



Wiltshire BKA

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HONEY BEE TIMES

Journal of the Wiltshire Beekeepers' Association



Royal bees – A first out-apiary – Spring tasks

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*John Chapple inspecting
the Queen's bees at
Buckingham Palace.
Photo: Richard Rickitt.*



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Editors' Report

Dear Wiltshire Beekeepers

It gives me great pleasure to introduce your latest copy of *The Honey Bee Times* – proof that even during a pandemic things change but some things remain the same. That is apart from the content, which I'm sure you'll agree is varied and interesting – from 'elephant proofing' your apiary to raising awareness of the small hive beetle, and from new beekeepers' experiences to first inspections in the 2021 season.

At the time of going to press we await the results of the vote at the WBKA Council meeting on 26 January to fill the vacant places on the WBKA Committee but they will be updated shortly after on the WBKA website www.wiltshirebeekeepers.co.uk. Do visit this to keep an eye on the events pages, which make it easy to find details of branch talks that you may want to listen in on via Zoom.

In speaking to beekeepers and bee farmers alike, 2020 was not a season to be remembered, not least due to the incursion on all our lives that a world-wide pandemic has made. However, I know that for those with bees, the simple task of checking they are flying, sitting watching them, delving into the brood nest or harvesting honey has helped keep



Stephen Auty

us sane and has been an element of normality during these torrid times.

I for one probably did more spring inspections than I can recall in recent times due to time away from work, and I think the colonies thrived as a result – certainly swarming was down for me although overall it was a busy year for the branch swarm co-ordinators.

I would like to pay tribute as I step back from the Chairman's role in WBKA to Brian Wilson and Frank Lenert (our outgoing General Secretary and Hon Treasurer) for the parts they have played over the past few years. Being an officer is a thankless task and can take up many hours and I thank them both for their devotion to their posts.

I also welcome Chris Rawlings as our new President – a familiar face to many – and a wise counsel to all.

Good luck to the new Committee!

*Stephen Auty, Co-editor Honey Bee Times
Outgoing Chairman, WBKA*



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It's Spring
and Summer
in a jar!

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Bees...



Branch reports

Kennet BKA

Thank goodness for beekeeping. While most people have been confined at home with little opportunity to venture out, we beekeepers have had legitimate reasons for going about our normal beekeeping activities, especially those with out-apiaries.

The damp, miserable spring last year changed to unseasonal warmth, accompanied by an early build up in a lot of hives resulting in strong colonies, although many members commented on the high number of swarms they had to deal with. Then, while the weather made it a perfect time to introduce our new beekeepers to the hobby, the Covid-19 distancing took its toll on apiary visits, training and branch monthly meetings in the village hall.

However, the committee worked hard on getting new beekeepers crucial, hands-on practice in a Covid-compliant way. We also managed to keep our monthly club meetings going via Zoom, and have been fortunate to have had some wonderful guest speakers. Many of us have also benefited from the presentations by other branches via Zoom.

It will be interesting to see how this year pans out, once the vaccination programme gathers pace. For now,

learning will continue via Zoom, as will our club nights, the next of which is on Wednesday 3 February, when Richard Rickitt, co-editor of *BeeCraft* magazine will present his talk entitled *Rolls-Royce to Rajasthan*. Richard will talk about some of the fascinating places he has visited and the people he has met while working on *BeeCraft*.

Future club nights will continue to run on the first Wednesday of each month, for now via Zoom.

On a different note, I thought I would share with you a story of a business that needed the help of a beekeeper. During the summer when the first lockdown had eased a little, I was approached by a business contact who was desperate for photos of bees. Sadly none of the numerous photos I had access to were what he was looking for. So we booted and suited him and took him along to the apiary where we spent the morning taking lovely photographs of the bees and their beautiful comb. I was pleased that my girls behaved themselves and no one got stung. You can imagine my pride when Steve confirmed that the images taken were going to be used on his company's new footwear. Check them out here:

www.backdoorshoes.co.uk

No, I'm not on commission; a missed opportunity perhaps. But



well done to Steve and his team at Backdoor Shoes for using bees in their latest promotion – anything that raises the profile of bees is welcome. Happy beekeeping.

Elaine Lewis, Secretary

Melksham & District BKA

I assumed the Melksham Chairman's role in October while I was away sailing in St Lucia of all places. In fact I had hoped to have visited their beekeeping extension department while I was there, but sadly Coronavirus restrictions put paid to that – so I guess I'll have to return when travel allows.

Melksham like so many branches had to put it's monthly meetings and apiary visits on hold during 2020 but we aim to come back stronger in 2021 with a full diary of Zoom presentations (see below) by some familiar names.

The Committee is almost entirely new in Melksham with some faces returning to the fold. In the branch apiary we have managed to see an increase in colonies across a variety of hive types and have plans to 'rat proof' the storage sheds this year. Thanks to everyone involved for keeping the bees there during

lockdown.

Sadly we now enter another lockdown which wasn't on the horizon in 2020, so our members will have to wait until later in the year for the first actual get-together.

