



COMBINGS

The newsletter of the York and District Beekeepers Association



Issue No. 96
Autumn 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 December 2026

Front page image: The picture accompanies Andy Marsden’s article on page 9 detailing his experiences with buying in package bees.

TWO EDS.

As last year's winter period proved exceptionally hard on colonies with extremely heavy losses being reported countywide, you will find that much of the content of this edition is devoted to the preparation of our colonies for the forthcoming winter.

We haven't said very much about varroa management this time, but that should be a given for all beekeepers. Don't take your eye off the ball with varroa!

Dr Jane Medwell's article in the September issue of BBKA news is well worth reading carefully. She says "Good beekeepers don't make better decisions because they know more rules; they make better decisions because they notice more".

Do remember to check on your bees regularly during the winter. They will need extra checks after heavy rain, wind and snow. Weather forecasts seem to indicate we are likely to have a lot of rain, so do watch out for flooding if your bees are near a watercourse. We have had members who have had to watch their hives float off along the Ouse!

A new editor or editorial team are required for "Combings" magazine. Please contact the editor if you would be interested in taking on this role.

FROM THE CHAIR

Bob Parnaby, YDBKA Chair

This year's heatwave in May turned out to be the first of several heatwaves; with a resultant lack of rain, it's been a difficult summer, the early season plants finished their flowering very early and some colonies have struggled to find forage due to the lack of moisture in the ground for the plants to access.

On the plus side, the early showing of wasps turned out not to be a bad omen as many beekeepers are reporting that they have not seen many this year so far.

Steve, our membership secretary, has sent out the membership renewal notices in early September and prior to this, you will have received an email noting that the fees have been slightly increased due to BBKA capitation and additional BDI fees have also increased so please take note of the details and take particular care to make any changes required when completing the registration document.

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 14 October.

Honey Show details of which are shown elsewhere in this edition. I do hope it will be successful and I encourage members to enter some exhibits and also attend for the evenings bring and share buffet and quiz.

Two members took the BBKA Basic assessment this year and both passed.

Thanks go to Alan Johnston who took on the task of doing one tutorial prior to the assessments.

Just a note on this year's Yellow Legged (Asian) Hornet, incursions to the UK have been at a lower rate than last year with the latest update (27 August) from NBU that there have

been 157 registered sightings so far and 49 confirmed nests have been found. Although many nests have been in the Southern counties, close to the Channel, there have been individuals sighted in Derbyshire, with a queen starting a prime nest in Chesterfield and a prime nest at Immingham, Lincolnshire, so please be aware and on the lookout for any Hornets on the move. I was contacted by a member in Dunnington who had found a nest in an elder tree: this looked very suspicious on the photo they sent to me. In the end it was identified as a European Hornet, but, unusually, it was in the open and I thought that they generally prefer hollow trees or similar areas. Maybe the hot dry weather made it possible to create this nest in the open!



Finally, as we are reaching the end of our financial year, it means we are only a couple of months away from the AGM, which this year is scheduled for Wednesday 18 November. We have a couple of committee members who intend to stand down this time, so we will have at least three vacancies for new committee members to join. We would welcome any members willing to put themselves forward to assist in the running of the association. If anybody would like to discuss the requirements, please contact any of the existing committee.

CHANGES TO YDBKA EQUIPMENT HIRE

Andy Marsden. Secretary YDBKA

As part of ongoing improvements to our systems, we have altered the way equipment can be hired.

Members can now book and pay for the hire online on the YDBKA website.

Hire periods are Friday to Thursday and the hire can be picked up and returned anytime between these days, as this is now self-service and items can be collected and returned to a locked storage unit in Murton Park. Once you pay for a hire, the location and code for the padlock will be emailed to you.

This new system should make the hire process easier.

NB. As a result of this, hires are no longer managed by the equipment officer email

WANTED

Good quality 2026 Oil Seed Rape honey, which should be set hard. Will swap for an equal weight of this summer's runny honey, cleaned and filtered.

Contact Alan Johnston telephone: 01757 633202.

PREPARATION FOR WINTER, A QUICK GUIDE

FEEDING

The feeding of bees should be carried out for winter rather than in winter, and has been traditionally completed by late September/early October. Changes to weather patterns, however, require beekeepers to be alert and flexible with timings, feeding earlier if the season closes quickly, and later in a warm autumn.

