



# West Suffolk Beekeepers' Association

## NEWSLETTER March 2021

### WSBKA Officers and Committee for 2021/22

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The opinions expressed in this Newsletter are not necessarily those of the Editor, nor of the Association

**REMINDER: WSBKA Subscriptions were due by 7th March. Please contact Tim Slaven (see above) if you still need to renew your membership.**

### Notes from the Editor

During the lock-down I have taken the opportunity to catch up with reading many of the books and scientific papers that I have accumulated and not had enough time to read over the last few years.

One of these is 'The Ethics of Beekeeping' by John Whitaker, a beekeeper from Herefordshire and I have just finished reading it. I must admit, Mr Librarian, I have had this book since the beginning of the first lock-down! I thoroughly recommend it to both new and experienced beekeepers.

As John says at the outset, 'beekeeping is beset by choices and choice by its very nature can involve to a greater or lesser degree, ethics'. He does not set out to persuade us of the rightness or wrongness of one choice as opposed to another or

tell us what is right or wrong in beekeeping, but to lay out the ethical choices as they affect the beekeeper, the welfare of bees, other beekeepers and society in general.

The discussion ranges from honeybee nests as opposed to choices of man-made hive type, foundation and other technical innovations such as design of queen excluders that help the beekeeper, to more recent moves in the direction of 'natural' beekeeping.

Further chapters are devoted to how we handle bees, their nutrition, diseases, 'improvement' brought about by breeding and how we interact with and benefit other beekeepers - individually or within associations and further afield with neighbours, fellow citizens and farmers. Finally, how the activities and mores of wider society can affect honeybees and other pollinating insects and of course the economics.

All of these topics may not appear very new taken individually but I found the way that he discussed these subjects in a very short and readable text made for enjoyable and stimulatory reading. My taste may not suit everyone but I recommend it to members when the library is functioning normally again.

I did write to John to congratulate him and he replied very modestly and recommended Tom Sealey's book 'The Lives of Bees', which was published a few months after his. You may also have seen some of John's articles on similar issues in BBKA News.

### **Bee News**

A rare Australian bee species, the Cloak Bee (*Pharohylaeous lactiferous*), not sighted for a century, has been recorded and reported on in the Journal of Hymenoptera Research. Only six have ever been found, the last in 1926. It has suffered badly due to de-forestation and is especially vulnerable as it favours specific flowers of the *Protoaceae* and *Malvaceae* families only found in tropical or sub-tropical rain forest.

Only this week, but on this side of the world, the extremely rare Great Yellow Bumblebee was spotted in thick heathland at John of Groats. Previously, it had only been seen in the very north of the Highlands and the Islands of Scotland.

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The tide is turning now with lighter, if still often, grey skies. I am nailing up new Manley super frames (highly recommended by your retired President Philip Draycott) and lifts for WBC hives and after the very cold snap my bees are pushing out all of the dead bees and venturing out occasionally into the sun. I have done more work on my equipment than ever this winter and am looking forward to the new season. At least we, as beekeepers being responsible for livestock, were legally allowed to travel. Soon we will explode into action and then the period of rapid expansion will be on us. There has been a prolonged period of not only rain but also extreme cold and snow so I hope that we will not lose too many colonies.

### **Roger Merry**

## Chair's Report

I hope everyone is keeping well and the bees are looking good for the spring. After a cold first half of February and an unseasonably warm second half, the weather seems to have settled into a normal March. I would remind newer beekeepers that March is the month where we see most failures, because if our Varroa treatments were not effective, the parasitised winter bees die before they can raise new brood. March is the month where the bees are trying to feed brood before the spring flow and are very reliant on winter stores. Please check your hives and if they feel light when lifting one side (hefting), add some baker's fondant and check it regularly. While there are plenty of pollen sources, the first flowers to give a meaningful supply of nectar will be dandelions for most of us.

Thank you to all members who have renewed their membership. The new payments system is working well with nearly all members using it. Of your membership fee the bulk of this (£21) goes to the BBKA to cover your national membership and this covers the cost of running the BBKA, which includes your monthly magazine and your bee disease insurance and public liability insurance. We collect these funds for the BBKA and pay them on your behalf in two half-yearly amounts. We now need to pay the first amount for members who have renewed to the BBKA in the next few days. This means that members who don't renew now may have a break in their BBKA membership and insurance cover.

The committee will be meeting in early April to discuss the forthcoming year's activities, where we hope, subject to government restrictions, to be able to open the apiary in May and run our usual bee safari in July.

