

Combing

The newsletter of the York and District
Beekeepers Association.

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“Combings” is the newsletter of the York & District Beekeepers Association. Views expressed in the newsletter are those of the individual contributors and not necessarily those of the Association as a whole or of the editor.

Contributions to, and comments on “Combings” are always welcome. I would particularly appreciate your pictures for “Reader’s Hives”.

Please send any copy or comments to: Combings@gmail.com

Combings Editor: Kate Wallace

Combings is published quarterly.

Please note that the last date for copy for the next edition is:

18th November 2014.

One Ed.

Hopefully you have had a successful and enjoyable season and maybe you have some honey, wax, mead or photos to put into the YDBKA Honey Show in November. There will be a novice class so all those who started up this year, here is your chance!

There are important matters to be discussed at the AGM so please make the effort to attend on 15th October.

I have had a colony outside my kitchen window this season – a swarm that arrived in May, as I had weekend visitors and no spare isolation site at the time, I left it in the spare kit it has chosen for its new home. It wasn’t a huge swarm but they

have done well enough to produce two full supers and even importantly have left me alone on my way to the compost bin! It has been a very interesting and educational experience; I even got to witness the eviction of the drones. It was fascinating, drones en masse make a lot of noise and they were clearly not expecting this rejection as they kept going back in!

From the Chair

15,000 bees seems a lot of bees to many but it is a significant figure for beekeepers. It is similar to a critical mass in a nuclear reactive material. Above this mass of nuclear material, a chain reaction may occur with powerful results but below this, the material is pretty inert. A colony in September below this number is also inert as there is insufficient combined bee respiration to generate the heat energy needed to get through a cold winter. Above 15,000 bees and with sufficient food reserves the colony should survive the winter, all things being equal, and be ready for spring.

In my diary I have a note for September 1st that reads 'start feeding the colonies'. Two of my colonies, however much food I give them, be it commercial or home-made, will not get through. They are too small; only 3 or 4 frames of brood in July. In one colony, during an inspection, Dhonn Atkinson said a bit of TLC was needed, which they got and ignored. In the other case, the old queen left in a late swarm and I doubt if the new queen will make it in time to build up to 15,000. As a retired science teacher, I accept the Darwinian idea of the 'survival of the fittest'. I have lost colonies before, as I guess many of you have. I believe it is the bees' way of survival and we are the problem. Late swarming is not in the bees' best interests and lazy queens need to go.

Clubs, Associations and Societies also have a critical mass and Y.D.B.K.A. is no exception. Our membership is currently above 150 but it was not always so. There were times when meetings were not so well attended and resources dwindled. With an increase of interest by the general public in environmental issues, beekeeping has once again become popular. The number attending our Beginners Course has steadily grown, generating, year on year, a valuable income. The Committee hope to publicly thank those who through patience and hard work have brought this about.

Y.D.B.K.A. is an essential part of the world of beekeeping offering advice and good practice to its members. It is incumbent upon us to carry on doing this, not just for our personal benefit but also for the environment in the long term. Organisational structures help to achieve this and at the top of ours is B.B.K.A.

A regional structure also exists with Y.B.K.A. being our regional association. At our next A.G.M. members are being invited to vote on whether to remain within the Y.B.K.A. for which there are advantages and disadvantages. In the last edition of Combings, members were offered the chance to air their views. Included in this edition of Combings is a ballot paper which you may bring to the A.G.M. on 15th October or post to the Secretary to reach him before that date. This procedure is to enable all members to have a vote without allowing some members to have multiple votes! In this way, all members get their say.

You may wonder why I have not expressed a personal view in this matter. Your Committee elected me as Chair and I see that role as enabling the group to work effectively rather than to influence their decisions. Some Committee members are strongly for our leaving the Y.B.K.A. whilst others are less sure. Similar views are held by non-committee members and I would like to see a democratic decision taken. I understand we have

been here before and may well re-visit it in the future. So please use your vote.

Our membership is well above a critical mass, we are in a healthy financial position and we have plenty of resources for you to use. Whatever the result, Y.D.B.K.A. has had a good few years thanks to former Committees and looks to have plenty more in the future.

