

## The fox and the hens

Posted by Peter on 24 March 2009



Our hens - two Black Stars and a Bluebelle.

I like hens. When I was a child, my grandmother kept hens. When we visited her, we could help her feed the hens. We thought she had hundreds of hens, but actually I think she had 40 or 50. They lived in hen houses in her garden, and during the day they ran around in [hen runs](#). Every week, a man with a lorry stopped at her house to collect the eggs for sale.

A "hen" is, of course, a female bird. A male bird is called a cock, or a cockerel. His job is to look beautiful and make lots of noise. Just like a man, in fact. Very often, people say "chickens" when they mean hens, though strictly a chicken is a baby bird. Hen meat which you buy in a supermarket is always called "chicken". It sounds so much better than "hen meat"!

My grandmother, however, did not call her hens "hens". She talked about her "[fowl](#)". Fowl is an old word meaning birds which are kept or hunted for their meat or their eggs. Another word which you may hear is "[poultry](#)". Poultry just means birds kept for their meat or their eggs. A poultry farm is a farm where they keep large numbers of birds, sometimes in big sheds, or sometimes in tiny cages called "battery cages".

My wife and I have our very own poultry farm, only a few kilometers from the centre of Birmingham. Last summer, we bought three hens, a hen house and a little hen run. The hens grew big and fat, they wandered round our garden and they laid big, brown eggs. The hens were happy. We were happy.

Then disaster struck. A fox killed one of our hens, and then another one. We gave the last hen to some friends who also keep hens, because she was lonely by herself.

Last weekend, we went to a [poultry breeder](#) to buy three new hens. There is a photo of them on the website, and - I hope - on your iPod screens. Like my grandmother, the poultry breeder does not call them "hens". She describes them as "pullets", which means a hen which has not started to lay eggs yet. In fact, they are what the breeder calls "point-of-lay" pullets - that is, birds of about 16 weeks which will shortly start laying.

What are our new hens or pullets like? They are all [hybrid](#) hens, that is they are a mixture of different types or breeds of hen. Many hen-keepers like hybrid hens because they are strong and lay lots of eggs. Two of our hens are of a hybrid type called Black Star. The third hen is a Bluebelle. She is very [aristocratic](#). Like human aristocrats, she is big, beautiful and slightly stupid. Yesterday, we found our first egg. Well done, hens!

We shall have to keep our hens in their hen run for most of the time, and not let them wander in the garden, otherwise the fox will get them too. There are foxes in most British cities. Indeed there may be more town foxes today than country foxes. There is an old English sport called [fox hunting](#). Special dogs called fox-hounds find a fox, and chase it across the fields and through the woods, until they catch and kill it. The hounds are followed by people riding horses. There has been a lot of controversy in recent years about fox-hunting. [Some people](#) say that it is cruel to let fox-hounds chase and kill foxes. [Other people](#) say that it is important to reduce the number of foxes. There have been some changes in the law about fox hunting in the last few years, which [restrict](#) the sport but do not prohibit it.

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At one time, I thought that fox hunting was very cruel. Now I am a hen keeper again, I think that it should be legal to hunt foxes with tanks and machine guns if you want to.

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=459>.