



Taking The Basic Assessment

By Ivor Davis

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When I started beekeeping about 20 years ago I was fortunate to join a group with experienced beekeepers that were willing to help me learn how to keep bees. They were generous with their time and shared their knowledge to encourage new beekeepers. This gives a good start to enjoying beekeeping but, because of the problems with varroa and other threats to beekeeping it is necessary to learn more and keep up to date with new developments.

As time goes by beekeepers usually become more proficient and learn more from books and study groups. The BBKA also backs this up with training manuals, advisory leaflets and 'train the trainer' courses that support local associations. The National Bee Unit also provides excellent leaflets on the management of disease.

The BBKA and many Associations are charities with specific objects of educating beekeepers. We also get public liability insurance at a reasonable price because we are attempting to improve the quality of beekeeping of our members. One indication of this is the number of members who have gained their Basic Assessment qualification. This is below 20% of all members and it shows a distinct lack of interest in showing that we train to be better beekeepers. The Basic qualification is much like the driving licence for honeybees. Once you have taken it (and the pass rate is well over 95%) it shows that the beekeeper is competent to keep bees.





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I hear many stories as I go around the country of people who join local associations for a couple of years; they go to the beginners' courses and come to meetings for a while and then leave. They think they have sufficient knowledge to keep bees. This is a shame for these people are at best poor beekeepers and lose the opportunity to keep up-to-date with the latest developments on good husbandry and retaining the health of colonies.

I feel there is so much more to beekeeping and my experience has shown me that much more pleasure can be gleaned from the craft when I understand more about how bees operate and how to care for them.

BBKA has decided to encourage beekeepers to take the Basic Assessment and with the help of the Examinations Board, we are going to try to increase the number of members who have taken Basic Assessment to 50% or more of all members. Please help us and if you have not already, resolve to take the Basic next year. It is never too late; one of my local members took it when he was 87 after keeping bees for over 50 years. He did it to encourage new beekeepers and he passed with flying colours!

In the next three issues of BBKA news I will be giving you tips on how to prepare for the Basic and also we will be running a 'master class' after the Spring Convention at Stoneleigh on Sunday April 20th to help candidates with last minute preparations for the Basic.





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So, there are no excuses. Make it your New Year resolution to take and pass the Basic in 2008! I will give you as much help as possible and you can help to raise the status of beekeeping and our Associations at the same time as learning more about our wonderful craft.

This edition of BBKA news has the first section on general beekeeping. The second will discuss bee health and the last will consider general theory about bees and beekeeping.

Passing the Basic – Part 1 general beekeeping

- **Get a copy of the syllabus. It is available on the BBKA web site http://www.bbka.org.uk/freefiles/syllabuses/basic_all.pdf**
- o **If Possible, take the assessment on a colony you know – one at the Branch apiary where you can get some prior practice with the bees.**
- o **The Assessor needs to be sure that the colony is in good condition for an assessment and will only use a Branch apiary colony if it is sure to be fine.**
- **You will need to light your smoker and keep it burning**
- o **It is fine to use a gas blow torch to light a smoker. Dry wood chips, paper, cardboard will stay alight for a long time with the occasional puff.**
- **You need to hold your hive tool correctly.**
- o **Do not put it down but keep it in you hand without using your thumb and fore fingers to secure it.**





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- o **When you approach the hive, stand away from the entrance behind if the frames are the ‘warm’ way or to the side if they are the ‘cold’ way.**
- **Make a few puffs of smoke at the entrance and about the roof and then wait a while before opening the hive.**
- **Use the hive tool to crack open the hive without too much disturbance**
- o **It is better if the hive was opened the day before so that the parts of the hive do not stick together.**
- **You need to know the names of hive and hive parts (roof, crown board, supers (castellated or normal), queen excluder, brood chamber, rood frames, floor and hive stand)**
- **Is the hive a commercial, national, WBC, Smith, langstroth or deep national?**
- o **If you do not know ask a colleague before the assessment starts!**
- **When you get to the brood chamber you will need to take out brood frames and inspect the colony.**
- o **If the hive has been opened recently the frames will be easy to remove. If you have a dummy board in the brood chamber it will make it easier to get the first frame out without ‘rolling’ the bees. If not push all the frames to one side of the brood box to give maximum space to remove the first frame.**
- **Leave the first frame to one side**





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- o **In a frame holder or propped near to the entrance of the hive but only if there is little or no brood on the frame.**

- **Now take each frame out by moving it to the gap in the brood box and lifting it vertically.**

- o **You must do this carefully so that you do not disturb the bees too much.**

- **You need to be able to recognise:**

- o **Workers**

- o **Drones**

- o **Sealed brood**

- o **Open brood**

- o **Eggs – practice and if necessary wear good glasses**

- o **The queen – it is not necessary to find the queen**

- **Keep an eye on the bees whilst you go through the colony and give an occasional puff from the smoker to encourage the bees to stay in the hive.**

- **Learn to place the smoker close at hand or between your legs (if it has a cage) so that you can reach it at any time.**

- **The assessor will ask you questions as you go through the colony. Answer the questions directly but do not stop concentrating on your task.**





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- o If you cannot remember a specific word the assessor will probably help you to remember it.
- o Return each frame in the order you removed it and squeeze the frames together to retain the space for getting the next frame out.
- You will be asked to take a sample of bees for disease diagnosis.
- o The easy way is to draw a part open matchbox over the face of a frame of bees and close it before removing it from the frame. You can practice this to get it working properly.
- Once finished you will be asked to put the hive back together.
- o Do this carefully, using the smoker to get the bees away from the edges of the hive and down between the frames.

