

# North Bucks Bee Keepers' Association

## Newsletter January 2013

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### Calendar at-a-glance

2 <sup>nd</sup> March 2013	County spring seminar, Wendover
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## News Articles

### *Editorial*

I hope 2013 will be a great year for you in many ways – bees, of course, included, *writes Andrew Beer*. Weatherwise it can't be worse than this last year, we must all desperately hope. A number of the bee journals appear to be suggesting that because the last season was so grim, we can expect in spring drone-brooding queens, laying workers, other queenless stocks in a big way – but I am not so sure. As our Olympians gloried in the Olympics so did many colonies in the warm, drier weather of August and September. Those I have seen in December appear generally in good shape. We shall just have to wait and see, but can there ever be a stronger case for taking measures now which will best ensure colonies go strongly into spring? At some times of the year the state of a colony can be perplexing, even to the most experienced beekeeper (you know the expression “Bees don't read books”, and they often follow their own “agenda”), but from now until about the beginning of March, if you take some simple well-trodden steps you really will be doing your best for your bees. *See below for Andrew's apiary notes.*

## ***Retiring Beekeeper Sells Equipment***

A member of NBBKA is retiring from beekeeping and wishes to sell his equipment. This includes both apiary and home equipment, and possibly his stock too. Please contact our member on 01908 647597 to discuss.

## ***Informal Advice on Selling Honey at Local Fairs***

The typesetter recently ran a stall at a local market in a community centre and was very pleased with a 10:1 return on his costs. The below are some observations and pieces of advice regarding selling honey at local fairs.



- If your fair is indoors, take an ironing board and tablecloth. You can set-up shop using these as your stall in any corner if table space is short.
- Watch out for questions from Joe Public that might make you choke: "I like honey but not honey from bees", and "Do bees poo and wee and is that what this is made of?" were my favourites.
- Have testers, use drinking straws for dipping and have vessels for the clean and dirty straws. Watch out for double-dippers (especially children). Label your tester as such, and keep the lid off, to encourage people to try. Don't use your black jar, leftover from the show, as a tester, it's too confusing.
- Bring your NBBKA honey show certificates and display them to show the quality of your products. They will impress even if they're for coming third of two entrants in a novice class.
- Don't worry too much about high prices. Start high and if after so-many hours you are not seeing a high enough conversion of tasters to buyers, lower the price. Make sure you cross out the old one conspicuously so that customers see that there's a sale on.
- If someone is in two minds about buying and are fretting over the (rightfully) high price of your quality product, knock a pound off but "just for you, madam,

don't tell the others". That will secure your sale.

- Ensure your prices are clearly visible, people either don't like to ask or assume that no price means they cannot afford it.
- Have a seasonal tag line on a poster. If you're selling near Christmas or at a Christmas market, encourage customers to buy honey as a stocking filler.
- Don't just sell honey, also offer other hive products such as honey or beeswax soap, beeswax polish, etc. Even if you don't plan to sell wax, some bars will brighten your display.
- Ensure that you have small jars as well as one-pound jars to sell. Some people want to buy something to support you, but don't necessarily want to spend on a large jar.
- Develop your opening line. If you invite a passer-by to try your honey and they say that they don't like honey, counter with something about having not yet tried your superior honey.
- Don't badger people.
- You'll be amazed that roughly as many people try but don't buy as buy without trying.
- Wear your bee suit to attract attention.
- Make sure you thank the organiser of the event.

Good luck with your 2013 sales.

## Regular Columns

### *January Apiary Notes from Andrew Beer*

#### IN THE APIARY

I suggest you go on visiting your colonies every two or three weeks, and immediately after gales and heavy snowfalls. Disturbance should be kept to a minimum, and most essentially nothing should be done to disturb the winter cluster. However, if you carry out the following measures you ought to be able adequately to assess how each colony is faring.

