ISSUE
January 2026


# The Apiarist

. . .High Weald Beekeepers' Newsletter

## Wings & things: Chair's Update

*By Roxanne Gould*

It is an honour to write to you as your new Chairperson, and I would like to begin by offering my sincere thanks to those who have brought us to this point. In particular, I want to recognise the dedication and steady leadership of our outgoing Chair, Malcolm Wilkie. His Chairman's Chatter was a familiar and trusted voice, guiding the Association through the past few years. I am also deeply grateful to the committee members who have recently stepped down. Their time, expertise, and quiet commitment have helped build the strong, supportive Association we benefit from today.

I step into this role with respect for our traditions and with real excitement for what lies ahead. Beekeeping is rooted in patience, observation, and shared knowledge passed from one generation to the next. Those values will remain at the heart of everything we do. At the same time, like any hive, we must continue to adapt if we are to thrive.

While beekeeping can often be a solitary pursuit, with many quiet hours spent alone among our hives, there is immense value in coming together to share what we have learned. The collective knowledge within this Association is one of our greatest strengths. By openly sharing successes, challenges, and hard-won lessons, we all become better beekeepers. I also believe there is much to be gained from building closer relationships with like-minded organisations in neighbouring areas, allowing ideas and support to flow more freely across our wider beekeeping community.

I look forward to working with you all, listening carefully, and helping our Association grow, together and in balance. If you have any ideas for the future, please reach out to me at: the.hwbka+chair@gmail.com

## IN THIS ISSUE



***The Apiarist*** is a quarterly newsletter from the High Weald Beekeepers' Association.

***Publisher:*** Roxanne Gould (HWBKA Chair)

***Contact:*** Paul Lindström (Editor)

the.hwbka+apiarist@gmail.com

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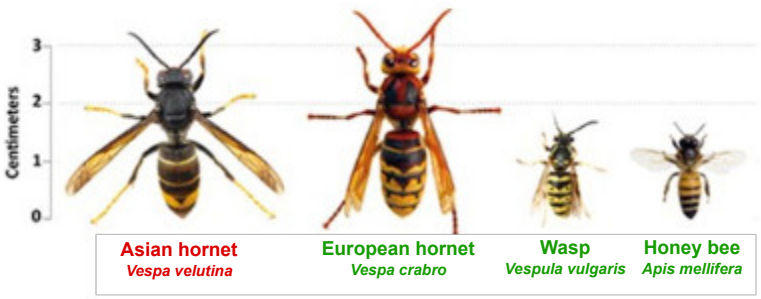
## Think you've seen an Asian hornet? Report it!




**Report through the Asian hornet Watch app on your smartphone**

**or at:**

https://catch.asianhornetalert.org.uk/

**or at:**

www.bit.ly/asianhornetreport

# Some Reflections on the National Honey Show Presentations – *not honey, wax, cake, or mead related I'm afraid*

*By Peter Coxon*

Since beginning beekeeping approximately fifteen years ago, I have found the concept of treating bees for varroa to be somewhat uncomfortable. While treatment became essential following the inadvertent introduction of varroa in 1992 – without which bee colonies and British apiculture would likely have crashed — the ongoing evolution of bee health management has raised important discussions going forward.

Terminologies such as 'treatment-free beekeeping,' 'hygienic bees,' and 'varroa-resistant bees' had become conflated in many minds, and in some quarters, prompted considerable contention and even hostility. However, the work of leading luminaries such as Thomas Seeley with his investigations into wild bee populations in New York's Arnot Forest, similar research from Ralph Büchler in Germany, and studies by Professor Stephen Martin and Joe Ibbertson, and Stephen Riley in the UK, among others—has greatly enhanced our understanding of the issues, and brought scientific objectivity based on data.

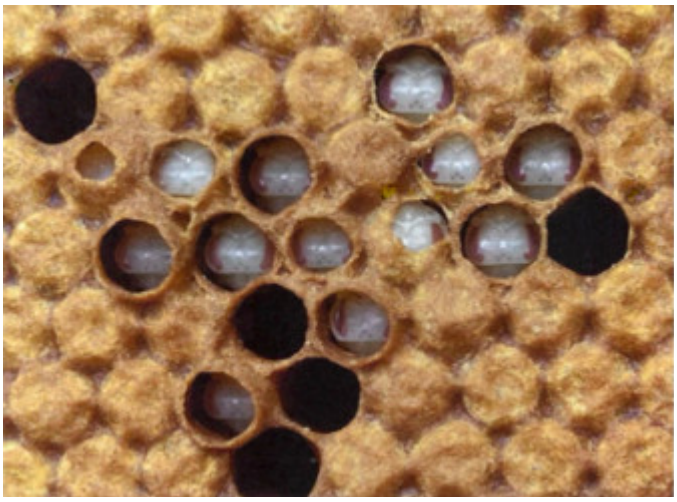
Notably, this year's National Honey Show had a strong focus on breeding varroa-resistant and hygienic bees. Of the seventeen talks, six addressed this subject exclusively, with contributions from respected experts mentioned above. Their extensive experience and rigorous research underpin compelling arguments in favour of selective breeding. As the SBKA sponsored one of Professor Martin's sessions, I had the privilege of introducing his talk and facilitating the subsequent discussion.

A separate panel Q&A session directly addressed concerns and misconceptions about breeding varroa-resistant bees. One key point, highlighted by Steve Riley, questioned how we define a healthy colony: is it one that requires regular chemical intervention, … or one that thrives independently through adaptation in its natural environment? Increasing numbers of colonies worldwide are surviving without treatments, indicating successful evolutionary responses.


