



YORK AND DISTRICT BEEKEEPERS 2024/2025

President	Sue Hesp	01904 489449
Vice Presidents	John Fuller	01757 638388
	Rob Coleman	07930 893383
Committee		
Chairman	Bob Parnaby	07831 658124
Vice Chairman	Bruno Hannemann	07854 020879
Secretary	Andy Marsden	07703 120606
Treasurer and Membership Secretary	Jonathan Sanders	07551 386550
Equipment Officer	Rob Coleman	07930 893383
Education	Bruno Hannemann	07854 020879
Web Master & Publicity	Bruno Hannemann	07854 020879
Events	Christine Johnston	07899 007880
Librarian	Paul Appleton	07764 655718
AHAT Coordinator	Bob Parnaby	07831 658124
Other committee members		
	Adam Fairweather	07948 481947
	Jill Cheney	07958 282414
	Matthew Roberts	07810 473751
	Sarah Haynes	07733 346839
	Steve Kritikos	07899 007880
Other post holders		
Combings editor	Kate Wallace	07842 703984
Assistant Editor	Alan Johnston	
Apiary Manager	Ben Morgan	07723 036897
Regional Bee Inspector	Dhonn Atkinson	07775 119437
Seasonal Bee Inspector	David Bough	07824 408973

The password for the members area of the YDBKA website is: beesatyork

“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 is published quarterly.

Please note the last date for copy for the next edition is: 18th May 2025

TWO EDS.

We are on the cusp of another season It's too early as yet to be aware of any pattern in the winter losses, although individual beekeepers will, of course, know how their colonies have fared so far. Do though keep a close eye on your bees during March and April as brood rearing makes demands on the colony and rapid weather changes can catch out foraging bees.

In many areas the dandelion is an important forage crop for bees at this time of year. It gives golden-coloured honey and wax and bright yellow pollen. Later, the oil seed rape is also an important resource for honeybees but do remember to take off any honey as soon as it is sealed – or just before – otherwise it will set solid in the comb, useless to both bees and beekeeper.

Welcome to those joining the Association this year. Hopefully you will have much enjoyment from your bees.

FROM THE CHAIR

AN UPDATE FROM ASSOCIATION CHAIRMAN, BOB PARNABY.

As I write this on the 4 of March, four days into meteorological spring, we appear to have had a good old-fashioned winter with some quite cold but mostly dry days and frosty nights throughout January and February. This has meant my colonies being quite confined to the hive even if the bees were not actually clustering and with some of my colonies wolfing fondant down but others not eating much at all.

There have been some warmer days recently and it was noticeable that pollen was being collected from various sources in our garden and on the allotment.

A new beginners theory programme started at York College on 27 January with thirty-three participants, which is a major increase on the fourteen beginners in 2024 and, already, a significant number have booked onto the Practical course with bees later in the year.

Could anyone who is thinking of entering items into the annual auction on Saturday 10 May, please ensure that all items are cleaned and sterilised as appropriate before bringing them along. The way that the weeks are zipping by, the auction will soon be here!

We will be asking for volunteer stewards closer to the auction date, but should you already be willing to help, please contact any committee member.

THE FIRST INSPECTION OF THE SEASON

ALAN GIVES SOME THOUGHT TO THE EARLY SEASON'S WORK IN THE APIARY.

Whilst there may be a meteorological "first day of spring", beekeeping inspections do not begin on a specific date on a calendar. Mid-February in the south of the country and two or three weeks later in North Yorkshire is probably an average but changing weather patterns due to climate change have made even this broad position rather unreliable.

Positive outcomes in any one season often depend on what was done the season before i.e. going into winter. A weatherproof hive, adequate feeding, mouseguards, a strong colony headed by a young queen, and steady through-ventilation should ensure a good chance of colony survival into spring.

