



Celebrating over 95 years of support for beekeeping and  
beekeepers in and around the Medway Towns



# WHATSTHEBUZZ

April  
2021

*Hello to April, to the start of  
swarming, and to you all!*

Even in the glorious sunshine today (19 March), the temperature barely reaches 9°C. Yet, it's possible that in a couple of weeks' time, the whole panoply of beekeeping might be brought in to play.

We'll signal the end to winter with simple things like removing protective armour against woodpeckers and mice. And even if we have been checking our colonies' stores regularly in March, and will continue to do so, after all this time of just seeing the topbars, we'll also start looking at the comb faces.

We'll be looking at the brood, checking that the queen has room to lay, and making decisions about adding supers. We'll be looking for queen cells, and deciding if those we find are swarm, emergency, or supersedure cells – and what we're going to do about that. We'll be devoting one whole inspection to a spring brood check for disease, particularly chalkbrood, sacbrood and foulbrood. We'll be assessing the age and quality of the comb in the brood box, and making plans for rotating some frames out, or, if we are so inclined, we'll be thinking about Bailey or shook swarm comb change. And in the case of the latter, we'll be bearing in mind that it is stressful for the colony and should only be attempted on a strong colony, in good weather, and with a good forecast.

You would be forgiven for thinking that beekeeping was all about beekeepers, having just worked through a list like that!

But of course beekeeping is really about the bees. The queen should now be laying strongly,

particularly if there is a nectar flow. Soon, we should notice the presence of drones in the colony. And as the colony builds up, the bees will, for reasons of their choosing, draw and charge queen cells.

In the gardens and edges of places like roads and fields, we will start to see dandelion, ribes (currant), and, later in the month, the apple blossom, which will fill the horizon above my back garden.



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# Stephen Martin: a talk on current research for varroa-tolerant bees

Prof Stephen Martin of Salford University gave the ninth in our Winter series of talks on Zoom on 24 February 2021. Although Stephen and his colleague have published the story of their research in a BBKA News Special, *Natural Varroa-Resistant honey Bees*, hearing about this research from the scientist himself made for a brilliant presentation, with an engaging and illuminating Q&A session afterwards.

There are significant large areas of the world where *A. mellifera* bees can survive with a varroa infestation. The South Africa government decided that they would not treat with any miticide and now their bees are able to thrive despite varroa. European and American bees are comparatively mollycoddled. Helping bees makes them less able to manage their problems for themselves.

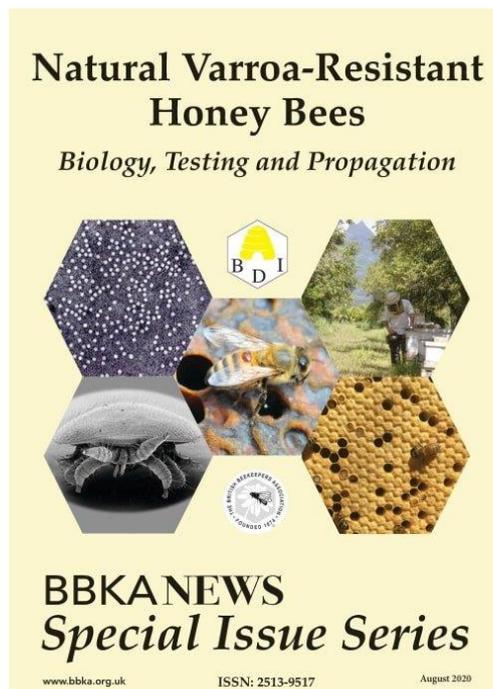
Stephen looked at the hygienic behaviour mechanism which honey bees have for control of mites. Varroa resistance has long been associated with a reduction in the mite offspring. As with other diseases like chalkbrood, some bees uncap cells if they suspect that the bee inside is diseased. They will then either recap the cell if they find nothing wrong, or cannibalise the contents (in which case the mite escapes), or remove the bee from the cell, and the hive.

Oddly, it is the incidence of recapping cells (where the bees have decided there is nothing wrong with the contents of the cell) which scientists measure for an indication of how much hygienic behaviour the bees engage in. In varroa free areas, recapping of cells does not occur at all.

Hygienic behaviour is the only means that any race of bees has of containing varroa infestations. Grooming was once thought to be how *A. cerana* had learned to survive with varroa. This, however, was an instance of bad science: the experiment involved putting *V. destructor* mites on *A. cerana* bees; the bees were then observed grooming these mites off each other. However, these were not the same mites as parasitised *A. cerana*, and naturally they had a different odour.

