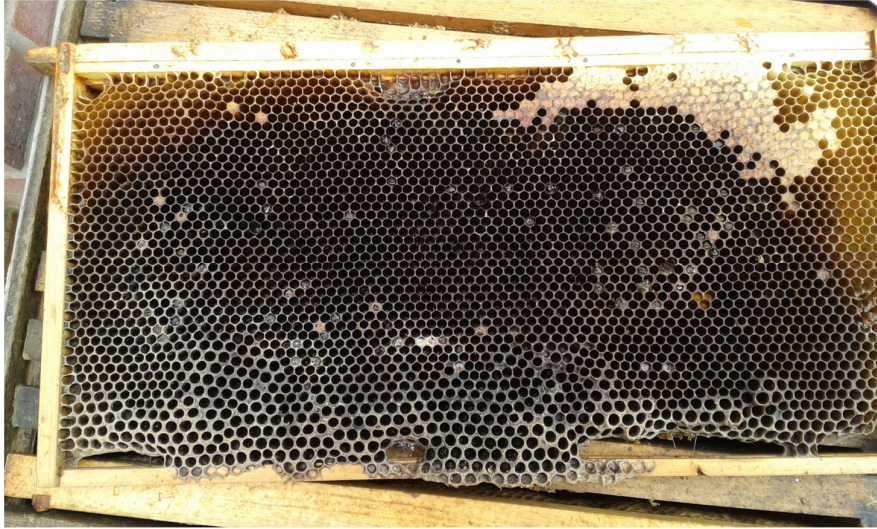


Swansea & District Beekeepers Newsletter Gwenynwyr Abertawe a'r Cylch

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Editor: D. Salkilld



Not a Pretty Picture

This comb was taken from one of my hives during the spring inspection.

For those of you just starting out in the craft, this is an example of old, dark comb which has been in a brood chamber for at least three years. Many bees have been raised from it, but it should have been replaced with new foundation long before getting to this state.

It is the sort of thing I have in mind when talking about recovery of beeswax from old, dark comb in the article on page 2.

Top Entrance Hives

In the last newsletter, Tom Davies wrote of a remarkable beekeeper, Mr. Norwood, of Torillo, Texas, using hives which not only had same size boxes for brood and super, but also had top entrances.

In the past I wondered why the majority of beehives were built with entrances at the bottom, after all, the natural home of honeybees is a hole in a tree, and entrances there are likely to be of any size and not located at any particular location. Surely an entrance somewhere in the middle of the brood box would better simulate a natural entrance. Incidentally this type of middle entrance was often used in straw skeps.

The most amazing top entrance hive that I ever saw was in a honey shop on Northcote Road, South London. Behind the sales counter was a demonstration hive, about a metre long, which hung down from the ceiling, so that visitors to the shop could see a working colony in action.

I should have taken a photo but in those days, before the widespread use of smart phones, we didn't have a camera with us. From the top of the hive, a tube went to the outside of the building and the bees happily used that tube without bothering about daylight in the hive or bothering about people in the shop.

I had never before seen a top entrance hive and was surprised that the bees went downwards, but, on consideration, that is exactly what they would have done in the wild. Looking back, I should have taken more notice of it and should have asked how they managed it. But, as the old saying goes, hindsight is twenty – twenty vision! Perhaps, when I am in London again, I will go along to see if it is still there.

D. S.

Neonicotinoids

This is a follow-up on articles in the last two newsletters where farmers had been asking that regulations on neonicotinoids for sugar beet treatment be relaxed. You will recall that initially the Government was going to allow their use on an emergency basis. However, after a backlash from many environmental groups, the plans to use these treatments have now been dropped. From a beekeeping standpoint, this is really good news.

“When Bees were Bees”

Moving bees from an apiary situated in what has been not very suited for obtaining good crops of honey is the theme of this article.

Mr. J. L. Byer, of Markham, Ontario, wrote into “Gleanings in Bee Culture”, for July 1930, of the operation to relocate some 200 colonies that were sited some 100 miles away, to where it should be more beneficial.