Paul Taylor

Book review

Alan has been reading one of Ron Brown's books from some years ago.

I generally find it hard to get excited about the more modern bee books: many of these are poorly printed or badly written. They can simply be a re-hash of existing works (often copying the earlier mistakes) or take a hippy/organic/"natural" stance where a more diligent, studied approach would be better suited. Having got that off my chest, this prejudice sometimes results in me overlooking some genuinely good modern books which do appear from time to time, and I have found a really good one from the '80s, that's recently been reprinted.

The author, Ron Brown OBE is perhaps best known for his work "Beeswax" but has written various other books, including the one which I've only belatedly discovered, "Beekeeping – a seasonal guide". It's a hardback book (which in itself is a pleasant change) of about 200 pages, and as the title suggests is divided into spring, summer, autumn and winter work. In itself that's is not unusual – quite a few books are so organised: where it does vary from most is that it is further sub-divided into tasks for beginners, improvers and experienced beekeepers. In that way, the author is able to include sections as varied as setting up ones first apiary to the use of Taranov boards, queen banks and mead making.

It is clearly written by an experienced, practical beekeeper – he'd already kept bees for 30 years when the first edition was published and he provides a series of elegant, alternative thought-provoking manipulations for most situations. The work, however, is not perfect – but which book is? The 1985 edition mentions varroa as a mere "threat on the horizon" and the updated version gives only the briefest of coverage to the problem. He also suggest the use of carpet pieces as insulation to keep the brood warm, which I think serves only to harbour damp and disease. But these are only minor criticisms in an otherwise excellent work which has rightly been described as a "modern classic".

It scores a solid 9/10 on the very scientific AJ Book Rating Score. At £17.00 it's not cheap but it's a worthy addition to one's bookshelf. Available from Thornes and Northern Bee Books.

From the inspectors

Thanks to Dhonn Atkinson for his report on the season from a bee-health perspective.

On the whole it's been a quiet season with regard to disease in our area.

We are now starting to see a steady build- up of varroa in hives and once again urge beekeepers to keep them under control.

Dhonn also sent in a couple of pictures but you'll have to wait until the next issue of "Combings" to see the honey he will not be putting in any honey show!

Dhonn was delighted that the balsam bash missed this area.



A short visit to Malta

Many thanks to Christopher Clayton who sent this article – and this edition's front page picture.

On a sun baked hill in Malta one of the oldest apiaries in the world that is still intact may be seen. The apiary is at Mgiebah, a historic site in Xemxija. The bus can be taken to the small settlement of Xemxija and it is a short walk up the old Roman road and may be seen on the right. There are two other apiaries nearby but not in such good condition. The apiary dates from Roman or possibly Phoenician times and was rented out by the owner. Bees were taken in in clay pots to be released through the openings seen in the photo. The bees feed on thyme and mint, and the apiaries face south for warmth. But what about the means of securing the bees? A swarm would be placed in a clay cylinder, with small holes at the front and then sealed at the open end with a piece of close fitting wood or possibly a tile. The Maltese used to catch

swarms in them in recent times before box hives by luring them in with a mixture of wax, lemon and honey smeared on the inside and leaving them around. If you go through the tiny doorway (I am 6' and had to crouch) the interior opens up to reveal the photo below.



I originally thought the hives or clay cylinders were in incredible condition, but these have been placed by the tourist authorities to show how the hives worked. You can see light from the outside through the small holes at the end of the pot, and the end nearest would have been sealed. The Roman versions might have been held in place with a dab of mud or mortar, they would not have been heavily mortared in as these are, the whole idea after all is to get the hive out to extract honeycomb, and doing this in an enclosed small space in the interior of the bee room in the rock with hundreds of angry bees filling the air is not credible, so they would have been carried out. The land seemed brown and dry when we went in early July, but this is

still thyme season, with spring for clover and autumn for carob honey.

