

THE CHICKS HAVE HATCHED!

Last month, you may have seen the article and photo of a bantam egg being candled at day four of incubation and the promise of photos of the chicks if they safely arrived. Well here they are!



Armitage (Cuckoo Pekin) – first to hatch



Speckle (Buff Pekin x Black Bantam)



Lavender (Chamois Poland)



Freckle (Silver Partridge Pekin)



Bambi – last to hatch with some help (Lavender Pekin)

On the morning of Friday 5th June, the eggs began to pip (the chicks tap a little hole to let air into their air sack in the egg). Then at 11pm, only an hour before Rosie's birthday on 6th, the first little one hatched and we were so blessed to be able to witness its safe and rather forceful arrival into the world. We also captured the event on a video (just over a minute) which you can see on this link: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/eXpU2iAESUFbVGTn7> The first chick to hatch was Armitage, a Cuckoo Pekin (in the video). Overnight another emerged and Rosie sneaked down on her birthday morning to witness another hatching at 5am. Her birthday was a wet day but she was more than entertained with the arrival of the six fluffy bantams.

Perhaps the most amazing part of the process is what happens in the final hours during hatching. The blood in the inner membrane of the egg can still be circulating after the chick has pipped and the egg yolk sack may not have fully entered the chick's abdomen. This happens during the very last hours to give the chick enough oxygen during hatching and food to survive up to three days post hatch before its first meal. This is where the art of assisted hatching can mean the difference between helping the chick if it is failing to hatch and killing it.

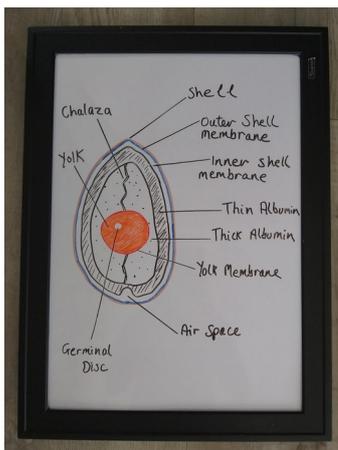
We faced this dilemma with the last egg which Rosie was especially keen to hatch being the only Lavender Pekin egg that had reached the final stage. At 10am this chick was still stuck at the unzipping phase (the part where having made a pipping hole, the chick continues to break around the circumference of the egg). After much indecision we decided I should try and help, however there was a tiny bleed when I pulled at the inner membrane. We put it back in the incubator, moistening the egg to prevent the membranes drying out, and realised this was a sign that the yolk had not been fully absorbed and we should wait. Eight hours later with no external progress, there was clearly a problem, so I tried again. This time to our relief, no blood came and I was able to unzip the best part of the shell to enable the poor little chick give the final push and release itself. It was very weak and its neck had been in an awkward position. We believe it would have failed without help. We were unsure whether it would survive, so left it to recover in the incubator overnight and thankfully by the morning it was cheeping loudly and able to join the others under the heat lamp.

Out of 13 original eggs in the incubator, we had six live chicks still thriving, one which failed around day four and another that failed at the pipping stage, the other five were infertile eggs. They certainly have kept us busy during lockdown, not to mention the hours spent building an ark for them in the garden.

At the end of July they will move to Silchester to live with my parents. They have imprinted on us and are just learning to fly up onto the side of their box. This evening one of the cheeky Chamois Polands leapt onto me and perched on my shoulder. Rosie was delighted; no doubt her memories of hatching chicks during lockdown will stay with her for many years to come... perhaps she may one day do the same with her children... although I'm not sure the same Ecostat incubator will survive another 26 years!!



Clover and Rosie



Lockdown home schooling lesson about egg structure during incubation.

As part of the lesson we compared a battery hen's egg (unfortunate substitute by Tesco that we failed to spot) with a free range egg. The differences were staggering. The battery egg being very watery, with a fragile shell, no distinct separate thick albumin and a very pale and thin yolk and membrane. We cooked them and did a blind tasting test. All four of us identified the difference and this led to a conversation about the effects of a poor diet and lifestyle, and how this affects us detrimentally shown clearly in the poor battery hen's egg.

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