



THE FEDERATION OF BERKSHIRE BEEKEEPERS ASSOCIATIONS

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The Federation, its Council, and its Officers cannot be held responsible for the views expressed in the Newsletter or possible errors.

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In The Apiary

At the time of writing, hawthorn is in flower and the weather is reasonable, the forecast is good, setting the stage for a spate of swarms. Be prepared for a sudden nectar flow and possibly, a shorter June gap. Conversely, if there is little nectar flow or any other reason, bees are short of stores, be prepared to feed,

After an unusually inclement April extending into May, some colonies have unmated or drone laying queens, in this case, insert a frame from another hive containing eggs, preferably with brood in all stages. Remove any drone laying queen and wait for fourteen days. Should there be no eggs or evidence of queen cells at this stage, remove the queen and insert another frame containing eggs.

2001 revisited

It was a very wet early spring, even now, as I write these notes at the beginning of April; we are still getting more rain. I am not a prophet, but I reckon we might have many swarms in the latter part of April into May and on to June. The reason could be this. In February, we had some warm spells and the bees were busy on the early pollen to feed the young, as well as knocking back their winter stores in order to produce food for their Queen. She in turn was increasing her egg laying and so the spiral continued. Then came the wet weather "again", interspersed with a day or so of fine weather and the bees continued to build up. During the wet spells when they couldn't get out the bees were getting over crowded. Even then, they could have been planning to swarm when the weather improved.

If they are building queen cells, follow the advice previously given, either separate the queen from the uncapped brood and knock out all the cells bar two or follow the numerous schemes in the many books that have been written on this subject. Look up artificial swarms, the Demaree, the Hall method, or if you have time on your hands and really want to 'go to town' have a go at the Snelgrove method! One last word on this vast subject, don't confuse swarm cells with supercedure cells.

As a rule, swarm cells are numerous, are of various ages, and are generally found at the edges of the brood nest. If one is capped the queen will have left home. Supercedure cells are fewer in number, are of the same age and are found in the centre of the comb. The queen will probably still be in residence, indeed it is not unknown for her to be still there when her daughter is born. They have even been seen on the face of the same comb, both laying at the same time. Don't worry about removing her; the bees will do that when they are ready.

Any time you are worried whether or not you are queen-less, just place a comb of eggs or very young larvae from another hive into the doubtful hive. After three or four days, have a look at it. If they have begun to draw out queen cells they are queen-less, and it will be OK to introduce a queen in a hair curler, or introduction cage. I use a large hair curler for this operation. It is prepared by stopping one end with a paste consisting of icing sugar and honey. The queen is inserted and this end is sealed. This is then fitted between the comb faces. The bees can touch and feed the queen through the hair curler but they can't sting her. Meanwhile they are eating away the paste bung. After about three days, they are able to release the queen and by this time they have acquired her scent, so they will now accept her.

As mentioned last month if your bees have been working oil seed rape, this should be extracted as soon as possible due to its tendency to granulate quickly. Remember you can extract even uncapped honey if, when given a good shake it doesn't come out. Incidentally, you may be able to recognise if they are on OSR, as they will arrive back at the hive with their faces, maybe covered in yellow pollen and a large yellow pellet attached to hairs (the corbicula) on their back legs.

Keep going with replacing the supers when necessary.

Ambrosia

Triad

Country File May 6th

Over the years I have learned that honey bee behaviour is unpredictable, but in recent years it seems to me that it has become even less predictable. Beekeeping has certainly become more difficult. I have also noticed a dramatic decline in the numbers of other insects about.

I think the agriculture business is responsible for this. The fields are now sown with wheat and rape which has been treated with Neonicotinoids, and the growing crops are sprayed every few weeks with an assortment of insecticides, fungicides and herbicides. Field margins are kept "clean" using weed killers. I walked through a rape crop on a sunny day at the weekend, and it was utterly barren, not an insect or wild flower anywhere. This must have a terrible effect on species further up the food chain. The silent spring is almost upon us.

Successive governments have failed to stand up to the international chemical companies who profit from agriculture, and I expect that the likes of Bayer and Monsanto are just as close to government as were News International. The people in DEFRA talk about caution, whilst allowing the widespread use of chemicals about which there is significant evidence of harm to insect life in general and honey bees in particular.

