

Sussex Beekeepers Association Brighton & Lewes Division



DECEMBER 2009

www.chelifer.com/bees

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**Next meeting Wednesday 16th December
"Beekeepers Question Time" - Lionel Reuben**

A three part evening:-

- 1 What are you looking at?
- 2 A short quiz (pencil & paper useful).
- 3 Ask the experts-your questions answered.

The evening will conclude with our usual tea/coffee but with Christmas fare and raffle. Please bring something to eat and a raffle prize, don't forget to bring a question for the experts!

We are pleased to note that Harveys Brewery have donated two bottles of wine from their fine collection.

Last meeting "Alternative Hives" 18th November

Penny Crowder from the Natural Bee Trust www.naturalbeekeepingtrust.org

The meeting attracted much attention from members of our division and other divisions. There follows three reports from different view points. No apologies for lengthy coverage Having read these articles and wish to raise any points I would welcome your comments for the next or subsequent newsletters. Ed

One hesitates to open a report on a charming lady's enthusiasm and love for bees which I truly share,

by casting aspersions but there was a feeling amongst the audience that years of beekeeping experience has led to bees having survived with man's co-operation whereas mamby-pambying would almost certainly have led to their extinction. To wit "you have to be cruel to be kind"

So now our eyes have been opened to the wonderful work that the Natural Beekeeping Trust is doing. There are oases for bees, like Penny's →

Bee Sanctuary and one I was privileged to visit was on the Calf of Man where Beo Cooper of the British Isles Beekeepers Association was rearing queens where the drone population could be controlled. Others, mainly for queen rearing, existed in valleys in Switzerland, Russia and China but without the efforts of Mendel, Bro. Adam, Roberts of the I.O.W. and hosts of others we would never have been able to compare the respective merits of Caucasian, Italian, British black, Carniolan, Ligurian and other races of honeybee. In many cases we should look at the changes in our environment rather than wonder why man seems to be being unkind to his pets (bees)

Penny was right in saying that clipping a queen's wing was a self-defeating activity. Also that retaining their warmth was important. That's one reason for 'long-idea' hives being used in warm climates so that heat can escape while the vertical arrangement is adopted in Russia and other cold climates. The importance of cover cloths should also have been mentioned. But put your fingers into a swarm out in the open – they are warm. On the subject of insulation whether in a square or round hive the bees are the best packing for bees. Langstroth (good business man) was given credit for movable frame hives, foundation and such like but because of these assets bees could be kept healthier and managed more carefully than in the days when skeps had to be held over a brimstone fire in order to extract their honey.

The splendid jars of crystal clear, golden honey (see 'Bee Movie') would not please Penny nor most of us when it comes to the goodness of virgin combs of honey but to deny the advantages of using queen excluders results in getting brood in honey supers and that is not on. It surprised me to learn that Penny had not heard of W. Bielby's book extolling the virtues of allowing the bees to build catenary comb within a National brood chamber.

'Let-alone' beekeeping has been advocated by lots and not on account of laziness. Supers on, supers off - otherwise leave them to themselves. But bees are

needed for pollination and that did not seem to be relevant to the Trust's approach any more than the need for migratory beekeeping or helping Kent to remain a centre for fruit production. To say bees are healthier if left alone belies the waves of trouble, like the Isle of Wight disease, or the plagues of foul brood and now Varroa that have ravaged their way across Britain in the past.. On feeding, stress should have been laid on the fact that a bee's gut is able to cope with that chemical, pure white sugar, and at times this has been an essential life-saver. Camomile is repulsive to bees who have never in my experience been seen on it and the use of salt is a strange one, why not a pinch of tartaric acid?

Drone shortage or lack of virility – well this does clash with our efforts to manage Varroa but the great web of radio and electric waves that sweep through all of us, the poisons inflicted in the interest of larger, more profitable crops, are reasons for this too. Overcrowding and drifting are problems in big apiaries but one honey farmer told me "Well they're all my bees whichever hive they put honey into". So: too many hives in an unsuitable area can of course be wrong, though at the heather or in Eucalyptus forests of Australia' you can hardly put in too many hives! I should have mentioned that my plastic Langstroth supers have been in use since the 60's. Of course there are plastics and plastics. Useful for gears on an extractor but not always good for the storage of honey.