Although it is the virus load which kills colonies, beekeepers need concern themselves only with mites, not viruses. Keeping infestation levels low will absolutely result in low virus loads.

There are pockets where treatment free beekeeping can and does work in the UK. Although some of these areas are free of mites, in others, locally adapted bees are now able to control infestations. Becoming a treatment-free beekeeper is a long and fraught process which does not include the option of live and let die. Stephen said that you could only describe yourself as a treatment-free beekeeper after about ten years of managing colonies without treatment. Monitoring and treating when necessary are very much a part of the journey to becoming a treatment-free beekeeper.



# Richard Rickitt, a talk ‘From Buckfast to Buckingham Palace’

**W**e came to the end of our Winter series of ten talks on Zoom on Monday 8 March. Richard Rickitt, co-editor of BeeCraft, is uniquely placed to entertain beekeepers for hours with stories of the places and people he has visited and met as he travels the UK in search of material to fill the columns of BeeCraft. His story-telling has an easy flow with wonderful photos (not surprising with his background in film and TV) to accompany his words.

Manchester is a stellar performer in British beekeeping. The city has long adopted the bee as a symbol of the high value it places on industriousness, so the Rickitts family, which includes three teenagers, devised a holiday challenge to find instances of the bee emblem throughout the city. Manchester Cathedral has a Canon Beekeeper, Adrian Rhodes, who looks after the hives on the cathedral roof, and Manchester BKA has a headquarters building to die for.



*Dower House in Heaton Park, Prestwich Manchester BKA Headquarters, with a public viewing area, extraction room and a bee garden (apiary).*

Richard also took us to the glorious meadows and apiaries of Salisbury Plain, a military training ground (not a straightforward tourist destination), and to the gardens of Buckingham Palace, where an eco-friendly philosophy has been adopted, sometimes to the consternation of the Garden Party guests (‘Shame they don’t seem to be able to afford people to cut the grass’). Although the trees and plants in the Palace gardens offer wonderful forage, the bees from the Palace hives now struggle to compete for their own forage. Unlike us human visitors, bees from outlying colonies (on the roofs of Fortnams, The Ritz and others) have no difficulty enjoying the delights of the palace gardens.

The Chat button on Zoom that evening was red-hot: there were some interesting questions, but mostly people wanted to say what an inspiring and enjoyable evening it had been.



## Getting to know you: this month, Kay Wreford

*A series in which WHATSTHEBUZZ chats with one of its members about beekeeping and life in general.*

*Our local Bee Inspector (and Master Beekeeper), Kay Wreford, talks about the job, about her beekeeping, and what gets her worked up.*

**WHATSTHEBUZZ** I know far too little about the Bee Inspector (BI) job, not even if it’s voluntary or paid.

**Kay Wreford** This is my day job, and, yes, I am paid for it. You probably wouldn’t do it otherwise! We are civil servants, and are employed by Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), which is part of DEFRA.

**WTB** Foulbrood is a big part of it?

**KW** It is a big part of it but there’s all sorts of other things. We’re looking for first signs of an invasive species like Tropilaelaps and Small hive beetle (SHB). And we take part in the hunt for Asian hornets. We check a percentage of



imports and exports. If they're from Italy, we check 50% or more because of the risk of SHB. From this year, only queens can be imported from the EU or exported to the EU.

**WTB** Any other activities?

**KW** We do two kinds of beekeeper education events. First, *Bee Health* days. All the bee inspectors in the region are there. They present a full day of lectures on bee health and disease. We take along infected frames, showing foulbrood, chalk brood, sacbrood, etc. Everyone can have a dig around in the frames to learn how to recognise these diseases.

Our other education event is called *Bee Safaris*. At these, a BKA will invite an inspector to come and look at the hives of, say, four or five beekeepers. Other members of the association will be there too. The BI will inspect a hive then describe what s/he finds.

**WTB** If you were told about hives which were under-managed or neglected, would you step in?

**KW** No. It's not up to us to police how people look after their hives. The only time I would intervene would be if there's foulbrood in the area. We are bee disease officers. If it's a health issue, we'll make comments and obviously if it's foulbrood, that will have to be cleared up and we'll give help with that. Just because you don't keep your bees the same way as everybody else, that's fine by us.

