



These days there seems to be greater variations in the weather in spring than at any other time of the year. My memory may not be all that it should be, but I feel sure the spring season was not as variable in years gone by as it is today. My beekeeping experiences began on a farm in the days of the war in about 1942 and continued till 1948. I seem to remember long settled periods, warm days working in the fields, all sorts of mixed crops and flowers everywhere. No one had ever heard of rape, or if they did it was a dirty word. The old farmer I knew never fed his bees because in spring he didn't have any. He'd killed them all the previous back end in order to remove the last of 'their' honey. Then he just waited for swarms in the spring, to refill his hives again.

They came from the thousands of trees in the area, now decimated by the M6 motorway. The weather in those days seemed to be so reliable that he seemed to know exactly when the swarms would arrive. In no time at all he was taking out honey quite frequently and with the addition of home made farm bread and butter it made for a wonderful luxury in those dreadful days of the war. How different today. Our efforts these days are geared to endeavouring to get our bees through the winter and into spring with a minimum of loss, for we know there will not be any swarms in early spring. We do of course have varroa to thank for some of that. I do wonder if we get our priorities right or think enough about just what we are doing. Do we keep stocks that are poor, that are too small to be useful, that left alone would die anyway or that we could probably do without. Do we put too much effort into saving unhealthy stocks because we cannot tell healthy from unhealthy bees. We should all know that success in Beekeeping depends upon a continuous programme of observation, recording and action; not knee jerk reaction to a particular situation, there's much to learn.

We are coming up to the flowering period for the Rape, the first major crop of the year, and our bees must be ready for it well in advance. Oilseed rape has been grown in Britain for many years. It now forms the bulk of the honey crop for many beekeepers, for some it is the sole major source of honey. It has suffered from the myth that it's the cause of hay fever, but it flowers at the same time as many other trees, like plum and hawthorn, which may cause such symptoms. It's too easy to blame oilseed rape because it's so bright and obvious. People complain about the colour, but it is only temporary; negative attitudes can be very subjective. Unfortunately the proportions of the honey sugars, sucrose and fructose, means that rape granulates very rapidly. Warm days in spring and high nectar flows encourage expansion into the supers, but cold nights force retraction back into the brood box. The nectar which then cools can granulate before it is really ripe. Seasons when the nights are warm with high nectar flows by day do not have this problem. It can be difficult to decide just when rape honey is sufficiently ripe to extract. Combs may be sealed

but still liquid, whilst exposed honey may even have started to granulate. A rule of thumb method used by many beekeepers is to hold the combs upside down and shake vigorously. If nectar/honey flies out - do not extract, if nothing emerges it is probably safe. Most of the time this seems to be correct though occasionally the odd container of honey will ferment.

I certainly feel that if you remove rape honey supers they should be extracted immediately whilst still warm from the hive. Have your extracting equipment ready - take off the supers and extract them immediately. Another possibility is to construct a cupboard where the supers can be kept warm until you are ready to extract. Some beekeepers go through their supers on a regular basis, say every two or three days, removing just those combs ready for extraction and replacing them with empty combs. This system works quite well for those beekeepers with small numbers of hives, but it is not a practical system for those whose numbers of hives approach double figures.

It is essential to have enough frames ready waxed up so that when honey is removed the full frames can be replaced with an equal number of empty ones. In addition it is essential to give new supers when those on the hive are full of bees. Do not wait until they are full of honey. During a nectar flow bees need room available beyond what they are using at that moment simply to 'hang' nectar until it can be processed later. They are much more likely to move vertically into new boxes than take advantage of end combs in the supers.

Another system is to give unwired foundation/ starters so allowing the bees to build new comb. This comb is intended to be destroyed in the extraction process - so the honey can be allowed to granulate freely. Under this method the first super on the hive should contain a little drawn comb in the centre in order to draw the bees upwards, but the rest can be foundation. Second and subsequent supers are placed underneath the first and the bees build downwards quite naturally. Comb built in this way containing a honey which is reluctant to granulate can be utilised as cut comb.

