



WHATSTHEBUZZ

January
2022

Hello to January, to the bees' start of the season, and to you all

The winter solstice was one week ago. It warms my heart to know that the days are getting longer now. For the first few days, the hours of daylight increase by only a few seconds each day, but by the end of January the increase is nearly three minutes a day. It really is noticeable if you become aware of it – though clear or cloudy skies make a big difference too.

There's no doubt that bees start rearing brood in earnest after the solstice. In fact, they may not have stopped throughout winter – although autumn brood breaks are common. If you haven't treated for Varroa with oxalic acid by now, you're too late – though repeat treatments gradually deal with mites as they emerge from sealed brood.

That's the theory anyway. Carefully reading your under-mesh boards can tell a lot about what is going on upstairs, inside the hive.

Our maintenance jobs don't change much this month: checking hives and entrances, and weighing or hefting for sufficient stores. Give fondant above the hole in the crownboard, or better, directly above the cluster if needed. You'll need an eke (no larger than necessary) to create space and some flexible insulation.

The advantage of cleaning boxes and boards at this time of year is that the bees won't be around to watch you at work. Have a think about what you've got and what you'll need... frames, foundation etc.

In fact, *having a think*, period, is part of beekeeping at this time of year. Planning, and writing down the details of these plans is a luxury we are able to indulge in now, and though events may overtake us later in the season, we'll still cope better than if we hadn't mentally prepared at all. David Evans will be with us on Zoom on 19 January to help us with that very task.

A couple of weeks ago, the mild air lured the bees out for a few days. They'll take opportunities like this from now on, especially to forage for pollen on hazel.

For many of us, the last season was frustrating and disappointing. The committee have asked me to pass on their good wishes for the coming year: hoping that your bees survive the winter and that the coming year is all you could wish for.

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From our Chair

John Chapman, our Chair, speaks to the members each month, sometimes about the Association, sometimes about the bees. Today he talks about....

WHATSTHEBUZZ I've not got a big theme for our chat today. There has been a little talk about the history of MBKA recently.

John Chapman Yes. Since we found that article in the British Bee Journal from May 1922 which refers to Medway BKA as a new association, people have been asking about our history.

WTB How far back do the minutes of the committee meetings go?

JC There was one book from the 1920s but I'm not sure if we still have it. We have the minutes from just before I joined, from Peter Griffiths' time. Sonia is going to write in the next issue of WTB about the early days using reports of meetings which appeared in the British Bee Journal from 1922.

WTB The report of that first meeting in 1922 ends with 'Questions were invited and quite a number were *tired* at Mr Semper, Mr Bryony being prominent as a 'poser-putter'. What do you think 'tired' means? Or is it a typo for 'fired' or 'tried'?

JC The trouble with the BBJ, which was a funny little magazine, a bit like a more chatty version of BeeCraft, was that its reporting of things wasn't absolutely precise. Peter Griffiths, when he was MBKA Secretary, used to write an article for it every month.

WTB When did MBKA join or rejoin the BBKA?

JC I'd need to look it up. It was quite a number of years ago. Terry Clare had a hand in this. It was apparent that we needed to be part of an organisation that could provide public liability insurance because we were holding public events and selling stuff. We had a relationship with the town councils in providing a swarm collection service. They paid us to cover our costs such as travel expenses.

Anyway, we decided to rejoin the BBKA. The rule was that you had to have 100 members, which we did, but even so we had to apply twice. It helped that John Hendrie supported us from within the BBKA.

WTB Is Bee Diseases Insurance (BDI) something that comes with BBKA membership?

JC No, you pay for it in your subscription, but [BDI is separate company](#). It acts as a broker to find insurance



cover for its members. It would be very difficult to provide that independently! The BBKA and BDI run in parallel, but they are separate organisations.

WTB What about property insurance, for theft etc? It was available from the BBKA briefly a year or two ago but seems to have been dropped?

JC Yes, there wasn't enough take up to make it viable. They needed thousands to sign up and most people weren't interested – or perhaps didn't hear about it. I think admin and marketing at the BBKA have improved hugely now with admin becoming more efficient.

WTB You made an announcement about the ADM at the end of our Winter Series talk in December.

JC [The ADM: the Annual Delegates Meeting](#). It takes place on Zoom on Saturday 15 January 2022 at 10.00am and members can observe via the YouTube link. It can be interesting, finding out about how other groups within the BBKA work. BKAs are sometimes very different from each other!

WTB There were some propositions from an association that wanted to see a government ban on the import of any bee from anywhere.

JC Yes, there are serious concerns about Small hive beetle finding its way into this country. But we do have bee inspectors who do incredibly valuable work to keep our bees healthy.

Other people who want a ban on imports are very passionate about preserving the 'native' bee population.

WTB Do you think that taking a very dogmatic position on banning imports could create an undesirable division between commercial and small-scale beekeepers?

JC Absolutely. Bee farmers have different way of working, and they have to make a profit. They don't have the options that are available to beekeepers with just a few hives; their way of working is of necessity quite different because they are farming. Often, their income will not be primarily from hive products but from sales of queens and bees.

Perhaps we could have a talk in our next Winter Series on anything that would help broaden our perspective of beekeeping.

WTB The committee had a meeting earlier this month. Could you give us a brief idea of the sort of things that were talked about – just to help us all keep abreast of things that are happening in the association.

JC Well, the AGM is on 19 February and we're very aware that we would like to have some more members on the committee. So we'll need something about that in the next newsletter, and also try to encourage people we're in contact with between now and then to consider helping with the running of the association.