Ivy is a fairly reliable source of both pollen and nectar: it's high glucose content, however, means that it crystalizes quickly and can cause other honey in the hive to set, should they mix. Should it mix with syrup fed late in September, though, it does produce a good winter food.

The recommended weight of stores is 40-50lbs/18k-20kgs for an average sized colony going into winter. A National brood frame full of stores weighs about 5lbs: a super frame weighs about half of that, so a quick calculation should tell you that the colony is likely to need at least a half-full super in addition to whatever stores are in the brood box.

Winter syrup should be thick, to minimize the work required of the bees to reduce its water content to a level where it can be capped. If making it at home, the mix should be 2lbs of white granulated sugar (NOT brown sugar) to 1 pint of water: alternatively, ready-made syrup can be bought from equipment suppliers. It is important that the syrup should be fed and taken down rapidly, ripened and capped all within the space of a week or so.

STORAGE OF SUPERS

This is a subject guaranteed to cause gentle disagreement amongst beekeepers. The main concern, of course, is that the supers, no longer protected by bees, will be a target for wax moth.

Historic chemical treatments, such as PDP crystals and Certan, are no longer approved due to them leaving residues in the wax. Glacial acetic acid is a highly effective pre-winter treatment but it is a potentially dangerous chemical which requires very careful handling and stringent safety precautions.

Freezing the frames in a refrigerator or old chest freezer for 24/48 hours may be more manageable for some: stacking the boxes outside of a building, rather than inside, in the hope of a cold winter is practiced by others.

In reality, most beekeepers over-winter their supers without any form of prior treatment. "Wet" supers (i.e. not given back to be bees to clean up after spinning off the honey) will discourage wax moth, as the larvae find it more difficult to get through the stickiness: there are concerns about the remaining honey fermenting in the frames over the winter, but I have never noticed any adverse effects when they go back on the hives in spring.

A mouse-proof top and bottom to each stack of supers (such as a travelling screen or queen excluder) is essential, and many beekeepers place a large single sheet of newspaper between each super to prevent vertical movement of any wax moth larvae which may have been in the stack. I am testing the suitability of sheets of Corex (corrugated plastic) instead of newspaper this winter. It is stronger than newspaper and can be sponged down for re-use if it has been interleaving wet supers.

Remember to check your stacked supers a few times over winter to make sure they are free from wax moth.

MOUSE GUARDS

Mouse guards should be pinned across the hive entrance before the weather turns colder, and not afterwards. This should prevent mice seeking shelter within the hive.

Ensure that you haven't locked in, rather than locked out, any mice. (A gentle sweep of the floor with a long stick inserted through the entrance should indicate the presence of mice, or otherwise).

QUEEN CHECK

Consider uniting smaller colonies to your better queens: in beekeeping, bigger is better going into winter. Be alert to drones still flying in late September and early October as it may indicate a failing queen who is beginning to turn drone-layer. There is an article on uniting hives on page 7.

VENTILATION

Bees are highly unlikely to die from cold in the UK (unless it is a small colony) but they are quite likely to die from damp which cannot escape from the hive. Ignore advice from those who would wrap hives in cling-film, and insulate them with everything from polystyrene sheeting to old woolly jumpers. Gentle ventilation, particularly at the top of the hive, is necessary to allow the escape of water vapour from the winter cluster. An open feed hole in the crown board will suffice, and the insertion of four matchsticks to lift the crown board slightly above the hive body is an old favourite.

HIVES

These should be sound and waterproof. If the entire unit is not strapped together, then at least the roofs should be weighted down with bricks or similar. I strap all mine to the hive stands for further stability, and in one apiary which is particularly vulnerable to winter gales, wooden props are pushed into the ground and wedged under the hip of the roof, and have proved to be essential more than once.

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.

DID YOU KNOW?

Thanks to Andy Marsen who sent in this timely advice.

A simple way to reduce the chances of hives being attacked by wasps is as follows:

Cut some conduit it to the same length as a hive entrance and then cut small ventilation holes in the front and a larger one in the back, the hole in the back should be big enough to let bees through.

Bees tend to work out what to do within minutes, whereas the wasps don't - even if the wasps do get in the sides of the conduit, the guard bees have a much better chance to protect the entrance.