**Heft** each hive from opposite sides. This is important because all the stores may be on one side of the hive and combs empty on the other. If light, you must feed if only as an insurance. How do I feed? Either with candy or fondant. In previous newsletters I have described how I place an eke immediately above the cluster, in which case it is easy to place the block of food immediately over the cluster. A torch may help you find the cluster. Be very wary if the cluster has reached the top of combs, even if surrounded by combs with food – if harsh weather strikes, the great danger is that the cluster will stay put and starve to death (which is known as isolation starvation). As previously mentioned, all my stocks of bees are fed Ambrosia from 1st December onwards, regardless of their needs: a course which in the past was regarded as a fad for beekeepers with nothing better to do! You may be wondering why I am against putting the feed over the feed hole in the cover board: first because you cannot guarantee that the cluster lies directly under the hole, and secondly because in really cold weather the bees may not cross the “gap” between the frames and the feed above. But the arrangement also makes easy the next step described.

Ensure that the colony is in **good shape**. Bees in good shape on a cold day will be tightly clustered over a minimum of four frames in a ball not less than six inches in diameter. They will be seen to be gently vibrating their bodies within the cluster; there will be no faeces on hive walls or tops of frames, and no excessive faeces on the outside of the hive – don't worry about a few droppings on hive roofs: that is normal bee business! If the bees are restless, the cause may be nosema or dysentery. In these cases, make a note to examine more closely later. The trouble may clear itself. My best hive in 2009 contained a tiny ball of rather restless bees in January and there was much evidence of dysentery, but it went on to produce over 100lbs of honey that year, and since then has been a “heavy, healthy cropper”. So please do not give up hope!

There are no firm guidelines in favour of use or non-use of **oxalic acid**. My understanding is that the National Bee Unit apply it in winter, and so do I, as many others in the Association. In 2012 I used Hive Clean at the beginning of March and in August, when supers were removed and followed with Oxalic Acid in December. If you

are going to use it, you really need to complete the task by 14th January (the acid will kill brood, and thus the need to use before serious brood-laying recommences). If in doubt, speak to an experienced beekeeper and strictly follow manufacturer's instructions. I advise against making up your own mix: it is dangerous stuff!

Do you need to **move colonies** within the apiary? Perhaps last season's activities make this necessary. Do the appropriate moves when the temperature is about 5°C and the bees have not been flying for about a week or so. Stuff hive entrances and gently do the necessary moves. Best to do it smoothly with a chum: your bees will then be unaware of the move and will re-locate when flying conditions improve (as they always do after a cold non-flying spell). Leave any move of colonies between apiaries until a warm day in late February/early March.

Be vigilant for **woodpeckers**. All I can add to what has been mentioned earlier is to suggest you remain on guard. If in doubt, put up your wire netting defences.

Look out for other troubles! **Look at entrances!** A disturbed entrance with debris in front of it usually means that mice are present. If so, with a chum gently lift hive body, clear any debris over the floor and any mice will make a fast exit. Re-assemble hive and make certain entrance is secure. In winter I use full entrance block with one-inch aperture, 3/8th inch deep which should be adequate to keep mice out. Particularly check hive roofs – given the dreadful weather we have had in December, you can be pretty certain that any defective roof, indeed perhaps good ones, are wet, in which case replace. Remember the adage "Damp kills bees, cold (at least in North Bucks) doesn't!"

I gave up using mouse guards over ten years ago: I got fed up with frosted fingers if it was cold, and being stung if it wasn't, trying to secure the guards with drawing pins and without gloves! Also check accumulations of dead bees within hives are not blocking entrances. It is perfectly normal for bees to die within the hive in winter, but an accumulation of bodies at the entrance may wholly impede egress. Other afflictions may be manifest on each inspection, in which case deal as appropriate. In two successive years, a herd of cattle tore through one of my apiaries, causing devastation with hives on their sides, roofs off etc. etc. All survived, I believe because all stocks were on Hoffman type frames rather than British Standards, stayed in place within the turned-over boxes, and in fact when righted the bees seemed rather miffed that they were back on "normal".