As many of you will know I am passionate about queen rearing and for UK beekeepers to be able to raise their own queens. It is the policy of the BBKA to discourage the importation of queens and the issues of bee viruses and pathogens are perhaps being made more real by our own experience of the pandemic. As I've mentioned in a separate article, I would like to help all beekeepers raise their own queens and overwinter at least 1 nucleus, even if starting with only one colony now. The hardest thing to do in beekeeping is to keep a single colony alive, but with two or more it becomes much easier. We all have winter losses and then queens who fail to mate, so it's useful to have a pre-prepared back-up plan. I aim to demonstrate through articles and videos how this can be done simply using my garden apiary, starting with a single colony and expanding to 2 colonies and a nucleus.

Speaking of winter losses, I'm pleased to report that after a particularly bad time last year, our winter losses are looking much lower, but I still need to check for drone laying queens, of which there are likely to be a few and as I mentioned, we are not through winter yet!

## Kevin the Bee Farmer

It has been pointed out to me that I've been rather ageist in my selection of beekeepers to chat about. Well, for this edition I have strayed from this image with a pen portrait of a younger model, Kevin Thorn (Plate 1) **Ed.**

As has been 'normal' in recent times I caught up 'virtually' with him on Facetime to talk about his life and how he got into beekeeping. Kevin (**Plate 1**) was born in York and went to Huntingdon school in a village on the outskirts. He joined Midland Bank at the time and did his degree through the Institute of Bankers. He later joined HSBC and was Area Manager for Norfolk and eventually for Essex and Suffolk.



Unlike many beekeepers, it wasn't family or friends that stimulated Kevin's interest in bees. In fact, it was only by chance that he caught the bug. One day he met a customer who ran three pubs around Halstead and, as many pubs have started to do, they had bought into the idea of provenance and were buying in beer direct from a small Belgian producer and had set up a small bakery and also an apiary where they produced honey for use in the pubs.

**Plate 1** Kevin working at home

He finished business on that day and just as he was leaving he mentioned that he had thought himself about keeping bees. Darren, the landlord, immediately asked him whether he would be interested in taking on a spare colony and Kevin went for it.



This was in August 2013 and he went away and ordered a WBC hive (**Plate 2** – it is now a decorative feature on his patio!) from a guy in Newcastle recommended by Darren who made them part time, and in his words 'bought a bee suit on Amazon' and he was 'ready to go'. A couple of weeks later Darren delivered the bees in a cardboard box and helped him to hive them and he was literally, in at the deep end.

Later Kevin joined the WSBKA and enrolled for Mike and Maureen Graystones' beginners' course at Troston Village Hall, where he met Tim Easting, one of our members and they became 'bee buddies' and worked closely together, with help from Philip Draycott and advice from Zac Blackmore and other people in the Association.

After about three seasons the business unit that Kevin was heading at HSBC was re-organised and he had the opportunity to take early retirement.

At this point he had six colonies, but by 2016 he had expanded to thirty-two, by collecting swarms and splitting colonies and was considering making it into a full-time business. After the initial experiment with WBCs he had switched to Commercial hives as recommended by Mike Graystone. However, in practice with Commercials he was only seeing six or seven seams of bees (they never seemed to fill up the box), so coupled with the problem of the extra weight of Commercials and the higher flexibility of Standard Nationals and with a little influence by Roger Patterson (more about him later), he switched to the latter. At this stage, at least technically, he became a bee farmer and joined the Bee Farming Association. At present, Kevin has 70 colonies and 30 nuclei. These are spread over 21 apiaries, with a mating apiary at Lavenham. The mating apiary has 60 mini nuclei and 13 of his other apiaries, all producing drones, surround it and are within a range of 1-5 miles.

Kevin is very much dedicated to improving his stock through natural selection of queens and more recently drones. In 2016 he joined the Bee Improvement and Bee Breeders Association (BIBBA) and volunteered to help Roger Patterson of Wisborough Green BKA, Surrey, promoting and organising his bee improvement courses around the UK. This led to Roger staying with Kevin and Julie when he was speaking in East Anglia. As a result of chats over dinner and listening to Roger speak many times this friendship has had a significant influence on Kevin's beekeeping. He became a Trustee of BIBBA, being responsible for helping groups of beekeepers around the country improve their stock, until stepping down last year to focus on his own growing bee business. In 2017 Kevin established the Abberton Native Bee project where in the season he spends his Saturdays. As a result of his involvement in the Abberton Group Kevin has regularly spoken about this and other honeybee topics across Eastern England.

In his incarnation as a Bee Farmer Kevin has invested in an impressive custom-made building divided into a Honey Kitchen, Storeroom and Workshop and with a range of new technologies such as an Apimelter, 2 x 20 frame extractors and 2 honey creamers. He is committed to producing at least 3 tonnes of honey/year, which he bottles, and it is sold to commercial outlets by his wife Julie.

Julie, who as he says was getting up at 5am and travelling and working full time, also as an area manager for HSBC, decided that she would resign and go in with Kevin. She has taken over their summerhouse and is making beeswax cosmetics and wraps and now employs one other person to do the production whilst she concentrates on selling.

