



# Jules Hudson

## COUNTRY ESCAPE

After a shakey start with the newest members of his brood, Jules is now a convert to the 'good life' joys of keeping hens – and not just for the eggs

**I**f I had 10 quid for everyone I met who longed for a life in the country with chickens at their feet, I could have gone on holiday last year for two weeks rather than one. Having chickens is one of those things that, for most of us, embodies the very essence of the good life. So why's it taken me so long to get some of my own?

The sad truth is that whilst I love a fresh egg or two in the morning, looking after a clutch of hens has always been a bit tricky whilst spending long periods away from home. But this year, having moved to Herefordshire, all that changed after a chance conversation with our lovely new neighbours. They'd be 'delighted' to babysit our brood should we get some, and we could all share in the eggs. This coincided with the news some friends were relocating from the South-east to Scotland and needed to re-house their two birds... So far, so good.

It was all meant to be. We even had the gift of an old hen house and so in the bitter chill of late January I collected Molly and Turtle from a service station on the M25, re-enacting a covert handover at Checkpoint Charlie, John Le Carré style. Our new girls made not a sound on the way, and readily made themselves at home that Sunday afternoon. Monday I awoke to the happy thought that we had new residents, and with Iolo at my heels I set off towards the orchard and the hen house. To my horror, and Iolo's incredulous delight, both Molly and Turtle had managed to escape the house and were casually exploring their new surroundings. I'd like to say that what happened next appeared to be in slow motion, but in truth it all occurred in a blur. Iolo, sensing that breakfast was now about to get much more exciting took off after the nearest hen, in this case Molly. In a state of panic, I followed suit, casting my toast and mug of tea into the hedge. During the time it would've taken to play the extended version of the Benny Hill soundtrack, I caught up with both Molly and Iolo, the latter having the former firmly between his jaws. How I got him to release her I still don't really know, but eventually a shaken hen and new owner returned to the coop, whilst an extremely grumpy Labrador was put on the naughty step in the kitchen. Phew! Two chickens rescued from the jaws of death, and we'd had them less than a day. Could this really be the good life?

I was beginning to rethink the whole enterprise when the phone rang. Would I like to be the celebrity student for a new

how-to DVD on keeping chickens? Astonished, I laughed out loud at this uncanny turn of events. Were these guys for real? Had they been watching? After I described the chaos, the team was convinced they had their man.

So it was, that just a few weeks ago I took the greatest pleasure in spending a couple of days with the legendary chicken expert Susie Baldwin down on her farm in Sussex. Brimming with passion, enthusiasm and knowledge gained over thirty years, I learnt more in 48 hours than I thought was possible, and it was an experience that changed the way I look at 'our girls'.

“ As for the eggs? They couldn't be fresher nor taste better...”

Once anonymous instruments there to provide eggs, they've now become part of the family, my parenting instincts heightened by those traumatic early hours in our care. They have a new run, now christened 'The Farm Park', complete with swings and CDs fluttering in the breeze to amuse them. These days they rush over to have a word whenever we pass by. As for the eggs? Having learnt most supermarket eggs are over a month old when sold, I've stopped writing the date on ours when they're laid. They couldn't be fresher nor taste better. Our chicks are now valued not just as creatures that produce food, but as personalities that give us much more in return. They've become friends even, it seems, to Iolo. There's no more barking, and no more chasing. With some resignation he now sits beside their run watching them quietly, no doubt reflecting on the one that got away. I'm sure they still whet his appetite, but there's a new found, grudging respect, because I think he now knows what we know; breakfast wouldn't be the same without them.

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the Countryfile team, but is best-known as the leading face of Escape To The Country. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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