



COMBINGS

The newsletter of the York and District Beekeepers Association



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Autumn 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 November 2025

TWO EDS.

We were a bit off the mark in the last edition when the prediction was that wasps would start to be a nuisance in August! The black and yellow jobbies started hanging around bee hives far earlier than usual this year and there have been a number of casualties reported. My own hives notes reveal that wasps were becoming a nuisance to colonies on one site as early as 10 June. Hopefully you have all had a good honey harvest despite the scorching weather, drought and wasps!

It was remarked upon by a member completing this year's beginners' course that the focus was on the negative, bee disease and what can go wrong. This edition of "Combings" won't do much to vary from that position! But in our defence, there is much that can go wrong and it's better to be forewarned.

There WILL be colonies that fail to get through the winter, there always are.

The usual expected rate is a loss of 10%, though higher rates are often recorded. If you have ten colonies a loss of one is not too big a blow, but if you lose your only colony then you're starting from scratch again next spring, though learning and experience have been gained.

The front-page picture is from Chairman, Bob Parnaby and nicely demonstrates why we must always check underneath the queen excluder when performing manipulations!

FROM THE CHAIR

AN UPDATE FROM ASSOCIATION CHAIRMAN, BOB PARNABY.

It's been a peculiar year so far and despite the good weather there have been some intermittent problems with queen matings, resulting in cases of drone-laying queens, laying workers and then wasps, which were about very early, causing in some very defensive behaviour from some colonies during inspections.

Time seems to rush by nowadays and as it is now early September, it is opportune to remind Members that our Annual Honey show is due to take place on Wednesday 15 October. I do hope it will be a successful evening and I encourage members to enter some exhibits and also attend for the evening's "bring and share" buffet and the quiz - there will be prizes!

There are discussions taking place in the next few days regarding a possible change of venue and there are also a few changes to the Show schedule. Nothing drastic is planned but it may not be finalised in time to include a copy with this issue of "Combings", in which case it will be emailed out as soon as possible.

Two members took the BBKA Basic assessment this year and two others took the Bee Health assessment, all passed. Once again special thanks go to Alan Johnston who took on the task of doing one- to -one tutorials prior to the assessments.

I have been contacted by a member suggesting that the Association should stock 1lb

round honey jars, as required by the Honey Show Schedule. We are considering this; in the meantime, if anyone requires a few jars, please contact me directly and I'll supply some.

Just a note on this year's Yellow-Legged (Asian) Hornet. As expected, given the relatively dry winter and warm spring, incursions to the UK have been at a high rate with today's (29 August) update from NBU revealing that there have been 342 registered sightings so far, and 86 confirmed nests have been found.

Although the majority of nests have been in the Southern counties close to the Channel, a disturbing discovery this week of a nest in a lime tree in Langton village, just south of Malton, is too close for comfort, so can members be vigilant and check any traps and report any sightings.

TOP TIP

One strong colony going into winter is far more likely to survive than two small colonies, so uniting such colonies in autumn is standard practice.

We have covered uniting in recent editions, so just a quick re-cap:

Bring the two hives together over a period of days (unless they are already adjacent), moving them no more than a metre at a time to allow for the flyers to relocate to their new situation.

Once side by side, select the queen you

wish to keep, quickly and humanely destroy the other queen. After an interval of around 20 - 30 minutes, place a broadsheet of newspaper on top of the brood box of the colony with the remaining queen, use the queen excluder to keep the newspaper in place, make a few pinprick holes in the paper to aid pheromone integration. Place the queenright box above the queenless colony, replace the crown board and roof and leave well alone for a week.

Ask for help if you're unsure.

AUTUMN CONSUMPTION OF POLLEN

Once forage becomes scarce in the autumn the queen will reduce her laying rate and brood production slows down. By mid-winter it may cease entirely for a while.

As the rate of brood rearing slows down, with little brood to rear, and few foraging opportunities available, there is a physical effect on the worker bees; the hypopharyngeal gland swells and regresses to the "nurse bee" stage, when the glands were used for producing the nourishment for growing larvae; the fat body size of the bee expands, mostly into the dorsal roof of the abdomen and the life of the workers is extended from around the expected six weeks life-span of summer bees to up to six months for winter bees.

