When you have bees in your life you tend to talk to them, tell them what’s happening and consult them. In that vein, we told our bees some time in Lent that they had to move. The pleasure of their company was wanted in a prison.

Years ago, the Trust had received a message from Dave Bloomfield, Substance Misuse Services, HMP Rye Hill, to inquire about teaching convicts to take care of bees and make hives.

‘Your approach to bee husbandry would suit us here; we’d like our people to learn to give rather than take. We envisage gardens with sun hives’.

COULD IT BE TRUE?
The British penal service is, regrettably, the shame of Europe. While other countries succeed in reducing prisoner numbers dramatically without descending to lawless anarchy, in Britain they are at a record high.

But at Rye Hill, soon, there would be meadows, and a garden! Offenders would learn to sow, cultivate and reap, make beehives, become beekeepers. A bee-loud glade and a hive for the honeybee, in a prison! We were delighted to get on board.

It was our first encounter with committee culture - nothing much happened for months on end, not counting an avalanche of correspondence, followed by silence. Had the plan been shelved? Not entirely, but the prison would become a specialist unit for people convicted of sexual offences. Ah, well. A year later a greenish light: the project is before the management! Approval is imminent. Could we reserve a date for a hivemaking workshop please? Making sun hives away from home base is a big hassle, involving lorry loads of specialist equipment, straw, two instructors etc. Dates had been offered, accepted, then cancelled. In some exasperation, but hopeful still, we offered another. Next came an official request from the governing committee: where was the evidence that caring for bees was of therapeutic value. Could we provide it? Time to throw down the gauntlet, we reckoned. We regret to inform you that the submission of evidence about the therapeutic value of caring for something, especially a creature vital to mankind, is beyond the remit of our charity; abundant literature testifying to the benefits of vital and wholesome pursuits on the human soul is extant. You may wish to peruse it. Perhaps they did. Perhaps the bees invaded their dreams, who knows - the date pro-offered was accepted. Dan Docherty describes the world’s first sun hive workshop in a penal institution on page 35.

Making a home for bees mysteriously connects the maker to the bees. In the days of steadily weaving a hive with loving hands, tender pictures arise, with the future bees. Sun hives are designed for the heights where bees want to live. They need special stands and covers. When the prototype appeared from the prison’s carpentry workshop, Peter Brown approved. An impressive stand had been designed for the new hives. And there was even talk of the prisoners’ new skills leading to a novel cottage industry: making skeps from biodynamically grown rye straw for the beekeeping world outside.

BEES FOR SUN HIVES
Six perfect hives now awaiting, the prison asked us to procure bees. We scoured the bee market for colonies naturally reproduced from swarms, untreated, raised on organic/biodynamic land. Such bees don’t exist outside our apiaries,
and those of a few like-minded souls. Bees are local creatures, adapted to the flora and fauna of their origins; moving them is not ideal. Gareth did not relish the prospect of parting with any of his bees, but procuring bees from chemically treated stock was not an option, and a journey from Sussex too hard on the bees. One, not six, would go, we decided. When you’ve settled, dear bees, and if you like the place, go forth and multiply. Six perfect hives awaiting. Sun hives!

The hive embodies an ideal. Guenther Mancke, the German sculptor and bee father, says: . . . the impetus for the hive’s development came from the need to free the bees from a principle at once earthbound and cuboid, one that goes against every law of form – we are dealing here with laws that are a particular expressions of a creature’s life. There are many reasons for bees’ present-day afflictions. We can be sure, however, that one of these is the fact that the creature, as a physical and ethereal entity, can no longer live its life as it is meant to.

At about mid morning, we arrived at the prison with a hive full of bees, and – on my part at least – mixed feelings. We introduced ourselves. Peter Brown had been before and knew the ropes, or rather the walls. Photos were taken, and fingerprints too. The whole prison was aware of the arrival of the bees. We were given a list of the items that cannot be taken inside. Neither bees nor hives featured, so we waited our turn to go through the entrance gates with the land rover and its cargo. Just as our turn arrived, a medical emergency was declared: no vehicles in or out until the ambulance had come, collected the patient and departed. Nothing happened for a very long time. I mean, nothing! My bees stuck in the back of the car. Not a great start. I started fretting for my bees lest they overheat. Locked up, taken on a few hours’ car journey, staying locked-up. A poignant picture, given the circumstances. Thankfully it was cool, and a slight breeze would reach them. Finally, more than three hours after arriving, we were ushered into the vehicle search compound. We were patted down. The vehicle was searched, but not the hive. The inner gates opened and we were inside. When we arrived at the garden area with our precious cargo the prisoners gathered round in keen anticipation: ‘Are you the beekeeper? Is this our hive? Where are you going to put it?’ Prisoners are allowed budgerigars and, now, bees. That leaves a whole alphabet to play with. Before the hive entrance was opened, crowding prisoners had to be shooed back to a safe distance. After a hive has been closed up all day, the bees often rush out in a state of some excitement. This can lead to awkward introductions. As it was, only a few bees came out to explore their new quarters. Thankfully, leaving the prison was far easier than getting in; which left me something to ponder on the drive home.

