

Beemaster

**The Newsletter of the
Nottinghamshire Beekeepers' Association
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Cover photo: Bee on *Eryngium giganteum* (back in the summer), Stuart Humphreys

Other photo credits: Griff Dixon (pages 7&8), Stuart Humphreys (p10), Anne & Rob Mason (pp20-22)

Please note:

Beemaster is published monthly. Contributions by 25th of prior month, please, to the Editor. Copy received after this date may have to be held over to the next Beemaster. The Editor retains the right to amend submitted articles or to reject articles which appear, in his opinion, to be unsuitable. Views expressed in Beemaster articles are not necessarily those of the Editor and may not reflect the opinions of the Council of the Nottinghamshire Beekeepers' Association.

Diary dates

Next **Zoom meeting** to be held on Monday, 10 December

Association in-person meetings remain cancelled until further notice.

Members should keep an eye on the excellent **NBKA website** which is regularly updated.

www.nottsbees.org.uk

Thursday,
10 December 7.30pm

Nottingham region meeting (by Zoom)

Bob Smith NDB will give a talk.

The subject is yet to be decided but Bob will say a few words about the Central Association of Beekeepers, of which he is the Chairman, as many of us, especially new members, may not have come across this group.

Saturday,
19 December 7.30pm

Bees Abroad Virtual Christmas Quiz (via Eventbrite)

Hosted by **Professor Adam Hart**

See www.beesabroad.org.uk or contact Anne Mason.

Monday,
4 January 2021

Nottingham region meeting (by Zoom)

Pam Hunter – “Natural isn’t always Nice”

Saturday, 30 January
4.00pm

BIBBA webinar

“Beekeeping. What’s it all about?”

Monday, 1 February

Nottingham region meeting (by Zoom)

Julia Hoggard – “Beeswax and New Comb”

Monday, 1 March

Nottingham region meeting (by Zoom)

David Evans – “Queen Rearing”

Saturday, 13 March
9.30am – 5.00pm

BIBBA webinar

“Introduction to Beekeeping”

In addition, the Newark region is holding informal meetings by Zoom. Please contact Paula Duckworth (see previous page) for details.

The NBKA website contains back issues of *Beemaster* from January 2019 onward.

From the Editor

Stuart Humphreys introduces this month's newsletter

As Tier 3 beckons, welcome to December's *Beemaster*! As the days grow ever shorter, I trust you will find something to interest – and perhaps even challenge – you.

You may have noticed on the previous page that the diary is starting to fill up again with various virtual meetings. This is very encouraging and, certainly, the two Zoom meetings held so far (top bar hives in October, a general Q&A session in November) have been well attended and well worth the effort by all involved.

As for the newsletter, my thanks to this month's contributors...

You will also have received an email from her, but **Janet Bates** provides a reminder of the forthcoming membership renewal at the end of the month.

Griff Dixon has his work cut out getting his apiary winter-ready, and can no longer put off the messy job of extracting heather honey from his supers, and looks forward to the BBKA's Annual Delegates Meeting in January.

In my 'View from the Vale' I go all hi-tech and use a thermal imaging camera to keep track of our colonies' winter clusters.

Despite noting that December is the quietest month for bees and their keepers, **Penny Forsyth** still finds plenty for us to think about (and do) in the month ahead. Penny also provides an update on the Asian Hornet Team: just the one sighting on the UK mainland so far in 2020.

Following last month's articles on top bar hive beekeeping, **Mick Flower** and **Alison Brown** provide a passionate defence of this approach. Whilst I count myself more in the 'minimise swarming/maximise honey' camp, some of the aspects of 'natural' beekeeping that Mick and Alison describe have certainly made me think.

On another controversial subject – but this time one on which I'm sure we're all agreed – **Rob Mason** discusses the Honey Authenticity Project and its shocking revelation, much reported in the media recently, of widespread adulterated honey in UK supermarkets.

In the latest of our occasional series on 'Bees in my garden', **Anne and Rob Mason** are full of admiration for the leafcutter bee.

Anne follows this with an update on much-needed fundraising activities for Bees Abroad, and asks for your help if at all possible.

And, last but not least, **Linda Jordan** provides us with two recipes (one with, one without alcohol) for seasonal tipples.

I hope you enjoy the read.

Stay safe and have a Merry Christmas!

Membership renewal 2021

A message from **Janet Bates**, Membership Secretary

I hope you have found 2020 membership of NBKA worthwhile, despite the COVID restrictions that have hampered us all.

Membership of NBKA (plus BBKA and BDI, Bee Diseases Insurance) is due for renewal at the end of the year, 31 December. Members who joined after 1 September 2020 have membership until 31 December **2021**.

I will be sending online renewal invitations via the eR2 email system during December. Please make sure that I have an up-to-date email address for you.

Subscription fees remain unchanged, yet again, for 2021. You may not be aware that our full membership fee of £25.00 is one of the lowest in the country and is excellent value for money. An increase is likely for the following year as the BBKA subscriptions are due to rise.

