

*Excerpt from Living The Good Life – Revamped, How One Family Changed Their World From Their Own Backyard – the bit about Chooks (Australian for chickens)*

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Around the time Caleb started to walk we bought four Seabright bantams. We chose bantams solely because they were cute. The cuties grew and became masters at scratching up or burying seedlings and removing mulch from around trees. Their chosen roost was the front door step and, if the door was left open, they liked to scuttle around inside and peck at Caleb's dropped food.

One ended up claiming a space behind a chest of drawers. We didn't discover this until 10 days and 10 eggs later. She'd saunter in every morning, disappear into the bedroom, reappear not long after, watch us while we scuttled around trying to clean up our own nest, and leave.

None were ever named, but were all referred to affectionately as 'chookie.' We felt they were well integrated into the family and were all on good terms, until two of them grew spurs, combs, wattles and an arrogant swagger.

We resisted building a permanent chook house, preferring to round them up in the evening and move them into a no-fox box. But gradually this became an activity based on terror. The dominant bantam (let's call him Dead) began to chase me more than I chased him. I didn't dare turn my back on him or risk him raking his spurs down my calves. I became good at walking backwards.

Trev encouraged me to get the upper hand with Dead, to show him who's boss, so I retaliated a few times, which really only upped the violence and his ferocity.

Once, while changing their water, Dead attacked. I dropped the water tray on top of him, and admit to grinding it in a little. He emerged, fell over a couple of times, shook his head in confusion, and staggered around for a few minutes. He was back to calf raking minutes later.

It got so bad I was frightened to go into the garden. I didn't know where my cute little feathered friend had borrowed his attitude from, but I wanted him to give it back. I developed a phobia, alek-torphobia, a fear of chickens.

One day Dead signed his own death certificate. Caleb and I were sitting in the sun, I was reading, he was playing in the dirt. The mob came around the corner, Dead in the lead. He sidled up, a worm-eating, menacing mafia boss. I tried to meet his eye; he ignored me. He seemed intent on removing invisible-to-the-eye seeds from a few feet away. Caleb remained oblivious to his approach, cramming dirt into the back of a toy dump truck. I was wary, I knew this chook, he was 20cm of hell on legs. He

managed to look bored, preoccupied; I wasn't convinced, but before I could react he made an agile leap at Caleb's face and scored a line from the inside of his eye to his chin.

That afternoon there was a solemn ceremony at the now jailed bird's pen. Dead, an axe and a nice solid block of wood. Me, the vengeful onlooker, and Trev, who promptly removed the little bastard's head and tied his legs to a nearby eucalypt, where he dripped and twisted for minutes more while the horrified chooks watched on.

I stood on the steps and crowed, 'Let that be a warning to you, you shalt not touch my child and live!'

The second rooster (shall we call him Gone?), had seemed comparatively mild, but rapidly took over Dead's role and came to just as rapid an end. I was away at the time. I received a call from Trev, who sighed heavily as he told me, 'Gone is Dead' which does sound confusing I'll admit.

'How? What happened?'

'He got out of the chook pen at 4am this morning and sat under the bedroom window and crowed non-stop, till I stopped him – with the axe.'

Trev then cooked and ate him. I don't miss them. I'm glad Dead and Gone are exactly that.

We bought a pair of Araucana hens, but it didn't take one of them long to grow spurs, a comb, wattle and a good imitation of a crow. He was big, glossy black-green, and quiet as a lamb; he's with us still.

The original chook pen Trev built didn't move. As I became more involved with permaculture I saw it as a problem. At irregular intervals we were climbing in, digging out the high-nitrogen soil and carting it around the garden beds. All that hard work really wasn't the done thing. We needed a moveable chook pen, one that wasn't an eyesore. Which meant the chooks could eat insect pests, weed, seed, dig and poo onsite, even lay eggs if they were up to it. Intrepid Trev tackled the job with vigour and we now have a 2.5 x 2.5-metre almost-moveable chook pen – we've shifted it ourselves on several occasions. On one I managed to get myself pinned underneath and the other time Trev put his back out. So it became a waiting game: wait till we have visitors. Before offering them tea or coffee suggest a quick trip down to the chook pen for the communal lift – any children present enjoy shoeing chooks back in. Caleb has required a further explanation of 'shoeing,' our version was spelt differently.

We aren't particularly sociable people; we're happy to call ourselves hermits. Sometimes the wait between moving jobs was getting too long. So I tackled the job of Mark II. It cost \$75 to make, a fraction of Mark I. Trev welded and we covered it in chook wire and a plastic tarp. It was light – I could almost lift it with one finger – which is why a neighbour rang me a while back to ask me if I knew where my chook pen was. – Nonplussed, I looked out the window at the now-vacant spot where it should've been.

'It's on the road,' he explained.

Cordless phone in hand, I went to investigate and it was. It had flown 20 metres, which puts a new slant on flying the coop. Modern-day aeronautical engineers might find the design of interest, but its days as a chook pen were over. It was cannibalised for all things reusable. So all my gloating over creating a 'moveable' versus 'almost moveable' chook pen came to naught.

Trev came to an ingenious rescue and made the chook pen roof removable. With the reduced weight we could manoeuvre it around the block without personal damage.

