



**STATEMENT FROM JOHN WHITTLES (BEE-ZOOKA LTD. COMPANY DIRECTOR)
RE: MASONBEES.CO.UK, @UK_MASONBEES & #BEEGUARDIAN PROJECT**

March 2023

Friends. Followers. Guardians...

At the time of writing, it has been almost a year since @uk_masonbees last posted on social media, around six months since anyone replied to an email or answered the phone, and just over four months since the last fulfilled order was dispatched.

So...what on Earth happened? How did it come to this? And where do **bee** go from here?

My name is John and since 2019, I have been the sole person running all day-to-day operations at MasonBees.co.uk. During this time, I have been responsible for processing and packing all web orders, answering all telephone enquiries and emails, and producing all written content for the website, including product guides, presentations, and social media posts. Alongside my bee-commerce duties, I have also been managing all aspects of the #BeeGuardian Project, which has grown from a few hundred participants to almost three thousand in a few short years.

The company behind this website, Bee-zooka Limited, (formerly MasonBees Limited), is based at my parent's house in Shrewsbury, where I have been living and working since 2017. The company was originally set up by my dad, Chris, as an agricultural pollination business, and my first involvement came in 2016, when I designed the first website. It was only after I had moved back home and accompanied my dad to a farm that I fell in love with Red Mason bees and began working for the business.

Although Dad and I managed to work together for a few years he ultimately ended up leaving the company in early 2020. I didn't feel that it was possible to replace him at that time, so when he stopped working, I just doubled down on my own efforts. I began working virtually every waking moment for the business in the hope that, with enough grafting, I could accrue enough Guardians, cocoons, and money in the bank to finally move the business out of the family home and set up somewhere else.

Things were going to plan, for a time – sales and social media followers grew, along with Guardian participation and our collective cocoon population. However, the better the business did, the harder it was for me to sustain on my own – and despite working 70+ hours a week for months on end, I was still struggling to get everything done. In May 2022, after cocoons had been distributed to Guardians, I took a break from day-to-day operations to focus on finding a new premises and place to live. It was my intention to relocate during the summer of 2022 – however, at this time, due to rising running costs, and the 'new normal' of drought and heatwave in the UK, I was becoming increasingly uncertain whether the business was even viable, let alone moveable...

Unable to make any progress with a relocation, I returned to work, but increasingly felt unable to fulfil even the most basic duties. For the first time I began to question if what I was attempting was achievable, or even worthwhile... As my workload mounted, there was further turmoil, as my dad was admitted to hospital with serious heart problems and



scheduled for a major operation. Eventually, after feeling increasingly overwhelmed over the course of the summer, I just sort of shut down. I can't really explain what happened, other than to say that a lot of what I was doing pretty much stopped... I stopped reading emails, stopped answering the phone, and stopped going out... I lost all my motivation and didn't leave the house for a very long time. It's not until recently, when a close friend physically came to the house to check on me, that things began to improve.

Although I have struggled to keep up with many elements of the business during this crisis, there has been one element that, even at my lowest point, I have been able to keep going: the #BeeGuardian Project. When the Returns Service opened in September, I had expected the worst – but I received a lifeline, instead. During the Autumn, almost **1,400** Guardians returned packages, containing a combined total **over 35,000** occupied tubes and **400** observation drawers. Processing the returns was a much-needed distraction from everything else going on, and by October 2023, Dad was also out of hospital and well enough to volunteer his time to open tubes. So, we got to work....

In total, **175,000** Red Mason bee cocoons were extracted, along with **9,000** cocoons of other solitary species – all of which have been screened, sorted, and stored, ready to be redistributed to Guardians this Spring.

Despite collective trends being generally downward from the last season, there wasn't a universal decline amongst all Guardians, and there were even some success stories among the results – which, given the context of extreme weather and our administrative failings, is quite remarkable, really. And, even though we have fewer bees than in 2022, 175,000 cocoons still represents our **second-highest collection ever** – which is more than enough to resupply all current Guardians for the 23/24 season, with potentially some surplus to recruit a few new Guardians as well.

At the time of writing, the homepage of the website has been updated to reflect the current situation, and an FAQ has been compiled, based on key questions from the many answerphone messages and emails that have built up over the past few months. Following the publication of this statement, my utmost priority for the immediate future is to complete the delivery of our 2022/23 season – and I'm confident this can be achieved. This means that, before the end of March 2023...

- all relevant Guardians will be issued with a Bee-port Card
- Season Survey and Cocoon Request Forms will be made available on our website
- 2023 cocoon deliveries will be scheduled, and Guardians notified of arrival dates.

I want to take this opportunity to apologise sincerely for my recent failings, and to reassure all those reading this that I want nothing more than to keep the business, and the #BeeGuardian Project, going. The future beyond delivering the above is uncertain, and I recognise that there is work to do to re-instate the company, to get our accounts in order, and that, in the long term, restructuring is required to ensure this situation cannot arise again. These are daunting, but exciting prospects – but, provided I can find the help I'm looking for, I'm hopeful for the future and confident that in the end, everything will **bee** OK.

Thanks for reading.

John Whittles
Director, Bee-zooka Ltd.