Many of you pay by standing order, often around 3 January, so all you will need to do is to check that the online form is correct, make any necessary alterations and submit it. I will pick up your subs from the bank statement.

If you don't pay by standing order then the preferred method is by bank transfer. Please put your NAME+Initials (or membership number)/2021SUBS on the reference box. Cheques are also accepted. Payment details will appear after your form is submitted.

When your form has been submitted and payment made, your membership certificate/receipt will be emailed to you.

Looking forward to a better 2021 for beekeeping!

Notes from Norwell

By **Griff Dixon**, including his Honorary Secretary's report

In the apiary

BeeBase has circulated a **starvation** and **varroa** alert. Observations from beekeepers and bee inspectors across the UK suggest that some colonies of bees are becoming short of food. Please monitor your colonies throughout the coming months and feed as required to ensure your bees do not starve. A standard full size British National colony needs between 20-25kg of stores to successfully overwinter. If they need feeding at this time then fondant should be used. This should be placed above the brood nest so that the bees are able to access it easily.

November was a bit wet with the van only having to be pulled out of the mud with a tractor the once. Also, the power steering has been fixed so the grinding noise has gone away; glow plugs next, as cold and damp starting is a bit of a nightmare. A new battery has helped.

My beekeeping in November was principally about taking all the feeders off for cleaning and storage once the bees stopped taking the sugar syrup down. Some of the remaining syrup was actually warm from the nest body generating heat. The clusters have been covered over and carpet added for insulation. I found one hive where the colony had collapsed due to starvation – a full syrup feeder was present – but they decided not to feed from it.

I had a similar occurrence last year with a full colony collapse from starvation where the queen and a few workers were left standing on the end comb. This time round I found the queen but no escorts. I wasn't sure if she was just on her last legs so I put her with some super combs that had some bees on. They immediately surrounded her, which was quite amazing to watch and reassuring in a sense that they cared for her.

Alas, a few days later when I did a quick check she was nowhere to be found, so I think she didn't make it. I will need to add these bees to another hive so they survive the oncoming cold weather.



Bee design face mask Van got stuck in the mud Syrup feeders off and carpet on Colony starved in spite of sugar syrup available Dead bees nose first into cells searching for food

Many thanks to Linda Jordan for the face mask made from bee-designed material – I have worn it to the supermarket several times. Also, thanks again to Maurice for assisting me in moving my entire Readyfield Farm apiary back two metres so that the farmer could get his hay trailer past without dropping bales onto the hives. Beekeeping is really a two person occupation at times; heavy hives get a lot lighter when there is two of you. Investing in a hive moving crane is a bit beyond the budget at the moment.

I have taken some photographs of various clusters in both wooden and poly hives. The poly hives all seemed to have a much broader cluster and were noticeably warmer as you could feel the heat. The wooden ones a much tighter cluster as they try to keep warm.



Workers surrounding rescued queen

National polyhive cluster

National wooden hive cluster

Preparation for heather honey extraction

I have started to gather together all the things required to extract the heather honey: honey press, comb cutter, honeycomb boxes, and various tools to scrape the cells off. Not looking forward to the very messy method required to extract it! I have my wax renderer ready to take all the spent combs and all the remaining pressed wax plus the various super and brood frames I have collected over the season. The resulting wax will be used at Thornes as an exchange when I have it all lumped together.

And here's the heather honey extraction in progress...!



NBKA matters

The BBKA's Annual Delegates Meeting in January will be held online. This will determine any changes to its constitution proposed by associations. Various decisions such as the budget and the proposed £2 membership uplift will also be voted upon. I have taken part in an online practice run with BBKA and ER2, using my PC for the Zoom meeting and my phone as the voting pad. It is odd seeing it all online with the proposals and voting system. A lot of hard work has been put in by Martin Smith and BBKA staff to enable all this. I have no doubt it will all come together on the day with all the associations present. I expect our AGM will be online once the Council takes the decision to do it this way.

We are still looking at how Beginners Courses might be undertaken in 2021. BIBBA are offering a basic free Zoom introduction online and a fee-paid follow-up. These webinars might be of interest to help prospective beekeepers in our area:

"Beekeeping. What's it all About?" Saturday, 30 January 2021 4.00pm

A one-hour presentation that gives the absolute basic information to help potential beekeepers decide if they should go further. Topics covered will include: time needed, costs, suitable site, sound information sources, etc. This will be free.

"Introduction to Beekeeping" Saturday, 13 March 2021 9.30am-5.00pm

Based on a successful one-day event that has been running for 15 years, this event covers everything potential beekeepers need to know in order to take the next step. It doesn't teach enough for people to start, but it encourages attendees to contact their local BKA, where they can learn more. There is a modest cost of £15.

There is no reason why NBKA cannot do presentations to our own prospective new members and keep it in-house. I have discussed this with the Education Secretary who agrees that we should look to do this in-house.

Finally, thank you to those members that invested in the Stuart Ching books; we still have a couple of copies left.