Swarming will have ceased by about the middle of July. If you have been breeding new

young queens now is the time to unite them to the colonies that are going to the heather, for July is the time to finalise your preparations of stocks for the heather. Choose colonies with a young queen and start to build it up by adding combs of sealed brood from other stocks. Put the eggs and larva in the centre of the brood chamber with the sealed brood on the flanks. This will prevent the bees storing in the centre frames forcing them to put the heather honey up in the super. The aim is to build up a colony with a good food reserve, a good broodnest, a large population of flying bees and the young queen. The rest depends on good weather at heather time.

Folks who attended the Northern Beekeepers Convention at Durham were treated to a day of practical beekeeping and humour the likes of which we have not seen for many years. Both speakers, renowned for 'wearing bees' as well as working with them, gave excellent talks which everyone appreciated and understood. That is never more obvious than when people insist on continuing to ask questions and will not go home. A day enjoyed by all.

Tony Jefferson gave us an interesting and very practical talk last month, clearly demonstrating the many years of beekeeping experience within the Jefferson family. Practical beekeeping with an emphasis on working with the bees, understanding their ways, knowing when to open a colony and to understand what you are looking for is only gained by many years experience. Tony stressed the need to be able to recognise all stages of the brood, to know the timing of each stage and to be able to work with the bees to obtain maximum honey crop. Everyone should have gained something from his talk.

Now the sad news; I opened my hives last week only to discover that my bees are dead, in fact not just dead but almost all gone. There wasn't a cupful of bees to be found amongst the five colonies - where have they gone? They all came back from the heather in fine form with lots of honey in the supers. They were fed and were flying well in February but by early April they had all gone. I don't understand it, and having read many accounts of such phenomena I can only say I may have joined the 'CCD club'. The hives are cleaned and put away, maybe I will start again after we have moved house; I need time to think. I was asked to speak to the Richmond association on the 5th of April and I learned that many of their members had also lost lots of bees this year. The same

story was being told by several folks who attended the Northern Convention at Durham on the previous weekend. I feel the situation is now desperate and it's time to halt the prevarication by government etc and begin serious investigation into the problems facing beekeeping in this country.

This brings into sharp focus a point I have raised several times with you, namely the need for someone to take over installation and maintenance of the observation hive on the Castle Eden Walkway. I installed a hive there 26 years ago and have managed it every year since. I confess to feeling guilty at not being able to continue the task, though I am assured that I have done my share and that it's time to pass the responsibility to someone else. I will

gladly introduce someone to the site and show them what is required etc. It is very popular with every one who sees it and is a great attraction with school children - please don't let them down.

Yet in spite of the problems facing beekeeping, the good news is that we still have new members joining. This month we welcome Damianou Danos Georgiou from Darlington, taking our total membership to over 55 for the first time for many years. The future's bright for we only had 36 members shortly after varroa was first detected in the area over ten years ago.

This will be the last newsletter until September and the only chance to remind you of the three honey shows, Cleveland 26th of July, Stokesley 20th of September and Gateshead 1st of August. Please do all you can to support them if only to demonstrate to the 'world' that bee keeping is here to stay in spite of its many problems. If you need help please ask. Your help is particularly valuable at the Cleveland Show if only to talk to the many members of the public who may ask things like "why does honey come in so many different colours?"

Due to personal problems Jackie can't manage the Honey Show Secretaries job and for this year it has been taken over by Sal Mancina. Do see Sal for copies of the Show schedules which will be available within the next few weeks. We need an enthusiastic volunteer to take on the Show Secretaries task.

Kindest regards to you all, may your only problem this summer be too much honey.



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Enthusiasm breakfasts on obstacles,  
lunches on objections and dines on  
competition.

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Meetings held, from September to April, in Lingfield Farm, Countryside Centre, Middlesbrough, on the 3rd Monday of each month at 7.15pm  
Newcomer's are welcome.

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Alphabetical Beekeeping

Copied from the Honey Association's WebSite

**M is for.. Mead - a honey wine brewed with spices.**

**N is for.. Natural - honey is a totally natural product, with nothing added**