**WTB** Do people phone you up about non-foulbrood issues?

**KW** If you think your bees have a disease, you can call us, send a photo etc. Usually people don't know what they've got. We can give advice on what to do, or not to do.

**WTB** You say you're not there to police how people keep their hives but sometime ago, you called me to say you might come along to see my hives – and that made me, as a new beekeeper, panic a little!

**KW** People get like that: Oh my God the BI is coming. And so, I have to say, so did I. Shortly after I started keeping bees, I got a call from the BI saying 'Can I come and have a look at your hives?' It was Bob Smith, in fact. I was really concerned. But he was coming because there was foulbrood in the area. The visit was, however, a fantastic learning experience and not at all something to be worried about.

**WTB** At the *Introduction to beekeeping* course this week, somebody threw an offhand comment that if you get a visit from a BI you'd better make sure your medical records are up to date.

**KW** We don't routinely check veterinary medicine records unless we're doing a honey sample. The Veterinary Medicine Directorate asks us to do honey samples because they're looking for various things: something illegal that a beekeeper might have put in their hives; or perhaps a farmer has sprayed something on crops that might have got into the honey. If you're a bee farmer, and on the DASH scheme (the Disease Accreditation Scheme for Honeybees), then we'd look at your veterinary medicine records. And look inside some hives too. If we come across something, we'd take a sample. It does occasionally happen.

**WTB** Would you mind my asking what you did in a previous life?

**KW** No that's fine, because half of Medway BKA knows anyway; I was a general practitioner, a GP in Sittingbourne. I've lived here 25 years now. I was born and bred in Orpington, lived there for 20 years, went to university in London, joined the army, saw the world.

**WTB** Really? How long were you in the army for?

**KW** I was in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and I was training to be a surgeon. Anyway, long story short, when I left the army I couldn't get a training post in the NHS to carry on doing orthopaedic surgery, so I changed, and became a general practitioner.

**WTB** And do you have a family in this area?

**KW** I've only got a hubby, and my mad dog who's downstairs. Otherwise he'd have joined in.

**WTB** And what started your interest in bees and beekeeping?

**KW** I always wanted to keep bees, even when I was tiny. My mum told me that when I was little, we would all go to Kent County show every year, and they used to leave me in the bee tent. I would be quite happy in there all day, looking at the observation hives. When I moved here I thought I'd really like to keep bees, and then I met my husband and we got married, and we also bought a bit of land that was next to us. So, for my birthday one year, he bought me a hive! A WBC hive, with all the beginners kit. A friend of ours, David Wood, was the swarm collector for Swale. I called him. All right, come out with me tonight, he said. We went into Sittingbourne, and there was an enormous swarm in a hedge; in fact it was so big we had to put it in two swarm boxes. And that's how I started keeping bees.

**WTB** How long ago was that?

**KW** That was 15 years ago. We hosted quite a few meetings here actually in the past at Medway BKA so a lot of the members have been here.

**WTB** How many colonies do you have? Are they just in your garden?

**KW** No, no, I've got an out apiary. I have 13 of my own and I'm babysitting another beekeeper's hives over winter so I'm looking after 20 hives at the moment.

The out apiary is in a pear orchard with apples on either side. In the blossom season there's plenty pollen and nectar, but otherwise the forage is a bit lacking.

**WTB** What about raising queens?

**KW** The really difficult thing at my out apiary is mating queens – not exactly mating but getting a queen back to the hive, because there's so much birdlife down there. I never have that problem at home.

**WTB** What aspect of beekeeping particularly interests you?

**KW** Just keeping bees well and healthy – and getting a honey crop off. I find bees fascinating. I enjoy them and they're a great stress reliever – apart from when they're wanting to swarm and hang off a tree!

**WTB** What do you hope for in beekeeping in the next 10-20 years?

**KW** The one thing that really gets me wound up is people keeping bees badly. You just think, what are you doing, not even doing the basics properly. Mucky, filthy beekeeping with a shocking mess, and starving bees. If you're going to keep bees, keep them properly – otherwise don't keep them at all.

I think we need to keep pushing and teaching people good husbandry. It doesn't have to be exactly the way it says in the book. Just look after them.

\* \* \* \*

The National Bee Unit South East Region Annual Report 2020, written by Kay Wreford, can be read [here](#). It contains much of interest on foulbrood in the SE, on SHB in Italy, on Asian Hornet sightings in the UK, and on the new rules for importing and exporting bees. There is also a request for beekeepers to participate as Voluntary Sentinel Apiaries, and a reminder to register your apiaries on BeeBase. Plus full contact info for SE Bee Inspectors.



