

CHALFONTS BEEKEEPERS' SOCIETY

Charity No. 1121231
www.chalfontsbeekeepers.co.uk

NEWSLETTER – April 2011

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Annual winter loss survey – act now!

Each year the four beekeeping associations in Buckinghamshire ask their members about how their colonies fared over winter. This is to help us build up a picture of the general health and well being of our bees, and pick up any trends. The BBKA carry out a nationwide survey each year, but by definition it cannot be as localised and specific as ours. Also, they publish their results late in the year.

In an “average” year a beekeeper could expect a natural colony loss rate of between 7% and 10%. Last year our (Chalfonts) survey showed an 18.9% loss, up on 2008/09 when it was 15.4%. Anecdotally there seems to have been far fewer losses this winter despite, or perhaps because of, the harsh weather.

It is quite simple, certainly a lot easier than the census survey you’ve just completed! Please e-mail John Catton at richard.catton1@ntlworld.com with the following detail **by the end of April:**

- 1) **How many colonies did you have on 1st November last year?**
- 2) **How many queen right colonies do you have on 15th April this year?**

And if you were unfortunate enough to lose colonies.

- 3) **What do you suspect the reason for the losses were?**
- 4) **Do you have any observations regarding your losses?**

Thank you.

Remember we now meet at 7:30pm.
And our April meeting is a week earlier than usual
(see dates at end)

Next Members’ Evening:

Tue 19th April

Varroa – the fightback.

This month’s talk is one of those “not to be missed” events.

If you ask any beekeeper what their greatest concern is, the answer will almost certainly be *Varroa*. The blood-sucking mite is the biggest global killer of honeybees, but over the past decade it has developed resistance to some previously efficacious medications.

You may remember that last December researchers from the National Bee Unit and Aberdeen University reported a potential break-through on a way to destroy the *varroa* mite – by getting it to self-destruct!

The lead researcher at Aberdeen University was Dr. Alan Bowman and he is our speaker this month, talking on a topic the importance of which cannot be overemphasised.

The meeting will be held on **Tuesday 19th April, at 7:30pm** in our usual venue: **St. Joseph’s, Austenwood Lane Chalfont St. Peter.**

What price a Nuc?

If you have been reading your BBKA News this month you will have seen a pull out giving you details of what to expect when you buy or sell a Nucleus Colony (or Nuc). Throughout the publication you will also have seen adverts for Nucs ranging from £150 to £200 for early season Nucs. The price may well be a little less for a Nuc produced later in the season.

Many of you may wonder how prices are conceived. Why do bees cost anything at all? Is it just that there are now so many newcomers to the craft that demand is outstripping supply? So, what price a Nuc?

There are actually some simple economics involved in the supply of Nucleus colonies. Imagine that a beekeeper is able to produce 80lbs (36.3kg) of honey per hive and to sell it for £5 per lb (£11 per kg). The income from each hive would be £400.

However, if the beekeeper decided to sell Nuc instead, they would forfeit the honey production for the year and probably make three Nucs. They would keep one to provide a colony for themselves for the next year and would sell the other two.

In this instance, the cost in lost honey sales is £400, so each Nuc would need to be sold at £200 to make up for this loss.

I know of some commercial beekeepers who average 200lbs per hive. Breaking up their colonies for Nucs would make their price prohibitive or they would lose money by doing this.

On the other hand, if a beekeeper had colonies that only averaged 30 lbs per hive and the honey was sold at £3 per lb, paying £45 might be a fair price. But then, would you want to buy a Nuc from someone who produced well below average yields and who did not know the value of their honey?

At our last Committee Meeting, we discussed a guide price for Nucs. It was agreed that a fair price for a May/June Nuc sold between members would be £120 in the current year. This is intended as a guide price only to give a helping hand to both buyers and sellers alike.

Getting to know your committee **30 second interview**

Mike Leon was elected as our Treasurer back in October 2001. In this, the fourth of our interviews with committee members, we ask Mike what makes him tick, what he wants to keep bees and what else he has time to do.



(Mike being presented with the Welford Cup – Sept 2005)

Q: How long have you been keeping bees?

ML: I started keeping bees in 1978, so that makes it 33 years!

Q: Why did you start beekeeping?