We talked about the job descriptions for the various roles in the committee. I remember that a former chairman, Richard Holland, said that his proudest achievement was abolishing the 'ladies committee'

Future talks in our Winter Series

On **Wednesday 16 February, 8.00pm at Wainscott**, **Murray McGregor** will visit us from Perthshire. Murray is Britain's largest bee farmer with, in the 2021 season, 4,588 hives at hundreds of sites for heather honey. Murray won't be using PowerPoint, but will chat about his work, and answer questions on anything for as long as people want to ask them. His visit on Zoom to Cambridgeshire BKA a couple of nights ago went on for three hours! He's not comfortable with Zoom and is looking forward very much to spending an evening with us. An engaging and authoritative speaker.

Adam Leitch, NDB will visit us at **8.00pm on Wednesday 2 March at Wainscott**, and his talk will be on Zoom too. Adam's talk is 'Why anatomy matters to practical beekeeping'. Adam's beekeeping has to be packed around a busy job, and teenage children. He is always looking for efficiencies and improvements to minimise the amount of time beekeeping takes. His talk will cover topics ranging from amazing anatomy of

who were tasked with providing the refreshments for our events.

Some roles are quite straightforward, but others have many tasks attached to them – like the Secretary, for instance. Everyone seems to know that the Chair's job is simply to do anything and everything that someone else isn't doing!

We talked about the progress of work at the Pavilion apiary, and about education activities, especially the introduction to beekeeping course which we're running in 2022. Tony, Mark and Sheila will run that jointly, as we don't have a single person in charge of education at the moment. On the subject of BBKA exams, we've decided that anyone who is successful in an exam will have their fees refunded by the association. It's a gesture of encouragement to members to show that we support and encourage an active engagement with the study of bees and beekeeping.

Finally we discussed the running of the meeting/talk earlier this month.

Thanks John. You've covered lots of bits and pieces – the sort of thing we've got time to catch up on at this time of year. 🐝

bees to understanding why some methods of swarm control are often unsuccessful.

Sarah Wyndham Lewis, honey sommelier and writer of a monthly column in BeeCraft, will be at **Wainscott at 8.00pm on Wednesday 16 March**. Her talk is *Honey in its many complexions and my work as a Honey Sommelier with chefs, bartenders and honey producers all over the world*. The special feature of this this event is a **honey tasting!**

The series winds up with **Richard Rickitt's** follow-up to his immensely entertaining talk about his bee-oriented travels around the UK at the end of last season. His talk on **Zoom will be at 8.00pm on Wednesday 30 March** and it is called *From Rolls Royce to Rajasthan*. He will tell us about his experiences of 'Traveling in style from the jungles and deserts of India to the birthplace of the theory of evolution, stopping off at the site of some illegal beekeeping skulduggery and taking a peek at a little local royalty along the way.' 🐝

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:

Refractometers

The bees reduce the water content of honey to less than 20% so that they can store it without fermentation setting in. When they consume it, they reintroduce water. If we attempt to store honey which consists of more than 20% water, it is likely to ferment. It's unlikely that the bees will cap honey with more than 20% moisture so it's usually safe to assume that capped honey is 'mature' or 'ripe'.

Testing to check whether honey is ready to remove from the hive can be done by shaking the frame, or by testing a sample with a refractometer.

The 'shake' test: shake a frame of uncapped or partly capped honey over the hive; if no nectar drips out, it's probably safe to harvest. Ken Basterfield NDB says that frequently there is no need to wait for honey to be capped – and in the case of oilseed rape honey, it is not wise to do so.

- Refractometers are instruments to measure something about honey (the sugar content) to tell you something else (the water content)
- a refractometer measures the difference in the angle of light entering a substance to the angle at which it leaves it – recall your childhood discovery of how a spoon in a glass of water seemed bent!
- light is 'refracted', or deflected, according to the density of solids (in this case, sugars)
- the angle of deflection is displayed on a scale in a refractometer which displays the water content as a percentage
- honey must be well mixed before extracting the sample for measurement
- honey must be clear and not part granulated
- readings are temperature dependent, so calibrate and use the refractometer at the same temperature – usually 20°C – though 'ATC' on a refractometer, as in the image above, indicates *automatic temperature compensation*.
- if you don't have dioptric liquid for calibrating, you can use extra virgin olive oil
- calibration method: lift the cover and place a couple of drops of olive oil on the prism plate; cover and rotate the calibration screw till the scale reads 27% water (71% Brix scale), which is the known water content of olive oil
- most refractometers have a Brix scale; best to get one with a scale for water/moisture content, such as [this one](#)
- Brix measures sugar content so, in theory, subtracting Brix from 100 should give the water content
- if the image is fuzzy when you look through the eyepiece, rotate the eyepiece – it's a focussing ring
- clean the refractometer well after use
- RTFM (read the flippin' manual)

CLOSING THOUGHT I've twice submitted honey to the National honey Monitoring Scheme. As per the instructions, I scraped the sample container across some capped honey on a frame, just removed from the hive. So, definitely ripe/mature honey.

The report from the NHMS includes a moisture content reading (done with a hand-held refractometer) as well as DNA analysis of pollen. The moisture readings were 20 and 20.5% for the last two years. These do not compare with my readings of the same honey after extraction which were in the range 17.5-18.5%.

