

HONEYCRAFT

October 2020



Dorset County Beekeepers Association



Editor's note

The end of another beekeeping season, but little to report by branches as there have been no communal activities; nor is there likely to be many over the next few months – no courses, no lectures and no social events. What a disappointment!

As the winter evenings close in, some may be wondering how to fill in those long dark hours. Fear not – there is plenty to do! There is lot of online activity and you will find a guide to some of the lectures on p. 13; Terry Payne is offering help to those who want to study for the BBKA modules and in case anyone still cannot work out how to fill their evenings and week-ends, I have repeated two previously-published articles by Terry, on what books you should be reading and might like in your Christmas stocking. You will also find two previously published articles by Chris Harwood on beekeeping videos you may find interesting. So there should be plenty to help everyone remain bee-minded over the winter before the bees start flying again.

Meanwhile, our SBI, Kevin Pope, is being bold enough to ask whether readers think that he has correctly summed up the basic rules of beekeeping, while Dennis Clemens has put forward some ideas that may provoke discussion! In fact, we really hope that both these articles lead to reader reaction and that you will be interested enough to set out your views on both or either subjects in a form that can be published in future issues as “letters to the Editor”.

Happily, as yet there are no Asian hornet sightings within Dorset this year. Kevin Pope brings us up to date on the current situation on p. 5.

Happy reading and, as many shops are apparently already full of tinsel, a very happy Christmas and best wishes for 2021.

Tim Villiers
Editor

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Chairwoman's chatter

During the last days of August I had the chance to chat to Kevin Pope. This is an appreciation of Kevin and also a bit about his concerns. I have known Kevin for almost as long as I have lived in Dorset. Fred, his father, was a committee member of Blandford and Sturminster BKA for many years and the first time I met Kevin was when we had an apiary visit to their smallholding where there were hundreds of chickens, goats and bees. Kevin showed us how to graft larvae into queen cells in the back of his vehicle. I was astonished at his dexterity and calmness. This must have been about 20 years ago. Kevin has been a beekeeper almost all his life and his skill with bees is equal to his skill with people.

Being a Seasonal Bee Inspector (SBI) is not only about how much you know about bees and their diseases, but how you deal with people who keep the bees. Some people see Kevin as part of a government spy network and are very defensive, while others phone him up at the drop of a hat and demand "help now". Some keep terrible bees that they are terrified of opening and others hope the bees will look after themselves! Kevin obviously has to take care of all shades of beekeeper. He thinks there are two things that would make life easier for all. The first is bee space which is between 6mm and 8mm between frames. If frames are too far apart the bees will build brace comb between the frames, whereas if they are too close they will only draw out one side of the frame and the frames will be distorted. Having the right amount of bee space means you can work through a hive very quickly without damaging the bees or the combs. Kevin's second concern is feeding bees. Often people are so determined to take as much honey they can; they forget that there is often a shortage of forage when the weather is dry and summer is coming to an end. Don't be too greedy; give your bees their share of the honey.

Lesley Gasson



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Dorset BKA

From the Hon Secretary's desk



A routine council meeting was held by Zoom on 16 September and the system worked well thanks to Stephen Potts' preparations. Notes on the meeting will be passed to members by their branch secretaries.

Future meetings are likely to be held in the same way for the foreseeable future.

Liz Rescorla

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The Inspector reports

Hi everyone

I was talking to a beekeeping friend about an article I'd recently read in the BBKA news and how dictatorial I felt it sounded. I suggested to her that there are very few rules in beekeeping and she agreed, saying that she attended a talk several years ago where the speaker said there are no rules in beekeeping and then counter-argued with herself by wisely pointing out that there is one; that being "you must always inform the bee inspector if you think you may have foul brood in your hives" (she was a bee inspector!). Who am I to disagree with such wise words? Having thought about it a bit more I think there are four rules, as follows:

- you have to supply a dry cavity;
- your bees must have enough food;
- they must also be kept healthy and treated if necessary – after all if your dog had fleas you would treat it to get rid of them;
- finally, you must report your suspicions to me if you think you have foul brood!

Editor's note. Kevin wonders whether readers have any views on this list and suggests that it would make a good subject for a letters' page in HoneyCraft. So, do you think he is right or is he wrong? Please let me know by writing to: tim@familyvilliers.co.uk

The situation in Dorset this year as far as foul brood is concerned has been "no American foul brood" (AFB) found". European Foul Brood (EFB) was naturally a different matter but still historically low. I found some between Wareham and Dorchester, Wareham and Swanage, Poole and Wimborne and Poole and Ferndown.