*One of the speakers at NHS was Stephen Martin (to the left) and his talk was sponsored by Sussex BKA. Here we see Peter Coxon, chairman of SBKA, inroduce Professor Martin before his presentation.*

Clarification of the terms 'treatment-free beekeeping,' 'hygienic bees,' and 'varroa-resistant bees' is essential. Fostering the latter two traits should not be seen as controversial, given humanity driven husbandry has been selecting for desirable characteristics in livestock and crops such as better sheep, cattle, wheat, rice etc over very many millennia—a practice that has yielded substantial benefits in agriculture for humanity. Applying these principles to apiculture by selectively breeding for natural hygienic behaviours is a logical extension. Bees do thrive in diverse environments globally, including Africa and South America, with minimal intervention. In Cuba, for example, government dictat/ economic restrictions on treatments meant bees have never been treated for varroa which led to naturally adapted, varroa-resilient populations which are thriving.

There is now accessible guidance on improving beekeeping practices. Steve Riley's book, *The Honey Bee Solution to Varroa*, provides excellent practical advice, emphasizing careful observation of colonies and selection for hygienic behavioural traits, such as brood uncapping and evidence of



*Uncapping at the pink to purple-eyed stage (often occurs in groups). Picture: Steve Riley.*

varroa infected larvae removal on the inspection board by chewing out and cannibalisation. The recommended approach involves propagating from such colonies and re-queening less resilient hives accordingly. … or as Stephen Martin joked giving those colonies to people you don't like. Space does not permit a comprehensive description here, but I strongly recommend consulting Riley's book and additional resources such as Home, varroa resistant, honeybees and the updated varroa calculator at https://www.varroaresistant.uk/mite-calculator/. BIBBA also offers valuable insights: Varroa Resistance – BIBBA.

Ultimately this will enable up us to go 'treatment free'. In the past some people have simply gone treatment free … somewhat akin to the folks against bit pharma simply quitting conventional treatment in the hope that trying whole food or whatever … with the inevitable consequences.

The alternative to better observation and husbandry … continuing down the treatment route seems a bleak and bankrupt policy. Last year in the USA colony numbers collapsed again and it is currently thought this to be a consequence of the varroa having adapted to the vastly preferred varroacide in the US … amitraz! So, what next? More new chemicals ?… driven by the economics of pollination and requirement for cheap honey… not sustainable!

Two other talks were by Humberto Boncristiani about the unpredictable and potentially disastrous consequences of dumping a cocktail of literally thousands of toxic chemicals unto the environment every year, and how the combinatorial effects increasing toxicity are as yet largely unstudied and unknown.

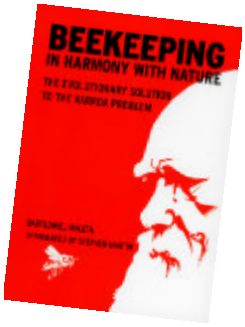
another other very serious concern raised relates to the number of queens currently imported into this country, largely but not exclusively by bee farmers and driven again by economics. The vast majority come from countries where there is no selection for hygienic traits at all and colonies are heavily treated. Many so called 'UK suppliers' are not in fact breeders at all but importers. It is also believed that it is via these routes that we will inevitably be faced the problem of tropilaelaps too. Message: DON'T BUY QUEENS unless from a reputable source… and don't be afraid to ask lots of questions.

On a slightly more positive note, it is thought that bees displaying hygienic behaviour as evidenced by copious uncapping are more likely to cope with tropilaelaps when it arrives … an added incentive if one were necessary. Uncapping which the NBU once (until quite recently in fact) referred to as 'bald brood' was thought to be a genetic defect which required re-queening is now seen as very desirable trait. After all bees have uncapped to combat other problems such as wax moth, chalk brood, and sac brood etc. long before varroa arrived on our shores.

On another positive note there is now a Europe wide initiative to become treatment free by 2033 *Varroa Resistance 2033* i.e. No miticides by 2033. See https://varroaresistenzprojekt.eu/ and use Google or similar to translate unless you are fluent in German.

## Book review

*By Paul Lindström*




*Beekeeping in Harmony with Nature: The Evolutionary Solution To The Varroa Problem* by Bartołomiej Maleta, translated by Stephen Martin. Published by Northern Bee Books, 2025. ISBN: 978-1-9192004-0-8.

I listened to Professor Stephen Martin's talk at the National Honeyshow, and he made references to this book and I thought – I must have it, despite the fairly high price, £55. But it is a thick book, 392 pages, and this far in the reading well worth the money.

It's interesting to read something on beekeeping that is not from the Western world, but actually from Eastern Europe where we know beekeeping is very, very big.

As the title indicates Maleta is in favour of what is sometimes called "Darwinian beekeeping" (Professor Thomas Seeley often uses this term and is referenced often in the book) but also promote efforts to breed varroa-resistant bees. Bartołomiej Maleta is from Poland and has an interesting background – a laywer by education, once a policeman and instructor of Chinese martial arts, today a beekeeper and promotor of the principle of sustainable development and co-operation in the selection of varroa-resistant honey bees.

The book is full of illustrations and photos and an easy read despite the scientific topic.

We learn about different types of "natural bee hives". We also learn about the author's efforts to try and reduce the use of chemicals in the fight against the Varroa mites as well as being presented with similar efforts world wide (and successful ones as that).

