Combings

The newsletter of the York and District Beekeepers Association.

Issue No. 53

Spring 2015.

www.yorkbeekeepers.com

"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 May 2015.

One Ed.

By now all of us will have heard the sad news of the death of David Gray. David became our president last year and was a previous chairman. David was held in the highest regard and he will be sadly missed. His memorial service, held at the Friends Meeting House on 22 February was very well attended; a number of York beekeepers were there. Nigel Davies gives an appreciation of David's life on page 9.

Another winter (nearly) over and the report from the Bee Unit will let us know what the national winter losses have been. Whatever the losses, be vigilant, as March is a difficult month for bees; they can venture forth on a warm and sunny morning only to be caught out in a snow storm shortly afterwards. Be

ready to feed with fondant early in the month and thin syrup later on.

Janet Cole has been busy and she has provided YDBKA with a most interesting, full and varied calendar of events this year; very many thanks for that, Janet. We even have renowned Buckfast-strain queen-breeder Ged Marshall speaking at the 2015 AGM! You will find your copy of this year's programme included in the envelope with this issue of "Combings".

The Yorkshire BKA also has an excellent diary with this year's emphasis on practical bee keeping skills. We can all learn from the high-level trainers at these events, so I hope many of us will take advantage of these opportunities to improve our skills.

We have a large number of new members on this year's beginners course, which has already started with the winter theory sessions. Welcome to all of you.

You may have wondered why the front cover has a picture of birds. They are of course, bee-eaters and you can read Alan Johnston's article about them on page 7.

Christmas Competition result:

The winner of the competition is John Thompson

Members were invited to have a go at translating the ditty:

Jeton d'avril,

Vaut une brebis;

Jeton de mai,

Vaut une vache a lait

Jeton de juin,

Vaut un boisseau de grain.

Although possibly not the most literal translation (!), the winning entry from John Thompson reflects how we all feel in those "swarmy" years:

If they fly away in April

Take up a new colony

If they fly away in May

Take up a dairy farm

If they fly away in June

Take up drinking single malt

Well done, John, you will shortly receive of copy of Pam Gregory and Claire Waring's book "Green guide to bee keeping".

Fuller's Earth

John's account of this year's Oxalic Acid Demonstration, held at Murton on Sunday 18th January 2015. The demo was led by Alan Johnston, assisted by Kate Wallace and John Fuller.

There was a good turnout on a cold morning with a covering of snow on the ground - ideal conditions for treating bees with oxalic acid as the bees will be clustered, which makes it easier to apply the oxalic acid to the bodies of the bees.
Alan started off by explaining why it is necessary to treat bees at this time of the year. In the depths of winter there will be

very little brood to host the mites (the phoretic stage), or be affected by the acid; any varroa mites will be living on the adult bees, so making the mites susceptible to the oxalic treatment.

Oxalic acid in concentrated form can be dangerous, so Alan's recommendation was to buy it ready mixed, in liquid (syrup) form. It can be bought in quantities to treat from one hive upwards. Application is by syringe, at the rate of 5ml per seam of bees. We were shown various applicators, from simple syringes to a more sophisticated device with a bottle holding a litre of liquid, feeding an automatically refilling "gun".

Outside in the apiary, Alan took one colony, Kate the second and I took the third. Those present split themselves into three groups and each individual had a go at trickling oxalic acid onto a seam of bees.

Did you know?

The bees use propolis to seal up gaps and holes and can coat it over the woodwork inside the hive, like a varnish. Another use is in strengthening the comb. In the hive it helps to protect against moulds and other infections, as it did on the tree from where it originated.

Alan's thoughts have been on ornithological matters.

Merops – The Bee-eaters

There are some twenty-four species of bee-eater birds, their geographical distribution being primarily tropical and Old World. The majority look similar and are highly distinctive – green heads, dark eye-stripes, buff or green bodies, long tails and a long curved beak would cover most of them.

Their diet consists primarily of membranous winged insects – the hymenoptera – which includes the four main types of honey-bee (Apis mellifera, Apis dorsata, Apis cerana and Apis florea). The range of the birds, not surprisingly, initially matched the natural range of the bees, although beekeeper activity has now extended the bees range well beyond that of Merops.

