



BEE TALK

Warwick and Leamington Branch of Warwickshire Beekeepers

A SIGN OF HOPE IN THE NEW YEAR

Perhaps a little early to be looking out for the snowdrops, but it won't be long! The first ones in my garden often pop through towards the end of January though the old saying goes:- *"The snowdrop in purest white array, first rears her head on Candlemas day"*

The Christian festival of lights or Candlemas is celebrated on 2nd February, hence snowdrops are often known as Candlemas Bells.

This beautiful little plant is notoriously difficult to grow from bulbs and is best split after flowering and then planted "in the green". It has taken me an awfully long time to learn this and I dread to think how many thousands of bulbs I have lost to the squirrels over the years!

Extract from the snowdrop has long been used as a traditional medicine and was used by the ancient Greeks for its powerful mind-altering effects. Scholars have argued that Homer in his *Odyssey*, describes Odysseus using the snowdrop to clear his mind of Circe's bewitchment.

Coming into today's world, this old remedy was found to be an alkaloid and named Galantamine (after the Latin name for the snowdrop, *Galanthus*, meaning Milk Flower). It was first extracted from the snowdrop in 1950 after a Bulgarian pharmacologist noticed villagers rubbing their foreheads with the leaves and bulbs. It was discovered to increase brain acetylcholine, a chemical of great importance in cerebral function. In 2001, it was approved for use in the management of Alzheimer's disease and is now available in over 70 countries worldwide.

Look out on a sunny day in a few weeks' time and you may just see one or two of the girls venturing out for their first taste of Spring on these amazing, glorious little plants. It will do your heart good - and possibly your head!

Maggie Curley



NEW YEAR SALE

We have started to assemble a catalogue of surplus beekeeping kit to offer for sale, so if you have stuff you want to offer, we need a description, its condition, price required and your contact details. A photo would also be useful as viewing is likely to be restricted by Covid.

An email with final details and a pro-forma for the details of items will be winging its way to your inbox soon.

Ivan A Perry

CHAIR'S NEW YEAR MESSAGE

This is not the New Year any of us were expecting, but one consolation during lockdown is our beekeeping. We must continue to maintain our colonies, as they are considered livestock and can be tended accordingly. However, at this time of year a little hefting, adding fondant or doing oxalic acid treatment is not too onerous.

Doing those jobs has taught me that you are never too experienced to make basic mistakes.

Having run out of mouse guards, I opened one of my hives (a very heavy brood and a half) to find an extremely corpulent mouse sitting on the crown board in the remains of a block of fondant. He was practically spherical! As he waddled off, I reflected that consuming a kilo of fondant is rather like what I have been doing over Christmas and that he, too, will benefit from some exercise. I was lucky - the contents of the hive were untouched so I have ordered a few more mouse guards.

The light work of winter means there is still time for reading and watching bee videos. Or studying for a module. Entries for the BBKA Modules must be in by January this year (just contact me on examsec@wbka.org.uk for advice) and the exams will be taken online, in your own home on 24th April. Why not give it a try?

We also have a backlog of practical assessments - Basic Assessments, Bee Health Assessments and General Husbandry Assessments which will go ahead in summer. If you would like to join the Towards the Basic sessions online (which prepare for the assessment), just sign up on the branch website.

BEEKEEPING TASKS THIS MONTH

- Add mouse guards or woodpecker mesh - the next menace in the cold is those woodpeckers.
- Brood production has ground to a halt at last, so now is a good time for oxalic acid treatments. There is good advice from [The Apiarist](#), as usual as we have just reached where he was in early December, temperature wise.
- Continue to heft or weigh regularly to check your colonies have plenty of stores. Most of my colonies are still very heavy, but a few are surprisingly light. Were they robbed in the very warm early winter?
- Put a precautionary block of fondant over a feed hole under the roof, if the colony is light. On a heavy colony this can be a menace if liquefies and runs into the colony, or attracts peckish mice.
- Check your entrances are clear, particularly behind mouseguards, they can become blocked with dead bees at this time of year.
- Frosty days are good times for frame cleaning, box flaming and wood treatments. But it's still too early to put in foundation (unless your storage is warm).