Finally, January is normally a good time of year to renew or level **hive stands**, taking suitable precautions. For at least the last 25 years I have, to the ridicule of some, used milk crates, which remain as good as the day they were made!

## BACK AT BASE

The way I see things is like this. In about 60 days' time some spring activities will commence, and 30 days after that, the swarm season could be upon us! Do, or do you not, want to be ready? If we are not ready, then handling of colonies will be fraught at best and beekeeping will be unenjoyable. I would like to make a number of observations and suggestions.

The general rule **for equipment** is that for each hive of bees at the beginning of spring, you need one spare hive. To save you rushing about buying equipment you may not need later, if you have five hives may I suggest you obtain (or have) an additional two floors, two broodboxes (and frames), two coverboards and two roofs. This will enable you to carry out two artificial swarms, additional equipment to be acquired later (but may I add the warning that at the height of summer orders for equipment may take up to a month to arrive!) I don't buy "seconds" - best cedar wood quality hives will last 50 years at least.

Equipment which needs **repairing** should be properly repaired. "Make-do measures" may be necessary in mid-summer, but in winter do a proper job! For example if you have a roof warped and looking horrible and leaking like a sieve, remove nails, strip down, clean, sterilize, glue and re-tin. Don't bother with felt - it soon splits - but others do use it.

**Sterilization** is becoming a very big issue. In my view a gap has developed between the level and degree of sterilization an amateur (like me) can carry out, and the levels now dictated by the National Bee Unit. For example, it has been reported that American Foul Brood has re-appeared in equipment professionally scorched, because of non-destroyed spores in the wood. Nigel Semmence of the NBU at our Autumn Gathering suggested that all wooden equipment should be lightly singed: a process which in my view must cause damage to equipment in the long run, and it would seem may not disease-wise be totally effective. So with enormous personal displeasure (because of environmental concerns) I shall soak all equipment in a bleach bath for an hour or so (Nigel supports that), hoping that by then I can find an acceptable way of disposing of the insidious solution! If anyone has views on this, please can we share them. Until now I have cleaned interiors of broodboxes and supers using steam, boiling water or soda crystals: measures which may now be inadequate.

Anyone who has known me for longer than about five minutes will need no telling that I have hitherto been a passionate re-user of **brood frames**. You strip them down, sterilize with steam, re-wax and re-use. Because of the sterilization risks now emerging (and I can hear countless Association members saying "You silly fool, Beer, we told you so"), I am putting all my old frames and blackened wax which is not economically worth re-cycling, on to a large bonfire and burning the lot. From now onwards, until someone points me in some other direction, I shall not recycle or re-use brood frames but buy new.

This is the time of year to sort out your old **wax** and buy in new. Apart from blackened wax, all old wax goes into my electric wax extractor, come out sufficiently clean (after two separate runs) and is exchanged through the suppliers for new foundation. For small quantities use a bain marie. It is a messy, slow, unprofitable process, but at least I pay little (if anything) for new foundation.

Decide **how many colonies** of bees you want in 2014 (yes 2014!). You see there should be lots of opportunity if you have, say, two hives and want five, to create the increase during the year. For example, your bees are raising queen cells. Carry out a swarm control measure (more later), and from the swarmed colony, i.e. from the original hive, take out frame with a cell, attendant bees and frame of food and raise a queen from it. With care (more later) it can be made up into a good stock for winter. Don't just rely upon a fellow beekeeper to steer colonies in your direction.

A good **bedtime exercise**. Read the books, plan and have ready your swarm strategy, because I can guarantee that if you go unprepared into the apiary and find a stock on the point of swarming feisty on a cold May day, and with no equipment to hand, the decision-making process can become a wee bit difficult.

As always I am here to help. I forgot – Best wishes for a very happy New Year.

Andrew Beer