

## North Bucks Beekeepers' Association

Affiliated to BBKA and Buckinghamshire BKA

Newsletter: June 2010

**May** Another varied month. Bob Sibley attended a Voluntary Sector Reception held by the Milton Keynes Community Foundation. This is the body from which we won last year's grant. Sue Bird was at the Stoke Goldington Steam Rally and Country Fayre. Weather could have been better but there were certainly some very interesting looking steam engines trundling around the country lanes.



As you can see from the photos we had a fantastic skep making weekend. Martin Buckle, as ever, proved to be an inspired teacher. Not least in that at 9.30 on the Saturday morning after a brief history of skeps and the great variety of materials, he gave us all a ready started circle of wheat straw and cane binder. After a few minutes instruction in "lipwork" – the style of weaving we were to use, we were all well away. The concentration levels were almost audible apart from the swish of straw. This was punctuated with bee talk and talk of people's histories and travels. What a cosmopolitan bunch we are. Teas & coffees were made as we went along, sweetened with Cynthia's marvellous Danish pastries and Carole's delicious chocolate brownies and cheese scones – with which we seem to have consumed half a pound of butter. Back to Martin's skill – having got us totally hooked on our lipwork, on Sunday he introduced us to the most difficult part of skep making and that is the starting of it. Martin demonstrated the ancient German, French and English ways of starting a skep and then we were left to hone our new found skill. We all found this very difficult, had we been faced with this on the first day I doubt we would have made such beautiful skeps. Many, many thanks, Martin, for such a fabulous weekend. We all thoroughly enjoyed it and watch out everyone for the skep class at the Annual Honey Show in September!

**Message from Julian Parker SBI** Thought you might be interested to know that Small Hive Beetle is on the move and has just been discovered in Hawaii, so if any members are importing queens from Hawaii or receiving Hawaiian Queens from UK suppliers, I would suggest being extra vigilant and checking packaging, queen and accompanying workers very carefully..

**Winter losses survey – a mixed message** John Catton tells us that 45 members of Chalfonts BKA responded to the survey. Analysis of the figures shows that 148 colonies went into winter and as at mid April there were 120 queenright colonies, a loss of 18.9% (last year 15.4%) North Bucks Beekeepers and Mid Bucks Beekeepers have carried out the same survey and are reporting losses are 16.2% and 27% respectively. This is very disappointing, as from early anecdotal reports, far fewer losses were anticipated, hoping even that our bees were slowly emerging from the problems of the past 3/4 years. Within the headline results, the picture is very uneven. Several members reported having strong vigorous colonies, but one observation which came up several times was, the bees went into winter as a strong colony, have survived, but in a very weak state. Many of these were fed fondant in March, and then united. The BBKA are getting very mixed reports, "some beekeepers losing almost a third of their hives and others losing none". Reasons for losses included isolation starvation, lost queen, a weak colony going into winter unable to withstand the cold snap in March.

**Apiary Notes from Andrew Beer** Persistent north-west winds and perhaps ash from Iceland spewing from the volcano have led to the authorities grounding bee flights – or so it would seem! Here in the

Leighton Buzzard area I reckon colonies are running about two to three weeks behind their normal annual schedules (meaning, for one thing, the swarming season here did not start around 15<sup>th</sup> April but on 29<sup>th</sup> April, or thereabouts, and then with not a great deal of conviction). Reports from around the County suggest colonies somewhat perversely are either very strong or very weak. Whether that is due to the recent winter and low temperatures confining bees for long periods or nosema or recent frost, the experts will no doubt advise. If it is of any interest, I recall after the severe winter of 1985, bees took most of the summer rebuilding their strengths and that swarming was at a low level. The following notes are intended to help guide people through their early stages of beekeeping.