View from the Vale (of Belvoir)

How bees are faring in the south-eastern corner of Notts by **Stuart Humphreys**

All quiet in our apiary now that all the colonies are hunkered down for winter. One or two bees venture out for water or to visit the last flowering plant in our garden, a *clematis cirrhosa* var. *purpurascens* 'Freckles' that climbs high up in a laburnum tree and flowers from November right through to late spring. Occasionally, we find the odd bee that has been caught out by the cold and try to revive her through a combination of warmth and honey. Otherwise, there isn't a great deal to do.

Over the years we have bought plenty of beekeeping items that seemed like a good idea at the time but now just take up space in the garage. (Thorne's 'swarm trap' is one such that arguably made some sense when work commitments left little time for weekly inspections but, now we are retired, is pretty much redundant.) One purchase I don't regret, however, is a thermal imaging camera that plugs into my smart phone. This might seem like an indulgence (and indeed it is, though I think we may originally have bought it to try to identify a leaking hot water pipe!). Although straightforward monitoring of the debris on varroa trays tells you much about what is going on inside each hive, we find it fascinating to monitor the size of and movement of the winter clusters using this hi-tech gadget. The lighter coloured patches in the image below show the heat being generated by a couple of our colonies, our largest one being on the right. NB. The dark-coloured, i.e. cold, roofs indicate that the carpet tiles we use to insulate the crown boards are working effectively to prevent heat loss.



On or around the winter solstice we will give the bees their annual oxalic acid treatment. As a 'reward' (a bit like the sugar lump we would be given at school following an inoculation) we have fondant ready to give to them early in the New Year. As Penny says overleaf, if the bees don't want it, they'll leave it, but better safe than sorry...

This month in your apiary: December

Penny Forsyth finds there are still a lot of things to think about as the nights draw in

December is the quietest month for bees and beekeepers alike. Our bees are in their winter cluster – secure, warm, dry and well-provisioned if we beekeepers have done our job properly – and will not be seen outside the hive unless on a cleansing flight or to collect water.

The population of each hive is now very much diminished, as few as 5,000 bees, and these form a cluster with the queen and remaining brood at the centre. The priority now is heat conservation and the protection of queen, brood and colony through the coldest months of the year. The cluster is formed with an outer shell of bees facing inwards, abdomens outwards, creating an insulating layer against heat loss: the bees can also protrude their stings should an intruder threaten the cluster. Within this outer shell the bees can move freely and can access their stores – vital as they maintain heat in the centre of the cluster by eating honey and vibrating their strong flight muscles. Larvae also produce heat by consuming food.

During a broodless period the temperature within the cluster is between 20-30C. The cluster can expand or contract to maintain this range and ensure that the outer wall does not get too cold. Bees from the centre will change places with bees from the outer layer to give them some time in the warmth and the cluster will loosen from time to time in order to move to a new area of stores. In very cold weather the bees may be unable to move far enough and can perish through isolation starvation – beekeeper vigilance is required here.

Regularly checking the varroa floor inserts for signs of uncapping will show you if the bees are working through their stores. Importantly, this will indicate the position of the cluster, which will help you to work quickly and effectively if you need to move food frames closer or wish to apply an oxalic acid treatment by the trickle method.

In the apiary there is little to do other than to continue checking that hives are intact and sound and that entrances are not blocked by snow, debris or dead bees. Check also that your equipment stacks haven't shifted and developed gaps to let in water or unwelcome visitors. A couple of hefty bricks on top will keep roofs secure. If your apiary is in an exposed or windy spot then rope and pegs might be a better option and you may wish to think about extra hive insulation.

It is very important to regularly heft the hives to estimate the amount of stores remaining and to take action if there is cause for concern – a quick look in does no harm if you suspect isolation starvation to be a risk. Many beekeepers give their bees a present of fondant on Christmas Day, and why not? They will ignore it if they don't need it and it will be welcome if they do.

Around New Year there is often a broodless period when oxalic acid treatment can be applied: on a still day put on suit, gloves and veil and work quickly with warmed solution. If using the sublimation method, be sure to wear adequate protection: if inhaled, the vapour can crystallise in the lungs. Winter is also a good time to move hives as the bees aren't flying so you can ignore the "less than 3 feet or more than 3 miles" rule: the bees will re-orientate when they start flying again in warmer weather.

In common with other wasp and hornet species, Asian hornet colonies will have dwindled away and the newly mated queens will be hibernating. Look out for them tucked away in roofs and stored boxes and don't forget to check sheds, garages and leaf litter. Keep an eye open for any signs of old nests in trees, hedges or shrubbery.

Jobs for December



Pay attention to hive insulation and ventilation.



Continue to visually check hives and equipment stacks.



Continue to heft the hives to estimate stores; feed if required.



Keep track of the cluster by regularly checking the varroa floor insert.



Continue to monitor varroa drop.



Treat with oxalic acid if that is part of your Integrated Pest Management plan.



Maintain vigilance for the presence of Asian hornets and their nests.



Continue to clean and repair last season's equipment – soda crystals and a blowtorch are your best friends here.



Make up all the flatpacks you bought in the sales.



Make up plenty of frames but don't wax them until you need them.



