

## COUNTRY SQUIRE MAGAZINE



**FARMING, FOOD**

### Nowt Wrong With £3.47 Chicken

**BY DR MILS HILLS**

I recently discovered that there is much controversy amongst some angry consumers about the existence of a raw whole chicken discounted by Tesco to the price of £3.47.

In fact, I had only just returned from shopping, placed a chicken into the slow-cooker (accompanied with merely some celery salt, olive oil and salt) when what should pop up on my Twitter timeline but a photo of the self-same chicken (or one of its siblings). This ‘serving suggestion’ was accompanied by much invective from an ‘investigative journalist’ who specialises in selling scaremongering books about the evils of food that is (wisely) processed to ensure its longevity, safety and palatability.

Predictably, such commentators make the allegation that these chickens (remarkably tasty, I have to say) have led short, miserable lives in a factory farming nightmare. Of course, all farms are factories, transforming soil, nutrients, pest control, water and sunlight into grains and pulses; or grass, hay, supplements, sunlight and water into meat. The perspective term ‘factory farming’ is such a lazy and deliberately destructive term – which actually denigrates rural enterprises which efficiently and profitably create safe and wholesome food at prices undreamt of just a generation or so ago.

That my £3.47 chicken did not live for years, was not outdoors, did not scratch around in the mud – but instead lived in conditions of high bio-security, in a carefully controlled environment, possibly without natural light, with thousands of other birds – does not mean that it was miserable.

Capturing what is ‘misery’ for a chicken is a difficult challenge. It is impossible to imagine what ‘being’ a chicken is like. Of course, as humans we would not want to live in that environment. But we wouldn’t want to peck around in a farmyard, dodging foxes, acquiring parasitic infections and carrying massive bacterial and viral load (including E Coli) either.

Criticisms are made that the sheds or barns that these mass-produced birds are reared in are not cleaned during their lives, that they suffer sore legs, die of heart attacks and so on isn’t entirely borne out by their fact that if this was true, there would not be enough of a profit margin left after these casualties were accounted for for farmers to make any money. There will inevitably be some animals in any rearing system which succumb to illness or unexplained death and no doubt across hundreds and thousands of poultry farms there may be the occasional welfare infringement, but there is no likelihood that this is widespread.

The £3.47 chicken is entirely safe, nutritious and good (the sole risk to health arises from how the consumer prepares and cooks it). But the corrosive and overblown criticism of how it was produced disguises a wider agenda that runs across much of the mainstream and extremist animal rights activist community. This agenda regards the consideration of animals as <strong>resources </strong>as inherently unethical. Whether it’s the elderly carnivore shot on an African reserve that generates thousands of times more income for the local community than eco-tourism; the red deer stag in the Highlands of Scotland culled to spare it a lethal winter wasting away unable to munch their food in a toothless mouth; the game shooting of wild or released birds or the mass-produced cheap chicken: activists employ a distinctively ethno-centric view of reality.

For just as these activists refuse to see that the production of a £3.47 healthy, safe and nutritious chicken – fully traceable along a supply-chain in terms of provenance, care and temperature control – is an ethical triumph of modern agricultural science and supermarket logistics: they will not baulk at making insurance claims for treatment for their companion animals (or fellow sentient beings) which cost thousands or even tens of thousands of pounds. Meanwhile, in South Sudan, Syria, Myanmar, Venezuela and many other places – human beings struggle to survive, face decades of injustice and suffering and, even closer to home, modern slaves potentially work in every post code district of the UK. Most of the planet’s human inhabitants lack access to even basic healthcare – yet many think it appropriate to have MRI scans, blood transfusions and other high-end treatments for their pooches. Where’s the ethical standard there?

Conventional, effective, efficient and safe methods of rearing animals (that necessarily view them as a resource to be husbanded in cost-sensitive ways) should not be criticised, but rather celebrated. We should ensure that animal resources are thoughtfully reared and transformed into meat or have eggs or milk harvested – and we should not lose sight of the fact that it is not unethical to have such an approach. As we drift towards the bizarre spectacle of opponents of processed food greedily embracing the notion of plant-based eggless mayo (the result of extraordinary amounts of food engineering and an unbelievably processed product) and meat grown in laboratory conditions – it seems to me that it is a good deal more ethical and natural to remember that the domestication and husbandry of livestock is something to be proud and not ashamed of.


Farmers and other producers have shaped our beautiful environments and continue to enable the rich diversity of flora, fauna and livelihoods that characterise our rural areas. Long may this continue.

*Dr Mils Hills is Associate Professor of Security at the University of Northampton. He has previously held posts in the Cabinet Office and Ministry of Defence leading efforts to build national resilience and to counter asymmetric threats. He welcomes debate @dr\_mils\_hills*


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