Stephen Auty, Chairman

Melksham Diary 2021

- 22 February: *Bees Needs* – Julia Haggard
- 29 March: *Wot a Woppa* – Bob Smith
- 26 April: *Swarming - Opportunity or Problem?* – Jim Vivian-Griffiths
- 24 May: *What Makes a Queen* – Pam Hunter
- 28 June: *Apiary Social*
- 26 July: *Organic Farm Visit* – Mark Cannings
- 23 August: *Rational Varroa Control* – David Evans

Swindon & District BKA

This last year has certainly brought us a different set of challenges to what any of us were expecting or had ever had to plan for or experienced.

Unfortunately, not long after the last AGM in October, Brian Hopper, our club president since 2015, sadly died. As a highly experienced beekeeper, his knowledge and experience will be missed by many.

Earlier in the year Brian donated a new cup to the club. The Brian Hopper Cup is awarded to the

Member of the Year at the club honey show. The inaugural winners were Mike Benson and Richard Bunce for their work at St. Francis School helping to set up and mentor a beekeeping club, which resulted in the school setting up its very own apiary. This year our Member of the Year is Ian Cowdy. Amongst other things Ian has been the lead keeper of our 'training' apiary at Park Farm, and so has been training and mentoring our less experienced members.

It was hoped that last winter that the trees at the back of the TWIGS apiary would be removed by the council. At the last minute they decided that they couldn't remove them, forcing a re-think by the committee. We decided that the best course of action would be to have the side branches on our side taken off. This was done in the spring, so hopefully some of the main issues with the site (pigeon muck and falling branches) will now be past us. There was also some fencing to be repaired, so the colonies from Park Farm have only just been returned.

In August the club colonies were inspected by the seasonal bee inspector. All bar one were given a clean bill of health. The 'suspect' hive caused much headscratching, resulting in one frame being sent to the NBU in York for investigation. Luckily no AFB or EFB was found

but DWV, chalkbrood, sacbrood and acute paralysis virus were all found. The colony was locked up at inspection and was subsequently killed off. The issues have not spread to any of the other colonies. This all goes to show the benefits of having the bee inspector call.

Even though we haven't been able to have our monthly meetings since March, there have been some meetings at the Park Farm Apiary – mostly for the less experienced members. With veils, gloves and by working only in pairs, social distancing was fairly easy! Many thanks to Ian Cowdy and also Andy Jones for coordinating and running the apiary and expanding the Whatsapp group. At the moment Haydon Wick Club is only open to its own members so we can't hold meetings there for the foreseeable future.

After four years Ian Cowdy has decided to step down from the branch committee, from his role as editor of the club newsletter and also as a trainer for the starting beekeeping courses so that he can give more time to his own bees. Many thanks for all your help and experience over the years, Ian, both to the club and myself as my mentor; it has been very worthwhile. I know that there are many members who would say the same.

Tim Bullock, Chair

West Wiltshire BKA

West Wiltshire usually holds apiary meetings fortnightly from the middle of April to the end August. Last year I planned these and sent out the dates to members, and then the Government announced the lock down in March. I cancelled the meetings for April thinking that, by May, we would be back to normal but, as we all know, that was not to be and eventually all meetings had to be cancelled.

In normal times I look at the bees one week and the following week members come along and look through the colonies while I just supply tea and cake. The new regulations meant that the only help I could safely have was my husband, and although he likes to say he is not the Assistant Apiary Manager or the Apiary Manager's Assistant, he did suffer to come with me each week.

We started the the season with five colonies: two 14x12s and three national hives, but it was such an early spring that it was not long before I had done artificial swarms on all of them and had ten colonies: four 14x12s and six standard nationals. Very soon they were making a lot of honey, so I spent hours decapping and then extracting with a manual extractor. 2020 produced the best honey harvest since I have been apiary manager;

I had to purchase more buckets, and storage became a little difficult. When Avril Earl, the Seasonal Bee Inspector, examined the colonies while I stood at a distance, she gave them all a clean bill of health.

During August six branch members came to help, all socially-distanced, carrying out some hive inspections and helping clean the equipment and tidy the shed, for which I was very grateful. The colonies were treated for varroa, some with Apiguard and some with Varromed. In October, queen excluders were removed, supers put under the brood boxes and mouse guards put in place and I have fondant ready to put on if needed.

I hope this year will be back to normal. I have missed meeting with other members and having a good chat and baking cakes for the apiary meetings.

We have had to adapt to virtual meetings via Zoom, which has its advantages and disadvantages – we soon realised that we needed some protocols e.g. using 'mute' and raising hands if we wanted to speak.

We are getting better and have managed to book various speakers that we might otherwise have felt unable to book because of distance and expenses.

Geraldine Lenert, Secretary

Tell us more

You have beekeeping stories to tell, inventions and time-saving kit you have designed, and delicious honey recipes you have cooked.

You have photos from travels abroad when, say, you visited a local apiary.