To let bees build downwards is no new idea but warmth rises and bees respond to working upwards simply because heat rises. Long deep combs are undoubtedly enjoyed by bees but when they are forced into sections or build horizontal combs under floor boards this only shows that they are very adaptable creatures

Thank you Penny, it was a mutual exchange of ideas in most pleasing circumstances, but as with all of us we should heed the saying, "Go to the ant thy sluggard. Study its ways and be wise"

Ken Stevens

Here is a members account of the evening.

Lots of people attended this interesting and stimulating talk, including several from other divisions, the fact that Lyn did not put the cat out until gone 10.20pm is evidence of the interest and discussions aroused by Penny's talk.

She first gave a bit of history; the NBKT was formed in spring 2009 and although primarily East Sussex based it has attracted a lot of interest countrywide. Rudolf Steiner's 1923 book, *Bees*, is fundamental to their movement. They have held courses and are setting up a bee garden at Plaw Hatch biodynamic farm in West Sussex, to demonstrate and encourage natural beekeeping by keeping bees in hives which they believe allow the bees to live more naturally, without exploiting them for honey. Penny pointed out that in ancient times most of the hives (pottery, logs etc) were round and that natural wild comb is round and the cluster etc. is round. Manipulations have been carried out for millennia, citing Aristotle writing

about clipped wings and Virgil mentioning disease such as foul brood, but that clay pots and skeps did not allow examination of the combs. She thought disease was not widespread until more recent times. Langstroth invented the first removable frame hive although the first patent for moveable frame was made in 1600's. With the Industrial Revolution the attitude to bees and other animals was to control and make a profit from and use in the service of mankind. More information and pictures of the hives can be found on www.themelissagarden.com/beekeeping.htm

Then came the more controversial part of her talk, which produced several questions and comments from the floor, by discussing procedures where the natural beekeepers differ from conventional, trying to demonstrate that most of these are for our benefit alone and not the bees.

First the use of frames she said compromised communication around the colony using vibration. She did not mention that much communication is thought to be via chemical messages. Certainly →



Penny with her list of benefits Us/Bees (Jonathan Coote of Eastbourne Division kindly holds up the list for her).



After the talk a chance to see the various hives.

the bees produce a beautiful catenary shaped comb when unrestrained, the difficulty in handling such delicate combs is not a problem as they do not believe in opening hives.

I think we were all agreed that commercial wax foundation can harbour dangerous chemicals, such as miticides and pesticides brought in from crops, there is plenty of evidence and data for this, but to say beeswax foundation is alien to bees...? Not using foundation means they cannot extract honey but just take off occasional frames for cut comb. A speaker from the floor said that her bees had been given the option of frames either with foundation or without foundation and they had built on the foundation only. It was agreed that this was because the bees still need a 'starter' of wax or strip of foundation to get them to build. A question was asked why the bees draw out wax across a full frame and not just a round area if that's what they prefer. The answer that they had lost their instincts in recent years did not explain why feral colonies in compost bins making lovely round combs, converted rapidly to filling square frames when moved into conventional hives. Much heated debate ensued.

Natural beekeepers disagree with weekly inspections; they prefer to let them swarm (depending on where they are). Regular opening lets the warmth and 'vapours' out, which could take up to two weeks to restore. Certainly warmth and correct humidity is important to bees but I found 2 weeks difficult to swallow. No data was offered to support the claim that natural comb requires three times less energy to heat than moveable frames. That the hive would lose its antiseptic qualities when opened is also open to debate.

Clipping queens is thought disrespectful and could damage the queen causing the workers to replace her.

The use of sugar syrup to feed is not common, as they tend to leave enough honey on the hive for the bees, in an emergency a mix of honey and syrup is preferred, with a bit of chamomile tea and a pinch of salt. I was not aware that granulated honey e.g. ivy, rape, went runny in the spring, it is more likely that the bees bring in water to dissolve it. Pollen supplements are not used, as they are usually soya and have very

little pollen.

It was reassuring to hear that they do use Apiguard against varroa, which apparently they do not suffer from much. It beats me how they can know the status of varroa if they only open the hive once a year and don't have mesh floors in the Warré.

The queen excluder is not used in natural beekeeping; they don't practice artificial insemination or routine requeening or drone culling. Noises from the floor indicated that several people who had used drone culling in the past had not done so this year, possibly due to the concern about reduced numbers and quality of drone. Natural beekeepers consider that conventional beekeeping is forcing the bees to produce lots of honey. This is a bit strong as so much is down to weather, available forage, disease etc that much of our time must be spent with our fingers crossed as to the honey crop. I am sure most of our bees overwinter on a mixture of honey and syrup.