Maltese beekeepers have the same problems as everyone else, with varroa, *N. ceranae* (treated with Nosevit, a natural product from oak bark made in Croatia, and also fed pollen substitute), and AFB and EFB monitoring. Well worth a visit, especially as the Maltese people are friendly and helpful.

Fuller's Earth

John's bees have been walking the wires.

This frame was chewed up by my bees during a period of drought, earlier this year. You will notice how the bees have followed the



wires both diagonally and horizontally. I would like to think that they used the wax elsewhere in the hive! The frame is a 14 x 12 that I favour.

Autumn varroa treatment

We have been reminded by our Inspector that treatment is needed. Use the effective treatment of your choice but please ensure you use something! If in doubt, please ask. The NBU webpage has lots of useful advice.

<https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/>

To Remain or Not to Remain in the YBKA – That is the Question!

For a number of years we as an Association have been paying our yearly dues to the Yorkshire Beekeepers' Association (this is a separate capitation to the one we pay to the BBKA for every member and is currently £3 per head) without perhaps really understanding why. When the question was raised in committee towards the beginning of this year, there was a lot of scratching of heads, ponderings and suppositions but none of us could say with any degree of certainty why we paid out somewhere between £300-£450 every year to an organisation that did not appear to give much, if anything in return. Most of us thought it was to do with the cost of the public liability insurance, some of us thought it was to do with YBKA education programme whilst others thought it was their free newsletter. So we set about trying to find out what the benefits were to our members and how we could justify spending this sort of money each year.

When the committee met again, each of us having researched the question, it became apparent that there was very little obvious benefit to our Association and so this gave rise to the question whether we should remain affiliated to the YBKA. Accordingly, we invited Bob Hunter, the YBKA Treasurer to come and speak at our Half Yearly Meeting and to present the YBKA's case for us to remain a member.

Those of you who attended the meeting probably went away believing that there was one very good reason to remain within the YBKA and that was the discounted price for wax

foundation. The sums were easy to do and the savings on the cost of foundation clearly were more than the £3 per member capitation fee.

The claims made by the YBKA as to the benefits they offer can be measured as follows:-

- The discounted wax foundation actually costs you £3 and your Association between £300-£450 per annum. It is not known how many of our members take advantage of this offer [The number is available and is usually between 20 - 30 members, Ed.]
- There is a monthly newsletter which is free but can only be circulated via email
- There is an Annual Conference with leading guest speakers for which members pay a subsidised rate. However there is no non-member rate to compare the cost benefit. There were only half a dozen of our members at this year's conference so it is clearly not a popular event in our programme
- There is a continuous education programme which members may or may not have to pay for. Your Association is currently addressing all of our members' training needs and the BBKA exams are not the obvious solution
- Members are allowed to sell honey at the Great Yorkshire Show but a percentage is paid to the YBKA for granting this facility. Again, it is not known how many of our members take advantage of this offer

So now we know we are a little clearer on what the YBKA is able to offer us.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the YBKA recently revamping its website, there are no such claims to any of these member benefits.

Having also read the statement by Tony Jefferson (YBKA Chairman) in Combings, I, along with other members of the

committee are of the view that most of what he says does not amount to anything at all. Indeed, it is either irrelevant or incorrect. His comment about Gift Aid is factually incorrect because our Association sees to the reclaiming of the tax entirely and the YBKA has nothing whatsoever to do with it.

In the last edition of Combings your Chairman Paul Taylor appealed for anybody to write to or email me expressing their own views on this subject, so that we could publish these views in this edition of Combings. The only communication I have seen relevant to this matter is from a longstanding member who makes some valid points about remaining in the YBKA. His main point was the savings he could demonstrate when taking advantage of the discounted wax foundation. However I have received no responses from anyone else and so I take this to mean that most of you are perhaps "sitting on the fence" and unclear as to which is the best way forward.

