



NEWSLETTER

JUNE 2020

www.westdorsetbees.org.uk

More Ramblings

I do hope that you and your colonies are in good health.

I think in some places it has been a difficult year so far. A long, wet warm winter, then dry and warming up, then a spot of rain, dry and hot, then a very cold wind and frost, then warm and dry. At my out apiary the grass hasn't grown and in mid-May the cattle were still being fed hay and looking wintry. Nearby farmers are cutting short instead of long grass for silage. Also some tit (coal and blue) parent birds were coming very close to me looking for live food for their young; they must be desperate. Brian hardly saw any flies during his paddle on the Axe and I haven't seen much invertebrate life. I counted on one hand the number of days the bees weren't collecting water, so few big nectar flow days.

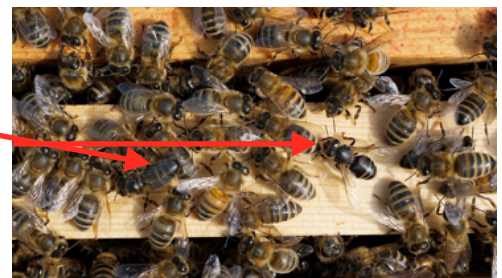
Some of my good colonies had dry brood, a sure sign of lack of income. Some colonies have built up strongly and will give some spring honey; others not, and even went back, with neglected brood and sac brood. Have you too had some small colonies that came through the winter and aren't building up? Kevin has seen a number. Was this a once-in-30-years event, or is it a sign of what is to come? Were those colonies just not killed off by a cold winter, or was it the damp causing unhealthy brood, poor brood production in the autumn or something else? Mine all have low varroa counts and plenty of stores and the queens looked great and were laying well. I suspect some just didn't have enough income to produce good quality nurse bees. Whatever the cause, "don't nurse small colonies" and "keep strong, healthy colonies" are two good sayings to bear in mind. The question is: were the colonies small as a result of what the beekeeper did or didn't do? I tried feeding two barely surviving ones of mine and also one of Brian's to see what happened; I am still a learner beekeeper. We were gobsmacked. A week later, one after taking six pints of syrup and another two pints, instead of us wondering if we needed to petrol them because of all the neglected brood, both colonies were expanding and the new brood looked plump and well fed. The other, which I have been feeding for three weeks, always had healthy brood and is looking stronger. I will requeen her with a daughter from a really nice colony some time.

I am seriously thinking of removing any queens showing Italian-type breeding, ie brood production before storing honey. I am also going to be firmer and reduce my number of colonies. The forage just isn't out there for them near my apiaries, probably along with too much pesticide pollution and intensive dairy production.

I have been having a problem with the odd persistent pestering bee at both my apiaries. They buzz round my head and follow. The main difficulty is determining which hive they come from. It also doesn't happen all the time. Why? Is it the weather, too many colonies in the apiary, a problem in a colony, which side of the bed the bee got out of, did she have a snoring bee next to her, was she the daughter of pesky-natured drone, so might the queen move on to the sperm from a better drone? No idea, and I still can't figure it out. I think the most likely answer is stress from their environment, other colonies and lack of income. The problem is that bees can teach and learn. Some beekeepers know from experience that if they have ill-mannered bees in their apiary, the other colonies may well learn to be a pain too.



You probably saw in the papers that chronic bee paralysis virus is widespread, especially among professional beekeepers. The majority of mine have it to a very minor extent. One of my nicest colonies had it quite badly, with lots of dead and dying bees on the slab in front of the hive and some seen on the top bars. The bees look odd, as they are hairless. They look shiny, with more definite colours. Others shake and quiver. It may be spread by the virus stimulating infected bees to de-hair others who then get infected by contact with the infected bees in confined spaces. It gets into the bees via the entrance left by the broken-off hair. I have narrow spacers on rather than Hoffmans as this gives the bees more space between the combs, so hopefully meaning less contact. As my nice colony lost so many of her workforce she took time to build up. I fed her garlic syrup 'a la Clare Densley' (the Sec. has the recipe and I have some available powder). I am pleased to report that the colony is now thriving with lots of healthy brood, and though she's not heavy, her weight is improving. On 7th May the hive smelt of May, a lovely honey -- but none for me from this colony this year!



A question for you: do you follow the common advice to choose one or two open queen cells and destroy all the rest? If so why? Have you ever thought to question this advice? One is advised to choose unsealed ones as then you know there is a larva in there. My question is: how do you know it is healthy? Can you spot a genetic defect, a malformation, a black queen virus infection etc? Do you not perhaps think that maybe the bees can? Perhaps they might be able to choose a queen with the most diverse genes? You are told that if you do this, they won't cast; sometimes quite true. They may of course build another queen cell or two and then cast. I do my variation of a Heddon (I shake some young bees in with the queen) and split the brood and queen cells between two hives/nucs and give them enough stores, but not an excessive amount, so they won't have enough honey to start up a new home so don't cast. Maybe it is a case of reduced income so the workers don't chance it? The only time I have had one cast was when I fed syrup before virgin hatching.