The agriculture business is unlikely to take a stand on principle because doing so would put them at a competitive disadvantage. They will only play to the rules set by government. An exception is the organic movement, but that seems to be under pressure in these difficult economic times.

We are told that Neonicotinoids are more than 5,000 times more toxic than DDT, that they act on insects' neural systems, and that approval testing was done only on the mortality levels of bees that were deliberately exposed to it. Given the risks involved with such toxic material this level of testing seems scandalously negligent. If a bee loses all or even part of its ability to smell, or to navigate, then the effect on colonies will be significant. It could well explain the recent strange behaviour of queens, the susceptibility of our colonies to diseases and the occasional sudden loss of large numbers of foragers.

It's about time that we beekeepers mounted a more aggressive approach to protect our environment. Unfortunately this seems unlikely to happen - bee keepers are not known for their militancy, and the BBKA is not exactly renowned for its independence from agribusiness...

I am not sure what we can do about it: lobby our MP's; write to DEFRA, buy organic food? Somehow this doesn't seem to be enough.

.....Perhaps we should take some hungry swarms up to the ministry?

Best wishes, Paul.

We have received several comments on the following lines.

An interesting TV programme which I also watched live. Especially interested by the flustering Bayer protest towards the end.

These insecticides are now banned in Switzerland; unfortunately, some farmers still have stocks of treated seed.

NBU ADVICE for OBTAINING BEES:

JOIN BEEBASE

By joining BeeBase you can access beekeeping information and ask for advice or help from the Bee Unit: <https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase>.

Your Regional Bee Inspectors are: -

Southern Region: Nigel Semmence at: nigel.semmence@fera.gsi.gov.uk,

The main website is: <https://secure.csl.gov.uk/beebase/public/Contacts/contacts.cfm>
National Bee Unit, Central Science Laboratory, Sand Hutton, York YO41 1 LZ, tel: 01 904 462 510, email: <mailto:nbu@fera.gsi.gov.uk> .

South Eastern Region: Mr Alan Byham, fax/tel: 01306 611 016

Wokingham and District Beekeepers' Association

So far this month we have had rain, hail and even more rain and on some occasions have not had the opportunity to check the hives. It was therefore no surprise to find, on opening one of the apiary hives on Sunday 6th May, a number of hatched queen cells. As we watched, another queen emerged from her cell, so we closed up and left them to it. We found open queen cells in some of the other hives, so broke these down and where necessary and added supers to give more space.

Spring arrived on the 12th and with it a number of calls from members of the public, reporting swarms. One was to say a swarm had settled just down the road from me. Why is it, calls always come when you are in the middle of a field in full bee suit? Peter Seagrave offered to go and collect them and I finished my bees. As the location was not too far from home, I detoured to take a look. By the time we arrived they had settled, and were nicely clustered in a shrub set in a beautifully manicured lawn, about a foot above the ground. A skep would fit nicely underneath and a gentle tap would see them drop in. The stars of the show hung there rustling gently as the neighbours took their photographs, and Peter suited up and lit his smoker, at which point they decided to leave and in thirty seconds they had gone! We followed them up the road and into the next estate, and in and out of someone's garden, but unfortunately, they carried on into a local countryside park. They must already have decided where they were going and the shrub was just a coffee break on the way!

Later that day, we checked the apiary hives with Maurice Hempson as Duty Apiarist. We went prepared to carry out artificial swarms, but fortunately most of the hives had not remade queen cells. One hive had sealed and unsealed queen cells, despite having removed them all last week. Morris found the queen, so moved her, with one frame of brood and the flying bees, to a new box on the original site, and then moved the rest of the brood into the old box just behind.

Next week we will move the old brood box to the other side of the apiary, and any bees that have learnt to fly during the week, will hopefully drift into the queen-right hive on the original site (being the nearest hive to their original location) and strengthen that colony. They are also starting to store some nectar, at long last, so we added supers to a number of colonies. Depending on the weather we might get some of the rape crop before it turns green, although as I write this it is raining and cool again.