Try and resist the temptation to go pulling frames out on the first half-decent day. If it's been cold for a prolonged period the bees may still be clustered, and you'll do more harm than good. A limited inspection in a warm-ish period in mid-March should be ok. However, we do need to answer two questions as soon as it's safe to make a start...is the colony queen-right and do they have enough food?

Pollen being taken in is always a good indicator of the former. If not, then carefully check for brood. If it's been cold recently then a perfectly good queen could have gone "off-lay", so check for open and sealed brood as well as eggs. Use as little smoke as possible, just enough to move the guard bees away from the entrance. A quick check on one or two central brood frames should tell you all you need to know.

As for food, more bees die of starvation in March than in the previous December. As egg laying, brood-rearing and pollen collection increase, so does the demand for food. If another cold spell is forecast, give the colony a pack of fondant. Its low water content means that the bees don't have to choose between a "cleansing flight" in bright but potentially fatal cold weather or soiling the inside of the hive. If it's a decent weather forecast, feed syrup and give at least half a gallon, and twice as much for a strong colony.

Over the next few weeks, give thought to the following. Although a life-long advocate for ventilation in beehives, I do replace my mesh floors with solid wooden ones for about six weeks (two brood cycles) in early spring. A draught, cooling a colony with a need to expand its brood nest as fast as possible, is not good. Instead of the standard crown boards, however, I use a travelling screen to provide an escape for any moisture.

As nectar starts to come in, gradually begin to replace the winter food frames in the brood box with frames of foundation. It gives work to the young bees, replaces old frames with new and contributes to a reduction in the impulse to swarm. Put on a super above a queen excluder: it will provide space for the bees before it gets used for honey storage, but "super early in spring" still holds good.

And at some point during the season do remember to replace the winter floor and the brood box with clean, scorched replacements.

Fingers crossed for a better season than the last few!

DID YOU KNOW?

The flowering currant, *Ribes sanguinum*, is often called the beekeeper's barometer.

As soon as it starts to flower, you should be able to inspect your bees.

THE USE OF THE SMOKER

Proper use of the smoker can make inspections painless for bees and beekeeper. Careful usage of smoke can ensure that the inspection is accepted by the colony without objection.

The smoker should be lit in advance of opening the hive and before you put on your veil and gloves. Flames leaping out of the top of an open smoker can cause veils to melt!

By the time you are ready to start, cool, white smoke should be coming from the smoker. If the smoke is still hot, wait for it to cool down and before you smoke the hive. Take a moment to assess the colony reaction to the opening of the hive, smoking it may be unnecessary.

Using hot smoke can singe bee wings; apart from the ethical implications, an injured bee gives off alarm pheromone which won't help the beekeepers' case. Test the temperature of the smoke on the back of your ungloved hand: if it's too hot for you, it's too hot for your bees.

Smoke disrupts normal colony behaviours and may prevent the usual guarding responses, causing bees to consume honey and nectar. It is said this as a response to fire threatening their home, so "eat and flee" to increase survival chances. Whether that is true is debatable, but bees do move onto honey stores and fill up when they are smoked. This, depending on your point of view, makes them feel

happy, too full to bend their abdomen into "stinging position No.1" or just keeps them busy whilst the beekeeper gets on with the task in hand. It is obvious, though, that a shortage of stores to consume whilst being smoked will not make for happy bees.

Every colony has its own character, and experience will inform the beekeeper how much smoke is needed, but even the most tolerant bees can have off-days: the weather, availability of food, handling by the beekeeper and presence of a queen all affect the reaction.

If the colony objects strongly to your intrusion to their domestic routine, or you see the colony beginning to "boil" from the top bars, then quickly and calmly put the hive back together and leave it for another day when things are quieter.

To sum up, use a minimum of cool smoke, respect the bees and be prepared to walk away if the situation begins to feel out of your control.

HUMAN DNA DETECTED IN HORNET GUTS

Although this sounds very alarming, researchers at the University of Exeter believe that the DNA has passed into the gut of Asian, or yellow- legged hornet larvae, via the blood-sucking invertebrates which have been consumed by the hornet.

