Brighton & Lewes Beekeepers

A DIVISION OF THE SUSSEX BEEKEEPERS' ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER APRIL 2024

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

You don't need me to tell you it's been raining and raining and raining for the last month or more. The bees have been largely confined to quarters while HM is continuing to increase her egg-laying rate. I'll leave the details to the experts here—but feeding is crucial!

Bit of focus on domestic matters now: it was a bit weird as I was compiling page 4. For the four years I've been editing the newsletter, that page has included the Chairman's column plus my Asian hornet report. However, we've no Chair this year, so no wise words from the top. Something must be done!

Elsewhere in the issue, we've a report on Pam Hunter's talk that she gave us recently, all about poisonous honey. Who knew? When you consider that honey is perceived as being one of the most benevolent foodstuffs out there, it came as a bit of a shock to me to discover that—in some places—that marvellous product of the hive might be seriously bad for you. In some places ? Fortunately, in the UK, there's little to fear. I think: Pam did provide us with a list of native plants that produce obnoxious nectar…

Further on, you'll find a report on the excellent *Introduction to Beekeeping* full day organised by our training co-ordinator Jude New. I'm only sorry I wasn't able to be there to help but it looks like everyone had a fun and useful time.

And we also present a feature on Honey Shows: how they started, what goes on behind the scenes and how you can make good use of them—like winning a prize of two, perhaps. There's lots of good tips in there, including criteria for making candles, wax wraps, cakes of wax (not edible!) and of course honey.

Asian hornet awareness seems to be increasing. Despite the incorrect images that red-tops and regional newspapers often use, there's no doubt that people are reacting when they see an unfamiliar insect. We haven't yet reached the stage that Jersey has though. The National Bee Unit's Nigel Semmence reported at the recent Apimondia seminar on invasive species that about 30% of reports from the public on the island correctly identified Asian hornets. Here in the UK, of the 20,000 sightings reported in 2023—double 2022's number—the ratio was around 1%. We still have work to do.

Manek Dubash, Editor

EVENTS

- Meetings and more
- See back page for details

NEXT MONTH

- Seasonal hints & tips
- Asian hornet update
- News updates
- Latest events

SHARE YOUR PHOTOS AND STORIES

Do you have interesting photos or video links you'd like to share? Or an insight from your beekeeping that would could enhance the hobby for others? Do you have skills that could be useful to other members? Anything else you'd like to see in this newsletter?

Ideas and contributions welcome; all contact details are on the back page.

ONLINE

B&L website
Facebook

QR link to our website

Seasonal tips for April

The first inspection

At last, the first full inspection of the year! You may have been able to inspect in late March, but don't forget the rule of thumb about opening the hive: it should be warm enough to go out in shirt sleeves. So, usually you'd wait for a dry day of about 15°C or more with only a light wind.

Early in the year, it matters less what time of day you inspect, but later in the year it's best to inspect around midday when most of the adult bees are out foraging.

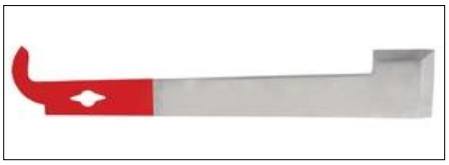
Experienced beekeepers have done this all before but it's worth thinking about before you get elbow-deep in your hive; you need a plan. Just take a few moments to think about why you are inspecting and what you might need—and what you might find.

Sting-proof bee suit—the Sentinel II

Why inspect?

The queen: you want to find the queen. I know this is difficult, but it is a skill you need to learn, and learn fast. If you're lucky, she has a big spot of colour on the back of her thorax. However, the old queen may have been superseded in the late autumn and have no marking; so, what do you do?

Scan each side of frame as it's removed; start on the edges and then zigzag across the face of the comb. The queen is bigger by at least half than any other bee in the hive at this time of year, she has a longer abdomen and has brown legs. If you fail to see her, don't despair, it will come with time. Your second option to knowing if the queen is present is to see if there is brood in all stages; eggs, larvae, and sealed cells.



J hive tool

If these are all present, then she's in there somewhere. Note; if you see multiple eggs in one cell then this is a sign that there may be a laying worker present in the hive and no queen.

