

BEEKEEPING

...but for bees

The Natural Beekeeping Trust was set up in 2009 to promote a non-interventional method of husbandry to counteract recent, often man-made, disasters which have decimated bee populations around the world. Paul Melnyczuk looks at the aims of the Trust, and at the sun hive – the core of their commitment to bee-guardianship

I HAVE REGULARLY included items about the plight of nature's pollinators in our news pages, and wherever you look or read these days, their problems are pretty well covered by the media – the solutions, however, sadly seem to be less of a priority. The French, together with many other European nations, have already banned the use of agricultural chemicals containing neonicotinoids, but we are still awaiting action from our own government on the matter. Monocultures (the bee equivalent of a diet of just one single food), modern agricultural techniques, changes to the landscape and, in particular this year, a climate which has discouraged bees from venturing out, have all combined to decimate populations.

Given that much of the problem lies in the nature of modern agriculture



and the use of man-made systems, it's fascinating to read the philosophy of the Natural Beekeeping Trust (NBT), and the steps they are taking to turn the situation

around by looking to more natural systems of 'passive' husbandry – and by passive I mean working extremely hard from the sidelines to provide an environment in which the bees can function as they would if wild and without the interference/interaction of mankind. Man-made chemical solutions to man-made problems are viewed by the Trust as the next set of problems just waiting to happen, and I can understand that logic.

Slowly we are becoming more aware of the need for more holistic approaches to livestock husbandry, and our current method of 'controlling' bee populations is coming under question as solutions to the present-day problems are sought. The Natural Beekeeping Trust was established in 2009 to assist and provide tuition for anyone interested in pursuing bee-friendly practices, and it serves ►

► as an example of how sustainable bee husbandry based on organic pesticide- and chemical-free principles can allow colonies to flourish. In the UK we are already compromised by many years of using so-called 'plant protection substances' such as neonicotinoids, which are causing considerable damage to many 'non-target' insects, including, ironically, many of the very pollinators who save the economy billions of pounds every year by perpetuating the harvests, doing nothing more than they have for millions of years.

Although bees have existed for many millions of years, much of that time revered by cultures across the world, it is the last hundred and fifty years that have been the problem, as agriculture has become more intensive and the bee, just like much of our livestock today, has become simply another unit of production. Its breeding, feeding and natural instincts have all been controlled and the genetics of populations greatly weakened as our attempts to interfere with nature have all too often backfired. The Natural Beekeeping Trust is of the view that we can only undo this damage by looking primarily at the needs of the bees, rather than our own, as we attempt to live in harmony with them: simply helping them to help themselves rather than as their masters – something we are hardly likely to ever be, in reality.

Today, more and more people are looking to keep bees on a small scale – a welcome alternative to the American habit of transporting many hundreds of hives around the land as agricultural contractors rather than beekeepers. We can confirm, too, that the popularity of books such as *Bird, Bee & Bug Houses*, *Wildlife Habitats for*



Your Garden and *The Bee Garden* show a keenness by concerned individuals to provide an ideal environment for these useful and marvellous insects and to welcome their presence. Whilst acknowledging that organisations already exist to further the cause of the honeybee, the Natural Beekeeping Trust was established as an alternative to their more traditional attitudes to bee husbandry, and to further a more holistic, less interventionist approach, to better understand the nature and requirements of bees and to care for them with due regard for their intrinsic needs. As

an example of this, the Trust advocates patient and loving observation, but at the flight entrance rather than through a commonly taught regime of frequent hive inspections, which the Trust regards as intrusive.

The Natural Beekeeping Trust has as its patron the UK Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, and five trustees, including Heidi Herrmann, who explained the sun hive in a recent *Countryfile* programme on the BBC. Its research indicates that winter survival rates are much better in colonies that have been allowed to swarm as part of their natural colony behaviour and where they have been left to feed on their own honey, rather than man-made alternatives. Feral colonies are also demonstrating better survival rates than 'kept' bees, with the



Heidi Herrmann and Countryfile's Julia Bradbury.

implication that our 'interference' may be a significant part of the problem. For the Trust it is very much a matter of how we perceive the honeybee; their view is that it is a 'sustainer of life on earth' rather than a 'producer of honey', and the importance of that role in pollination and how we may not survive if the honeybee disappears has become a topic of conversation among non-beekeepers these days, so the perception is obviously spreading.

Critically, provision of appropriate housing is a prime requirement for all livestock – shelter being one of the legal requirements for keepers of any animal today, and the bee is of course no exception. The traditional familiar hive has become an icon of the beekeeping world, but the essence of the Natural Beekeeping Trust's philosophy is embodied by the sun hive (or the Weissensteifener Hängkorb, to give it its original title), which was introduced to the UK at the Natural Beekeeping Alliance conference in 2012.