Standard procedures for refractometer use include using mixed honey for samples, and taking multiple readings. 🐝



MBKA news and events

MBKA subscription renewals due now

Our acting Treasurer, John Hendrie, has recently emailed you with a form and details on annual subscription renewals which are now due. *If you do not intend to renew, it would be helpful if you would contact John to say so.* Any questions, please email John: bibba26@talktalk.net

The next talk in the Winter Series

David Evans makes a welcome return on **Zoom at 8.00pm on Wednesday 19 January**. David's talk is *Preparing for the season ahead*. His blog, *The Apiarist*, now makes him possibly Britain's best known beekeeper and bee scientist *across the world* (as Nicholas Parsons used to say on Radio 4's *Just a minute*). About this talk, David writes:

We know what's coming in the season ahead, but we're not quite sure when it will happen. The goal of this talk is to make beekeepers a little more proactive and a bit less reactive. The bees will do whatever they want (as usual!) but with a little preparation the relatively short season can feel a bit less frantic. I cover record keeping, equipment needs, feeding, Varroa management and queen rearing. Inevitably, because of the breadth of topics covered, each gets less attention than it would in a dedicated talk. However, focusing on some of these subjects before the season starts should allow beekeepers to think, plan and prepare for events when they (inevitably) happen.

Looking for a site?

There is a possible site for an apiary on the Isle of Sheppey. If you are interested please contact our secretary, Sheila Stunell.

sheila.stunell@medwaybeekeepers.co.uk

BBKA courses

The BBKA run [courses on beekeeping](#).

- 5-day *Bee Handling and Husbandry* in April
- 1-day *Introductory Microscopy* in February
- 2-day *Intermediate Microscopy* in February
- A course in *Queen Rearing* is sold out.

BeeBase

If you haven't yet done so, there are just two days left to update your records on BeeBase for The National Hive Count 2021. Click [here](#) to confirm your total number of overwintering hives as of 1st November 2021.

Over 10,000 beekeepers completed the Hive Count in 2020. The National Bee Unit and the Scottish Bee Health Team use this information for planning and preparation for outbreaks of disease or exotic pests. Knowing the number and location of beekeepers, hives and apiaries helps to inform where Bee Inspectors should be deployed. This applies in relation to familiar pests and diseases and to more recent threats such as the damaging invasive species Asian hornet (*Vespa velutina*).

The NBU also use the figures on BeeBase to monitor honey bee populations over time. Having up-to-date records that reflect the current position in each year allows them to monitor changes over time.

National honey Monitoring Scheme

Do you want to know what the bees have foraged on to make your honey? Then [sign up to the NHMS](#) and request a sample pack for 2022. Go to the *Taking Part* page and follow the instructions. *This needs to be done every time you wish to request a pack.* 

TIMES AND DATES

4 January	7.30pm Module 6 (Bee Behaviour), study group, session 6, on Zoom (leaders Andy, Paul, Sue C)
18 January	7.30pm Module 6 (Bee Behaviour), study group, session 7, on Zoom (leaders Simon, Sonia, Sue V)
19 January	8.00pm, Winter Series Talk 4, David Evans on Zoom, <i>Preparing for the season ahead</i>
1 February	7.30pm Module 6 (Bee Behaviour), study group, session 8, on Zoom (leaders Sonia, Chris, Paul)
15 February	7.30pm Module 6 (Bee Behaviour), study group, session 9, on Zoom (leaders Simon, Chris, Jen)

16 February	8.00pm, Winter Series Talk 5 at Wainscott Hall, 16-18 Holly Road, Wainscot, ME2 4LG, Murray McGregor, <i>on managing Britain's largest heather honey operation</i>
19 February	2.00pm MBKA Annual General Meeting , Wainscott Hall, 16-18 Holly Road, Wainscot, ME2 4LG
1 March	7.30pm Module 6 (Bee Behaviour), study group, session 10, on Zoom (leaders Chris, Sue C, Paul)
2 March	8.00pm, Winter Series Talk 6 at Wainscott Hall, 16-18 Holly Road, Wainscot, ME2 4LG, and also on Zoom, Adam Leitch, NDB, <i>Why anatomy matters to practical beekeeping</i>
16 March	8.00pm, Winter Series Talk 7 at Wainscott Hall, 16-18 Holly Road, Wainscot, ME2 4LG, Sarah Wyndham Lewis, <i>Honey in its many complexions and my work as a Honey Sommelier (includes a honey tasting)</i>
19 March	BBKA Module exams
23 March	Introductory Course 1, 8-10pm, Wainscott Hall, 16-18 Holly Road, Wainscot, ME2 4LG
30 March	Introductory Course 2, 8-10pm, Wainscott Hall, 16-18 Holly Road, Wainscot, ME2 4LG
30 March	8.00pm, Winter Series Talk 8, Richard Rickitt on Zoom, <i>From Rolls Royce to Rajasthan</i>

Philip Argyle – An evening with a wayward beekeeper

I came across Philip on *Beekeeping Forum*. After reading his posts, I thought I'd ask if he gave talks to BKAs. No, he never had done, but he agreed to give it a try. In the event, his talk at St Stephen's Church in Chatham on 8 December was very well received. Philip said afterwards: 'I must admit that I was a little nervous about airing my wayward ways face-to-face with proper beekeepers present, but they seemed to take it well and I enjoyed it too. Please make sure you thank them from me for being such a good crowd.'

Philip's personal story is connected with his start in beekeeping in 2010. His construction firm, with 35 employees which he had run for 30 years, struggled in the financial crash of 2008 and eventually ceased operating. Having remortgaged his house, Philip and his wife had to rethink their values and decided to place their love of nature more centrally in their lives. This led to beekeeping, with the additional challenge of a very limited budget.

The budget was not an option, but the decision to keep bees in as natural a way as an unnatural hive permitted was a challenge Philip embraced from the outset. In a nutshell, he wanted to put nothing inside a hive that the bees did not bring in by themselves. So, no feeding, no foundation, and no substances to treat disease or prevent pests.