The remainder of the article reported in the "I" newspaper was equally concerning. Analysis has suggested that Asian hornet prey on up to 1,400 different species. Many of the species detected are pollinators but large numbers of the insects eaten by the hornet are specialists in the disposal of carrion and dung.

The findings are the result of tests carried out on the gut of more than 1,500 Asian hornet larvae and raises more concerns about the threat posed by the hornet to native wildlife.

The study underlines the potential threat to UK agriculture with forty-three of the fifty most commonly identified species in the hornet diet are known to visit flowers, including Europe's three main crop pollinators i.e. the honeybee, the buff-tailed bumble bee and the red-tailed bumble bee. Honey production on the continent has already been affected by the impact of hornet populations.

Its twenty years since the hornet first arrived in France in a cargo of pottery from China and it has spread rapidly. The hornet was first seen in the UK in 2016 although a rapid response to destroy hornet and nests has been deployed here.

The University researchers identified 1,449 prey items fed to the hornet larvae, more than half of which could be identified as specific species, including a wide range of flies, bees, butterflies, moths, spiders and honeybees.

TOP TIP

Swarming will happen, so be prepared. Even those who are fully on top of their own swarm control can have swarms landing in the apiary or be called to deal with a swarm nearby so be ready and have your collection kit ready. Mine includes a set of stepladders as not all swarms are accessible from ground level. I also have secateurs and tree loppers to hand, though do remember to ask if its ok to cut someone's tree first! As the option is leaving the swarm in situ, it's not usually a problem.

COLLECTING SWARMS

The first swarm that a beekeeper collects will live on in the memory!

It can be daunting prospect, but when you've done it once you will find it's (usually...) as easy enough and you are getting bees for nothing.

Once the swarm has settled, hopefully in a good sized, rugby ball shaped fashion, it is often fairly easy to retrieve it by a sharp shake of the branch or by brushing the bees and their queen, quickly into whatever you use to collect your swarms, the traditional straw skep, a cardboard box or “flexi tub” bucket. Then transfer the bees into the waiting brood box which you have filled with frames of foundation.

Some like the bees to walk into the hive, other prefer the rapid “pour them onto the top bars” method. The method you choose may depend on the situation at the time.

Ideally you would leave the box until dusk to allow flying bees to find their way to their new home before moving it (preferably an isolation apiary to allow time to check for disease and assess the colony temperament) but again, there is always a need to be pragmatic and if the swarm has landed in a busy street or somewhere you really don't want to leave it unattended for several hours then you may have to move it immediately and lose the fliers.

Swarms are programmed to make new wax so give them work to do drawing out foundation.

Some beekeepers put a queen excluder below the brood box, on top of the floor, to prevent the swarm absconding - they can't go anywhere without their queen, and she will be held in place by the excluder. If you choose to do that, do not forget to remove the queen excluder once the bees have begun to draw comb. (Drones can't get in and out through a queen excluder either.)

Allow a day or two to let the wax drawing bees to use up their reserves and then you can feed syrup to the colony. The theory behind using up the reserves is that any disease present in the colony will be “locked up” in the wax.

If there is a honey flow on and the weather is reasonable there should be no necessity to feed. Drawing wax is a resource-hungry business for bees, so feeding a swarm will help it expand quickly.

The queen should begin laying as soon as there is comb available to her, though obviously it will take longer if you have a virgin queen in there. Give her a couple of weeks to get established before you start worrying.

Carefully check the brood for any signs of disease for two brood cycles (six weeks) before you move the swarm to your main apiary. Look for anything that doesn't look normal: uncapped brood should be pearly white in colour and be clearly segmented. Sealed brood should have even, biscuit coloured capping that are dry to the touch. If in any doubt at all, ask your mentor, that's what they are there for!

Once the six weeks is up, you have got yourself a new, free colony. If you don't wish to increase your numbers, then in the autumn you can unite colonies to give you the required number of strong colonies going into winter.