I've still to finish the book, so can't give a full review, but can point to a very good review by Ann Chilcott, "The BeeListener" for you to read meanwhile. You will find her blog here.

# HWBKA AGM and Honey Show 23rd November 2025

*By Paul Lindström*

As soon as the minutes from the AGM are approved they will be sent to you all, so I won't go into too much details, but I will highlight some of the main things that took place, such as for example outgoing and incoming committee members.

The outgoing President Keith Obbard opened the AGM and thanked the committee for it's work in 2025. He then handed over to the outgoing Chairman Malcolm Wilkie (who like Keith stood down from his role after the AGM) and Malcolm summarised the year, stressing the importance of promoting cooperation between the other divisions in Sussex BKA. He gave a special thanks to Peter Coxon who are among those who step down from committee work this year.

*The outgoing President Keith Obbard opened the AGM and swiftly handed over to outgoing chairman Malcolm Wilkie.*

Our Honorary Secretary Simon Bishop mentioned that we now have role descriptions for all the key roles in the HWBKA Committee and also mentioned some minor changes to the constitution regarding the number of signatories needed.

Our Membership Secretary Peter Halford updated us on membership fees and membership numbers.

Outgoing Apiary Manager Peter Coxon told us about the condition of the apiary at Horsted Green Park and mentioned the incident during the heat wave where a smoker fell over and caused a fire. Luckily no harm was done to the hives and we now have proper fire safe metal boxes to put the smokers in after inspections. We have produced lots of honey again from the colonies at Horsted – seven colonies went into Winter rest.

The idea is to set up a small team of helpers in the Apiary, a cooperative that can place a couple of their own hives in the apiary and also look after some of the colonies that belongs to HWBKA. For educational purposes we actually don't need very many colonies belonging to our association. Another idea is to apply "Darwinian style beekeeping" at the association apiary, that is, to try and breed varroa-resistant honey bees. Anyone interested in working in the HWBKA Apiary in 2026 can contact me, the Assistant Apiary Manager via my HWBKA email: the.hwbka+apiarist@gmail.com.

*Vanessa Jones (left standing) gave an update on how the work against Asian hornets are done on the Channel Islands and Peter Coxon, outgoing Asian hornet Action Team Coordinator, gave us an update on the situation in 2025 regarding Asian hornets (or Yellow legged hornets as they are said to be called now) and what to expect in 2026.*

Our Honorary Treasurer Steve Adams reported on our finances which are still strong with a fund available if we need a new apiary site or place for a future club house for training and socialising.

We then thanked the outgoung committee members – Sandy Infield, Malcolm Wilkie and Peter Coxon, and elected new committee members and also elected Roxanne Gould to become our new Chair person. Deborah Park was elected to become our new President. Carlton Waghorn will be our new Events Secretary while Liz Missen and Simon Kipping were elected as General Members of the HWBA Committee.

Malcolm Awarded the following certificates for modules passed by members this year:

Basic Assessment: Sarah Cullen, Tim Wadham (with Credit), Rob Gore.

HoneyBee Health: Roxanne Gould

A special thanks was given to Phil Edwards for the time he served as our Treasurer. Also a big thank you to David Chivers and Gail Schumacher who did the catering at the AGM.

The AGM was thus concluded and the Honeyshow could begin.

# The HWBKA Honeyshow 2025

*By Paul Lindström*

The honeyshow is a good place to display your honey based products as well as any bee-related DIY item. After the Honeyshow we also awarded some members with memorial cups, of which a new one was introduced this year, the Steve Davies Cup for "Best DIY Entry".

The Vera Becvar Cup was awarded to Fern Burgess for "Best Entry in Show" while the Lynn Moore Cup was awarded to Peter Coxon for "Contributions to HWBKA". The new DIY Cup was awarded to Bob Curtis and the prize was handed over by Steve Davies himself, visiting the AGM for this purpose. See gallery below for the other winners.

*At the honeyshow we had a raffle as usual, organised by Roxanne Gould and Steve Adams.*

*Lesley Francis and Rob Gore were among the judges in the honeyshow and explained the criteria for how honey was judged.*

*Phil Edwards (not in the picture), got 1st prize in Class Two "Set Honey" while Helen Searle (left) got 2nd prize and Bob Curtis (right) got 3rd prize.*

*Phil Edwards (no picture), got the 1st prize in Class Three "Cut Comb". The other entries didn't qualify for a prize.*

*Calton Waghorn got the 1st prize in Class Four "Novice Class", here represented by his girlfriend and fellow beekeeper Natasha "Tash" Morling (to the right) since Carlton couldn't attend the AGM. Douglas Andrews (left) got 2nd prize and Kerry Nutley (not in the picture) got 3rd prize.*

*Mark Wilcox, centre, got 1st prize in Class One "Clear Honey" while Simon Kipping (left) got 2nd prize and Bob Curtis (right) got 3rd prize.*

*Picture to the left:*
*Roxanne Gould got the 1st prize in Class Six "Biscuits" (furthest to the right), while Fern Burgess (furthest to the left) got 2nd prize. Helen Searle (centre left) got a shared 3rd prize together with Vanessa Jones (centre right).*

*Kerry Nutley (not in the picture but represented by Malcolm Wilkie), got the 1st prize in Class Seven "Preserves". Phil Edwards (also not in the picture) got 2nd prize while Deborah Park (right) got 3rd prize.*

*Helen Searle got 1st prize in Class Ten "Dipped Candle" and is congratulated here by Malcolm Wilkie. No other entries qualified for a prize.*