Immediately, a member of the audience asked about varroa treatment. Philip explained that he was not a

leave-alone beekeeper, and he regarded swarm control as a responsibility. He monitored his colonies for mites regularly – using sugar-rolls, because he regarded mite drop on a board as highly inaccurate – and would treat if ever he felt that the mite count reached a level that could be a health risk to his bees. So far, in ten years of keeping bees, he had not had to treat. He did treat the colonies that he looked after for a friend and was extremely knowledgeable in methods and products for mite treatment. Although he was unsure why he had succeeded – so far – in not having to treat, he thought that it was not impossible that two reasons might be that he kept his hives very well insulated all year round, and also that the forage in his area gave the bees a very varied diet. And he felt that good luck had played a part too.

As you might expect, Philip use foundationless frames. He also explained how he managed without queen excluders, and yet expected to take a good crop of honey every year. There was lots more. Philip concluded with a survey of some of the equipment that is well-known to readers on *Beekeeping Forum* (where he is a moderator). Not all of it is mainstream yet. Some items such as floors with entrances from underneath – rather than in front of – the hive (UFE under-floor entrance), or crownboards with clear tops are now available (for those who don't relish DIY) from retailers. Philip talked about a range of products and materials that have been mooted, shared, and adopted

as a *good idea* on Beekeeping Forum. He promised to send links, and here they are:

- [Varroa Tester 3 in 1](#) from Abelo. [This video](#) shows its three functions in use
- [Old Castle Farm Ventilated Suits](#)
- [Aluminium Foil tape](#), available in different sizes from Toolstatio
- [Kingspan Insulation](#) from Wickes (watch Gumtree and Ebay for cheaper deals or go skip diving).
- [Gas Vap](#) – a low cost method of administering oxalic acid by sublimation
- [Zettle Card Reader](#): Philip said: I really can't recommend this bit of kit enough. It's so easy to take payments, with just a mobile phone and the Zettle, and the money is in your bank account within a day or so. Mine cost £19
- [Square plastic buckets](#). So much easier to use, pour from, and store than circular buckets
- Clear crownboards. Philip makes his own by skip diving for old shower doors etc, but all good ideas

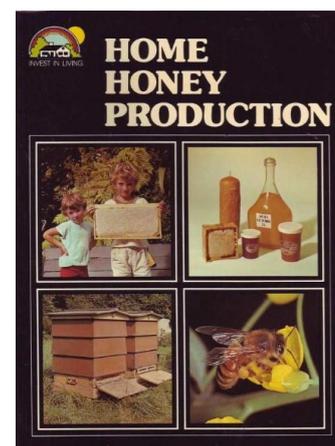
get taken up eventually by retailers. [Here is the link to Thornes version.](#)

- Lastly, Philip mentioned [Bill Summers and the Zest hive](#) His website explains the thinking

Philip added, 'Feel free to direct anyone with questions to my email address, and of course there's always [BeekeepingForum.co.uk](#). It's free to sign up; there's no need to subscribe.' Philip has some photos online in Flickr accounts [here](#) and [here](#).

Finally, we got one book recommendation: *Home Honey Production* by W Bielby (1977). Copies are available second-hand and there is also a digital copy online.

Archie McLellan



Getting to know you: this month, Sue Chapman

A series in which WHATSTHEBUZZ chats with MBKA members about beekeeping and life in general. This month, WHATSTHEBUZZ chats with Sue Chapman, who is of course married to John, our chair.

WHATSTHEBUZZ Welcome, Sue. Tell me, when and how did you get into beekeeping?

SUE CHAPMAN I got into beekeeping in the early 1970s. I'm a horticultural geneticist by training and I was working for a firm called Asma Seeds who were one of the largest wholesale seed merchants in the country at the time. They had a couple of stations where they used quality control trials and bred new varieties. My boss actually had in his contract that he had to keep hives of bees for pollination. And my interest was sparked then.

WTB Has the number of sites and colonies you've had over the years changed much?

SC It has changed quite a bit. When we lived in London, we had bees on the edge of our allotment, just across the road from our flat. And when we moved here, we had them in an orchard owned by a colleague of John and that worked well. We've got four sites at the moment, one of which is mine, and the other three are joint ones. It's about a dozen colonies overwinter

WTB Does the forage vary between sites?



SC The forage is mainly urban fringe. My hives near Snodland are the only ones that tend to regularly forage on oilseed rape. They occasionally get hawthorn as well in a good year which makes a very nice honey.

WTB The hawthorn was amazing this year but was it warm and dry enough for the bees to get out?

SC Yes, they did. I'll know more when the honey samples results come back from the National Honey Monitoring Scheme.

WTB What is the most challenging part of beekeeping for you?

SC Keeping up! Sometimes at the height of the season, the bees get ahead of you and you realise that you should have put two more supers on a week ago.

WTB Has it hasn't been easier since you retired and how did you manage it when you were working?

SC It's certainly easier since retiring and your time is your own. Although when you retire everybody feels they can put a finger in the pie of your time. 'Can you just...' is a phrase you dread to hear. When we were working, we just had to be very disciplined. If it rained and the weather wasn't great, it could be tricky.

I must admit I watch I enjoy watching the bees come back to the hive when they know it's about to rain. There's a certain urgency and desperation as they land on the alighting board to get in.

WTB After all these decades of keeping bees you must be fairly settled in the way you do things.

SC No, I think it's always changing and if you're entirely happy you've probably gone off the boil. Things change – Varroa was a big change! – and there are things that you need to learn and get your head around.

