

# RABBIT HOUSING

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BSc (Hons) MSc

Whether you keep one to a hundred rabbits, our guide will answer most of the queries on housing and hopefully (see page 15) will also solve what can be a messy problem

## What Are The Essentials of Good Housing?

According to the Welfare of Livestock Regulations (1994) "Any hutches or cages where rabbits are kept shall be (a) of sufficient size to allow the rabbits to move around and to feed and drink without difficulty and to enable all the rabbits

kept in them to lie on their sides at the same time; and (b) of sufficient height to allow the rabbits to sit upright on all four feet without their ears touching the top of the hutch or cage.

"Where any rabbits are kept in any accommodation that is exposed to the weather,

home of a pet, indoor or show rabbit.

As rabbits come in a variety of shapes and sizes, it is very difficult to pinpoint an actual recommended size of hutch –

it is therefore odd that most high

**"A run gives the rabbit some freedom from their hutches and exercise – no rabbit should be without one"**

street pet stores offer such a small range of hutches.

Marie Salt, a British Rabbit Council District Adviser says: "The cages all seem to be bought in various lengths, from two foot to four foot but there is no depth to the cages and, more importantly, no height.

"I realise that most pet shops sell small rabbits but what about an English or a Silver Fox? They could never stand up on their hind legs and stretch up in these types of cages".

Norma Hughes (Avondale Animal Housing) also feels that the size of hutch should take into account the size and the breed of the rabbit and will be affected by the owners' expectations: "On the whole people with pet rabbits tend to like their rabbits to have lots of room whereas breeders keep their rabbits in smaller hutches but still with enough room for the rabbit to move around".

It seems that the best advice when purchasing a hutch is that

the rabbit should be able to stand up on its hind legs (even on top of bedding)

and be able to take a couple of hops in any direction once it is fully grown.

With a wild rabbit spending nearly two-thirds of its day within a cramped burrow it is not always the size of hutch that is important – it is also the amount of exercise and time

away from the hutch that can really matter. Many breeders let their rabbits run around on the floor of the rabbit shed whilst they are being cleaned out and rabbits that live as outdoor / indoor pets, coming into the home to stretch their legs and kick up their heels each day, are also very common.

Most hutch manufacturers make rabbit runs. Graham Barnard from happyhutch.com (01482-214744)

believes that nothing enriches a rabbit's environment more. "We manufacture hutches with runs underneath and also hutches with runs in front. You can also purchase separate runs with box backs, ideal in the summer as the rabbit has a cool shaded area to rest. A run gives the rabbit some freedom from their hutches and exercise – no rabbit should be without one".

A behavioural need of the rabbit is social contact, whether with another rabbit or with the owner / breeder. When mixing more than one rabbit the space allocation has to be adjusted



A traditional outdoor hutch as used by rabbit keepers about fifty years ago, recreated from an advert from that period

accordingly and it seems that most people would recommend half the space again, assuming that the breeds are of a similar size.

Forsham Cottage Arks designed The Peterborough as a purpose designed pet ark with split-levels of a covered lawn run and a ramp leading to an upstairs 'bedroom'. This amount of space (the dimensions are 1270 x 1220 x 1060 mm) should be sufficient for most medium sized rabbits if kept as a pair.

Looking back through old copies of *Fur & Feather*, I was hoping to find a large difference between the rabbit



suitable steps shall be taken so as to ensure that the rabbits have access to shelter from the action of the weather (including direct sunlight)."

Are these recommendations enough for our domestic rabbit who may live on its own, as part of a group, outside in a rabbitry or inside in the home?

We asked the Rabbit Welfare Association, Forsham Cottage Arks, happyhutch.com, the British Rabbit Council, Supreme Petfoods Ltd and Avondale Animal Housing to help us compile the definitive guide to rabbit housing.

Firstly, everyone agreed on space and exercise as the number one priority for the

**"In severe weather, a tarpaulin or plastic sheet can be used to cover the front of the hutch; covering the external back and sides with roofing felt also keeps the hutch warm and dry"**



These blocks of outdoor breeder hutches are protected from the weather by a corrugated plastic roof

housing of today and yesteryear.

Interestingly, rabbits seemed to be allocated a similar amount of space, with the same considerations for social contact and exercise in 1935 as they do today. Whilst there were countless articles explaining how to turn packing cases into hutches, create a 3-tier hutch to fit into a small back garden and build "A Hutch That Has Stood All The Tests Of Time" there were also several discussing the merits of keeping and breeding rabbits in a colony and creating a portable backyard colony house.

Eva Waller offered the benefits of this system of housing rabbits to be that the rabbits received exercise and that this style of living suited their gregarious nature. She also cited the time saved on feeding and cleaning out and the quantity of young produced as advantages. She was keen to point out that this system does not always lend itself well to pedigree breeding, particularly of the marked breeds, as the young do not normally stay faithful to one nest box making it hard to ascertain parentage.

**"Many a rabbit is misplaced or lost by a faulty catch"**

So should we 'resurrect' this idea of group living? Linda Dykes of the Rabbit Welfare Association thinks so. "To a certain extent the lot of the show rabbit is far better than that of a solitary rabbit stuck alone in a small hutch at the bottom of the garden but it is somewhat ironic that when the laboratory and meat rabbit communities are trying hard to move towards providing communal housing systems that the rabbit fancy has not even started to look at whether there are feasible alternative management systems, and the pet world has only recently started to make progress."

When purchasing hutches, the phrase "act in haste, repent at leisure" is worth bearing in mind as the cheaper 'bargain' hutch so prevalent in many pet shops and stores may not last as long as the slightly more expensive, better-made one. Durability and quality contribute towards the essentials of good housing, especially as many hutches

need to be able to brave the elements.