Most of us are aware of the Egyptian hieroglyphs depicting bees and beekeeping activity, but the bee-eaters are also depicted there. One papyrus recommends that for certain female ailments, one should "…fumigate her eyes with the shanks of bee-eaters". Another suggests the use of bee-eater fat as an unguent. Much later, the birds are noted as bee pests in the natural history writings of Aristotle and Virgil.

The birds can take bees in full flight. I watched a pair in a Durham quarry (blown there from southern Europe by gale force winds, ten years ago) effortlessly taking slow-moving bumble bees. They often feed on hive bees however, by sitting on or around hives on dull days, picking off stragglers. The reaction of bee-keepers varies greatly between countries: some are content to leave them alone; others not, shooting or poisoning them or, bizarrely catching them on fishing lines suspended from trees, using hive bees as bait attached to fishing hooks. In other areas where beekeepers are troubled by wasps or hornets, the birds are actually welcomed as they also eat these bee predators.

Birds other than Merops also eat bees – in this country, great tits, swifts and swallows are well-known predators – but the bee-eaters have a unique way of removing bee stings prior to swallowing the insect. Bees are caught in the beak and taken back to a branch. The head is dashed against the branch until it is dead, and then its abdomen is rubbed back and forth until the sting is removed. The bird's eyes are kept closed during the

operation to avoid faecal and poison "splash", and then the bee is swallowed.

Perhaps as population and food requirements increase globally, the pressure to protect honey production and pollinator hives will result in greater persecution of the bee-eaters. It would be understandable, but a great shame. They are spectacular creatures – a pest in certain instances, but what a pest!

Did you know?

Many astigmatic mites associated with bees live on the hive floor, feeding on bee debris, dead insects and fungi growing there.

David Gray.

My thanks to Margaret Gray and Nigel Davies for sharing this with us.

David Burtt Gray, was born on 10 October 1931 at Holgate Hill, Nursing Home, York. David died on 9 January 2015 at the age of 84 years. He leaves a wife, Margaret, four children and eight grandchildren.

David's father, Donald, was the headmaster at Bootham School and the family lived at the headmaster's house in Bootham York. David was educated at a number of schools in the York area: Mount Junior School and York College for Girls (where they took infant boys). During the war, children were moved out of York and David went to Ampleforth School and Earnseed School near Carnforth, and then back to York's Bootham School. After finishing school, David was due to complete his National Service. However as a Quaker, he was a conscientious objector so instead of National Service, he joined the Friends

Ambulance Service, and served in Paris and Le Havre in France, followed by six months at Bradford Infirmary.

In 1952 he went to Merton College, Oxford University to study English.
1956 - He graduated and moved to Bradford Grammar School, where he taught English.
1959 – David and Margaret were married.
1960 - 1971 Saffron Walden Friends School, during which time he was seconded to Philadelphia in 1965 - 1966.
1971 - 1976 he taught at Richmond School.
1976 - He taught at Darlington College.
1977 – 1994 Woodbrook Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham
When David retired in 1994 he and Margaret returned to Richmond, North Yorkshire, before moving to York in 2006.

David started his beekeeping in 1978; he joined Birmingham Beekeepers, later joining Richmond Beekeepers and on moving to York, David joined York District Beekeepers. David took an active part in all of the associations, whilst in York he regularly helped with the beginners.
He became a York committee member, rising to become Chairman and at the time of his death he was President.

Margaret told me that he actively sought the opportunity to travel in relation to his Quaker roots and over the years he and Margaret travelled to New Zealand, Australia, Africa, Israel, Palestine, Malawi, Philadelphia, Seattle, San Francisco, to name just a few.
He was a lovely kind, gentle soul and he will be missed by many.

Nigel Davies.

Top tip.

How many supers do you need? The usual advice is to have three available per hive but not all colonies are equal, so some will need more and some less – be prepared! Add a super to provide space for rapidly expanding colonies in the spring as cramped quarters are likely to prompt swarming, although providing space isn't a guarantee of preventing it!

BBWear discount 2015

A note from our Treasurer, John Thompson.