Yet again, I need you all to be very vigilant; if any hives that die out over winter, please shut them down to stop any robbing as this is the main way that EFB spreads naturally. We, as beekeepers, spread it far more than nature by moving frames, making up nucs, amalgamating and so on.

Then we come to Asian hornets, About the same number of reports from the public as last year; the last figure I heard was over 6,000 but, as yet, only one confirmed and that was in Gosport. The hornet was reported by a non-beekeeper and a beekeeper within 24 hours of each other. From report to nest destruction was only three days. We are still checking traps in the area on a weekly timescale; also we are looking in the Christchurch area where we have had some reports, but nothing confirmed. As we had the nest in Highcliffe last year we are being very careful not to overlook anything. Please shout about the dangers of Asian hornets getting established to anybody who will listen (and to anybody who won't, as well).

I will probably miss the next issue of HoneyCraft as there will not be much to talk about as far as disease is concerned on the bee front. On the Covid-19 front who can tell? It already looks as though our usual start of season tech-training in York is going to be "virtual", so the bigwigs in APHA seem to anticipate that not a lot will have changed by next year. Let's hope they are wrong!

So until next year; keep vigilant, stay safe and see you on the other side!

Kevin Pope

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Blandford and Sturminster BKA



The bees are tucked up for winter. Gordon Grant has arranged a rota to go through the winter for people to check out the apiary every fortnight. We always have two people for an inspection in case there is an accident or other incident that is beyond the capabilities of someone on their own.

Our current apiary arrangement in the grounds of the Forum School in Shillingstone is workable but not good. Theoretical instruction is carried out in the Shillingstone Church Centre, where cars have to be parked as we have no parking at the apiary. Access to the apiary site is difficult and there is no water or electricity on site. We hope that our new site, also in Shillingstone, will remedy some of these disadvantages. Easy access to the apiary for vehicles is important because carrying heavy items across a rough field and over stiles is a real challenge. We are hoping to share a county council field with the Lavender Farm Project which is a social enterprise. The lavender farm will use the site for parking during the week and we shall use it during the weekends and in the evenings. Dorset Council is keen to improve its green credentials and sees beekeeping as part of this. The lavender farm will use most of the field and we shall have a corner. I am sure the bees will enjoy the lavender.

Apart from the apiary story there are a few items of interest:

I was called to the Forum School in August to collect a swarm clustered on the steps of their dining hall. The swarm was very docile and I put a nuc with a couple of frames of honey near them. They crawled in and I took them away. They must have suffered from starvation to take off at that time of year.

On another day, Gordon and I went to St. Mary's School, Shaftesbury to look at a couple of colonies that had been abandoned. St Mary's is up for sale. The hives had not been looked at for a year. One colony was almost queenless but had plenty of honey and the other had plenty of brood but was on the verge of starvation. We offered to take them away but St. Mary's, I think, were hoping for money.

In both July and August we took advantage of the Food and Craft Fairs organised by the show committee on the showground of the cancelled Gillingham and Shaftesbury Show to sell association and members' honey and other hive-derived products.



Both days were very successful with the public buying the produce on sale in good quantities and appreciating the opportunity to obtain



high quality local honey. Many were also interested in the back-story, wanting to know about bees, pollination and beekeeping.

One really useful innovation for the stand was the purchase of a contactless card reader, which works through a mobile phone – over 50% of the sales made on each day were paid for by card rather than cash and might have been “lost sales” had we not had an efficient working machine. To our surprise and delight, the acquisition and operation of the card machine was simplicity itself with the cost and sales commission being minimal.

We have decided to delay our AGM until the spring when we hope to use it as a social occasion to launch the new season.

Lesley Gasson

Dorchester & Weymouth



This has been a strange season as regards the honey yield. Some of our members have reported taking off super after super. Some (like myself & fellow apiary site beekeeper) despite our hives being next to a wildflower site, with extra strips sown (shown left), have had a very light honey yield. Yet these strips were packed with all types of pollinating insects including honey bees, which I would like to think were ours. So what happened?

They were healthy colonies and large enough to cope with good nectar flows.