Two large trucks were used, the first loaded with 130 colonies and were on their way at 9.30 p.m. By 4.00 a.m. they arrived at the new site and were placed on stands. A second truck brought the remaining colonies and supers and no damage resulted from the move.

Mr. Byer was convinced that things had gone so well due to improvements in transport, such as trucks that were used to move the bees.

He cited an instance where his bees had been moved by train some years previously for a similar operation. The move to a train station five miles away meant that Mr. Byer had to engage teams of horses with carts to get to the station. Arrival at the destination meant more horses with carts for delivery to the new site.

Mr. Byer was thankful that improved transport had made moving colonies not the struggle it used to be and could give more time for other jobs in beekeeping. More next time,

Tom.

Even More on Beeswax. Producing Beeswax Blocks for Showing

Dark brood comb. In the last newsletter I mentioned dealing with old, dark brood comb (see picture on page 1). Yes, there is still a little beeswax in it, but also a lot of old larval cases. Honestly, nowadays I don't even try to get the wax from it, but discard it, however, if you do want to try and recover that wax, this the method I have used successfully in the past.

Firstly, wrap the brood comb in a cloth bundle, tied tightly to keep it together. Put the bundle in a large, deep container and weight it down with something heavy to keep it at the bottom. Then fill the container with rain-water, not tap water, as tap water has chemicals like calcium in it. Boil the water and the wax will melt and rise to the surface whilst most of the dross is left behind in the bundle at the bottom. After cooling, you will find a disc of wax on top which can be refined further.

Caution here, once it heats up, the bundle behaves like an amoeba and tries to rise. If it 'escapes' from under the heavy weight and rises to the surface, it is the very devil to deal with. Make absolutely sure that the bundle is kept securely at the bottom.

Wax blocks for showing. Now for one of the hardest things to produce for the show bench, beeswax blocks. It is a truth that for any show item, high quality ingredients must be used, quality in equals quality out! In the case of beeswax, this means using your best white cappings wax which have had all the honey removed, perhaps by washing or alternatively, by putting them back on a hive for a day or so to allow the bees to clean them up. Note here that comb which has been left on the hive for months is likely to be dirty because the bees have walked over it with their dirty feet! Much of that dirt is propolis.

Let's presuppose that your clean, pristine cappings have been melted, taking care that the temperature never approaches 80°C (where wax discolours) and have been filtered, had the dross and tiny specks of dirt scraped off the bottom, then filtered and scraped again leaving show quality wax. The longer that you can keep the wax hot, the more time any foreign particles have to sink to the bottom for later removal, after all, you don't want them showing up on the finished item.

Making the wax into a 335 g (12 oz.) or 454g (1lb.) block. Incidentally, Class 13 on the Gower Show schedule calls for a 335g cake of beeswax. Firstly, and most importantly, you need a mould. These are usually round or oval, made of glass or plastic, without any blemishes. For my show blocks, I use a Pyrex oval dish because I have never yet found a plastic one without blemishes. I also use a glass cover for the dish so that when cooling, the whole block is surrounded by the same material to ensure that heat loss is uniform. Without the cover, I used to get ripples on the surface, but with it the surface is almost perfectly flat. I had the cover made by a local glass company,

Preparing the oven is important. After cleaning it I put a wooden board in and check it with a spirit level to make sure it is horizontal. If there is even a slight slope, it shows on the finished block. Preheat the oven to about 70°C, giving the wood, and the oven itself, time to warm up completely.

Some people treat the mould by putting the tiniest smear of washing-up liquid on as a release agent, or alternatively, by using a silicon spray. I have tried both and silicon is the better option but use it sparingly.

Karl Showler, (an old beekeeping friend who wrote a number of books and pamphlets on beekeeping) once told me that for his show blocks, he would first produce a number of 1 oz. blocks, then put the exact weight of them in the dish and melt them in the oven. That way he was certain to have correct weight for the judges. I tried it in the days before I had a glass cover, but tiny specks got into the wax. Otherwise, it worked well.

These specks sink to the bottom of the liquid wax so that when it sets and is turned over, they show up on the top surface of the finished block.