ML: I was inspired by my cousin, who lived and kept bees not far from me at Bennetts End (Herts).

Q: What type of hives do you use?

ML: Nationals.

Q: How many hives do you have and how many do you want?

ML: Currently, just two. Ideally I'd like to increase up to 4 or 5 colonies.

Q: What's your worst beekeeping purchase?

ML: I must be lucky as everything I have bought relating to bees has been very useful!

Q: Do you have a favourite beekeeping gadget?

ML: What must be the most essential piece of equipment, my Hive Tool.

Q: What have been your best beekeeping moments?

ML: What every beekeeper aims for; having strong colonies going into winter.

Q: Where do you keep your bees?

ML: Where I always have done - in the garden

Q: Do you have favourite beekeeping book / manual?

ML: "Beekeeping" by Frank Vernon

Q: The next best thing to beekeeping?

ML: Gardening.

Mike's garden is a joy to behold; you can come and see it at our annual Family Day that Mike is very kindly hosting yet again on Saturday 16th July. It must be heaven for his bees! (Ed).

If only I'd know that 33 years ago!

Ian Holmer, ex Regional Bee Inspector, has that intuitive knack of imparting good basic beekeeping knowledge in an entertaining manner. He came to Chalfonts for our March meeting and kept us amused (and informed) about the things he'd learned over the years, but wished he'd known when he started beekeeping, 33 years ago. Fundamental, practical things which, once known, make beekeeping a lot easier! For instance:

- Keep hive records and *read them before* you make subsequent inspections.

- Don't leave your *varroa* tray under the hive. Slot it in for just 5 days a month when you are conducting a mite count.
- Beware the osteopath's back. Ideally the floor of your hive should be on a stand roughly level with your thighs.
- Best fuel for your smoker? Dried elephant poo! Visit your local zoo for some. Failing that, dried grass pellets (as fed to animals).
- Fed up with prising the queen excluder from the brood box or digging the frames out for inspection because the bees have stuck them together with propolis? Simply smear a thin film of petroleum jelly over the box edges and frame ends just once at the beginning of the season. The problem is eased considerably.
- And, can't remove the propolis from your bee suit and gloves? Wash them with washing soda – works wonders for the washing machine too!
- Brand *all* your equipment; thefts are regrettably on the increase again.
- "Wire" queen excluders are infinitely better than "slotted steel" as they do not distort when removing them.
- Use your wired queen excluder as a queen *includer* when hiving a swarm. Before you "tip" the swarm into the hive, place a queen excluder under the brood box, this will ensure the queen does not escape, but allow the workers to fly in and out of the hive.

The new BBKA News

By now you will have received the first edition of the totally revamped all colour *monthly* BBKA News. Isn't it good!

It is certainly easier to read than the "old" one and is a nice mix of practical guidance (the first in a series of "Beekeeping Notes For Beginners" starts on page 10) alongside reports on current research work (see page 23) and an appreciation of foraging plants (page 13).

The apiary in April

Here we are with yet another year that is defying weather predictions. During the first week in April we, the country that is, enjoyed average temperatures of 23°C, 10°C above normal and 40 hours of sunshine, 10 more than

normal. No wonder our Assistant Editor, Richard Simpson, experienced his first swarm of the year on the 7th April*. Admittedly, he does now live in Devon, but have *you* had a swarm yet?

I've just noticed in a back copy of this newsletter, April 2007, that it was Richard who reported the first swarm of the season in that year, on 12th April to be exact – so, perhaps it is just Richard and we don't have to worry *just* yet!

Apart from reading "In the Apiary" on page 3 of the BBKA News, the key message this month, and indeed for the next 12 weeks is, on each weekly inspection the brood comb must be examined for queen cups – any with larvae in them must be destroyed. Especially look on the bottom and sides of the frames. That is only a start however: more will almost certainly be built and an artificial swarm or other management technique must be implemented.

Another thing you could do is place a "bait hive" (a spare brood box containing some old combs no longer good enough for a working colony) somewhere as far away from your hives as possible and at about head height, to attract a swarm. It's a bit like shutting the stable door...but at least it might give you a chance to get your bees back and start a nuc.

Remember the traditional ditty:

A swarm of bees in May
Is worth a load of hay.
A swarm of bees in June
Is worth a silver spoon.
A swarm of bees in July
Is not worth a fly.