*Bob Curtis (right), got 1st prize in Class Thirteen "Hive/Beekeeping Item". Mark Wilcox (centre) got 2nd prize while Paul Lindström (left) got 3rd prize.*

*Peter Coxon (right), received The Lynn Moore Cup, awarded for "Contributions to HWBKA".*

*Fern Burgess got 1st prize in Class Eight "Alcoholic Bewerage" and is congratulated here by Malcolm Wilkie. Holly de Castro got 2nd prize (was not at the AGM), Kerry Nutley and Phil Edwards shared 3rd prize (both of them also not at the AGM).*

*Bob Curtis (right), got the 1st prize in Class Eleven "Moulded Candle". Helen Searle (left) got 2nd prize while Phil Edwards (not in the picture) got 3rd prize.*

*Bob Curtis (right), received the newly introduced cup for "Best Hive/Beekeeping Item". The cup was presented by Steve Davies himself, nickname "The DIY Slave", who came to the AGM for this reason only since he has moved out of the HWBKA area.*

*Deborah Park (left), got the 1st prize in Class Nine "Confectionary". Vanessa Jones (right) got 2nd prize while Kerry Nutley (not in the picture) got 3rd prize.*

*Fern Burgess (left), got the 1st prize in Class Twelve "Any other wax, pollen or propolis product". Carlton Waghorn (not at the AGM but again represented by girlfriend and fellow beekeeper Natasha "Tash" Morling to the right) got 2nd prize while Jo Crawford (centre) got 3rd prize.*

*Fern Burgess (right), received The Vera Becvar Cup, awarded for "Best Entry in Show".*

# The HWBKA Christmas Dinner 2025

*By Paul Lindström*

We had a lovely Christmas dinner at Sandy Infield's Black Shed Studios in Fairwarp. Besides nice food and drinks we were asked to prepare a nativity play with a bee-theme. Each table was to create puppets. The script, instructions and images was prepared by Kerry Nutley (with help from Sandy, Carlton and Tash) and it was so good that we thought we should share it with all members of HWBKA. Here goes:


## "The Birth of the Holy Bee"

Due to global warming and increased transport links, many insects had drifted far from their correct countries of origin. Concerned for the safety of the meadow, sweet **Bee Warden Helen** sent out a pollen-powered decree:

> "All insects, please return home — *especially you horrible Asian Hornets!*"

As the insects buzzed back to their native lands, peace returned to the High Weald... And something extraordinary was about to happen.

### 🌸 The Announcement

**Narrator:** Queen Bee Mary rested her wings when a flash of glitter filled the hive.

**Angel Bee:** "Buzz not, Queen Mary! You are chosen to bring

forth the **Holy Bee**, who will bring sweetness to all hives!"

**Mary:** "Oh my honeycomb! How can this be?"

**Angel Bee:** "With nectar, love, and a drop of royal jelly."

### The Journey to Bee-thlehem

**Narrator:** Mary and Joseph buzzed across moonlit meadows, searching for a place to rest.

**Joseph:** "Keep buzzing, Mary! We'll find a hive!"

**Other insects:** "No room here!" "No space at our flower!" "Too many of us in this meadow!"

**Mary:** "My wings ache..."


### 🐝 No Room in the Hive

**Narrator:** At last, a hive! But a grumpy Wasp Innkeeper answered...

**Wasp Innkeeper:** "No room in the comb! Packed with hornets!"

**Joseph:** "Please — Queen Mary carries the **Holy Bee**!"

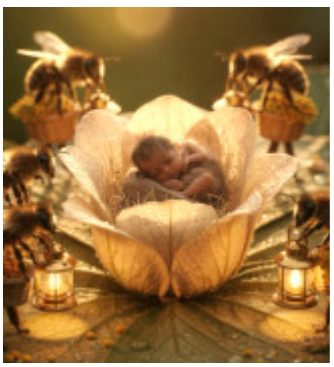
**Wasp:** "Oh fine... Joe and Rob Gore have left an old hive by their back door.
You can use that, like a swarm does every year
But don't make a mess!"

### 🍯 The Birth of the Holy Bee

**Narrator:** That night, the **Holy Bee** was born, glowing like honey in moonlight.

**Mary:** "He's perfect!"

**Joseph:** "He buzzes like an angel!"



Worker Bees: "Buzz hallelujah! Buzz hallelujah!"

## 🌾 The Shepherds (Guard Bees)

**Narrator:** The Guard Bees watched over the clover fields.

**Guard Bee 1:** "All quiet."

**Guard Bee 2:** "What's that golden glow?"

**Angel Bee:** "The **Holy Bee** is born! Follow the pollen trail!"

## 🌺 The Wise Foragers Arrive

**Narrator:** Three Wise Foragers travelled from distant hives, following the jasmine scent.

**Forager 1:** "I bring nectar!"

**Forager 2:** "I bring pollen!"

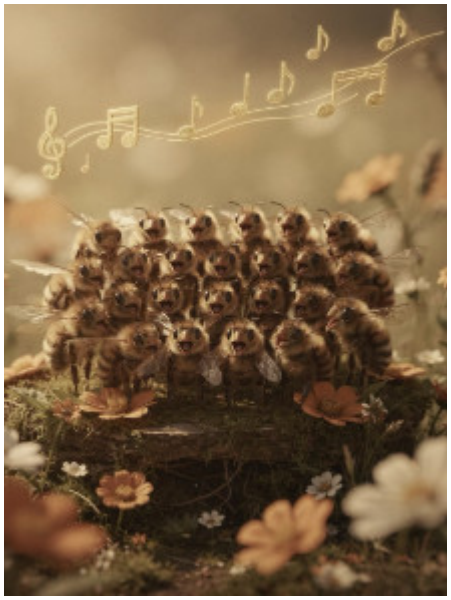
**Forager 3:** "And I bring royal jelly!"
They bowed before the Holy Bee.