You have amazing pictures of honey, of products from your hive, or your bees. For instance, here is one taken by co-editor Sophie Butcher of a honey bee with flakes of wax still tucked into its wax gland



pockets, ready to use on this lovely new comb – snapped on her mobile phone.

Please send ideas for articles and photos you want to share to co-editor Stephen Auty at sjauty@aol.com

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Rates per issue placed, as follows:

- Whole page £18
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- Quarter page £6
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In the news

Bee hives as fences

As human-elephant conflict (HEC) increases, research is going into understanding the human dimensions of these conflicts, and finding non-violent ways of mitigating the problem to foster long-term coexistence.

In four rural villages in Thailand, researchers conducted over 290 household questionnaires to assess the prevalence of HEC and attitudes towards elephants. In addition, they evaluated a pilot beehive fence as a sustainable solution for HEC.

Most households reported seeing or hearing elephants near their property at least once a week (84.9%) and experienced negative impacts from elephants in the last five years (81.0%).

The beehive fence deterred 88.4% of individual elephants (n=155) and 64.3% of elephant groups (n=28) that approached the fence.

Most elephants (70.7%) exhibited behaviors suggesting heightened attentiveness or alarm. The farm owner reported economic and social benefits of the beehive fence.

By contributing to farmer income and reducing crop damage caused by wild elephants, beehive fencing may provide an important locally-managed complement to regional human-elephant conflict mitigation methods. <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp.2.260>



Part of a beehive elephant fence in Kenya. Bee hives are suspended from wires. When elephants brush against the wires, the hives bounce and the bees come out to defend them. Apparently elephants' trunks are tender at the tip and they do not like to be stung so they quickly learn to avoid the area.

Make some candles

Beat the lockdown blues and make some dipped candles. Here's how. <https://tinyurl.com/hbt202101>



How much honey do bees take with them when they swarm?

A recent study investigated the resources available to a typical honey bee swarm as it gathered information and decided which was the best of some 13–34 potential nest sites to move into.

The study included a brief

description of the decision-making mechanisms involved, and the use of the swarm's finite energy, memory and carrier resources.

It was found that each individual scout decision-maker only carried enough energy reserves to provide for 2.6 days of visits to evaluate distant sites and, effectively, only enough memory space to remember the location and quality of one site.

Scouts, who only formed 4.4% of the swarm bees, consumed 22.8% of the swarm's energy budget, showing that their best-of-N computations were energetically *very* expensive.

A typical swarm of 12,000 bees only contained enough energy reserves to last for 13.5 days after which foraging had to restart.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.2733>



Swarming bees may only carry enough reserves to last them up to 13.5 days before needing to forage.



Researchers develop a new test to detect the presence of the small hive beetle.

Testing for small hive beetle

The small hive beetle (SHB), *Aethina tumida*, is an invasive pest of honey bees and comes from Europe and Africa.

The main risk of entry into the UK is via imports of package bees and queens. The National Bee Unit monitors imports of live bees and sentinel apiaries around the UK through collection of hive debris for visual inspection of pests.

However, an SHB invasion is likely to start with low numbers and might only present with partial specimens broken up in the hive or eggs from the beetle – difficult to identify by visual inspection.

Researchers have now developed a method for detecting SHB in hive debris using a loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) assay. This is able to detect the SHB in under 30 minutes, does not cross-react with non-target species tested and is sensitive enough to detect less than 1 mg of tissue in a 30g complex matrix of honey bee hive debris.

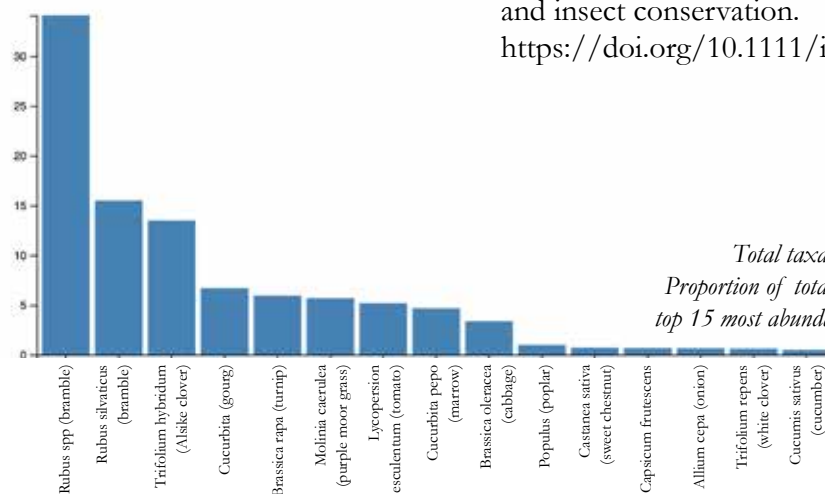
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ps.6168>

Maybe leave the brambles to flower this year

The bramble (*Rubus fruticosus*) is a common summer-flowering plant native to the United Kingdom. But how useful is it to the honey bee, bumblebees (*Bombus* spp.) and other flower-visiting insects?