Talking to the owner of the wildflower site, despite the abundance of pollinating insects on the strips, he has found it has been a very poor year for seeds. It was too dry for too long.

Obviously we have had no apiary meetings or socials this season so no opportunity to discuss all this with other members. There's one thing you can guarantee with beekeepers: that you will get an opinion.

Our next event would have been our AGM but having looked at various advice on BBKA and the Charities Commission, we have decided to postpone it for three months. This will bring it to 14th January 2021. If we still cannot have face-to-face meetings then, we will possibly look at organising one online.

There has been a wonderful programme of online lectures/webinars. D&W gave a donation to Somerset

Beekeepers to allow us to join in with their series of lectures and I know a good percentage of our members have tuned in to them. There is definitely a benefit to listening to these lectures in your own home: it saves having to drive anywhere, especially on dark evenings.

However, speaking personally, I have missed our monthly socials that we held at the Colliton Club. It was always a good opportunity to meet new members, have a convivial drink and, of course, partake in some interesting conversations, bee-related or otherwise. I'm not sure this would relate equally well somehow online.



We did hold two outdoor theory sessions for some of our beginners (as shown left) in the days when we could have larger meetings outside. We also tried to match each of them with an experienced member to actually have a look inside some hives. With the help of a mentor some of them have gone ahead with getting bees. All of them are still enthusiastic which just shows how beekeeping can grip you.

We have signed up quite a few new members since lockdown. Once again the frustration is not being able to hold any apiary visits or our usual socials where we could meet them. So at the moment they are just names on our mailing list but hopefully next year things will be better.

Sally Leslie

ITEMS WANTED

Two of our members are interested in:

Modified commercial hives and ideally would like to purchase a couple of brood boxes before next Spring to replace a couple of ours which have seen better days! We were hoping that there might be a member who has a brood box or two which are surplus to requirements.

My tel.number is 07821 387346 and Duncan's 01300 341979.

Nick Gill

East Dorset BKA

With the first day of autumn behind us, and the evenings drawing in, our thoughts would normally have been on our winter talks and events. Yet again, the restrictions imposed by Covid have struck. Our honey show and our winter quiz have already been cancelled, and our annual inter-association skittles match with BADS is looking doubtful.

EDBKA continues to attract new members, with our membership at 205 for 2020. On being asked how we attracted so many new members Ivor Kemp replied that he thought it was down to the training programme being followed up with bee buddies for new members and our two active WhatsApp groups – one for all members and one for the newbies.

These have both proved extremely popular, and rarely a day passes without a discussion or two. Recent topics have included how to prevent/reduce wasps attacking hives, (which led to several members nipping off to their local electrical suppliers for a length of plastic conduit) winter treatments, winter feeding – what to feed when to feed and even should we feed, how to store supers and frames – wet or dry. Lots of photos get posted, and much information and advice is given – even with the ten different answers from ten different beekeepers, as is the norm! Offers of help given, and a few nods about possible new apiary sites. All in all, the WhatsApp group has been a very good tool, and I'm sure it will continue to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Our training programme continues to be popular. We already have over 30 applications for next year's training programme, which bodes well for the continued growth of the association.

The hives at the association teaching apiary have been fed with syrup and have had Apistan on, and somewhere in the region of 120lb of honey has been decanted into jars – not bad for a teaching apiary.

Our committee has been holding meetings via Zoom for most of this year and the association AGM will be held on Thursday 22nd October 2020 via the same medium. Further details will be sent out to members soon (if not already out by the time this is in print).

Jim Dunne

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News from West Dorset BKA—October 2020



Well, what a strange year. This Covid-19 put paid to so many things in our lives as beekeepers. No practicals at the teaching apiary, which has been a great shame. We could not show off our new cabins to the students and members, as well as the bees. Four of us have kept the apiary ticking over during this period. We have eight colonies, which have all been fed and treated for varroa. We will be giving them Api-bioxal treatment in December to keep the mite population down as much as we can. Just a tidy up all round needed now for the season ahead.

We have kept with these eight colonies going (assuming they get through the winter) just in case we can next year give the students of 2020 a chance of coming along to have a hands on experience on four hives and if the course of 2021 can go ahead they can open up the others, but who knows what's in store for 2021? The honey crop has been good this year. Luckily we have found a few more outlets, as we have missed out big time on selling our produce at the Melplash Show this year.