WTB Have you had any disasters over the years?

SC I once you remember doing an inspection and for some reason I had to take the entrance out and I put it back in the wrong way. And it was only the noise of the bees protesting as I was leaving the apiary that alerted me to my stupidity that I nearly shut them all in. On another occasion, I was taking a sealed observation hive to a demonstration. I'd carefully brushed all the bees off the underside of the mesh floor. It turned out the hive wasn't sealed at all and the hive bees joined me in the car. That's an experience I really don't want again, thank you.

WTB What part of beekeeping do you enjoy most?

SC Watching what's going on at the front of a hive, the bees coming and going. And in the summer when you open up, I love the smell of honey and wax that comes up to me.

WTB Is there a book you'd recommend?

SC *Bees at the bottom of the garden*, by Alan Campion. It's a sentimental choice because that was the book I

learned from. I read now to keep up to date, usually on specific issues.

I like *The Beekeepers Quarterly* because that just gives you a wider view. It's very easy to have your head down in your own little corner and not see what other beekeepers are up to in Europe and the world.

WTB Are there some honeys you like in particular?

SC I really love heather honey, which is a bit sad because it's one I can't produce.

I don't think you can beat a good mixed floral honey.

We keep the extraction from each apiary separate so you can see changes in colour and flavour through the year.

WTB Presumably you sell your honey.

SC I do. We sell a lot from the door and I'm a member of the Country Market trading cooperative, which operates in Rochester, and it's sold there every week.

We talk a lot about education of beekeepers, but I think that education and raising awareness in the public is really important too. Our presence at events like the English Festival, the Ploughing Match and our own honey show are very important. We don't need to make everybody into beekeepers. But it's important that the general public understand as much as they wish to. We're well placed to do that.

WTB Do you have other interests?

SC I'm a keen gardener and I do embroidery too. I do voluntary work for the Witness Service at the local Magistrates Court. We support witnesses who are going to give evidence with practical help and advice and conduct information sessions including showing people around the court so that they are more comfortable when they give evidence.

WTB And how'd you feel about our association? Do you wish that people were more involved?

SC I think I'm happy with what happens. Many years ago when we moved from London to Kent, we asked around about which association to join. We were told, Medway beekeepers – because they were a friendly bunch. And I think I still stand by that recommendation. People do as much as they can. I think that's the way it is in any association of volunteers. 

The Kent Plan-Bee

Did you miss the Kent Plan-Bee webinar a few weeks ago? Those of us who were able to sign up for it have been sent links for [a recording of the presentations](#). I also have pdf files of the PowerPoints for two of the talks. I'd be happy to forward them to you if you contact me.



It was interesting hearing about plans at local council level to improve opportunities for pollinators. We saw how strips at the sides of roads, motorways, rivers, and railways could all be managed differently so that wild flowers could thrive throughout the season. Grass is the most invasive plant which smothers many flowers. In many gardens of course, this is precisely the expressed intention. Fertilise the grass and wild flowers don't have a chance. The first rule for managing grassland spaces for wildlife is 'Low fertility is the key to biodiversity.'

Fertilising grass is not all about applying nitrogen and potassium.

Simply failing to gather up the clippings ensures that the ground remains fertile. For wild flowers to thrive, the soil must be poor and stony. In *A Buzz in the Meadow*, Dave Goulson writes about spending summers in France over a ten-year period, mowing the field he had bought, raking up all the grass, and donating it to a farmer neighbour.

There are pictures in the Kent Plan-Bee talks showing a council mower with a huge bucket to collect the cut grass. And some photos show the difference in just a few seasons resulting from gathering in cut grass clippings. 🐝



Wax moth ~~treatments~~ solutions

Can we take anything for Certan?

Certan B401 was as a treatment for wax-moth to protect comb during winter storage. [It was withdrawn in 2019](#) and has been replaced by B402, currently only available in the US.

Certain B401/402 is a suspension of *Bacillus thuringiensis* spores and proteins. It is a biological product, non-toxic for bees, but, as David Evans writes, 'If ingested by the larvae of wax moths, the δ -endotoxin component dissolves in the alkaline environment of the gut, is activated following cleavage by gut proteases and then 'punches' a hole through the gut wall.'

Just because something is a biological product doesn't mean that it can't sometimes do a lot of harm!

However, there are other products available to control moths and some beekeepers have been using Dipel DF

or Xen-Tari, both of which consist of *Bacillus thuringiensis*. In the case of the latter, the subspecies is identical to Certan: *Bacillus thuringiensis aizawai* (Bta). More information about these is on the [manufacturer's website](#). They can be bought online. Xen-Tari is available in smaller packaging and so costs less.

At Philip Argyle's talk to MBKA recently, he mentioned Dipel as a solution to wax moth problems. And recently on an online course, I asked about the use of Xen-Tari. On both occasions, the question of regulatory approval arose. Philip's response was that as the treatment was used not as a medicine or pesticide with bees in the hive, but on equipment in winter storage, he doubted if the need for VMD approval was relevant. And if some felt that approval was needed, what about the other

unapproved products that were used during winter storage: acetic acid, sulphur strips etc.?

The reason for the withdrawal of Certan B401 was that a new regulatory regime came into force. This meant that the product could now not be sold *specifically* for protection against wax moths on stored combs.

And because of that, there is no specific dilution for beekeepers' use. [David Evans wrote](#) on his solution to dilution: 'if you grow tomatoes under cover, the recommended dose is 100g per 100 litres of water i.e. a 0.1% solution. I've used DiPel DF at a 1%

concentration. I mixed the powder thoroughly 1 part in 20 and then used this stock solution 1:5 to make the working-strength solution to be sprayed onto the frames.'

