



JANE BOWN

ge hens. 'They are my friends,' he says.

ens are profitable hens

in a cage with four or five others. To prevent cannibalism they are often debeaked.

They have nothing to do except lay eggs on the bare wire floor and poke their heads through the bars for food and water. By the end of their short life they are frequently bald, from the rubbing of the bars against their neck and breast feathers, and are fit only for chicken pie factories.

Mr Pitts's hens are plump, glossy, inquisitive and sweet smelling. They are free to wander anywhere in the hen-house, which is divided into straw-covered floor space and overhead perches, and in the runs outside. They lay their eggs in nesting boxes placed at corresponding heights to their perches and are fed by automatic feeder with whole grain food five times a day.

In the eyes of the conventional farming community, Mr Pitts, who farms 400 acres near Marlborough, Wiltshire, has achieved the impossible. Put those numbers of hens together, walking about and pecking in their own droppings, he was told, and you'll lose them all through disease and cannibalism. Perch them in tiered perches and they defecate on each other.

Although the prophets of gloom were proved wrong, Mr Pitts is convinced, despite the good intentions of the members of the Commons Agricultural Committee, that his method will never become the standard way of producing eggs for the mass market.

'In the first place the eggs work out too expensive. Secondly it involves too much work for the average modern egg producer.'

Eggs from Levets Farm retail in the shops for between £1 and £1.20 a dozen depending on the shop's own mark-up system. It is largely this price that determines the condition the hens enjoy.

'These henhouses are expensive because the hens are mollycoddled. We have dozens of little bathroom strip lights, instead of one

lighting is better for them.

'We take out space with 10 extra hens could go to have a viewing platform. I don't like ever to be more than 10ft from any of my birds.

'The way I keep hens makes it a 16-hour day. We believe in automation, yes. The hens are fed automatically, the eggs collected automatically. But we see automation as an aid to good stockmanship, not a substitute for it.