A BIT MORE ABOUT SWARM CONTROL In April's and May's notes I attempted to cover to some extent swarm prevention and swarm control but may I just "re-remind" you that at 7-day intervals these tasks go on until at least the end of July. Once you have had a little more experience you will find that some examinations can be missed; for example, some beekeepers don't start 7-day comb-by-comb swarm control inspections until their strongest colonies are stating (in bee terms!) their intention to swarm, by their queens producing eggs in queen cells (even one egg in one cell may be your swarm wake-up call!). But apart from swarm prevention and control you will learn much by looking through each of your colonies' chambers every seven days and "reading" what is or isn't happening, and surely that is all part of the joy of beekeeping. Again, until you have more experience, we cannot too strongly advise/urge you to follow the Adrian Waring "Teach Yourself Beekeeping" book or the 2010 Edition – now called "Get Started in Beekeeping". About finding queens, or at least knowing where the queen is, which is part of your control measures. There cannot be a beekeeper who has not, at one time or another, got into quite a state if he/she ploughs through a colony's combs two or more times and nowhere is that elusive queen to be found, especially if she is unmarked, dark and slimmed down for her swarm flight. I have a suggestion. Until you have more confidence follow Adrian's advice under the paragraph headed "Cannot find the queen?" **BUT DON'T EVEN BOTHER TO LOOK FOR HER WHEN YOU START YOUR CONTROL PLAN.** In other words, you open up the colony **INTENDING TO SWARM** and immediately take the 5 steps on page 68 or page 88 without a prior search. The 5 steps will take five minutes to carry out at the most; neither you nor your bees will get into a lather and even the neighbours may be happier with largely undisturbed bees in your hives. The point is that by dividing your hive into two in this way (flying bees separated from the bulk of brood) there is no realistic risk of your bees swarming in the next seven days. Once you have broken the colony in two it will be far easier and more leisurely to come back later to find the queen and to decide which brood box holds her and which one doesn't. You then complete your swarm control plan in accordance with Adrian's advice.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED A SWARM (HURRAY!) OR COLONY OR NUCLEUS Swarms will benefit from all the help we can give them and may well produce a fine crop later. Once hived, give them a gallon of syrup, in a rapid not bucket feeder, two pints at a time. I use 1 kg sugar to 1 pint water, as quickly as my bees will take it. Go on feeding until combs in their brood box are fully drawn out and they have say, at least, 8 kg of stores. Fit and keep entrance blocks in the "narrow" position at least until all feeding is done, to avoid robbing. The same advice goes for nuclei and small colonies which are to be retained in due course as full colonies and nuclei to be united with their parent stock which will need sufficient stores to keep them going. Never feed above any super when a super for honey production is added. When adding first super, especially if they are fitted with frames of foundation, place directly over brood chambers without a queen excluder to encourage bees to come up into them and draw foundation out. Watch the situation closely and insert queen excluder before Her Majesty strides upwards (a really good blow of thick smoke into the super combs will usually drive her down). Keep adding supers as soon as top super is 75% full. This may result in pyramid filling of supers but, in my view, that is preferable to overcrowded bees increasing the risk of swarming.

MAGIC! YOUR FIRST TASTE OF YOUR OWN HONEY Perhaps a beekeeper's finest moment. I still recall coming back from school, rushing to take off supers and, later, spreading a thick slab of butter and honey over a slice of local fresh farmhouse brown bread. Scrummy! I hope the following notes will help lead you to similar ecstasy!

- On your 7 day inspections keep checking whether super combs are sealed. If so they can be extracted.
- If you are in range of oil-seed rape, as most of us are, take off frames individually as soon as they are ripe, placing empty super over your opened-up hive and using this as a funnel to collect bees which you will shake from the combs. The same goes for unsealed or partially sealed

combs. However, first vigorously shake each side of these unsealed combs down over and into the hive – the Beekeeper’s Shake Test - and if no drops whatever of honey emerge they too can be extracted. Why the rush? Oil-seed rape and some other honeys crystallise within days and if you were to use boards/Porter Bee escapes or similar, your honey might well be set by the time it reaches your honey extractor after about 1<sup>st</sup> July.

- Make certain the gates of the escape are clear of debris and “gates” are just ajar. When crystallisation of honey is not a problem, always use boards/escapes, especially if there is any risk of robbing.
- To do so you put a clearer board under a super whose combs you wish to extract with Porter Bee escape(s) inserted in the openings. Pin down escapes with drawing pins because they can be moved by bees and so can your crop! Seal over all external accesses in super boxes; even the tiniest holes are accesses for bees and wasps. You will be able to remove super 2-4 days later – brush off any stragglers into the hive.
- All honey removal from hives is best done in evening when flying has stopped. Be careful to ensure no spills whatever and if any these must be cleared up and washed up. Bees’ and wasps’ sense of smell is about 1000 times stronger than ours, apparently!
- You don’t have to extract honey if you are happy to have your honey in comb form. Few people these days produce comb honey sections because bees hate them and success is uncertain. Alternatively, you can cut out combs from frames and then store them in plastic containers available from bee suppliers. If you want to stop crystallisation of these combs, place in storage bags in your freezer – apparently it works!
- Larger scale beekeepers need fairly expensive and sophisticated equipment to extract honey. If you have, say, three hives and produce a maximum of 120 lbs of honey a year for family and as gifts for friends, then there is no need for it and you can do it almost for nothing. The plain fact is that in your kitchen there will be almost everything you need to produce a first class crop of honey. If your operations expand, however, you will need dedicated space and equipment. The advice which follows is not set in stone and can be varied to meet your particular circumstances and to bring in and look after the crop.
- Take supers to the room where extraction is to take place and warm the room overnight.
- Borrow from the association a honey extractor. A manual extractor should be quite satisfactory. WARNING: don’t buy an extractor at least until the end of your first beekeeping year when you can decide what you need. It is so easy to get the wrong one. In any event when you do get one be 101% certain both supers and deep frames fit it. Some won’t.
- Use a serrated bread knife to remove capping from combs. Skim under the surface of the wax faces through the “air gap” (if there is one) of combs and most of the honey will remain intact.
- Place combs in extractor, balancing the weight of combs. Start wheeling slowly or combs will end up a nasty mush at the bottom of your extractor.
- Strain collected honey through conical food strainer into food jugs or containers. To improve quality of straining attach butter muslin to strainer. Strain to fill containers. In my opinion, if your honey is just for domestic consumption and the strainer is a fine one, then there is no need for the butter muslin.
- Leave filled containers overnight to settle in a warm room, skim off wax froth and any debris and pour into jars.
- By all means use standard honey jars but you can also use discarded jam jars and lids for family consumption, However, wash out jars and lids thoroughly and sterilise in the oven before use. Don’t forget please we have a honey show so do fill several standard honey jars. Beginners always do well at the show and there is a special class so you must enter!
- If honey starts going cloudy and stiffening at any stage of the process before jarring, it needs the gentlest warming to return it to a runny and strainable state. If the problem happens when the honey is still in the extractor, use a domestic electric blow heater placed close to and directed at the extractor. Stir to avoid local overheating. If the problem happens when the honey has been jugged, place container in hot water bath and stir vigorously until cleared. Personally I