However, many people find there is another solution to preventing wax moth in supers, if not stored brood combs: contrary to popular advice about giving extracted combs back to the bees to clean up, they store them 'wet' – straight from the extractor to the shed, or the stack in the apiary. 🐝

Plantain

People have been writing about plantain recently. That's plantain, genus *plantago*, the weed which we've grown up with and possibly stopped noticing. It's not plantain, genus *musa*, the unrelated source of green bananas, used in cooking in some tropical regions. On milder days in December, the bees are collecting pollen from it – something to have while they await the hazel and alder.

Like some other broad leaf 'weeds', it has been used as a herbal remedy since time immemorial. The Wikipedia entry describes the herb as 'astringent, anti-toxic, antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, anti-histamine, as well as demulcent, expectorant, styptic and diuretic'.

Did you spot *anti-histamine* in there? Not surprisingly some have concocted [a remedy](#) for bee stings. Such as: *soak some plantain leaves in hot coconut/olive oil for around six hours, then strain, and mix with some beeswax to form a salve. To treat a sting, apply some ammonia, then smear some of the salve on it. If you don't have any salve with you when it's needed, find a plantain leaf, chew it a little, and then apply to the skin.* 🐝



Quiz

1. What two names are given to the final stage of metamorphosis of an insect's development?
2. What is trophallaxis: immobility caused by 'fainting' | food sharing | a bee shaking another prior to swarming?
3. What is a kairomone: a queen piping sound | a parasite in the gut of the bee | a chemical used by a parasite to help locate a host?
4. What do Manley, castellations, 'plastic metal ends', and Hoffman have in common?
5. What is another name for a Baldock cage?

Answers on page 15 🐝

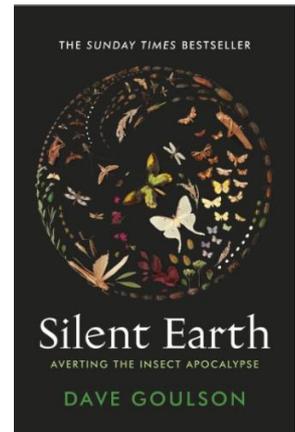
Dave Goulson

Dave Goulson's latest book is *Silent Earth: Averting the Insect Apocalypse*. About it, Isabella Tree (author of *Wilding: the return of nature to a British farm*, and co-owner of the [Knepp Estate](#)) wrote: 'Compelling, penetrating, devastating – *Silent Earth* is a wake-up call for the world.' However, if you don't plan to read the book, here's an interview with Goulson, published in [Science Focus](#).

Although Goulson is at pains to say that it is not too late to avert the catastrophe resulting from serious loss of insect populations, there are sections of his book which make for very depressing reading. It was just my bad luck that I listened (in the audio book) to the chapter in which Goulson turns novelist as I drove to the National Honey Show. In this chapter he imagines a family in the UK in 2080, by which time the worst has happened. I'll spare you the details but it is very depressing. It did not put me in the best frame of mind

to listen to the first talk of the Honey Show: Torbin Schiffer, on why everything about beekeeping as practised now is morally wrong – and should be made illegal.

Always aware that making people too downhearted is more likely to make them feel hopeless rather than galvanised into *doing something*, Goulson tries to navigate a path between generating real concern by presenting horrific scientific data, and encouraging us all by showing that action now is possible by everyone at a level that can make a real difference. After all, insects are among us everywhere. There's a lot we can do for them in our gardens. 🐝



Words

Comb honey and Honeycomb

I used to buy *Mackie's honeycomb ice cream*. That, and heather honey for less than a fiver in the supermarket, are just two of the *essential* foodstuffs no longer available to me since moving south. I enjoyed it for what it was and didn't question too much that the non-ice cream content of it was more like bits of Crunchie than actual honey.

Am I the only person to be a bit embarrassed by how old I was when I discovered that there is one kind of honeycomb with no honey in it? The [Mackie's website](#) is very clear. Did they rewrite it after a visit from Trading Standards? Of course not, but they're well aware that it's possible that some people may not know what *honeycomb*, at least in this context, actually is. In the description of this ice cream, there's a lot of flannel, as is usual when describing food, but they start with a bald statement of fact: '*Honeycomb is puff candy, which we hand make with a traditional recipe in copper pots in our Sweetie Kitchen.*' Well, the first four words are fact, the rest is scene-setting – perhaps to soften the blow!

And *comb honey*? That's easy. It describes any honey that is still in the comb, just as it was in the hive. Sometimes comb honey is called honeycomb too, but it's good to be aware that it can mean something completely different.

Comb honey is sometimes a whole piece (eg a frame or section) straight from the hive. More usually it has been divided into portions and is called *cut comb*. To get the best of both worlds, pieces can be placed in clear honey as *cut comb in honey*. Don't call it *chunk honey*; the word *chunk* feels cheap, and more appropriate for cubes of cheese or potatoes.

You probably think I'm a snob now. Archie McLellan 🐝



MBKA apiaries

The Pavilion Apiary

Work will start again in January. Look out for an email.

The Pavilion Apiary, Cliffe Woods ME3 8EX. The entrance to the field is 2nd left off Lee Green Road.

City Way Apiary: a review of 2021

What a challenging year for beekeeping! A glance at the weather and temperatures shows why.