# WORDS: does varroa have a phoretic phase?

(with thanks to the Module 3 revision group)

The first stage of the life of a varroa mite is called the reproductive stage, where it has developed from egg to mated adult while feeding on a bee larva/pupa. On emerging from the cell, it begins the so-called phoretic stage, because it will now be transported around the hive (and the world) on the body of an adult bee. So far, so good. Phoresy (from Greek phorēsis 'being carried') refers to the association between organisms in which one is carried on the body of another.

However, phoresy excludes parasites. There is no feeding stage in phoresy.

So, can we just replace phoretic with parasitic then? Sadly, no. The mite is a parasite of honey bees at all stages of its life. Here, we're looking for a word that distinguishes the two stages of the life of varroa, commonly known as *reproductive* and *phoretic*. The mite is a parasite throughout both stages.

Any ideas for a more accurate term? It has to cover **transport with meals included**.



## Recent research

(From Bob Smith) Just published, some [amazing video footage](#) of individual bees within a colony; highly recommended!

I've not had time to read the text of the paper so may have missed some of the observations of relevance to everyday beekeeping. Here are a few things immediately grasped my attention:

- Pollen unloading and packing – the back legs go in the cell and the middle legs nudge it off slowly until in the base of the cell then the back legs flick it towards the rear. Obvious I suppose, but never seen and works well. Then other bees (?) go in head first and work it towards the back of the cell.
- Cell capping – I'd like to look at that again but I think it was a single bee that did the whole job. I'd imagined it would be several. Also note that no new wax is involved; they simply use what is within the rim to seal it off, which is the reason the cappings colour reflects that of the comb.
- 'The larva spins a cocoon' – easily said but now I've seen it and the contortions involved. I'd like to look again to get the time-line.
- Liquids management – interesting to see the evaporative cooling video and the ones where nectar is deposited or withdrawn; the work of a single bee is quite significant.
- Oviposition – fascinating!
- Egg hatch – note that the egg does not change much over the time; again, I need to look at the time scale but it seemed to 'fall over' just before hatching.

Bob Smith



*Varroa mites feed on bees as larvae, pupae and adults. Photo: Gilles San Martin*

# The Beekeeper's Checklist: a pot-luck series on almost any beekeeping topic

*Sometimes you don't need to read an article. Glancing down a list of bullet points is all that's needed to bring things back to mind. This month's topic:*

## Getting drawn comb

Many manipulations ask for drawn comb (if available, otherwise foundation). Foundation is definitely second-best. And the need for drawn comb is one of the reasons that beekeepers should not build up their colony numbers too quickly.

- In a natural situation, bees only have to draw comb quickly after swarming. They will have plenty of young wax-producing bees, a nectar flow, and good weather.
- That's a guide for us. We can feed syrup (1:1 or 2:1; Randy Oliver found that it didn't seem to matter) in a large feeder.
- If the weather is not warm, position frames of foundation near the brood nest, replacing them with more foundation when they are partially drawn.
- If the bees do not have sufficient comb, they will store nectar in the brood nest. And these cells cannot then be used for brood. So super early, and if the temperature is not warm, place two sheets of newspaper under the queen excluder. The bees will chew through it when they need more space.
- Bees only draw comb if they have to, so are less likely to do so later in the season when the colony is not expanding. So, don't use up all your drawn comb early in the season.
- Large colonies are needed. Better to have fewer, bigger colonies.
- Raising brood is a priority for the bees. Drawing comb will only be done by the bees who are free to do so! If foundation in supers is not being drawn, the bees may be fully engaged in feeding brood.
- Do not alternate comb and foundation, especially in supers. The bees will overextend the comb.
- To encourage the bees to go up to draw comb, remove the queen excluder and place a frame of drawn comb in the upper box at the outer edge.

Roger Patterson's method for getting comb drawn:

- Early in spring, place a brood box of foundation on a strong colony, preferably under some supers that have been started.
- When the bees start to draw the foundation, place the brood box between the two supers – to prevent pollen being stored in it.

Phil Craft's method for getting comb drawn:

- Move a strong hive to a new location in the same apiary.
- Place a new hive filled with foundation on the site of the first hive.
- Find the queen and place her with 50-66% of the bees shaken into the new hive.
- Add a queen excluder and supers, and a feeder if there is no nectar flow.
- As there are no cells for the queen to lay in, the bees will concentrate on drawing comb, first in the brood box, then in the supers.
- As the original colony was strong, you can leave it to raise a new queen, or give it a cell or queen.
- Be sure to protect your drawn comb from wax moth and mice.