Some years ago Harrogate & Ripon BKA decided to leave the YBKA. They became affiliated to the BBKA to enable them to continue to enjoy the benefits which are:-

- Bee Disease Insurance including Public Liability cover for up to 3 Hives [BDI is currently unavailable to YDBKA due to the incidence of EFB in the area over the last few years, as explained by BDI at a previous AGM. Ed.]
- Monthly Newsletter
- Access to a Members' only section of website which offers a whole host of benefits and in particular some very attractive discounts on essential beekeeping items
- Bee Base – an early warning system managed by the NBU alerting you to outbreaks of disease in your area as well as important notifications and advice [NB. Beebase is wholly owned and run by NBU and is available to all, not just BBKA members. Ed]
- Extensive educational programmes & libraries of slides and videos for hire

- Discussion forum
- Speaker directory
- Plenty of tips and hints as well as brochures and information leaflets to download

Of course, we as members of the BBKA also enjoy these same benefits and we have been advised by the BBKA that we will continue to do so even if we decide to leave the YBKA and apply directly to become a member association. Your committee would plan to do this because it would see considerable benefit from the £18 capitation fee we currently and would continue to pay to the BBKA.

At this point you should be aware that in the past few weeks, your Association has negotiated, in its own right, an equally attractive discount scheme with Thornes. So in the event that we decide to leave the YBKA, we can continue to enjoy the same discounts on wax foundation (as well as many other essential items) that we already have but in future we would also have the benefit of not parting with a capitation fee to the YBKA. So there will be a real benefit because not only will we have discounted wax foundation but also we will not have to pay the YBKA for it! Full details of these discounts will be published shortly but they are confirmed as being on offer to us.

In my position as your Secretary, as well as regional delegate of the YBKA, I attended the first Annual Delegate Meeting of the YBKA under its new constitution to try to understand what they stood for and how they could be of benefit to your Association. Many of you will know that the YBKA changed their constitution at the end of last year to enable them to make decisions based on what their members associations wanted them to do, so I was informed. At the time this struck me as odd because I would have thought that regional associations were there to facilitate and enable the directives of the BBKA. Tail wagging dog springs to mind. I felt that I took an active part in the meeting, constantly questioning the strategy of how

the YBKA could deliver what its members wanted when they admitted they would not be able to arrive at any decisions for at least 12 months because they had inherited so much baggage from the previous constitution! And so it was that at the end of a very long day, I came away with nothing positive to report to your committee other than several of the other associations had expressed their frustration to me throughout the day. It seems to me that as an organisation, the YBKA currently lacks any kind of focus or direction.

My view today would be, if I was asked to cast my vote, in the light of these uncertain and tremendous changes going on in the YBKA, to leave well alone, step aside, bide one's time and see what develops – and in the meantime pocket the extra £3

André Scruton, Association Secretary

Thank you to Nigel Davies for his point of view:

I raised the question at one of our committee meetings. I felt as a committee member it was important to verify that any monies we spend result in value for money, and I found it difficult to see where we were getting the value.

I raised the question in a way which would allow all interested parties to express a view and for the association to decide the outcome at the AGM.

Having read the statement by Tony Jefferson I would like to make the following comments.

We have been in touch with the BBKA and there would be no problem with York District joining the BBKA as an individual association. There would be no break in the insurance.

(His comments are factually incorrect, almost verging on a form of veiled threat or a form of blackmail)

I have caused enquiries to be made at Thornes about the foundation offer. We would get the same level of discount on foundation and a great number of other items such as frames, hive parts, etc. etc.

We claim Gift Aid, this was organised by John Thompson with no contribution by Yorkshire Beekeepers.

Many of the other points he makes have had little or no relevance to my experiences as a beekeeper.

Over the years I have been a member of York District Beekeepers, Yorkshire Beekeepers has received a substantial amount in capitation payments with little to show in return. The prospect of our association leaving them has not produced any initiatives which benefit our association or myself as an individual. I do not think they provide value for the payments we make to them.

Nigel Davies.

Thanks also to Alan Johnston for his thoughts:

Better together (for beekeepers)

I have decided to stand down as co-editor of "Combings" in order to preserve the editorial neutrality which Kate and I have tried to achieve over the last few years. This has freed me to respond to what I feared was going to be an inexorable sleep-walk into separation from the County set-up, and more.