A definite success story, but I would guess it was helped very much by both Kevin and Julie's banking and business experience. We wish them well in the future.

## **Roger Merry**

## Good News at Last

With any luck our Honey Show will be up and running again in September. The Pakenham Water Mill committee is hopeful that they are going to be able to hold the Annual Craft Festival on Sunday Sept 12 and we anticipate joining them there as before the pandemic.

## Offered Articles

### Treating varroa; vaporising with oxalic acid

Giles Youngs, the author of this article was concerned that he may be accused of preaching to the experts and assured me that this article is a summary of the subject and mainly for the benefit of beginners. **Ed.**

For my first twenty years of beekeeping I was blissfully unaware of the impending pandemic of *Varroa destructor*. Happy days! The following twenty-five years have seen us all struggle to control the mite - there are no eradication measures.

For the last 10-15 years, I have relied on oxalic acid (OA) for the mid-winter treatment of varroa. Until recently my early-autumn treatments have been thymol-based, as explained in a footnote. This organic substance (think rhubarb) does not enter capped brood - which is where most of the breeding varroa reside. That is why it is only used (see footnote for exception) in the broodless state i.e. mid-winter or for treating a swarm. As I understand it, the OA causes the mites to fall off the host bees and the mite-drop can be counted on the varroa board beneath the open-mesh floor.

For the first few years I applied the OA by trickling a solution of the crystals in-between the frames. This meant opening the hive for a few minutes, which did not always please the bees. I was never sure if the liquid reached all the bees, especially in a brood-and-a-half or double brood box.



More recently vaporising (vaping) or sublimating the OA has become increasingly popular - judging by reported practice on [beekeepingforum.co.uk](http://beekeepingforum.co.uk) . Thus I purchased a Varrox\*\*, and have found it very effective. The OA crystals are put into the pan which is then inserted through the hive entrance and the bulldog clips attached to a 12v battery. About 30 seconds later 'smoke' may be seen escaping from any gaps in the hive. The burn continues for 2.5

minutes and the pan is removed after a further two minutes. There are disadvantages to the Varrox:

1. It is expensive @ £125. There are cheaper versions advertised on line.
2. A 12v battery is needed. I drive my car as close as possible and attach the Varrox to the car battery via jump leads. For inaccessible hives I use a jump-start battery which will power about four burns (see **Plate 3**).
3. It is difficult to slide it in through very narrow hive entrances.
4. It may melt the wax and singe the frame immediately above. The alternative is to vape below the open-mesh floor but then some of the sublimate sticks to the mesh.
5. Protection is advised, even 'an apron as worn by mortuary attendants'! See the yellow box at the bottom of Dave Cushman's page. My own views are expressed in a foot-note.

I now rely on a GasVap. <https://bridge-cottage.com/store> . It costs £38 but additionally needs a butane torch and a face mask. The torch is ignited and the OA crystals applied via a small copper cup, as per the video on the link above.



If you have enough spare cups and pre-fill them it's possible to vape a hive every minute or so.

**Plate 4** The GasVap and mask

#### Disadvantages:

1. More protection is needed because the 'smoke' comes almost instantaneously while you are inserting the pipe into the hive entrance.
2. The pipe is too short for some poly hives so an extension is supplied. This inevitably tends to cool and the OA sublimate is prone to condense and block the pipe. A reamer is supplied for this.

I haven't mentioned a further disadvantage of the Varrox and GasVap. My hives sit on under-floor entrances, so I cannot insert the equipment into the body of the hive. The obvious alternative is to vape from below the open mesh floor but some of the sublimate will be wasted, as mentioned above. Alternatively, some of my floors have a trap-door at the rear through which the equipment can be inserted (**Plate 5**).



My latest ruse is to vape from the top of the hive - but surely the hot sublimate won't sink to bathe the lower combs? In fact it does: the sublimate is not a gas but is particulate and heavier than air. My reversible polycarbonate crown boards are suited to this process. The rim on one side is 7mm deep, that on the other side is 15mm, creating a shallow eke, which in winter is the lower aspect.

**Plate 5** Trap-door at the rear of an under-floor entrance.



I drill a hole through the 15mm rim, which will admit the GasVap pipe (**Plate 6**) I have no experience of the Sublimox\* vaporiser @ £390.

**Plate 6** The GasVap is approaching the not-very-visible hole in the crown board.

#### Notes:

1. Simple generic OA crystals, cheap as chips, are not approved by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate whereas the more expensive OA mixed with a sugar substrate is e.g. Apibioxal.
2. Protection when vaping: in my opinion the advice appended to Dave Cushman's site is excessive when using the Varro.
3. It takes at least 30 seconds for the smoke to appear, by which time I am several yards away upwind. For the GasVap I wear a mask with suitable filters (**Plate 4**) and goggles.
4. I stated above that OA must be used in a broodless period i.e. mid-winter. For two years now I have been using the GasVap for my late August treatment as well, rather than the customary thymol-based recipes. I follow the practice learnt from others: three vapes at five day intervals. This covers the whole of the mite reproduction cycle. My understanding is that Varroa does not become resistant to OA.