Read and learn, watch some of the excellent talks available online or join in some webinars, maybe sign up for a course.

Happy Christmas!

NBKA Asian Hornet Team news

Penny Forsyth reports on the current UK situation

There have been no further reports of Asian hornets or their nests since the Gosport sighting in September. A recent APHA/DEFRA paper suggests, although not conclusively, there is no single established population occupying southern England. The story may well be a different one in 2021 if the hoped-for lifting of COVID-19 restrictions brings a return to normal freight and tourist traffic and activity, the most obvious conduit for this invader.

A post on the Jersey Asian Hornet Group Facebook page highlights this: the Asian hornet found in Hamburg was from the European population rather than a new introduction from Asia and must have been transported at least 350km from a known area of incursion. Another incursion into Europe is highlighted by Dr. Xesus Feas on the Asian Hornet Action Team Facebook page, where he posts information about the first sightings of Asian hornets in Luxembourg and the subsequent discovery of a nest. The threat from the Asian hornet has not gone away: Asian Hornet Teams need to be ready.

In the Channel Islands no further Asian hornet nests have been found since No. 38 on 22 September. However, a very lively small queen was found on 7 November and dissected after being frozen overnight to determine whether or not she had been mated. The results were inconclusive but what it did show was that small Asian hornets should not be discounted as possible queens: the previous criteria on size may no longer be accurate.

The Jersey Asian Hornet Facebook page has new footage of Asian hornets, much of it in French; a bit of fun about Asian hornets as both tasty snack and beverage in China; some items on the Giant Asian hornet, known in the US as 'murder hornets'; and some rather worrying news about the effect of projectile liquids being ejected from Asian hornets when their nests are approached. It is not known yet whether this is a defensive tactic or simply a case of insects voiding the contents of their rectums on leaving the nest, in these cases *en masse* as a result of disturbance. It is, however, another worrying factor to take into account when attempting nest destruction as the liquid is highly irritant and potentially damaging to the eyes. This observation further underlines the fact that Asian hornet nests should be approached with extreme care: there have been several deaths from Asian hornet attacks, mostly among farmers unwittingly disturbing nests but some as a result of imprudent attempts at removal. Don't take the risk, just remember: See it, Snap it, Send it! Non-Native Species Secretariat <http://www.nonnativespecies.org>

As winter approaches we are unlikely to see any Asian hornet activity: most of the workers will have died and this year's queens should be tucked away in some cosy nook or cranny to hibernate until warmer weather returns. Look for them wherever you might expect to find overwintering wasp queens or ladybirds. Old nests may, however, become visible as the last leaves fall so cast an eye regularly over bramble thickets, hedges and trees as you venture out and about. Winter is the ideal time to read and study: I would urge everyone to take time to learn as much as possible about this potentially devastating intruder. You can test your level of knowledge by completing the exercise on the BBKA website: <https://www.bbka.org.uk/asian-hornet-action-team-map>

Download the Asian Hornet Watch app to your smartphone and maybe think about joining the NBKA Asian Hornet Team as a Verifier, just email me at pennyforsyth16@gmail.com.

In defence of top bar beekeeping (1)

Mick Flower makes the case

I would like to reply to the recent criticism levelled at the top bar method of beekeeping.

I should start by saying that the purpose of my Zoom presentation in October was to describe my journey in beekeeping, why I choose the top bar route, and how I construct the hives.

My presentation deliberately contained no mention of varroa; not because I was avoiding the issue but because my brief was to explain the practicalities and potential problems associated with top bar hives, specifically drawing on my own experience.

The bees in my Kenyan top bar hive have just completed their fourth season. To the best of my knowledge they have never swarmed. Also, I have registered my bees on BeeBase; I am not hiding them.

As a beekeeper I am very grateful for the training I have received through our Association. By attending Association meetings I have been introduced to many beekeepers whose knowledge, skill and enthusiasm I both admire and respect. Despite the fact that I have moved down a differing beekeeping route, due to circumstances that I shared in my presentation, I hope that I will be able to continue attending meetings and to learn from others' experience and expertise.

So, let me address the criticisms that I feel have been levelled at top bar beekeepers like myself... Firstly, that we do not exercise swarm control.

Swarming is in honeybees' genetic make-up. It is their prime means of reproducing and they have been doing it to a greater or lesser extent for millions of years. Bees that are "living free", to use Roger Patterson's phrase, will naturally swarm out of choice, primarily because they have outgrown the cavity or hollow tree that they have colonised. In doing so they give themselves a natural brood break. Beekeepers have, in the last 150 years or so, taken it upon themselves to manage this swarming instinct and stop the brood break. If the bees swarm and there is a brood break, then there is a reduction in the honey that can be taken from that colony. I believe that avoiding this reduction is in the interest of beekeepers themselves, rather than in the interest of bees, and perhaps explains why so much emphasis is placed on swarm control.

