

COMBINGS

The newsletter of the York and District Beekeepers Association



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Summer 2025

YORK AND DISTRICT BEEKEEPERS 2024/2025

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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 is published quarterly.

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

TWO EDS.

It was quite a start to the 2025 season with a warm dry spring giving the bees a head-start with swarming; it's been hectic with some colonies having more than one attempt at swarming.

It's also been a busy time for the Association, with the beginners' courses, the auction and the bee health day. Thanks to everyone who helped out with these events and to our hard-working committee who make all this possible.

FRONT PAGE

Thanks to Andrew Grant for sending in the image for the front page.

Andrew reported that:

I am a "newbee" beekeeper this year and have done the course over winter and am booked in for the "with bees" course in May.

However, I got impatient and when Sean put up some of his hives for sale in Newton on Ouse, I went to have a look.

I had a great visit on 31 March and decided to buy a hive and after a long and interesting chat I decided collect it the next day in a boat.

So, on April fool's day, I rocked up at the end of Sean's garden in my little boat. My son, Fraser, and I loaded the hive into the boat and we set off back home down the river. The trip was actually very gentle on the bees, probably much smoother than a car.

The bees are now successfully in my garden and doing very well.

FROM THE CHAIR

An update from Association Chairman, Bob Parnaby.

As I write this on 4 June, four days into meteorological summer, we have already experienced some extremely good, dry and warm weather in April and May. The bees have been out foraging and bringing in copious amounts of nectar. It's been reported that some beekeepers have taken record spring honey harvests.

This year's beginners practical programme started on 19 May and, at the time of writing, we have already completed the first three sessions.

Our annual auction was held on Saturday 10 of May. We were fortunate that the weather was warm and sunny.

Auction lot entries were slightly down on last year and there were no colonies of bees for sale, no doubt because the good spring weather was ideal for making successful splits and queen rearing.

Some of my colonies were “out of the blocks” very early in the season and required intervention to prevent swarming.

Auction results as follows:

18 sellers with 180 lots sold

Approx 35 buyers

Total Hammer price with receipts: £2901.00

The total commission of £290.00 was paid to the Association, plus £95.00 receipts for Association lots

Total profit to the Association after costs was £234.12

Rob Coleman has decided to step down from the equipment officer role: if you would like to borrow any equipment, please contact Jonathan Sanders at the following email address: equipment@yorkbeekeepers.com

NB. Please note that we are making some changes to the method of hiring the association equipment.

Further details will be communicated after finalising at the next committee meeting.

Chairman Bob took these pictures at the Bee Health Day, hosted this year by our own Association and held at Stockton on Forest.



BEEKEEPERS WATCHING THE BEE INSPECTORS CARRY OUT COLONY EXAMINATIONS.



THE REGIONAL BEE INSPECTOR, DHONN ATKINSON, DEMONSTRATES HOW TO THOROUGHLY SCORCH BEEKEEPING EQUIPMENT.

NEGLECTED DRONE BROOD

Neglected drone brood is the name given to a condition where the worker bees in a colony cease to care for and in particular, cease feeding drones at the larval stage, resulting in their death.

There are several potential causes for this neglect, but the underlying cause in each is a colony under stress: energy and resources need to be conserved and the drones become a “luxury” that can no longer be afforded, and they are simply left to die as soon as they are distinguished from worker brood.

A small colony, often a nuc, perhaps short of forage, will often understandably concentrate on the production and development of additional workers.

Drones are often eaten (recycled!) by the workers when still at the egg stage or, if they do hatch, are not fed sufficiently, or at all, and they die before being capped to conserve colony reserves.

A colony with a queen that is going drone-layer, or a colony without a queen where some of the workers in the absence of queen and brood pheromone, have begun laying their own unfertilized eggs - “laying workers” - can also result in neglected drone brood.

Visually, neglected drone brood lose their normal pearly, segmented appearance and “melt down” to a dirty-brown watery mass. They look remarkably like worker brood that is infected with European Foul Brood (EFB) and the two conditions can easily be confused. The primary cause in both cases is effectively the same: in EFB the spores out-compete the larva for food in its gut; with neglected drone brood, the larvae simply are not fed, in both cases resulting in starvation and the same visual appearance.

The beekeeper should identify the cause of the initial stress. If the queen is going drone-layer, replace her, or unite with another colony. If it's laying workers, re-queening won't work and uniting is very problematic.

Tip the colony out a few hundred yards away and let them try for adoption from another colony as they fly homeward.

Check that it is only drones that are affected. If you find that “melted-down” worker larvae, call an experienced beekeeper or the bee inspector as it could be EFB (European Foul Brood).

UNITING BEES AFTER EXPOSURE TO LIGHT

It's taken me a while (some 20 years!) but I've finally done a “sunshine unite”. I was amazed how quickly the two lots accepted each other.