A lot of our members have been tuning into all the webinars which are available, to keep up their learning. They have been great. I must say thank goodness for all this technology during this difficult time, especially for folk on their own. A big thank you to the associations and BIBBA for organising these webinars.

Just heard of two swarms of bees in the last week; has anyone else?

Must get all my equipment cleaned up ready for next year, to start all over again!

Carole Brown

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Learning during the pandemic

BBKA modules

“We can’t meet, so how can we learn?”

“Why should I bother when I know my bees are fine and the exams are cancelled anyway?”

Two valid questions frequently asked, but are there any good answers?

There are certainly some answers but whether they are good answers or not will depend upon how you want to spend your time while we wait for the return of normality (whenever that might be) and of course winter is now looming ahead of us so you could soon have time on your hands to spare.

Any study for the BBKA exams is normally aimed at passing the module exams but all of them have a very practical basis, so you will find that the knowledge you gain from the exam structure can be put to good practical use in caring for your bees and improving your honey harvest, if not now then perhaps sometime later on.

As a correspondence course tutor I have found that one of the best ways to improve your knowledge and gauge your progress is to work through some of the old module question papers and I will be glad to help anyone who would like to try that approach.

I have a number of old papers for all of the modules which I will share with anyone who asks and I invite you to have a go and see how you get on.

You can keep the results to yourself if you wish or you can email your answers to me for checking and I will be happy to put you right if there is any doubt.

Have a go; it is free and you might find you enjoy testing yourself without the stress of taking an exam.

Terry Payne

(e-mail twpayne@btinternet.com)

Online learning

1. Richard Norman, our President, has come across a series of talks which can be accessed through:

<https://www.eventbrite.ie/d/online/beekeeping/>

The dates are a bit muddled but there are some well known speakers.

2. **National Honey Show**

The 2020 National Honey show will be a professional, online conference for all. The programme can be found at: <http://www.honeyshow.co.uk/>

3. **Somerset BKA** Lock-Down lecture series. All beekeepers are welcome to listen to these lectures, but you have to register in advance for a ticket at Eventbrite. Information about these lectures can be found at:

<https://www.somersetbeekeepers.org.uk/>

4. **BBKA.**

Keep an eye on the BBKA website for their forecast instructional videos.

Building a bee library – 1

I am often asked by new beekeepers: “what books should I buy?”

This is a loaded question because it must always depend upon the individual and also because personal opinions will vary, so I can only speak about those books which have helped and interested me, first as a beginner myself and then later on as my understanding increased.

With this in mind the first book on my list has to be :

Ted Hooper’s “Guide to Bees and Honey”

First written in 1976, it is very easy to read and will lead the new beekeeper through all the essential stages of the craft with an emphasis on understanding the bee’s behaviour and its biology.

Because of that, the book provides valuable advice and support as one’s own knowledge develops, including harvesting your honey and wax to a standard suitable for sale or showing.

The book is on the BBKA’s own list of recommended reading and it is useful to know that their examination board often makes reference to it.

As I said earlier, the book was written more than 40 years ago and, although the principles described are still very sound, there have been legislative changes in the interim which could pull you up short.

Do please make allowance, for example, that Ted could not have known that PDB (parodichloro-benzine) for the control of wax moth would one day be prohibited!

There are very few textbooks which do not become out of date the moment they are published and any student must be prepared to keep abreast of current regulations.

There is now a fifth edition available through Amazon or E H Thorne (about £13) but I haven’t read it myself so I don’t know if this has been rectified but, nevertheless, I strongly recommend this book to any new beekeeper who I am sure will find it a constantly valuable reference book.

Another book high on my list is:

“Practical Beekeeping” by Clive de Bruyn.

This was first published in 1997 and is available for about £25.

Again, it is a comprehensive guide for everything that a new beekeeper might wish to know, well illustrated with diagrams and photographs, some of them in colour.

It also adopts a very practical approach with clear text and an easy manner, making it easy to read.

A practical feature that appealed to me is the use of summaries throughout the book of what had just been described in more detail in the texts.

It means that you don’t have to read the whole chapter all over again to pick up on a particular point – Clive has done that for you.

I hope these thoughts will prove useful to anyone just starting out and I will offer advice on other books in later editions of Honeycraft.