My answer is that I do manage swarming. My bees are only inspected when I feel there is a need. They are, though, observed on an almost daily basis. Much can be deduced from watching the bees as they go about their daily routine. I am retired and two of my three hives are in my garden, so I can afford to spend time observing the comings and goings of my bees at very regular intervals. I try not to open my hives unless I sense that they are getting over-crowded and need more space within the hive. I am a firm believer that it takes bees considerable energy and effort to restore the brood nest to 35 degrees Celsius once someone has removed the roof and crown board.

Bees are happier at not being disturbed as valuable honey is not used up restoring the temperature and humidity levels that they have worked hard to achieve. However, I can perform all the regular beekeeping tasks such as making splits, queen rearing and artificial swarming in a top bar environment, if I find it necessary. With this approach, I would maintain that my bees remain relatively unstressed. They can make comb to their own specification, they can feed on the honey they produce and are not given sugar unless I think they are in danger of starving.

I did not start beekeeping in order to gain access to large quantities of honey. Nor did I take up beekeeping with any thoughts of selling honey. I am delighted to have bees in my garden and, if they can share a little honey, then that is a lovely bonus. It is ironic that I have had to go and buy honey this year as my bees have not produced much surplus! On the other hand, I have spent very little on hives, frames and equipment. I would hope that my philosophy can sit alongside those of you who look to maximise honey yields. I have never said that what you are doing is wrong; it is quite simply different to the way I have chosen to bee keep.

The second criticism relates to my approach to dealing with the problem of varroa.

My take on the thorny issue of varroa is that it has been around for the best part of 30 years and we have still not managed to eradicate it chemically. Surely it is time, for those of us motivated to do so, to try a different approach. My instinct is that we must give the bees a chance to develop their own means of living with the threat that varroa mites pose. There is evidence, hard evidence, that “free living” bees are in fact learning to ‘self-manage’ varroa infestations. This may be because the bees are free to organise a brood break by swarming and this naturally reduces the infestation back down to a level with which they can cope. The new colony is only carrying phoretic mites. Many of these will die off without a chance to reproduce as there are no brood cells present. This will enable the colony to start again with a much lower mite load. What this new colony will not do is produce a large surplus of honey. The old colony may be wiped out, but wax moths etc. can be relied on to do a pretty good job of cleaning everything up so the cavity can be re-colonised at some future point. In saying this I am not advocating that we allow our bees to become totally feral, but I do find it interesting that bees, left to their own devices, have begun to sort the problem out.

What I am personally doing to keep varroa levels tolerable in my hives is relatively simple. Firstly, I try to avoid feeding my bees, allowing them to consume the honey they have worked so hard to produce. Secondly, I do not ‘steal’ honey if this means I must supplement their food. I have, in the past, treated my bees by dusting them with icing sugar but I believe current evidence is showing that this is not particularly effective. I have also, on one occasion, removed a large section of drone brood but I do not think I will do this again as I have been reading about the necessity for a strong gene pool and the importance of drones in creating strong native bees.

Thirdly, I actively look to reduce the stress that I cause my bees. I try not to inspect too often. I build hives that are well insulated but not sealed so tight that water vapour cannot escape. I do not chase after queens in order to clip their wings, nor do I mark them with coloured dots. I am also fortunate that I live in an urban area with a wide variety of forage. I believe that these factors help reduce stress for my bees, reduce the urge to swarm and ensure that they are healthy and strong enough to thrive despite the varroa that will inevitably be present.

Finally, it could be said that my bees are a potential 'mite bomb'. The perceived wisdom is that my hives are likely to infect nearby apiaries. My counter-argument is that, if my bees are healthy and coping with their varroa load, they are capable of defending the hive and will not be 'robbed out' by other bees. The issue is not whether varroa mites are present. The issue is whether the varroa concentration can collapse the colony. If I suspect this is the case then I will of course exercise some aspect of varroa control. However, my first port of call would not be the shelves of chemicals at Thornes! Equally, if my bees were to succumb to heavy varroa infestation, the likelihood is that they would not survive the winter. As other bees are not in 'robbing' mode during the winter months, any remaining varroa mites would be dead by the time spring bees come round to investigate.

As my bees are provided with top bars, they have the luxury of being allowed to build comb to their own size specification. The lack of stress and an opportunity to self-govern provides them with the time to address the issue of the varroa mites in their midst. My Kenyan top bar hive, as I have said, has just completed its fourth season. The colony is calm, strong and purposeful despite never having been treated with chemicals.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I will happily continue to talk about the way I keep bees and how I build my hives to anyone who is interested. I also sincerely hope to continue learning from beekeepers who are more experienced and more knowledgeable than me.

I do, however, have lingering concerns regarding the negativity that my presentation has generated in some quarters. As an Association we should endeavour to debate constructively and not deter new members or those not wholly subscribing to conventionally accepted practice.

Thank you for taking the trouble to read my article. I am contactable on the Nottsbees-Naturally Facebook page if you wish to follow anything up.

In defence of top bar beekeeping (2)

Alison Brown asks for open, non-judgmental debate, and some kindness

I would like to respond to the article written in response to top bar beekeeping in the last issue of *Beemaster*.