Above: A big moment! A first swarm installed in a sun hive.

Right: Guenther Mancke, the designer of the sun hive.



Originally designed by German sculptor Guenther Mancke, the sun hive is the result of many years of research into honeybee colonies and is a combination of a skep basket made using rye straw and a wooden support structure. It is intended to be suspended at a height of at least 2.5m (8ft), and the shape harmonises with the natural movements of a colony, enabling the bees to design their own brood nests in a manner normal for the insect rather than within the restrictions of a 'man-made' design. ►



Bees building inside the hive.



Building the Sun Hive



Collecting rye straw in preparation.



Mark Houghton manufacturing the frames.



Step 1 – Beginning the skep-making process.



Step 2 – Attaching the rye grass to the frame.



Step 3 – Building up the skep.



Step 4 – Half-finished skep.



Step 5 – Almost there.



The upper section.



Weaving the upper section of the skep.



The completed sun hive.



Applying an optional coating of cow dung.



Miranda Hansen Lise looking to house a swarm.

► The philosophy behind the sun hive is biodynamics, a concept created in the early 20th century by Rudolf Steiner, who drew attention to the interconnection between all life and the environment which it inhabited at a series of lectures in 1924. A biodynamic farm functions as a strong, self-sustaining and vibrant single organism that recognises and respects the basic principles at work in nature – a complete system in which all the different components of the farm are seen as parts of a greater whole. With farm animals at the centre, a self-sustaining, balanced and harmonious environment is the result. Special manure and herb-based preparations are applied to the fields and compost to enhance and stimulate microbiological life in the soil and improve fertility, and they have been shown to significantly improve the health and well-being of the soil, plants and animals as well as enhancing the vitality, flavour and keeping qualities of the produce. As the soil sequesters up to 25 per cent more carbon than in conventional farming methods, the health of the planet is also cared for.

The biodynamic farmer also recognises that the life of any farm is exposed to wider as well as internal influences, and the sun, the moon and the planets form the basis of an annually produced planting calendar. This guides the farmer towards appropriate times for cultivation and sowing for maximum quantity and quality, and results in a rich, diverse enterprise built on sound organic principles and sensitised to its surroundings and produce with the 'terroir' or sense of the place on which it was produced. Many of Steiner's principles are embraced by today's organic movement, and the



Swarm-cuddling.

sun hive strives, in as far as it can, to embody these principles according to the insects' natural instincts.

The Natural Beekeeping Trust runs regular two-day workshops to make sun hives at Emerson College in Forest Row, East Sussex (see Further Info), but the altruism of the Trust is demonstrated by their willingness to share the design in the same manner in which it was first introduced by its creator, who saw it not as a personal possession but as an aid to an important goal through which we might all (including the bee, of course) benefit. A book has been written about the building of a sun hive, in itself a most beautiful and aesthetically pleasing structure, and although we have included the basic steps, it is a complex procedure for which you probably will require the book if you intend to attempt the project from scratch. Sun hive building workshops with inspirational skepmaker Rachel Hanney, biodynamic farmer Peter Brown and trustees of the Natural

Beekeeping Trust are run regularly at The Rachel Carson Centre at Emerson College, Forest Row, East Sussex. They will be available again from next year, but the hive components can also be purchased individually from the Trust, should anyone wish to have a go at creating the skep parts themselves. However, since the skeps need to be made to very precise dimensions, your best bet will probably be to apply for a place on one of the Trust's very popular workshops. A small number of completed hives are also available for purchase too, together with a new English translation of Guenther Mancke's book *The Sun Hive*. *

Further Info

The Natural Beekeeping Trust's work is carried out entirely by a small group of dedicated volunteers. Their website is:

www.naturalbeekeepingtrust.org, where you can learn much more about their philosophy and the action they are taking to help bee populations and advise people interested in the Trust's aims. The site also has details of courses and events in East Sussex, together with availability and prices of both completed hives and hive parts, and *The Sun Hive* book, which is priced at £15. If you wish to become involved, they would be very pleased to hear from you. You might also consider supporting the aims of the Natural Beekeeping Trust by becoming a 'Friend of the Trust'.

Also visit: www.biodynamic.org.uk to learn more about the principles of biodynamics.

And a big thank you to Heidi Herrmann for her efforts in helping to put this article together.



Peter Brown, biodynamic farmer and workshop teacher.
Rachel Hanney, sun hive workshop teacher.