



COMBINGS

The newsletter of the York and District Beekeepers Association



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Summer 2026

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 2026

FRONT PAGE IMAGE

Bill Webster's picture shown on the front cover of this issue was taken on Prince Edward Island, Canada and is a functioning piece of public art which actually contains a bee hive!

Thanks to Bill for sending the photo. A further image from Bill is on the back page.

TWO EDS.

The cold spring of 2026 may well have had an impact on early season queen matings; we await the results.

Last year's very settled weather gave us some very good queens, but the unseasonable weather this time may lead to a run of drone laying queens. There have already been some mating failures.

On the plus side the honey has been pouring in this spring, with brood nests being so congested with nectar and honey there not been enough space for the queen to lay the next generation! Make sure you give your bees enough space and that you keep on "supering-up"; supers provide space for bees to "hang -up" and provide a bit of air space in hot weather.

Each beekeeping season brings a different challenge!

FROM THE CHAIR

Bob Parnaby, YDBKA Chair

I write this on the first day of June, the first day of meteorological summer, and we have just endured the hottest few days that have been recorded in May. Previously the spring weather had been a real mixed bag, with swarm preparations taking place and resultant mating of new queens having very mixed results.

This year's beginners practical programme started on 18 May, and we have already completed the first three sessions.

Our annual auction was held on Saturday 9 of May and we were fortunate that although the forecast wet weather did arrive, it mostly held off for the duration of the auction.

I was not there this year, but I was told it was very successful and the figures are as follows:

- There were 20 sellers with a grand total of 299 lots, including a couple of nucs of bees.
- There were approximately 39 buyers.
- Total hammer prices were £5980.00
- Totalling commission of £598.00 to YDBKA, plus £993.00 receipts for Association lots sold.
- Total profit to the Association, after costs, was approximately £1440.

Renovations and updates to the pavilion at Murton have continued: the removal of the squirrel nest from the roof space resulted in two full “builders’ bags” of material removed. After the damaged ceiling was repaired, the decorating team took over. There is only a little work left to do before the floor is cleaned up and repainted.

Kate Wallace was at Murton on 10 of May and opened the pavilion for visitors to Murton and has a separate report of the proceedings of the day later in this issue.

ROBBING

The robbing of nectar from one colony of bees by another is a problem that most beekeepers will face at some time in their beekeeping career.

Even though large quantities of honey and nectar may be readily available in a nearby hive, bees are reluctant to rob another colony if there is a reasonable supply of forage available in the fields. Robbing is primarily a result of natural shortage rather than a mere convenience, at which time the bees will seek sugar from not only neighbouring hives, but from any source.

The behaviour of bees whilst engaged in robbing has been well described, and can be easily distinguished from that of bees entering their own hive. They appear nervous and “flighty”: rather than flying straight up to and through the entrance, they move laterally from side to side, as though looking for an opportunity to dodge past the guard bees. If robbers are disturbed by the beekeeper, they fly up, in a cloud, but re-settled on the frames once calm returns.

At all times, but particularly during a nectar shortage, the beekeeper should keep to a minimum the opportunity for robbing to begin. Supers should be covered during inspections, hives kept open for the minimum time possible and under no circumstances should unwanted frames be left in the apiary for the bees to “clean up”! Should small colonies require supplementary feeding with syrup, it should be given in the evening when potential robbers are safely at home.

Once robbing has started, however, it can be difficult to stop. The narrowing of entrances may help a little, but a small colony under pressure from robbers may be difficult to save. Moving it may save it but it will be weak and vulnerable wherever it goes: better to move the aggressor if possible.

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.

A DAY AT MURTON

The editor recently responded to Secretary, Andy Marsden's request for members to attend the YDBKA Bee Pavilion at Murton on "big event" days at the Museum. The Museum has asked if we can be there at the bee pavilion a few days each summer, as visitors to Murton are genuinely interested in our craft.

There would be an opportunity to sell honey and talk about bees to members of the public. What's not to like!

The "big event" of this particular day was a vintage vehicle rally.

The day passed quickly as there were quite a number of interested visitors to the apiary (no beekeeping was involved). Many of the children were incredibly well-informed and enthusiastic about pollinators generally.

The adults asked the usual questions "Do you ever get stung?" "Does it hurt?", although one visitor, who had absconded from the vehicle rally, said she was only there to escape the endless talk about carburettors!

There's nothing very taxing in the questions we get asked on such occasions so I would encourage you to support your committee and put your hand up for these events.

And yes, I quickly sold out of honey.

