

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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The **Meat Factory**: Progress halves chickens' lifespan - Intensively-reared broilers are now ready for slaughter after 42 days. James Erlichman meets a farmer distressed by the demands of his trade

BYLINE: By JAMES ERLICHMAN

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HE spoke with quiet dignity but his words were a lament. 'It distresses me. I would prefer to be seen as a craftsman, not as a commercial exploiter of animals, but I feel I am being turned from one to the other.'

Christopher Turton has raised chickens for dinner tables for 25 years. Many factory farmers are unwilling to open their sheds to inspection, some fearing the Animal Liberation Front may blow up their businesses. Mr Turton's qualms are of a different sort.

He pulls open the doors of his shed - it looks more like an aircraft hanger - to reveal 24,000 standard broiler chickens standing about. They are 19-days-old. They have nothing to perch on or peck at except the cereal-based feed that moves by on a conveyor belt, or their nearest neighbour. They will never see the light of day, but the humidity, temperature, and light in the shed are controlled to maximise their growth, and so far they are in no pain.

But in another 23 days they will have grown so fast and pack the place so densely that they will each have just a 10-inch square patch to stand in when the forklift arrives to take them to the abattoir.

Mr Turton owns this factory farm but does not control its conditions. He is a contractor for one of the giant poultry producers which he declines to name. This company supplies the chicks and feed, dictates how densely they will be stocked, and decides when they will be slaughtered.

Mr Turton came home with his wife from Kenya 25 years ago when the government compulsorily purchased his land to restore it to local tribes. The Turtons' 3,000 Kenyan acres bought 88 acres of Sussex clay, too small for the dairy herd they tried, so they switched to chicken rearing when factory farming was just beginning.

'When we started keeping broilers it took 84 days to rear them; now thanks to genetic and nutritional 'progress' they reach the same weight in 42 days, exactly half the time.

'This means that a 42-day-old skeletal frame is being forced to carry an 84-day weight. Many birds consequently suffer from leg, back, or heart failure.

'I am just a small cog in a big industry,' Mr Turton said. 'Today poultry management is dictated by the company accountant rather than the stockman, but the big companies are not so much villains, as victims of a system that dictates that only the economically ruthless shall survive.'

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The Farm Animal Welfare Council lays down voluntary guidelines, but Mr Turton says they are widely ignored.

He also complains that the chicks supplied are 'soft' - genetically designed only to grow fast, but with weak hearts and soft skin that suffers 'burn' because their feet cannot stand the wet mix of dung and wood shavings in which they stand. Even the supermarkets can't disguise the brown discolouring which climbs to the knees of a third of birds sold.

As a result mortality, once 2 per cent, now exceeds 5 per cent. 'I used to walk through and just pick up the dead birds, but now I have to carry a container.' The prematurely dead are sold to the the maggot angling bait industry.

On the 42nd day the company forklift comes to carry away the survivors, which by now present a nearly solid covering on the floor. The lights are dimmed. Chickens have poor eyesight and go dozy in the dark, and they can't see to run.

'A substantial number of dead birds are never found, and remain to rot under the carpet of living birds, detectable only by smell,' he said.

'So thick is the covering of birds that they are unable to move out of the path of the stockman as he shuffles slowly through them, accidentally treading on feet and causing physical damage as the birds struggle to release themselves.'

Mr Turton has agreed a stocking density with his company that is slightly more generous than the industry norm. He inspects both his 24,000-bird units at least three times a day, and gives his hens four hours a day of darkness, instead of the single hour of most of his competitors. 'I like to try to leave a bit of nature in it.'

Most birds are removed on the 42nd day, leaving room for the stragglers to recuperate and grow a bit before they are taken a week later, but these efforts, he accepts, are essentially gestures. Kindness doesn't come cheap. 'Unfortunately it is advantageous to stock above the recommended rates because the increased throughput more than compensates for increased mortality.'

Only legislation can improve welfare, Mr Turton said, and it must be pan-European. He wants existing welfare codes to become law, backed by a rigorous inspection system. A legal age/weight limit would stop breeders from designing new super strains that grow even faster. 'It would be far better to breed back some of the natural hardiness of the original farm stock.'

Tomorrow: Pigs, the perfect meat machines

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