Let's get the courtesies out of the way at the outset. Having served on the Committee, and performed other non-committee tasks for more years than I care to recall, I am fully aware of how much unseen, unsung work is carried out by those who will be sitting at or around the "top-table" at the forthcoming AGM, and they deserve due credit for that.

The audience that they are going to be addressing on that evening, however, is unlikely to have the same profile as it did even ten years ago, Over the last four or five years, there has been a significant increase in people joining the craft, as

national publicity about bees has fired the imagination of an increasingly environmentally-aware population. This has been reflected in York & District beginners' classes; a few years ago there would have been six or eight people standing round hives at Murton; now there are three or four times that number spread between the sites at Murton and Bossall.

This influx of new members is to be welcomed; they are the future of the craft (the situation is far better than when I joined, when you felt that you were being assessed for membership of some Victorian men's club!) What it has done, however, is drastically alter the "experience profile" of the membership; a decade ago, a substantial number of the (active) membership, the committee and the educational tutors had a good 10+ years beekeeping experience. Many of them kept significant numbers of hives and collected large amounts of honey. They knew their business. The "experience-profile" was toward the "heavy-weight" end. Now, these heavy-weights have either passed away, left the association or are so dismayed about the running of YDBKA that they no longer attend or participate. The "experience profile" of those now pulling the strings has radically changed. The ten-year people, with twenty hives and a ton of honey – the experienced beekeepers are now few and far between in the committee or tutor lists. The Committee, with few exceptions, has become "light-weight" in experience, but retains the appearance of wisdom to an audience many of whom have even less experience than the committee. This position of the "one-eyed man in the land of the blind", carries substantial risks. Firstly there is the risk that large numbers of the relatively new membership will believe what the Committee says simply because it is the Committee that is saying it. They will ascribe

to the leaders experience and insight which they may not possess, many of them being only a few pages ahead of the membership in the "Beekeepers Training Manual". The forthcoming AGM motion to exit the County set-up may, I fear, be similarly regarded, the assumption being that is the Committee has suggested it then it is, de facto, a sound, experience-based proposal. I do not believe that this is the case, and will explain why in a moment.

The other major risk is to the long-term education and training of the ever-increasing number of beginners. More beginners mean more hives, more colonies and thus a greater risk to the reputation of the craft and to the health of the bee population. Increased membership brings increased risk, and, thus, a duty to ever more and better education. It requires an increased use of experienced and/or qualified tutors rather than having those light-in-experience teaching those who are even lighter.

The go-it-alone campaign has also pointed to our near neighbours of Harrogate & Ripon, who are not affiliated to the Yorkshire County set-up. They seem to believe that having a decent-sized membership and good intentions is all that we need to exit from the County organization. I can speak with some knowledge about the Harrogate set-up as I have also been a full member there for some five years, and have been on the receiving end of countless tutorials led by senior Harrogate members. The quality and number of their educational and management teams are far and away better than anything we have or can expect to have in York for the foreseeable future. They strongly encourage the sitting of the BBKA exams and provide tutoring specifically for them. So educationally and experientially strong are they, that they can

invite members from other neighbouring associations to attend their training courses. At the risk of offending the York management, Harrogate are quite simply in a different league, and some of those who aspire to York tutoring stardom would not be allowed to give any form of training to anyone yon side of the A1.

The separatists also repeatedly refer to the yearly foundation offer. I've been personally involved in organizing it for a few years now, but in truth it's no big deal. If the Committee want to arrange the ordering, collection and dispatch of members wax requirements, and can get a decent discount from Thornes then let them do so. We do not need to leave the County set-up for that to happen. Leaving the County would have long-term consequences far greater than a few pence off a sheet of wax.

