The National Egg Scheme by **Simon Wilson**

"Every British hen should be on active service" - Poultry World



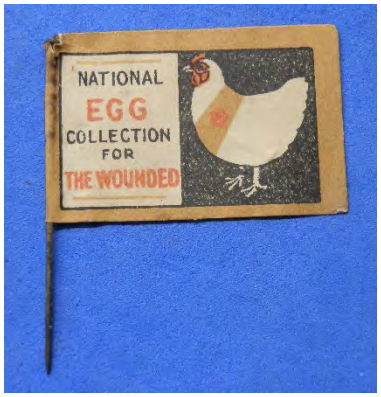
The scheme was started in November 1914 on the suggestion of the editor of *Poultry World.* Its initial aim was to provide 20,000 new laid eggs for British servicemen in hospital in Boulogne, because a fresh egg was both nourishing and good for morale. It was possible to ship an egg from the UK to France in three days. The names of local collectors, responsible for villages, or groups of villages, and collecting depots, were being published in local papers as early as December 1914 (*Mid-Sussex Time*s 22 December 1914, *Sussex Express, Surrey Standard & Kent Mail* 4 December 1914).

By Easter 1915 they were actually sending 200,000 eggs a week.

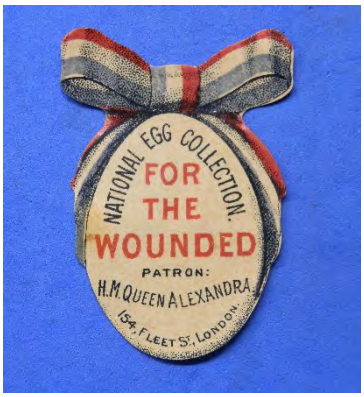
Poultry keepers were encouraged to send as many eggs as they could spare, and those without poultry were encouraged to make donations in cash, for the purchase of eggs. One scheme in Bristol had 800 collecting boxes for collecting money to buy eggs.

Flag Days were also held to raise funds for the scheme, which also bought eggs as well as soliciting donations. Many of the costs involved in running the scheme were met by donations such as the free use of a warehouse donated by Harrods, to assist in the early days, and the free transport provided by the railways.

One Flag Day in Burton on Trent and Tutbury raised £184 9s 4d in April 1916 (*Burton Observer & Chronicle* 6 April 1916). The "young ladies" who *"*laboured from early morn till dusk" sold miniature Union Jacks. Neither of the flags illustrated below would have been available until later in the year. They also took donations of 3,799 eggs.



By the time the scheme was wound up in March 1919 over 41 million eggs had been donated, of which 32 million were sent to Hospitals on the Western Front. The rest were consumed by hospitals in the UK, which also benefited from local donations that were not part of the National Scheme. The poultry of the UK, truly had done their bit.



(*Above*), these are examples of flags sold on Flag Days. One is the same chicken picture as the one used in the poster at the head of the article. The presence of the Lord Derby Scheme armband, suggests that the flag must date from the end of 1915 at the earliest. The other dates from August 1915 or later. Queen Alexandra became Patron in that month.

Wednesday 14th February 1917 was a National Flag Day for the scheme and the organisers hoped to stage events in as many small villages as possible so that everyone would have a chance to contribute. Eggs, they said, were in short supply. This was always likely to be the case with poultry kept in natural conditions – it takes artificial light to produce eggs all year round.

An announcement was made in the *Nottingham Evening Post* (29 July 1918) in an article on food control and rationing. Arrangements were being made for the import of American and Canadian eggs to ease the shortage of eggs in the UK, and the Government had a supply of Irish and Danish eggs "in pickle", which would be released in autumn.

These eggs are not pickled eggs as we understand them. It was standard practice until 1950s to preserve eggs for winter by immersing them in a container of water to which waterglass (sodium silicate) had been added. This sealed the pores and prevented the eggs from going bad. In theory. I'm told by my parents that they did sometimes go off, and that they also sometimes had a strange taste. However, they would easily last 8 months, which was plenty of time to bridge the gap until the poultry started laying again.

When the scheme was finally wound up, it was able to donate £5,865 to the War Office.