Disease: the new beekeeper can't be expected to be able to identify all the diseases that affect bees, but they should know how to spot that something is not right. Healthy larvae should be pearly white, shiny and have clear segmentation, lying in the bottom of the cell in a tight 'C' shape. Sealed worker cells should be biscuit coloured (because the wax seal has been mixed with pollen to make it air permeable)

What do you need?

Personal equipment

Bee suit/jacket: Do you know how to put it on so it is bee-proof? Check the seals around the sleeves and legs/bottom of jacket. Check the zip closers on the veil.

Gloves: It is better to use disposable gloves, either latex, or my choice, long-cuffed nitriles. You can use ordinary washing-up gloves: rinse them in a washing soda solution between inspections. The long sleeved 'hazmat' gloves are too thick for delicate manipulations and the leather type could be vector for disease as they are seldom cleaned regularly.

Boots: Either Wellingtons or Rigger type are OK, as you can tuck your suit legs or trousers into them. Bees tend not to crawl down, so always tuck loose ends into the top of the boots or into the top of gloves.

Smoker: Any type is OK. Warning, do not try to light it with your veil on, at best you could melt the veil, at worst; if it catches alight you will be in all sorts of trouble. Make sure you know how to light the smoker and are able to keep it alight. Don't use matches unless you're a Boy Scout. I use a plumber's blowtorch, but others have been known to use crème brûlée torches. For a new beekeeper, it's probably best just to use old egg boxes or shredded cardboard from your favourite delivery company, but as you progress there are other solutions to smoker fuel. My preference is chipped wood from any tree surgeon; dried, it burns for ages.

Hive tool: These are many and various but start with the standard 'J' type (above) which will do almost everything you want.

Hive equipment

Keep to hand a selection of hive parts as you may want to replace damaged items as you find them. If nothing else, make a note of the bits that need changing.

I usually take this opportunity to replace the floor, boxes, crown board and roof as the accumulation of propolis and wax over the winter will make any later inspection harder.

Seasonal tips for April (cont.)

An unmarked queen

and should have no noticeable holes in them. Any capped drone cells present will look similar but will be domed due to the egg being laid in a worker cell and not a cell made for drones.

If the brood pattern is any different, or there is a strange smell coming off the comb; sometimes likened to the smell of Copydex glue, then quickly seek help from your mentor or the bee inspector—see back page for contact details.

Space: It's still important to ensure there is enough space for the queen to lay. With early flowering trees and flowers in bloom, the workers need to be able to store this nectar without taking up the space the queen needs.

When the colony has expanded so that it covers both sides of about 6-8 frames, put a super on. If this is filled with new foundation it may be better to omit the queen excluder until they have started to draw out the comb.

Stores: the colony needs to be able to support itself during this period and will need to have about 3-4kg of stores. A full brood frame will contain about 2-2.5kg so you will have to estimate the amount of stores distributed through the hive.

Hopefully, with a good tide and a following wind the weather will stay good, and by the end of the month there should be enough forage to see them start laying down honey for the first harvest in late June.

Opening the hive

All the literature suggests that you puff a *little* smoke (they're not beagles) at the entrance and wait for a minute or so before lifting the lid of the hive. The rationale is that the bees think the hive is in danger from a forest fire and, in preparation for evacuation, they load up on honey which makes them less annoyed. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

The next technique the new beekeeper must learn is how to open the hive and remove frames in a quick, efficient manner but without any sudden movements or cracking of stuck components. Here's how.

Lift the lid off the hive and place it upside down on the ground or a spare stand (it saves you bending). Gently insert the chisel end of your hive tool at a shallow angle into the joint between the crown board and the top of the brood box. Work your tool all the way around the joint until the crown board comes off. Try to avoid the *crack* as the propolis seal gives way.

Check the underside of the board to make sure the queen is not sitting on it; it's unlikely but bees don't read books. Place the crown board on the roof so the corners are diagonally opposite to those of the roof.

At this point, give another little puff of smoke into the hive. Working from one end/side of the brood box, gently prise the first frame/dummy board away from its neighbour.

When both sides have been freed, keeping your hive tool in your hand, lift the frame/dummy board vertically out of the brood box using the lugs on each end of the frame.

Check to see if the queen is on it. If not, place it in front of the hive or in a frame holder. Repeat with the next

Healthy brood

Smoking calms the bees—sometimes.

frame but, after inspecting it, place it in the gap left by the first frame/dummy board. Repeat all the way through the hive, maintaining the gap as you go.