BBwear have updated their discount structure and procedure for members who wish to purchase clothing from them; The following procedure should be followed:

- **Members need to contact BBwear directly, by telephone or email to place the order.** Orders placed on-line will not get the discounts, and discounts cannot be refunded after the order has been placed through the website.
- A discount of 20% off is on offer for all items in their clothing range, however free gloves are not included with the full suits. See website for product range.
- A 50% discount is offered on washable leather gloves or spats.
- Having contacted them with your order and told them you are a member, please email me to advise me that you are placing an order and I will confirm to them that you are a paid up member. They will then process your order.

BBwear, Unit NP1 Rosedene Farm, Threemilestone, Truro, Cornwall TR4 9AN Tel: 01872 562731

website: www.bbwear.co.uk

Ambrosia syrup for sale:

Alan Johnston and David Bough each have 12.5 kg containers of "Ambrosia" bee syrup for sale at £19.00.

Thanks to Janet Cole for this report of the BIBBA bee improvement day.

Leeds Beekeepers Association 17th January 2015 Roger Patterson of the Bee Improvement and Bee Breeders

Several YDBKA Members were amongst the 150 beekeepers attending this event.

Roger Patterson proved a relaxed and entertaining speaker and, with his dog Nell, soon formed a rapport with his audience. His underlying theme was very much the constant improvement of your bees. Although preference for one strain of bees over another was touched upon, this was lightly done and the message was very much decide what are the best bees for you, and direct your efforts towards making more of the sort of bees you do want and dispensing with the ones you don't.

The criteria for assessing bees might include:

- Temper
- Quietness on the comb
- Suitability for the locale
- Prolificacy
- Bees: brood ratio - are there plenty of nurses for the brood?
- Pollen variety - will the bees feed well from a variety of sources?

- Productivity

Then, observe your bees closely at each inspection. Don't just look for the queen: "read" the bees, assess which colonies meet your criteria and which do not. Mentally divide your colonies into an "A" and "B" group with a view to always retaining and improving those in the "A" group while re-queening or culling those in the "B" group. As a colony improves, for example through successful re-queening, it will move from one group to the other. This should be an ongoing process.
We were also introduced to the idea of PQN - peak queen cell number. Apparently this is the number of queen cells a particular colony will put up at the point of swarming. The same colony will be consistent: 10 this year, 8-12 next year. This is a good indicator of "swarminess" and can be used as a selection criterion. If some queen cells are removed, the bees will rebuild back up to PQN. The same applies to emergency queen cells where the queen is not present.

Once you have good queen cells, what can be done with them?

- Use a sealed queen cell from an "A" colony to re-queen a "B" colony (remove emergency queen cells from the "B" colony)
- Use an "A" queen to make up an artificial swarm
- If you have queen cells in "A" **and** "B" colonies, carry out the Pagden method (or equivalent) in one or both colonies. When you put in the new queen cells, mark their position to distinguish them from subsequent emergency cells.
- If uniting colonies, add a good queen cell before uniting them.
- Give some away

The lecturer thought it best that queens be mated where they will lay, to avoid dangers and to save time, but obviously this does not always happen.

The lecture closed with the reminder that bee improvement is not something to be carried out and then abandoned - it should be a continuous process based on careful and conscientious handling of the bees, good observation and good record keeping. BIBBA can help with tuition and will run 2-day courses for people wishing to take things to the next level.

Top tip:

Keep packs of foundation stored flat and at room temperature. In hot weather, however, foundation can be stored in the fridge until it is needed, which will keep it firm enough to work with, as long as you work quickly!

Early spring management

Thanks to Alan Johnston for the guide on how to manage this important part of the season.

As I write this, there is snow on the ground, but as you read it, spring will be approaching and we will all be hoping that our bees have survived the winter. Some will be, also, desperately trying to remember what they were taught at last year's beginners' course and will be anxious about taking the roofs off – so here's a Janet & John guide to early spring management.

Assuming that your hives were heavy, full of bees and queen-right going into winter, then there should be little to worry about at this time. Semi-dormant, the bees will have used only a small amount of food over winter; the risk of starvation increases with the resumption of egg-laying and brood rearing in spring. Starvation is far more likely in March than in

December and so if you don't already have fondant on, February/March is a good time to give a pack to the hives which feel light. I prefer feeding **under** the crown board, using an eke between the brood box and the crown board, placing the fondant on the top bars directly above the cluster. Don't begin feeding syrup until the bees are flying regularly enough to void the excess water.

