COMBINGS

The newsletter of the York and District Beekeepers Association

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Winter 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 February 2026

Front page image: The pictures on our front and back pages this time are of Andrew Raby’s Flow Hive. Andrew gives an interesting account of his year with this hive on page 7, which answers some of those questions we’ve all wanted to ask!

TWO EDS.

Another season has rolled over; the hottest and driest one that any of us can remember, resulting in a huge variation in honey yield over the local area.

Wasps have been a nightmare for many beekeepers this year but as ever, we can take consolation from the fact that every season is a different experience and next year will be the best season ever!

Winter is a quiet time in the apiary, time to take advantage of the bee suppliers' January sales to order the equipment you've realised that you've been missing this year and plan how you will approach things in 2026. Making up frames can be done well in advance of the forthcoming season, if you're desperate for bee-related activity,

Above all, don't forget about your bees! Check them after strong winds, heavy rains and snowfall. Remember to regularly heft each hive, feeding fondant before their weight becomes low.

The Association will hold a demonstration of oxalic acid application in January. The date is weather-dependant, so will be notified nearer the time, via email.

Have a great festive season and a happy 2026.

FROM THE CHAIR

This time, from Bob Parnanby, we have the Trustees report from the AGM, which was held on 19 November 2025:

The Association once again ran a successful beginners' course early in the year, with 33 participants attending the theory course. Thanks to Bruno Hannemann for organising this and to the other tutors: Sarah Haynes, Alan Johnston and myself.

Later in the year, practical sessions were held with 17 participants at Escrick who bought colonies. This course was run by Bruno Hannemann, Vicki Leaf, John Fuller, Greg House, Rob Coleman and Paul Appleton.

The practical without bees' course was held at Murton with a further 8 participants and run by Alan Johnston and myself.

We are now accepting bookings for our 2026 beginners' courses.

We have continued to produce regular quarterly issues of Combings, thanks to Kate Wallace and Alan Johnston. There are still a significant number of members who prefer to receive a hard copy.

Our annual auction was held in May. This year we did not have any live bees for sale. This contributed to a lower financial gain for the association than in previous years.

Special thanks go to Jonathan Sanders and Michelle Mulder operating the cash desk.

Our programme of speakers organised for this past year by Christine Johnston had several interesting talks, some over Zoom and some in person but again these have

been relatively poorly attended. It is disheartening to the committee and to the speakers to have only a handful of people turning up at some meetings.

The Bee Health Day was rescheduled for the 15 of June 2025 and was held at Stockton on the Forest village hall.

Invitations were sent to all Yorkshire affiliated associations which resulted in 60 attendees from 15 different associations including 23 from our own association. This was totally funded by our association and there were some appreciative responses from attendees

Spring and summer kept our team of swarm collectors busy, so thanks to all on the collectors list. Swarm collection is a valuable service to the community and it wouldn't be possible without the help of the participating members.

Thanks to Ben Morgan, our apiary manager, for looking after the Association's colonies and preparing them for apiary meetings.

Two members took and passed the BBKA Basic assessment this year and on the same day two other members passed the Bee Health Assessment. Credit to them and thanks to Alan Johnston for the one-to-one monitoring sessions prior to this.

The annual barbecue has been reinstated and was held at Jill Cheney's on the 29 July; this was a good social event with a lot of members attending, so we will keep it on the calendar.

The Honey Show in October was organised by myself; the format of delivering the entries ahead of the judging allowed for a more streamlined time for the judging, without the delay we have seen in previous years.

The judge was again complimentary of the quality and number of entries in the show.

We have two committee members retiring: Rob Coleman is to resign from the committee but he remains as Vice President. He has been beekeeping for 35 years and has been a stalwart member of the association for all that time.

Adam Fairweather is also leaving the committee. Adam has been a supportive member and done a lot of work behind the scenes, as well as assisting with the beginners each year. Many thanks to both Rob and Adam.

John Fuller is also stepping down as Vice President after a long and distinguished period of service to the Association. Many thanks to John for training and helping newcomers to beekeeping over the past 45 years

As reported last year, we decided to split the membership secretary role from the treasurer post. This was completed earlier this year with Steve Kritikos now being the membership secretary.

Up to the present date, we have 205 members, including some who have transferred from other associations.