References: Megan Milbrath, ABJ The Classroom, Jun 2020  
Paterson on comb, BBKA News Mar 2020  
Phil Craft, ABJ 2015

# Talks and courses coming soon

## INTRODUCTION TO BEEKEEPING COURSE

This course is taking place on Zoom on the five Tuesdays in March, and grows more lively by the week! Bee buddies are needed to support new beekeepers. You don't need to be an expert; just know your own limitations! Contact [Tony Edwards](#) if you can help.

## MODULE 3 EXAM REVISION GROUP

On three Thursday evenings in March, presented by Jen Ferry, one of the candidates, and overseen by Bob Smith. Also lively and stimulating sessions.

## QUEEN REARING GROUP

Tuesdays, 7.00-8.30pm, from 6 April. Initially on Zoom, and later at the Association apiary. Contact [Jen Ferry](#).

## THE 2021 BBKA SPRING CONVENTION, 16-18 APRIL

A great 'virtual' event to look forward to. Speakers include: Keith Delaplane (USA), Steve Pernal (Canada) and, from the UK, Steve Martin, Celia Davis, Nicola Bradbear, Marin Anastasov, Jane Medwell, Rinke Vinkenoog, Colin Pavey, Lynfa Davies, Matthew Pound, Shirley & Richard Bond – and more. Entry to the Virtual Tradeshow (AKA The Marketplace) will be free; an opportunity to browse the latest beekeeping kit and to take advantage of special Convention offers. Visit [BBKA online](#) for more news and event updates.



## BBKA RESEARCH DAY

No charge to attend, but it is necessary to register beforehand [here](#). The programme includes:

- news on a project to compare urban and rural sites assessing pollinator diversity in city centres, with Drs Rinke Vinkenoog and Matthew Pound, University of Northumbria.
- a plan to evaluate the effect of particulate matter (pollution) on honey bee colonies by placing sensors in apiaries, with Dr Barbara Smith, University of Coventry.
- news on a project funded by BBKA is looking specifically at the prey of the Asian hornet with Dr Juliette Poidatz, University of Exeter.



## There's no cure for a viral disease, but...

**T** rue, there's no cure for a viral disease, but that doesn't mean you sit back, do nothing, and wait for the worst! In a Zoom talk to the CABK last September, Prof Robert Pickard outlined one course of action for a beekeeper who finds that a viral disease is getting out of hand.

Requirements: a hive, two new queens, an excluder-cover for a brood frame, foundation, fondant (candy), and a queen introduction cage

- Remove the brood of a colony, with its young adult bees, and place it in a remote 'hospital' site with a new young queen, caged in an excluder-covered brood frame. [Do the split, leave for about an hour to bleed off the flying bees, and then shift the parent away to the hospital. Obviously this needs to be done in good flying weather and at the right time – around midday, early afternoon.]
- Place a sterilised hive with new comb foundation, a candy feed, and one frame of eggs and larvae from a healthy stock, on the original site to re-house the flying bees.

- Add a new, young queen from a healthy stock in an introduction cage.
- When the bees at the hospital site have all emerged, re-house that colony too on brand new comb and release the new, young queen.
- If Varroa is present, treat these two colonies when neither contains any sealed brood in which the mites can hide.

From *Viruses in Honeybees and Humans*, a talk by Professor Robert Pickard to the Central Association of Beekeepers on 16 September 2020



## The spoken word

An excerpt from a lecture or interview. In a 2019 National Honey Show talk entitled [Basic Honey Bee Genetics for Beekeepers](#) John Chalmers discusses one problem for bee improvers by selective breeding.

IMAGINE YOU ARE a bee improver. Three qualities you might want to improve in your bees are

- gentle behaviour
- good foraging
- hygienic behaviour

Let's look at gentle behaviour. I'm thinking of a trait to which all of the following could be applied:

- Tolerant of people in the vicinity
- Tolerant of hive inspections
- Tolerant of ground vibrations
- Blunted sensitivity to mammalian smells
- Tolerant of light suddenly flooding the hive
- Slow to attack and slow to sting
- Slow and poor recruitment of other bees
- Not instantly stinging ankles and face
- Non-following
- Quick to calm down again



This single quality turns out to be multiple qualities, and some of them probably break down into smaller parts. Is it likely that a single gene will control all of these things?

