



## The National Egg Collection for Wounded Soldiers and Sailors 1914-1918

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The National Egg Collection was launched in November 1914 following proposals put forward by Frederick Carl, the editor of *Poultry World*. The aim initially was to provide 20,000 newly-laid eggs a week to the wounded in hospital in Boulogne. However, very soon the organisation began to aim even higher, endeavouring to collect or purchase 200,000 eggs a week: a target that was reached at Easter 1915. In the following August, partly to celebrate the fact that Queen Alexandra had become the patron of the scheme, the War Office decided to see if the number could be increased to one million eggs a week. 1,030,380 eggs were received during the week 16-23 August, not including those sent directly to local hospitals, a practice which *Poultry World* discouraged. Special boxes and labels were supplied (there were over 2000 depots run by local groups and churches) and free transport was provided by the railways. A central collection point was established in London in a warehouse initially provided free of charge by Harrods.

The National Egg Collection was one of a range of initiatives appealing to all classes and to all ages but especially to children. A variety of posters were issued, one depicting a hen wearing a red sash, a sort of honorary soldier 'enlisted for duration of the war?', thus echoing the sentiment expressed by *Poultry World* that 'every British hen should be on active service'.

Postcards, too, were produced, one of appeal to children showing a little chick looking up at her mother and saying: 'Ma! Teach me how to lay an Egg ' I want to do my bit for the wounded!' The famous graphic artist, Donald McGill, produced a card aimed at a more mature audience. Egg services were being held in a number of churches and McGill's card depicted a clergyman pronouncing from the pulpit: 'It would greatly assist the collectors of eggs for the wounded soldiers if, upon coming to Church, each lady would lay an egg in the Font!'

Cardboard or silk lapel pins and badges were sold on flag days and advertisements employing a mixture of patriotic idealism and emotional blackmail placed in the newspapers. 'Do your duty by the wounded men. You cannot eat eggs and feel that the wounded are going without.' Those not participating were deemed to be not worthy of the name 'Britisher'.

Donors were encouraged to write their name and address on the eggs with a message for the wounded (*Poultry World* called them 'eggograms?') and often the grateful recipient of an egg would write to thank the sender. Such letters record the reception given to the arrival of fresh eggs in the hospitals. 'I wish you could see the joy on the poor fellows' faces when they get the eggs; it would fully repay you for all your trouble' is a typical observation. Indeed, the morale-boosting aspect of the receipt of a fresh egg cannot be over-emphasised. It was estimated

that an egg was placed in front of a wounded serviceman, even in France, within three days of being laid.

As the war dragged on, the collection of eggs continued apace, though urgent representations were constantly being made for the number of gifts not to be decreased. Germany's 'devilish practice of sinking Hospital Ships' meant that 'thousands of wounded men cannot be brought home. In consequence the 'National Egg Collection' must send at least 250,000 eggs weekly across the Channel. There is no substitute for eggs in maintaining a man's vitality, hastening his convalescence or even in preserving life.' In October 1917 the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, wrote to the Collection what they called 'a most encouraging and appreciative letter'. Meanwhile, on 21 October 1918 *The Times* published in facsimile a letter from Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, expressing the gratitude of the Base hospitals in France for the eggs sent from home. A week later the letter was printed again, this time with the added enticement for donors of eggs during what the paper dubbed 'Autograph Egg Week' of receiving a copy of the letter 'reproduced in facsimile upon paper suitable for framing'. What a stampede there must have been!

The Armistice was signed on 11 November 1918 and the National Egg Collection effort was gradually wound down, drawing to a close on the last day of March 1919. Many collectors were issued with Certificates of Honour. Over 41 million eggs had been collected, of which no fewer than 32 million had been despatched to the Base hospitals in France and Belgium. Its work finally over, the National Egg Collection was able to send a cheque for the cash balance of 5,865 to the War Office. One hopes that they spent it wisely.

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