I and others, most of whose names would mean nothing to the majority of the readership, have been attending County-organized lectures and training events for years and years. I would encourage our new faces to do the same. County organizers can attract speakers of national and even international standard and although some parts of the lectures may go over some of our heads, the cumulative effect of such exposure is to deepen and broaden our knowledge. Almost subconsciously, and drip-feeds its way down to newer members either in formal trainings sessions or when giving advice to others over tea and biscuits before an evening association meeting. I suppose we could sneak into County sessions as pay-on-the-door attendees, but if you expect to benefit directly or indirectly from a system, then it's only reasonable to help support that system. Three pounds a years,

for that's all it costs, doesn't seem a lot. And it's not just the County of Yorkshire that provides these educational jewels: I and other YDBKA members attend Northumberland/Durham and Lincolnshire County events. There is a nationwide network of County events, and we're being invited to back out of our own local organization. Had the Committee provided a parade of superstars to talk to us over the last few years, they might hold a bit more sway with me, but when we are reduced to watching a video at an association meeting because a speaker, any speaker, cannot be arranged, then one has to wonder about the wisdom of distancing oneself from a set-up which can organize national-standard speakers years in advance.

You may have no intentions of ever going to a County-organized lecture or training session, but if you once ask one of the older members for advice or opinion then remember where the answer may have originated. Even if only part of the reply is based on what he or she heard at County, then surely your £3 was well-spent. I do not want to be part of an Association which is becoming increasingly inward-looking and "light-weight". I want York to be an association which values and uses its experienced members whilst developing new tutors over time, using and supporting external systems necessary to supplement its own shortcomings. Future intakes of new beekeepers deserve a breadth of understanding and knowledge in its senior members which it is in danger of losing for ever

On previous experience, the majority of the 150 or so YDBKA members probably won't attend the AGM in October. You will however be sent a voting form asking you whether you want to pay £3 a year as part of your subs to stay within the County structure. I urge you to take a few minutes to tick the "I want to stay within the County structure" box, and post the letter

back to whoever wants it. Don't forget or throw it aside, for in doing so you will be contributing to our exit from something which I feel strongly should be supported. Vote to stay in; for £3 a year – less than the price of a pint of beer! – You can sustain a structure which can help improve a knowledge of bees and beekeeping for ourselves and future generations of York beekeepers. Better still, get yourselves to the AGM and put your hands up to stay in the County – a visible show of support for something bigger than an inward-looking "Little Yorkist" proposal. Much, much "Better together".

Alan Johnston

Feeding in the autumn

At the beginning of September we can start to top-up the reserves of our colonies by feeding sugar syrup at the strength of 2 lbs sugar to 1 pint of water (these measures are critical at this time of year, and are not the same as 2kg to 1 litre). Just as important is the autumn varroa treatment as numbers must be kept as low as possible – there are enough winter risks without adding a high varroa population to the mix. Treat now and consider oxalic acid treatment mid-winter as part of your Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

Famous Beekeepers – Thomas William Cowan

As part of an occasional series, Alan looks at the life and work of another famous beekeeper.

Those with even a passing interest in the history of beekeeping in the UK are likely to have heard of Cowan, even if the detail of his life may be not known to them.

There are certain features of his life and times which are repeated in every history of the craft. He was born and educated in Russia to an engineering father and aged 22 took over the family iron works in Kent. A few years later he became even wealthier when he married one Fanny Mitchell, who was

comfortably well-off herself. It was about this time that he took a fancy to beekeeping, having seen Woodbury's modern hives described in the Victorian "Journal of Horticulture". He bought some and started his first apiary. He joined the newly formed BBKA and, aged thirty-eight, was elected as chairman by a committee which recognised leadership, status and perhaps more importantly wealth. He was at the forefront of trying to move poor rural beekeepers ("cottagers") from the use of skeps and the sulphuring of bees for their honey, to the using the recently invented bar-frame hive. He was later heavily involved in the move to standardize frames and hive sizes resulting in the compromise which was to lead to the "National" hive still used today.