This is my second full year as a beekeeper, and it is still a steep learning curve. I have never seen our queen and still have trouble spotting eggs. We had decided to move our bees to a larger brood box and were doing this via a Bailey change. Half way through the process they made queen cells. However, due to the location of the hives we did not want to risk a swarm, so broke the cells down and I went back a few days later to do an artificial swarm. I was too late, and we had more sealed queen cells but we did the artificial swarm just in case the queen was still around due to the bad weather. We ended up with a combination of Bailey change/artificial swarm¹ without seeing the queen – a tower of three brood boxes and a super! I split the boxes the following day and checked for the queen but again no sign. I guessed she had already gone first time round, but went back four days later to make sure. As expected, numerous queen cells which I broke down, leaving the best open cell with a nice fat larva in two of the boxes. We are now keeping our fingers crossed for a change in the weather.

There must be a knack to seeing the queen. I have looked for the way she walks, the colour of her legs, the parting of the bees as she strolls around but nothing. I have paired up frames with gaps between the pairs so she cannot run from one frame to another and at one time put half the frames into another hive and then checked both sets but still couldn't find her. I can only spot a queen if she has a dot on her back, preferably white or yellow. If anyone wants to be entrepreneurial and set up a queen finding company "have bee suit, will travel", I will be their first customer. In hindsight, maybe beekeeping is not the hobby for someone who cannot find a queen or see eggs but a little late now having spent a fortune on equipment and building a shed to house it all. When does it stop being one step forward, six back?

¹ Instructions for Bailey changes and artificial swarms without seeing the queen are quite detailed and are available on the web and in most books

Lynn Janes. Hon. Sec. Mobile: 07721 338833

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Slough, Windsor and Maidenhead Beekeepers' Society

The swarm season is well under way, and our team of collectors is busy finding new homes for swarmed colonies (including a caravan in one instance). A reminder to members looking to take swarms: please make sure you are on our swarm list (check with Glynis Morse, our Swarm Coordinator).

We had the last of our winter talks on 15th May, when Dr. David Aston NDB and Chairman of the BBKA, gave us a most illuminating talk on 'Plants and Bees'. Dr. Aston described the relationship between honey bees and the many plants, flowers and trees, upon which they depend. More details to follow in next month's newsletter.

Nine of our members took the BBKA Basic Assessment in May, this is a fantastic achievement. We are encouraging as many members as possible to do the Basic, which comprises a practical assessment and theoretical oral test, and which demonstrates basic competence in bee-keeping. See http://www.bbka.org.uk/learn/examinations_assessments/basic_assessment for more information. If you are interested in taking the Basic Assessment please contact Tony Wolstenholme.

Our apiary meetings are continuing on a weekly basis, and as always, details of all our meetings, topical articles and much more are on our website at: <http://www.bbka.org.uk/local/slough-windsor-maidenhead>

Neil Coxhead Secretary SWM BKS



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Reading and District Beekeepers' Association

For the second year running, we were invited to attend 'Bean Pole Day', which is inspired by National Bean Pole Week and run by the Econet Conservation Volunteers. It was held on the 28th April at Caversham Court and was also attended by organisations such as the RSPB, The Mammal Society and the BBO Wildlife Trust. In spite of the weather, we had a lot of interest and potentially some new members. The stand looked superb with the plants, supplied and sold by Lin Jenkins, in aid of The Motor Neurone Disease Society. A special thank you to John & Linda Rogerson, Mike Dabbs and Lin for braving the weather! The Organisers have expressed their thanks and are very keen for us to attend next year.



On Sunday 20th May, Reading Beekeepers met in chilly conditions at Cross Lanes Apple Farm, Sonning where Michael Blackburn has an apiary. This is a well know and much appreciated fruit Farm with many customers for their excellent apples and Michael's honey in the farm shop. We had a chat with the farmer about the lamentable weather for pollination; few trees still showed blossom and not many foraging bees had been seen on the trees. Michael has also viewed nearby fields of oilseed rape, a few bees only, no hoverflies and other wild pollinators about. However, with warmer weather now in prospect, there is hope for better activity on the rape and we should get some secondary blossom growth on the fruit trees.

On then to the hives. As we had a good turn out with many new beekeepers, Michael selected some of these to act as his assistants, and 'older hands' were asked to stand back a bit, unless called forward, and asked to comment a bit on the demonstration, this to give new people the best possible view of proceedings. The first two hives had big populations with no capped stores visible, except for some last years honey, on a couple of deep frames at the edge, Michael replaced these with new frames of foundation and scoured, and placed above the crown boards, two 'coffee jar feeders' of syrup, and then a quilt.