Research tells us that bees learn and can teach. We know that bees make decisions about everything that goes on in their world, including foraging behaviour, a new nest site, drone brood production, queen laying rate, queen suitability etc, so perhaps queen cell choice would be natural too. Why do you think they make so many queen cells in preparation for swarming and also, yes, fewer but usually more than one for supersedure or for emergencies?

Female humans are born with about a million eggs, a heifer calf with several hundred thousand. Most humans and cows have fewer than 20 offspring, so why so many eggs? I was taught that the miracle is that an offspring gets born alive at all, especially a healthy one. There is just so much that can go wrong, from fertilization of a single celled egg to the birth of the multi-celled offspring. The same surely applies to the production of a virgin queen. If you inspect between doing an artificial swarm and the emergence of the first virgin you will most likely find that many colonies have reduced the number of queen cells. Now were these defective/not ideal or were the bees just randomly reducing them? I believe bees do things for a reason; I think they choose to remove those cells.

We know so little about honeybees and yet we play God with their reproduction and give them a choice of one or two cells. Why do we think we know what is best for them? They've been around much longer than us, millions of years. Why not let the bees do their thing and choose the two queens (one from each half) they decide on. Usually, if the colony isn't diseased, both will be healthy.

Beekeepers say: "oh, too many colonies. I only want one virgin, not two." Surely they are forgetting those who have lost bees, or beginners who want bees? Why are colonies so expensive? It's surely all about supply and demand. Yes, a nice overwintered one requires rental property and beekeeper care and attention for a long time, but spring/early summer nucs? It would be so much kinder to beginners to let them start with a nuc from a good-tempered, non-swarmy, local colony rather than with a swarm that could be anything. I believe like a lot of others that swarms need to be assessed before going to beginners. The health status, manners, swarminess etc should be judged first before handing them over. Those not suitable can be requeened by one of those nice young queens your colonies have produced.

Do remember to leave enough honey on the bees if you are taking some off. "Mind the gap," as the railways say; the forage plants could have a June one. So maybe, as for some people during this pandemic, income will be in short supply for our *Apis mellifera* tenants.

My best wishes to you and your bees.

Kindly by Sarah More

How much do *you* know about your honey?

Every year I try to attempt at least something new with my beekeeping. Last year I decided to join the National Honey Monitoring Scheme. This would have the benefit of helping research by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) and hopefully help me to better understand the constituents of my honey.

I was sent two test tubes to fill from recently capped comb on the same hive to include cappings and nectar. These are then sent to the laboratory in Wallingford for analysis.

I sent off my samples in the middle of August (they like you to send them twice a year). The results came back in early January.

The results include a reading of the sugar content (measured in °Brix - mine was 81%), the density (specific gravity) and the moisture content 18%. Honey should have less than 20% moisture as greater than this leads to fermentation. All their measures were with a hand held refractometer — so no more accurate than the one I have at home.

With an avenue of 50 lime trees next to my apiary I was expecting a high percentage of lime in the analysis. Lime only just made the top 20 with a negligible percentage. How might this be?

The top three percentages accounting for over 95% were bramble (60%) white clover (25%) and brassica (turnip, cabbage and rape) the balance. I am not even aware of nearby farmers growing turnip and cabbage — the rape might be left over from the spring flow.

The simple explanation about the lime is that these were in flower in the first two weeks of July so as I added supers between mid July and mid August the lime honey was left further from the brood and I took my samples from later frames.

So my food (or nectar) for thought is — how consistent is the blend of honey I sell since I fill storage tubs as I extract the supers? One Langstroth super usually fills a 15kg storage tub. So the answer is — probably not very!

Kindly by Michael Gates

<https://honey-monitoring.ac.uk/>

<https://www.facebook.com/fhhoney/videos/701710303586997/?t=0>



Delicious Dorset Turnip Honey!

Like Michael, my honey monitoring results had some surprises.

I sent two samples last year. The first was collected on the 5th of May from the initial super filled by an overwintered nucleus from the previous year. The super had foundation in the frames and the colony had been fed sugar syrup the previous autumn so I thought this would minimise contamination. They filled the super very quickly in late April. This honey had a moisture content of 16.6%. Pollen DNA was detected from 13 different plants, the most common of which — 35% of the sample — was.....turnip!