Happy reading,

Terry Payne

Building a bee library – 2

Previously, I described and recommended books by Ted Hooper and Clive de Bruyn which I think any new beekeeper will find helpful and should keep on their bookshelf.

However, there are many others which a few minutes online will reveal and, with the emphasis on new beekeepers, I cannot leave out the **BBKA's "Guide to Beekeeping"** by Ivor Davis and Roger Cullom-Kenyon. There are few people better qualified to write such a book. Ivor understands exactly what a new beekeeper wants and needs to know and he is straightforward and uncomplicated in meeting that need with plentiful photographs and illustrations.

These three books will take a beginner a long way towards learning how to keep their bees safely and in good health but if the Basic Assessment is in your mind – and maybe the modules later on – then **the series of books by J D & B D Yates** will prove invaluable.

There are several books in the series dealing with the modules and yet others to guide you through all the practical assessments including microscopy. An advantage of these books is that each chapter deals specifically with an item from the syllabus which makes it easy to work your way through the syllabus, knowing exactly where to look for the answers to anything that you might want to clarify.

A single (brown) book deals with the Basic Assessment and the "Purple Book" will guide you through the Husbandry Assessment.

Two more cover all of the modules;-

The "Green Book" covers modules 1, 2 and 3 while the "Orange Book" deals with modules 5, 6, 7 and 8. I expect you know that module 4 no longer exists, which once dealt with some aspects of the bee's biology, and now all contained in module 5

If **Microscopy** interests you and you have plans to tackle the BBKA's microscopy certificate, then Yates can also help you there with his **"Blue Book"**, but another good book is written by **Bob Maurer** titled **"Practical Microscopy for Beekeepers"**. The word "practical" is the watchword for this book, which is easy to read and deals with every aspect of microscopy in a manner which deals with some complicated aspects in an understandable and engaging way. The book is well illustrated, with clear diagrams and many photographs, together with an excellent glossary which explains the various technical terms common to microscopy but which are not familiar to most of us.

Next time I will suggest some other books which will take more experienced beekeepers further into the exploration of the honey bee and its secrets but I will leave you with a final thought (although you have probably already come to appreciate this) ; The more you learn, the more there is to discover – and the more books you will find you need !

Perhaps Santa will bring you some for Christmas!

Happy reading,

Terry Payne

Beekeeping videos –1

There has been a lot written about looking after bees but there is nothing quite like practical experience. Obviously the best help is from an experienced tutor, but when that isn't possible, or if it is simply not the season for, say, swarming, then videos are an excellent second.

Beekeepers are often asked by neighbours what they can do to help. Defra have produced some simple introductory videos to help stimulate interest in the general public. A short introductory address you can email to those who ask is <https://www.facebook.com/TheBritishBeekeepersAssociation/videos/463419497826852/>

For beginner beekeepers there is a large number of videos. The video at <https://youtu.be/M8nP59IoX6M> entitled “Getting started in beekeeping: the beekeeping Year Part 1” is the start of a series, each one covering one season. This video covers spring (March, April and May) and describes how a colony fluctuates throughout the year and the jobs a beekeeper has to do to make sure that the bees are healthy and productive. It looks at buying a nucleus, installing, feeding, adding frames, inspecting, swarm control, building up the colony, disease inspections and checking for eggs. It contains links to videos on feeding, the diseases that may be encountered, what a healthy brood pattern looks like, record keeping, how to mark a queen, splitting a colony and to the Norfolk Honey Co website at www.norfolk-honey.co.uk. It is not a substitute for being trained at a BKA, but it is a good introduction or reminder.

For those who are more experienced at beekeeping, then <https://youtu.be/HF6MpolcvCw> entitled “How to find and mark a queen” is aimed at developing those skills. There is a number of different ways of achieving this, so there are a number of videos covering the topic.

When you get to the stage where you want to perform an artificial swarm, then <https://youtu.be/YUm4-Tn166g> will be of interest. If you are going to do this, one thing is certain: you will want to plan it thoroughly in advance. There are many ways to perform an artificial swarm, so if you decide to use a modified version of this method or even if you use a completely different method: this will help you think it through.

If you are thinking of using a Snelgrove board to perform an artificial swarm then see <https://youtu.be/sne2riqU4ug>. There are actually four parts to this and also a link to making your own Snelgrove board!

Those with woodworking skills may be interested in building their own boxes, especially if they are going to perform an artificial swarming procedure or a shook swarm. <https://youtu.be/NAj5cpkJFyk> describes building your own brood boxes using plywood.