[\\*https://www.thorne.co.uk/index.php?route=product/product&filter\\_name=sublimox&product\\_id=7869](https://www.thorne.co.uk/index.php?route=product/product&filter_name=sublimox&product_id=7869)

\*\* <http://www.dave-cushman.net/bee/oxalictorne.html>

**Giles Youngs**

## **The sustainable apiary for small scale beekeepers**

### **Introduction**

Part of my winter listening was a zoom presentation by Mike Palmer on his method of sustainable beekeeping in Vermont USA. I had previously seen this as a YouTube video on the National Honey show website (still available with many other videos from key speakers). Mike produces all of his own queens and overwinters 300 nuclei to replace his winter losses. This, given his position geographically where six feet of snow often covers the hives, is quite an achievement. Most of the fellow beekeepers on the call, arranged by Cambridge BKA, were small beekeepers and it made me wonder how even the smallest beekeepers among us might manage a sustainable apiary using very simple methods. Many hobby beekeepers keep 1 or 2 colonies for interest and to produce a small amount of honey. If, however something goes wrong, they may not have the resources to recover the situation. The main risk is that a colony attempts to swarm and the new queen does not mate, or the colony does not survive the winter. Colonies can also develop diseases in the summer and perish. With this in mind, I have developed a simple model that will insure against the above events, which I'm confident will work. I want to demonstrate this and show others how this can be done over the coming seasons.

### **Aims**

1. To demonstrate a simple method of keeping a sustainable population of bees in a small apiary and raise queens for beekeepers' own use over a period of time, with the emphasis on using simple methods that anyone who has completed a beginners' course should be able to follow.
2. To start with a single hive with a last year's queen at its head, and produce an above average honey crop and one to three additional colonies to overwinter.
3. The long-term aim will be to have two full colonies and one or two nuclei to overwinter. Any excess bees can be sold or used to expand further.
4. Demonstrate that bees can be produced that will yield a cash surplus per hive per year.

I hope to demonstrate that it's not necessary to buy queens as they can be produced easily by all beekeepers with little cost and make beekeeping more rewarding from both a personal satisfaction point of view and also a financial one, if that's important.

If you are interested in joining me in this venture watch out for articles and videos that I will post on the WSBKA website

**Kevin Thorn**

## BBKA News

- 1) Information about this year's 'Virtual' BBKA Spring Convention (attachments w/eR2 in the title)
- 2) Help in responding to the Pesticide Consultation Review (see attached)
- 3) President's Letter 4 Feb'21 – update on the pesticides issue & announcement of a Judicial Review (see attached)

## Other Items

**Queen frame traps** (as seen on Steve Riley's talk to us about varroa-tolerant bees) They are expensive to buy (c £50 at Thornes), so Westerham BKA made their own based on a German design, which cost under £10. If you are interested have a look at the Westerham Beekeepers website for instructions and a video of one of the lead breeding groups in action! <https://westerham.kbka.org.uk/treatment-free-methods/>

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### Brandon in Bloom

Our community group, Brandon in Bloom, are launching a new volunteers' area called the Hive. Jane Corcoran and Lewis Turner are hoping to help organise and run a stall for this event and want to know if other members would like to take part. If so, contact [jane\\_corcoran@hotmail.com](mailto:jane_corcoran@hotmail.com)

BiB is also taking part in Britain in Bloom and our theme for 2021 is 'plight of the pollinators'. We will be planting pollinator friendly plants, highlighting issues with pesticides and weed killers, putting up bug boxes etc.

BiB will be having a launch event as soon as COVID19 restrictions allow and would love to have beekeepers there. If you have any bee and beeswax products, honey available to sell you would be very welcome to have a stall too.

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There is an online article in **The Apiarist** about creamed honey. Some of you may not be aware of this blog but there are often interesting articles on it <https://westerham.kbka.org.uk/treatment-free-methods/>

## For Sale, Free and Wanted

Nichola Biela has the following for sale:

WBC, National and Langstroth hives, new and previously owned. All hives are empty.

16-frame Fritz extractor with sieves and buckets, only been used once.

If interested, please phone Nicola on 07936 745192.

Is anyone interested in **free** back issues of BBKA News and Beecraft magazines dating from late 2016 before I recycle them?

**email** [francescawoodburn@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:francescawoodburn@yahoo.co.uk)

'Skepmaker needed! If you know one or make them and have any for sale, could you please contact Carol at [wsbka@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:wsbka@yahoo.co.uk).'