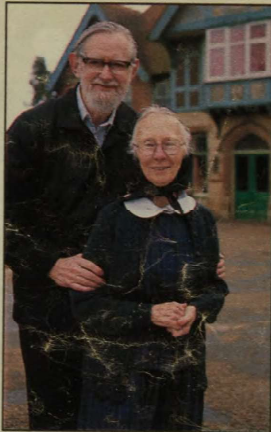


# Have these villagers found heaven on earth?



**Above: Old-timers John and Gwen Hinde joined the Bruderhof 50 years ago**

Enter the check-shirted, headscarfed world of the Bruderhof and the problems of modern-day life fade away. This religious community's 300 members, tucked away in the Sussex countryside, share their children, jobs, possessions and meals. They never marry "outsiders" and divorce is forbidden. Sarah Sands reports

**T**he simple wooden sign at the top of the winding driveway leads to Darvell, home of Britain's 300 Hutterian Brethren, a religious community who spend their lives working together for peace.

Fiona and David Hibbs discovered Darvell while out for a summer's walk in Robertsbridge, Sussex. It was 1987 and the former Army nurses were on holiday with their children, Olivia and Bernard.

"The drive leading to the main house put us off at first," smiles Fiona as she pours a cup of tea in their dining room-kitchen. "But something about it must have gripped us because later, when we were heading back to the hotel, we decided to walk up the drive and explore."

"A woman came out, and when Dave saw her checked dress and spotted headscarf, he realised that we'd found the Bruderhof."

"I'd read that they were

a Christian community who had grown up in Germany during the 1920s, with the aim of working and living in peace, and that they were totally opposed to warfare and violence," explains David.

"The brothers and sisters had moved all over the world during the first and second world wars because of their beliefs. I knew only one community now existed in

**'Our children learn to love each other, not hate each other'**

England, and was thrilled when I realised we'd discovered it."

"That day we saw their homes, the school, and the workshops," says Fiona. "We were bowled over but we couldn't explain why. When we went home to Surrey we kept in touch with the brothers and sisters."

"In November, 1989, we sold our home and arrived with our books and a few bits and pieces for the kitchen. We've never regretted it."

Under a kitchen window looking out on to some of the Bruderhof's 75 acres, Fiona's two pet quails, Fili and Kili, sit in their cage. Fiona, 41, is dressed in a traditional red and green check dress and white blouse and David, like all the brothers, wears

a checked shirt with black trousers, and a beard.

Both admit their families were horrified when they joined.

"I'm sure they linked it with the flower-power era," laughs Fiona. "They were disgusted, but at first only a handful of people came here with their family's blessing. People on the outside think we're a funny bunch until they visit us and see how happy we are. Then the barriers are broken down."

Through the open window filters the sound of children walking to school. The smaller ones, towed along in small, wooden wagons by their parents, are heading for the baby house and the kindergarten.

In the nearby harvest house are the kindergarten children. Edna Ben-Eliezer is in charge of the energetic four-year-olds gathered round the table in the centre of the room. Together, they are making "cookies" from purple modelling dough.

Edna, red-cheeked and slightly breathless, was born into the Bruderhof. Her parents live in one of the six American communities, but two years ago Edna moved to the Robertsbridge settlement.

"I lived on the outside for seven months and worked in a home for the handicapped in Ohio," says 28-year-old Edna. "Going outside helped me decide to stay in the Bruderhof. At the home everyone was constantly talking about someone else behind their back. That life wasn't for me."

In the summer, Edna married the community's doctor. Marriage to people from outside the Bruderhof is forbidden — and so is divorce.

"We don't need it," explains 73-year-old brother John Hinde. "Brothers and sisters are given time to get to know each other beforehand, but there's definitely no sex before marriage. Here, family life, stability and commitment still mean something. Outside, everyone says 'til death us do part'. But how many keep to it?"

"When a problem does arise in a marriage here, the couple fight



**Above: The Hibbs family Right: Lunch-time in the dining hall at Darvell and all the generations sit down together**



**Left: Edna busy in the kindergarten with the future Bruderhof**







**WOMAN'S WEEKLY  
EXCLUSIVE  
INTERVIEW**

the thing through until they get straight again."

At 12.15pm the 300 brothers and sisters gather in the dining hall. Two or three generations of one family sit at long tables. They open their red song books to sing a short hymn before helping themselves to the bowls of steaming food. Today it is spaghetti bolognese and, after grace, all that can be heard is the clatter of knives and forks on plastic plates.

John and his wife Gwen joined the Bruderhof in the 1930s. Both were disillusioned with life and the threat of a second world war.

The community was founded when Eberhard and Emmy Arnold started a Christian organisation, the Bruderhof, and in 1930 the group joined the 400-year-old Hutterian Church. Thousands of people from across Europe visited the communities to see how they worked together in peace. But in 1937, as Hitler's iron grip took hold of Germany, Gestapo guards stormed the communities, giving the brothers and sisters 48 hours to leave. They fled to England.

"Hitler didn't like our stand against war," says John, "so a community was set up in Wiltshire, the Cotswold Bruderhof. When things became a bit difficult for the Germans and English living there,



**Main photo: The Greenyer family outside their home  
Above: In the kitchen, cooking for the masses  
Left: Home from school in hand-made wagons**

the community moved to Paraguay. It was the only place they could go together.

"I'd been an insurance broker at Lloyd's in London, where I got involved with the pacifist movement and met the Bruderhof. I thought they were funny people in funny

**'We arrived with our books and a few bits for the kitchen'**

clothes until I visited the Cotswold Bruderhof and saw these people working alongside each other. I decided to join and at the end of 1940, when they fled to Paraguay, I went with them.

"At first, my father was bitter because he thought he'd lost a son. But my brother kept in touch and we feel a lot of warmth and respect for each other."

The Bruderhof finances itself by making high-quality wooden toys,

classroom furniture and equipment for the disabled. All the brothers and sisters are allocated jobs which are changed regularly. Mark Greenyer is a supervisor in one of the workshops.

"I've been here for 19 years, but was born in a community in Shropshire in a converted chicken house — our delivery room," he laughs. "When I was 13 my parents left the Bruderhof. I did some social work in London, and taught in Ghana with the VSO, but it didn't fulfil me. I came back to the community when I was 25."

Then Mark was sent to the Woodcrest community in America. There he met his future wife, Sue, and they now have five children aged between four and 14.

"My parents joined when I was five," 44-year-old Sue told me, as we chatted in the family kitchen.

The walls are lined with jars of herbs and spices, identified by red-and-white checked labels; their children's crayoned pictures are on the walls.

"People may find our lifestyle hard, because you keep nothing for yourself, but we are a family-centred community, and that means a lot."

The brothers and sisters receive no wages. But their day-to-day needs are catered for. New clothes are supplied by the sisters in the sewing room; when a couple marry, a home is furnished for them, and children go to the Bruderhof school until they are 14.

"Maybe our children are a little sheltered," says Fiona Hibbs. "But at least they're not so exposed that they lose their values in life. They learn to love, not hate each other. That's not such a bad thing, is it?"

Photos: David Porter