Once you have inspected every frame and noted the condition of the brood and stores level (and found the queen), slide the frames back into their original position. This can be done all together, in groups or one at a time, but the fewer movements the better as you are less likely to damage the bees, especially the queen.

Replace the first frame/dummy board and rebuild the hive.

Finishing up

Just a couple more jobs: record what you have seen. Chances are you'll have forgotten what you did or saw by the next inspection. You can devise your own record card or there are plenty available on the web.

Then, to avoid attracting rats and mice and reducing the chances of spreading disease, you need to clean up the apiary, collecting debris removed from the hive by disposing of it in the bin or burning it.

Clean any components you replaced; don't leave them to later, as later never comes and you end up with an annoying pile by the end of the year. Clean your hive tool and gloves in a solution of washing soda. Wash your bee suit.

And so the season begins. Next time: queen cells and swarm prevention.

Another Veiled Beekeeper

Manek Dubash
Asian Hornet
Team Co-ordinator

Asian Hornet report

Two yellow-legged Asian hornet queens have been found already this year. Clearly, some nests either escaped destruction last autumn, or they emitted gynes before being destroyed. Either way, this suggests there are likely to be more out there. Vigilance as ever is key.

I attended an Apimondia seminar recently on the topic of invasive species. As an international group, the focus was not solely on *Vespa velutina* but it was both top of the agenda, and the topic most relevant to us.

Twenty years since the first AH arrived in France, most interesting were analyses of what the AH does and where it can be found.

Researcher Quentin Rome reported that the diet of the hornet varies according to its location: its diet in urban areas is 66% bees, but only 35% in fields and forest areas, the rest being other diptera. Its ecosystem impact is largely on the pollination of late blooms, while he reported that it had a low impact on other insect fauna.

The hornet's impact on honey bee colonies is huge: just 12 or more hornets hawking outside a hive results in colony paralysis, increasing the risk of colony collapse. In areas where hornet nest density is at its maximum then 30% of bee colonies will collapse. The impact of the hornet in financial terms has been €31m annually.

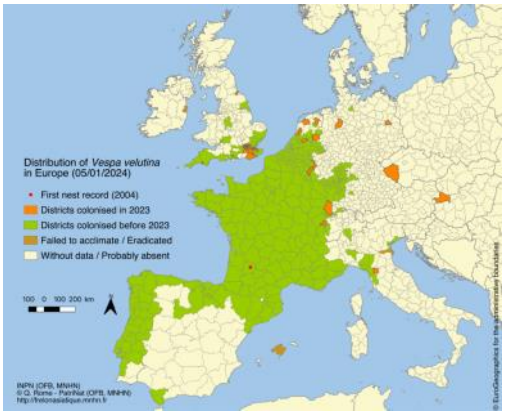
French beekeepers are deploying muzzles (muselières) which reduce colony stress.

French beekeeper Alain Goulnik said there was no national plan for such an invasion. There is one now: *Le Plan National de lutte contre des frelons asiatiques*. Its aim is to mitigate the consequences (because eradication is now impossible): improve bee colony health, improve biodiversity, protect people. This means destroying nests, spring trapping of queens, and reducing hive stress.

We then heard from researchers in Spain and Italy who are dealing with invading species such as *Apis orientalis* and the Small Hive Beetle as well as *V. velutina*.

A small chink of light was offered by researcher Antonio Felicioli, who reported finding hornets with deformed wings, presumed to be DWV contracted from contact with honey bees.

This month is critical: trap those queens!



Apiary report: Barcombe

Rain, rain and more rain—but the bees are waking up at last after what seems a very long and wet winter.

For me, this year's beekeeping started last September, that's when my notes for this year begin so at my first inspection I know what was happening just before I wrapped them up for winter. I find it certainly helps in those earlier weeks.

Sadly colony 2 didn't survive: at the end of February, a carpet of bees on the floor greeted me. There were loads of stores and even a very small patch of brood and no sign of mites. I took a sample of dead bees home and tested them but there was no sign of Nosema so unfortunately they will be one of Barcombe's winter mysteries.