Air temperatures did not get into double figures until the second half of April and hovered around 11-15°C till early June. After a fortnight at 21-22°C, temperatures again dropped to the mid-teens till the second week in July when it reached 24°C. And then, till the end of September, it fluctuated between 18 and 24°C. For many of us, this was the only time our bees produced a honey crop.

We then had above average temperatures during October, November and the first part of December. On mild days earlier in December, I noticed that the bees were flying freely. Not a particularly good sign at this time of the year as queens were probably still laying and this could lead to more mouths to feed in the early part of next year when stores will be getting depleted.

January Three active hives on site: a standard National, a 14x12 National, and a 14x12 WBC. All three were treated with Api-Bioxal oxalic acid.

February Fondant levels checked and topped up.

March Weekly hive inspections started on the 20th March but because of the cold the hives were not opened on the 20th or the 24th.

April Too cold to inspect on the 3rd and 9th. 18th was slightly warmer (15°C), and all three hives were inspected and clean/sterilised floors, brood boxes, queen excluders and supers were put on the hives.

Despite the cold, Hive 1 went into swarming mode and produced 12 queen cells. An artificial swarm was carried out and put onto the stand for H3. All colonies were building up but very slowly averaging about 6/7 seams of bees in each colony.

May Still cold; colonies building up slowly.

June With slightly warmer temperatures, colonies began to increase in size. H1 went into swarming mode again. A second artificial swarm was carried out and was put on the stand for H5.

July Entrance block put on all hives. Two supers were removed from H2.

August Two supers were removed from H1. 1 super was removed from H2. H2 and H3 were united. H5 was struggling. There was no queen or eggs so a frame of eggs was put in from H6. However, this did not work despite putting in another frame of eggs. They refused to raise a queen.

September MAQS was put on all hives and left on for 7 days. 3 supers were removed from H2. H5 continued to struggle with no queen or eggs. The colony was eventually shaken onto the ground in front of H4. At the beginning of September mouse guards were put on all hives.

October All queen excluders were removed, and colonies prepared for winter. Levels of stores checked, and fondant put onto all hives. This will be monitored throughout winter.

We go into winter with 4 colonies: H1 standard National, H2 14x12 National, H4 standard National and H6 14x12 WBC.

Although it was a struggle to encourage the colonies to build up to full strength, we did manage to produce enough honey to pay the rent and to sell at The Kent County Country Fair.

This is the last year that we will have bees on the City Way Apiary. Now that the work is progressing at The Pavilion Apiary at Cliff Woods, we will be moving the bees there in early spring 2022.

Mark Ballard (Apiary Manager) 

What's it all about?

Something awful has happened here (I think!), and, no, you don't need a magnifier because it isn't Varroa. Here's a clue: The colony has had CBPV for months. I removed the floor for about 6 weeks and when I replaced it, I did not put an entrance block in initially but left the entrance completely open.

Please email me with your thoughts. I'm not certain about this but there are a couple of particles of debris which seem conclusive to me. 🐝



In the next issue...

Do you balk at the price of poly nucs? Then build your own wooden ones for a fraction of the price! The next issue will have plans and photos – and almost certainly one design option which you won't have considered.

Have you thought about doing a BBKA beekeeping exam? The *modules* (written theory exams) are not the only options. Tony Edwards will tell us about the first *practical and oral* exam, The Basic Assessment. It's a

great confidence booster and worth doing even if you decide you won't do any other exams. One of the most well-known beekeepers in the UK (David Evans) is happy to admit that the Basic is the only beekeeping exam he has ever done.

The MBKA AGM is on Saturday 19 February. We'll have a trailer for that. 🐝

Newsletters are outdated

Newsletters are outdated and should be scrapped.

The feature at the end of the January issue of the BBKA News made a strong case that newsletters had had their day and that their time was up. It was a well-considered article and it made a strong point. So why did the writer withhold his name!

This followed up on an article in praise of newsletters in the preceding issue. The unnamed writer made a case for abandoning print and emailed newsletters and replacing them with more active use of the association website and social media accounts.

I'd be interested to know your reactions to this idea. And to that end, I'll create a questionnaire and circulate it in the next few weeks.

The writer of the article created his BKA newsletter for 18 months and obviously became disenchanted by the complete lack of response and reaction by the members to his work. 'You do not know if newsletters are ever actually read', he wrote.

I'll keep my thoughts about this to myself, at least for the time being. But the appearance of this article has spurred me on to giving you, the members, a chance to say

- if you read this newsletter
- what you think the purpose of our newsletter is
- if you think it is appropriate for your idea of what a BKA newsletter should be.

Look out for an email questionnaire in the next few weeks. 🐝

Trivia, – or, on this occasion, just one trivium

There is a website called [timeanddate](#). You can waste enjoy hours there discovering so much about time, the sun, moon, day length, weather, meteor showers, eclipses, leap years. You can download calendars in umpteen formats, tailored for your own use. And as if you weren't enjoying yourself enough already, there are some seriously trivial items, like a [word clock](#) or a list of [funny, random, and weird holidays](#) throughout the year.

Just in case you've forgotten, Friday, 1 January, is [Polar Bear Plunge Day](#).

Beekeeping has side-effects. You will notice your interest grow in so many areas that you took for granted before: for instance, in *land* – what's growing on it and in it; in *weather* and forecasts; in *daylight* and the lengths of days...