For light relief you might want to watch the BSBKA video on making an Asian Hornet trap. This shows Ian Condon leading a practical session at a meeting at Shillingstone : <https://youtu.be/Ctcl4upsrMY> The important point here is to make an inspection trap, not a kill trap. Some of those sold commercially are kill traps. You need to differentiate between the two.

Chris Harwood

Beekeeping videos – 2

This is the second article in the beekeeping videos series. As before, there is a clickable link to the video mentioned, but, as usual, playing that video causes a list of similar videos to be displayed alongside which might also be of interest.

The second of the beginner beekeeper's videos is <https://youtu.be/IGDXJUgyZal> : Getting Started in Beekeeping 2: June, July & August. This is the busiest time of the beekeeping year and a time when most beekeepers watch for signs of swarming.

Once beginners start to feel more confident about dealing with bees they might want to consider collecting a swarm. There is a video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gihM9T7QQLk> Your own club will probably maintain a swarm list, which is a list of names and contact details of those in the area who would like to collect swarms. The club's swarm list co-ordinator will probably also hold a list of names of people looking to acquire swarms. The co-ordinator may also be able to advise on a suitable fee to charge the recipient for this.

Once they have left the hive, the main problem with swarms is that the bees may end up somewhere unsuitable, which is where they conflict with people. Making a swarm trap enables some of these loose swarms to be rehoused. Swarm trap construction is described in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS37gIEsWuw>

Beekeeping microscopy enables you to understand a lot about the health of your bees and perform a health check at the start and end of each season. The first of our beekeeping microscopy videos is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CgfXulicDM> which is "How to diagnose nosema". The video describes the methodology in detail. If you find it fascinating you might even go on to buy "Practical Microscopy for Beekeepers" by Bob Maurer, Master Beekeeper, and even a microscope!

If the weather gets cold for a protracted period over the winter, unless you use WBC hives you might want to consider adding insulation to your hives. The purpose is not the bees' comfort, but rather reducing condensation. The centre of the hive is warm and slightly damp. When the warm, damp air meets cold hive walls, the moisture in the warm air condenses on the inside of the hive and bacteria and fungus start to grow. These can kill bees or damage the overall health of the hive. The video at <https://youtu.be/egix-XrxDKk> describes the simple building of foam insulators. These are becoming more popular.

The varroa mite is a serious pest in itself and also it introduces other pathogens. Anti-varroa treatments seem to be successful only in limiting the numbers of the mite, not in eradicating it. If the infestation is bad, then it may be necessary to change the wax in the brood box and remove infected eggs, larvae and pupae. One of the most successful ways of doing this is to use "shook swarm". This is demonstrated at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4HtEloe_rg . It is also beneficial to change the wax in the brood box about every three years for general bee health reasons. Shook swarm is useful for that too.

Finally, this issue's swarm control method is Pagden Method. There is a very clear description of this in the video cartoon at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCReKLV6CB4>

Chris Harwood

Swarm control, frame changing and queen replacement

A re-think which achieves our goals, whilst keeping on the front foot

by Dennis Clemens (a D&W member)

The planning should start in early August, by ensuring that our colonies are healthy, varroa free, strong and well fed. (All my stocks receive Hive Alive in their autumn feed).

Young queens are preferable, but not essential for this approach. By mid- March our colonies should have at least six, preferably eight, frames of brood.

Three things which I believe are essential to achieve that target are:

1. Avoid any form of top ventilation.
2. Overwinter on solid floors
3. **INSULATE** your hives. This is essential for an early build-up.

Your bees will thrive and love you, if you can get your head around these three points. This is to understand the natural environment of the honey bee (a wild creature).

Many of you will have read books which contradict what I have said. My bees and I will happily argue each point in detail and convince you that nature is best.

Swarm prediction

At first inspection, a tall order, I hear you say. My observations over the last few years have led me to understand a few clues. First, know the age of the queen. At first inspection you should find either an unmarked queen, the product of supersedure the previous autumn, or a marked queen, either one or more years old. The potential for a future swarm event at this time has three indicators.

1. The age of the queen
2. The pace of spring build-up
3. The quantity of drone cells under development.

A big advantage at this time would be having two or more colonies in order to have a comparison. **The age of the queen;** a new queen, ie a supersedure will have a swarm risk of less than 10%, subject to space/congestion never being allowed to be a problem.

