

Swansea & District Beekeepers Newsletter Gwenynwyr Abertawe a'r Cylch

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The bus shelter on Pengwern Common, Gower.

A similar photo appeared in the Daily Telegraph accompanying a letter by Mr. Tim Lovett, past President of the BBKA, reported on page 4.

Harvesting Honey.

This is that wonderful time of year when we harvest our honey. If you'd asked me a month ago, I'd have forecast a good harvest, slightly above average. However, with the rains we've had of late, it is likely that the bees have stayed at home and eaten some of their stores. There are a few things we need to take into consideration when harvesting.

When you are taking the honey from the hive, make sure that the frames are fully or near fully capped over. Uncapped honey has a higher percentage of water and if it is anywhere over 18½%, it may ferment if storage conditions are not perfect. Water content can be checked with a refractometer which reads as a percentage. A number of us have these and, if you need, can check a sample of your honey for you.

But first we have to get the honey off the hive, which means clearing bees from the comb. There are a number of ways to do this, but the simplest ways are to use a clearer board with an escape, such a

porter escape, (usually used in pairs) or merely brush the bees from the combs, one frame at a time. There are many designs of escape and those that I have tried all work. With escapes, it is important to make sure that the exits beneath are not blocked with brace comb or the bees won't be able to get through.

Other more exotic ways are to blow the bees off the supers with a fan, like a leaf blower, a system often used by bee farmers with hundreds of hives to clear. Another is to use a chemical clearer which drives the bees down.

However, with only a few hives to manage, I have never had to resort to these methods and nowadays usually brush the bees away. This entails taking one frame at a time and shaking / brushing the bees off and putting it in an empty super. If you do this, remember to cover that super or the bees will find it again. This method has the advantage of not having to lift full supers to put escapes in at lower levels. If you use an escape, make sure there is space for the whole colony in the hive below. When I used escapes in the past, I usually put an empty super below the escapes, left them overnight and took the supers away next day. Mostly it worked well with only a few bees not cleared.

Those of you who have done this before will know how to proceed but first-timers are well advised to attend a demonstration at the apiary, or assist a mentor / friend, as they clear their hives. Practical experience is the best way to learn.

Then there comes the job of getting the honey out of the frames. The Society has an extractor which is available to members for a nominal weekly fee. Cut the cappings off both sides of the frame, fill the extractor with frames and spin the honey out. Try to get the frames balanced in the extractor. If they are not balanced, the extractor will shake and move about as it gathers speed.

Store the honey in an airtight container prior to bottling, I use 15 or 30 lb. tubs with a honey valve fitted in the bottom and it works for me. If you leave the honey for a while, wax particles rise to the surface and inclusions sink to the bottom, leaving good honey in the middle. As an added precaution, I have always filtered my honey just to ensure that no foreign bodies get into the finished product. Filters can be bought from any of the beekeeping suppliers

A word of caution here. If the honey is left in the tubs for a long period of time, it will granulate in the tubs and need to be warmed to liquify it prior to bottling. This entails having access to a warming cabinet. In the past I have had some batches of honey granulate inside a month whilst others have taken over nine months before they set. It all depends on the different percentage of sugars in the honey which is dependent on plants that the bees have been foraging on.

It just remains to wish you all Good Luck with your harvesting. D. S.

Safety Advice

Last month, in Topical Tips, I talked about personal safety, lifting supers, protective clothing etc. Now I'd like to add a couple more safety items to the list, beginning with smokers and fire dangers.

Fire Awareness. Recently a small fire occurred in a shed at the apiary. The cause is unknown but may have been the result of a spark occurring during lighting. Luckily it was dealt with before major damage occurred but there was some smoke damage to equipment.

Honeybees do not like hot smoke!! They get very upset by it and can become rather nasty if sparks are blown at them. (I talk from experience). One of the easiest ways to keep the smoke cool is to stuff damp grass in the top of the smoker. Hopefully, there will be some in your apiary.

Fire is always a hazard, so we beekeepers need to concentrate on three areas:

1. **Lighting the smoker.** Always have your veil away from your face when lighting your smoker. Puffing air into a smoker can throw flames / sparks up into the air and if these touch your veil it might catch fire or burn holes in it.

2. **Extinguish the smoker** before putting it away. The best option is to empty the smoker and extinguish the contents by putting water or earth on them, or tread them out.

3. **Safety.** Never puff smoke at your face to test if the smoke is cool. Many years ago, someone in our society told me the story of her friend who was concerned that the smoke might be too hot for the bees. Instead of walking away to check the smoker the beekeeper puffed smoke towards his own face to test it. However, the smoker was extremely hot and sparks burned holes in his veil, letting bees in and he was badly stung. Luckily it didn't set light to the veil.

Ladder Safety. At the factory where I worked, accident prevention was paramount. With use of ladders, safety precautions were strictly adhered to. They were simple and sensible. Always have someone holding the ladder while you climb it. Make sure the ladder is on level, stable ground. Tie the top firmly to make sure it doesn't move while you are up it. Don't twist, lean or stretch beyond a sensible limit.

From a beekeeping perspective, remember that **a swarm has weight**, if it suddenly drops into your box it could easily overbalance you. Of course, if the swarm is on a small branch, high up in a tree, it is not always possible to get a perfect grounding for your ladder. At this point you have to decide if it is beyond your ability to safely take the swarm.

If the risk is too high or the swarm is too difficult to reach, it is better to walk away.

Here I diverge from safety to mention that there are other ways to get to such difficult swarms. One, which I heard of many years ago from the Leicestershire beekeepers, was to use a vacuum system with a long plastic (plumbing) tube. They had successfully demonstrated its use in such situations and had reached high into trees with it. I am told that there are some members in our Society who have adapted vacuums to catch swarms. Also, on a smaller scale, a hand-held vacuum is used by the Bee Tent group to collect bees whilst clearing up after a show. Personally, I never got around to making one but will talk about their design in the next issue of the newsletter.