Regional surveys of insect groups at seven sites across two years showed that foraging activity on brambles was dominated by honey bees (60.2% in 28 surveys) and bumblebees (17.4%), compared to non *Apis/Bombus* bees (2.8%), hoverflies (*Syrphidae*, 7.9%), non-syrphid flies (0.6%), butterflies (6.4%), wasps (0.4%) and beetles (4.4%).

The table below (unrelated to the research above) shows the taxa in a typical honey sample taken around 1 August 2020 from a Chippenham hive, illustrating the importance of *Rubus* spp in honey.



Total taxa in sample: 22.
Proportion of total sample for the top 15 most abundant taxa: 0.99.

In detailed local surveys at one rural and one urban location, there was a diverse range of insect taxa foraging on the bramble flowers, including species of conservation concern (*Bombus humilis*, *Coenonympha pamphilus* and *Limenitis camilla*).

Pollen trapping at 12 honey bee hives in four locations showed that an average of 31% of pollen pellets collected by honeybees from late May to early August were bramble, with a peak of 66–86% per location.

The bramble is sometimes considered an undesirable plant or a thug that outcompetes other wild flowers. However, these findings confirm that it is highly valuable for flower-visiting insects. Wherever conflicts of interest and management strategies allow, bramble should be maintained and promoted for wildlife and insect conservation.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/icad.12436>

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Educational opportunities in 2021

Last year Covid caused the BBKA to cancel all exams and assessments countrywide.

For 2021 there is a plan for the module exams to be taken online (see below) and there is every hope that it will also be possible to conduct assessments.

Within Wiltshire BKA our plans are as follows.

Why study?

The BBKA has developed seven modules that collectively cover the theory supporting beekeeping.

Individually and collectively they provide beekeepers with a better understanding of the craft.

When inspecting your bees knowledge acquired when studying the modules will help you become more adept at 'reading the bees' and help you resolve problems in the hive.

Module 2: Honey Bee Products and Forage

Wiltshire Beekeepers Association will be running zoom sessions on this module this spring.

The aim of this course is to help members either to prepare for the exam or just to expand their knowledge and understanding of

these interesting topics.

The syllabus, which can be downloaded from the BBKA website, covers not just how to prepare honey in all its guises but also its physical properties and why it ferments.

In addition, the syllabus covers how flowers are pollinated, the factors affecting nectar secretion and how bees convert nectar into honey.

The course comprises six sessions via Zoom each lasting about 90 minutes and starting at 7pm on the following Tuesdays: 12 & 26 Jan, 9 & 23 Feb and 9 & 23 Mar.

The exam is scheduled for 24 April **with registration by 31 January.**

Previous exam papers will be provided so no need to purchase them from the BBKA.

Module 7: Selection & Breeding of Honey Bees

For members who prepared to sit Module 7 last year, there will be three Zoom sessions starting in late February.

This might best be done using a Question & Answer format, perhaps based on topics from past papers. Candidates' views are welcome on format, dates and timings.

Exam Format

The exams in April will be run online using the Inspira.com assessment platform.

The exam papers will follow the familiar format. They will be typewritten with 1¾ hours allowed, 15 minutes longer than usual.

Training will be provided to include a check that each candidate has a compatible system including a live video link and an open microphone.

The hope is to offer handwritten exams in November.

Basic Assessment

All beekeepers should aspire to take the Basic Assessment and prove to themselves that they are competent beekeepers.

It is a straightforward, practical assessment lasting about an hour and is based on the Beginners course plus a couple of seasons' experience of keeping bees.

Honey Bee Health Certificate

This is a practical assessment ideally suited for beekeepers who find written exams stressful.

The assessment requires candidates to perform a couple

of health-related manipulations followed by an oral questions on other aspects of the syllabus.

The plan is to run a concentrated training course over a weekend in June with assessments taking place in July. However, applications will need to be submitted in March.

Honey Bee Breeding

We are investigating the possibility of running a Queen Rearing course during the season.

Microscopy

It seems unlikely that we will be able to resume our practical microscopy sessions until April at the earliest. Before then it is hoped to run a couple of Zoom sessions covering certain procedures, e.g. staining.

Action

If you require further information or are interested in participating in any of these sessions, or taking any of the assessments, please contact Richard Oliver.

E: raoliver.64@gmail.com
M: 07974 816 947

Richard Oliver, Education Officer

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Branching out – a first out-apiary

In spring 2020, Nettie Brown and Rob Bottoms (right) were immensely proud to have successfully over-wintered two hives in their first year of beekeeping. They tell of their quest to set up an out-apiary.

Rob and I enjoyed watching the girls daily from our window or sitting by the hive – there seemed to be lots of activity even in wet February. By the time of our first inspection on the 24 March both hives were filling up quickly. Everything was in order.

The swarming season starts

Then, on 25 April, Daenerys (we like to name our queens) swarmed. We'd seen empty play cells the previous week but nothing else. Oh dear. Never mind – our well-rehearsed swarm collection system swung into action and Daenerys was re-housed. We now had three hives.