We are in the process of splitting the role of Examination secretary from the Education brief. More information will be forthcoming.

Regarding the discussions about the Murton pavilion upgrades; some committee members attended for a couple of days in April to tidy up the Pavilion to make it a bit

more hospitable for visitors. We have had a meeting with Murton staff to explore options to upgrade the Pavilion for future joint use, another meeting is planned but to date there are no concrete proposals

An email was sent out to all members on the 17 of October asking whether any member was willing to attend Murton pavilion for a few hours on a designated day to talk about bees and maybe sell some of their honey or other hive products. To date we have had no replies but further discussions are taking place and we will give more details of what are expected if members are willing to contribute to these open days.

A brief mention of the Yellow Legged Asian Hornet. A concern to our region is that a nest was found at Langton near Malton, quite close to us.

Our best defence is to remain vigilant and keep up the work of educating the public, as quite a few of this year's sightings have been by non-beekeepers.

This year we introduced a Code of Conduct for members. We live in a democracy, and whilst it is right to question what we do, the way we go about that should be balanced and with mutual respect. In the workplace there is legislation we must abide by, such as the Equality Act. Most of our members are mindful of the wellbeing of others and there should be nothing controversial, in this document.

I wish all the members a great festive season, and a short winter with no colony losses!

Hopefully see you all at the Association activities in 2026.

An important reminder about BDI for communal apiary sites

If you keep your bees on a communal apiary, you will need to purchase sufficient cover for all the hives currently on the site and take into account any future increases in stock for all of the beekeepers using the apiary.

JOHN THOMPSON

Many of us are aware that John Thompson died in August.

Thanks to Nigel Davies and Bob Parnaby, for this account of John's life.

John Charles Thompson was born in Hull. His first job was working for National Westminster Bank in their offices based in Leeds. Most of his adult working life was as a bank manager. He emigrated to Canada in the 1970's where he joined the Institute of Canadian Bankers in 1975.

After he retired from banking, John and Doreen moved to Cheshire where they opened two florist shops. They later moved to Claxton in 2000, to be closer to John's father.

John started beekeeping in 2010 and quickly became a committee member and treasurer, combining this with membership secretary duties for York & District Beekeepers, a position he held almost continuously until 2023. During this time, he also oversaw the change in status to a CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organisation), which included totally rewriting the constitution.

John was an active participant in the education and training of many of the new beekeepers learning the craft.

He was a well-liked and respected member of the association until his sudden death on 29 August 2025. He will be much missed.

RIP John.

ON HORNETS AND WASPS

After a tough “wasp year”, Alan has been searching his library for solace!

Some of our members have had a difficult year with wasps. It’s little consolation, but the problem is not a new one.

“Hornets in spring will watch the coming out of the Bees, and destroy them. But as these fierce insects are few in number, and scarce, unless they are nested near the Apiary, they seldom do any great damage.”

“Wasps are extremely dangerous at the latter end of the summer, and in autumn. A Wasp is much stronger than a Bee; so much so that one will disengage himself from two or three Bees, and probably with the death of one or two of them. They are very bold, and will frequently get into a hive in spite of all obstacles, and are the greatest hazard, but are generally either killed or escape loaded with the choicest honey. But when the weather grows so cold that the Bees cannot keep guard, numbers will then get in and devour a great deal of honey, as well as many of the Bees; and should the stock be weak, will totally destroy it.”

Key’s Beemaster 1780.

USING A FLOW HIVE

Thanks to Andrew Raby for sharing his experience of using a Flow hive.

When we kicked-off our family beekeeping journey, we chose to go with an unusual kind of hive which seemed to be attractive, sturdy, and above all, easy to use.

These hives are called Flow Hives, and were launched in Australia in 2015, since when they have swept cross the world with their innovative honey harvesting system, wooden construction and viewing windows (you may have seen the Beckhams showing theirs off on social media, for example).

The brood boxes are fairly standard, but the Flow super has plastic frames, with the plastic foundation already built-up, so that the cells are almost complete. That way the bees can focus on filling and capping the cells, rather than using wax to draw them out from the foundation, and the cells can be manipulated for harvesting.