## 🌟 The Great Buzzing (Finale)

**Narrator:** All insects gathered around the Holy Bee — bees, wasps, butterflies, beetles.

Together they hummed:

*" Hark! The Meadow Guardian Is Born!"*



## 🐝🎶 Hark! The Meadow Guardian Sing

*(To the tune of " Hark! The Herald Angels Sing", please all tables stand to sing)*

***Verse 1***

Hark! The meadow guardians sing,
Glory to the newborn Bee!
Peace on flowers, honey mild,
Born to bless each meadow child.
Joyful all ye insects rise,
Buzzing softly through the skies,
With antennae raised in glee—
Welcome now the Holy Bee!
Hark! The meadow guardians sing,
Glory to the newborn Bee!

***Verse 2***

Born in petals soft and bright,
Holy Bee of golden light,
Wrapped within a flower's care,
Nectar-scented meadow air.
Worker bees with gifts draw near,
Foragers from afar appear,
Singing with harmonious glee—
"Bless this tiny Holy Bee!"
Hark! The meadow guardians sing,
Glory to the newborn Bee!

***Verse 3***

Buzzed he brings the hive new peace,
Honeyed hope that shall not cease,
Light and warmth in every comb,
*Guiding all the gentle bees back home.*
Let the meadows bloom again,
Free from hornets' fear and reign,
With the Holy Bee we see—
Joy restored to hive and bee!
Hark! The meadow guardians sing,
Glory to the newborn Bee!

# How do virgin queens mate?

## *– Hives, Bee stings and 'aggressive' bees*

*By Jonathan Coote*

Although these three beekeeping elements are only indirectly related, they are all significant practical aspects of beekeeping

If it is done thoughtfully, gently and confidently, keeping honeybees does not normally produce a negative or aggressive response from colonies or individual bees.

This is surprising as what we, as beekeepers do involves breaking open their 'nest', disturbing them, subduing them, sometimes inadvertently squashing then, reorganising their combs (frames) of food and brood and, from time to time, 'robbing' them of their honey stores, changing their queen or simply moving them to a different hive or location.

In the wild as well as in managed colonies new colonies are created when the parent colony reaches the optimum size to replicate itself. The process is probably brought about by the workers sensing the density of the colony and preparing vertical queen cells the workers have created for this purpose – the queen takes no part in the decision process.

The eggs laid in the queen cells hatch after three days and develop rapidly as larvae. As soon as the first larva is ready to be capped, weather permitting, about half the workers in the colony along with a number of drones, departs with the 'old' queen to a new nest site, already selected by the workers and once there, set up a new colony.

Then, usually fairly soon after the new colony has built sufficient comb and stored stocks of food and the queen has laid a few thousand eggs, unless it is late in the season, the workers prepare further queen cells and when the first of these emerges it fights with or destroys its rivals, it mates and the old queen is then superseded (replaced) with this new queen too. About a year or sometimes two later, in nature, the process is repeated, as each year or two of colony growth leads eventually to crowding, triggering the colony reproduction process by dividing, by swarming once again.

As beekeepers we try to work, rather against nature, to discourage swarming, as swarming usually prevents the colony remaining at its strongest just when the main honeyflow arrives. With a strong nectarflow, a newly swarmed colony will be more likely to be able to gather enough stores to overwinter but would not normally produce enough for the beekeeper to remove part as a crop surplus. Honey production therefore depends to a large extent on delaying the natural cycle of queen production and fertilisation. A workable compromise is to induce the bees to think they have swarmed in about mid-August by temporarily removing the queen into a small nuke. This will prompt the colony to prepare emergency queen cells and one of the best of these can be saved and left to develop, mate and start laying, during September. The old queen can be kept in the nuke until this process has been completed successfully, but it is a useful 'insurance' in case things do not turn out as planned.

### On different hive types

However, with a double 'national' broodbox system beekeepers can induce the generation a new 'autumn queen within one half of a split, removing the old queen into the other half which continues to lay. If the beekeeper is not trying to increase the number of colonies managed, when the new queen in the other half has mated and started laying, the beekeeper can remove the old queen and, using newspaper as a temporary divider, reunite the two halves. A double brood box system makes this easy and reduces the risk involved in queen production and mating. Each of these two halves can be kept adjacent during the process but with their entrances pointing slightly away from one another until ready to remove the old queen and

**About Jonathan Coote**

I have been keeping bees continuously for almost 50 years. I joined Eastbourne BKA in 2003 and became an EBKA committee member in 2005, then EBKA Chair from 2008 to 2018.

I did some beekeeping in the Orne Department of Normandy France where we used to have a holiday cottage and I took live worker samples, located the nest and reported the first Asian Hornets to be found in the region in 2013. Over the last 3-4 years we were there I believe there were about 10 deaths caused by the Asian Hornets in the region – apparently including three beekeepers.

Until recently I managed more than 20 honey bee colonies in various locations, but I have now reduced to at the most two hives. Having finally been caught up by age, I am now interested in making active beekeeping more accessible for the older and less able bodied.