But the chook pen trials were far from over. It took him four years to do it, but finally the fox found a way into the previously secure chook pen. It was 3am and I woke to a kerfuffle which is not uncommon as we have an early layer and they all like to make a fuss about giving birth on a daily basis. But this went on too long and involved more than one kerfuffler. Torch in hand, I ran down in time to catch a fox in the act of removing himself from the hole he'd dug under the pen. Only 10 metres apart, we stared at each other, he was long, red and malevolent. He took off and I watched him disappear down the culvert. In the chook pen were five pairs of chooky legs pointing at the sky – he'd killed them all in a frenzy without feast.

Only two remained: the Araucana hen and rooster. I've never seen two more traumatised chooks. Neither of them were injured, but both went into serious decline. We removed the dead and shifted the pen away from the scene of the crime. The next night we realised we couldn't leave them in the pen, the fox had figured out how to get in. We did something I'll always regret – we transferred them to the top immovable pen, which housed half a dozen brown Lohmann hens. Feathers went flying as the pecking order process began. The rooster seemed completely out of it; he retired to the back of the pen where he literally stuck his head under a rock. We pulled him out a couple of times but he crawled straight back under. The Araucana hen was being chased relentlessly and, although I sympathised, it seemed a better fate than fox sport. The Lohmanns had always been hens with attitude; they considered me a part of their pecking order and were keen to work things out on my toes. I assumed it would sort itself out. The next morning I left for work before 6am and Trev not long after. I stayed away overnight, Trev didn't get home till after dark, and left before dawn. I arrived home in the afternoon and went straight down to see how the survivors had fared. The rooster still had his head under the rock and the hen was crouched beside him, a 10-centimetre-square area bared almost to the bone – I could see her parson's nose. The culprits, six brown Lohmanns with a taste for blood, were in the process of eating her alive.

The evil, egg-layers were unceremoniously swung from the pen. I ruffled feathers and swore at them, calling them lurid names, most beginning with 'f.' I found it hard to believe members of the same species could do that to each other, then had to admit, as a human, I didn't have a great deal of standing room on my disgust.

I devised a great revenge. The rooster and hen were put into their own pen until they healed and had regained confidence, then I reintroduced the Lohmann hens, one at a time. We sat and watched with

pleasure as the first Lohmann was chased around the pen, chastised and demoted to the bottom of the pecking order. Once she was sufficiently demoralised, another was added to the mix, until they were all together and my wee Araucanas reigned supreme.

Two chooks are dedicated goat penners, there to keep the flies down. Natural biological control, plus a bit of company for Possum. They also make best use of the grain and food she doesn't eat. We often see them roosting on her back, between her horns, or sharing the same feed trough. Occasionally we have to remove the evidence of their roosting from her sides.

Three, including the rooster, live in the first-built immovable pen with luxury ensuite and laying boxes. Two of the newest and yet to lay chooks have been relocated to the 'paddock' – the area currently struggling to grow lablab.

Five live in the almost moveable pen, which has been adapted so a door can be secured each night. It's the job of whomever is most prepared to go down in the dark and shut it each night. It's usually me, though I have a repertoire of excuses, from feigned sleep; exhaustion (never feigned); I can't find my shoes (usually true); to 'Hell, I've undressed, I'm in bed, I've just remembered. Oh, it's OK, you're still clothed,' followed by an appreciative smile, pulling a swifty.

Altogether we have nine egg layers and our now one-eyed rooster, who lost it either to the evil ones or the fox.

We've tried feeding them all sorts of things. Apart from the staple of table scraps, they've tried the by-product of tofu, Okara – after 1 kilo of it, one of them laid an egg so large I rushed around to see if she'd survived the process. Snails, which were eventually ignored, lots of delicious maggots (mostly fruit fly) and clabbered milk, a traditional chook food made from unpasteurised milk left a day or so to sour (pasteurised milk spoils). They're also fed with whey, which is a high-protein by-product of cheese-making. Lately we've had a lot of big brown grasshoppers, it's a team effort to catch them. I spot, Trev catches, though I'm getting good with the secateurs. We then throw them in the chook pens where pandemonium breaks loose as chooks grapple – a great spectator sport and source of protein. One thing the chooks and goats have taught me is an appreciation of protein.

We don't eat our chooks as a rule, and it's just as much of an environmental as a sentimental decision. I'm sure they appreciate it too. I've let Trev know I'll do my best to raise meat chooks, but he will have to be the one to kill them. He's not happy with meat chooks, it's cruel to breed them so large. We've heard their bones break under their own weight, and most of their body weight is fat. If necessary, he'll chop the heads off young roosters. The older Trev gets, the less inclined he is towards such slaughter. He decided he'd rather go vegetarian, although he considers kangaroo, an unfarmed and native animal growing in large numbers, 'fair game.' I wonder how many more vegetarians there'd be in the world if we had to kill and butcher a pig before we had bacon with our breakfast, or personally kill and prepare the 92 sheep, 17 beef cattle, 15 pigs, 1171 chickens and in-numerable fish the average Australian eats in their lifetime.

The ABS estimates that in 2000–2001 around 400 million (now 600 million) birds were raised and killed at between six to eight weeks of age for human consumption in Australia. The consumption of chicken has increased by 38% in the last ten years (*100% in the past 24*) – the average Aussie eats 23.7kg (*now 47kg*) of chicken a year. *Chicken is the most consumed form of protein in Australia.*

Eggs are a useful commodity for barter. Currently, we're getting half a dozen a day – nice, large, brown organic eggs.

Caleb refused his baked beans for dinner, they had a different texture than he expected, as they were from our soybeans and tomato sauce. The gag reflex stepped in and the masticated results lay on the table as verification of its inedibility. Trev relented and poached him an egg in a star-shaped cookie cutter.