BEE DISEASES INSURANCE LTD. (BDI)

The annual member subscription renewal for YDBKA invites us to add BDI to our renewal cost. What is BDI, and is it worth the cost?

Any member who has been unfortunate enough to have had an outbreak of European Foulbrood (EFB), or even worse, American Foulbrood (AFB), will have experienced the cost of replacing kit that was destroyed by the Bee Inspector as a result of being infected by either of these two notifiable diseases. (There's more on these diseases in the next article.)

There is, thankfully, currently a low incidence of Foulbrood locally, no doubt due to the vigilance of the National Bee Unit's (NBU) inspection regime. Nevertheless, having frames and foundation destroyed, as in the case of EFB being present, can be costly and even more so should AFB raise its ugly head. The whole hive is destroyed, as several beekeepers in West Yorkshire last year found to their cost.

BDI will not cover the cost of any bees destroyed during the course of an outbreak of Foulbrood but it will cover the cost of equipment destroyed by the Inspectorate.

It's worth noting that all colonies on a communal site must be covered by BDI for the insurance to be valid, so if you share a site either permanently or if you've moved your bees for a specific crop (i.e. heather, borage etc.) all individuals must be covered by BDI for the cover to be valid.

Incidentally, BDI now also has a limited contingency fund to cover equipment destroyed following infestation by a notifiable pest, currently Small Hive Beetle (*Aethina tumida*) and *Tropilaelaps*.

The cost of BDI is very affordable and well worth considering at the next renewal date.

BDI website is available at: <https://www.beediseasesinsurance.co.uk>

THE FOULBROOD DISEASES.

As mentioned in the previous article, the instances of American Foulbrood (AFB) and European Foulbrood (EFB) locally are currently low, but this has not always been the case. The York area was, until fairly recently, and EFB “hotspot” and several members of YDBKA were affected. So, what do we need to know? Here is a brief guide.

Both AFB and EFB are legally notifiable diseases. As beekeepers, we have some legal obligations, to read more please see: <https://www.nationalbeeunit.com/bees-and-the-law/legal-responsibility-of-beekeepers>

AFB

American foulbrood (AFB) is caused by a spore-forming bacterium called *Paenibacillus larvae*. AFB is extremely virulent and will kill 100% of infected larvae.

AFB can form spores, which are a dormant form of the bacteria, these are very resilient in the environment and can survive extremes of temperature and humidity. Therefore, AFB spores are difficult to eliminate.

Young honey bee larvae become infected when they consume *P. larvae* spores in their food. The spores germinate in the gut and the bacteria infects the gut tissues, and eventually spreads to the rest of the body.

The infected larvae usually die after their cells are sealed. The bacteria multiplies and millions of infectious spores are formed in their remains. The larval remains eventually dry out to form ‘scales’ that adhere closely to the cell wall and cannot easily be removed by the bees.

Once a colony is infected, the disease will progress until most of the brood is affected. The colony then becomes unable to replace the ageing adult bee population, causing it to become weakened and, finally, to die out.

What to look out for:

AFB generally affects only sealed brood. A good way of remembering this is: AFB:

‘A’ as in ‘After’ the cell is capped

Healthy wax cappings are dry and digestive biscuit coloured. During AFB infection,

cappings become sunken and dark as the larvae inside die.

Cappings become perforated when the adult bees nibble holes in them to try to remove the infected larvae underneath. NB. Do be aware that the presence of perforated cappings alone may indicate other diseases or problems with the colony, such as EFB, sacbrood or parasitic mite syndrome.

Some cappings may become moist or greasy-looking and slightly darker in colour than other cells.

EFB

European foulbrood (EFB) is caused by the bacterium, *Melissococcus plutonius*. The bacteria are a gut pathogen and will kill some of the larvae they infect.

EFB infected larvae lose the healthy, pearly white 'C' shape appearance and the segmentation of healthy larvae. Some larvae appear twisted in their cells and others have the appearance of looking "melted down".

The gut of an infected larva may be visible through its translucent body wall. It has a creamy colour caused by the bacteria living within it. The colour will change from the healthy pearly-white to a dull off-white and will progressively discolour as the disease advances and the gut fills with bacteria. After death, the larval remains will turn brown. Sometimes infected larvae die after they are sealed. When this happens, there may be perforated cell cappings, where the nurse bees have detected the disease and investigated.

As larval decomposition progresses further, the remains dry out and become a rubbery, brown scale, which may be easily removed from the cell.