He wrote clearly and concisely and in 1881 wrote the first edition of the British Beekeepers Guide Book. It ran to twenty-five editions, the last issued in 1924. It was hugely influential spanning Victorian and Edwardian beekeeping. Further books on bee anatomy and wax craft added to his reputation. In 1887, he purchased and took editorial control of the British Bee Journal, which was used to drive the craft into a more enlightened, recognisably modern era. He initiated the basic, intermediate and advanced levels of beekeepers examination. All these are the well-known, flattering aspects of someone who was undoubtedly a well-to-do Victorian gentleman, talented, and in the right place at the right time. But there was another less well documented side to Cowan's character. He used his books and the magazine to unashamedly publicize his own inventions, hives and equipment: he expected and did win countless honey show prizes at a time when the exhibitor's name was allowed on entries. He was arrogant and vindictive. His long-running legal battle with his Irish counterpart, Rev, Digges is well-known. There was a dispute between the two over copyright and authorization of bee-book illustrations and Cowan, with a stronger financial footing threatened to drive Digges to bankruptcy. It was finally settled in Cowan's favour,

but Digges' "apology/letter of surrender" was said to hang on Cowan's office wall for years. He dealt with the other dissenting voices in like manner.

Robert Hawker's book "The enigma that was Thomas Cowan" lists an additional raft of unpleasant, racist, arrogant shortcomings from a man who undoubtedly moved British beekeeping forward to an incredible degree. A job needed doing and he did it, but it is right and proper that Hawker provides balance and objectivity to a British beekeeping legend who is normally portrayed as faultless.

Laying workers

There seems to have been a lot of it about this season!

This definition is from the website of the late Dave Cushman
<http://dave-cushman.net/bee/newhome.html>

Laying workers are caused if or when a hive becomes hopelessly queenless or queen and brood pheromones drop to negligible levels. Worker ovary development is normally suppressed by a combination of queen pheromone and brood pheromones, in the absence of a young and vigorous queen, the lack of (or lower level of) pheromones allows some workers to develop ovaries, these are not as well developed as a queen's ovaries would be, but can produce eggs. As there is no mating involved, all the eggs that are produced will be unfertilised and male (apart from the rare case of *Thelytoky*.)

The pheromones that prevent development of laying workers are brood recognition pheromones... In some cases, a failing queen is not superseded, and laying workers can develop in the presence of this queen. As the queen failure process is gradual the first few laying workers may develop just one ovariole to the state of being able to produce eggs, as the degeneration in the queen continues and there is less brood as well, then a

larger number of workers develop up to around a half a dozen active ovarioles (there are only about ten in a worker anyway). The process of laying worker development usually takes weeks to occur, but as this process is gradual it is rarely noticed in its early stages and is rapidly accelerated if the queen fails completely, so it is usually quoted as being a delay of seven days or so after queen failure/disappearance.

Identifying laying workers...

- Brood pattern is spotty. Laying worker eggs do not have any egg recognition pheromone that is normally deposited by a queen, as a result other workers will remove the eggs (worker policing). This results in a spotty brood pattern, with empty cells scattered throughout frames of capped brood.
- Number of eggs in a cell. Queen honey bees will in most cases lay only a one egg in a cell, but laying workers will lay multiple eggs per cell. Multiple eggs in a cell are not absolute proof of laying workers, because a newly mated queen may lay more than one egg per cell, in the early stages of laying.
- Position of egg within a cell. Position in the cell that the egg is laid, is a good indicator of whether it was laid by a queen or a laying worker. A queen's abdomen is significantly longer than that of a worker, allowing a queen to lay an egg at the bottom of the cell. A queen will usually lay an egg reasonably centred in the cell. However workers cannot reach the bottom of normal depth brood cells, and will lay eggs on the sides of the cell or off centre
- Drone Brood in Worker Cells. A good indicator of laying workers is drone brood in worker sized cells. Drones are normally raised in larger cells that are in patches that are all drone sized. Drones in worker cells (recognisable by bullet shaped cappings),

particularly if scattered, are a sign of a failing queen or laying workers.

Laying workers mostly occur in large numbers rather than singularly, if the conditions are right for them to develop at all.



Laying workers: Multiple eggs in one cell.