Because of the reduction in natural forage; wild flowers, flowering hedges, hay meadows, it is not possible to put as many hives in an apiary as in the past. Shortage of forage leads to stressed bees which can lead to increased disease.

There was a bit of discussion about plastic hives which are becoming popular. Certain plastics give off chemicals, are not breathable and the insulation properties are not as good as wood. Personally I don't think you can beat cedar, and wild bees certainly like tree holes, but they are also quite happy to colonise black plastic compost bins, and other weird manmade structures, so can we really say what the bees prefer? Should we presume we know what is best for bees? I should like to see an experiment where a variety of empty hives are set up and then see which one bee swarms move into of their own choice.

Penny brought 3 types of hive which created great interest; all based on the top bar principle. They provide a bar from which the bees can build a comb without retaining side bars and without the use of foundation. The Warré hive is quite small being only about 30cm square and 21cm deep, painted with eco-paint. The normally nailed narrow top bars were instead located on nails through holes so the bee →

inspectors could look if necessary. The 'coverboard' was a frame of stiffened sacking and a box with insulation such as straw or wool is normally put on from autumn until April. The Warré did not have a mesh floor, they only open the hive once or twice a year, to put new boxes on the bottom and take off the top ones. These top boxes have honey in comb previously used for brood, the thought of dark cut comb with bee moultings in clearly put some people off. The queen is supposed to move down into the new box. This puzzles me as the Bailey comb exchange normally has the new box of foundation above the brood box as bees are supposed to draw out new wax better in the warmth above the brood, the time I put my new box below the old one the bees did not want to know.

The other two were long hives; the Kenyan top bar with wide bars touching so when the lid is removed nothing could be seen of the colony, with hive sides sloping inwards and following more closely the line of natural curved comb. The other was a German-designed one-room-hive (or Golden Hive) based on the 'golden mean' philosophy with vertical sides. This hive was very deep with frames with side bars which, without measuring, looked nearly twice as deep as they were wide. Frames with remains of wax comb suggested that bees had not built combs to the bottom and seemed to me to be too deep for the catenary or inverted arch shape of wild comb. The mesh floor was also not like normal mesh, being a sheet with holes

more widely spaced than standard mesh or wire, so mite drop and ventilation would be less. One feature which I was really taken by was the glass windows in the sides of all these hives which on removing the insulated cover, enabled you to view what was happening to the edges of the frames. Essential if the hives are not opened up.

A conventional beekeeper would wholeheartedly agree with several aspects of the natural beekeepers philosophy, such as reduced chemical use, only treating when there is a problem, keeping the right number of hives for the available forage, the worry of chemicals in foundation. I suspect few amateurs have ever tried AI, and many are happy to have a two year old queen or allow supersedure. Not all clip queens, cull drones or use plastic hives but to tar us all with the same brush, I suspect, increases polarisation of views. There are some areas I would like to see data on, some research, before being convinced that bees are better off without frames. Data that preservation of heat and humidity by not opening regularly outweighs the annoyance to neighbours caused by swarms and of loss of bees to swarms. And I remain concerned that the potential build up of varroa and disease through not opening the hive risks disease spreading to neighbouring apiaries. It is a nice concept to promote the welfare of bees and I look forward to research and data demonstrating that top bar hives truly lead to healthier, less stressed bees.

Here is a third perspective of the evening from a new beekeeper

From my perspective as a new beekeeper I found the talk given by Penny on the principles of the Natural Beekeeping Trust thought provoking. During her introduction she observed that in the 1850's beekeeping practices came under the influence of Victorian demands for greater efficiency, a trend continued to the present day, noting that this has coincided with the significant destruction of many bee colonies. She went on to challenge many of the conventional practices, pointing out that bees choose the interior of their hive to be dark, any light therefore must be unwelcome, and that every time the hive is opened, the healthful atmospheric ambience the colony has created is destroyed, the bees are stressed, which over time makes them less resistant to disease. To this end she cautioned against weekly inspections, even during the swarming period - swarming being a natural process and disrupting it unnecessary, little ingenuity being called for to capture a swarm. Prevention by clipping the queen's wings was condemned absolutely. And sacrificial drone culling could be causing all sorts of damage to the gene pool. I could not help but think that if the bees were in the audience they would be bound to agree. And this led on to the crux of the matter, Honey.