Graham Barnard of happyhutch.com strongly believes that whilst housing needs vary for indoor or outdoor rabbits some basic principles remain the same.

"We recommend Orientated Strand Board for a good long lasting flooring and it must be at least a quarter of an inch in thickness. This is safe for the rabbit but is strong and durable and won't rot within a few weeks of purchasing your hutch".

Norma Hughes from Avondale Animal Housing adds, "the floor's need to be treated with an animal friendly seal and the edges glued, as well as nailed to stop seepage".

With the extremes of weather in the UK it is important to provide shelter from the rain but also the sun, protection from high winds but enough ventilation to keep the house aired. The location of the hutches is therefore almost as

important as the size and quality.

Many hutches include an enclosed sleeping area, which can give some protection from high or low temperatures, and are therefore useful for rabbits housed outside. Forsham Cottage Arks provide all their hutches with



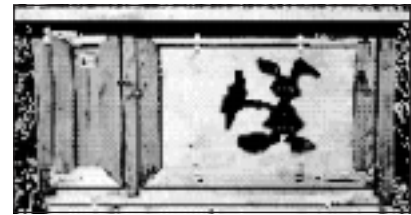
**THE ESSENTIALS OF GOOD HOUSING**

- Space / Exercise
- Durability / Quality
- Protection from the weather
- Hygiene
- Security / Safety

solid shutters that do not flap and have an air hole for ventilation.

Many people convert outbuildings into rabbitries so that the rabbits (and themselves) can be kept at a similar level of temperature, ventilation and humidity, whatever the weather.

The only negative to this way of living is that the rabbits may not be exposed to enough natural light and steps must be taken to address this.



Night shutter on a 4' Hutch (Forsham Cottage Arks)

shed may be outside the realms of some people's bank balances or space allocation, extending a roof over the hutch block or perhaps planting conifers can easily provide shelter.

Norma Hughes of Avondale suggests that "in severe weather, a tarpaulin or plastic sheet can be used to cover the front of the hutch and covering the external back and sides with roofing felt also keeps the hutch warm and dry".

According to Linda Dykes "Rabbits can cope with cold weather perfectly well, it's damp that they hate. A waterproof hutch with a decent overhang and sleeping compartment (or cardboard box placed inside stuffed with

plenty of straw) can cope with most needs, and some kind of flap to bring down over the front of the hutch (whilst still allowing plenty of

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# WIN A RABBIT HUTCH!

from [happyhutch.com](http://happyhutch.com)

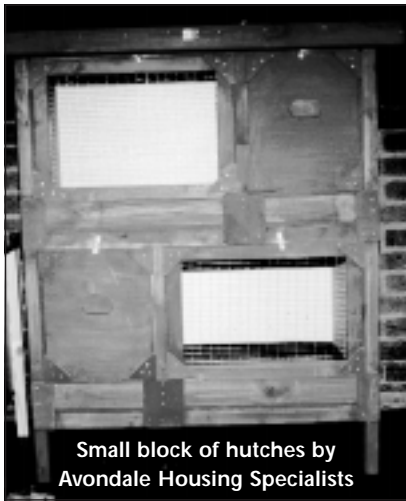


Send the correct answer to the question below and you could win £150 worth of rabbit housing courtesy of Graham Barnard of happyhutch.com

**What kind of board does Graham Barnard recommend for hutch flooring?**

Please send answers to Fur & Feather, Elder House, Chattisham, Ipswich, Suffolk IP8 3Q. Fax number 01473 652788 or e mail [emmamagnus@btopenworld.com](mailto:emmamagnus@btopenworld.com)

Winners will be drawn on March 31st and the winner will be announced in our May issue.



Small block of hutches by Avondale Housing Specialists

ventilation as well as enabling the hutch to dry.

According to Nick Thomas of Supreme Petfoods Ltd hygiene is a major factor. "If an animal is kept in a clean environment, then this reduces the risk of infection and illness. It is important to remember that the hutch should be protected against the elements, as a damp hutch can be a dirty hutch. Moisture in the wood of a hutch will quickly result in mildew growth and the wood will rot".

The final necessity of good housing is security and safety. Whether to keep predators out or prevent the rabbit from escaping, and perhaps injuring itself.

ventilation) to keep out driving snow and rain".

It is worth remembering that under both The Allotments Act (1950) and The Environmental Protection Act (1990) rabbits should be kept in a good sanitary condition and in a

**"Moisture in the wood of a hutch will quickly result in mildew growth and the wood will rot"**

structure that is visually attractive.

Hygiene is therefore a very necessary consideration for housing and it is important that the design of the hutch is such that it is easy for the owner to reach every corner during cleaning. The wood should also be treated in such a way as to prevent urine and faeces seeping into the wood.

By raising hutches at least 200-300mm off the floor and keeping 250mm between the back of the hutch and wall, air is able to circulate - aiding

Hutch doors should be heavy enough not to be lifted by predators and the hutch itself should be raised as high as possible to make it difficult for predators to gain a foothold. Rabbit sheds and block hutches should be secured overnight when predators are more likely to strike.

Two tiered hutches like Forsham Cottage Arks' Peterborough have a hinged ramp that can be locked to keep the rabbit secure and these are becoming more popular.

"Many a rabbit is misplaced or lost by a faulty catch" according to Marie Salt. There are many different types of door catches that are strong enough to withstand pressure. Breeders and manufacturers most commonly use a simple button catch. If they are not available from a local hardware store then they can be made at home using a small rectangular

block of wood that is then secured in place.

With rabbits living with humans in such a variety of ways there is no hard or fast

rule to housing but it is important that the physical health and behavioural needs of the rabbit come first. □ □ □



Petstore chain Notcutts responded to their customers' requests for a larger hutch by launching this model

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happyhutch.com rabbit hutch with run attached