By the end of April the garden was becoming busy – three hives full of bees, a thriving bee hotel, assorted bumble bees, queen wasps, and solitary bees in the house bricks – the dog was refusing to go out and I'd been stung on my head by a passing bee.

It was time to think of an out-apiary. It needed to be accessible,



local and somewhere we could easily work from.

Fortunately the monthly branch newsletter mentioned someone offering an out-apiary opportunity. This was timely because, whilst we were pondering, Ruby decided to swarm – we were starting to believe we weren't cut out for this game. (We gave away the swarm and a nuc with queen cells to a beekeeping friend who had had losses over winter, and re-queened the remaining hive.)

Finding the right site

We arranged to meet the landowners to discuss the opportunity. It seemed they wanted beehives on their land for altruistic reasons – to increase the overall bee population and to put something back into nature, a cause close to all our hearts.

A tour of the gardens enabled us

to point out the best places to site the hives – shelter, water sources close by, somewhere with less traffic passing. They were happy to prepare the site – a meadow area with a bank of trees as a wind break and plenty of forage nearby. It was perfect.

They also offered us two old WBC hives that they hoped we could re-use. We took photos and measurements of these, and with a virtual handshake we sealed a deal: we had a site, two additional hives, the promise of unlimited access, use of wheelbarrows and a storage room.

Changing hive size

A prep list longer than both our arms began to form.

Would the old WBC hives be suitable? How would we prepare our hives for the move? How much would it cost if we had to buy more equipment? Is it only a mile away – how do we deal with that? What if they swarmed before/after? How



A crowded garden.

would we know if anything was wrong with the bees if we weren't watching them on a daily basis?

The first question was quickly resolved: the vintage WBC hives were exactly that – made before standardisation in the 1960s, so it would have been difficult to source frames/internal boxes and other parts for them. Amazingly the landowners offered to purchase two new WBC hives rather than have us move in with our multi-coloured Nationals.

As we constantly find a national brood box isn't quite big enough for our Buckfast bees, we advised them to opt for 14x12 brood boxes with an extra lift, giving us two supers. It turned out to be a real headache transferring our bees from one size frame to another and from 11 frames to just 10 frames.

Changing frame size

Part of the planning involved ensuring there was enough space for at least some of the new larger frames in the old hives. We also decided to reduce the number of frames in Daenerys's brood box (the swarm) before she expanded anymore, which allowed us to take out three

unused frames. Rob had ordered some spare 14x12s and made a temporary eke to accommodate the larger frames to give us versatility in brood box sizes for the future.

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, neither the new hives nor the large frames arrived as quickly as promised, so later the following week we had to take off the queen excluder and allow Daenerys to lay in the super. This would theoretically be easier to reverse in the new WBC. We were now ready for the move.

Different frame sizes

Because we were moving the bees less than three miles, we would have to keep the bees locked up for three days to break their orientation memory. At the time we were

experiencing a heat wave, so we planned to move the first hive as soon as the weather broke. On the night of 22 May, we blocked the Daenerys's hive ready for the move in the morning.

We left her in a shady area under the trees in the new apiary for the following two days. On the evening of the second day, we moved her closer to the prepared area, leaving space in front for the new hives when they arrived. We placed branches and grass across the entrance to confuse the bees and promote reorientation, and opened up to one bee space. The following afternoon we opened the entrance further as the bees were orientating well. We had left a nuc at home in the old spot and did get a few



Daenerys on the move; Two hives settled in the new out-apiary.

returners – but not too many.

The following week, 27 May, Daenerys was laying well but there were also empty play cups in the supers – time for action! We took down the play cells and ‘phoned a friend’ who lent us a spare brood box.

Just to add to the game of frames, it was a commercial brood box.

31st May: Pagden day! The larger frames arrived at last, and we had a commercial box to house the split. We moved Daenerys – she looked happy on her super frame with a frame of brood and a super of stores. We left the original hive with the rest of the National frames with



The WBCs arrived ready assembled and looked great.

a queen excluder above, and a super full of brood.

An abundance of hives

If you’re counting, this takes us up to four hives in two locations!

7 June: Daenerys was laying well in the borrowed commercial and her daughter Millicent’s colony had already drawn and filled four new

frames, although the bees quite liked the super frame and we had some beautiful but precarious brace comb on this. Cue – look up how to ‘tie in’ brace comb.

In the original hive, we found several queen cells in the super and one on the brood frame. We took the cells down from the super and put a queen excluder on.

Eventually the new toys arrived in June. It was like playing a huge game of Jenga. Even the gardener had trouble trying to fit it all together. Luckily, he had been following our progress with interest, and goes out to check they are happy. He promised to call if they swarm or appear agitated – so our fears of being remote from ‘our bees’ have been allayed.

Now it was time for the big transfer. We hoped all our planning would prove effective – there had been a lot of sleepless nights.

The big swap

Oh my. It was hard work! We moved the first WBC to the old position and hoped the bees would find their way in.

We couldn’t find Daenerys – but triple checked she wasn’t on the brace comb before tying that to a new frame and either knocked the bees into the new box or allowed them to fly/crawl in.

