

## North Bucks Bee Keepers' Association

# Newsletter December 2014

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### Calendar at-a-glance

12 <sup>th</sup> January	Social event at Shoulder of Mutton Public House
27 <sup>th</sup> January	Paul Walton talk on "Breeding Better Bees"
9 <sup>th</sup> February	Social event at Shoulder of Mutton Public House
24 <sup>th</sup> March	Simon Crosan talk on "Bees and Beekeeping in Nepal"
13 <sup>th</sup> April	Social event at Shoulder of Mutton Public House
28 <sup>th</sup> April	Richard Smith talk on "Extracting the Crop"

### Bedfordshire Improvers' Day

Bedfordshire beekeepers invite our members to join them at their training day. This is an all day course and aims to show ways of improving your stock of bees over time. We hear of stories of colonies that are so nasty it is difficult to get anywhere near them. They will talk about dealing with colonies such as these and how to raise queens from your better behaved stock. The cost is only £10 and you need to bring a packed lunch.

If you want more details please contact Gill Brewer at: [the\\_brewers@btinternet.com](mailto:the_brewers@btinternet.com)

It is on Saturday 10th January 2015 and runs from 10am to 4.30pm.

## Australian native stingless bees



In November I was in Australia on business and joined the Sydney Beekeepers in their inspection and splitting of a hive of stingless bees, *tetragonula carbonaria*. These are beautiful tiny bees – around 3mm long – native to Australia (unlike European honey bees).

They are very important to pollination but don't produce much honey. They are kept in wooden hives that are about the size of a shoebox, made of two halves divided vertically. The bees produce wonderful comb in the shape of spiral, in a roughly

spherical nest. To divide the colony the operation is quite similar to ours on moveable frames: the box is opened, and the nest cut through the middle forming two hemispheres using a knife or even piano wire. The two halves are then made into two new nests by closing each half of the box with a fresh empty half. Thus one box, kept in the old position, will comprise the old top half of the box and upper hemisphere of the nest with a new empty bottom box; the converse is moved to a new site. Flying bees return to the old site and a new queen is raised in the half that did not keep the old queen; the queen is not sought during the operation.



This photo includes a five-pound note to give you an idea of the size of the bees:



Some honey was extracted with a spoon and I tasted it; it is quite spicy like propolis or Christmas spices and not nearly as sweet as honeybee honey.

This next photo shows the bottom half of the nest. You can make out the comb in its spiral shape, as well as resin that is quite similar to propolis. The thick wooden box helps insulate it.



Article and photos by Daniel Clarke.

## Editorial and Seasonal Notes

Well, it's December at the end of what I think has been a rather good year for beekeeping! That is the general feedback I have been getting, I would add, after speaking to some fifty or so associations up and down the country. But it would be a mistake to think that all problems "bee" are now solved; they are most certainly not, gratifying though it is to see that if we get some decent weather our bees can do themselves, and us beekeepers, proud. Personally I think here in North Bucks/Milton Keynes we are in a good "bee" area; for example there is an even mix between arable and pasture crops, and perhaps even more important, we are not in an area of high incidence for foul brood. As to the latter, that is something which each and every one of us must continue to ensure at all costs.

For example, purchase of a nucleus with AFB can cause untold problems for all of us. Simply, don't do it!

I want to write about the Numbers Game (some have heard it all before, so to them my apologies), and we are not talking about Bingo! By that I mean the number of bees in a colony at any time of the year. In pre-varroa days, a colony could reasonably be expected to have about 7,000 bees at the beginning of March, rising to 60,000 by late May, thereafter dropping back to the lower figure by the following March. Of course, these figures are generalisations; no account has been taken of swarms, supercedure or the like. However, the 7,000 March figure needs looking at more closely. That there were in pre-varroa days about 7,000 bees was based on winter bees born in September and October being able to survive until the spring build-up in, say, late March to late April. A particular trouble with varroa is that it shortens lives, with the result that fewer bees survive until spring is well under way. This is evident in some colonies in winter: if you lift a cover and find far fewer bees than you expect, and at first spring inspection perhaps what was a very strong colony the previous autumn is reduced to a small cluster "ball" of mainly young bees the size of a melon. This has led me to the following thoughts.....