So a website like this ends up feeling not so peripheral after all! 🐝

Book review

Liquid Gold: Bees and the Pursuit of Midlife Honey by Roger Morgan-Grenville

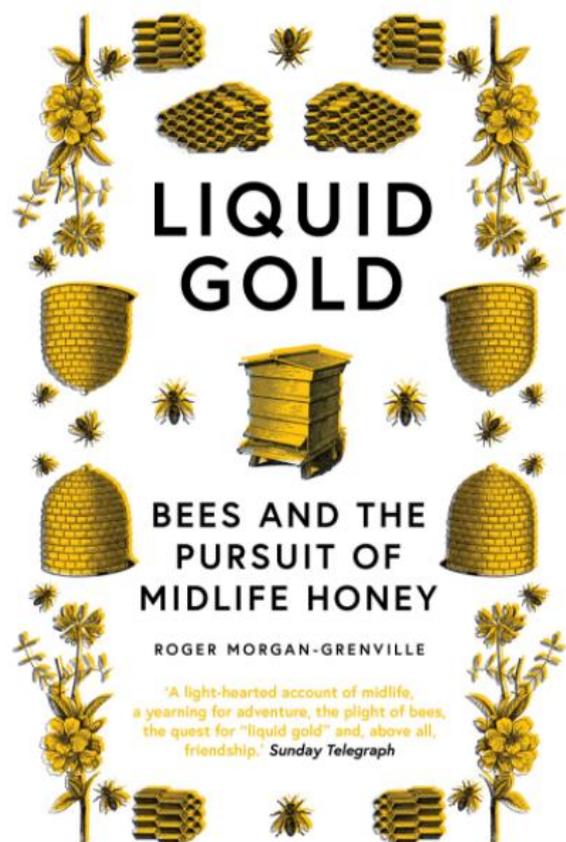
There are books about beekeeping and there are books about beekeepers. And when a beekeeper writes about their own experience of beekeeping, that's definitely a book about a beekeeper!

Roger Morgan-Grenville was a soldier for 8 years, then worked in business for 25 years. He is now a full-time writer and [posts on his blog every week](#). This book describes the unplanned events that led him into beekeeping. It is a story of a friendship and a radical review of who he had become and where he still hoped he might go.

'While never losing the ability to laugh at the caricature I was in danger of becoming, I also could not hide from myself that I needed to achieve little things, *new* things, that I was proud of before I lost the ability to achieve anything at all. ... There was I thinking I needed to become Prime Minister ... and it turned out that what I really needed was the responsibility for, and the company of, a load of relatively grumpy insects.'

An extremely capable person, he wanted to keep bees properly and signed up for an introductory course at his local association somewhere in West Sussex. It was not what he was hoping for. 'I'm not proud to say that I lasted just one session... our instructor outlining the seriousness of what we were embarking on... at no point did he welcome us into his magical world.'

It is difficult to write a book about a specialised subject for a general audience without boring those who already the language – so there are parts that beekeepers will skim through. But this is beautiful story-telling, with words to capture experiences and feelings that remain unarticulated for most of us, but which we acknowledge as real – and perhaps identify with. 🐝

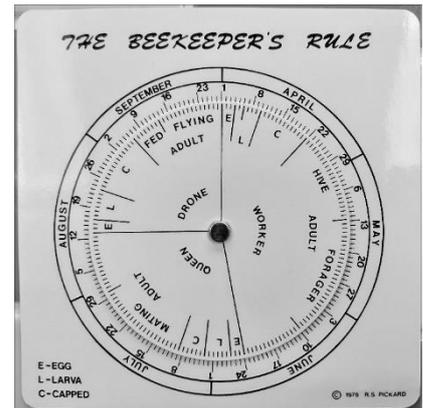


Handy Hints

If you plan to raise queens selectively to improve your stock, don't be too greedy. Select for one, or at most two traits that you value in your queens. Any more than that and the incidence of these qualities being retained in successive generations becomes too small to give any real chance of success.

You need to keep careful track of days and dates in queen rearing. THE BEEKEEPER'S RULE (right), a simple device created by Prof Robert Pickard, gives the dates for the life cycle of queen, drone and worker, starting at any date from April through September. It's incredibly useful!

Available from [Thornes](#), £2.00 



Comments

TO POST A COMMENT, PLEASE EMAIL WHATSTHEBUZZ. Was there anything that caught your attention in this issue? Perhaps you read something that you'd not thought of before, or saw something that didn't feel right to you. If so, do please write a sentence or two for this Comments section. Items from readers are always good to hear.

From (name withheld) I've barely had time to read the last issue and the next one will be in my inbox before I've finished unwrapping my Christmas presents. Count yourself lucky if I manage to read it. I certainly won't be writing anything for it! 

Answers to the quiz

1. imago or adult
2. food sharing; the mutual exchange of regurgitated liquids between adult social insects or between them and their larvae.
3. chemical used by a parasite to help locate a host; for example, small hive beetles are attracted by the alarm pheromone of honey bees.
4. methods of controlling frame spacing, by either frame design, or a separate device
5. crown of thorns (COT) queen cage, made with gramophone needles. Apparently, Mr Baldock lived in Tunbridge Wells. He wasn't a beekeeper but was an eccentric inventor. 

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Please send your PICTURES, ARTICLES, AND IDEAS for the next issue of WHATSTHEBUZZ by 18th of each month. And if you'd like to comment on anything in or about this issue, please email me.

Archie McLellan, WHATSTHEBUZZ compiler 

Happy New Year!



Photo: *Winter rose*, A McLellan

One rose is enough for the dawn – Edmond Jabès

Every best wish to all in Medway BKA

for a happy and fulfilling beekeeping year, from

John H (Treasurer), John C (Chair), Sheila (Secretary),

Mark (Apiary), Bob (Education), Sonia (Exams), Paul (Website),

Tony (Mentors), Elaine (Apiary), and Archie (WTB)