Not what I was expecting and I couldn't work out why turnips would be flowering in April and May. Some detective work discovered that a local farm leaves turnips and cabbage, grown as livestock fodder, in the ground over winter, which then flowers in the spring. Cabbage was the next most common plant and dandelion the third. The honey was lovely but crystallised very quickly. I decided that a picture of a turnip on the jar label would not be an attractive selling point!

The second sample was collected as late as possible on 28th August from a colony which had started to put stores into new comb in the brood box. This had a much higher water content than the May sample — 20% and the DNA from 37 plants was found in the sample. White clover (40%) Himalayan balsam (24%) and bramble (23%) were the most common but there was a whole range of wild and garden plants in tiny amounts, including *Ilex perado*, a rare Madeiran holly. I am still trying to find out which of my neighbours is growing this in their garden.

Sadly, the pandemic restrictions mean that the Centre can't receive samples at the present but we can still collect them and keep them until they are able to restart work on the project.

I plan to take samples this year from a super that a swarm filled in mid May and from a colony in the middle of a wildflower meadow in July.

Kindly by Carole Astbury



Apiary Update - May 2020

The Apiary Management Committee has continued to check the Apiary bees in two teams of two “socially distanced” beekeepers. It has been a busy month in which we started with five queen-right colonies and ended with four of the original queens, three new queens and over 100lb of honey.

Three of the colonies have still not shown any sign of making swarm preparations. The other two produced queen cells in April and from these we now have three new laying queens and one hive in which we are still waiting to see eggs.

One colony, number 4 has always been more reactive than the others and last year every time she was checked with students we were surrounded by clouds of bees. This year we decided to cull the queen as they were becoming progressively more unpleasant to inspect. We are considering whether to let this colony produce daughter queens or whether to combine it with one of the weaker splits from another colony.

The vertical swarm manipulation on Colony 8 appears to have been successful and we now have a new queen and a potential new queen in two separate hives. No more need for stepladders!

Colony 2 has been particularly prolific and had reached the limit of five supers which could be safely lifted. Over the last two weeks of May we have taken off a total of six supers of honey from all the hives, with more to come as the bees seem to be slow to cap their stores this year. Carole Brown has again kindly done all the extraction for us in her conservatory.

We had a friendly little visitor at our last Apiary session but she disappeared once the hives were open!

WDBKA AMC



BRIAN'S OBSERVATIONS

Waiting for a hive to settle down so that I could close them up prior to moving them, I became bored waiting for them to go to bed and tried gently smoking them in. In actual fact even more came out to see what was going on, so then I tried a warm water spray and like magic.

They all shook themselves and went inside to shelter from the rain!

You do need to know that spraying makes it tricky to stick duct tape over the entrance, but if you push tissue etc in quickly you can wipe the hive dry and tape it up successfully .

Since trying this out I now use a gentle warm water spray instead of a smoker for a lot of my inspections, not every time but a useful alternative to smoking. Well worth trying.



I try to use different coloured gloves for different apiaries. My son James (who is colour-blind) bought me some new pink gloves thinking they were dark, and interestingly I seem to get a lot of undeserved stings when wearing them rather than my usual blue or yellow gloves. Thinking about it, we know that bees don't like black gloves and as bees don't see the red end of the spectrum, they probably see these gloves as black and attack them. At great personal cost I have tried them on different hives and definitely get stung more and for no good reason when wearing them so have now retired them!



Kindly by Brian Godfrey

HIRE OF HONEY EXTRACTORS

If you wish to hire one of the two honey extractors, please contact
Liz Moxom Tel 01308 485504

Chris Thompson Tel 01300 341888 who has a spare one to lend.



When hiring an extractor please be mindful of others wishing to use it,
so do have your supers ready for extracting and return the extractor to
Liz and Chris clean as soon as you have finished with it.

Best way of cleaning the extractor is with cold water.

2020 EFB - European Foul Brood

This disease sadly has been found again in South Somerset — so, especially
for those on the Dorset border, please be vigilant when inspecting your bees.
If you have any suspicions please notify Kevin Pope our SBI
on Mobile 07775 119 466

MARKING A QUEEN

A simple easy way of marking a queen is using this plunger

2020 the colour for queens is **BLUE**



Asian Hornet Link worth looking at:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/345541099280201/permalink/886363428531296/>

Varroa Treatments

There will be a bulk order for the different treatments to choose from in the next month's Newsletter — Terry Knight is seeking out the best prices for us.

NO EVENTS FOR WEST DORSET BKA

ARRANGED FOR 2020 AT PRESENT DUE TO COVID-19

BUT AS SOON AS RULES CHANGE REGARDING GROUPS

WATCH THIS SPACE & EMAILS