Early in the season the editor set up two nucs to receive new (and expensive...) queens. Despite setting up "by the book", each nuc killed their queen and went on to develop laying workers. These girls were good at it, some putting a single egg in the base of a cell but nonetheless there was no queen and all brood developed as drone. Finding a nearby colony with about to hatch swarm cells, as an experiment, I "ran in" a virgin queen to one hive and added a point-of-hatching cell to the other nuc. A check a week later found both queens wandering about, having been accepted, another week later both looked larger, so I guessed had been successfully mated.

Another week and neither were to be seen, one nuc had a queen cell with half a dozen eggs in it so the laying workers were not going to hand over to a real queen. End of experiment! Or so I thought.

I rarely rush my beekeeping so I just left both nucs whilst I had a think and found that a couple of inspections later both queens were up and running properly and in due course the two colonies will be united.

Alan's advice on uniting – just remember to health-check all colonies you want to unite first. If in doubt, ask!

Uniting – variations on a theme

As the 2014 cycle draws to an end, the same autumn tasks re-appear: uniting, feeding, queen right-ness, mice and wasps. It becomes part of the rhythm of the apiarist year.

Estimating forty pounds of stores or pinning on mouse-guards is relatively easy compared to the decision about which hives to unite. Those with fewer hives are understandably reluctant to reduce that number even further, even though they recognise the good sense in doing so. Fewer, bigger, stronger is always the way to go into winter.

The traditional method of uniting colonies - the "paper wedding" system - is fairly reliable but is not fool proof. Occasionally a large queenless aggressive colony will overwhelm a smaller queen right one, resulting in the killing of the queen. There can also be doubts about whether the queen less colony is really queenless. Are those eggs just from laying workers or from a newly-mated queen which simply cannot be found? Do you really want to take the risk and end up with a poorly mated nasty queen killing the nice one which you want to keep? Well, here's a variation on the uniting theme which I have used successfully three or four times this year.

For my own records, I've called it a drift/unite and it's based on a flying bee's instinct to return to the site which it knows as home. If have a good-tempered queen and colony which I want to unite to a large one of doubtful temperament, or possibly with laying workers, or with a virgin or newly-mated queen which I cannot find, I simply move the "nasty" hive at least six feet away and put the nice, queen-right one in its place. The flying bees from the "nasty" colony return home to find that home isn't there any longer – in its place is a queen-right unit which smells different and just isn't theirs. You'd

imagine that fighting would ensue, but it doesn't seem to happen. The "nasty" flyers simply integrate themselves into their new home, boosting its numbers, thankful of acceptance. After a week, most of the potentially difficult bees have relocated by themselves. Thereafter, move any frames of brood from nasty to nice, clearing them of all but nurse bees. If there is a queen in the "nasty" box, it will be far easier to find her amongst fewer bees and fewer frames. If you are still unsure whether there's a still a nasty queen about, simply shake the few remaining bees out and remove the old nasty hive to your storage shed. Any laying workers or hidden queens will have to take "pot luck" and rehouse themselves (queens trying to do so will be killed if they enter a queen-right hive).

We only usually make use of the "drift" response when artificially swarming/Pagden-ing colonies, or when equalizing colony strengths, again to reduce the likelihood of swarming. But most bee traits have multiple uses, and this drift/unite is a nice solution to an autumn problem.

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Top tip:

If you are leaving your bees with a super of honey over the winter, don't forget to remove the queen excluder to enable the cluster to move together. In the spring, to prevent the queen laying in the super either replace the excluder or remove the super when all the stores have been used.

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Did you know?

In the Middle Ages it was not uncommon for hives of bees to be left to a church, to provide beeswax for candles. In 1407 Henry Castilay of Bexley in Kent bequeathed his bees to the churchwardens of Bexley, the profit from them to be devoted towards maintaining three wax tapers in the church, ever burning, one before St. Mary in the chancel, another before St. Catherine and the third before St. Margaret.

Reader's hives

Anthony Day's bees have had a very good year on an allotment site. Anthony reports that by July he had already harvested 60lbs of honey, with the balsam yet to come!



It appears that the apiary is surrounded by bamboo but Anthony tells me it's rather less exotic – it is willow.