



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

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Please note the last date for copy for the next edition is: 18th May 2026

FRONT PAGE IMAGE

This time on our front page we have the legendary Bill Bell, receiving his Certificate of Merit from the Yorkshire Beekeepers Association in recognition of his many years educating beekeepers. Bill is in the centre, with Chairman Bob Parnaby presenting the Certificate and Rob Coleman on the left.

Bill began his beekeeping career as an eight-year-old schoolboy who spotted a swarm in a hedge! A long-term member, and former Chairman of YDBKA, for many years after he retired from teaching beekeeping at Askham Bryan college, Bill continued running YDBKA training courses and events from a caravan in his garden.

He still keeps bees today.

Congratulations on your award, Bill.

TWO EDS.

Welcome to the first “Combings” of 2026 and an especially warm welcome to all our new members this year. We hope you will have many happy years in the craft.

As ever, our committee has been busy over the winter, this year’s beginners’ course has already begun with the theory sessions being held at York College. The renovation of the pavilion at Murton is described in “From the Chair” on page 5

Hopefully the winter will not have been too cruel to beekeepers and their bees, but there are always losses and wet winters can be tough on bee colonies.

Before we know it, swarming time will be upon us, so now is the time to check that all your kit is clean and serviceable and you’ve plenty of frames made up and ready for use. We say it every year, but the old refrain still applies, it’s no good waiting until your neighbour has a metre-long swarm hanging from their apple tree to get out your blowtorch and frame hammer!

MARGARET LANGSTAFF

by Bob Parnaby

Margaret started beekeeping in 1988 by attending the YDBKA beginners’ course and she was still an active beekeeper, having five colonies in her local village, when she died quite suddenly at the end of November last year.

Margaret had been a member of YDBKA committee several times in different roles, including being our first female chair and for some time was our representative on the Yorkshire BKA Committee.

She was well-liked and will be sadly missed as a highly respected member of the association.

FROM THE CHAIR

Bob Parnaby, YDBKA Chair

As I write this on 24 February, we appear to have paid the price for having a glorious 2025 summer followed by almost four months of miserable wet weather, with only occasional days when the bees have been able to get out on cleansing flights and to collect pollen. Let's hope that with the lengthening daylight hours and drier days our colonies will survive and prosper.

The beginners' theory programme started at York College on 26 January with twenty-seven participants. A significant number are booked onto the practical course later in the year.

Kate Wallace has agreed to take on the position of Examination Secretary and in that role, she will coordinate the arrangements for members wishing to take any BBKA modules or practical assessments.

The contact email is: exams@yorkbeekeepers.com

NB. Please note the closing date for all practical assessments is 30 April, quite a lot earlier than previous years but that does give us time to make sure sufficient time is available for any extra training that candidates wish to have.

Please contact Kate if you have any questions about the process

If you are thinking of entering any items into the annual auction on Saturday 9 May, do make sure that all items are cleaned and sterilised as appropriate before bringing them along. We will be asking for volunteer stewards closer to the date, but if you are willing to help, please, contact any committee member to register your interest.

After much debate, we have made some progress in updating the bee pavilion at Murton, using some of the money that we received as a grant from Hiscox Insurance. Work is still ongoing, but so far, the internal wall has been removed, a new sink unit and modern water heater have been installed and the electrical layout has been upgraded to include extra external lighting.

As shown in this picture, the work has revealed that squirrels have built a substantial nest in the roof space of the pavilion. We will need to do some work towards making it squirrel proof (hopefully) and replace some ceiling boards, which are damaged with squirrel droppings and urine, then we can move on to the repainting and tidying-up phase.

There are some more pictures from the project on page 12.

The reason we decided on the project is to make it a more suitable venue for YDBKA members to meet members of the public, who attend the various events that are run by Murton Park. As part of such events, we can talk to the visitors about beekeeping and maybe sell hive products. This was part of the Association's programme in the past, and we are hoping to make it happen on a more regular basis. We will be contacting members with more details and a request for volunteers later in the spring.



SPRING MANAGEMENT: A QUICK GUIDE

FEBRUARY

- Resist the temptation to check inside the brood box
- Watch for bees working early flowers. Pollen-gathering is a good, though not definitive, sign that all is well.
- Keep entrances clear of dead bees
- Heft hives to assess weight. Feed fondant if required.

MARCH

- Remove mouseguards once the likelihood of hard frosts is passed
- If it's an unusually warm day, it's just about ok to have a quick peep into the brood nest, but don't undergo a full inspection just yet.
- Assess hive weight. If the bees are flying regularly, switch from fondant to thin syrup (2 pints water: 1lb sugar) if supplementary feeding is required.
- Prepare and clean replacement floors, brood boxes and queen excluders.