Following a career as a Chartered Surveyor, on retiring in 1999 I retrained as an arborist (tree surgeon). having some 50 acres of mixed woodlands to manage.

Through this I became interested in feral honeybees living in trees. I have worked with several local arborists in removing and re-homing these bees, when necessary or making it safe for tree work to be carried out close to feral nests. I also often remove feral colonies from buildings and other odd places where necessary and re-home them.

reunite the two halves. In most years strong, healthy and productive colonies are maintained. A temporary floor, crownboard and roof will be needed for this system. With other hive types a nuke box is used as a temporary 'second home'. A single National brood box is really too small for the size of colonies we have in the south of the UK. The larger brood boxes such as the National 14x12, Dadant and Langstroth are big enough but also rather cumbersome and too spacious for a young developing colony.

Some beekeepers regard the additional work of checking 24 instead of 12 frames during inspections to be a disadvantage of this arrangement but I think there is some compensation in the frames being significantly lighter for handling during inspections. If the inspection is for checking the imminence of swarming, simply removing the supers and breaking the joint between the two brood boxes allows the upper box to be hinged upwards. If swarming is imminent, it is almost certain that queen cells will be found along the bottom edges of the upper box frames.

In this case it is possible to retain the queen in one box and allow a virgin to develop and mate in the second box. Once mated there is a choice of either reuniting or, if the two boxes are evenly balanced in terms of brood and stores separating into two colonies which, if balanced and well stocked will each survive the winter.

I am undoubtedly prejudiced but for about 25 years I ran three apiaries, each more than six miles apart. Each apiary had about 8-10 colonies.

For most of my beekeeping life I have kept my bees on National double broodbox hives. This has not prevented me from trying different systems, including at one stage having six Dadant hives. These are really quite challenging because of both the weight of a fully occupied frame and of having, in my case12 Langstroth deep sized brood frames, a full broodbox weighing in excess of 50 kg.

I also experimented with 'long' hives with about 30 deep frames. I found these work best if the entrance is in the middle not as mainly seen, at one end. They are also, like the Dadant, very difficult to move from one site to another should the need arise

## Mating flights

Many beekeeping books including some recent publications propound the view that virgin queens fly alone from the parent colony to mate.

My own observations differ from that point of view. I think it is more probable that, rather than as often suggested, the virgin flying out alone and randomly mating with the first drones encountered, mating is unlikely to be attempted until only a single virgin is present in the colony. Individual virgin queens engage in mortal combat until the successful one is left and ready to mate. Mating can then take place.

I think it is very likely that at this time she does actually leave the colony on her own but awaiting her are a number of workers from the colony who intercept her and subsequently guide and protect her all the way to a relatively distant 'drone congregation area'. This is a small groups of workers, perhaps a 100 or so. They are most likely 'scout bees', able to guide the virgin queen to fairly distant sites. This makes sense as quite logically it greatly reduces the risk of inbreeding from being mated with the virgin colony's own drones in a colony, which are genetically her brothers. Such a mating would be potentially disastrous for the future of such a colony.

Little is known about how these workers 'organise' this and many highly respected and expert authors including Thomas D Seeley strongly maintain that the virgin queen flies out alone to mate. However, there is growing evidence that mating occurs in drone congregation areas several miles away from a virgin queen's colony and this idea is becoming accepted. It does seem unrealistic to assume that a virgin queen could find a distant drone congregation area, let alone get there without first being waylaid by drones from her own colony.

Assuming this arrangement can be verified it would clearly be advantageous for virgins to be mated only by the fastest and fittest non-related drones. It also helps to see the advantage of having a large selection of genetic material available and, by a competition ending in the certain death of successful competitors, plenty of genetic competitors as after this frantic pursuit each of the fastest successful inseminators dies. Having received upwards of ten different insemination the newly mated virgin is 'gathered' again and, protected by her own workers, guided back to the nest/hive she came from. It is quite probable that the now mated queen may need to pause and recuperate on the return journey, so if you come across what seems like a very small resting swarm it would be best to leave it alone in case it is actually a mating flight.

Experiments were carried out to test this hypothesis some years ago with a positive outcome. This was done in Switzerland in a long and deep valley with several apiaries along it but no bees joining the experiment from adjacent valleys.

Despite many years of active beekeeping, I have only witnessed a 'mating party', i.e. a colony's virgin queen and her worker attendants, once 'close up'. It consisted of the now mated virgin, and I would guess, about 100 or so workers, which were returning to the hive. Before this occurred, I had examined the colony in question. The virgin along with others had emerged from its pupal stage a couple weeks beforehand and there had subsequently been no sign of brood in the colony. When I first opened the hive, which was just a single broodbox, I noted the queen's absence and the continued lack of brood. I noticed to my surprise there were a significant number of drones within it but almost all of them were on the upper side of the crown board immediately beneath the roof. This seemed odd and led me to consider that perhaps a colony's drones might

actually be 'corralled' in the hive by some of the workers while a virgin queen takes her mating flights.

A few minutes later as I closed up the hive from behind it, what turned out to be the returning 'mating party', actually alighted on the back of my beesuit.

I (bravely) took off my beesuit with the bees on it and laid it at the front of the hive on a convenient small piece of plywood. There were no drones among these bees.

I was then able to watch the entire party of accompanying workers usher the virgin, noticeable from the evidence of her last mating attached to her rear end, into the hive. This whole procedure, from landing on me to all the accompanying bees disappearing into the hive took no more than 5 or 6 minutes. These bees could only have been absent for around 40 minutes or so and the initially solo departure of the queen at that time would not have been apparent.

