
THE BUZZ

Westerham Beekeepers'

newsletter

February 2024

published every other month

Issue One

New look newsletter:

Welcome to the new look Westerham Beekeepers' newsletter. The newsletter will incorporate input from our Chairman's, Steve Riley, excellent BeeZeen, provide a regular update on events, cover seasonal topics, and provide a helpful guide as to what to do over the coming weeks to look after your bees.

Of course, we are very keen to have your feedback or your input. So, if you think there is something you would like to be included, please let us know. Also, if you would like to provide an article for a future newsletter, we'd love to hear from you.

Chairman's Chat:

Colonies in delicate balance

It is still early in the year, but we are hopeful of a better outcome on winter colony losses at the club this spring. The BBKA reported winter losses of 41% last year in the south-east, and many of our members lost colonies.

Most colony losses occur in March, and for several reasons:

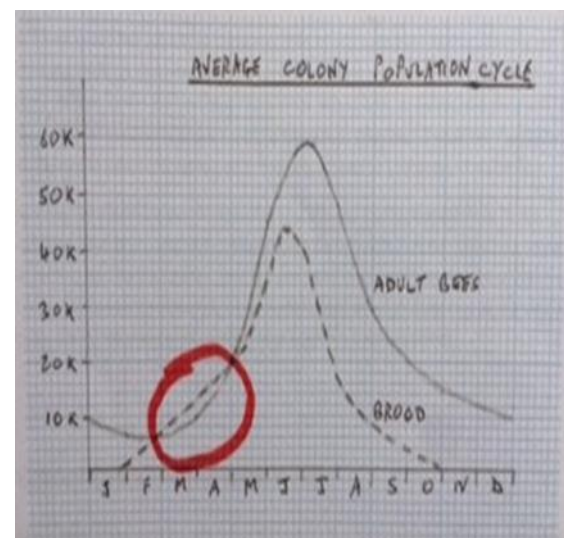
The colony is made up of old winter bees coming to the end of their lives and the colony cannot replenish them in time.

Honey stores are used up rapidly, with the spring's new progeny requiring the brood nest to be kept at circa 35°C, as large amounts of fuel are used to generate the necessary heat.

The colony goes into imbalance with more brood than adult bees to support them.
See the graph opposite

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Ref: Yates

Chairman's Chat contd:

At this time of year, the fate of colonies is delicately balanced and careful management is necessary.

Here are my tips for helping your colonies get through to spring:

Insulation: Nights are still often cold, so leave hive top insulation on; I have mine on all year round.

Warm syrup: If at late February to early March, you have a colony, or nuc, which is light on stores try providing small quantities of warm syrup (nb. honey above the cluster is a little warmer). But don't overfeed, as surplus syrup can end up as stored *honey*.

Water source: A safely accessible water supply is very important at this time of year. Water is needed to dilute honey both to eat, and to produce the large amount of larval food required for the rapid spring brood development. Later, the spring nectar flow will take over as their water supply. Water fetching is a specialist job, and the bees don't want to fly too far, particularly if it's cold. Set up a source in the apiary, preferably in the sun to warm the water. Add moss or stones for the bees to land safely.



Photo Steve Riley

Ivy honey frames left over from the Autumn?

Bees love ivy honey, even when it's crystallised. It has a similar consistency to fondant but includes the good, natural stuff. In the picture opposite, you can see

the crystallised ivy honey being nibbled away (in the centre-left of the frame) where the bees are making room for brood.



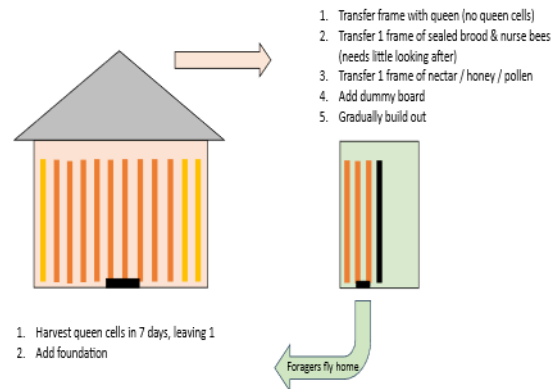
Photo Steve Riley

If you worry that these, ivy honey filled frames, will clog up the brood nest in the spring and reduce the room for the queen to lay, then you can encourage the bees to eat it.