Of course not. We now have [scientific evidence](#) that multiple genes are responsible for the aggressiveness or gentleness of a colony. This presents serious problems for bee improvers. We know that the outstanding quality of the kind we dream of exists at the extremic end of a normal distribution curve. Only about 2% of all colonies are truly outstanding for a quality such as gentle behaviour and they essentially pop up and disappear largely by chance.

No bee breeder could fix all the desired alleles between generations in a closed breeding population without seriously damaging genetic diversity, which is so important.

Just 2% of colonies considered truly outstanding for one quality such as gentle behaviour could be expected to be simultaneously outstanding for a second desirable quality such as hygienic behaviour.

Of course the ephemeral nature of truly outstanding colonies doesn't bother honey bees in the slightest because the whole concept is human folly.

# Being controversial

– with the usual warning about the opinions expressed anywhere in this newsletter not representing MBKA, BBKA etc! 😊

How do you feel when you see a jar of ‘raw’ honey for sale? Perhaps your own label says ‘Raw honey’ – but somehow I doubt it.



## Estate Honey – 227g

Yes, this is the one Nigel Slater opened to raptures on BBC1. This shiny, golden jar represents the liquid gold deliciousness inside – and now you get more in the jar! Our raw honey is unpasteurised which means more benefit to you – preserving the natural enzymes in the honey.

£14.00



SHARE

A recent [thread on Beekeeping Forum](#) called *Top Dollar* was kick-started by this honey for sale. (Note the weight AND price!)

Is there an issue with the use of the word ‘raw’? What do marketing people hope to achieve with it? What do people understand by it?

To take these questions in order, the word ‘raw’ does not appear in the Honey Regulations and is not a product name or description for honey.

In fact, there was a court case about the use of the phrase ‘raw honey’. As ‘raw’ has no legal basis in law at present, it would take a court case to decide what it legally means. However, in this instance, the court regarded it as a gimmick word and so the case was tried under advertising law. So, was there any attempt to mislead, or make false claims? The court decided that having the word raw on the labels implied that the honey was better than other honeys which did not have this label. This was misleading as all honey sold as ‘Honey’ is, under the Honey Regulations, raw. (If it has been overheated, it is labelled Bakers Honey.)

So, if it’s a dodgy word to use, why do the marketing guys persist? Probably because there has been a great deal of public concern about honey adulteration and processing by major producers. ‘Raw’ suggests, perhaps, something unprocessed, unheated, uncooked; something that hasn’t materially changed since it left the hive. And everyone knows that you mustn’t heat honey because you will destroy the enzymes and delicate properties that give a honey its individual characteristics.

I have a trendy recipe book which mentions honey many times, always preceded by ‘raw’. I’m sure it’s there because of the sound of it, because of the aura it carries. And I guess the authors draw a veil over the fact that their recipes require it to be heated to very high temperatures!

People want to buy an artisan product. They reckon the best way to be sure that they are getting real honey is to buy local, and a label with the beekeeper’s name on it goes some way to satisfying that desire. I can’t know what proportion of the public swallow marketing-speak hook, line, and sinker.

Here’s a few not-unrelated thoughts for beekeepers:

- Pasteurisation is heating, but is not illegal. HMF, which, like cooking, is a product of time and temperature, is the measure (along with Diastase activity) by which honey becomes illegal.
- ‘Extracted honey’ in the Honey Regs describes the use of an extractor, but makes no mention of a straining device, something which many beekeepers regard as an intrinsic part of the process. Beekeepers are very conscientious about using the word straining (or sieving) to avoid any connection with the legal description ‘Filtered honey’.
- This is not the only time in this issue of WHATSTHEBUZZ that we’re stuck for the right word. How can we show on a honey jar label that our honey is different to the processed, consolidated, blended and fine-filtered offerings in the supermarkets?

As so often happens on beekeeping Forum, the matter is resolved by wise words from a beekeeper prophet for our times, whose forum name 'Into the lions den' has, I've just noticed, a sort of biblical connotation. He, Murray McGregor, a bee farmer in the Scottish Highlands with over 4,000 hives, writes:

'Go to the honey of the small beekeepers and beekeeper packers and you will see the whole gamut from excellent to truly awful. What it says on the label about raw or any other spurious words seems to have almost zero relevance to the quality in the jar. The very best and very worst comes from the small guys, as does the conviction that some of the best honey in the world is from their own area.