Our knowledge of honeybee behaviour has grown enormously in the 50 years that I have been beekeeping. Even so a great deal depends on the skill of beekeepers noticing when the bees seem to be doing something unexpected.

## Aggressive bees

For the majority of colonies, a confident and proficient beekeeper should be able to manage bees without feeling discouraged by their aggressive behaviour nor having to wear body armour.

One way of overcoming this issue, assuming you have more than a single colony, is to re-queen it, but only if you are sure that, either you are not the cause, or that something else is not causing it such, perhaps, as an outbreak of robbing.

It is absolutely essential to act if a single colony is behaving badly, or they are behaving aggressively towards your neighbours. If that is the case the suspect colony should be identified and removed to a safe but distant location or if that is not possible it will have to be destroyed. Simply buying a new queen and introducing it to such a colony is likely to fail as she may well be rejected or killed almost immediately.

Assuming this is not the case, it still requires a bit of thought as to how to achieve requeening to stop or minimise aggressive behaviour.

One way to proceed, if it is safe to do so, is to move the aggressive colony to a new site in the apiary, perhaps 10 or more metres away. A single broodbox with a few frames of drawn comb with a small quantity of stores is left on the original location. Most of the flying bees which tend to be the most aggressive will return to that site.

Left for a few days all the flying bees will be back at the original site and, for now, 'out of the contest'. It should now be easier to find and kill the existing queen. The bees will respond by attempting to make a new one on any larvae produced by this queen which if allowed to develop might be an equal nuisance. However, after 10 days or so any larvae of worker brood capable of becoming a replacement queen will be too old to achieve this and any younger ones will be clearly visible as they will by now have become emergency queen cells. These can be removed and comb or two of unsealed brood with eggs and young larvae, but no worker bees, from another quieter colony will help keep the colony going and will enable emergency queens to be produced. One of these can now be allowed to develop as a replacement.

Alternatively, at this point a single comb of eggs and larvae from a calm colony 'borrowed' from another beekeeper for the purpose will serve the same purpose. Selecting the 'youngest 'of these Emergency Queen Cells and removing the remainder, as the new queen develops, mates and starts to lay it will enable the colony to recover and become productive again but hopefully with a much reducing tendency to aggression. The colony should be reasonably easy to manage during these operations as most of the 'angry brigade' of mature workers have gone back to the original site and over the next couple of weeks will die or they can be eliminated. The requeening colony will need feeding until the number of flying workers has recovered. In both parts of the colony drones might be carrying the aggressive tendency so maturing drone brood, in either part initially, should be destroyed. Once the new queen is laying the colony can be moved, a few metres every few days, back to the original location.

I have some confidence in recommending the use of one of the 'emergency queens', produced in this way, as trying to introduce an expensive 'bought in' queen might result expensively in its destruction as the process is a bit disturbing for the colony in question.

If you only have a single colony, it should still be possible to beg or borrow a single frame of eggs and young larvae, or even better – a sealed queen cell from a calm colony to carry out the process.

## Emergency treatment of bee stings

As the aspect of beekeeping just described probably includes a higher risk of being stung it is worth being prepared for that eventuality, as an aggressive colony in an apiary can often make the other normally passive bees more defensive too.

Some years ago, a relatively new beekeeper rang me to say his bees had suddenly become aggressive and could I advise him about it.

I had an hour to spare before going out that evening to give a beekeeping talk, so off I went. His front door was some 10 metres distant from his very small apiary.

While I was waiting for him to open the front door a solitary bee flew round the corner and without warning stung me on the face, on the lower eyelid.

It did not survive the encounter, but as my friend opened the door, I asked him if he could quickly heat some water and let me have half a cup, and also a piece of kitchen towel

He hesitated but complied. As soon as it arrived, I dipped the corner of the towel into the hot water (I would guess still about 50-60° C) and

Hatless beekeeper dies from sting

Nadeem Badshah

A beekeeper on the Isle of Wight died of anaphylactic shock after he was stung when he was not wearing a protective veil, a coroner has said.

The islands coroner, Caroline Sweeney, who recorded a conclusion of misadventure, said that Alan Ransom, 55, died of a lack of oxygen to the brain caused by anaphylactic shock after a bee sting.

Ransom, a civil engineer, had been examining his hives on May 10, 2024, when he was stung on the left ear. An air ambulance was called and he was taken to St Mary's Hospital, Newport, but he died five days later.

The coroner added that Ransom's death was "pursuant to developing an anaphylactic reaction to a bee sting on his left ear, after he failed to wear a beekeeper's hat".

Ransom, who lived in Godshill, near Ventnor, had run a YouTube channel since 2022 as The Vectis Bee Man in which he described himself as a "hobbyist beekeeper".

He had kept bees for about six years and had several active hives at Marvel Solar Farm Apiary. Ransom, who was born in Epsom, Surrey, typically produced about 40lb of honey a year.

He said on his YouTube channel: "Follow my journey as I document my mistakes and my successes as I endeavour to progress from a complete newbie to a more experienced and rounded beekeeper."

In 2023, Ransom made the local news when he rehomed a swarm of about 2,000 bees from a car park at the headquarters of Island Roads in Newport, where he worked, to one of his hives.

After he died his friends and family raised more than £1,500 for Cancer Research UK in his memory. In tributes on the fundraiser, he was described as a "great man and a great friend" and a "kind and gentle soul".