The other colonies however are big, I took the opportunity in mid-March to remove the roofing membrane and have a sneaky look under the crownboard and most of the colonies were occupying 9 or 10 seams. These hives are due a comb change so I put a new brood box with clean foundation on top of each of them and topped up their fondant. I'm away again the first two weeks of April so I'm hoping when I get back I can flip the brood boxes around and do a Bailey comb change.

Remember that stores is the most important thing at the moment: if we have a cold spell they can consume all their stores very quickly especially as the brood is increasing rapidly now. However if we have a warm spell there is a risk they can move the food you've given them up into the supers – it's a balancing act!

Hopefully, at next month's first inspection we'll be back in full swing.

Tony Birkbeck, Apiary Manager

Poisonous Honey: a talk by Pam Hunter

On the chilly evening of 20 March, venerable Master Beekeeper and B&L member Pam Hunter gave us a fascinating talk on poisonous honey. Given that most beekeepers love honey, and that honey is seen almost universally as being a highly benevolent substance, it came as a bit of a shock to learn that some honeys are poisonous—but it's true.

First, the good news: Pam assured us that few UK nectars are toxic.

There are, however, many in New Zealand. For example, the tutu tree is used by Maoris for healing but the nectar and therefore the honey that results from it is toxic, despite the bees themselves being unaffected.

It was to be a story that became familiar through Pam's talk. The nectar comes from honeydew produced by vine hoppers that feed on the tree, and bees will feed on the honeydew when there's little else available.

The tutu tree's toxin, tutin, is also produced by trees in South America. The karaka tree's emanations, also in New Zealand, are similarly toxic but also to bees, though it does eventually diminish in strength in the comb.

On saying, earlier, that there are few toxic honeys in the UK, Pam then provided us with a list—some of which is provided below—of those that are toxic or just unpleasant.

In UK, henbane, belladonna, datura are all toxic. Atropine, scopolamine and more come from these plants. Datura is toxic to many animals but doesn't seem to affect bees; there are some reports of toxicity from honey from a study in Hungary, Pam said.

Ericaceous plants, eg *Rhododendron ponticum* and *R. luteum*, produce toxic nectar, which both bad for us and the bees; it can be fatal for children. Tests found that colonies were killed on Colonsay after starting to collect nectar. In Nepal, grayanotoxin from rhododendrons was banned.

Nectar from the calico bush—*Kalmia latifolia*—is very poisonous. Other toxic UK plants include digitalis (foxgloves). Claims exist that that pollen can poison bees but not much evidence.

Monkshood Wolfsbane makes aconitine and its pollen is toxic to bees, but it's mainly bumbles that go to foxgloves.

California buckeye is related to horse chestnut. After feeding on it, bees behave abnormally, the next generation of bees are deformed, and queen stops laying. So it's bad!

Milkweeds are not toxic to bees but are to mammals, while sophora is said to be soporific for bees.

Cyanide—a poison as we all know—is found in peaches, almonds, cassava and others, but it's very rare for these plants or their honey to be reported as toxic for bees or humans.

Buttercups & crowsfoots are avoided by bees but if they collect pollen in cold spring, it is toxic. The closely related celandine is benign.

Pyrrozolidine alkaloids are made by borage, daisies, coltsfoot. However, they're not found in honey, but in the labs.

Privet makes honey many don't like. Unlikely to be a major component of honey. Not toxic.

Lime trees stupefy bees, so they're often found comatose underneath them. The active ingredient is mannose which binds to glucose, but gradually falls away. It reduces bees' ability to retain the energy to fly—though it makes lovely honey! Luckily, mannose doesn't make it into the honey.

Nicotine and caffeine: nicotine is an insecticide—but while bees feed on nicotine producers without problems, in tests more insects visited tobacco plants with lower levels of the stuff. Caffeine is found in 55% of flowering plants. Pam said it makes bees over-estimate the strength of the substance so they go back to it more often.

Finally, Pam touched on the invasive giant hogweed, which as we know is poisonous, and a potent skin irritant. However, bees and hoverflies love it.

Rounds of well-deserved applause were followed by chat, tea and cake.

Manek Dubash (words & photos, except photo above by Bob Curtis)

Introduction to beekeeping: a taster day by B&L

The introductory day was well-attended, and help came from seasoned B&L members: Jude New, Ian White, Hilary Osman, Sarah Peek, Diana Lewis, Tony Birkbeck, Graham Bubloz and Rowena Bennet.