UNITING COLONIES

Every colony of bees, regardless of size, has its own unique odour, created from a combination of bees, brood and forage.

Bees from a particular colony can differentiate between their own nest-mates and those bees from another colony.

When there is a shortage of pollen or nectar, this awareness of “strangers” is heightened, with an increase in the number and alertness of guard bees. Whatever the reason behind a decision to unite colonies, an awareness of the abundance, or otherwise, of stores is necessary. In times of shortage, feeding both colonies prior to the unite is a sensible precaution.

The factors resulting in a decision to unite can be broadly divided into:

- a. Queen issues
- b. Colony size.

Queen issues can include an ageing, failing queen, a poor mating, aggressive progeny, or susceptibility to disease.

Colony size can be a concern at any time of the season, but action is particularly important at this time of year as, all other things being equal, one large colony has more chance of surviving the winter than two smaller ones.

The temptation is often to retain numerous small colonies rather than fewer larger ones, in the hope that at least some will survive the winter. Should you choose this option, prepare to be disappointed.

Workers have the capacity to lay eggs, although, as they are incapable of mating with drones, any eggs laid by them can only ever be unfertilized, resulting in drone brood. The trigger for workers to begin laying eggs is the absence of both a queen and her brood for several weeks. The absence of these two sets of pheromones causes some workers to begin laying

and when this happens, the colony will regard itself as queen-right and will react aggressively to any attempt to impose another queen on it, e.g. by way of a unite.

If you are considering uniting a queen-right colony to one which has been queen-less and brood-less for some time, consider the likelihood of it becoming, or already being, a “laying worker” colony. If it has reached that stage, any attempt to unite it with a queen-right colony will fail.

If your manipulation involves starting with two queen-right colonies, remove the unwanted queen, and then wait 20-25 minutes before bringing the two sets of boxes in contact with one another.

This is long enough for the de-queened colony to recognize the loss due to the absence of queen pheromone but not long enough for them to get “creative”, and to start thinking about raising replacement queen cells.

The traditional method is to separate the two boxes with a single sheet of newspaper. (Broadsheet newspapers, such as the Telegraph and the Yorkshire Post are large enough not to require the joining of two separate sheets).

Being porous, the newspaper allows the two differing sets of colony scents to mingle before the bees encounter one another, having chewed through the newspaper. A few small nicks in the paper with a corner of the hive tool helps to initiate the process. I also separate the two colonies by a queen excluder, either above or below the newspaper. It in no way impedes the uniting process but it means that when I next inspect the colonies to confirm the success, or otherwise, of the unite, I know in which brood box the queen will, hopefully, be found.

The final and potentially most problematic issue is which brood box goes on top of the newspaper and which below it.

There are a number of factors to consider: is the site of the unite that of the queen-less or the queen-right colony; which colony is the largest; which colony is the most aggressive etc.? The primary concern is the safety of the queen: what must be avoided is a small, gentle queen-right colony in the bottom box on the site of a queen-less, potentially aggressive colony, flying in numbers into its own brood box site, only to encounter a "foreign" queen.

She will not survive.

Always placing the queen-right colony above the newspaper is a sensible approach, she will not encounter the queen-less bees until the newspaper has been breached and colony odours have mingled.

Where there is still greater concern, consider placing her in a queen cage, even within her own brood box. Close the entrance of the queen cage with fondant. This will further delay direct contact with the queen-less bees and increases the chances of success.

PACKAGE BEES. PART 2.

Following the article on package bees in the summer edition of "Combings", we are grateful to Andy Marsden who has sent in this account of his experience with buying package bees earlier this year.

It was a dark night at Wetherby service station when the lorry containing the bees turned up. Each of these boxes contained worker bees, and a pheromone to stop them worrying about being queen-less, however, due to the strength of the pheromone, the boxes had other bees on them that had been attracted by it!

Our first job was to remove these extra bees before we could put them into the car safely for transport. We were given the queens separately.

We then had a drive home and put the packages in the garage. We sprayed some water over the packages to ensure the bees were sufficiently hydrated before leaving them to settle overnight.

The next day we took the boxes to the apiary and put them in a double brood box. The bottom box empty, the next had frames of foundation, then a crown board and then feeding boxes - the package bees will need up to 10 litres of syrup to "get going".