Before uniting colonies by any method, you should be sure that no disease is present in either stock, and that the queen you plan to keep is young and vigorous.

EB Wedmore, in the classic 1932 “A Manual of Beekeeping”, describes the process:

“Bees in a not too dissimilar condition may be readily united if thoroughly subdued and all combs separated so that all the bees are freely exposed to the light. The combs of the two lots should then be alternated, arranging to keep their general arrangement otherwise undisturbed.

This method necessitates bringing the two lots near together.... Trouble occurs if combs are not straight and fairly even in thickness.”

Though not stated in the Wedmore text, do choose a day that's early in the season, when the weather is warm and sunny with little or no wind blowing.

If both units are queenright, choose which queen to keep and humanely cull the other. Leave it for 20 minutes in a queenless state before attempting the manoeuvre. This allows the colony time to recognize their lack of a queen but not enough time to start making a replacement.

The exposure to light method of uniting is not suitable for a later season unite, when, to avoid disturbing the queen, the paper method should be used. This method is described below.

NEWSPAPER METHOD OF UNITING BEES

Uniting bees of a similar type through sheets of newspaper is usually trouble-free.

Wedmore advises that its best practice to feed both colonies before attempting the unite and to perform the unite at the end of the day after the bees have settled.

In my own experience an end-of-day unite isn't always practical or necessary, but I wouldn't argue with Wedmore.

Before beginning you will need to:

- Move the colonies to be united close together over a period of days, once they've been adjacent for a couple of days, the unite can be carried out.
- Decide which queen you wish to keep.
- Have a supply of broadsheet newspaper ready to place between the two colonies.
- Decide which colony will be placed on top of the other. The lower colony should remain on its own stand.
- Placing of the colonies:
- When uniting a strong and a weak colony, the weaker lot should be placed on top.
- If you're uniting colonies where one has been queenless for a while, the queenless colony should be underneath.
- Where the colonies are similar, the hive that has been moved into a new position in the apiary should be placed on the top.

Remove the crown board and roof of the lower unit. Place a single sheet of newspaper – or a double thickness if you're cautious – above the lower colony. I usually put a queen excluder above the paper as my apiary sites tend to be windy and the paper blows off before I can lift the other brood box into place. Alternatively, drawing pins can be used to secure the newspaper.

Pierce the paper in several places with the edge of your hive tool. This allows the colony aromas to begin to mix and to give the bees a start with chewing through the paper.

Place the second brood box above the first. Add the crown board and roof and leave them undisturbed for a few days. The bees will chew through the paper, usually within hours, then the colony scents will mingle and two become one. You can then place any brood from the top colony into the bottom brood box, shake off the bees from the remaining upper frames and remove the surplus brood box.

DID YOU KNOW?

Worker bees will travel a further distance to collect pollen than they do for nectar. This may be because pollen is lighter to carry and quicker to collect than nectar.

QUEEN REARING

Thanks to Nigel Davies for sharing the queen rearing method that he uses.

By choosing [one]day-old larva from your best colony, it is possible to carry some of the best genetic qualities on into your own home-raised queens.

Firstly, read the following article on Bee Base: <https://www.nationalbeeunit.com/resources-for-beekeepers/queen-rearing>.

Further reading, which gives a more comprehensive version of the process is available at <https://www.nationalbeeunit.com/resources-for-beekeepers/queen-rearing>,

When grafting one day old larvae, choose a frame of eggs and larvae where the frame is relatively new and has nice yellow wax. To help you to be able to take the larvae without damaging them, use a hive tool and scrape away the cell walls leaving the bottom of the cell so it looks like foundation. You will see the day-old larvae in a pool of royal jelly. They are only just bigger than a full stop. Don't take older larvae or they will hatch earlier and kill the other queens who have yet to hatch.



To graft the larvae, use a Chinese grafting tool. These are widely available from the usual bee keeping equipment suppliers.

From the above Bee base articles, you will have read about preparing the graft frame, which should be put in to the cell raising colony at least eight hours prior to doing any grafting to enable time for the plastic cups to be cleaned and a ring of wax applied around the opening.

These are the cups I use to graft into. Again, these are widely available.



Day-old larvae are four days old from being laid as an egg. They will hatch on the 15th or 16th day.

I did some grafting on 15 April and on 25 April, the queen cells will be 14 days old.

Fourteen grafted larvae resulted in twelve queen cells.

I have turned a brood box into a queen mating unit by screwing this onto the bottom an 18mm piece of plywood, and creating 4 partitions with 3 dividers.

Each unit has an entrance facing a different direction i.e. north, south, east and west. Each unit has its own crown board which separates the queens and prevents them fighting.

Each unit will hold two brood frames which, when finished with, can be transferred into a hive or a nucleus box.