Resist any temptation to start pulling out frames in February or early March. Excessive disturbance too early in the season can result in the bees balling the queen. A sharp rap on the side of the hive, however, can provide useful guidance. If all is well, an initial "buzz" will subside after second or two, with perhaps a guard bee or two appearing at the entrance: a queen-less colony, however, will hiss and then "roar", with some occupants investigating the source of the disturbance. Earmark such hives for early investigation, but action in February is likely to exacerbate any problem.

I tend to change my hive floors in late February/early March and in the last few seasons have exchanged the winter mesh floors for old-fashioned solid wooden ones, which stay on for 4-6 weeks. They help to retain the heat better at a time when the colonies are desperate to increase brood production. Clean mesh floors go back on in April for the rest of the season. Changing floors is more easily done by two persons rather than by one, with one lifting and the other swapping floors. Done correctly the bees shouldn't even notice any human activity. Put the mouse-guards back on; look for problems or signs of disease amongst the bees corpses on the mesh floor.

Bees flying and bringing in pollen is a good but not an absolute sign of well-being. Smaller, weaker colonies tend to fly earlier, of necessity, than larger, prosperous ones; be alert to this and be prepared to feed if required.

The first inspection is usually made about mid-March, but should be determined by the weather and not the calendar.

The purpose of this inspection should simply be to verify the state of the colony, and in particular the presence of adequate stores and its queen right-ness. Temperatures of 12^0-15^0 C should have prevailed for a few days. A glance down between the top bars will show how many frames are covered with bees and brood. Half a dozen frames so covered would be welcome. Anything less would invite further inspection, as would the presence of significant numbers of drones, suggesting a drone-laying queen.

Any queen-less colony should be united to a queen-right one of medium strength, through newspaper. A colony with a drone-laying queen should be similarly treated after de-queening.

If the colony is significantly short of food, redistribute unwanted food frames from other (health-checked) colonies, feed fondant or syrup, dependant on the whether the bees are flying regularly or not, or in emergencies, spray dilute sugar syrup directly onto the bees and the combs.

That should be about it for the first inspection. Contact more experienced beekeepers to confirm the start of weekly inspections. Get ready to provide your bees with a clean brood box to go with the clean floor, and decide whether you are going to replace a percentage of your old brood frames (minimum 3 or 4), or the whole lot in one go (Bailey frame change or shook swarm), but some must be changed. And remember to get the ladders out of the garage… swarming season is just a frame-change away!! Have a good season.

A date for your diary:

YDBKA annual auction of bees and equipment 23 May 2015 at Murton. Email auction@yorkbeekeepers.com

All bees for sale must be given a clean bill of health by the Bee Inspector before they are brought to Murton.

This article appeared in the Telegraph online on 9 February 2015:

Bee colonies collapse 'as stressed young workers grow up too fast'…

Phenomenon may be a factor behind colony collapse disorder, which has seen bee populations plummet around the world

Stressed young bees that are forced to grow up too fast could be a leading factor in disastrous declines in populations of the insects around the world, research suggests.

Bees usually begin foraging at two to three weeks old, but when older workers are killed off by disease, lack of food or other factors they have to start younger.

The phenomenon is a natural adaptation helping colonies survive, but researchers believe when exceptional numbers of older bees die, the surge in immature bees being pressed into service could instead be a key factor behind them collapsing.

Scientists who attached radio tracking devices to thousands of bees found that early-starters completed fewer foraging flights and were more likely to die on their first sortie.

The finding may help explain why bee populations in Britain, Europe and America are being wiped out by the mysterious Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), a term for the sudden disappearance of entire colonies which has left up to a quarter of hives in some countries empty.

Lead researcher Dr Clint Perry, from the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences at Queen Mary, University of London, said: "Young bees leaving the hive early is likely to be an

adaptive behaviour to a reduction in the number of older foraging bees.