We debated on whether we should transfer the second hive but worked out the new queen Millicent would not have emerged by then and we could always re-unite if she proved unsuccessful.

At last we finished. The new WBCs look the part and fulfill the landowners’ remit of replicating the vintage hives. The bees were happy when we left them.

Transferring bees to bigger boxes was more work for us but hopefully easier than inspecting double brood boxes. It was a long, long day but

with plenty of reasons to be cheerful. We were smelly, exhausted and happy to go home and relax.

*Nettie Brown
& Rob Bottoms,
Kennet*



L-R: Adding a frame extender; Rob uses rubber bands to hold comb in place; the new WBCs in situ.



Cleaning the suits after a long day in the apiary.

First inspections of the season

The primary aim of a superorganism such as a colony of honey bees is survival.

In our temperate climate the greatest obstacle to survival is the winter months. As winter approaches our role as beekeepers is to do our best to help by ensuring our colonies are strong, disease free, have a youngish queen and adequate stores (about 20kg).

Hefting the hives

By late January the days will get longer, the bees will be keen to expand the brood nest and taking every opportunity to forage for pollen on sunny days.

Being more active, they will consume more stores so it is a good idea to heft your hives periodically. Remove the roof, lift the hive front and back or on both sides to get a feel of the weight.

If it feels light add fondant up to the middle of March. After that you can provide one to one syrup (1kg white granulated sugar: 1.25l water) preferably in a contact feeder.

Resist the temptation to lift the crown board.

Clean the floor

Bees will have been dying in the hive

throughout the winter months and they could block the entrance. In early March clean the floor of your hives.

- Have one clean floor to hand.
- Move the colony to one side.
- Set up the clean floor and replace the brood box etc.
- Scrape the debris off the dirty floor, which can then be used on the next hive.
- Mouse guards can be removed at this stage.

Take time sit and watch

On sunny days in March and early April take a moment to observe your colonies.

You can be fairly certain that those taking in good load of pollen are queen right and the brood expanding. However, if a colony is idle when all the others are active, then an immediate check is in order as it may be dead or, more likely, queenless. If it is weak colony with only old bees it will not be worth saving and should be culled. If there are lots of bees consider uniting with a strong colony.

Wait for the flowering currants

Come April, resist the temptation to open the colonies until the

temperature reaches at least 14°C. If the flowering currant (*Rubus sanguinem*) is in bloom and you feel comfortable in shirt sleeves, you are good to go.

Review and plan

Check your records from last year to remind yourself of the state of each colony when last inspected. Make a plan. The aim should be to answer Ted Hooper's five questions:

- Has the colony sufficient room?
- Is the queen present and laying the expected quantity of eggs?
- Is the colony building up in size as fast as the other colonies in the apiary?
- Is there sign of disease or abnormality?
- Has the colony sufficient stores to last until the next inspection?

The queen needs room to lay and the foragers need room to store nectar, especially if there is an early flow from oil seed rape.

If you left a super on over winter, now is the time to replace the queen excluder and place the super above. If it is a strong colony and there is a flow, consider adding a second super.

There is no need to waste time looking for the queen at this stage.

As long as you see eggs you can be confident she is there. But do try and estimate the ratio of eggs : larvae : brood. In steady state this will be 1 : 2 : 4 but at this time of year if the colony is expanding it will be 1½ : 2¼ : 4.

If a colony is not building up as fast as the others it may owe to either a 'poor queen' or suffering from nosema. If you think it is the latter, take a sample of 30 bees from an outside frame and arrange for your branch microscopist to check for nosema.

Wait for the drones

Quick inspections will suffice until you see drones in the colony: as soon as they appear, start your weekly inspections as part of your swarm prevention plan. In the meantime, conduct a full inspection of all your colonies to check for disease.

Richard Oliver, Education Officer

Useful references

- *Guide to Bees & Honey* by Ted Hoper MBE
- *Practical Beekeeping* by Clive de Bryun
- *In the Apiary: A Month-by Month Guide* – BBKA News Special Issue Series

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What would Mrs Beeton do?

It was blowing a gale outside and I had some cleaning to do but I was procrastinating. I started thumbing through the cookbooks looking for something interesting to make and there it was – hidden between Delia and Mary Berry – the long forgotten copy of *Household Management* by Mrs Isabella Beeton.

It was a book our son picked up in a charity shop when he had moved away and wanted a 'new' cookbook. He had heard it was good, but was bemused at the weights and measures and, although he lives in a moderately sized city, he found it quite a struggle to get hold of corn-crake, plovers or teal. And just how many ortolans would be suitable for a curry? Hence we 'inherited' the book. It hasn't had a lot of use, so I thought I would spend a windy evening trying to find anything beekeeping related or something I could cook with honey.

The book includes a rather splendid chapter on Domestic Servants: I don't have the experience of these myself, but it seems quite comprehensive. There is also a chapter on Legal Memoranda. However I fear that the Internet, despite all its faults, may be somewhat more reliable since, despite our copy of *Household*

Management being labeled a New Edition, it is dated 1869.