Firstly, I'd like to address the fact that, as a group of people who have chosen to be beekeepers for all sorts of different reasons, not everyone is going to follow an identical approach or all share the same views, and quite frankly that is absolutely fine! Someone choosing to keep bees for honey harvest or commercial beekeeping is going to have entirely different priorities to someone keeping them to observe their behaviour and as pollinators.

It should, however, be a respectful environment where people can present different approaches and discuss them openly. I find it disappointing that what should be a supportive group can make an immediate judgement to state that without swarm control or varroa treatment our bees 'will die' and that, even more disappointingly, that we are 'not beekeepers'. Also, that despite having never had a top bar 'knowing they are not for beginners'...

The following may go some way to explaining my frustrations, aside from the obvious complete lack of manners. I am a microbiologist by trade so have a fairly solid grounding and interest in biological systems. Therefore, when we decided we wanted to start beekeeping, I did a huge amount of research into all aspects. My husband did a beekeeping course through Thorne to get a basic grounding, and I joined various social media groups, bought books, read up on websites and spent a lot of time with a good friend who has kept bees for several years.

During this time I came across top bar hives as a hive option. Upon reading more about this approach, it seemed to fit our ethos incredibly well. I suffer with my back following an ice skating accident as a child and we have two young children who we were keen to involve. Top bars allow you to work at a standing height without bending or heavy lifting. It is an incredible way to observe bee behaviour by watching them create comb from scratch and distribute brood, pollen, nectar and honey throughout the nest. I joined some top bar social media groups and read more books and websites. (Phil Chandler is an incredible source of information for anyone who's interested.)

After lots of conversations with my social media mentors, we bought our first hive and haven't looked back. We've found them to be wonderful for beginners and have learnt a huge amount about bee behaviour.

So, onto the controversial subjects of swarming and varroa treatment. Swarming is the way bees reproduce. It's part of their natural behaviour and has many advantages. It creates a brood break and helps reduce disease (there are several published papers available regarding this). Our hive swarmed and successfully raised a new queen with no intervention from us. There is no evidence to suggest our bees 'will die' as a result of allowing them to swarm. From a neighbourly aspect, we're extremely rural so bothering our neighbours isn't an issue, although I understand why this is a consideration for many and why people decide on artificial swarms. Again different people, different situations – all valid!

In terms of varroa, there are many published papers and a decent amount of research on the various treatments, resistance and genetics. No treatment for varroa is 100% effective, therefore most colonies will always have a mite count to some degree. The idea that non-treated colonies are 'mite bombs' is ridiculous. There are already mites in most colonies, so the odd bee drifting into neighbouring colonies carrying a mite is quite frankly going to make little difference. There are areas where people are consistently not treating, where colony losses are actually now lower than those of treated hives. There is also a very interesting paper on deformed wing virus (DWV) that showed that treatment, although reducing the varroa count, actually increased the prevalence of DWV, suggesting that treatment makes bees more susceptible to infections from viral diseases.

Rest assured that we're aware that we may lose some colonies over the years, but we have chosen to follow a Darwinian approach and to try and keep bees that are able to adapt and manage varroa loads. This is being done across the globe successfully and there are many studies available.

In summary, we are not uneducated fools blindly keeping bees and 'leaving them to die', actually quite the opposite. I hope to help build an environment with a greater level of mutual respect going forward in what I hope will become a welcoming and supportive space for beekeepers from all walks of life.

In a world where you can be anything, be kind.

What would Winnie the Pooh say?

Rob Mason reports on the Honey Authenticity Project

Did you know that we in the UK are allegedly the worst country in Europe for importing adulterated honey? The Honey Authenticity Project undertakes annual studies of what is actually in the honey that UK consumers buy. In their 2019 report they tested 11 different honeys purchased from supermarkets, and sampled 13 supermarket honeys in their 2020 report. The main sample criterion was low price.



All samples were found to be adulterated, i.e. were not what they said on the jar!

Amongst other things, adulterated honey may contain corn or sugar syrup to bulk out any honey used, thereby making it much cheaper to produce. This adversely affects honey producers around the world, including those in developing countries.

The honeys sampled in this year's study were tested in an accredited laboratory in Germany. They were bought from a wide range of supermarkets including Aldi, Co-op, Lidl, M&S, Morrisons, Poundland, Sainsburys, Tesco and Waitrose. The honey, according to the labels, was a "blend of EU and non-EU honey" and were cheap 'own brands' plus Rowse Squeezy Honey, all priced between £1.00 and £2.85.

As beekeepers with hopefully your own source of 'pure raw honey', you may think that these findings do not have any relevance to your own honey sales. However, low honey prices may well lead local consumers to question beekeepers' pricing when faced with alternative much cheaper honeys in the supermarket! Perhaps as beekeepers we should make our customers aware that they are paying for the 'real thing' and that cheap honey prices are not a good deal globally for anyone!

If you would like PDF copies of these brief reports from the Honey Authenticity Project 2018, 2019 and 2020, please email me (rob.mason7@btinternet.com) and I will gladly forward them to you. They make interesting if rather alarming reading! Alternatively, they are available at: www.honeyap.org.