When the bees have filled the frame, the beekeeper can harvest the honey by inserting a long rod, or “key”, which acts as a lever to displace the two halves of the cells by shifting them slightly. In this way the honey begins to flow out, and down the frame (hence the name!) emerging via small tubes for collection in jars, tubs, or whatever you choose. I use a large container and filter the honey as it comes out, harvesting from 2-3 frames at a time, although you can do more, or fewer, frames at a time.

So, the explanations over, the question is surely: “Does it work?”

Simple answer is yes. The bees seem very happy with the hive - we have had two good harvests, and the bees don’t even notice when the honey is being harvested.

There are also viewing windows in the sides of the supers and panels can be taken from the ends of the hive to give a quick check on honey levels, bee health and numbers etc.

The question I am most asked though, is “What about oil seed rape honey? Does that flow?”

I’m afraid I don’t know the answer to that. We don’t seem to have had any rape seed grown near our hive and so it hasn’t been an issue.

It is certainly better to harvest on a warm day, and to tip the hive slightly to encourage the flow. It can take a couple of hours to harvest a whole frame, plus this year’s wasp explosion meant that fighting them off from the flow of honey was a constant issue! However, being able to take a small amount - or all - of your honey without the bees becoming agitated, or unhappy, is a definite plus.

BEES AND LAWBREAKERS

Bee stings, as we know, can be painful: they are uncomfortable enough when they are the result of our well-intentioned beekeeping but imagine the anxiety arising from the knowledge that you are about to be stung as part of some legal punishment!

The Hittites, a few thousand years BCE, declared that anyone found guilty of stealing beehives was to be flogged, stripped naked, covered in honey and left to be stung to death.

Only in 1817 did the Isle of Man repeal an act which made the theft of a beehive an offence punishable by death.

A WINTER'S TAIL

For those who have forgotten to put on mouseguards, here is some possible help from Kassianos Bassos, a Byzantine Bithynian who lived in the 10th century.

Take slip of paper and write on it these words: I adjure you, O mice, who dwell here not to injure me yourselves nor to permit any other mouse to do so; and I make over to you this field. But should I find you staying here after having been warned, with the help of the mother of the gods I will cut you into seven pieces.

Taken from The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals. EP Evans, published in 1906.

DID YOU KNOW?

The central temperature of the brood-less winter cluster is between 20- 30℃. The bees on the bottom outside of this cluster are kept at around 9℃, should the cluster cool and the bottom temperature drop to 8℃ or below, then these bees will become immobile, fall off the cluster and die.

Once brood rearing starts again, the cluster must be maintained between 32-36℃. Larvae and pupae themselves produce a lot of heat whilst they are growing and during metamorphosis, which is some help to the adult bees.

2025 HONEY SHOW REPORT BY BOB PARNABY

The 2025 Honey show was held on the 15 of October and proved to be a good, well attended event.

We had a similar format to the last couple of years, with registration being held on the day before the Show, which minimises delay during the judging period. I would like to thank Vicki Leaf, Kate Wallace and Matthew Roberts for assistance during registration.

Special thanks to Janet Cole for writing out the prize cards and to Matthew Roberts, Bruno Hannemann and Paul Appleton for setting up the exhibits and stewarding during the judging. Thank you to all the members who brought entries which contributed to a successful evening.

20 members submitted a total of 84 exhibits, 16 of which were in classes 1,2 and 3 for two matched jars per entry so that meant there were 102 individual entries.

Judging started at 5pm and was concluded about 7.30. After the presentations there was time for a short quiz (whilst tucking into the food!). Then there was the chance to view the exhibits and results.

The overall quality of entries was of excellent standard and very few were put aside at first evaluation.

This year's judge was again Peter Lewis who shared his thoughts and advice in a short Q & A after the trophy awards.

HONEY SHOW RESULTS:

The winner of the Bill Bell cup for novices was Andrew Raby.

The John Fuller trophy for a wax block over 1lb was won Bob Parnaby.

The winner of the Johnston Shield for the best exhibit was Andrew Raby for his "Spectacular Russian Honey Cake" in Class 17.

The winner of the David Gray shield for best honey in show was Bruno Hannemann for his two jars of light clear honey in class 1.

The winner of the Alf Race cup for the most points in the show was won by Bruno Hannemann, with Greg Sharp coming second and Ron Clarke in third place.