have put container into a preserving pan placed over the hob to clear stiffening honey with no undue consequences, but keep stirring vigorously and avoid local overheating.

- Despite your best attempts to avoid crystallised honey in combs, invariably there will be some. You can scrape off and deal with as part of your cappings. Alternatively, place with a nuc or weak stock as a supplement to the feed you are giving them. You will probably have to take further action with crystallised combs later in the season, I will make suggestions later. Cleared supers then go back to the bees for refilling or clearing according to the time of year. But be careful about robbing! Weak stocks plus all stocks after 1<sup>st</sup> July should have entrance blocks in the narrow position until combs are cleared.

One important final point: when you remove supers you may well be removing a colony's food supply. In June your brood chamber may contain frames of brood wall to wall. Some food should always be left for bees and after supers are removed your bees may need immediate feeding. Bees can starve in June!

**Queenie's Kitchen** When you return from slaving away in the apiary put your feet up with a cup of tea and a slice of **Honey and Lemon Tart**, a luxurious version of treacle tart.

- Sift 8oz plain flour and ½ teasp salt into a mixing bowl. Add 6 oz chilled butter, cut into small pieces. Crumble together with your fingertips until evenly combined.
- Using a knife mix in one egg yolk and the grated rind and juice of a lemon until the mixture just begins to stick together. Gather into a ball, wrap in cling film and chill for half an hour or more.
- Preheat the oven to 200C/400F/gas mark 6. Roll out the pastry on a floured board to about 1/8 inch thick. Line a buttered 8 inch flan tin with the pastry and prick the base lightly with a fork.
- Mix together 5 rounded tabs of aromatic honey, 4oz fresh white breadcrumbs and the rind and juice of a second lemon. Pour into the pastry case. Roll out the pastry trimmings to make a lattice pattern on top of the tart.
- Bake in the centre of the oven for 25-30 minutes.
- Serve warm or cold with cream or crème fraiche.

**Buzz Words** Did you know....

- Martin Buckle made Friar Tuck's skeps for the Robin Hood film which is out on general release at the moment? I have no idea who Russell Crowe is but I may very well go to see the film for the sake of Martin's skeps!
- "Innocent" the company which makes fruit smoothies has just launched a new drink – Lemons, Honey and Ginger Smoothie – the label says, "*Buy one get one **bee***"? Each bottle comes with a packet of seeds, so everyone can take part in Innocent's project to introduce more than two million honeybees and 40 new beehives into Britain.

## June

Beginners' apiary sessions continue. Do come along to assist and educate. Remember, you were a beginner once. Contact: Bob Sibley 01908 647597

Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> June is the **Riverside Fair** at Stony Stratford from 1 – 4 p.m. Sue Bird will have a stand with an observation hive, information and bee products for sale. Please consider giving Sue a hand for an hour or two. Call her on 01908 501101

**And Finally...** Annie lives in Adstock. She is setting up a conservation project which includes planting a small orchard. Annie is looking for smallholders and their expertise, including beekeepers who could site hives within the new orchard and who would become her Bee Buddy. Contact: 01296 712197

If you would like to comment on or contribute to our Newsletter, contact Libby Culshaw 01908 375968  
[laviniaaculshaw@hotmail.com](mailto:laviniaaculshaw@hotmail.com)