Bees in my garden: Willughby's leafcutter bee

Anne and Rob Mason marvel at the leafcutter bee

With help from our grandchildren Evie and Archie, we have put up a number of different types of bee homes and bug hotels around our garden as you can see from the photos below. According to advice and what we have seen in RHS gardens, we place each bee home at approximately eye level in a sunny spot against a fence or post that receives plenty of sunshine. Over the last couple of years we have been very pleased to see that we do indeed have leafcutter bees, a type of solitary bee, both leafcutting (note the circles nibbled out of the leaves of a climbing rose) and nesting in the garden.



In particular, we have seen Willughby's leafcutter bees (*Megachile willughbiella*). These are named after the 17th century naturalist Francis Willughby, who first studied this larger species which can grow from 8mm to 12mm+ in length. Males are easier to identify with their distinctive flattened front tarsi (legs) compared to the females. This type of leafcutter bee is the most frequently seen in the British Isles and is widely distributed from the Isles of Scilly up to Scotland. However, they occur less frequently the further north you travel and BWARS (the Bees, Wasps and Ants Recording Society) is pleased to receive records of any sightings you may have.

Leafcutter bees are found in a variety of habitats including gardens, brownfield sites and certain agricultural settings. Depending on what type of leafcutter bee the adult might be, they emerge from their cells from May onwards and last briefly until late August. A female leafcutter bee lays each of her eggs within the cells she creates using small circular pieces of thin leaves such as those of *Persicaria* plants. She provides each egg with sufficient nectar and pollen so that the bee grub has plenty of food to eat before it transforms from its larval state into a pupal form over the autumn and winter before emerging as an adult 9-11 months later.

Watching these bees in the garden is a delight and absolutely fascinating! We have yet to see a leaf being nibbled by a bee, unfortunately. But we did witness a leafcutter bee busy carrying leaf circles into a bamboo tube nest situated on a fence close to where we were celebrating our granddaughter Evie's birthday one July, which made it even more memorable!

Eleven months later we took this bee home to show children at our local infant school and of all the days the bees chose to emerge, it was that one, much to the great astonishment of us all!

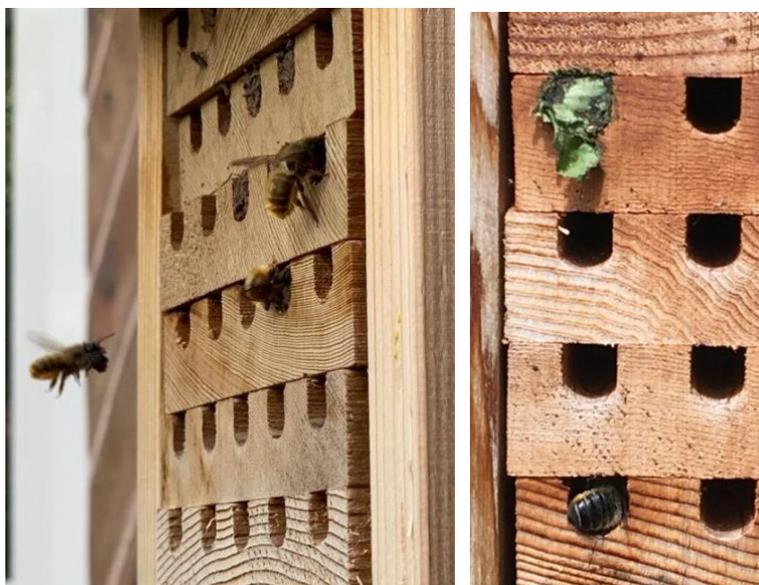


Leafcutter bees use tubular nests in wood including bee hotels, soil, hollow plant stems such as bamboo canes, and have even been recorded nesting in a length of hose in a greenhouse! Once the female leafcutter bees have found a hollow tube to their liking, they are very busy girls and depending on how long the tube is, may create up to 20 cells each with an egg in it. The last egg laid is the first to emerge!



Some commercially made solitary bee house hotels (ours is made by Panacea) come with detachable cardboard nesting tubes or wood trays with slots milled out that can be withdrawn once the bees have finished their egg laying season. Alternatively some allow you to see the cell building in progress by lifting a wooden cover at the side of the bee house to reveal the cells through a perspex window. However, creating or buying bee homes like these come with a note of caution in order to prevent bee parasites passing on viruses – sound familiar? Bamboo or cardboard tubes should be removed, burnt or composted every 1-2 years and replaced. The bee homes with removable trays need to be thoroughly cleaned once the adult bees have emerged before putting back in position again ready for a new brood.

Further guidance regarding providing bee homes for solitary bees can be found on the website www.foxleas.com 'The Pollinator Garden'; look for the heading 'What you can do' and 'Managing a bee hotel'.



Three useful books about bees in our gardens are two Haynes manuals ('Bee Garden' & 'Bee Hotel') and 'RHS Wildlife Gardening' by Kate Bradbury... maybe a thought for your Father Christmas list!