The pheromone was then removed (this can be used for swarm boxes etc. as it can be placed in a bag and kept in the freezer until it is needed).

The queen was then introduced. The bees should then be left for seven days without disturbance.

Then check the feeder and remove the bottom brood box and the original package - this has a feeder tin in it that you can empty into your feeder. If all is good, then you have a package bee success story!

I had to get some replacement queens but all are good now and building out the supers, so if you want to try this as an alternative to buying local nucs, it may be worth it.

HONEY SHOW WEDNESDAY 14 OCTOBER 2026

Space restricts the information we can include here. For full details of the Show please see the YDBKA website (yorkbeekeepers.com).

The Honey Show is open to paid up members of the York and District Beekeepers Association, for the fiscal year, which begins 1 October.

The honey and wax used in exhibits shall be from the exhibitors' own bees.

Points will be awarded to prize winners thus:

3 points to the winner of each class, 2 points will go to second place and 1 point to third place.

The judge's decision will be final.

Entries will be accepted from 15.30 to 19.15 on Tuesday 13 October at Murton Park but it is expected that any late entries could be submitted in a short window on Wednesday 14th between 15:30 to 16:30 only.

Judging will begin by 17:00 hrs at the latest, on the show day to ensure an early completion which will coincide with the start of the bring and share buffet.

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES.

- Class 1. Two matching jars Honey light clear.
- Class 1a. One jar Honey light clear. Novice.
- Class 2. Two matching jars Honey medium clear.
- Class 2a. One jar Honey medium clear. Novice.
- Class 3. Two matching jars Honey dark clear.
- Class 3a. One jar Honey dark clear. Novice.
- Class 4. One jar Honey naturally set. Not stirred.
- Class 5. One jar Honey soft set.
- Class 6. One jar Heather honey.
- Class 7. Jar of honey presented as for sale.
- Class 8. 8 oz. cut comb.
- Class 9. Dry mead.
- Class 10. Sweet mead.
- Class 11. Block of beeswax less than 1 lb.
- Class 12. Block of beeswax more than 1 lb.
- Class 13. Plain moulded beeswax candle. Minimum dimensions to be 1½ in diameter and 3" high. (Excluding the wick).
- Class 14. Beeswax candle. Any shape or size or method of production.
- Class 15. One shallow frame suitable for extraction.
- Class 16. Honey cake made to the standard recipe.
- Class 17. Honey cake to your own recipe.
- Class 18. Any item made from Hive products please make sure entries are described and labelled correctly.
- Class 19. Any beekeeping related photograph.
- Class 20. Novice category see notes for details. 1 jar of any honey minimum weight of honey 227g

NOTES FOR THE CLASSES

Classes 1 to 6 – To be in 1lb round squat honey jars.

Class 7 – Can be any shape or size. Classes

9 and 10 – To be shown in 26 oz clear glass bottles of round section, with rounded shoulders. White flanged corks to be used.

GENERAL NOTES

- The Honey Show is open to paid-up members of the York and District Beekeepers Association, for the fiscal year which commences on the 1 October.
- A novice is a person who has taken up beekeeping since the start of the previous year's beekeeping season i.e. April 2025.
- Novices may also enter classes 4 to 19 on equal terms with experienced exhibitors.
- Only one entry per person per class.
- Candles entered in classes 13 and 14 may be lit at the judge's discretion. The honey and wax used in exhibits shall be from the exhibitors' own bees.
- Points will be awarded to prize winners thus: 3 points to the winner of each class, 2 points will go to second place and 1 point to third place.
- The Bill Bell cup will be awarded to the entrant with most points awarded in the Novice classes, namely 1a, 2a and 3a.
- The John Fuller Trophy will be awarded to the winner of Class 12. (Block of beeswax more than 1lb).
- The Johnston Shield will be awarded for the best exhibit in the show.
- The Alf Race Memorial Cup will be awarded to the member with the most points in the show.
- The judge will decide on the best Honey in the show, regardless of the class entered in, and the winner will be awarded the David Gray Memorial Shield.
- NB. The recipe for the Class 16 standard Honey cake is shown on the website.

READER'S HIVES



We have a picture this time of what turned out to be a successful paper unite.

Thank you to our contributor, who prefers to remain anonymous.