But if the increased death rate continues for too long, or the hive isn't big enough to withstand it in the short term, this natural response could upset the societal balance of the colony and have catastrophic consequences. Our results suggest that tracking when bees begin to forage may be a good indicator of the overall health of a hive. Our work sheds light on the reasons behind colony collapse and could help in the search for ways of preventing colony collapse."

The scientists used data from the bee-tracking to model the impact on honey bee colonies in a computer simulation. They found that any stress leading to chronic forager death among older bees led to an increasingly young foraging force.

Having a younger foraging population lead to poorer performance, and more rapid deaths of foragers. It dramatically accelerated colony decline in line with observations of CCD seen around the world.

The findings appear in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

Nigel Davies has been busy:

I have been working with Darren Lovatt, who is the allotments officer for York City Council, to resolve some issues between beekeepers and allotment holders.
It started late last summer, when one of our new beekeepers from last year was keeping bees on the Low Moor allotments at the bottom of Kilburn Road, Fulford Road, York, where the adjacent allotment holder to the beekeeper had complained that they were terrified of bees and was not happy that there were bees on the next allotment. Darren and I spoke to both

parties and tried to mediate. The beekeeper had some bees on on the perimeter of the allotments, the bees were adequately screened to prevent "straying" on to any adjacent allotment.
The situation was eventually solved by the person who was fearful moving on to another allotment.
A short time later, at Bootham Stray allotments, bees returning to the hive were getting caught in an adjacent allotment holder's greenhouse. This was solved by adding more screening around the hive. Looking to a more long term solution, Darren proposed setting up a secure apiary site at Bootham Stray on an overgrown allotment, on the perimeter of the site. Together with Darren and the Bootham Stray Allotment Secretary, volunteers cleared the site, cut back hedges and prepared the area for future occupation by up to 4 beekeepers, each with a small number of hives. The area has been covered with weed suppressant and will eventually be covered with shredded wood. The first hive is now in place.
We are looking to work on providing similar facilities at other allotment sites. There is likely to be a press release soon about these activities.

The beekeeper at Bootham Stray allotments is Julia Smith, one of last year's beginners. She has sent the following statement to Darren for the press release:

'Having the opportunity for an apiary at the allotments means I can do something to directly support vitally important pollinators such as honey bees, whilst also hopefully helping to encourage a good harvest on the plots through the activity of the bees. I've found my first year of beekeeping really exciting and fascinating; checking in on the hive and seeing the growth of the colony, experiencing first-hand the many and various colours of pollen that they bring into the hive from a wide range of flowers, and extracting Queen Alice's first honey which has, I'm proud to say, had some very positive reviews from friends!'

The picture above shows work in progress on the allotments. Well done to all the volunteers who cleared the overgrown wilderness.

Did you know?

Bees fly at about 17 miles per hour.

CLARO BEES LTD. for all your beekeeping supplies

2015 opening times:

Saturday mornings from 9am – 12.30pm on the following dates:

Beekeeping Season: March 21st to October 31st (inclusive)

Fondant & Oxalic Acid Winter Special: December 5th

- Very keen prices on all items.
- Comprehensive stocks of hive parts & accessories, foundation, tools, smokers, clothing, queen rearing equipment, medications, jars & lids, candle making equipment and books.
- Ample FREE parking adjacent to shop.
- Knowledgeable beekeepers are always present to offer impartial advice on suitability of equipment prior to purchase as well as beekeeping problems.

In order to keep our prices low, **CLARO BEES LTD.** continue to handle payments by cash and cheque only.

Find us: first left after the RHS Harlow Carr Gardens, Crag Lane, Harrogate, HG3 1QA

East Riding Honey and Bee Supplies

We are the local bee supplies people for the East Riding. We always stock a good range of hive parts, frames, foundation, jars in a range of sizes, protective clothing and much more. We also supply Queens and Nucs during the season.

We're based in Dunswell between Hull and Beverley, just off the A1079, the main York to Hull road. It's always best to ring before calling to make sure that we are home and have the items you are after.

Tel 01482 859324, email lester@quayle.karoo. co.uk

456 Hull Road, Dunswell, Hull HU6 0AS 

Agent for Thorne Beehives

David Gray 1931 - 2015