A heavy infection will lead to a spotty brood pattern will become patchy uneven as the dead brood is removed by the nurse bees.

Control of AFB and EFB is subject to the Bee Diseases and Pests Control (England) Order 2006, and as notifiable diseases they must be reported as soon as possible to the Inspectorate via: nbu@apha.gov.uk.

The phone numbers of both the Regional Bee Inspector and the York area Seasonal Bee Inspector are shown within the listing of useful contact numbers on page 2 of this edition of "Comblings".

BEEBASE

We are fortunate to have BeeBase, which is the free website of the Animal and Plant Health Agency which incorporates the Bee Inspectorate.

BeeBase is packed with valuable information for beekeepers so do make the most of it!

Find it at: <https://www.nationalbeeunit.com/>

A VIEW FROM THE BEGINNERS' THEORY COURSE

Back in the winter, I met Jim Durston in the car park at York College, where he'd been attending this year's beginners' theory course, and he kindly agreed to my request for an article on his thoughts.

Thank you, Jim, for this tongue-in-cheek piece:

Thank you to all the tutors for their expert input on the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of beekeeping.

I now know that the essential kit will require at least a second or third mortgage, or may result in bankruptcy. This of course, is the good scenario. The bad scenario is my wife finding out!

I can look forward to building my hive, safe in the knowledge that my carpentry skills will, at the very least, result in my hitting my thumb with a hammer on multiple occasions.

If I am able to acquire a colony of bees, I need to accept that if I don't check them every week during the season they may swarm and abscond. I will then be left largely bee-less. Even if I manage to prevent the bees from swarming, I will then need to check for EFB, AFB or some other disease that may be around the corner and then I run the risk of my hives being consumed by fire.

The only time I can take a holiday is in the middle of winter, when a wet weekend in Bognor holds little attraction.

Should I reach the stage of selling honey, given the expenditure leading up to this, I will need to sell the honey at a similar cost to that of fifty-year-old malt whisky.

The good news is that if I go down with a bad case of anaphylaxis this will put an end to it, and me!

Just when I thought I was about to enter the Slough of Despond, we were introduced to the delights of mead!! If all else fails, this will, at least, give me something with which to drown my sorrows when the aforementioned problems arrive.

Seriously though, the introductory sessions have been very enjoyable, and the tutors have shared their enthusiasm. Despite all the above, I look forward to becoming a beekeeper.

Thank you.

PREPARE FOR WASP SEASON NOW!

It's an early shout but there won't be another issue of "Combing" until September!

Last year produced an awful lot of wasps and there were many reports of wasps killing honeybee colonies.

Wasp season seems as if it is getting earlier, possibly as a result of climate change. The likelihood is they will start bothering our hives in July.

Once wasps are spotted around your colonies, its time to take action, here's a re-run of the annual advice.

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 and that all is bee-tight and

Whilst we're on the subject of wasps...

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.

If predation by wasps is unmanageable, consider moving the bees to another site, away from the marauding wasp nest.

YELLOW LEGGED HORNET

At the time of writing, there have already been 24 sightings of Yellow Legged (Asian) Hornet (YLH) in 2026. Most of the reports are from members of the public.

Last year's discovery of YLH near Malton was far too close for comfort and no doubt we can expect an incursion into our area very soon. The National Bee Unit ask that all sightings of YLH, be reported via the online form, available on BeeBase or, on download the free Asian hornet Watch app which is available for iPhone or Android devices.

POLLEN STORAGE

Pollen is the main source of protein for a bee colony. A primary function of pollen is the production of "brood food", a milky substance produced in the hypopharyngeal glands of younger, nurse bees and which is then fed to developing honey bee larvae.

After collection by foragers, the pollen is usually stored on the periphery of the brood nest. To prevent the pollen from germinating, the bees add certain enzymes, which also increases its protein content.

Pollen cells being used up by nurse bees for immediate brood food production take on a matt appearance: those earmarked for later use are often covered with a thin layer of honey, and present as shiny. In winter when brood rearing is greatly reduced or ceases altogether, pollen cells are covered with a wax capping for use in spring.

Stored pollen which has been neglected by the bees, or on a frame removed by the beekeeper is at risk from attack from *Bettsia alvei*, a fungus which affects stored pollen. It turns the pollen grey with mould, rendering it unfit for further use by the bees.

DID YOU KNOW?

The queen honeybee can lay up to 2,000 eggs per day at the peak of summer when food is coming into the hive quickly.

In an average hive in the middle of the summer period there could be as many as 9,000 uncapped and 20,000 uncapped cells of brood.