1. We must do everything we can to boost the number of "winter bees". These are the bees born in (and after) September. This thinking conflicts with the usual practice of not taking a large population of bees into winter requiring a greater quantity of stores than a smaller one.
2. But with a six-frame colony of bees in spring costing, say, £150 and swarms in the wild being almost non-existent, the cost of extra feeding in autumn and continued feeding (with fondant) during the winter and early spring (say an extra £20 per colony) is almost insignificant.
3. The problem of small "melon size" colonies in spring is exacerbated, in my view, in our North Bucks area by the high dependency of many of us on the oilseed rape crop in early spring requiring the strongest possible colonies.
4. So these are my tactics:
  - a) I feed heavily in early September, with my Ashforth feeders. The job is completed by 10th September at the latest. Obviously if supers are still on because you are taking a late crop, this can't be done.
  - b) Whether needed or not, fondant is supplied to ALL stocks from 1st December onwards. N.B. This is combined with an oxalic treatment. To demonstrate that this is not hot air, this job was completed in my apiaries today (3rd December). A block of fondant (say 1 kg) is placed directly on the frames, directly over the cluster wrapped in cling film with a few slash holes for bee access. An eke houses the block of fondant, and the hive is reassembled with the cover board ABOVE the eke.
  - c) Once you start fondant feeding you must go on with it until full spring activity, or you have put the bees on to spring syrup feed. Why? Because the fondant will act as a magnet to the bees, who may tend to ignore distant stores elsewhere in the hive. As a result, if the fondant flow is stopped and cold weather sets in, bees may stay put and

starve, rather than reach plentiful stores elsewhere in the hive. N.B. Fondant feeding is as much to boost the number of winter bees as to avoid isolation starvation.

d) In spring build-up, you look and see what you have got and you open up each hive. Hopefully, you will find a good healthy colony well stocked with bees and stores ready for early supering. But if you still have a "melon sized colony" don't necessarily panic. It is not your fault that it looks that way if you have gone through the feeding regime I suggest.

The only question now is whether the colony looks healthy. If visual and later comb inspection shows that it is, feed steadily with syrup, give a frame of almost-to-emerge brood from a colony which can spare it (and to discourage that colony from swarming!) from time to time, and just watch the colony grow. Could be your best for that year!

Please note most especially these are only my thoughts and practices which work for me. Many beekeepers wholly disappreciate winter feeding in any circumstances, and I am not saying they are wrong!

### **December Checklist**

**Feeding** (already covered, but never forget to heft your hives for stores, too.)

**Varroa treatment.** If you are using oxalic acid, for heaven's sake read the label! Roger Woodbridge told me a while ago of one of our members' bees being treated with oxalic acid which were shortly afterwards found DEAD. Remember not more than 5ml per seam, and 50 ml per full colony, and apply it at "human body temperature" warmth ( a bottle of oxalic acid put in an empty bucket with a hot water bottle for a couple of hours and wrapped up in a blanket does the trick).

**Woodpeckers.** The guards (whatever your guards) should now be in place in your hive in a "woodpecker danger area". Woodpecker Danger Area? If in doubt, play safe and assume you are in one!

**Periodic inspections.** Try to do an external inspection once every few weeks and immediately after bad weather. Except for topping up fondant supplies, there is no need to make an internal inspection of the hive unless something appears to be wrong, e.g. mice. Act as needed.