DID YOU KNOW?

We should not be surprised that gorillas, chimpanzees and baboons, like many humans, have a sweet tooth.

Marfield and Miller (1956) reported on the use of stick tools by chimpanzees to obtain honey. "...each ape held a long twig, poked it down the hole and withdrew it coated with honey".

Deschodt (1969) described a honey raid by a group of some twenty chimpanzees near Lake Kivu (west of Lake Victoria). A large chimpanzee got the combs from a crevasse in a granite wall and threw what he did not eat to the others. All got stung but seemed to enjoy the party.

POLLEN, IT'S A SUPERFOOD FOR HONEYBEES!

A look at the use of pollen within honeybee colonies.

Honeybees have similar nutritional requirements to mammals; they need proteins, carbohydrates, minerals, fats, vitamins and water.

Nectar and pollens provide both carbohydrate and protein. Nectar is a source of many of the required minerals, although the water supply to the colony may also contain some mineral sources.

We all know that bees need nectar in the form of honey to live and to feed brood, but the pollen requirements of the colony cannot be under- estimated.

Pollen is the colony's main source of protein and provides fats, minerals and vitamins. It is the foundation of brood production and larval development.

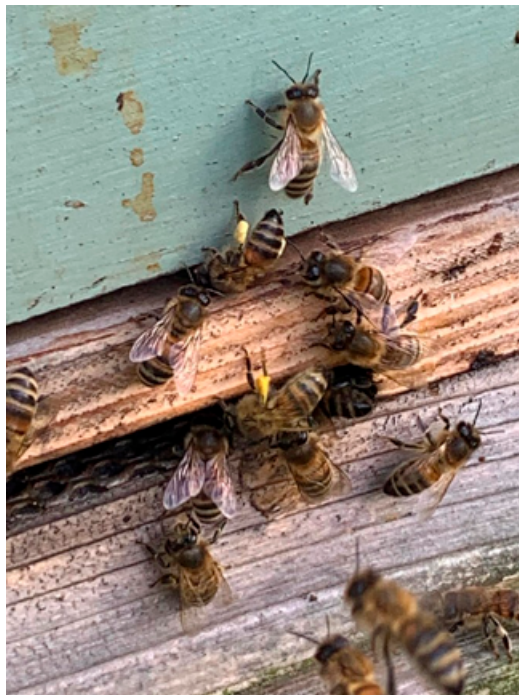
Pollens vary in nutritional make-up, but a broad outline of the composition is:

- Water
- Protein
- Carbohydrate
- Sugars
- Starch
- Fats/lipids
- Ash
- Unknown substances

It is believed that worker honeybees choose pollens based on the odour, shape and size of the pollen grains, rather than the nutritional value, but pollen from different sources has varying amounts of each component; different pollens are not all of equal value to honeybees.

The presence of brood in the colony stimulates foraging for pollen. The average colony is estimated to need between 20 - 50 kgs of pollen over the course of the year (depending on which book you read!) and with an individual honeybee being able to carry around 15mg of pollen in its corbicula or "pollen baskets" that's a lot of work.

The pollen baskets are clearly seen on this picture by Bob Parnaby:



Once back at the hive, the bees prepare the pollen, adding enzymes and acids to preserve it for storage.

Pollen is the raw food from which brood is raised, brood can only be reared in proportion to the quantity and quality of the pollen available.

If pollen is not readily available, then brood-food can be made from resources within the body of the nurse bees, but this will impact on their lifespan. Lack of pollen will limit brood-rearing, and the queen will stop laying.

Pollen is used rapidly by the colony, especially in spring when the colony numbers are building quickly.

The old rule of thumb was “one frame of honey and one frame of pollen makes one frame of bees”.

Pollen is essential for growth and development. It forms part of the brood food and once hatched, young bees will eat pollen to aid the development of the hypopharyngeal and mandibular glands which produce brood food and royal jelly. The development of the wax glands, used later in the lifecycle, also requires a significant consumption of pollen. Pollen also aids the development of the fat body and the production of venom.

