



*The founders at a houseparty in the Lake District - (standing, left to right) Lizzie Smith, Linda Dykes, (sitting) Helen Flack, Anne Mitchell*

# The seven ages of the RWAF

## The first 15 years

*By Dr Linda Dykes, founder of the BHRA/RWAF*

A few years ago, it wasn't uncommon for rabbit medicine to resemble something from the James Herriott era... remember the tales of sick animals being treated with multi-vitamin injections?

Fast forward to the mid 1990s, and that's exactly how some vets would have treated your rabbit if it stopped eating.

Fifteen years later, you're clued up about "GI stasis". You know about the impact of dental disease and the benefits of neutering. And the fact you know these things – and your vet does too – is in no small part due to the RWAF.

For the members that were not with us at the very beginning, here's how the RWAF began – and started to change the lives of Britain's bunnies for the better.

### How we began

The association began when four rabbit lovers decided to start a club for people who were keen to bring their rabbits indoors, aiming to "raise the status of the domestic rabbit to that of a cat or dog".

Today, as we celebrate the RWAF's 15th birthday, here is a reminder of the various stages we have gone through on our journey

to where we are today: the UK's largest charity dedicated to improving the lives of pet rabbits.

### Step One: Educating enthusiastic owners

The Association began with a leaflet, "Hey Look at me, I'm a Houserabbit!" containing basic information on neutering, diet and behaviour, followed by the first incarnation of *Rabbiting On: A5*, photocopied and stapled by hand! Members were hungry for knowledge, and bearing in mind that fewer than 10% of the UK population used the internet in those early years (no Facebook! No forums!) the association responded by opening the Helpline and setting up a network of 'advisors' who could give basic general advice.

The association relied on the traditional media to spread the word, with articles in magazines and newspapers, the biggest breakthrough being houserabbits as the cover story in "You" magazine (Mail on Sunday).

### Step two: Outreach

The RWAF membership consists of the most enthusiastic rabbit owners in the UK. The challenge is reaching people who simply don't know how to give their pet bunny a decent quality of life.

Educational leaflets remain a vital tool: even with the rise in internet usage, the RWAF still produces more than 100,000 leaflets (14

titles) every year – costing around £7,000.

The RWF also attends as many public events as possible. These outreach efforts occasionally attract criticism from those who think we should have nothing to do with other facets of the pet rabbit industry, but the RWF has always believed that it is more important to seize opportunities to educate and, when necessary, dispel myths, than to pretend that pet shops and rabbit shows (which many members find disturbing) do not exist.

If you want a benchmark for how far things have come, consider this: 15 years ago, you couldn't buy a six-foot hutch from a mainstream retailer, and rabbits were rarely kept in pairs.

### Step three: Educating vets

Although the initial emphasis of the association was providing an entertaining, informative network for members, we quickly realised that UK vets needed to catch up with their American counterparts: better rabbit healthcare is linked inextricably to improved welfare, even the basics such as safe neutering which enables rabbits to be kept in pairs.

The handful of vets who were particularly rabbit-savvy (indeed, there were some international experts in rabbit medicine in Britain even then) were recognised on the “rabbit friendly vet list” - a service that still exists today. For the rest, the association launched an ambitious educational programme.

In 2002 the RWF organised its first “Rabbit Health Matters” conference. The event was a sell-out, and has taken place annually since.

The next phase in influencing the UK veterinary profession was more ambitious... targeting vets still in training. Back in 1996, veterinary students typically only received five days' training in rabbit medicine. So, when the opportunity arose to half-fund a residency at Bristol Vet School (shared with Bristol Zoo) we jumped at the chance. To date, over 2,000 veterinary and veterinary nursing students have been trained in Bristol's state-of-the-art rabbit clinic, creating a generation of rabbit-savvy professionals in practice throughout the UK.

### Step four: Research

Progressing knowledge of rabbit welfare and medicine requires research, and the RWF has always supported humane studies.

RWF grants have enabled research into topics such as *E cuniculi* (it was a RWF-funded project that revealed that a shocking 50% of British pet rabbits have been exposed

to EC), myxomatosis vectors, heart disease in rabbits, environmental enrichment and coccidiosis. YOUR rabbit may already have benefitted from RWF-supported research.

### Step five: Supporting rabbit rescue

From the early days, the association has supported rabbit rescue – but decided not to take a hands-on role.

The reason is simple: rabbit rescue provides an essential service to pick up the pieces when things have gone wrong. But without education, things go wrong more often. Founder member Dr Linda Dykes once said “£100 will pay for one or two rabbits to be neutered... or for 1,000 educational leaflets, which would hopefully result in at least ten times as many rabbits actually being neutered...”

As well as providing educational literature free of charge for rescue centres to distribute, we've always encouraged people to adopt rescued rabbits (a directory of rescues is available via the Helpline). Mindful of the fact that many members do want to support hands-on rescue, in 2006 we launched “Sponsor a Rescue”. The scheme has raised almost £12,000, benefiting 18 rescue centres so far.

### Step six: Campaigning on the national stage

Prior to the creation of the RWF, there was no single national body offering expert advice on companion rabbit issues. It has taken a number of years (we were first approached by the government in 2002 when the Animal Welfare Act was still on the drawing board) but we are now undoubtedly Britain's leading rabbit welfare organisation, participating on committees alongside other major organisations such as the PDSA and RSPCA. We are part of DEFRA's Companion Animal Sector Council (CASC) and are currently working on the Rabbit Health & Welfare standards

As well as the expertise available within the RWF, one of the key reasons we are now established as the authority for rabbit welfare issues is our productive, politically moderate approach: building bridges not barriers, working with organisations with which we share a common goal, or even those whose philosophy is different, so long as we can see an opportunity to improve rabbit welfare as a result.

You can read more about our numerous campaigning successes in *Rabbiting On*, but the most notable success recently has undoubtedly been in influencing major retailers to stop selling completely inadequate hutches.

### From BHRA to RWF

By 2000 the BHRA had become much more than a club for houserabbit owners: it was time to become a charity, and also to re-brand the association to reflect the work we were doing promoting rabbit welfare. The result was the Rabbit Welfare Association (the club) and The Rabbit Welfare Fund (the charity). Following charitable registration the BHRA was re-launched as the RWF.

Throughout all of this time we have developed and improved our website, which we believe is one of the most up to date and informative rabbit specific websites in the world.

### Step seven: Moving on

What happens next is largely up to you, the members. Each and every one of you can help us to further our aims. However small your donation — be it time or money — collectively RWF members can make a difference. For ideas on how you can contribute, why not visit the ‘Get involved’ section on the website? Or simply encourage ONE friend to join the RWF.

RWF members love to “talk rabbit” and we've always facilitated this. First came local ‘Hopper Groups’, where groups of members would meet up and share rabbit stories and photos. Next were annual events such as the ‘houserabbit houseparty’, then owner conferences and more recently, fund-raising gala dinners. This in addition to the Helpline, vet list, bunny boarding list and more recently the free vet referral service in conjunction with the vet residency programme!

### A special Thank You

The RWF has been able to grow and achieve much of its success because of the dedication of Anne Mitchell. She has managed the day-to-day running of the association, taken care of the book-keeping, manned the Helpline - answering calls even on Christmas Day – as well as carrying out a variety of other tasks.

“The other members of the committee would like to say a huge Thank You to Anne for everything she has done for the RWF over the past 15 years,” Rae Todd, chief executive officer, said.