Around the time that brood rearing slows, the bees eat copious amounts of protein, in the form of pollen. This is stored in the fat body of the bees as protein and fats, honey consumed at this time is also stored in the fat body as glycogen.

The need for pollen in the autumn is vital for the survival chances of the colony over winter. Colonies failing to find good pollen sources in the autumn are more likely to succumb to the effects of weather and disease and are unlikely to be able to fund the spring build-up.

PREPARATION FOR WINTER

The unusually warm weather has speeded up the season by several weeks and colonies are preparing for winter earlier than usual. Egg laying by the queen is much reduced and beekeepers should look to their winter preparation earlier than is normal.

The following is the standard “winter prep” list, but if one leaves implementation too late, then colonies may already be below par to survive the winter months.

THE BEES.

- Confirm the queen state of the colony. Check for drone-laying queens or laying workers.
- Unite weak colonies to proven quality stock. A single large colony has a greater chance of survival than two smaller ones.
- Provide supplementary feeding to keep queens laying as long as possible.

NB. Feeding in autumn should be in the form of thick syrup, if you make your own then use a 2:1 ratio of white sugar (it must be white sugar, as bees cannot properly digest brown sugar) i.e. 2lbs of sugar to 1 pint of water.

Alternatively, you can buy ready prepared inverted syrup.

STORES

- The need to provide supplementary syrup is much increased in a year where the hot weather has drastically reduced honey income. 50bs or 23 kg of honey/syrup per colony is the recommended weight.
- If you’ve not yet learned how to “heft” your colonies to estimate their weight, ask an established beekeeper to help.
- Be aware of the possible need to feed fondant in the winter months, and particularly in March, when the winter cluster is beginning to break up.

THE HIVE

- Ensure hives are weatherproof.
- Check there are no mice in the hive before putting on the mouse guard. Do this on a warm day when any resident mouse is likely to be out but check before installing the mouse guard.
- Don’t forget to remove the queen excluder if you’re leaving on a super, as the winter cluster will need to stay together and if the queen is below the excluder that can’t happen.
- Allow gentle ventilation through the hive to prevent dampness. Damp kills far more colonies than does the cold.

- On windy sites, secure the hive with straps, and peg them to the ground if necessary.

DISEASE MANAGEMENT

- Treat for varroa once you've taken any honey off, and have plans in place for winter treatments with oxalic acid. The Association is likely to hold a winter demonstration of the application of oxalic acid.

WAX MOTH

A look at a common pest of beeswax.

Most beekeepers are familiar with wax moth and the problems they cause; Wax Moths can be disastrous if they get into your stored supers in the winter!

Wax Moth larvae live in the comb made by the honeybee (a separate species affects bumblebee nests).

Most organisms have a role to play in ecology, and the job of the Wax Moth is to destroy and dispose of combs left by dead and diseased colonies, leaving the nest area free of diseased comb, ready for incoming swarms.

Wax moth can destroy stored comb at anytime of year but in the winter months they can cause unseen havoc in a stack of stored supers or in drawn comb that we hope will be a flying start for next year's colony splits and swarms.

In the UK there are two species of Wax Moth, the Greater Wax Moth, *Galleria mellonella* and the Lesser Wax moth, *Achroia grisella*.

The adult moth of the two species is very different in appearance. The Greater Wax Moth females size varies between 25-35 mm from wing tip to wing tip. The moth is mottled brown and buff in appearance and has a concave shape of the outer edge of its forewing, this is particularly obvious in the males.

The Lesser Wax Moth is smaller, within the range 15-20 mm and is a pale grey colour. Mature adults of each species do not retain their wing colour as the scales of the wings wear off and they all develop a pale buff coloured appearance.

Greater and Lesser Wax moth have similar life cycles. Once hatched and mated the female will find a host honeybee colony where she will lay several hundred eggs in cracks and crevices and within the comb. After a few days the eggs hatch into cream-coloured larvae which have a brown head.

The time spent in the larval stage varies between the species, the Greater Moth taking around four weeks and the Lesser two or three weeks, though timings are dependent on temperature – lower temperatures may result in the larvae taking months to develop.