Using an existing colony, I put two frames with bees into each unit and put a queen cell in to hatch and get mated. They will keep each other warm and when they are taking in pollen, I inspect to see if the queen is mated. This usually takes about four weeks.

You can then re-queen existing colonies or use the two frames in a nucleus to start a new colony.



DEFINITION OF A BAIT HIVE

This definition of the use of bait hives is by a local farmer.

“Ah, so it’s like leaving t’stable door open and getting another ‘oss in”!

LARVAL COCOONS

Alan has been perusing his bee books....

The article below is taken directly from the Morse and Hooper’s “Encyclopaedia of beekeeping”.

“...soon after the cell is sealed, or capped, the larval honey bee spins a thin cocoon over the inside of the cell. The “silk” for the cocoon is produced in two large glands, each longer than the larva itself, situated in the ventral part of the body cavity.

The two glands join into a common exit tube in the head of the larva, opening into the labium or lower lip. The larva defecates just prior to spinning and the faeces therefore lie between the cocoon and the cell wall. The drone and worker larvae spin the cocoons over the whole of the inside of the cells, but the queen larva always spins her cocoon on the lower half of the cell only, and does not take it right out to the capping, suspending it a little way back”

The shortening of the queen cocoon noted in the last sentence of the quote intrigued me. The shortening of the cocoon surely has a purpose. As both workers and drones have a full-length cocoon, a shortened one is clearly not designed to allow the entry of something. If its shortening is designed to allow something to exit from the queen cell, then what? The obvious answer would be the passage of queen mandibular pheromone, but this is usually described as being spread by contact once the queen has emerged.

Anyone got any ideas or information?

TOP TIP

Making sure that your colonies have enough room to store honey in the summer months is very important.

If all has gone smoothly and your colonies are a good size and still growing, you can now take advantage of any honey flow that's available in your area.

It's surprising how quickly bees can fill up a honey super when there's a "flow on". You will need to "super-up", that is to add super boxes to the hive as is required.

It's understood that bees will respond to the availability of drawn comb and keep filling it beyond the colony's own requirements and you may wish to take advantage of this.

CELL CAPPINGS

Brood cappings are made primarily from beeswax and are applied when the larval period of a particular bee is coming to an end, be it queen, worker or drone. Worker cells are capped with a slightly domed, convex capping, held in that shape by gases released during pupal respiration. The cappings of drones, be they in drone cells or worker cells are significantly raised to accommodate the larger occupants.

The domes are constructed primarily from the wax at the top of the cell walls; relatively little new wax is produced for cappings.

The cappings' colour therefore reflects the colour of the comb in general: as the comb darkens with generations of brood, so do the cappings. Cappings wax also contains particles of silken cocoon, propolis and pollen grains, the latter is thought to assist in the passage of respirational gases.

Honey cappings are applied when the bees are satisfied that the honey below has had the water contents reduced to a level which will prevent its fermentation. The cappings are flat, rather than domed and may include "wrinkles" which spread over several cells, as though groups of cells are capped together rather than individually. The wax is generally produced specifically for that purpose and is thus paler in colour, either white or cream coloured.

Different strains of bee lay down the wax nearer or farther from the top of the honey in the cells. Those that leave a small air gap between honey and capping are prized by honey show competitors who value the clear white cappings surface. Those strains which cap close to, or touching, the honey surface are less preferred as the contact between cappings and honey resulting in a darker, sometimes mottled appearance, of the combs on show.

TOP TIP

Once August comes around, wasps will start to make their presence known around any nearby apiaries.

Wasps can be a serious threat to honeybee colonies at the end of summer so be ready for them.

Avoid spilling honey around the apiary when you are removing supers for extraction or inspecting your colony. Keep any removed supers covered and have them replaced or removed as quickly as possible.

Reduce the hive entrances to a size that is more easily defended by the guard bees - use a solid entrance block or just the ubiquitous blue foam strips that are available from the bee kit suppliers. In cases of severe robbing the entrance can be reduced to a single bee space.

Make sure there are no gaps in the woodwork that all is bee-tight and wasp proof. Don't forget to block up any Porter bee escape holes in the crown board and replace any Porter escapes with a solid alternative as wasps can, and will, get through bee escapes.

You can put out wasp traps (the old-fashioned jam-jar type is fine for this purpose) in your apiary but don't bait them with honey or you will find your bees in there too. Use cheap, watered-down jam instead.

Other insects may well be attracted into these traps too, so be mindful of that.

READER'S HIVES



The image above may not be immediately apparent but Alan Johnston found a Great Tit nesting in one of his hives!

Bob Parnaby's photo was taken after the eight chicks had successfully fledged. Here we are looking down into the box; the white circle indicates the area that was occupied during the hive's alternative life as a nesting box. The entrance hole is top right.