Dr Alison Caffyn: “Chicken farm… or factory?”

Author : Molly Allen

Date : 23 February, 2025

I have had to address this question twice in the last week. Both times I was chatting with people from conservation charities in Shropshire about the environmental impacts of intensive poultry operations locally. Both times the individual expressed sympathy with chicken farmers – along these lines: “It’s been so difficult for family farms in the last few years; what with low farm gate prices, huge shifts in support mechanisms and challenging climate changes. One has to symphathise if they feel their only option is to put up a chicken shed or two.” Each time I have tried to rebalance their perceptions of a typical ‘chicken farm’ in this area.

Firstly, it is true, there are some operations which fit the above description, particularly on and over the Welsh border. Small, one shed, free range egg units with, commonly, 16,000 birds operating in upland landscapes, diversifying from unprofitable sheep or cattle businesses. There are even some older chicken operations producing a few thousand organic and free range birds for the local market – but these are few and far between. The vast majority of intensive poultry units have capacity for 30-90,000 hens or many hundreds of thousands of broiler (meat) chickens.

When I interviewed farmers and land agents in Shropshire and Herefordshire for my research we

discussed farmers' motivations for going into poultry. I even developed a typology. The five 'types' included the 'desperation factor' described above. But there were also: older, large, well-established broiler operations – some dating back to the start of the industry in the 1960s and some still owned by the chicken processing company (Cargill). There were many large farms which diversified into poultry in order to support other farm enterprises. There were several large estates developing poultry as a new venture (for tenants) and finally, a few cases where investors had made speculative land purchases in order to set up a new poultry operation.

Some older sites have been expanded in stages over the decades with some IPUs now having 10-16 'sheds' and up to a million birds. I was told the average return on investment (of about £500,000 per shed at the time) was ten years. Sooner, if the site installed biomass boilers and the like to receive generous Renewable Heat Incentive payments. Some IPUs were making substantial annual profits.

I've done a bit of number crunching to check my facts. The average size of all 150 odd IPUs in Shropshire is 131,000 birds. Broiler units are larger on average, housing around 200,000 birds per four sheds. Egg units are generally smaller averaging 83,000 hens – but that includes both several units with only around 4,000 birds and one large egg operation with nearly 2 million.

I have walked close to or through many IPUs in Shropshire and Herefordshire and spent more hours than I care to admit poring over satellite imagery of all the others. Most don't look or sound or feel or smell like a farm. The brooding 100m long sheds, the acres of concrete, sickly reek and eerie stillness are not what you would expect on most farms. The operation is overseen on the site manager's laptop or phone. There is a periodic rattle of feed being pumped along automatic feeding tubes. There will be someone who walks through each shed once a day to pick up the dead birds. Until, after six weeks, the lorries arrive to take the birds away to the processing factory.

You get the picture. And that picture is more factory than farm. An agricultural factory, in a rural location. But not a farm. And, indeed, many farmers say exactly this themselves.

We need to take this growing diversity of agricultural operations into account when addressing the impacts of the industry. No one want to accuse all farmers of environmental harm. Many are doing amazing, progressive things to transition towards more sustainable farming systems. Only a small percentage of farms locally have intensive livestock operations, but their environmental impacts far outweigh those that do not. But out of date perceptions and misplaced sympathy are not helpful – although they are often promoted by farming lobbyists.

Dr Alison Caffyn – River Action Advisory Board member