**CONVICTS AND BEES**

Now it was time for the bee course, to tell the prisoners about the bees, how they live and what they need. Getting lost in the triste environs of the prison on my way there, my heart sank. Where would our bees find food in these
monotonous wastelands of chemical farming? Bees go far for forage, it is true, but there wasn’t much to be seen.

By the time Gareth and I had declared our intent, stowed away our bags in lockers, had fingerprints and photographs taken, waited, got searched and walked on command through screens and armoured doors to emerge in the first wire-fenced compound, all I could think of was Dostoyevsky. The degree of civilisation in a society is revealed by entering its prisons. This was bleakness taken to a whole new level of menace. Gates, treble locks, red-lettered warnings of huge fines for security breaches. Razor-wire coils stretching into infinity. The prison is run by security services giant G4S. ‘Securing your world’ is the company’s maxim. Outsourcing of penal services is a growing trend in Britain, following in the footsteps of the US.

We arrived in the project area. There stood a little white hive. Gareth’s bees! Content looking bees, returning with pollen loads. Exceedingly comforting to see. The garden – the manifestation of the ‘horticultural intervention’ – was buzzing with life. Casually dressed men tending to weeds, planting, watering. Lettuces, broccoli, herbs, sweet williams, wallflowers in pristine bed of rich dark earth. Winding paths lead to polytunnels, sheds and a pond, a very pleasing layout devoid of hard lines. We learnt that the prisoners, involved from scratch, had pleaded for meanders and curves. Straight lines dominated their lives here. We spotted a little stand of rye swaying in the wind – the prisoners had saved the seeds left over from the sun hive workshop detritus and planted them! Then we saw the hives, woven in prison, from rye straw grown at two biodynamic farms, Tablehurst and Hungary Lane.

The men who had made them would now attend the bee course. Except for one who was barred because of a violent incident. Violence is rife in the hell of incarceration. A prison is like a gigantic quarantine facility. Terrifying, demeaning, ugly. Staff shortages spell extended lock-up periods for inmates. Self-harm, suicides, depression are pervasive.

In a hive, every single bee always knows what to do and when to do it. And does it, we explained, after our students had introduced themselves. All men, most on life sentences, all ages. Every single bee relates to the other, and works for the weal of the hive. All is shared. All that is brought into the hive – nectar, pollen, propolis, water – is for the good of all. Everything is shared. Bees work together for the good of all. The queen, that heavenly creature, is the mother of all. We showed them pictures. Told them about the young nurse bees who visit their charges thousands of times before the cradle is closed with wax. It is always warm inside the hive. The bees make sure of that by thousands venting their wings. The bee is perfectly fitted to the world into which it emerges. The bee babies must never get chilled, they need the same warmth that we do. The men began to engage. Questions galore. Good questions. The sessions were short. Lock-up times are tightly prescribed. After lunch, one of the group was missing. Bad news from home had upset him, so
he stayed locked-up.

Attention was being paid to every last detail. We learnt that many of the men had already taken to standing near the hive in quiet moments, watching the bees come and go. How quickly will the hive swarm so that we can have bees in our sun hives? Engagement indeed! Steve Hammond, one of the instructors here, told us about the huge changes he’d seen over time in the men working in the garden. It’s not like this, normally. You should see them on the wings. Tense, closed, unpredictable. They are different people when they work in the garden.

Next, swarming was the theme. What happens in the hive before the bees take-off for the wild abandon of swarming. Will our bees do it? How do we tell? When? They were keen on the detail, on imagining the swarm that might issue and hopefully set up home in one of their hives. What if the scout bees find a better place over the wall? Will we lose our bees? We suggested that the bees might well choose to stay with them. They were animated now, keen to rush out and get their sun hives up so that the scout bees, the house hunters could find them. There was plenty of time. It was mid Easter. The men were relating to their bees now. Tomorrow, weather permitting, we’ll have a look inside the hive, was how we left them. Remember to prepare for it.