IVY – HEDERA HELIX

The ivy flowers late in the beekeeping season, usually from September onwards, by which time I, like the hives, am starting to slow down.

I see it year after year but because winter preparations are usually complete by then, I have not paid the plant the attention that I ought.

The ivy flowers usually until the first prolonged cold spell and is a good source of both pollen and nectar. The pollen can vary in colour from a pale brown to a mustard yellow and the nectar is often the last available in the season.

The nectar contains a high proportion of glucose, a monosaccharide sugar which causes the honey made from it to crystallize quickly (similar to oil see rape). Some studies have shown that strong concentrations of the nectar can be responsible for individual bee, and even whole colony deaths. The high glucose contents appear to have crystallized the nectar within the bees' stomach resulting, ultimately, in respiratory failure and death. Assuming a non-fatal concentration of nectar, however, it does tend to have a lower water content than summer nectars, making it more immediately useful as it reduces the need for the bees to fan off excess moisture before storage or capping.

DESTRUCTION OF WASP NESTS

NB. This is how it was done in 1780 – do not try this at home!!

"Wasp nests should be sought out and as many destroyed as possible.

For a trifle, boys will do it by way of diversion. The best method of doing it, is to take half an ounce of gunpowder, wet it just sufficiently to make it stick together to burn without explosion, similar to what the boys call a wild-fire. Put it into a paper, rolled up like a quill, of about a finger's length: leaving one end open. It must be made up a little while

before it is used, or it will grow too dry. A little before night, or very early in the morning, when the wasps are all at home, examine if there are no more passages to their nest than one, and with a clump of sod, stop them all up but one, and have another sod in readiness to stop up that one also. Then with a match, set fire to the end of the squib, thrust it directly into the hole or mouth of the nest, and immediately stop it up with the sod as close as possible that none of the fume may escape. In a few minutes, the wasps will all be suffocated…."

From Keys Beemaster. 1780

COLOUR VARIATION IN POLLEN LOADS

There can be no beekeeper who has not wondered at the range of colours, and the origins of pollen loads collected by the honey bee.

An average-sized colony can use up to 70lbs/30kg of pollen during the course of the season. It is eaten primarily by the younger nurse bees: this triggers the production of brood food in glands in their heads, which in turn is fed to the developing honeybee larvae.

The colour of pollen varies from plant to plant, from the palest cream to the purple/black colour of the poppy. Simple pollen identification charts are readily available which tend to show one colour of the pollen for each named plant, but closer study will show that the same plant can produce significant variation in pollen colour throughout the season, and even over the course of a day.

Pollen may be darker in the morning as a result of dew, or after rain. Lighter colour may be expected in sunny weather, or when a flow has just opened. In turn, traffic and chimney emissions can darken pollen colours, as can the presence of fungal spores from other sources. Even the bees themselves can affect the colour, should they inadvertently bring the pollen into contact with nectar during collection.

Beekeepers should be aware of the nectar and pollen sources within flying distance of their hives. A little study should give an indication of what is being worked at any particular time.

(For book-lovers, "The pollen loads of the honey bee" by Dorothy Hodges is the classic text.)

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.

HIMALAYAN BALSAM GIN

It's a bit late in the year for this recipe, but I will try it next year when the balsam is in flower.

Just a reminder though… the transportation of seeds or whole plants is an offence under the Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order 2019 in England and Wales and Section 14AA of the Wildlife and Countryside Act in Scotland. This means that no seeds or plants should be removed from the site where they currently grow, and sowing seeds or planting elsewhere either deliberately or accidentally would be a particularly serious offence but just removing the flowering heads of the plant should be ok.

You will need:

- 2-litre container of Himalayan balsam flowers
- Grated zest of 4 limes
- 2 dessert spoons white granulated sugar, or to taste
- 1-litre gin
- A "Kilner"-type preserving jar

After removing any green bits showing at the base of the flowers, put them all in the Kilner jar with the lime zest and gin.

Leave it to infuse a dark, cool place for 24 hours.

After 24 hours, strain the gin through muslin into a clean jar, add the sugar and shake to dissolve the sugar. It may take few days to dissolve.

READER'S HIVES

Andrew Raby has begun his beekeeping career with a Flow Hive; you can read the account of his experiences on page 7.

Can honey extraction really be so easy? Maybe it can!