PACKAGE BEES

With heavy colony losses over the recent winter, many beekeepers have sought to increase their numbers again by buying colonies early in the season in the hope of them attaining a reasonable size in time for the summer flow, and subsequent overwintering.

Most purchases will comprise a mated queen, three or so frames of brood, two of stores and bees covering most of the frames. The current prices of such a “nuc” varies from approximately £250-£350, a considerable outlay. There is, however, a less expensive option.

Package bees are sold by weight, usually 2-3lbs or 1-1.5 kg approximately, and comprise the bees and a mated queen, but without frames or brood.

The container in which they arrive usually has a mesh screen top and bottom for ventilation and a caged, mated queen. Some sort of syrup feeder is also included, to sustain the bees in transit.

On receipt, the bees should be further fed by spraying syrup onto the travelling screens, a pint or so will be quickly consumed. The queen and the bees are unlikely to have originated from the

same colony but during transport will have accepted one another. Even so, the immediate transfer of the package contents into the hive is likely to result in the bees choosing to relocate to a nearby up and running hive, leaving just the queen and a reduced number of workers.

Cool weather or light rain at the time of the package installation will help in reducing drift. Better still to transfer the bees late evening: there will be much reduced flying as the sun sets and the bees can orientate themselves the following morning with little drifting.

The package can now be treated as though it were a “shook swarm”, with a brood box of foundation and at least a gallon/4.5 litre of syrup.

A queen excluder, temporarily placed between the bottom of the brood box and the floor and retained until comb is drawn, the queen is laying and the bees have accepted their new home is also a sensible plan. Don't forget to remove it, however, as it will clog up with dead bees and general detritus.

MOVING BEES

Moving colonies of bees from one place to another, be it a short distance or a movement of many miles, should be a relatively easy task provided that a few simple rules are observed.

It is arguably more difficult to move bees shorter distances than longer ones, as many of the flying bees will remember, and return to, their original site. If the beekeeper wishes to move bees only a very short distance, across a garden or apiary, they should be moved about one metre every few days. If there is only one colony in the garden or apiary then it can be moved a little further than a metre, as the bees have but one hive to find, with no other to cause confusion.

As bees can forage up to a distance of about three miles, the movement of a colony anywhere within that range can result in bees returning to their former location. Shorter movements have been covered earlier in this article, but re-locations of one or two miles obviously cannot be managed by incremental movements of a metre at the time. The hive should be moved temporarily four or five miles away and left there for some three weeks or so, and then returned to the desired location.

Preparations for moving bees beyond the garden or apiary are straightforward but should be observed carefully to ensure the colony doesn't suffer injury or even total loss. It is less than ideal to pack up and move a hive all on the same day, as many of the hive's occupants may be out foraging, and thus left behind after the move. Trying to undertake tasks such as attaching hive straps and closing entrances early on the morning of the move is theoretically possible, but the slightest bump or slip will result in large numbers of bees exiting the hive to investigate the disturbance. Far better to carry out the preparatory work a day or so in advance of the intended move, thus reducing the tasks on the day, and keeping disturbance, to an absolute minimum.

A day or so before the move, put the hive straps in position and replace the crown board with a travelling screen. The screen, in conjunction with the now fairly ubiquitous mesh floor, should provide adequate ventilation, (without such ventilation, the colony can overheat to such a degree that the wax combs can melt and the colony drown in a sticky mess!). The entrances should be closed with a foam rubber bung all except the final inch or two and then left until the day of the move before full closure. Depending on the weight and numbers, supers containing bees may need to be travelled separately, with travel screens top and bottom.

On the morning of the move, before the bees are flying, the first job is to close the entrances the last inch or so, before handling any roofs or straps. With the bees safely tucked in, any clumsiness or disturbance will be of no consequence to the beekeeper. Tighten the straps and place the hive in your car or trailer. The top bars of the hive should align to the front and rear of the vehicle, to minimise any lateral "rocking" of the frames which may injure or kill bees.

On arrival at the new site, place the hive on its stand and replace the roof. Loosen the straps if this is necessary to allow the roof to sit correctly. Do not attempt to inspect the hive or replace the travelling screen with the crown board at that time or the bees, agitated and stressed by the move, are likely to give you exactly what they think you deserve! Remove the entrance bung, and once you are satisfied that they are flying, depart and leave them alone until at least the following day.

READER'S HIVES



The picture this time is from Bill Webster's holiday last year in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada. Bill tells me that lots of excellent information boards and Bee friendly planting accompanied these.