There was plenty of sealed brood, some bigger larvae but no eggs or tiny larvae seen. Some queen cups were removed, but a nice looking sealed queen cell on the face of a comb, i.e. in 'supercedure' position was left undisturbed, uncapped stores in some cells. Michael removed solid floors, these were clean and tidy, obviously good housekeeper bees. (Michael muttered something about "a bit lazy when it comes to honey production!") New mesh floors with a sticky surfaced varroa floors were inserted, and hive positions adjusted.

The next two hives were much the same, and worked in the same way, new beekeepers were able to assist, use the smoker, handle frames, and view a reasonable looking queen in one colony. In hive number four, there was plenty of drone brood and for the benefit of newer beekeepers, some was raked-out to try to find some varroa, but absolutely nil, all of Michael's colonies are treated with oxalic acid in the winter.

Hive number five looked ominously quiet, the bottom deep was vacant, and the frames were speedily cleaned off, however, in the half above, a thousand or so workers were there with a patch of brood, some tiny larvae and eggs, a little uncapped honey also, we had no difficulty finding the queen and she looked reasonable. Jar feeders and quilts were put on. Obviously, these had difficulties over the winter and early spring period but hopefully, have turned the corner and may have a chance to build-up.

Number six was a bit of fun, a heavy super was removed, and the brood boxes had an excellent brood pattern, sealed and bigger larvae in the deep, and on new comb in the half above. The heavy super was examined, and nothing capped yet but should be in a few days, Michael will monitor, with an eye on the nearby rape blossom, a new super was added. Michael uses where possible, shallow frames in his supers alternating, drone comb, worker comb, drone etc. He gets a better yield that way. These bees were of a 'lively' disposition, often found in good foragers and a couple of newer people wearing rather tight fitting lycra on their lower limbs were forced to withdraw, recommendations were passed about heavyweight denim next time!

A really splendid beekeeping session! With very many thanks to Michael & Hazel Blackburn who had set-up sandwiches, cakes and teas for us in one of the farm buildings away from the chill, so we were very well looked after. Thanks also to Reading beekeepers new and not so new for the good turnout.

Our next meeting is on Sunday 17th June and starts at 11-30 and our hosts are Nick and Caroline Matenga, and Jeremy Gilmore, both in Sonning. Initial plans are to park our cars in Sonning Lane, after the Bluecoat School entrance and proceed to Nick's apiary which is in grounds opposite the entrance behind the Sports Club. Afterwards to Caroline and Jeremy's this is off Thames Street. If we organize ourselves well, we may be able to drive in three or four vehicles; otherwise, it is a pleasant stroll through this scenic Thames-side village.

Jon Davey

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South Chilterns Beekeepers' Association

We were lucky enough to have the first dry day in weeks for the visit to John Hall's apiary at Chalkhouse Green Farm, and were able to look inside four of the hives, (Tom, Dick, Bill and Little Weed), all of which had a problem of some sort.

The remaining two hives, (Harry and Ben) were nuclei, made up with two frames and two sealed queen cells each from the hive containing last year's nucleus, which had grown well. These were made to replace the two hives lost in the winter: one probably too small to survive, which appeared to starve, despite still having fondant; and one which was found mysteriously empty (had they just all moved next door?) As the nuclei had only been made up two weeks previously, we could not open them yet, but did give them some more sugar syrup each in small rapid feeders, as they would have had virtually no food of their own.



Ron began by reminding us that it is not good practice to take a frame out of the centre of the hive to save time, as it's possible to roll the queen in the process and damage her; always start by taking a frame out at one end and work across the hive, one frame at a time.

Hive 1 (Tom) is a Commercial size hive. We had thought it was queen-less a week before, and were hoping the bees had made some emergency cells from the small larvae that had been there then. They had – with a vengeance; lots of sealed and unsealed cells were present. As there was no queen to produce eggs, the unsealed cells were empty, so there was no choice but to remove these, and most of the sealed cells, leaving just one. A nice-looking one was rejected as favourite because it was built in a space between the bottom of the comb and the frame, and Ron felt that the tip was so close to the wood that the queen would have problems emerging. Ron also advised that the Ashforth feeder that had been keeping them going through the wettest April on record could be removed now. There is a huge field of rape in full flower next to Chalkhouse Green Farm!