If you need help with your bees, contact me or any other member of the committee at (warleambees@warleambees.org.uk). Stay safe, stay warm and lets look forward to beekeeping to come!

Jane Medwell
Branch Chair

TRAINING APIARY UPDATE

The girls have come home! On Saturday 19th December, after much clearing of weeds and general tidying up, the training apiary was ready to receive the first

six colonies back from their "lockdown vacation". They are all in good health, have had their Christmas fondant and been given vapourised oxalic acid treatment by the "super team" of Steve Poynter and Alan Deeley. The aim for 2021 is to limit colony numbers to no more than eight in order to leave adequate room in which trainers and trainees can work comfortably.

Let's hope that the government's prediction of life getting back to some sort of normality by Easter, will mean we will be able to start training again towards the end of April.

Maggie Curley



BOOKISH BEEKS

The next meeting of Bookish Beeks will take place on Thursday 28th January at 7.30pm via Zoom. We will be discussing **Buzz: The Nature and Necessity of Bees** by Thor Hanson.

Reviews of the book: *'Buzz is a must-read for anyone with an inkling of an interest in the natural history of bees. Thor Hanson tells the story of bees, right from the beginning, from their evolution to how ancient civilizations recognised their importance to become honey hunters and beekeepers. The book goes well beyond the story of honeybees though, accounting for the lives of a multitude of species from bumblebees to leaf-cutters, and the hugely important role they play in pollinating our crops and wildflowers. Eloquent and captivating throughout, Hanson writes in a way which is accessible for all; his appendices, notes and glossary provide more detailed information and are as highly recommended as the main text.'* -- Darryl Cox

Why not join us and our book chat - it's bound to make for an interesting conversation:

Time: 28 January 2021 at 7.30pm

Join Zoom Meeting: <https://zoom.us/j/96136382696>

Meeting ID: 961 3638 2696

Passcode: 408879

Any questions please email Jane: fjordie@btinternet.com

Jane Ford, Branch Librarian



Bernard Brown getting his bees into the Christmas spirit

BEE LINES

At the recent frame cleaning day 400 frames were cleaned for members.

Hats off to the frame cleaning team. What an achievement!

It was a bit of a slog but undeterred, there will be more sessions in the New Year.

TREASURER'S REPORT 2020

To say this year has been a difficult one is an understatement but, where the finances of our branch are concerned, I'm pleased to report that we have remained financially secure.

Our Introduction to Beekeeping had to be discontinued after 2 of the planned 6 sessions had run and those trainees who requested a full refund received it. A number of them asked for their payment to be carried over to the 2021 course. By the end of November both weekend courses in March were full.

The Co-op was disrupted for a short time while we planned how to deliver stock safely, but now it is back to full strength and members are collecting goods under these new arrangements.

Now it is time for you to renew your membership.

You will have received an email on December 2nd from Membership Services asking you to complete the attached form and return it with your subs. If you haven't received it, please check in your Junk Mail. If you can't find it, please contact Liz Gurney, our new Membership Secretary on lizdinks@hotmail.co.uk and she will send you another one.

Membership runs from January 1st until December 31st so, if you haven't already done so, please make your payment as soon as possible.

It was agreed by the Committee that membership should be paid by 14th February. If payment hasn't been received by that date, then membership will be deemed to have lapsed. This will mean that after that date the member will not be insured and will not receive any communication from the BBKA or County.

If, after this time, a member pays, then it will be 6 weeks before their Bee Disease Insurance becomes active.

May I wish you all a very safe and Happy New Year.