A queen that has been in lay for a full year will have a swarm risk of 40-60%.

Queens older than this can be used, however the risks of swarming are high.

The pace and development of the brood (spring build-up). A young queen will provide a good supply of queen mandibular pheromone (QMD). The colony will be confident in the queen's ability to serve them for the foreseeable future and as such there is no urgency to build early in preparation for a successful swarming event.

A colony with an older queen will assess her and respond accordingly.

The drone angle. All colonies will produce drones. It is the queen's way of projecting her genes into the local gene pool, even without swarming. However, a colony planning to issue a swarm will massively increase its drone production well ahead of swarming, as drones are not sexually mature for at least two weeks post-emergence. Therefore a colony planning a swarm event will need to start drone production six to seven weeks ahead. For example, a late April swarm needs an early March drone build-up.

We need to understand that possible early prediction of swarming is about the age of the queen, the timing of spring build-up and the volume of production of drones.

What can we do with all this information? Swarming is for many a real challenge. Use what you have read and rank

your colonies in order of swarm risk: low, medium or high. With your high risk stocks do not wait for swarm preparation – PREVENT IT.

By April, week one, you will know which colony is ahead of the others. Have ready a nucleus box. Take the queen from the colony with two frames of mainly sealed brood and one frame of mixed eggs, larvae and stores plus one very full frame of stores and one foundation frame. Move this to a new site, feed with half a gallon of syrup 2:1. If remaining on the same site follow the same procedure but add extra bees to counter the loss of flying bees.

Now for the queenless parent stock: Applying the Miller method of queen cell production (the simplest system). Find one or two frames with eggs and one-day-old larvae. The plan is to cut out two rectangles 1 ½" horizontal and 2 ½" vertical in each of the frames with the upper edge cutting through an area of eggs and day-old larvae. This gives the bees a perfect space to draw perfect length queen cells. Other queen cells will be produced; destroy these after seven days.

The space left by the removal of the nucleus should not be filled with foundation. In the absence of a laying queen the workers will not draw comb in the brood box. Move the dummy boards up; better still, fill this space with insulated frames. This will reduce heat loss into the void, enabling heat retention in the brood nest. Once the colony has a laying queen there is a perfect opportunity for frame renewal.

Once the queen has laid one or two frames transfer her on her frames into a clean box on a clean floor. NOTE. By this time all brood will have emerged as in the Bailey comb change system. Old comb can now be dealt with, without the loss of bees, as happens with the shook swarm system. This system is applicable where no disease is present or suspected. If disease is suspected, ring the Seasonal Bee Inspector (SBI) and pray.

Give your new queen only four frames of foundation; fill the rest of the box with insulated dummy boards. All supers will have been taken off by now, allowing you to feed half a gallon of 2:1 syrup per week. As foundation is drawn out insulation is swapped for foundation, one or two (max) frames at a time. The logic behind the drip feeding, half a gallon per week, is to maximise comb building rather than storing. This method of comb change is a friendly mix of Bailey and shook swarm without the need to place a queen excluder under the receiving box. The queen has brood and therefore will not abscond, a common risk with the classic shook swarm.

Now back to the nuc. It will need moving to a big box within seven to ten days as the emerging brood will need more space. An additional two frames of foundation – yes by now you got it – the other space will be occupied with insulated dummy boards and gentle feeding will continue. I have found this method of feeding and gradual space expansion enables the colony to expand at maximum pace.

The first nucs I split on 19th April filled their first super by 16th June and needed their second super.

There is nothing new about this approach. I have simply taken a long look at all that we do and picked out the best bits and joined them up. This approach has many steps and, just like walking, we need to take one step at a time. Any beekeeper can have a go. Just remember: one step, one hive at a time, and hopefully we will all spend more time next year on the front foot. Good luck.

PS Another thought. At the point of the first split consider splitting the remaining box into two nucs. This gives three possible benefits:

1. If one fails you still have the other two
2. If both the queens are successful you have a spare to cover later failure

If you consider this colony to be one of your best, take this opportunity to expand the line.

The End for now!

I believe a critical element is INSULATION. I will happily show what I do and how I make it.

Editor's Note: Dennis has kindly offered to provide his insulation guide for the next issue of HoneyCraft.

Dennis Clemens

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