Hive 4 (Bill) had been the grumpiest hive, so we weren't too sorry when it looked as though they might have swarmed at the beginning of May, as there was a single empty queen cell, no brood and hardly any bees at home. Not knowing for sure whether there was a virgin queen in there or not, a few days later we had given them a queen cell frame from the hive containing last year's nucleus, crossing our fingers that they wouldn't cast. On the apiary day, the donated queen cell had been torn open, Ron said, either by a mated queen or a virgin. There were fresh queen cells, one unsealed and containing a grub. Ron showed us an extra-long queen cell, which, although it looks like a good specimen, is so long that it might just contain two drones rather than a huge queen! Fortunately, their temper was much improved.

Hive 6 (Little Weed, last year's nucleus) was also queen-less, which was a shame as she had been very good, building up nicely in her National brood box. Although she was less than a year old the bees were determined to replace her, as they had been producing queen cells prolifically, which we had been gaily taking away to start the two new nuclei, and to help out Hive 4. Perhaps they felt in need of an additional half brood, although they didn't appear to be short of space. This day there were yet another three unsealed cells and two sealed ones. Although the books tell us to remove the sealed ones when there are unsealed cells present, this time the bees had the good fortune of being looked at by two experts, who came up with a solution that a beginner should never do alone if the cell was the only one. One of the sealed cells was apparently just ready to emerge. Ron described how the queen eats away at the tip from the inside, changing the colour and appearance enough for an expert to tell she was about to emerge. Reg. very delicately pulled the end of the cell off, and we had the enormous pleasure of seeing a virgin queen wriggle out, shake herself and disappear down into the hive. It's not every day you see a queen emerge before your very eyes! In order to give her the best possible start and reduce risk of damage from competing virgins getting into a fight, Reg. then knocked off all the remaining queen cells, both sealed and unsealed. Ron was at pains to emphasise that this event is definitely NOT to be attempted by a beginner if there was no means to replace the queen if she should be damaged!

Hive 2 (Dick) was the only hive that appeared to have started working properly at last, had a second super just added, and the bees were bringing in nectar. But they had also just started to produce queen cells; a week before we had destroyed the first three unsealed ones, but it didn't put them off and they had managed to seal one up by the apiary day. Had the bees been reading the books that tell you the queen leaves as soon as a cell is sealed? So the big question was "is the queen still there?" As a beginner, I would not have been in a position to know; we have never spotted a queen yet so not one of them is marked. Fortunately again for the bees, Reg. had little trouble locating her, and kindly performed the wing-clipping and marking ceremony. He regretted letting her go a moment later, when it was decided to carry out an artificial swarm, since we had both a queen and a suitable queen cell, and bees that wanted to swarm; but he caught her again pretty quickly.

The queen stayed in a queen clip on top of the frames for a few minutes while a new box was set up. It happened to be a Commercial, for which we only had foundationed frames, and I'm told that as it was a laying queen, it would be much better to use at least one drawn comb if available.

The new box went into the position of the original hive, with two national frames (without any queen cells) inserted in the middle. We remembered to put the queen back in before replacing the supers on top, Ron said that the extra space below the standard frames might be used for drone comb. Because the Commercial box is made from a National with an eke extension, it appears to be the wrong way round with the hand-holds on the wrong side, which caused some consternation. But the frames are all lined up the correct way, so the bees should be less confused than we were. The old box was moved off to one side, so that flying bees will all go back to the queen in their original position, and we should have succeeded in separating the brood from the queen and the foraging bees, the prime requirement in achieving an artificial swarm. In a week's time we have to move it again, to deplete it further of all the bees that have started to fly in the intervening week.

Then we all went back to the farm for an absolutely splendid afternoon tea, and to buy from the honey stall and the collection of donated plants. Ron thanked the hosts, John and Sarah Hall, and announced the sales had made about a hundred pounds for the disabled children's' charity, Soundabout. John and Sarah are very grateful to everyone present for their great generosity.

John and I would like to offer our VERY grateful thanks to Reg. and to Ron for a really informative, action-packed meeting, and for once again rescuing the bees from our blunders.

Meryl Toomey

Footnote from John and Sarah Hall

We much enjoyed seeing so many here. We have now added up the contributions in "the tin" which added to plant sales and honey sales came to a grand total of £165! Thank you so much for your generosity. Thank you too Ron and Reg. for sorting out our bees. A cheque is on its way to Soundabout who will be delighted.



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