First, score the sealed honey with your hive tool, and then spray the frame with water. Alternatively, move these ivy frames away from the brood-nest area and replace with drawn comb.

And lastly - get ready for swarm control

It's an odd thing beekeeping. One minute you are biting your fingernails over winter survival. The next, about swarm prevention! The *nuc artificial swarm* is a piece of cake. You just need to remove the queen to a nuc!



Steve Riley

Things to do next month:

Spring-clean your beekeeping equipment. Now is a good time to stick your head in that shed or storeroom, give everything a dust off and check the state of your beekeeping equipment. Check any stored frames for mould or wax moth. If you overwintered any dirty kit, give it a proper clean and scrape, and then either a good soak in a hot strong soda crystal solution or a going over with a blow torch. Everyone has their favourite methods.

Check what you need and make a shopping list. Did I run out supers last summer? How many old frames went in the fire pit? Am I ready for the first possible swarm? The equipment suppliers are relatively quiet right now and you wouldn't want to be ordering frames just when you are running out.

Heft your beehives and add fondant. As Steve has described earlier in this newsletter, spring is a fragile time for our colonies. Stores may be dwindling; the queen is getting very busy, and the weather can be highly variable. If you are using fondant as a feed supplement, make sure it is topped up.

And, related to adding fondant and checking up on our stock ... **Don't do your first inspection too soon.** Tempting as it is on a mild day when the girls are flying, an early inspection can set things back. When there is spring brood, the colony looks to maintain a temperature of circa 35°C – about 15-20 degrees higher than most mild spring days. And those early inspections will break all the propolis seals and could let a draught in – who forgot to close the window?! And the mild spring days have in recent years been followed by some nasty cold spells. Resist the temptation.

Put out an Asian Hornet bait trap. This is of course our big campaign this year and frankly, all diligent members should be putting out bait traps for the greater good of your and others' colonies. Go to the updates in Topsy's presentation

(see page 6) on the Asian Hornet action plan for more details of what to do.

What's On - Dates for the diary & future events:

There are two talks left in our winter series:

On **Thursday 29th February**, Celia and David Rudland of East Surrey Bees (<http://www.eastsurreybees.co.uk/>) will talk to us about **mead making**. There are many wonderful honey products, and a honey-based tippie is a special indulgence. Come along and learn about the craft.

On **Wednesday 27th March**, we welcome Andy Barnes-Willis, who will talk to us about **forage for bees, year-round and what to plant in your garden**.

Both talks will be held at 8pm at:

Westerham Hall
Quebec Avenue
Westerham
TN16 1BG

In May, we will start our usual round of apiary visits. If you haven't been before, they are basically our summer social gatherings. One member beekeeper hosts the visit and another member – usually more experienced – inspects their colonies. Everyone gets to learn, and afterwards, we have afternoon tea and snacks. All you need to do is bring some goodies or bake something to bring along. This year, we will hold visits in May, June and July, usually on the last Saturday of the month.

If you are willing to host an event or would like to inspect someone else's colonies, please let me know.

Finally, please let me know if you have any ideas or suggestions for topics for next winter's talk series.

Mark Waddington

Membership:

Thank you to everyone who has renewed their membership for this year and welcome to our new members - eleven, so far. We now have 107 full 'active' members and 22 'friend' members. Hopefully all fully paid-up members have been receiving monthly copies of both BeeCraft and BBKA News. Please let me know if any of you are missing these or have any other membership related issues.

And finally, if you haven't done so already, please take a few minutes to complete the BBKA Asian Hornet Training Exercise, click on the Asian Hornet Training Exercise link here:

[BBKA Asian Hornet Training](#)



photo Asian Hornet BBKA

Please note: the training exercise is just for your own information. Your details are no longer being added to the BBKA online map (despite what the first page of the training exercise suggests). The BBKA map now only shows the AH Coordinators' contact details.

And, the BBKA is 150 years old this year.



Robert Ambroziak

Training Apiary:



Please don't forget your most valuable branch resource, our training apiary. This is the place to come to learn about handling bees and the essentials of beekeeping, to refresh your skills and to learn new ones, to keep in touch with fellow beekeepers during the season and to practice honey cake making and tasting!

All are welcome, Steve and I are there every fortnight on Sundays at 10:00 am for a couple of hours. We hope to start our sessions in April (weather permitting) to run through to early October. The site is at Crockham Hill, and the exact location is not widely broadcast for security reasons. If you aren't sure where it is, please ask me.