The two keys to producing a perfect wax block are in having perfectly clean wax and extremely slow cooling. If the block cools on the edges whilst the centre is still soft, cracks will develop in the centre. Once the liquid wax is in the mould, I put it in the oven, put the warmed cover on top, close the door and leave it to cool overnight. The aim is to cool the block very slowly and evenly.

Getting the block out of the mould can be fun. Sometimes the block comes straight out and sometimes it sticks in the mould. To ease the situation, I put the mould in the fridge for a day so that the wax shrinks ever so slightly. Usually, after doing this, I can get it out easily. Sometimes however, it still sticks to the sides of the mould, so it is then put in the freezer for a day which shrinks it a little more.

Some people polish the finished block to improve its appearance on the show bench. If you do this, the recommended polishing material is soft silk.

At a honey show some years ago, I got talking to one of the Judges about small inclusions in wax blocks. In those days the entry label was put on the top surface. He told me the tale of exhibitors

who have tried to cover up such a blemish by putting the entry label over the spot. As the Judge said, if the label was not plum centre of the block, he would look under it expecting to find a blemish there!

I realise that other people have different ways of producing wax blocks for shows but this one works for me as demonstrated on the show bench where they have a better than evens chance of taking a prize.

Always remember, it's the quality of input materials and careful preparation that make all the difference. Refine your beeswax and keep the temperature down so as not to damage the wax. It isn't easy to make these blocks but do have a go and see what you can achieve.

D. S.



Example of a large wax block using a Pyrex mould

Spring Inspection.

After writing about spring inspections in the last newsletter, I thought that I should follow my own advice, so on a bright sunny day the other week, when, for the first time this year, the temperatures were 14°C, I did my inspections.

I have two colonies, kept in my son's garden on the other side of town so it was a matter of getting a long list of bits and pieces together in case they were needed. Brood frames with foundation, spare brood boxes and supers, clean excluders and crown boards, all the usual tools and fuel for the smoker, bee suit and wellies, in fact, a boot load.

Both hives were laying well, brood was present in all stages with newly laid eggs, but I could not see the queen in either hive. When I do, they will be marked. New brood foundation was put in both hives and the old, dark comb taken home for clean-up.

One hive had overwintered on brood only. These are Langstroth hives so there was plenty of room and stores for them. That hive had large patches of brood on both sides of four combs and plenty of pollen and honey stores too.

The second hive had overwintered on brood and a half. On opening it up, most of the new brood was in the half which had the newer, cleaner comb. Queens invariably lay on newer cleaner comb if it is available. After putting new frames of brood foundation in the brood box, all bees from the half were shaken down, an excluder added between the two boxes and the half replaced on top. When the weather is warm enough, I will check them again and hopefully find the queens.

On a second look at the colonies, one, unfortunately, had problems of my own making. It was queenless. I had somehow damaged her during the previous inspection, but, on the bright side, there was one capped emergency queen cell in the brood area. I will not touch the colony for the next three weeks to allow the new queen to hatch, mate and start laying. As Tom says in his articles, more on this later.

Sadly, damaging the queen sometimes happens but marking and caging her during inspections eliminates this sort of accidental damage.

D. S.

“More About Bees” by Tom Davies

Easter Monday and I have spent a few hours in the garden, nice and warm in the sun, but in the shade a bit of a chill in the wind.

In the greenhouse I have dwarf French marigolds coming on nicely, about a week and I should be able to pot them up singly, also some agastaches, plus leeks, chillies, and some kale, dahlias all in trays ready to sprout.

Did a bit of tidying up and mowing, made my bones creak a bit after the chilly winter, but glad of the exercise.

Not much to see in bee terms, one or two bumble queens about, plus a few hoverflies. I have seen one or two flowers coming out on the gooseberries and redcurrants here, with a little warmth they will bring the bees out.

Over the next couple of weeks I should be able to dig a trench for my runner beans. I have a compost bin quite full to use in the trench, which gives the growing beans enough food for the season.

I haven't heard about any great losses of colonies so far, let's hope that things are not too bad, Till next time,

Tom.

Ed. My thanks to those who send me these interesting articles and newspaper cuttings.

The next newsletter is due out on 1st July 2021. Please let me have your articles / items by **20th June**. Many thanks.

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