The larva can digest beeswax but the preferred food is the old larval and pupal casings of the honeybee.

The larvae of the two Moth species are similar but the Greater Moth tends to dart about and seek shelter elsewhere when it is disturbed whereas the Lesser Moth will stay still.

Once the larval stage is complete, they pupate in a cocoon.

Problems for the beekeeper begin once the moth eggs hatch, the larvae of both moths will tunnel through the comb and in doing this they deposit their frass, which is the faeces of the larva, wrapped in a silken case. Bits of wax will stick to the frass and the comb will disintegrate into an unusable mess known as webbing.

The Greater species pupates by forming a hollow in the woodwork (poly hives are not immune to this), on frames and in the hive itself. A great deal of damage can be done by pupating moths as they tend to congregate at this life stage and form into rows.

The Lesser moth will pupate on the comb itself. The cocoons are covered by frass and are dark in appearance.

Although most moth damage is seen in boxes of stored comb in the winter, weak colonies can be susceptible to Wax Moth at any time of year, affected colonies will have the comb damaged and welded together by a mass of frass and cocoons.

Strong colonies of honeybees will not usually be damaged by Wax Moth though occasionally a single moth larva tunnelling through a patch of sealed brood may result in "bald brood", where the bees remove the cappings to investigate the problem, this does not cause too many problems for the developing bee but if there is contact with the faeces of the moth, it may result in developmental problems for the bee.

When preparing to store drawn comb for winter, check for any visible damage by moths. If you have access to a freezer, three or four days at -15C will kill off all moth stages.

NB. This action may affect domestic harmony...

Do be careful with frozen comb as its very brittle and can easily shatter.

Stack supers with layers of newspaper above, below and in between each box (putting a queen excluder at the top and bottom of each stack will keep out mice) this will prevent any Wax Moth that you may have missed from "running" between the supers. Before storing kit for winter scorching woodwork and scrubbing poly hives will destroy any hidden eggs.

Keeping any stored comb as cool as possible will help, supers can be stored outside but ensure it's a dry spot with good ventilation as comb can go mouldy in damp conditions.

YDBKA HONEY SHOW 2025

As Bob mentioned in “From the Chair”, the schedule and venue may change for this year’s Show, which will take place on 15 October and will be judged by Peter Lewis. Details will be confirmed via email.

Show entries do not just have to be honey, but also bee related photographs, any product from the hive, a shallow frame of capped honey, wax rendered by yourself, beeswax candles and also honey cakes.

The novice entries will apply to beekeepers who took up the craft from April 2024 onward and the Bill Bell cup is for novice entrants only.

Several other awards will be given and novices may also wish to compete with the more experienced beekeepers.

Please do make an effort to attend the event, even if you don’t put in an entry, there is a social side to the Show, a “bring and share” supper, a team quiz, a chance to meet-up with other members and ask questions of the more experienced beekeepers.

The Committee works hard all year to provide an excellent programme of events, please support them by attending.

AN END TO PREDICTABILITY?

Alan’s thoughts on what the future may hold.

And so, another season draws towards a close, and what a strange one it’s been. Several beekeepers I’ve spoken to have enthused about the prolonged warm weather, and claimed good, if not record, honey harvests. But these happy tales have been more than matched by concerns of unexpectedly early swarming, poor matings and recently NBU warnings of colony starvation. Unusually, I’m siding with the “glass half-empty” brigade on this occasion.

Only a small percentage of our membership will be able to recall the time before wide-spread oil-seed rape (OSR) planting, when swarming took place in May, and when the June gap actually fell in June. One major “spin out” towards the end of the season was normally enough and oxalic acid was unheard of.

Those good-old-days have emphatically gone, driven by ongoing varroa problems, Asian Hornet concerns, and most importantly the effects of climate change.

The first half of last year’s season was virtually a wash-out, later matings were half-decent, and if you were lucky enough to get honey, then it was probably from late and long-lasting Himalayan balsam, which continued long after previous seasons would have finished.

This year, here in deepest Selby, it’s been even more problematic. An unusually early spring triggered colony build-up and very early swarming. Many beekeepers failed to heed the old “super early in spring” warning and swarms were lost. Those on the “swarm collectors” list had a right old time of it!