With the weather gradually warming up we are now seeing the training apiary bees out and about and all four of our colonies have made it through the winter so far. It's interesting to see what flowers are already available for forage and we look forward to the first brief inspections once mild enough.

For all those that borrowed bee suits last season- you'll need your own suit/gloves etc so we can loan out the suits to this season's newbies.

Please contact me if you are new to Westerham Beekeepers and you'd like to come. We look forward to seeing you there!

Jacky DeLooze

The Mind of a Bee:

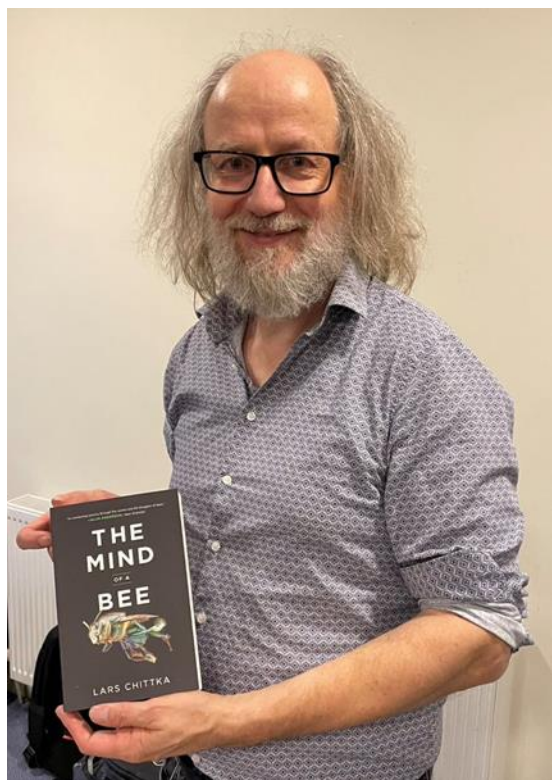


Photo Steve Riley

On Wednesday 31st January, we had a fascinating talk on *The Mind of a Bee* by Professor Lars Chittka, of Queen Mary University, London.

We were taken through several historic observations of naturalists contrasted with modern experiments that show how bees can learn and adapt to their environment. There were many *wow* moments where the audience could see just how clever bees are and how much processing power is required of a bee's brain.



We heard how bees can build comb in different directions (top-to-bottom, left-to-right, etc.) as they adapt to changes. Lars explained their awareness of space and time, used to navigate their local environment, find food, return to the hive, and communicate the information via the waggle dance; all relative to the angle of the Sun as it moves through the day. He explained their ability to see shape, pattern and colour and use that to memorize a route. Particularly interesting were his experiments using harmonic radar to track the flights of individual bees and build up a picture of flight patterns such as: orientation around the hive and routes to a drone congregation area. All in all, a very enjoyable evening.

The book: [*The Mind of a Bee*](#)

Andrew Smith

Westerham Beekeepers' Library:

We have a small stock of books that members can borrow, free of charge.

There are some reference publications for beginners such as: *Starting Out with Bees* by John Williams, and *Guide to Bees and Honey* by Ted Hooper; plus, some older books that are interesting for historical reference. For those beekeepers looking for help with minimal intervention, there is a very interesting slim volume: *At the Hive Entrance* by H. Storch.



The library is available to browse at the winter meetings, where books can be signed out or returned. For any other enquiries please contact us, the Librarians.

Andrew Smith & Sue Bradshaw-Smith

The Asian Hornet:



photo Gilles San Martin

My presentation on Asian Hornets via Zoom on 7th February, covered their life cycle; how and when they are likely to be seeking food for raising brood; how this may affect our bees and other pollinators; and what we can do to help control them, including trapping and hive protection measures. The presentation can be found here:

[Asian Hornet Zoom Presentation](#)

Passcode: *ziOy!cyB*

The key action right now is to try to trap the mated queens that emerge from hibernation in February/March. Each queen can start a nest which containing about 6,000 hornets which can kill over 100,000 insects per year.

We have released some of our association funds to bulk buy traps and the attractant liquid, Trappit. After making holes to release by-catch (non-target insects) we will be distributing these to members.