That is all there is to it. The best way to prepare is to have a quick practical session with an experienced colleague and make sure that the hive you will use is in good condition and has been opened recently.

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Taking The Basic Assessment Part 2

By Ivor Davis

Taking the Basic Assessment – Part 2

This is the second article about taking the Basic Assessment and will primarily deal with honey bee health. At one time we used to talk about diseases but from the Basic Assessment point of view the important ability is to be able to recognise a healthy colony and be aware when things are not quite as they should be. In depth understanding of adult and brood diseases comes later (in the modular examinations and in the General Husbandry Assessment). I hope by now you have obtained a copy of the syllabus (http://www.bbka.org.uk/files/library/basic_syllabus_1303983817.pdf) as this does help you to understand the scope of the Assessment. You should also seek out an experienced beekeeping colleague who can help you by watching you as you inspect your colony. Soon the weather will be warm enough to have a look at the colony and you can start to get some practice.

Passing the Basic Assessment will give you a feeling of competence that can be recognised by beekeepers and members of the public. You can rightly claim that you are qualified to keep bees. This will help to raise your status, the status of your Association and ultimately the status of the BBKA when it is in discussion with the government to ensure adequate support for beekeeping in this country.

Good luck and I hope these notes help and encourage you to take the Basic Assessment this year.

Passing the Basic – Part 2 honey bee health

Varroa

- o This is the main problem for all beekeepers and is present in all colonies. Therefore, having bees, you will be very familiar with this and will not need much revision.
- o You need to know how to detect varroa
 - Use a varroa floor and look for dead mites on the screen. The number of dead mites can be related to the number of mites in the colony.
 - Uncap sealed Drone brood. The number of drone larvae that have a varroa mite on them is an indication of the number of mites in the colony
- o You need to know how many mites that the colony can tolerate before it is damaged





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- The National Bee Unit have a very useful calculator on their web site (<http://beebase.csl.gov.uk/public/BeeDiseases/varroaCalculator.cfm>) that will tell when treatment is necessary based on the number of mites found on the floor or found from drone brood uncapping
- You need to know how to control varroa in the colony
- Use of Apistan or Bavaryl (pyrethroids) is fine where there is no evidence of PR (pyrethroid resistant) varroa. Insert strips for the 6 week period as instructed
- In areas of PR varroa use Apiguard or a similar Thymol product and practice IPM (Integrated Pest Management)
- You need to know a bit about IPM. The main elements are:
 - Drone brood removal
 - Open mesh floors
 - Dusting with icing sugar
 - Recognise healthy sealed brood
 - Sealed brood has biscuit coloured cappings
 - There should be no perforated cappings
 - The pattern should be uniform (not patchy)
 - Recognise healthy open brood
 - Larvae are creamy white
 - They should be curled in the cells
 - Larvae of the same age (size) should be together
 - Variations in the size of larvae should be uniform on the comb (a progression from eggs to small larvae to large larvae to sealed brood)





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- Describe unhealthy brood
 - o AFB and EFB (and to a certain extent varroa) result in patchy brood (many unfilled cells in an area of sealed brood)
 - o Some cappings may be perforated (holes in the centre)
 - o Chalk brood is characterised by 'dummies' in the cells (usually white hard chalk like deposits)
 - o Chalk brood 'dummies' are easily removed from the cells and can be seen on the floor of the hive
- Describe unhealthy bees
 - o Main adult diseases are
 - Nosema (microsporidian) lives in the gut of the bee. It affects digestion and shortens the life of the bee. The pathogen can be seen under a microscope (x400). It can induce dysentery and result in stained frames and hive components
 - Acarine (mite) lives in the trachea (breathing tubes) of the bee. It can transmit viruses to the bee and also weaken the bee. The effect is a weakened colony and shorter lived bees. The mite can not easily be seen but under a microscope (x40) it is possible to see damage to the trachea caused by the mite.
- What to do if a notifiable disease is expected
 - o Notifiable diseases are: EFB, AFB, Small Hive beetle & Tropilaelaps (another mite). The last two have not been found in the UK yet.
 - o If suspected contact an experienced beekeeper for second opinion
 - o If still suspected contact local Authorised Bee Inspector
 - o Then do as he tells you. It could be treatment or destruction in the worst case.
- Poisoning
 - o Recognised by 100s of dead and dying bees outside hive entrance





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- o Collect 3 samples of about 200-300 and store in freezer.
- o Contact local spray liaison officer
- o Do as instructed (send off one sample to CSL [Central Science Laboratory] with as many details as possible about the incident and keep the other two for backup in case of a legal outcome)
- How to prevent wax moth
 - o Do not leave wax around to attract moths
 - o Frames should be prepared before they are stored. Either
 - Spray with Certan before putting away
 - Deep frozen for 24 hours and then stored away from any potential source of wax moth larvae
 - Protect from winter pests
 - o Use mouse guards to stop mice entering the hive in winter
 - o Protect from woodpeckers (chicken wire about hive or plastic strips over hive sides) so they cannot peck holes in side of hive.

That is all there is to it! It sounds detailed and tedious but if you are keeping bees much of this is just common sense or common knowledge. Remember the Assessor is not there to trip you up but will help you to get the right answer. The Assessor wants you to pass!!