A more interesting problem followed, however: usually swarms don't issue until colonies have produced sufficient mature drones to mate with the virgin queens emerging from the remaining queen cells. This time, the swarms seemed to have "jumped the gun" and the matings turned out to be very poor. "The boys just weren't up to the job" was the best summary I heard!

Poor in quality and insufficient in number, these poor matings were quickly identified by the bees who despatched their new queens in short order and produced supersedure cells to replace them. Many of these, too, resulted in poorly mated queens.

One of my own colonies was on to its 4th replacement queen by mid-May!

Queens became drone-layers or, if unspotted, colonies lost their queens altogether and the workers became laying workers. This was, apparently, an exceedingly wide-spread phenomenon. It significantly impacted on colony development and honey gathering.

Then we got the nice warm weather... to such an extent that shallow-rooted plants either went into shock, or died. Deeper rooted OSR and field beans were seen in flower together (that can mess-up your set honey!) but were not guaranteed to be yielding and general honey income reduced to such an extent that many queens went off-lay (no food in one end, no eggs out of the other!). Colony growth was impacted for a second time. There was a recent warning from the NBU advising beekeepers to look out for colony starvation.

Some of our membership in some locations will certainly be doing ok: such problems and warnings can only be broad generalizations. The issue is that whatever unpredictability there might have been is now gone and that at some point, we're all at risk of being caught-out, directly or indirectly, by the effects of climate change on our beekeeping. An already difficult craft is becoming exponentially more difficult.

If our skills don't change to match, we're at risk of becoming like the Victorians who kept bees in skeps with little or no control over a large proportion of their beekeeping. Queen rearing skills must be improved, causes of drone laying need to be understood and recognised by everyone. Smaller colonies may have to be accepted as the norm, especially given the continued increase in membership numbers and the resulting pressure on the availability of forage. A decrease in honey yields must be expected in some years. Queen introduction and colony uniting manipulations need to become routine techniques for everyone.

This puts an increased onus on associations to identify training needs and to have properly trained tutors in place to address these needs.

Darwinian theory applies to beekeepers as well as bees. If we don't adapt to changing environmental conditions, natural selection will weed out the weak amongst us, as surely as it did the dinosaurs.

DID YOU KNOW?

The process of bees “ripening” the honey by fanning with their wings, forcing warm air from inside the hive over the comb.

HIMALAYAN BALSAM CONTROL TRIALS

The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT) is trialling a pathological rust fungus to control Himalayan balsam and has claimed “early success”.

YWT said the plant, which is native to India and Pakistan is one of the UK’s “most pervasive and iconic invasive species”.

The trial, at locations in West and North Yorkshire uses the rust fungus which is found in the Himalayas to tackle the plant’s growth.

YWT said the plant, which grows up to 3 metres high, causes river bank erosion and smothers native plant species nearby.

Rust fungus “the natural enemy” of Himalayan balsam was release in the summer of 2024 in Hertfordshire by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and also in West Yorkshire.

Additional Defra funding has also seen a fungus release at Wheldrake Ings near York.

The rust fungus survived the Yorkshire winter and in spring it “naturally reinfected” this year’s balsam seedlings.

REPORT FROM THE EDUCATION OFFICER

Congratulations to the members who took the practical exams this summer:

Christine Johnston and Ben Morgan - Bee Health Certificate

Samantha Quinney and Graham Hodgson - Basic Certificate

The practical assessments are an excellent way to consolidate your knowledge, and an extra incentive to study and research. They take place during the summer months, if you are interested you can find more information on the BBKA online learning platform: <https://learning.bbka.org.uk/>

Login is required using your BBKA membership number and postcode. If you need help or want to put your name forward for one of the assessments, please get in touch via education@yorkbeekeepers.com.

There is a booking fee for the assessments, but the Association will refund successful candidates!



See the back cover for more information.

READER'S HIVES



Nigel Davies had an exciting swarm-collecting season, which included taking two established colonies from one house!

One colony had taken up residence in a flat roof and the one shown above was in the porch roof.

Nigel reports that it took seven hours to complete the job.

(more images on the inside)