MEETING THE BEES

Inner calm. A quiet attitude. No anger, no fear. Would these troubled individuals be mindful of what we had impressed on them? Had they remembered to think about meeting the bees last thing at night? Bees are highly sensitive to people’s emotions and react in kind. Watch yourself, they say. Bearing in mind that all of the prisoners were here because of acts of violence, it was a tall order. But Gareth, bent over the busy hive in shirtsleeves, trusted that they would be mindful and the bees forgiving. We assembled around the hive. Things can go wrong quickly if you’re not on your best behaviour. The bees remained calm. The men pointed out the pollen-bearers to each other. Then, silence, save the music of thousands of wings as the bees were leaving and arriving at the hive. Were they aware of us, aware that something extraordinary was unfolding for the men watching them?

Gareth gently loosened the boxes. Two men slowly lifted the top, others took turns to draw closer to gaze at the mass of bees in full view now. Indrawn breaths. What were the men feeling? Nobody spoke. Hundreds of bees were circling and spiralling above our heads, chanting softly. Of course the bees were aware of us. The circlers above are the watchers. They keep an eye on things, on behalf of the hive. Ready to deploy their defences should danger arise.

A face appeared at one of the barred windows behind. "That’s A., the one who made the sun hive ever so well" Steve explained quietly. A reminder of where we were. When the bees draw you into their world, all else fades into oblivion, for a time. Bee time.

The hum of the bees became louder now. A certain pitch expresses a higher state of alert. It’s best to take notice. We closed the hive and thanked the bees.

The prisoners’ first encounter with the Bee had gone exceedingly well. But we had noted that one of the men was constantly bothered by a single bee that buzzed around his veil insistently. He resisted swatting it. He moved away and came back, the bee with him. When a bee lands on you, say hello. Do nothing. He hadn’t forgotten. Self-control is essential in the presence of bees. Sitting quietly on a bench in the garden a little later, he confided to Gareth that he had been feeling very angry. ‘Couldn’t shift it. When I am feeling better, I’ll go and stand by the hive and say sorry’ he said, ‘It wasn’t fair on them’. The bees were already showing that they have gifts to bestow more precious than honey.

The Rye Hill Garden project is bearing fruit. Prisoners are keen to be involved. The work is voluntary, there is no pay. I am proud to be working here, with these guys, I am proud of what they achieve. Steve Hammond told us; he took early retirement to follow this vocation. Robin Baxter is employed by Garden Organic. For both working here is full of rewards. The prisoners can feel that. Robin and Steve are treated with the greatest of respect.

The project’s impact was evaluated by Coventry University. ‘Participants related well to the activity of gardening and were aware that in undertaking the programme they had a common bond; this is important as prison is almost always a very individual experience. In addition, the staff working directly with participants on the Master Gardener programme were accepted by participants to be part of the community, and viewed themselves similarly too. A community spirit was created so that all felt part of something greater than their own role.’
The food grown in the garden is for the inmates to keep. To eat or share around on the wing. Steve tells me that some of the men had never tasted a salad leaf, or fresh vegetable. But they have come to love what they grow, their lettuces, herbs and fruit. Consider this against the dispiriting scenario described by the Howard Trust: Prisons are so unhealthy that people are considered to be old at 50 years of age. The poor diet, lack of exercise, lack of sunshine and daylight make for poor physical health. Many people going into prison have already lead unhealthy lives and the prison regime compounds that. The budget for food per prisoner is less than £2 per day. Cuts in staff numbers means that prisoners often get no outside exercise, etc.

The evaluation report describes how prisoners were seen to be supporting each other in countless ways, with gardening tasks, making each other beverages, supporting each other with literacy and numeracy skills, even recognising when someone was having a difficult day and offering help and solace. The warmth and kindness shown them by Robin and Steve, who guide the garden work, and Paul Evans, who manages the project, were noted by all the prisoners whose diaries formed part of the evaluation. It is great to be part of a team, it makes you proud to see what we have done together. We have achieved quite a lot.