Val Dillon, Branch Treasurer

A LATE AUTUMN BEE RESCUE

Sunday 29th November seemed just an ordinary day. I was just about to head out the door for a walk with my dog when I noticed I'd been tagged on a Facebook post by my neighbour. It was a photo of a bee colony up in a tree on the canal bank opposite Morrison's in Leamington. The dog would have to wait as I went along to take a look. Seeing that the colony was not very high up, I cut away some of the thorny branches and discovered that the bees were alive. But with branches criss-crossing through the comb, I knew it was going to be a tricky removal and not one to attempt single handedly.

So I contacted my "go to" person, Bernard Brown, who put me in touch with Chris Price. Like me, Chris was only in his second year of beekeeping and whereas I had two previous swarm collections under my belt, he had none. Thankfully we were joined by Megan Bialecka, who added her 9 years beekeeping experience to our little band.

Armed with saws and secateurs, Chris and Megan calmly and confidently set about removing the colony while I kept an eye on the canal path and pavement for pedestrians. The comb and bees were carefully placed in a box with Megan estimating that there were about four seams of bees. Thankfully I had an available polynuc and drawn comb.

However, hiving the colony was quite an experience. Having set up the polynuc and stand, I began shaking the bees into the nuc as Megan had advised. While most of the bees went into the nuc after a few good shakes, the comb was breaking and falling in. I continued by brushing all the bees from each piece of broken comb. I hoped that the queen had made it into the nuc but with bees flying into the nuc, I was hopeful that she was in there somewhere.

By the time I had finished, the bees' old home was in many, many pieces. I felt like a vandal and could only imagine how stressful this ordeal was for them. Not only had their home been moved but it had then been destroyed. To make amends, I quickly fed them some thymolated syrup, although fondant is usually recommended for this time of year.

Bernard very helpfully put me in touch with "branch guru" Mike Townsend, who has provided some much needed pearls of bee wisdom. He suggested that if the bees were taking the syrup, I should continue giving it to them until they stopped and then feed fondant. The following morning, all the syrup was gone and they continued to take it for three days at which point I replaced it with fondant and Candipolene Gold.

Before this bee rescue adventure, I had never heard of bees building a colony out in the open. Obviously, when they settled there, presumably from a swarm in the Spring, the tree would have been in foliage and may have seemed like a cosy option. Pity



the bees had not heard of Autumn. Interestingly, a post on the online Beekeeping Forum revealed that beeks in East Essex had also rescued an outside colony from a tree on the same day. Perhaps it happens more often than we realise but the colonies are in areas away from people and are never seen.

I also went back to the Facebook post that initiated this adventure and wrote underneath it that the bees had been rescued. With a lot of people interested in how they are getting on, I've been posting updates.

I feel a great responsibility in getting these bees through the winter, and although it's never guaranteed whether a colony will make it through to the Spring, at least with a hive over their heads they have a much better chance. They would surely be dead by now if it wasn't for my observant neighbour and the support from Bernard and Mike, and especially Chris and Megan. Thank you all!

Janet Hyatt



FAMED BEEKS: BROTHER ADAM

Just off the A38, shortly after Exeter, as you drive into south Devon and on to Cornwall, is Buckfast Abbey. It is a place of great peace and beauty, with an excellent restaurant and shops; perfect for a stop-off and a complete contrast to motorway services.

The Abbey itself is a modern building of warm grey stone, built by a small team of monks in the twentieth century. It has the most beautiful chapel at its east end, calm and silent, with a glorious stained glass representation of Christ. (The chapel is sadly closed at present because of the pandemic, though the main building and restaurant are open).

The Abbey of St Mary, Buckfast, was home from 1910 to 1996 to Karl Kehrle OSB OBE, who was born on August 3rd 1898, in Mittelbiberach, in southern Germany. At the age of 11, in poor health, he was sent by his family to Buckfast Abbey to join its small Benedictine community. At first they called him Louis; then when he became a monk in 1916, he took the name Adam. Because of his ill health, he was excused the masonry work of the other monks, and instead, he worked in the apiary.