In search of honey recipes

My search for beekeeping/honey related references was not too fruitful: there is one reference to a honey cake and another to Bites and stings, on which it says:

BITES AND STINGS may be divided into three kinds. 1. Those of Insects. 2. Those of Snakes. 3. Those of Dogs and other Animals.

The Bites or Stings of Insects, such as gnats, bees, wasps, &c., need cause very little alarm, and are, generally speaking easily cured. They are very serious, however, when they take place on some delicate part of the body, such as near the eye, or in the throat. The treatment is very simple in most cases; and consists in taking out the sting, if it is left behind, with a needle, and applying to the part a liniment made of finely-scraped chalk and olive-oil, mixed together to about the thickness of cream.

To remove a Bee Sting, pull the sting out at once with the fingers or a needle. Press a key tightly over the stung part; this forces the poison out; wipe the place, suck it, and the apply the blue-bag. (*The blue bag was used*

for washing clothes, if you are wondering.)

Bathing the part bitten with warm turpentine or warm vinegar is also of great use. If the person feels faint, he should lie quietly on his back, and take a little brandy-and-water, or sal-volatile and water. When the inside of the throat is the part stung, there is great danger of violent inflammation taking place. In this case, from eight to twelve leeches should be immediately put to the outside of the throat, and when they drop off, the part to which they had been applied should be well fomented with warm water. Bits of ice are to be sucked. Rubbing the face and hands well over with plain olive-oil, before going to bed, will often keep gnats and mosquitos from biting during the night. Strong scent, such as Eau de Cologne, will have the same effect.

Hm. I'd recommend recent issues of *BBKA News*, which give some more up-to-date advice, where the supply of blue bags and leeches may have been interrupted.

Meanwhile, the honey cake seems

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worth a try. I just need to source a breakfast-cup for measuring sugar, flour, carbonate of soda, rich sour cream and some honey to taste. Average cost should be 8d (about £2.09 today) and sufficient for three or four persons. Mind you, I don't think that includes the price of coal for the range.

Alan Hepper, West Wilts

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The Queen's Bees

To mark the centenary of *BeeCraft* magazine, three years ago I was granted a private tour of Buckingham Palace gardens to see its beehives. I was only the second journalist to have been accorded this privilege, the first being Alan Titchmarsh and a TV crew.

On a glorious June morning I met the Queen's head gardener Mark Lane and her beekeeper John Chapple. John is one of the UK's best-known and respected beekeepers, having served as chair of London Beekeepers' Association and the Central Association of Beekeepers, as well as president of



Buckingham Palace, a wildlife haven in a welter of concrete.

the National Honey Show.

City-centre seclusion

The moment you enter the gardens at Buckingham Palace the impact is profound. Beyond the austere

perimeter wall the atmosphere is one of such seclusion and tranquillity that I found it hard to believe that I was at the centre of one of the world's great cities. Passing walls covered with climbing roses and sweet-smelling jasmine, Mark



Buckingham Palace – a view from the royal apiary.



John Chapple (the Queen's beekeeper) and Mark Lane (the Queen's head gardener) cross the bridge across to the island that houses the royal apiary.

led the way to his secluded office where we began our conversation over a cup of tea.

'The gardens here have been recognised in a number of surveys as an extremely species-rich



The royal beehives are situated in a delightful and unexpected wilderness in the middle of London.

environment – in fact they are thought to have more diversity per square foot than almost anywhere else in the UK,' Mark told me. 'For example, in our 40 acres there are around 6,000 species of plant and 2,500 species of insect – some of which are quite rare. The fact that we are right in the middle of London makes that diversity all the more remarkable. It means we have two very demanding priorities; as the official

residence of the monarch, the gardens here have to be among the best in the world, both in terms of high-quality horticulture and as a stage for national events. But they

also have to be cared for as a valuable natural reserve. Everything we do here is about finding a balance.'

Mark told me about some of the management techniques that have been adopted with the environment in mind. The garden is largely organic, although some

chemicals are used very sparingly. All weeding is done by hand or with a weed burner. Fertilisers are only used on the ornamental lawns and shrubberies. Biodegradable diesel, lubricants and oils are used in all machinery. A large recycling operation processes all green waste – including the ‘arisings’ that emanate from the stables in the Royal Mews. This produces all the compost and leaf litter used within the gardens and is thought to be particularly beneficial to the 280-or-so species of beetle found here. Annual planting lists are produced with the help of lepidopterists and entomologists to benefit various insect species, and seed-bearing plants are grown to support bird life.

An island apiary

The apiary is sited on an island on the edge of the four-acre lake. When I watched a TV documentary about the Palace gardens a few years ago, Alan Titchmarsh made a spectacle of having to travel to the island by rowing boat to see the bees. I was slightly disappointed therefore to discover that the island is usually accessed by a small footbridge.