Penny insisted that the use of sugar syrup should only be used in extremis, not as substitute for the bees' honey. In a truly natural state the bees would be able to select an ideal location for their home, where there was varied forage, and certainly they would not

be influenced by the easy pickings of monoculture, they would also likely choose one with a water source nearby. The resultant stores would contain fluid, as well as granulated honey, the bees' diet, and environment benefitting from the availability of this rich and complex substance. Penny continued that we often put hives too close together in places convenient to us, so we don't have to walk too far to get the honey back to the car/kitchen. She advocated taking minimal amounts, ideally only the true surplus at the start of the Spring nectar flow, and made the case that honey should be considered a more valuable, precious and luxury foodstuff, consumers prepared to pay more and savour honey in smaller amounts.

The rectangular shape of, and use of mass produced imprinted sheets of foundation was condemned as interfering with a colony's communications in the hive, as well as introducing potential contaminants. The argument against plastic hives was at one point countered by a member of the audience, stating that he had often picked up swarms from peoples plastic compost bins, even plastic buckets. I couldn't help but wonder though - a scout bee chancing upon a nice hollowed out log in an undisturbed area, and a designed plastic box in the same locale, which would it select? Sadly nowadays there is rather a dearth of fallen logs. But until such a choice is provided, can we really be sure. Initially when the bee sanctuary was mentioned, (currently being cleared by 3 very happy pigs) I was dismissive of the idea as being on rather flaky, knit your own yoghurt, sort of territory, but later discussing it with my oh so pragmatic husband, he was interested enough →

be determined to try it at home, and so am keen to learn more. Likewise alternative hives, I would have been interested to hear more, including reasons for.

Whatever is causing the failure of so many bee colonies remains conjecture, so although I remain as wary of the instant expert who has read all the 'right

books' as one who cites years of experience instead of reasoned argument, believe it is of crucial importance we have the debate, with open minds, prepared to face the possibility of error, for it makes it a safer place from which to discard those ideas that are merely fancy.

Food For Thought – TRH

Very little to do in the apiary this month, just check the mouse guards and wood pecker precautions are in place. Do get used to hefting the hive to assess the stores as yet there should be very little weight loss. Bakers' fondant is quite useful on late swarms or over wintered neuc's when the little colony could not take sufficient stores down before the weather turned cold or even on suspect hives you think may

have low stores. Brood boxes can be given a coat of Creosote or Cuprinol when the bees are not active, this may also help to deter any creature that wants to get into the bees nest for the high protein food. Badgers and woodpeckers can be quite a problem through the winter months particularly if the weather turns very cold and the ground is frozen.

Varroa monitoring and treatment

If you have been monitoring the varroa drop from your colonies by putting the insert in under the mesh floor for a week and counting the mites, then you may wish to use a treatment of organic acid. Bear in mind that a one-off mite drop count may not be very accurate; it is a good idea to monitor regularly to get a trend for your colony.

If you are dropping more than 2 mites day it would be a good idea to treat them now. Most people use Oxalic acid as it can be dribbled easily into the occupied space between frames, others might use Lactic acid but this needs to be sprayed on the bees

by taking each frame out, so is more dangerous to us and very disturbing to the bees, some of which may die from being chilled. Amanda Millar (amanda.millar@tiscali.co.uk) has a selection of information and data sheets she can email you if you request her, also see the Oxalic acid cleansing leaflet on the BBKA website: www.britishbee.org.uk/information_leaflets.php. The Beebase website has a leaflet on Varroa Management www.secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/public/Advisory/advisory.cfm Oxalic acid already made up, or as crystals, can be obtained from Paynes Southdown Beefarms at Hassocks.

Bees and Christmas - Ken Stevens

May I start with this poetic extract:



Marriage, birth and buryin'
News across the seas
All you're sad and merry in,
You must tell the Bees.
Tell 'em coming in an' out
Where the fanners fan,
'Cause the Bees are just about
As curious as a man!

Rudyard Kipling's *The Bee Boy's Song* (extract)

The social life of bees and physical things associated with them go right back to the origins of man. As Christmas approaches it seems appropriate to let our minds go back to the Holy Land. Please understand I am agnostic and not a worshipper.