A virulent disease that originated in the Isle of Wight decimated apiaries nationally. Buckfast was left with 16 of its 45 hives. Adam inherited the apiary in 1919, and in 1925 he moved it to a remote site at Sherbeton on Dartmoor. Here the bees were isolated, and exposed to harsh weather that quickly destroyed weaker strains. Adam began to read widely about apiculture, and to breed his bees, following the genetic ideas of Gregor Mendel.

He travelled widely, collecting different strains of bees. Between 1950 and 1960, he covered 82,000 miles by road in Europe, north Africa and the near East. He bred his bees from strains including *Apis mellifera monticola*, aiming for a calm temperament, disease resistance and productivity. He recorded his work and wrote books for other beekeepers that are still relevant today. Eventually, his work produced the Buckfast bee, which met all these criteria – which I can confirm from personal experience. The Buckfast apiary is still at Sherbeton (below).

Brother Adam received many awards and honorary degrees,



together with the OBE. Towards the end of his life, he returned to his home town; his last visit home had been in 1932. At the age of 97, he was moved to a nearby nursing home, where he died, on September 1st, 1996.

John Stringer



WELL AND TRULY FLEECEED

I've always been somewhat ambivalent about insulating our hives. Some of the branch gurus have never bothered and claimed they do not suffer exceptional winter losses. I can accept that reducing heat loss means that the bees have less work to do to maintain the hive temperature thereby conserving stores and prompting the Queen to lay earlier than uninsulated colonies. But oil seed rape does not feature in our girls foraging landscape and early brood rearing without the necessary forage can itself spell, if not disaster, a significant setback. However, my main reservation about insulating hives was the material of choice amongst its proponents. Even before Grenfell and the cynical marketing of the product, the use of chemical laden polyisocyanurate boards with high energy consuming aluminium facings did not seem to be the most environmentally friendly of products.

A conversation with a local sheep farmer, during which he lamented the fact that the value of the fleeces of his sheep did not cover the shearing costs, had me thinking. Here was a sustainable product with insulating properties good enough to keep sheep warm over winter. Perhaps there was an application for this in our hives. However, dreams of making my fortune by fleecing the beekeeping community dissolved upon closer examination of the fleeces with their generous loads of sheep poo and lanolin. OK, so it would wash out, but the washing machine (and domestic relationship) would never be the same again.

However, someone else with more persistence and perceptiveness was already on the case. Idly surfing the net, as one does in these peculiar times, I came upon the Heather Bell Honey Bees Company



from Cornwall who were marketing sheep's wool insulation batts for hives. The natural sheep's wool fibres are, allegedly, breathable and provide excellent insulation as well as water vapour absorption helping to keep bees warm and dry. They are made with 75% British sheep's wool combined with recycled polyester fibres. They are approximately 50mm, (2 inches) thick and 400mm, 16 inches square. They fit within a standard crown board although you may need an eke if your roof cannot accommodate the thickness.

At £3.25 per slab, the price is no more than that of new rigid insulation boards and, as there is no cutting nor waste involved, I thought it was worth a punt. Taking the opportunity whilst the hives were having their oxalic acid treatment, the insulation is now nestling snugly on all 8 hives.

I guess only time will tell how it performs, so watch this space.

Bernard Brown

HINTS & TIPS

Well, it is about -2°C and snowing outside and here I am thinking what I can do for the bees from the comfort of my warm front room! I came up with these ideas:

- Firstly, I have just paid my association membership so I can be sure that I have the continuity of insurance cover and membership.
- Now I am going to check on BeeBase to make sure that the colony numbers are up-to-date and that the apiary location details are all correct.
- I think planning your equipment needs for the coming season is a really good way to be prepared. It also means that if you plan ahead, as far as is possible, then you can take advantage of the winter sales that are coming up.

With that all done, I'm now feeling really smug at what I've achieved without even going out. Now to curl up and read those books I bought last year!!

HELEN ESSEX

If you have any hints or tips that you would like to share, please send them to Helen on h.essex@virgin.net

The editor of Bee Talk is Tanya Weaver. Please send content for the newsletter to her by the 28th of each month:
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