APRIL

- Likely to signal the start of regular inspections, but it's still weather-dependant.
- Confirm the queen is laying and that you have brood in all stages. Look for a ratio of 1 egg: 2 open larvae: 4 sealed brood cells
- Undertake a "disease-only" inspection
- Start replacing unnecessary frames of stores with clean drawn comb or foundation.
- If the weather is "patchy" continue feeding with thin syrup if required
- Consider putting a super above the queen excluder even if there is no significant nectar coming in. If the bees believe themselves to be cramped, early swarming can be triggered.

DID YOU KNOW?

Carl Linnaeus, 1707–1778, the Swedish botanist, biologist and zoologist, introduced the system of nomenclature for identification of life with two Latin parts (genus and species).

Linnaeus named the honeybee *Apis mellifera* in 1758. *Apis* is the Latin for "bee" and *mellifera* is from the Greek "melli" honey and "ferre" to bear, so we have a scientific name meaning honey-bearing bee. Linnaeus recognised his mistake in 1761, in that bees bear nectar, not honey, and he tried to change the name to *Apis mellifica*, meaning the honey-making bee. The International Code of Zoological Nomenclature gives precedence to the original name, so we still use the term *Apis mellifera*.

HONEY FRAUD

Thanks to Pete Kendall who drew my attention the episode of the BBC Radio 4's "The Food Programme" which was broadcast on 30 January 2026.

Whilst there has been concern for many years about some imported honey being mixed with corn syrup or rice syrup, the scale of global honey fraud is now quite astonishing with the European Union finding 46% of the honey it sampled was suspected of being fraudulent.

Last year's at APIMONDIA World Beekeeping Awards, the prize for Best Honey was cancelled, due to fears that adulterated honey might have been entered. The fraud is now so sophisticated than it can be undetectable.

The programme is available on BBC Sounds.

SUPER FRAMES

"Windy warfare has raged around the subject of equipment since the principle of moveable frames was discovered by Langstroth and will doubtless continue, although much of it spends itself upon trivialities while some essentials are rather neglected." A.L. Gregg 1949

I was recently asked about my preference regarding brood and super frames. An apparently innocent query, it unwittingly risked setting me away on a well-practiced rant regarding Hoffman super frames! I managed (just about) to restrain myself but my dislike of them remains undimmed.

They are frequently included in a "starter package" for beginners, and whilst that particular spacing system is fine in a brood box, I do not believe them to be at all suitable for use in the super. Their unsuitability, I suggest, increases with the number of hives kept and with the amount of honey produced. They are awkward to uncap, the knife having to follow the curving line of the Hoffman shoulder which itself results in an unnecessarily large volume of sticky cappings to deal with.

The ideal super frame would surely be one where all four sides of the frame lie in the same plane, allowing smooth, flat, uncapping by knife or machine. News flash – it exists!

Re-wind a moment to the subject of top-bars, another choice topic for a rant! Many beekeepers fail to realize that top bars come in two widths, narrow and wide. The narrow ones are 7/8-inch wide; the wide ones are 1 1/16-inch wide. Once you're aware of the difference, it's easy to spot the mix-and-match set-up present in many boxes. Unfortunately, the narrow ones tend to be those most favoured by equipment retailers.

The practical effects of using narrow top bars are particularly noticeable in the brood box: Hoffman spacers keep the frames the regulation distance apart, but the gap from one top bar to the next is larger than bee-space with frames fitted with narrow top bars resulting in the increased likelihood of brace-comb between the frames. At the very least, it should be wide top bars only on brood frames.

Back in the supers, a flat super frame across all four sides can therefore be created around either a narrow or a wide top bar. Both, I suggest, are preferable to a Hoffman side bar super frame although that formed around a narrow top bar creates a few problems of its own. Being narrow, you can squeeze more of them into a super: it's only a minor increase in work when uncapping just a few supers but the extra work adds up with increasing honey production. Should you put fewer frames into the super, you end up with an increased volume of cappings to process.

So, we're back to the wonderful 1 1/16-inch top bar! Side bars of the same width are available from National Bee Supplies (other suppliers may also stock them) and bottom bars completing the fourth 1 1/16-inch face are readily available. They may be described as either "wide bottom bars" or "Manley bottom bars"

As the removal of the Hoffmans also removes the self-spacing aspect of the frames, the beekeeper needs to consider how to keep the super frames separate from one another. Plastic spacers are an option, though they can be fiddly: I prefer the ten-slot castellations pinned into each super.