We have thoroughly enjoyed watching the bees in our garden and this year perhaps found the time to do a little more! Although we no longer keep honeybees there are plenty of bees to see from early in the year until autumn – something else to look forward to in 2021!

Bees Abroad update

When is a Bees Abroad Christmas raffle not a raffle? asks **Anne Mason**

When it's a **Just Giving** page...

If you would like to donate the amount you would normally buy in our annual Bees Abroad Christmas raffle please go to the **Just Giving** page below.

www.justgiving.com/fundraising/nbkabeesabroadchristmas2020

My target is to try and raise £250 towards the Rory's Well Project in Sierra Leone, a nutritional programme set up to support a remote rural community living in the rainforest. Bees Abroad is funding and delivering the beekeeping project with 400 hives set up. The honey processing aspect is the current focus, getting the honey and hive products packaged, ready for sale and to market.

Thank you to the NBKA President Alec Thomson for giving me permission to organise this 'alternative raffle'.



If you would like to purchase any of the two new Bees Abroad Christmas card designs featured please email me. Each pack costs £6 and has 5 cards.

Alternatively, if you would prefer to send an ecard, please go to www.DontSendMeACard.com and donate the cost of sending the e-card design (see right) to Bees Abroad.



Thank you!

Anne Mason (anne.mason3@btinternet.com Tel: 01159 223703)

Recipe of the month: Cranberry punch

A non-alcoholic recipe from **Linda Jordan**

Ingredients:

60ml (2 fluid oz) honey
120ml (4 fluid oz) orange juice
1 litre (1 ¾ pints) sparkling mineral water
200ml (7 fluid oz) cranberry juice
4 tablespoons tap water
1 stick cinnamon
1 small orange
Fresh cranberries and mint to garnish or
make into ice cubes (optional)

Method:

1. Put the orange juice, honey and cinnamon with the tap water into a small pan.
2. Heat gently to melt the honey, then boil briefly, leave to cool.
3. When ready to serve, put the cranberry juice, mineral water and slices of orange into a punch bowl with the prepared syrup.
4. Add the cranberries and leaves of mint or prepared ice cubes.

‘Lockdown 2’ bonus recipe: Mulled red wine

A ‘buzzy’ alternative, again courtesy of **Linda Jordan**

Makes 12 servings.

Ingredients:

2 bottles of cheap red wine
1.5 litres (2½ pints) water
6 tablespoons honey
1 stick cinnamon
3 oranges
2 lemons
2 teaspoons grated fresh root ginger
12 cloves
2 tablespoons brandy or liqueur (optional)

Method:

1. Stick the cloves into one of the oranges, all over the outside.
2. Put all the ingredients into a large saucepan and heat to simmering point. Do not boil.
3. Simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.
4. Serve immediately – with a warning about the heat!

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EXTRACTORS

Members may borrow the NBKA extractors - 4-frame, hand driven kept at Brackenhurst and hired from Maurice Jordan. An electric one (with settling tank) is held by Glenis Swift 0115 9538617. The EasyBee extractor which is useful for extracting frames that hold honey that has granulated is held by Frank Chambers in Calverton (0115 965 2128).

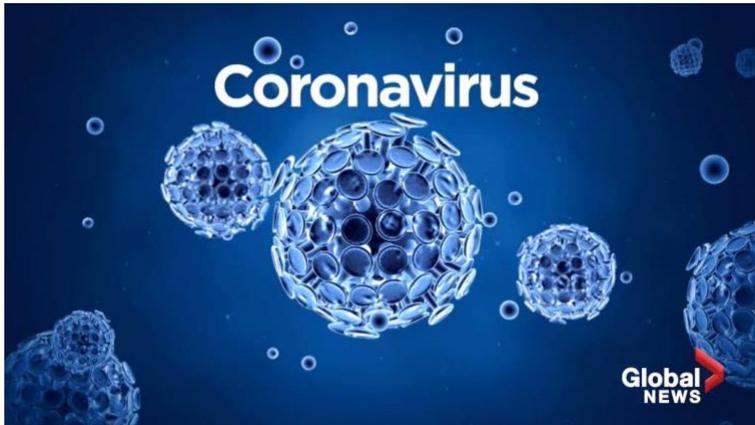
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Advertisements free to paid-up members but 10p per word – minimum charge £1 to non-members. Circulation approx 300 throughout the UK and abroad.

Short adverts may be paid for in First and Second Class postage stamps which should be sent directly to the Editor. Cheques should be made out to NBKA and sent to the Treasurer.



Beekeeping has many different challenges and this year is no different, except it us and not the bees in danger this time.

Bees are unaffected but we Beekeepers have to take great care when going to and handling our bees, collecting equipment, as well as the recommended distance between other people.

During the COVID 19 Virus crisis, The Honey Pot at Canal Street is open by appointment only to customers wanting Beekeeping Equipment and Honey etc. See our web site www.thehoneypot.store for up to date information.

BEEKEEPING MUST GO ON Whilst we are closed to the casual caller, you can arrange a weekday and a time to suit and meet you there individually maintaining our social distance.

CONTACT By email or send a message from the new web site.

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