion and not fact.*' The NFU went so far as to claim that a ban on enriched cages would '*devastate the [UK poultry] industry*'.[12]

At the end of the three-month consultation, during which evidence outlining the many welfare problems of the proposed new 'enriched' cage was submitted by the RSPCA, CIWF, the Green Party and others, hopes of an outright ban were dashed. Claiming insufficient grounds on which to base a decision, Mr Morley passed the buck and announced: '*I consider that a better approach would be to review the future of enriched cages on an EU basis, when the Directive is next considered by the EU Agriculture Council in 2005.*'[13]

Mr Morley was referring to Article 10 of the EU Directive, which had required the Commission to submit to the European Council, no later than January 1st 2005, a report covering the ethics of the various methods of egg production. This report would not actually be delivered until January 8th 2008- three years late- at which point no further recommendations were made over and above the original requirement that conventional battery cages be phased out.[14] Individual Member States were always allowed to pass stricter regulations themselves, of course, to 'gold plate' the Directive. This is something that Germany would go on to do, by bringing forward its ban on conventional cages to January 1st 2010, and banning the 'enriched' cage as of January 1st 2012.[15]

Tragically, unlike Germany, the UK did not make any moves to improve the welfare of its egg-laying flock over and above what the EU was requiring.

The NFU welcomed the decision to permit the continued use of cages, and welfare groups continued to campaign against it. In 2008, CIWF produced a report showing that Defra's analysis of the costs involved in banning cages outright was flawed and its figures inflated. CIWF noted that total production costs for barn eggs would be only 23p more per bird per year than for hens kept in enriched cages. If all 17.6 million battery hens were placed in barn systems stocked at 12 birds/m², the extra production costs per year spread across the industry would be just £4 million, the group concluded, not the £50 million claimed by Defra.[16] The report was ignored.

That same year, the RSPCA incurred the wrath of the NFU when it announced: '*Enriched cages are little better than the notorious battery cages. Little will change from the hens' point of view, so we are calling on the Government to ban all cages.*'[17] '*The RSPCA is being short-sighted and irresponsible in calling for enriched colony systems to be banned*', retaliated NFU chief poultry adviser Robert Newbery.[18]

The conventional battery cage

These typically held four to five hens, with each hen having 550cm² of space (less than the size of an A4 sheet of paper, which is 623cm²).[19]

The 'enriched' battery cage

The original enriched cages held ten hens, but most recent systems are 'colony' cages, holding 60-80 hens per cage. A shed with colony cages will typically confine a greater number of birds than conventional battery cage barns.[20] The new cages must provide at least 750cm² of cage area per hen. Of this, 600cm² must be 'usable area', the other 150cm² is for a nest-box.[21] Each hen still has less space than the size of this sheet of paper: the amount of extra space afforded each bird amounts to 50cm², which is less than the size of a beer mat. Almost all normal behaviours require significantly more usable space per bird. In fact, a hen simply resting takes up an average of 600cm², and she requires at least 750cm² to create any 'free space'.[22] Additionally, they need 2000cm² to flap their wings.[23] Clearly, inside the new cages, hens are still unable to move freely, and to fulfil their most basic needs, such as to stretch and flap their wings, dust-bathe and lay eggs without being stressed by the presence of other birds. This can result in suffering, frustration and poor welfare.[24] The nest box consists of a part of the cage separated by plastic flaps and the scratching area (for which there is no minimum size requirement) is typically a small piece of Astroturf. All 60 to 80 hens must compete for access to these small areas.

The term 'enriched' implies a level of comfort and welfare that is not in keeping with the reality of the system it describes. In 2007, the Farm Animal Welfare Council published an opinion piece on the new cage system, pointing out: '*The term "furnished cages" has been coined by some observers to describe cage systems providing additional space or other provisions, on the basis that some of the requirements more accurately furnish the cage, whilst it is a matter of opinion as to whether they actually enrich the cage for the hen's benefit.*' It also noted that the presence of furniture (e.g. a perch) may actually make it more difficult for hens to move around and rest comfortably.[25]

Churning out the old argument that cheaper battery eggs from countries with less stringent standards would flood the UK market, the NFU claimed that banning the enriched cage would be '*worse than useless*' if the same standards were not applied to imported eggs.[26]

On January 1st 2012, the conventional battery cage ban came into effect. Instead of more than 17 million hens being freed from cages, egg farmers simply moved them from one type of cage to another.

To the dismay of campaigners, a genuine opportunity to end one of the cruellest practices of modern factory farming had come and gone.

It is not entirely surprising that profit is the NFU's number one priority, given that its members are in the business of exploiting animals for financial gain. But by focusing on the argument that an all-cage ban would mean the UK egg industry could not compete with cheaper, more intensively produced eggs from outside of the EU, the NFU has held Britain back, whilst other countries, such as Germany, have taken a stride forward in farmed animal welfare.

Conclusion

Over the last 15 years, the production and purchase of eggs from caged hens has decreased whilst the free-range market has grown. In 2003, free-range eggs made up 31 per cent of the market.[27] Defra statistics for UK packing station throughput by type show that during the third quarter of 2013, intensive eggs accounted for 50 per cent, free-range eggs 44 per cent and barn and organic eggs combined accounted for five per cent of the total throughput.[28] In other words, eggs from non-caged hens (free range, barn and organic combined) now outsell those from caged hens. This is evidence that consumers are moving towards buying what they perceive to be 'cruelty-free'. An RSPCA poll in December 2011, however, found that one in five shoppers mistakenly assumed *all* cages would be banned under the 2012 battery cage ban,[29] which, in tandem with the coining of the term 'colony eggs', could perhaps foster the belief that the day of the battery cage is over. This, most certainly, is not the case.

A cage is a cage is a cage, whether 'conventional' or 'enriched' – and millions of hens continue to spend their lives in industrial prisons. What could have been a major improvement in the quality of life of the UK's egg-laying hens was reduced to little more than a token gesture.

Egg production inherently cruel

With 33 million laying hens, the UK is the sixth largest egg producer in the EU. Around half the UK flock is still kept in cages. The use of battery cages, whether conventional or colony, could be described as one of the most flagrant abuses of farmed animals. However, 'barn' and 'free-range' eggs are far from cruelty-free.

Free-range hens must have access to an outdoor range area, accessible from their barn. Openings may be only along one side. In large-scale free-range units, which can contain up to 16,000 hens, the birds at the back of the barn are unlikely ever to be able to pick their way through and get outside.

Eggs labelled 'barn' are laid by hens who are uncaged, but nonetheless confined to a cramped and crowded shed. Inside the barns, there is no natural daylight or fresh air, and the hens are unable to exercise fully their natural impulses to dust-bathe, peck at the ground and lay their eggs in privacy.

With the killing of millions of male chicks (deemed useless because they cannot lay eggs), de-beaking (to prevent birds pecking and cannibalising each other due to stress) and hens being killed at around 18 months of age being routine across all systems, commercial egg production involves suffering no matter what it says on the label.

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