Mary the Jewish mother of Jesus probably used honey in the kitchen and her son made reference to the eating of honeycomb. Their land was under Roman occupation and who were well acquainted with the value of honeybees. Beeswax was even more important than honey and a Roman governor might use a wax-covered plate, mark it with a sharp instrument to send a message. Having read it the recipient would melt the wax surface and inscribe a reply.

But wax was used in many other ways: for the sealing of wine amphorae, making of models, candles, for lubrication, preservation of wood and leather.... it

was a valuable tradeable commodity.

Candles not only gave light but were marked with lines of burning time to act as clocks. For centuries only the purest wax candles were used in churches but gradually, through subsequent Papal encyclicals, increasing amounts of other waxes were incorporated. The flame of a beeswax candle is beautiful. It has a purity associated with the purity of Jesus and points steadily upwards to heaven. But the hymn using the words "with smoke ascending like a prayer", does not apply to beeswax candles because they are relatively smoke-free and emanate a lovely aroma.

A Christmas Eve Tale

The family were around the fireside; contentedness, smiles and laughter produced an ethos, tranquil like a world of dreams. Great Grandad (Tom) who had worked with bees all his long life, was enthralled by his great grandchildren by telling them about things that go on in a honeybee's nest. Esmeralda, his favourite, who dearly loved all living creatures, looked incredulously at Tom who was explaining how in warm lands the Death's head hawk moth had developed a special propensity for honey. Even its tongue (most moths have long curled ones) was shaped to help it upload honey. "Yes", he said, "it has many cunning tricks to help it gain entry to a hive". By fanning in unison with the fanners it absorbs the odour of the hive. Then,

sneaking past the guards, it goes to work. Only when it tries to steal away again is it likely to be accosted. However it is able to squeak with a note that is so akin to that of a virgin queen's 'piping' that the bees around it stand as if frozen.

Their decorations included of course holly and ivy both of whose flowers yield nectar and pollen. Esmerelda's mother had sweetened their dry wine with honey. She'd used honey too to baste the turkey. Tom brought out his extra special mead. Ordinary mead deep frozen and then allowed to melt and drip in the refrigerator until all its alcohol had been separated producing a rich fortified mead.

Esmerelda was longing for the moment when her Greatgrandad would take her out on this frosty night to post a note to the hive saying, "Happy Xmas dear Bees". So, suitably clad, off they went crunching through the frosty grass along a path which in summer would have been shoulder-high with nettles and bestrewn with blackberry fronds ready to trip one up when carrying a full super. Tom paused and looked up into the clear sky, besprinkled with

stars. Venus had gone down but Jupiter shone with unremitting brightness as planets do, looking almost as challenging as Sirius our brightest star but that twinkling giant was well below the horizon. As he crunched along his thoughts drifted to the words of the carol "Mark my footsteps good my Page; tread thou in them boldly, thou shalt find the winter's rage, freeze thy blood less coldly. He told Esmerelda that the ancients used to decide when to put supers on and when to harvest according to the position of the stars. The air was clear and sharp and the hive looked so quiet and almost forlorn. They had taken a home-made stethoscope and gently held it against the hive. Esmerelda could only make out a subdued humming but suddenly she said they're singing a carol I'm sure, but Tom smiled, what you can hear is the neighbour's television you know. Kissing the little note Esmerelda slipped it carefully under the roof conveying the family's good wishes to the bees.

Lets go back now we've that quiz to do and those paper models you wanted to strengthen with liquid wax.....

Divisional Diary Winter/Spring Programme 2009/10

Winter/Spring meetings are held monthly on Wednesday evenings at St Thomas's Church Hall, Cliffe High Street, Lewes (7.30 for 7.45pm). Summer meetings are held at our divisional out-apiaries at Whitelands and Plumpton (downloadable maps available at www.chelifer.com), as well as at members' apiaries and those of other divisions; summer meetings start at 2.30pm (bring a mug for tea and something to share to eat).

16th December 2009 - **Beekeepers Question Time**, Chairman - Lionel Reuben.

20th January 2010 - **AGM and Hives Save Lives** - Linda Whitby.

17th February 2010 - **Queen Failure** - Alan Byham.

17th March 2010 - **Swarm Control** - David Rudland.

Occasionally Dates and Venue's do change - check out the diary/newsletter at chelifer.com

Non-members are welcome.

The Brighton & Lewes Division of the Sussex Beekeepers Association cannot accept any responsibility for loss, injury or damage sustained by persons in consequence of their participation in activities arranged

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