'Been through this discussion hundreds of times. Accentuate the positives in your product. Resist knocking others, even by implication.

'There is NOTHING to prevent you putting a description of your product on the label to enlighten the customer. Just make it true. There is nothing wrong with saying your honey is an artisan product just so long as it is.'



## Who would have thought it?

*... with Bob Smith, on monitoring for varroa*

**WHATSTHEBUZZ** That was an interesting comment you dropped into the Module 3 revision session last week, that you monitor for varroa around 12-15 times a year. Is that monthly?

**Bob Smith** It's not monthly, I just do it fairly frequently. I want to know what's going on colony by colony, so as to be in a position to make interventions if necessary.

**WTB** You use varroa boards for your monitoring? Some people find daily mite drops (DMD) an unreliable guide.

**BS** Well, all I can say is my personal experience is that the DMD works just fine; it gives reliable results and indicates what's going on in the colonies, and it doesn't let me down.

**WTB** Do you have tight fitting varroa boards?

**BS** My floor is not a typical WBC floor. It's flat and has a flat mesh. I have a board which is cut to fit underneath and held in place by friction with a tray (a cups and saucers tray). I just put in for a couple of days.

**WTB** Do you need to grease or oil it?

**BS** No, I just put it in dry.

**WTB** Do you use it to check brood development when not opening the hives in winter and early spring?

**BS** I haven't this year; the boards just sat on top of the hives with the mesh floors open at the moment. At one apiary I had some bad experiences over winter; in that first year I lost a lot, and I put it down to the wind and the cold up there. And so, after that I kept the varroa trays in over winter on that particular apiary, but not on the others.

**WTB** In your talk two or three years ago, you talked about organic acids being your preferred treatment, and if things got bad during the season, MAQS was there to help us out. Is that still how you feel?

**BS** That's still how I work really, although increasingly I haven't had to treat at all. I was just sorting out my record cards for this season and seeing how many I did treat last year. I've got 11 colonies going at the moment and I treated three last year, maybe four.

**WTB** Do you think it's a queen trait, these colonies that are managing not to need treating?

**BS** I guess it is. But my selection hasn't been on that so much as gentleness and productivity.

**WTB** I remember once you said, single figure DMDs are okay as a general rule throughout the year.

**BS** I don't like high single figures in June, or May; I might do something about that. Over 20 is always going to worry me. But you make a judgement considering the strength of the colony, time of year, etc. It's difficult to generalise; you get a feel for these things, I guess.

**WTB** What do you think is happening that your colonies need less treating?

**BS** It's interesting that suddenly over the last couple of years I've got to the stage where quite a few of them have very low counts at the end of the year. And I think, should I leave them? My thinking is that if they come out in the spring, and they've got high levels I can do something about it. So sometimes I just leave them alone.

I'm looking at a record sheet: DMD 3, not treated. DMD 11, treated with Apiguard. Very occasionally with Apiguard, the bees really object, and start chewing everything up, cannibalising all of the brood; it's horrible. The floor is absolutely covered in bits of bee, antennae, and so on; on other occasions, again rarely, they all hang on the outside, horrible. But those are rare.

**WTB** Recently, we heard Stephen Martin saying, if you want to be treatment-free, 'Live and Let Die' is not an option. The way to become treatment-free is through monitoring, not putting your head in the sand, and treating when needed.

It's been interesting to hear about your monitoring regime, Bob. It's certainly much more than I would have considered doing.



## Handy Hints

From [Brian Campbell](#)

ADD THREE SUPERS to the brood box long before the queen runs out of space to lay in. You will see a massive reduction in swarming with this method. You can insert a sheet of newspaper between the upper empty supers to encourage the bees to fill the lower frames first.

DON'T NAME YOUR queens or grow too attached to them. Culling ageing queens is a necessary part of the beekeeper's job.



## Sale of beekeeping kit next month

**H**ave you found that you've got spare kit lying around that you know you don't need and won't use again? We're planning to have a sale in the newsletter next month, so [drop me an email](#) with the details:

- the item name and brand;
- price new and what you're asking;
- approximate age and condition;
- collection location and/or if you will deliver.

# Recommended reading

**M**aurice Maeterlinck, *The Life of the Bee* (1901). I can't remember who recommended this book to me, but I see that Carol Ann Duffy (who has published a book of poems about bees) has just given it a mention in *The Week* magazine.