“When Bees Were Bees” by Tom Davies

A “Cautionary Tale” now, as old-time writers used to say, about opening a hive which appears to be different from the rest, i.e. a fine day, but not a lot going on at the entrance to the hive.

In “Gleanings in Bee Culture” for January 1930, a Mr. W. H. Henderson, of Dunedin, Florida, sent in to the magazine an account of a narrow escape, which could have been fatal.

It occurred when the District Apiary Inspector of Florida, a Mr. Earnest W. Macomber, was inspecting hives of bees near Tampa. When inspecting bees Mr. Macomber was in the habit of wearing heavy puttees on his legs, which he had no doubt that they saved his life.

Lifting a super from a hive he disturbed a snake which struck out at him, he dropped the super and it trapped a snake, allowing Mr. Macomber to kill it with his hive tool.

Marks on the top of the puttees showed the accuracy of the snake strike, and the snake was found to be a rattlesnake of the diamond back variety, four and a half feet long, possessed of seven rattles and a button, possibly this indicates the lethality of the venom.

More next time, Tom.

From the Newspapers

My thanks to all who send me these fascinating cuttings related to bees and honey. Ed

From a recent **Sunday Times Magazine** there was an article by Jeremy Clarkson, who has recently taken up the craft under the guidance of a Ukrainian beekeeping friend named Victor. It covered the normal ‘stuff’ that celebrity beginners write about, waggle dance etc., but tucked away in the middle of the article he makes the salient point that all nature is interconnected and if a species dies out,

others, which are dependent on it, may also die out. In his words “If the honeybee becomes extinct, pretty soon you’ll be killing your neighbour for food, and goes on to say the bee is the cornerstone of everything. It is the planet’s keystone species.”

Ed: Amen to that.

Turning over the page I saw the headline “How to Make a Cold Smoker”. Wow, I thought, and then realised it wasn’t a smoker as we know them, but a smoker for curing fish, cheese, meats etc. Sadly, the design was a little too complicated to turn it to beekeeping use.

There was a letter in the **Daily Telegraph** on 9th July, from Tim Lovett, former President of the BBKA, rebutting the argument that beekeepers had enslaved bees (there must have been a previous letter or article on the subject). Mr. Lovett explained that with the arrival of the Asian hornet, the varroa mite, viruses, bacterial and fungal diseases, modern agricultural practices, etc. the honeybee was under great stress and now struggles to survive in the wild. In conclusion he wrote that the intervention of beekeepers in providing hives, combating disease, winter feeding and restoring colony numbers has, if anything, emancipated the honeybee.

As mentioned on the front page, Mr. Lovett’s article was accompanied by a photograph of the bus shelter on Pengwern Common, Gower, painted with bees. Being cautious of copyright laws, I went along and took my own picture. The Telegraph’s photo looked a lot brighter, it must have been taken on a sunnier day.

It seems that there is now an acceptance that pollution is affecting pollinators. Studies on wild bees in the Indian city, Bangalore, reported in the **Daily Telegraph** on 12th August, have shown that a range of pollinators are sensitive to air pollution and live somewhat shorter lives because of it. There is concern because India is the world’s largest fruit producer and the second largest vegetable producer. 75 % of the country’s crop depends on pollinators!

In response to a letter in the **Times**, July this year, enquiring about removal of a colony of honeybees from a roof, Martyn Belcher, of ABM Pest Control, wrote that, in the past four years, his company successfully removed 114 colonies from roofs, bedroom walls, trees and chimneys, with the aim of saving as many as possible. He mentioned using a vacuum to take the fliers (stinging bees) and removing roof tiles to reach the rest of the nest.

Society Meetings and Social Events.

We hear that the New Lodge Social Club, Gorseinon, is now open for business and committee members are considering the possibility of holding meetings again. I’m sure that when information is available, Martin will put out a message by email and on the Society website.

I Missed the Gower Show.

This year, Covid 19 robbed me of one of my favourite outings, the Gower Show on 2nd of August. Normally there would be an article here with photos and stories from the show, but this year it is different.

As it happened, the run-up to the show and show-day itself had good weather, it would have been a great day. I missed the hustle and bustle of setting up on Friday and Saturday, the excitement of seeing who had taken prizes for their entries and chatting with show visitors, some of whom are regular visitors to the marquee every year. The only other time that I can remember the show being cancelled was when foot and mouth disease was rampant a few years ago.

Ah well, we’ll be able to plan and look forward to next year’s show instead. My mead will have the opportunity to mature another year if I can resist drinking it for Christmas. D. S.

“More About Bees” by Tom Davies

The unusual weather we've been having has damaged my bee garden, I'm hoping that it will soon improve, for it to recover somewhat.

On the good side though, although my dwarf beans in the kitchen garden have been battered to the ground, my climbing beans have stood up well and bearing good crops.

My runner beans (Moonlight), while being partially self fertile, attracts bumble bees very well, even to the extent that they will be working on the blooms while I am picking beans.

With all the wet weather we've had, it is keeping the white clover around here, and blackberries have so much blossom on them, that a spell of nice weather should result in a good crop of berries. I have seen a good many honey bees working on them, and I am looking forward to blackberry and apple crumble!

My gooseberries and blackcurrants have done well too, and my freezer has quite a few pounds of both to look forward to over winter.

So all in all, my year has not been all bad so far, and I hope that all of you will have some success with your bees after all that has happened up to now.

Till next time - Tom

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The next newsletter is due out on 1st November. Please let me have your articles / items by **20th October**. Thanks.