The island itself is a wilderness of trees, shrubs and wild flowers and feels as though it is hidden deep within the countryside. The rural effect is emphasised by the largely native planting which includes guelder rose, the wayfaring tree, blackthorn, whitethorn, sea buckthorn, honeysuckles and goat willow – not



A view from the Palace of the island that houses the apiary.

to mention plenty of nettles and brambles.

On the day of my visit, the air was heavy with the musky smell of wild privet which was flowering abundantly.

Just off the path, we found the apiary. The hives stand on a rise not far from the edge of the lake, the honey-coloured west front of the Palace just visible through the lakeside trees. John keeps five hives here, all Nationals on standard deep brood boxes.

When I visited in mid-June, two of the colonies had been split into nuc boxes and another was undergoing swarm control with a

Snelgrove board. John wasn't due to inspect any of the colonies, but he opened one hive and was pleased to see that a flow was in progress and the super was filling rapidly. 'Look at that,' he exclaimed with pleasure, 'these have got to be some of the luckiest bees alive. It really is a paradise for them here.'

Gentle bees

I commented that the bees seemed very gentle and John agreed, telling me that keeping bees in a royal residence comes with responsibilities, the main ones being that no one gets stung, and that the bees don't swarm.

'Can you imagine what it would



John Chapple reassembling hives after an inspection.

be like if my bees swarmed in the middle of a garden party when the Royal Family were here with 8,000 guests!’ he laughed, slightly nervously. ‘Luckily, we haven’t yet had a sting or a swarm.’

John’s management regime is designed with these risks in mind. He replaces the queens each spring using queens raised on site. He also splits colonies that get too large and undertakes control measures if there is any hint that they are planning to swarm. ‘I don’t keep any equipment here at the Palace,’ he told me, ‘so I always bring a spare nuc box and a Snelgrove board. That way I’m covered for most eventualities. Safety is my main aim with these bees, not

productivity.’

To avoid opening hives when people are around, John usually attends the Palace bees at the weekend when most garden staff aren’t present. ‘Sometimes I feel like I must be the luckiest beekeeper alive,’ he said, with obvious glee. ‘I often have 40 acres of magical gardens more or less to myself – well, just me and the bees.’

An unexpected crop

Moving on, we came across one of the most unexpected sights of the day: a large patch of yellow and purple flowers that seemed familiar yet strangely out of place.

Mark explained that a shrubbery here had been removed and the area was being prepared for re-planting. New soil had been imported from outside the garden and, much to his surprise, had sprouted a volunteer crop of oilseed rape and phacelia. The large border was humming with honey bees as well as several species of bumblebee and solitary bee.

In order to benefit the bees, it had been

decided to let the uninvited plants remain until they had finished flowering. Oilseed rape is a crop that many rural beekeepers are used to dealing with but, for John, having always been a city beekeeper, this was something of a novelty and he wasn’t yet sure how it would affect his honey crop.

Trees for bees

A huge variety of trees grow in the gardens, from the native woodland species found around the perimeter, to the ornamental specimen trees in the arboretum on the east side of the gardens.

Part of the area now occupied by Buckingham Palace gardens was where, four hundred years ago,

James I set up his famously flawed mulberry-growing enterprise. Today, the gardens are home to a national collection of mulberries, with more than 40 varieties. In May, the trees produce somewhat unspectacular flowers which are nonetheless appreciated by the bees. Later, the mulberries are picked and used in the Royal Kitchens.

The garden also has some 15 varieties of lime tree which flower at different times, providing nectar continuously throughout the early summer. Other bee-friendly trees include the tree of heaven (*Ailanthus alitissima*), a wide variety of maples and various fir trees – no doubt visited by bees when collecting propolis. John’s favourite tree in



A crop of oilseed rape and phacelia is left for the bees when it sprouts on some newly imported top soil.



One of the many borders where the bees can forage.

the garden is an Indian bean tree (*Catalpa bignonioides*), which he enjoys watching the bees visit in large numbers when it flowers in July.

Too many bees

When I asked how much honey is produced, John was somewhat candid, saying only that ‘several hundred jars’ is the norm.

He did, however, tell me that the honey crop has decreased in recent years. ‘The problem is that there are just too many bees in London now. We are surrounded by businesses and department stores who think that having bees on their roofs boosts their green credentials. But these people don’t provide any forage for their bees, they just expect them to go out and find flowers. Unfortunately, The Queen’s guards can’t stop other people’s bees from getting over the walls, so half of them end up here.’

Aware of the general lack of forage in central London, bee-friendly planting schemes have been adopted in all the Royal Gardens in Mark’s care.

The extraordinary diversity of plants within the Palace Gardens must certainly mean that there is always something of value to be found here. Indeed, Mark told me that visiting the gardens one Christmas day he counted more than

50 varieties of plant that were in flower!

At the end of my visit I exited through a gate in the perimeter wall and, feeling rather as if I had left Narnia and climbed back through the wardrobe, found myself again in frenetic, fume-fogged central London.

Richard Rickitt, Kennet

The full-length version of this article appeared in the March 2019 issue of BeeCraft magazine.



Above and right: foraging opportunities at Buckingham Palace