We aim to avoid non-artificial swarms for two very good reasons; first it can scare the hell out of your neighbours and second, as the ditty tells us (albeit later in the season), you'll lose half your colony and instead of producing honey for you the colony is using its energies to build itself up again.

If your garden is anything like mine, trees are heavy with blossom and you can almost see the plants grow!

Some plants bees will be seeking out: plum, cherry and pear along with dead nettles, blackthorn, rosemary, gorse, forget-me-not, alyssum, alliums and hyacinth.

* Richard adds a footnote:

It could be just bad beekeeping, putting off my first spring inspection too late and, in one sense, events prove the point as otherwise the swarms would not have emerged. But there is more to it than that: if these were the earliest reported swarms twice in four years, why me? (2007-2011 = 5 seasons, but

one year without bees). Part of the answer may lie in two factors: firstly, the colonies are derived from swarms, that is from queens or their descendants who have proved their propensity to swarm; secondly, they were housed in single National brood boxes. Does this add strength to the argument for a larger hive, or at least a larger configuration of the National design, 14 x 12 or double brood, for instance? There may be merit in both arguments and I shall be implementing changes to address these. I shall also be clipping queens in future!

So don't rely only on the books, or country rhymes, rely on observing your bees and the prevailing weather that season. Early, warm, dry spring with plenty of drones = early swarms. Also recognise that they don't always wait for a capped, perfectly formed queen cell. Mine didn't! Barely any evidence of swarming intention, plenty of freshly laid eggs, just two open, dwarf 'play cups', *but with larvae*. That was enough, and off!

Pollen alert – for humans!

The National Pollen and Aerobiology Research Unit, based at the University of Worcester, breaks the pollen season down into three main sections:

- 1) Tree pollen - late March to mid-May.
- 2) Grass pollen - mid-May to July.
- 3) Weed pollen - end of June to September

We are currently in the tree pollen section and the trees to avoid are birch, plane, ash and willow. For those of you unfortunate enough to suffer from hay fever the NPARU provide UK pollen forecasts on their website from the end of April. <http://www.worcester.ac.uk/discover/national-pollen-and-aerobiology-research-unit.html>

Dandelions: one of nature's miracle flowers

Not only are they beautiful to look at, and good as bee plants, they are also nutritious for humans. This recipe combines dandelions and honey, some of which might even have been derived from that very species.

Dandelion Flower Cookies http://www.learningherbs.com/herbal_branch_21.html

For this dandelion recipe, you'll need: 1/2 cup vegetable oil, 1/2 cup honey, 2 eggs, 1 tsp. vanilla extract, 1 cup unbleached flour, 1 cup dry oatmeal, and 1/2 cup dandelion flowers.

- 1) Preheat the oven to 375F (190C)
- 2) Mix the oil and honey and then beat in the 2 eggs and vanilla.
- 3) Remove the yellow flower parts from the green parts (compost the green parts).
- 4) Stir in the flour, oatmeal, and dandelion flowers.
- 5) Drop the batter by tablespoonfuls onto an oiled cookie sheet.
- 6) Bake for 10-15 minutes.
- 7) Cool and enjoy!



It's not only fun to gather and use dandelion flowers in your cooking they offer health benefits as well. The blossoms are good for your heart. When steeped as a tea, they have been recommended for headaches, menstrual cramps, backaches, stomach aches, and even depression.

Dandelion flower oil makes great massage oil. It's particularly good for stiff, sore muscles and joints, and to relieve back tension.

Dates for your diary

Fri 15th, Sat 16th & Sun 17th April
Spring Convention: Stoneleigh.
Full details on www.britishbee.org

Tuesday 19th April
Varroa, the fight-back. A talk by Dr. Alan Bowman from Aberdeen University

Tuesday 24th May
Help! I need a new queen. A talk by Will Steynor, past President of Wycombe Beekeepers.

Tuesday 28th June
Question Time. Your chance to quiz experienced beekeepers with your problems.

Saturday 16th July
Annual Family Day at Mike Leon's.
Full details in newsletter nearer the date.

Unless otherwise stated all our monthly meetings and the Beginners course are held at: **St. Joseph's, Austenwood Lane, Chalfont St. Peter, SL9 8RY** and start at **7:30pm**