I recognise that changing from existing kit can be expensive and time consuming. I moved from one type of super frames to the 1 1/16-inch after twenty years of beekeeping and have never regretted it. Consider at least trying it out in one super before becoming inexorably committed to Hoffmans.

NB. Credit must be given to YDBKA's own John Fuller for introducing these super frames to this part of the country.

FONDANT AND SYRUP FOR SALE

Alan Johnston has fondant and syrup for sale:

12.5 kg syrup £25

Box of 5 x 2.5kg packs of fondant £28

Single pack of 2.5 kg fondant £6

Telephone Alan on 01757 633202.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MOVEABLE FRAME HIVE

Although Langstroth is rightly credited with the invention of the moveable frame with bee-space around all four sides of the frame in the 1850s, the desire to manage the movement of individual combs was evident long before that.

In 1675, it is recorded that the Greeks used basket-shaped bodies, open top and bottom, with wooden bars laid across the top to aid in the support and removal of comb. Ten years later, an author, known only as J.A. described the use of four-sided frames with the top bars resting in channels cut into the side walls of the hive,

but with the frame sides resting against the hive walls.

The failure to recognise the need for side spacing continued throughout the seventeen and eighteen hundreds until Langstroth recognised that that bees would tolerate a bee-space gap the entire length of the side bar. His invention, however, didn't immediately receive the recognition that it deserved. It was first described as not good, and then not new. It was even credited as not being an invention – it was something that anyone might have done... and then it was brought into universal use!

DRONES

A timely look at drones and their role in colony life.

The only known purpose of the male honeybee is to mate with virgin queens. Drones don't forage, feed brood, have a sting or produce wax. Indeed, most of the glands found in the worker bee are absent from the male honeybee. Drones drift about from hive to hive, unchallenged by guard bees. They are permitted to feed freely on stores of food. If a hive is empty of stores, the drone will move on to a better larder. It has been suggested that up to 15% of the drone population within a colony may be visitors. Visiting drones could be a vector for disease transfer. So, what's so good about drones?

Vital for his role in colony reproduction and general colony morale, the importance of the honeybee drone is often underestimated. Too often, the uncapping fork is unthinkingly taken to a patch of sealed drone brood in order to destroy the varroa mites living within the cells. Whilst it's true that varroa prefer to lay their own eggs within the uncapped drone cells as there is more room in the larger cells and the extra three days it takes the drone to emerge from its cell (24 days for the drone as opposed to 21 for worker bees) also gives the newly-hatched varroa mite valuable maturity time; in my opinion, it's far better to control varroa by other methods and leave the drone cells alone and let them produce enough new drones to fulfil colony requirements.

Seldom, in normal conditions, are too many drones produced. Estimates vary considerably but it is thought that the average colony will produce upwards of two thousand drones in the course of the year, with most of the drone-producing activity being concentrated during the spring growth i.e. when nectar and pollen are abundant and drones are required to inseminate the new crop of virgin queens.

Drone cells are mostly found towards the bottom of the frame and at the outer edge of the brood nest. The developing larger body is 1.5 times the size of the worker, so drone

cells are visibly larger than those of the worker bee and the cells have raised, domed cappings. Developing brood within the hive inhibits further drone production, as will a lack of incoming forage. The colony will self-regulate the number of drones required. Drone-rearing is a drain on colony resources, so many drone eggs and larvae may be cannibalised by the workers when the weather is poor or there is a shortage of food reserves in the hive. It is thought that less than half of eggs laid will result in mature drones.

At the end of the season, or during periods of food shortage, the workers will prevent the drones from entering the hive. Most drones will simply starve as they are unable to forage, but some will be stung to death. The honeybee colony is ruthlessly efficient!

Drones result from unfertilized eggs, which means they have no direct father, only a grandfather and that they may have grandsons but will have no sons. Drones are haploid, having only the 16 chromosomes from their mother, rather than the 32 of worker and queen bees, which inherit chromosomes from each parent. The female bees are therefore diploid. This is characteristic of the insect order Hymenoptera, ants, bees and wasps.

Peak drone population is timed to coincide with the swarming season, with eggs being laid for this purpose in the spring when forage is abundant and in favourable weather conditions.

Colonies within the same area will usually synchronise their drone rearing, although larger colonies may commence drone rearing earlier. Colonies with larger food stores will produce more drones; small colonies with fewer than 4000 workers are unlikely to produce any drones. Diseased colonies or those under environmental stress are equally unlikely to begin raising drones.

As sexually mature drones are needed in sufficient number to support early virgin queen mating, drone rearing activity will begin three or four weeks before the colonies begin the raising of the new season's queens. Although drone production is not necessarily a prediction of swarming, a lack of drone brood in spring may indicate a problem within a colony. Swarming is a natural event and the main focus of colony activity early in the season.