We set up a pop-up honey shop which Hilary and others ran during the day to promote local honey and hive products. The Patcham producers sold a lot of their honey; we hope for repeat customers.

Diana greeted all arrivals and provided each with a name badge and was on hand helping throughout the morning.

Few of the guests had any beekeeping experience, as you'd expect, but one had already joined B&L. So, it was an ideal group of people to offer a series of talks and workshops entitled "Introduction to Beekeeping."

The programme lasted a full day with breaks for tea/coffee and lunch in between. The morning would be a series of talks and presentations, and the afternoon session was dedicated to several workshops.

Went the day well?

At around 10am, Jude welcomed everyone along. It's important to note that she had organised the whole event and brought in many stalwarts from Brighton & Lewes Beekeepers.

Graham then talked briefly about Sussex Beekeepers and B&L.

Tony Birkbeck continued with the theme "how much does it cost?" and gave a very useful, practical guide of typical costs when buying equipment, bees, and hardware, plus other restrictions to be aware of.

Following that, with the aid of a National hive, Ian White explained the factors to consider when establishing a hive / apiary for the first time.

Jude then explained the Asian hornet threat. All received a poster urging vigilance, and taking pictures of the hornet, rather than killing it, to allow tracking back to its nest.

While several of us got involved trying to fix the projector, Jude kindly filled in by taking questions and answers.

After 40 minutes or so, we got the projector working again, enabling Sarak Peek to give an excellent presentation into the highs and lows of her first beekeeping year.

In between the talks and at breaks, Hilary was selling products from the hive and helping in all aspects throughout the day.

Workshops

After lunch, a series of 25-minute workshops was established, each with a different theme, arranged so four people could sit at a table and take part in the workshop. Topics were as follows:

Sarah was in charge of honey tasting—helped by Rowena—where candidates had to assess several different jars of honey for flavour and colour, and to identify the shop-bought one.

Another workshop run by Tony and Graham demonstrated how to make an Asian Hornet trap, and each person was given 20 minutes to make their own from a set of parts.

A third workshop had Ian demonstrating and involving each person in making a frame with foundation.

Finally, Jude ran a workshop at which everyone could make a wax wrap. Everyone had the opportunity to leave with an Asian hornet trap and a wax wrap.

A great deal of learning was imparted and everyone had a good time. *[Well done, Jude! MD]*

Graham Bubloz & Jude New. Photos by Graham.

How to win at Honey Shows

Have you ever wondered about how and why the Honey Show—ours and the national event run by the BBKA—came to be, and how it all works? Wonder no more!

In 1874 the British Beekeepers' Association (BBKA) was instituted "For the Encouragement, Improvement and Advancement of Bee Culture in the United Kingdom, particularly as a means of bettering the Condition of Cottagers and the Agricultural Labouring Classes, as well as the advocacy of humanity to the industrious labourer – the Honey Bee.'

The National Honey Show (NHS) has been an annual event since the 1920s and the BBKA has been in existence since 1874, lots of experience!

B&L in context

Sussex Beekeepers' Association and in particular Brighton and Lewes Beekeepers are relatively new; we are currently investigating establishment and the emergence of Brighton and Lewes Beekeepers as a division of Sussex Beekeepers' Association.

We also noticed that other beekeeping associations are celebrating longevity, so are we due a celebration? Please let us know if you can help.

B&L is affiliated to the BBKA. Full members of B&L use the BBKA Bee Disease Insurance and receive a copy of BBKA news each month. One of the main purposes of the BBKA has always been to educate the public and beekeepers about the craft of beekeeping, including hive product creation, all of which need to be made with care and attention.

Competitive beekeepers

In a similar fashion to flower and vegetable shows, honey shows bring out the competitive spirit in beekeepers. I made a poll on Facebook and WhatsApp Buzz to gather the members' views to discover what our honey show represents to them.

Most of the respondents agreed that exchanging knowledge and raising standards are best served by it. The National Honey Show, the South of England Honey show and other local divisions also use this as a sales opportunity for beekeepers and the local community.

Since 2020, the numbers of entries for the B&L Honey have increased. Some years we know that the honey gods are on our side, the bees don't eat all the honey, so the clear honey class has lots of entries. When I was a honey show virgin, I thought that a jar of honey had to be presented in a 1lb jar and that I would win!