In a normal spring, pollen will be freely available. If you are concerned that your bees do not have enough pollen you could try giving the pollen substitute that available from bee suppliers. In my experience colonies either love it or won't touch it!

THE TOM ROBINSON METHOD OF QUEEN REARING EIGHT OR NINE QUEENS

Although Tom no longer keeps bees, he was at various times, Chair, Secretary, Treasurer (sometimes more than one of these posts at a time!). He was also an active member of the Bee Improvement and Bee Breeders Association (BIBBA) and offered much support and encouragement to YDBKA members in their efforts to raise their own queens.

Many years ago, Tom gave me a copy of his own method of raising a small number of queens. I hope you find it useful.

“Select a colony from which you wish to raise queen and wait until early or late May.

All that is required is a five or six frame nucleus box and a frame with unwired foundation.

FIRST DAY

Take the queen and bees on a brood comb and put them in a nucleus box about three feet (1 metre) away from the parent colony.

Take another brood comb and others containing honey and pollen and put it in the nucleus box.

Add a fifth comb of unwired foundation, trimmed into zigzag shapes along the lower edge and place it next to the brood frames.

Shake in the bees from two other frames.

If the weather is cold or there is no honey flow, give a syrup feed to the nucleus.

SIXTH DAY

Go through the parent stock and take out any queen cells that have been built. Ensure all queen cells are cut out.

Remove the foundation frame from the nucleus colony which should now be partly drawn out and contain eggs and young larvae.

Trim back the lower edge in a scalloped fashion to where they occur. Place this comb in the parent colony.

ELEVENTH DAY

Make another check on the parent colony to ensure there are no wild cells.

Scrutinise the inserted foundation and count the queen cells that have been produced, leaving only the number you required, using, of course, the best ones.

SEVENTEENTH DAY

The queen cells on the prepared foundation are now near to emergence. Distribute to other nucs or de-queen other colonies and insert the ripe cells in the brood combs.

The original nucleus can now be united with its parent colony or a new colony can be made up, leaving a ripe queen cells in the parent colony.”

NEWS ON NEONICOTINOID USE IN THE UK 2025.

The government confirmed on 23 January that emergency application on sugar beet seed in England of Syngenta's Cruiser SB neonicotinoid thiamethoxam pesticide will not be permitted this year.

It's the first time in five years that an emergency application has not been approved for use.

Cruiser SB usage is banned within the EU.

Defra said that the decision is based on robust assessments of environmental, health and economic risks and benefits and on advice from its chief scientific advisor, economists, the Health and Safety Executive and the UK Expert Committee on Pesticides.

RESEARCH ON VARROA CONTROL

Last year GreenLight Biosciences won approval from the US Environmental Protection Agency for usage of its product "Calantha" in the control of the destructive pest of potato crops, Colorado Beetle.

Based on a mechanism called RNA interference (RNAi), the spray targets a vital gene in the beetle. The gene is unique to the beetle and its close relatives, which should prevent the spray damaging other species.

More RNAi products are being researched. GreenLight is currently seeking regulatory approval for use within the USA a pesticide, applied via a sugar solution rather than by spraying, which could target the Varroa mite.

The research process for an acaricide to control Varroa is more complicated than with the Colorado Beetle, due to the complex relationship between the honeybee and the Varroa mite but it is hoped that the treatment could target a gene within the mite without affecting the bee genes.

Early data is promising, say Greenlight Biosciences; there may soon be a new weapon in the fight against Varroa, which remains the single largest threat to our honeybees.

READER'S HIVES



Thank you to Mary Ellwood who sent in this picture of poppies coated with beeswax.

Mary says that the wreath is totally biodegradable with the poppies made from red card painted with melted beeswax to make them waterproof.

The British Legion is working on the aim of making their wreaths biodegradable but as yet, they are made mainly of plastic.