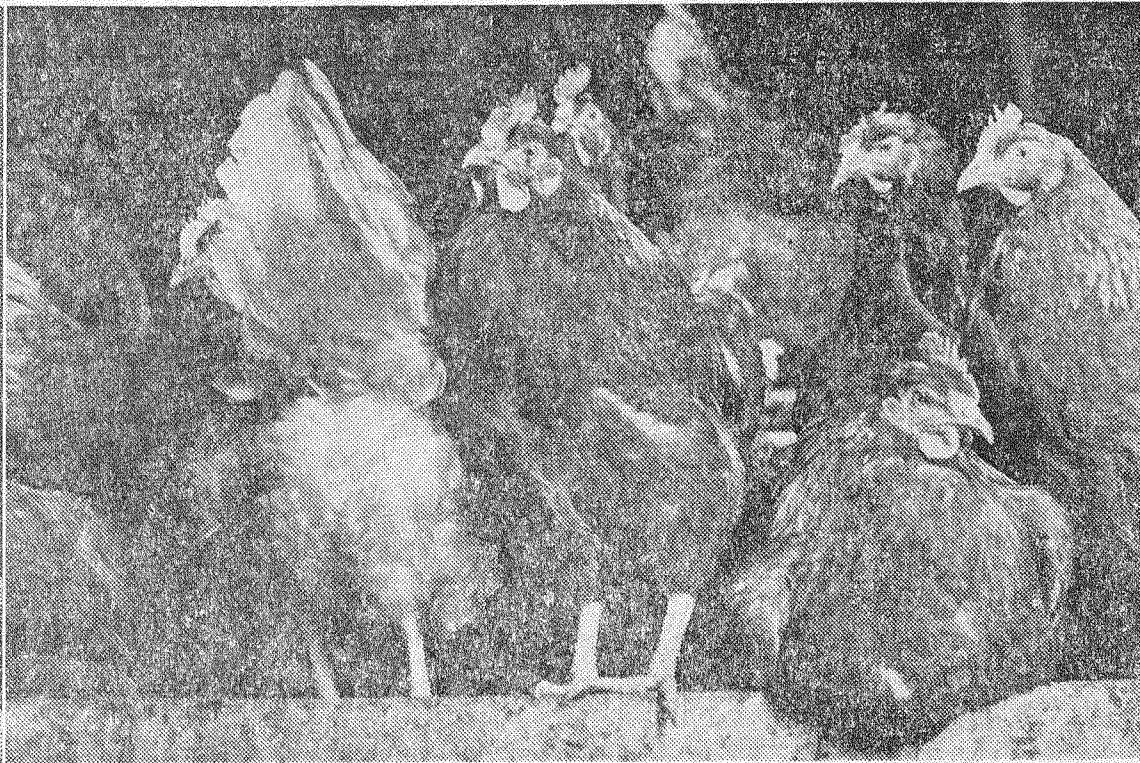
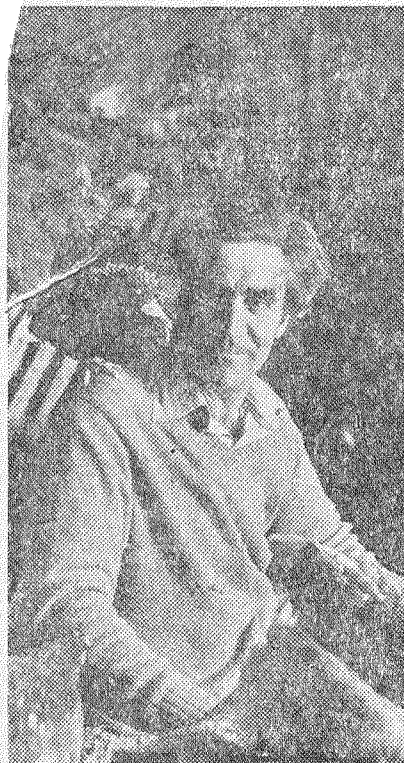




Farmer Martin Pitts and his healthy free-range hens. 'They are my friends,' he says.

When happy hens are profitable hen

by NICOLA TYRER

A GLOSSY brown hen, perched nonchalantly on to Martin Pitts's shoulder, began to preen herself. He smiled and patted her.

'These hens are my friends. And that's the way I want to keep it. If there was any bird in here with something wrong with it I would notice and I would be able to catch her and examine her.'

It could be any small farmer, faithful to old-fashioned methods, talking. Martin Pitts is neither. The henhouse we were standing in contained 1,800 birds and though the hens lay their eggs in traditional nesting boxes, those eggs are collected by a machine which costs £1,000.

A Government report published last Thursday recommended the phasing out of the battery cage system of egg production and the

development of more humane alternatives.

Mr Pitts has spent the past five years developing just such an alternative. Far and away the biggest producer of free-range eggs in the country, his hens lay 500 dozen a day, many of which end up, not only in health food shops, but in the copper frying pans of our most esteemed chefs, who favour them for their freshness and whipping qualities.

He is also the only person in Britain—possibly even in Europe—producing eggs on this scale without relying on battery cages.

His method of egg production is known as the aviary system and his hens are very different creatures from their timorous battery-reared cousins. Battery hens live only 18 months and spend almost all that time

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 henhouse, 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 Levett's tail in the shops for £1 and £1.20 a dozen, on the shop's own system. It is largely that determines the the hens enjoy.

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

lighting is better for. 'We take out space extra hens could go a viewing platform like ever to be m 10+ from any of r

'The way I keep makes it a 16-hour believe in automation. The hens are fed matically, the eggs automatically. But automation as an ai stockmanship, not stitute for it.