The drone's main role in his short life is to mate with new queens, passing on his mother's genes in order to preserve their species. Drones will gather together in congregations (often these areas are historical, having been used for many years for the same purpose); how generations of drones know where these areas exist remains a mystery. Queens are presumably guided there by olfactory senses.

Honeybee mating lasts only a few seconds and during this time the drone's head and thorax become paralysed; the still-active muscles in his abdomen begin to contract as he inserts the endophallus into the queen's sting chamber, and after a few seconds, the endophallus snaps off and he falls to the ground, leaving his mating sign, a thin, whiteish thread, in the queen's sting chamber. The mating sign will be removed by the next drone to mate with the queen or by the workers once she returns home.

The multiple mating behaviour (possibly mating with between 10 and 20 drones) of the honeybee queen ensures genetic diversity for her colony.

Drones are so important to colony life: for reproduction and genetic diversity, for hive morale; a summer colony just isn't happy without the presence of drones. The drones' larger body size may even play a part in the thermoregulation of the brood nest.

So, the next time you are tempted to pick up the uncapping fork for the "drone sacrifice" method of varroa control, please think again!

BEE BRUSHES

Bee brushes are not as widely used as they once were, but still appear in equipment catalogues. For £5 or so, they are a relatively inexpensive way of annoying bees and encouraging them to sting!

My original mentor encouraged the use of a goose wing – a left wing for a right-handed person and vice versa. Being softer than a bristled brush, he rightly felt them to be less annoying to the bees, but even as a novice I harboured concerns about potential disease transmission from an item that was used from one hive to another but which was impossible to clean thoroughly. As part of our end-of-course farewell, he presented each of us with an

appropriate goose wing: out of respect for him I kept it for years, though it remained unused in the bottom of my tool box.

Removing bees from super frames presents no great problem: there are plenty of "Bee escape" devices which can do the job. In the brood box, the skill of shaking bees from a frame should be learned quickly to allow inspections for disease identification and swarm preparation.

A few stubborn bees (which tend to be the younger ones as they have stronger legs!) which refuse to be dislodged by shaking can be gently moved, if necessary, by a temporary brush made from long grass or plant stems.

CLIPPING QUEENS

As with so many things in beekeeping, there are heated opinions!

You may have already decided that wing clipping is not for you but if you're undecided, please do some research from reliable sources – and as with everything else, there is some utter twaddle about wing-clipping on the internet!

Clipping the queen's wing entails cutting off enough of the wing to prevent her from flying off with a swarm. Some choose to remove most of both wings, others cut off the tip of one wing. If you do choose to clip, it's a job for sharp scissors, careful and adept handling of the queen, as well as a confident and steady hand.

It's not known if the queen feels any pain when her wings are clipped. A network of cuticle struts, known as veins can be seen in the wings, however, although the veining does carry haemolymph, its main purpose is to maintain the rigid structure of the wing. A swarm emerging with a clipped queen will hang up nearby for about half an hour and then return home as their clipped queen has been lost, falling to the ground due to her inability to fly. She may make her way back to the hive; if she does, it's likely that she will be located underneath the hive floor, which will be evident from the number of bees clustering underneath the next day.

So, the queen may be lost, but not the “honey production team”, as the swarm will return home if there’s no queen flying with them, and unless beekeeper intervention is exercised, they will merely await the first virgin queen’s emergence and set off again a few days later.

Whatever your point of view, clipping is not a method of swarm prevention! Clipping a queen is not a substitute for rigorously timed hive inspections, with the beekeeper picking up the presence of queen cells and instigating their chosen method of swarm control.

Proponents of the clipped queen are given some extra time when the colonies are making queen cells in preparation for swarming. This is based on the “ten-day inspection system”, rather than the seven-day routine employed by many hobbyist beekeepers.

Ted Hooper’s Guide to bees and honey states that: “...time is gained by the fact that clipped queens swarm when the first virgin queen is ready to emerge. It is extremely rare for them to swarm out before this time. Unclipped queens, on the other hand will often swarm out when the first queen cell is sealed and will often go earlier than this if disturbed by manipulations”.

For some, there will be ethical considerations regarding clipping wings; others may decide it’s a bit of insurance if time is short.

There’s a lot of thinking involved in beekeeping!

“A beginner with a few brains, boards and a buzz-saw is he of all others who feels called upon to invent a beehive”

W.Z. Hutchinson 1905

READER'S PAVILION



These pictures from Chairman Bob Parnaby show progress on the renovations being carried out on the Murton bee pavilion.