

The Christmas Turkey

Report by Wendy Valentine

In 2000 Hillside highlighted turkeys existing in appalling conditions on an RSPCA 'monitored' Freedom Food farm in Norfolk.



On follow up visits (September 2003) to Hungry Hill farm in Northrepps belonging to turkey producer, Cherryridge Poultry Ltd, we found conditions there had deteriorated even more. Not only were many birds lingering around for days with horrific head and body injuries from severe head pecking, in some units the turkeys were also contending with a serious infestation of flies. We soon found the cause of this - pits full of dead turkeys left to rot in a heaving sea of maggots! Not only is this a serious health hazard for people living nearby (flies can travel up to two miles) it is illegal to leave dead animals not properly disposed of for more than 24 hours, and from the 1st May 2003 it is also illegal to bury them (which was being attempted on this farm in September 2003). We also filmed birds roosting on and around rat bait boxes full of poison which had been placed inside the sheds - another illegal practice!

I tried to alleviate some of the turkeys' suffering by offering them water, but many were already dying as their injuries prevented them from getting to the food and drinkers. Other birds were dragging themselves around on painful, swollen and very often deformed joints.

Those who were not so badly affected still had to endure the dirty,

stinking conditions, unavoidably breathing in the stifling stench of ammonia. In some sheds, millions of flies covered the roof, walls and excrement-covered floor, plaguing the birds, especially the sick and injured. Because we are so often faced with extreme suffering, we have sometimes put birds out of their misery in the most humane way we can at the time to save at least some further distress. One particular Sunday evening we filmed this farm's daily management charts to show that the birds had not been checked at all that day. Obviously a 'day of rest' for the staff at Cherryridge. Freedom Food's own code of practice states that the birds should be inspected at least three times daily.

Faced regularly with appalling situations like this, we are always in a real quandary as to whom we should report our findings. Despite legislation stating '*It is an offence to cause, or knowingly allow, livestock to suffer unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress whilst they are on agricultural land.*', there is no authority we can approach that will take any action other than an initial inspection which seems to us to be no more than a PR exercise. We do not even bother contacting Defra (previously MAFF) any more as after visiting offending sites in the past, they have *always* denied there is a problem even though our footage, which is supported by a Global Positioning System (GPS - proving the date, time and location), has *always* shown appalling suffering. In our experience, Trading Standards and the RSPCA (despite their propaganda) also have the same attitude towards the poor exploited farm animal and rarely prosecute even the most severe cases. From our experience over the last few years, there would be a case for a prosecution on over 95% of the country's farms. In our opinion, the aforementioned authorities are well aware of this and know that if they prosecuted one, they would have to bring them all to justice and so subsequently turn a blind eye to the enormous scale of suffering that's going on behind closed doors. Often in the past when we have reported such findings to the authorities, the farmer, most likely having been warned of a 'visit', may temporarily clean up his act, but when we have revisited the same site sometimes just two weeks later, we usually find that the same farmer has reverted to his usual shoddy practices of animal abuse.

One method we often find that has a slightly longer lasting effect on the offending farms, is to name and shame them in a national newspaper or on television.

In the case of the Cherryridge turkeys, we contacted TESCO who are supplied by this firm, and offered them the chance to witness for themselves, along with our own investigators, the true conditions under which they are purchasing their produce. They refused, and wanted to send in their own representative alone. Having seen Cherryridge farm visitors' books where Tesco buyers stay just 45 minutes to inspect several thousand birds on one site, we didn't have much faith in their response. We have always believed that when supermarkets check on their suppliers' farms, their visits are announced, and they are shown just what the farmers want them to see: 'show sheds' which have been cleaned and specially prepared for the occasion. This has been confirmed by ex-poultry workers who have contacted us to tell us exactly what goes on in the industry. Even in the case of the RSPCA's Freedom Food scheme 'annual' inspection, the following extract from a memo (Oct 2000) from a Cherryridge manager to his staff gives a clear picture of what's going on:

'We are going to be inspected by a Freedom Food assessor on Thursday 2nd November. Please ensure that all paperwork is in order. The brooder sheds are less likely to be a problem unlike the fattening sheds! So for Hungry Hill choose 2 sheds preferably with Xmas birds in and for Metfield choose 1 shed that has the least birds in.'

Cherryridge's records for the

Hungry Hill site show that the Freedom Food assessor stayed just one hour.

We reported Cherryridge Poultry Ltd to Norfolk Trading Standards, who inspected the site with a DEFRA vet, who responded with " We didn't find one single welfare issue."

If you would like to register your protest at the sad plight of Cherryridge turkeys to Tesco who claim, 'We will not make any misleading claims or inferences to our customers. We will continue to communicate honestly and clearly to them about the animal welfare standards under which our food is produced.' please write to demand that supermarkets take some responsibility to ensure that the suffering stops! Continued with pictures below . . .





Giving water to the suffering and dying, being in the presence of these helpless birds, always brings home to me the grim reality of the plight of millions of others in Britain's heartless farming industry.

We took this bird - just one of Cherryridge's neglected turkeys to obtain a vet's opinion. To save further suffering he immediately put it to sleep and reported...



"This is to certify that on 12th September 2003 I examined a white turkey brought to me by Hillside Animal Sanctuary. It appeared unkempt with scabs to the top of its head and neck and it carried its left leg and was unable to move around freely. The leg appeared to be malformed but not dislocated. The bird was euthanased on welfare grounds."



Unable to walk, this turkey is dragging itself along by its wings



Many turkeys have swollen joints. At slaughter these heavy birds are hung upside down by painful legs before reaching the stunner.



Many crippled and deformed birds struggle to get to food and water

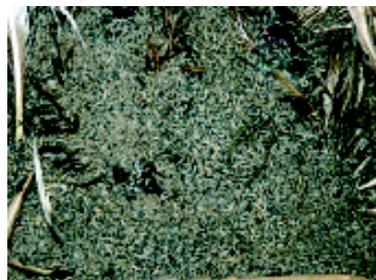


'THE CHRISTMAS TURKEY' video showing exactly what we found on this farm. Perhaps you could show your friends or even make an appointment to show your local TESCO manager for his comments. It is only because people buy these products and cause a demand, that there is so much animal suffering to produce the supply!



This turkey (pictured while still alive top left) lay down and died next to a rat bait box

We found scores of mal-treated turkeys left suffering and often blind due to severe head pecking, to linger on until they died.



We found pits full of illegally dumped turkey carcasses left to rot in a heaving sea of maggots!

Wendy with pet turkeys Pacco and Rosie, showing quite a different picture of health!



If you would like to help fund our **Animal Investigation Appeal** please visit our **Donation Page**