**A glass of tippie** (or whatever) This is a good time to have a little think about the apiary, and a glass will help the process as you stride within it. The goal is to strive to achieve what is best for the bees and the best for you so re-arrangements in winter may help. If you want to move a hive, wait until, say, late February when the bees, due to cold weather, have been confined for several weeks. Then VERY GENTLY WITH NO JOGS move it to wherever you wish, and the bees will automatically re-locate To their new site and you can forget the 3feet/3mile rule. Personally, when I am opening a hive I like to feel I am at the controls (and in control) of a large jet plane on take-off, which means in beekeeping terms having everything ready to hand, and most importantly, having the tops of the brood frames of a hive about 2 inches above my kneecaps, saving a lot of bending (and a bad back!) N.B. If your back hurts, you will NEVER find the queen (or so it seems!)

**News.**

First, I am afraid I must give you some very bad news. Adam Marshall, son of Ged and Sheila Marshall, known to all of us, died of a brain tumour on 7th November. There is nothing adequate any of us can do, but I know the Marshall family will be much in our thought at this time. I have written on behalf of the Association to Ged and Sheila. Also some sad news. Our former chairman, Ken Neil, was recently working on his house and the ladder he was on crumpled and Ken suffered an extremely bad ankle break, which currently is showing no signs of mending. Ken is bed bound for a minimum of two months. I am sure Ken would like to hear from his many friends. In the meantime, please Ken (and your doctors) produce a well Ken, because we need you amongst us, and are rooting for you.

**Honey show.** Yes, we will be having one in 2015; so start getting your entries ready now! I am delighted to tell you that Sue Long, who is on her way towards becoming a top honey judge, has been appointed NBBKA honey show secretary. With Sue's beekeeping experience (in Bedfordshire going back for many years) you can expect a 'top draw' show. Thank you Sue for taking us on, and thanks to Cynthia Smith for ably running the show in the past, and 'graciously' agreeing to stand down for Sue. Cynthia, we will soon have a job for you if we may?

**John Lewis / Waitrose.** I am sure none of you (unlike me) would need any introduction to Magna Pack, Milton Keynes (the large blue buildings you see on the left as you head for the M1). Anyway, these two great companies are making a very strong environmental statement by laying out the grounds and adjoining park with 'bee friendly plants, and have invited NBBKA to put an apiary there. Planning is at an early stage and we will keep you posted. The springboards of this proposal are the John Lewis Group, Gazeley the developer, BBKA (who recommended us), Fiona Felbeck and and Ken Neil who have done the spade work.

**Calverton.** Henry and Judy Hayter, who have hitherto generally allowed NBBKA (and others) to keep bees in the field at their home at Calverton, have now sold up. We are hoping we can continue to keep bees there. Henry and Judy have already raised the matter with the new owners. We will keep you informed.

**Next NBBKA Dates**

**Nog and Natter.** Come and raise your glasses to the New Year on Monday 12th January at the Shoulder of Mutton Pub, Calverton, kick off 8pm. No pressure, just fun. Bee or other talk as you wish. Some fifteen of us had a lovely meet in November. Mark your new diaries now.

**Breeding better Bees:** Paul Walton, Rectory Cottages, Church Green Road, Bletchley. Starting at 7:30 pm, Tuesday 27th January . Paul, a member of our association, has been vitally involved in this project for many years. This is a topic of enormous interest to beekeepers. 'Better bees' means far more than just bees producing more honey, it encompasses a wide range of targets, such as gentler bees and bees more resistant to disease and pests, notably varroa and much more. Fiona Cook's talk on 'Bee Stress' indicated all sorts of ways in which we could make handling and management of bees easier. This lecture is very much a companion to Fiona's; but the emphasis will be on improving the bees themselves. We are set for a fascinating and interesting evening- Please come!

May I wish everyone a most marvellous Christmas and the very best of New Years – like 2014 if we are so lucky. Have Fun.

Andrew

P.S. We had a marvellous talk from Fiona on stress (bees not humans). Thanks Fiona.  
Two points to note:

1. If you keep your bees the 'cold way' i.e. frames at 90 ° to the entrance, removal of each frame gives guard bees an additional warning to go on to attack.
2. Livestock rubbing against hives makes bees bad tempered. Something to consider at Calverton where sheep have direct access to hives.