Anaphylaxis is a life-threatening allergic reaction caused by food, medicine or insect stings. Symptoms come on rapidly and include swelling of the throat and tongue; difficulty breathing or breathing very fast; difficulty swallowing; tightness in the throat or a hoarse voice; wheezing and coughing or noisy breathing.

*An article from 2024 describing how a beekeeper got stung on the ear and later died having had an anaphylactic shock.*

applied it to the still present pulsating sting.

This seemed to have had good effects. Firstly, the heat killed the pulsating muscle on the bee sting, stopping it pumping venom into my eyelid and the surrounding tissues. Secondly the heat seemed quickly to break down the complex allergens in the venom now in my eyelid which give bee stings their powerful effect. It also enabled the now-dead stinger to be easily removed.

I had no further problems. Had I failed to achieve this success I suspect my face would have become almost unrecognisable over the next few hours as the area around the eye is very tender. Had it failed my audience that evening, mainly beekeeping novices, on seeing me thus would have been seriously discouraged from pursuing this activity.

I decided to try this old remedy again. It was mentioned somewhat obliquely by Wedmore a Sussex beekeeper who wrote in a book written about 100 years ago, saying merely a temperature of around 50° C would break down the toxins responsible (or put simply, fight heat with heat).

I tried, and it worked. I now carry a thermos of hot tea and some kitchen roll when beekeeping expressly for this purpose, and it works without taking off your protective clothing or through a veil if necessary.

As hot tea works well, I suppose coffee or even plain hot water does, if hot enough, but avoid getting stung when you have just drunk your last cup!

If bee stings trouble you, you could try routinely taking a single cetirizine tablet an hour or so before you start. These are available over the counter and are cheap and very effective, but they are prophylactic, in my experience, and do not work retrospectively.

Having had a great many stings over many years, perhaps upwards of a thousand, so far without serious side effects, I now carry an 'EpiPen' as the risk of anaphylaxis, a major and sometimes fatal reaction to bee stings, is probably a significant risk for me now. As they – say its not the first sting that kills a beekeeper but the last!

Having expressed my concerns to my GP some years ago, an NHS prescription for an EpiPen (or its equivalent) was provided. Replacements are available every year or two, to allow for the fact that an unused injector loses some of its efficacy over time.

The injector has a spring-loaded needle which will pierce several layers of protective bee clothing when the release button is pressed. It should be used if a sting starts to make you feel even slightly unsteady or woozy. It is effective for about 30-40 minutes, so, if you are some distance from treatment, a second one should be in your first aid kit.

I don't think it is necessary to discard an out of date unused, but not cloudy one. It will help if needed and can be kept as a second shot even if a year or two out of date.

# Summary of the latest HWBKA committee meeting

The HWBKA committee met on 6 November 2025 via ZOOM, mainly to prepare the AGM. The next HWBKA Committee meeting will be on 21 January 2026 – ***please submit issues to discuss to our Honorary Secretary Simon Bishop on email:*** the.hwbka+secretary@gmail.com

# Dates for your calendar

At the moment the calendar is not quite ready, but the Bee Banters will continue as before; the last Wednesday of the month, alternating between the Blue Anchor pub in Crowborough and The Rose & Crown Pub in Mayfield. More details about the Beginner's Course will follow shortly. Look out for announcements via email and our WhatsApp groups, and check the calendar when it is updated.

Saturday 21th February
**Start of Beginner's Course**
Venue: Five Ashes Village Hall

Saturday 7th March
**Sussex BKA AGM**
Venue: Uckfield Centre. Talk on YLH and Spring Trapping by Tom Bickerdyke

Saturday 9th May
**Sussex BKA Bee Market**
Venue: Uckfield College.

22nd, 23rd & 24th October
**National Honey Show**
Venue: Sandown Park, Esher, Surrey

***More events might be listed on our web site – check it regularly for the latest updates.***

## HWBKA Committee 2025-2026

President: Deborah Park the.hwbka+president@gmail.com

Chairman: Roxanne Gould the.hwbka+chair@gmail.com

Honorary Secretary: Simon Bishop
the.hwbka+secretary@gmail.com

Honorary Treasurer: Steve Adams
the.hwbka+treasurer@gmail.com

Magazine Editor, Vice Chairman and Assistant Apiary Manager: Paul Lindström the.hwbka+apiarist@gmail.com

Apiary Manager: vacant

Events Secretary: Carlton Waghorn
the.hwbka+events@gmail.com

Lecture Coordinator and Librarian: Helen Chivers
the.hwbka+lecturecoordinator@gmail.com

Membership Secretary: Peter Halford
the.hwbka+membership@gmail.com)

Training & Education Manager: Mark Wilcox
the.hwbka+training@gmail.com

AHAT Coordinator: Tim Wadham
the.hwbka+ahat@gmail.com

Swarm Coordinators:
Simon Bishop the.hwbka+secretary@gmail.com
Peter Coxon the.hwbka+webmaster@gmail.com
Peter Halford the.hwbka+membership@gmail.com

Acting web master: Peter Coxon
the.hwbka+webmaster@gmail.com

Committee members: Liz Missen and Simon Kipping

**Other useful contacts – National Bee Unit inspectors:**

Local Bee Inspectors:
Daniel Morgan (Mobile: 07500 95 43 90, email daniel.morgan@apha.gov.uk)
Helen Hadley (Mobile: 07871 320 316, email: helen.hadley@apha.gov.uk)

For more Bee Inspectors see the National Bee Unit web site.