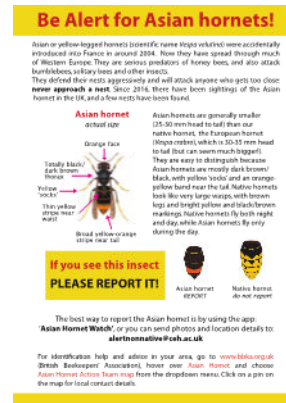
Please put a trap somewhere in your garden (not in your apiary) where you will be able to see it every day, and release by-catch if necessary. If you catch a queen Asian Hornet, put the trap into a freezer to kill her, then photograph her and report it on the Asian Hornet Watch App which can be found on using the QR Code opposite.

Please notify Peter Cobley, our Asian Hornet coordinator and, importantly,

keep the queen as the National Bee Unit can use them for DNA analysis.



The other key action that we, as a group, are carrying out is to inform the public and try to encourage them to report any sightings, using the Asian Hornet Watch App or on-line, or by email. To help with this please could you find out if you have a local Facebook community page and post this information on it? We will be circulating, by email, posters that you can print out and take to your local community centre, supermarket, church, garden centre, allotment etc to let people know.



This useful poster can be downloaded here: [Poster](#)

There is a risk to all of us from these hornets because when they nest later in the year, typically in hedges and brambles, sometimes in sheds and bird boxes, that anyone approaching or disturbing the nest may get badly stung.

So, it is not just us beekeepers who need to be on the alert!

Topsy Rudd

Locally-Adapted Bees:



Inspired by our trip to the Bee Improvement & Bee Breeders Association (BIBBA) last autumn, we're setting up a new project to breed locally-adapted, near-native bees and queens selected for positive traits including varroa resistant traits.

Many of our club members are already working hard on these traits for their own colonies, but our plan is to do this for the benefit of the entire club, eventually providing a potential source of locally-adapted bees for all members but particularly newer members who may be tempted to buy in bees from further afield in their rush to get started.

We strongly support BIBBA's opposition to the importation of honeybees and queens. We're busy locating an apiary and then we'll be selecting bees to kick the project off, including genetic tests to determine the lineage of the initial colonies. We'll also be catching up with Grace McCormack at the BBKA Spring Convention to discuss DNA testing. Grace is also interested in our inclusion of selecting for varroa resistance traits.



Stay tuned for more updates as we get this project off the ground.

Steve McGrath

The Bee's Knees:



The Bee's Knees cocktail is credited to Frank Meier, an Austrian-born bartender who plied his trade at the Hôtel Ritz, Paris, during the 1920s. It is a simple extension of the classic Gin Sour (gin, lemon, and sugar) that features honey instead of sugar. Of course, the honey creates a richer drink.

Find the recipe here: [The Bee's Knees](#)

About Westerham Beekeepers:

Westerham Beekeepers is a branch of the Kent Beekeepers Association. Our aim is to promote the craft of beekeeping by helping to educate both beekeepers and the public. While we are mostly practising amateur beekeepers, membership is open to interested members of the public. We meet during the winter months in Westerham usually for lectures by visiting specialists and our own members. During the active beekeeping season, we meet for demonstrations by experienced beekeepers in our members' apiaries.

Website: <https://westerham.kbka.org.uk>

Contact Information:

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Peter Cobley – Asian Hornet Co-ordinator
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Mark Waddington – Events Programme -
contributions for newsletters and ideas
for winter talks & summer visits
mark.waddington@live.co.uk



To join the Westerham
Beekeepers' WhatsApp group,
please contact Mark Waddington



To join the Training Apiary's
Facebook group, please contact
Jacky DeLooze

Committee Members:

Steve Riley - Chairman & Education
Officer

Topsy Rudd – Branch Secretary

Keith Masters - Treasurer

Jacky DeLooze - Training Apiary Manager

Mark Waddington - Events Programme

Robert Ambroziak - Membership
Secretary

Robert Dudgeon - Swarm Co-ordinator &
Branch representative on KBKA Council

James Cash - Branch representative on
KBKA Council

Advice for Beginners & FAQs:

[Advice for Beginners & FAQs](#)

Swarm Reporting:

Please contact our swarm co-ordinator,
Robert Dudgeon on 01732 864486, Topsy
Rudd on 07855 300352 or the nearest
contact from the [BBKA website](#) if neither
Robert nor Topsy are available.

Last Word: *Skep* – a domed beehive
made of twisted straw.



Chris Park, Skep maker with an occupied hive