

CHICKEN-KEEPING

...with the FT

DEBORAH DEVONSHIRE

The Dowager Duchess of Devonshire has loved hens since she was a young 'Mitford girl'. She introduced flocks at Chatsworth, where they still do brisk egg business today. *By Hester Lacey*

The fashion designer Oscar de la Renta was a regular summer visitor to Chatsworth in the 1990s, and the Duchess of Devonshire, chatelaine of the great country house in Derbyshire, felt that the flower arrangements for the dining table were becoming a little predictable. "[He] always came at the same time of year, so it was always the same flowers," she explains. A lifelong lover of chickens, she pressed some of her favourites into service. A Buff Cochin cockerel of steady temperament, specially washed for the occasion, took his place in a rectangular glass container at one end of the table, with a pair of his consorts in a similar container at the other.

Rather than roses, the table featured eggs. "We put the eggs in a pair of beautiful wine coolers made by the silversmith Paul Storr, which could have been made for them," recalls the duchess. The pièce de résistance consisted of newly hatched chicks, snuggled into little china baskets, with hay to keep them warm. "They were only a day old, which was very handy, as they knew no different and thought it was all perfectly normal." The guests were apparently charmed by these surprising additions to the table. "The hens were so beautiful," says the duchess. "Oscar de la Renta entirely understands hens."

If anyone entirely understands hens, it is more likely to be the duchess herself. Her passion for poultry began when she was a small child and has

now lasted well over 80 years. Deborah Devonshire, who will be 91 on March 31, is the youngest of the famously (and sometimes infamously) unconventional Mitford sisters, Nancy, Pamela, Diana, Unity and Jessica. At the age of 21 she married Andrew Cavendish, who succeeded as the 11th Duke of Devonshire and inherited Chatsworth in 1950.

The duchess introduced an extensive flock of chickens at Chatsworth to supply the Chatsworth farm shop. They became so tame that, on one occasion, 20 of them stowed away on a visiting school bus. (This story did not end happily as the chickens, evicted from the bus, met a fox on the way home.) The hens that she keeps today at her home in a former vicarage on the Chatsworth estate enjoy a more secure existence. They are protected by a high stone wall, unscalable by even the most athletic fox, and wire netting fencing dug 18in into the ground.

Her 12 frisky brown and buff crossbreeds have little idea how lucky they are; they could otherwise have ended up in a battery shed. "That existence is a complete hellhole for them and they are far better free range," says the duchess firmly, as the hens scratch around her feet – shod in neat black ankle boots, her only sartorial concession to the mud.

She points out the head hen, a bustling creature with a pale beige tail. "That one is the self-appointed chairman, she's always first at the trough. There's no such thing as equality for hens; whoever invented the phrase 'pecking ▶

The duchess with her brown and buff crossbreeds: 'They've got real character'





As a girl, the duchess sold her hens' eggs to her mother: 'It was entirely commercial'

◀ order' was very clever. I do really love them, they've got real character and are so tame." They flee, however, from my attempts to coax them close enough to be picked up. Chickens, as the duchess points out, can be funny with people they don't know. As one comes within range, tempted by a handful of corn, she swiftly and expertly scoops it up and tucks it under her arm. "I've known them almost since they were chicks; they came to me at point of lay."

As well as the crossbreeds, the duchess keeps eight sleek, deep-brown Welsummers in a separate pen, where spring daffodils are starting to bloom. "They look like French ladies with their lovely feathers, but they are very scatty and the stupidest hens I've ever had," she observes. She is not the only local Welsummer fancier: "The parson also has them; he always wins at the shows and I am lucky to scrape second place."

Keeping chickens in smart, plastic designer apartments has become something of a trend in recent years, but these birds live happily in old-fashioned wooden sheds. Stout fencing keeps them in their extensive runs, so they cannot wreak havoc in the neighbouring asparagus beds and fruit cages.

Looking after chickens, says the duchess, is "quite a little task in the end. They love attention, you must keep their water fresh, and I now have one or two staunch good fellows who help me; I can't lift a lot of stuff these days." Chickens also appreciate variety in their diet. "They get very bored with pellets. They like proper greens, a cabbage hung up so they can jump for it, but they hate melon and they hate carrot – they turn up their noses at both."

The duchess's home is also full of hens – china, carved, cast in metal and even woven into the hearth rug. She first kept chickens at about the age of six. "It was entirely commercial, I did it for

Five Honnish hens

THE LEGHORN

A favourite of the Duchess of Devonshire. "Leghorns lay pure white eggs, which are loved by Americans, though I like dark brown ones – they look like chocolate."

THE SUSSEX

A popular breed, and another favourite. "I like the steady old British breeds, nothing earth-shaking."

THE APPENZELLER SPITZHAUBEN

The duchess believes she may have been the first importer of this Swiss variety; she smuggled in eggs in the 1970s after visiting her sister Pamela in Switzerland.

THE SEBRIGHT

This flamboyant bird looks as though it is in fancy dress, according to the duchess.

THE HUMBLE CROSSBREED

"They keep laying and laying, and they have real personality. There is something charming about them."

'Chickens get very bored with pellets. They like proper greens – a cabbage hung up so they can jump for it'

money – children love to earn pocket money and think they're doing something wonderful. My mother used to provide the food for them and I sold her the eggs. It was a bargain for me and she was quite sporting about it."

Deborah and Jessica Mitford were particularly close as children and invented their own language, Honnish. In Honnish, "hon" meant "hen", and Deborah and Jessica referred to each other as "hen" throughout their lives, though Jessica, in fact, was less keen on the real thing than Deborah. "She preferred sitting in front of the fire with a book. She didn't like animals apart from Tray, her dog, and she also adored Miranda, her lamb, who would push the drawing room door open."

Jessica also had a ring dove, purchased at Harrods, which became very tame. "She would cycle to the village shop with the dove flying around her head, like the holy spirit."

Other visitors to Chatsworth who have appreciated the chickens are the photographer Mario Testino ("he loves them") and the sculptor Elisabeth Frink, who kept chickens of her own. Her cockerel Reggie fell ill and had to be taken to the vet. "I loved the idea of this very distinguished lady in the waiting room with a cockerel on her lap, though he probably ended up in the pot – there isn't much you can do for chickens at the vet."

When the duchess sees me to the front door, where a larger-than-life Frink dog sits permanently on guard, she fixes me with her brilliantly blue gaze. Despite a chilly morning spent in the hen coops, her concern is for the birds. "I really do hope that what I've come up with today is worthy of the hens," she says. **FT**

Deborah Devonshire's memoirs, "Wait For Me!", are published by John Murray