How to win at Honey Shows

The National Honey Show produces a series of downloadable guides, one of which is entitled **Showing Honey Products**. This document very helpfully explains the different levels that judging will follow, for example 'the entry (honey) is free from such obvious faults as particles of foreign matter, seen when viewed in a strong light, rusty or discoloured lids… Normally any such entries are 'pushed back' and not given further consideration.' And 'The flavour will be judged by tasting … Many competitors will gently warm their show honey to clear it of any traces of crystals; this is in order, but the occasional

How to win at Honey Shows

unscrupulous exhibitor may heat for rather longer to darken the honey a little, for example to get it into the dark class'.

So, you see, that if the honey fails at one level it is not judged further. We use the hall for the same time on the night of the AGM and Honey Show as we do for regular winter meetings, time is at a premium!

Wax

'A cake of wax has 'no purpose' says the NHS Guide **Wax for Show** but 'for the exhibitor there is no doubt that the production of a perfect cake of wax is a real challenge to his/her skill. In honey classes, care and cleanliness are the main considerations but whilst these are of importance in the wax class, without skill, success will not be obtained. It has been said that an exhibitor who gains an award for wax deserves a gold medal as large as a frying pan'.

The guide catalogues equipment and methods including helpful hints on temperatures and methods for filtering, pouring, and packing for a show.

Candles

The guide for **Beeswax Candle Judging** is even more prescriptive: the wax must be clean enough to stand inspection with a magnifying glass. Its colour must be clear and bright. It must have the delicious honey smell that comes from fresh beeswax. The following points of appearance will be noted by the judge.

All candles must match in all respects, such as colour and symmetry. Moulding should be clear, no join mark must show and no release agent should remain. Smooth surfaces must be really smooth.

Wicks must be centred at the top and bottom; this can be checked immediately after filling the mould.

Does the wick look like the right size? (Only burning will confirm this.) Is the wick tip waxed?

The wax entries are not as well represented. B&L doesn't use all these methods of judging or stipulate the number of candles in each class, although the NHS and the S of England Agricultural Show (Honey Show) does.

When the criteria for judging are read and understood the entries are easier/harder for us to judge.

Wraps

I wrote to Enid Brown, the judge of the NHS, to ask for her criteria for the judging of beeswax wraps, which is still considered a 'new class'. She replied:

- For the NHS class there should not be any other substance used other than beeswax. Some people like to add resin or oils but not for NHS.
- A half apple is wrapped in the beeswax wrap the day before and when judged the judge is looking to see how fresh the apple still is.
- How flexible the wrap is as it should be able to seal the fruit properly.
- Does it have a pleasant beeswax aroma and not the aroma of other substances.
- Does it meet the requirements of the schedule.'

Three things come to my mind at this point: is judging a honey show a dark art only to be understood by the judges? Do we have long enough to judge the entries we receive?

I haven't even mentioned the classes for photographs (submitted before the event via email) cakes, biscuits, and this year beekeeping inventions!!

Maybe we could open our Honey Show to the public and sell/auction the winning honeys (as the NHS does).

Can we raise standards and share knowledge to win more placements with B&L, South of England Agricultural Show and the NHS?

There will be wax workshops scheduled in the autumn, maybe beekeepers will come along and share their knowledge…

Jude New

B&L Events 2024

Indoor meetings

Date	Speaker(s)	Topic
Wed 17 April	Francis Ratnieks	Ivy Bees

Next Bee Chat

19.30, Wednesday 3 April, Elephant & Castle, White Hill, Lewes BN7 2DJ

Out-apiary meetings

Date	Apiary	Topic
Saturday 20 April	Barcombe	Swarm control & spring inspection
Sunday 21 April	Grassroots	Beginners' spring hive inspection
Saturday 27 April	Cooksbridge	Swarm control & spring inspection
Sunday 28 April	Rottingdean	Beginners' spring hive inspection

Out-apiary meetings start at 13.30 and run until about 16.00. Apiary locations are on the website. Bring a mug for tea!

Deadlines

Please send all contributions for the newsletter, **including photos**, to the Editor (details on right). Max. length: 500 words.

Copy deadline: 18th of the month before the publication date (except December: 11th). Email photos etc. for the website to Webmaster Gerald Legg (details on right).
Publication date: 25th of the month.

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