Convicted criminals bring to prison issues that evolve directly from poverty, social inequality, broken homes, schools and communities, illness, alcoholism and addiction and estrangement. Every day prison reality is grim, brutal, demeaning. In a piece entitled ‘Britain’s prisons reek of a desperately backward nation’ Sir Simon Jenkins, journalist and editor, says: Not only does Britain imprison far more of its citizens than any other country in Europe, it imprisons for more offences and for longer terms, and is obsessed with incarcerating women and children. The British are prison addicts. We scour the country for reasons to imprison. Historic sex abuse is our latest obsession. Every week someone over 60 is jailed for actions unreported 30 or 40 years ago. In the past year, 700 people have been sent to jail for this crime, making up about half of the rise in the prison population. Seen in this light, or darkness, growing flowers for bees in prison gardens might offer new perspectives for ‘securing our world’. BIRTH OF BEE COLONY

The swarm so keenly awaited by the prisoners duly happened. Thousands of bees poured from the hive to rise heavenwards and join together in a wild dance, circling in the heights with joyful abandon, each bee perfectly attuned to all others. Imagine the sheer delight of a swarm within those walls! Please stay, dear bees, don’t fly over the fence, will have been on the mind of all who stood watching the formation wavering to and fro, coming breathtakingly close to the razor-wired wall – hovering – moving back again towards the garden. The bees finally settled on the canopy of the newly installed sun hive. Who chooses to end the dance, who decides where to land? That which guides the wisdom-filled rhythms of the hive eludes us, is not accessible to what can be gleaned by our ordinary senses.

The bees now had to be coaxed from the canopy of the hive into the hive proper. Steve and two prisoners stepped into the breach, all hopes upon them. Security had to relent and put back the two prisoner’s lock-up time. They had been on the bee course, and now nothing could go forward without them. After four exhausting hours atop a high ladder, and a series of trial and error manipulations to get the great cluster to move inside the hive, the bees were in the sunhive at sunset. A truly fantastic achievement for Steve and his men. Their exhilaration was boundless. The first swarm is a happening never to be forgotten.

The project’s open day celebration was a great success. Our bee conservation project is truly rewarding, says project manager Paul Evans. ‘The bees received massive attention, they were out in force. We were watching them closely. We think they feel at home now. So we now have our very own Rye Hill bees in our Rye Hill made sun hive, in a garden we created together,’ Steve wrote, ‘Do I sound proud or what?’ We all share Steve’s sense of pride, as well as his sadness upon learning that Rye Hill prison which already houses nearly 700 inmates, is destined to become a mega-prison. A large area earmarked for flowering meadows has been withdrawn to make space for more cell blocks.

The bees responded with unequalled fecundity as if to assert themselves and blazon their message in this strange world where prisons grow faster than flowers. They are knowing, the bees. Thanks to social media we now get instant news about them:

Stephen Hammond @steveh9491 May 17 So excited, no sleep yet. First swarm collected & only one sting. Not bad.
Stephen Hammond @steveh9491 May 26 Bees swarm again at HMP Rye Hill, witnessed incredible scenes and still had the luck to collect and add to 2nd sunhive with inmates help.
Stephen Hammond @steveh9491 May 27 Quite amazing 3 swarms from 1 hive in 11 days, have some great photos for you. Great work from the prisoners at HMP Rye Hill.
Stephen Hammond @steveh9491 May 27 Bees must love it at HMP Rye Hill, 3 swarms in 11 days, from 1 to 4 hives in the blink of an eye. Plus 4 baby wagtails in raised beds.

Whitsun at Rye Hill prison 2015. Three sun hives alive with bees. Many thousands of bees have swarmed into the prisoners’ lives from the mother hive. Three new bee colonies born within those walls. When I returned recently with Peter Brown to inspect the new colonies, we were delighted to find that the bees had already caused much wonder and excitement. The sunhives, mounted high, make for a strong presence in the prison yard. Where previously the eye travelled inexorably to the razorwire on top of the wall, one cannot but look up to the bees now. A gracious change indeed.

Those of us privileged to bring to Rye Hill prison biodynamic rye, sun hive making skills, as well as bees and their wondrous ways, share a deep sense of gratitude – for the kindness we have met, for the hope embodied in the growing gardens, and all the people who have opened their hearts to the bees. The bees are doing good work here, they are loved and most keenly observed. Now the prisoners will learn how to take care of them through the seasons of the year. They will be bee guardians. Bees are in the lives now. May it help them and offer much solace and understanding.

Bees always foster change in the lives that they touch. They are good at that, it’s what they do best.