The language is very 19<sup>th</sup> century, with elaborate sentences, but the observations of the bees' behaviour and their life cycle are never less than astonishing. It seems that as long as 120 years ago the understanding of bee behaviour was complete, and since then we have just been keeping up with new developments. Maeterlinck was Belgian, and wrote in French. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1911, 'in appreciation of his many-sided literary activities, and especially of his dramatic works, which are distinguished by a wealth of imagination and by a poetic fancy, which reveals, sometimes in the guise of a fairy tale, a deep inspiration, while in a mysterious way they appeal to the readers' own feelings and stimulate their imaginations.'

Beekeepers are indeed fortunate that Maeterlinck wrote about bees.

Have you read a book you'd like to tell us about? Do drop me a line.

Archie McLellan



## Quiz

1. What is the recommended mix for a solution of soda crystals?
2. What can you use to clean propolis off phones, hands, cameras etc?
3. Describe a bait recipe for an Asian hornet trap?
4. Melissopalynology is the study of?
5. The finer honey extraction strainer has sieve holes around 400 microns ( $\mu\text{m}$ ) in diameter. What size is that in millimetres?

Answers: 1, soda to water at 1:5, plus a little washing up liquid; 2, isopropyl alcohol, or alcohol-based hand sanitizer; 3. Lots of possible answers, here's one: 500ml water + 3 tablespoons of sugar + a glass of vinegar; 4. The study of pollen contained in honey and, in particular, the pollen's source; 5. 0.4 millimetres. A micron (or micrometre) is 0.0001 millimetres.

Prize draw in the last issue: *Who wrote the song which has the same title as our new newsletter (WHATSTHEBUZZ)?* Answer: *Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, Jesus Christ Superstar*. Winner: Simon Marshall. A bag of post-lockdown homemade tablet (fudge) will reach you eventually, Simon. Thank you to everyone who took part in the quiz draw.



# Keeping up-to-date and organised

Our [website](#) and [Facebook](#) have full details of our events and what's happening in MBKA and beyond. You can also get more info about MBKA on the website, including committee contact details.



MBKA has a long and successful history of support, using various techniques to help beekeepers in the area. We have a strong focus on providing quality information and advice to our members. These services are provided by the Midway Towns Beekeepers Club (MTBC) which is a registered charity. The club is a not-for-profit organisation and any surplus funds are used to support the club's activities. For more information about the club, please contact the club secretary or visit our website at [www.midwaytownsbeekeepersclub.co.uk](#)

REGISTER YOUR APIARIES with the National Bee Unit on their website, [BeeBase](#), and remember to update it when things change.

BEE DISEASE INSURANCE (BDI) is included with your membership of MBKA – but do you have sufficient cover for the maximum number of colonies you will have at any point in the season?

ALL RISKS INSURANCE COVER: This appears to have been recently discontinued by the BBKA or the insurers, Aston Lark, which is a pity because £5000 cover cost just £12 pa. More info [here](#).



## Comments

*Have you had any thoughts about anything in this newsletter? To post a comment, please email [the Newsletter](#).*

FROM JOHN HENDRIE: What a fantastic newsletter! You have set the bar extremely high with that.

\* \* \* \*

From John Chapman: It looks very good. Quite long, but that is not a bad thing except that Paul always found it difficult to get content except from a few people. All the best for the next one.

\* \* \* \*

FROM VERONICA OWEN: What a great newsletter! it had a bit of everything! I genuinely liked the interview with Simon; that reminds me how nice it is to have a group of nice people to learn from. I also found answers and links for the Module 3 dreading point: 'The statutory requirements relating to the importation of honeybees'.

What's the buzz? I had to Google it, sorry. But if I'm correct and you don't mind I'd like to be entered for the tablet/fudge prize draw 😊 [No chance, Veronica! WTB]. Lovely letter and so grateful for all the effort that you and Jen and the people behind the scenes have put in to keeps us smiling in these peculiar times.

\* \* \* \*

FROM JEN FERRY: Good job Archie, I've just read your first issue, very good. Thank you.

\* \* \* \*

FROM BEEKEYPLAYER: It's bad enough that you ask us to read this rag. Comments? Now you're asking us to write it too!



*A demijohn of mead, started recently using the recipe which John Chapman shared in last month's WTB. Reassuring bubbles every 4-6 seconds, but is the bottle too full?*

# Contact details

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Please send items for the newsletter five days before the end of each month for inclusion in the next issue. And if you'd like to comment on anything in or about this issue, please call or email me.

*Archie McLellan, newsletter compiler*

