



# Avon Beekeepers

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**NEWSLETTER 2020**

**Spring**

**No 7**

*There's often a feeling of inevitability when the task of putting together this newsletter comes round. Here we go again! Another season! Another plunge into the strange and thoroughly engaging world of the honeybee. If you are reading this then it's the middle of March and you will be starting to think about all that you need to do out there with your beehives. As I write this it's the end of February and the rain is coursing down the road beside me. Yesterday my bees were flying as if it was the start of April. What next? Today there's snow in the north. With climate change the beekeeper is likely to be more confused than ever. All we can do is try to understand the implications and be more aware of how it affects our bees. As bees have their complex and successful way of communicating honed over millions of years, we as beekeepers, who've been around for considerably less time, also need to keep in touch with what is going on.*

*In this news letter there's a reminder about the AGM, hosted this year by the Bath branch. With an excellent speaker this promises to be very interesting. Please come along if you can.*

*In January this year we received sad news of the death of David Jack who was for many years an active member of the Keynsham branch (see obituary on page 8). There's also an interview with our president, Stephen Brain; an article about how to collect swarms by sitting in your armchair; an update about the new Dave Maslen Building in Bristol and news of the Asian Hornet. Good reason to give a few minutes to reading this through. Consider it a simple waggle dance!*

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Rob Francis - Newsletter editor.



Brigit Strawbridge Howard – the speaker at the Avon Beekeepers Association AGM.

## Events from the branches:

### Bath:

### **BEES – A Window into Nature. Saturday March 28<sup>th</sup> at 2pm**

This year's AGM is being hosted by Bath Beekeepers at their apiary and the speaker will be Brigit Strawbridge Howard. Brigit has just published her book *Dancing with Bees: A journey back to Nature*. (See more about the book on Page 9 of this newsletter)

Find out more:

<https://www.chelseagreen.com/product/dancing-with-bees/>

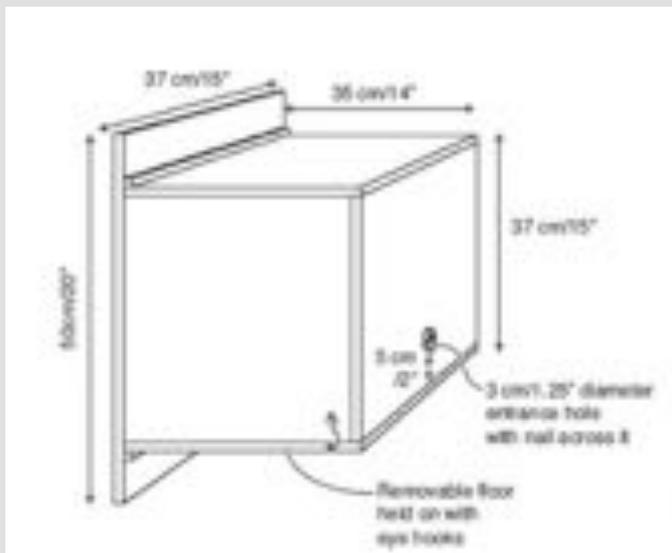
The talk will start at 2pm and will be followed by the AGM. The location of the Bath Apiary can be found at

<https://www.bathbeekeepers.com/contact/>

### **The Spring Day School postponed**

The spring day school this year had been scheduled for Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> April. Unfortunately this date has had to be postponed. It is intended to run this in the autumn.

# Armchair Swarm Collecting by Paul Moorhouse



Prof Seeley's book describes his research into how a swarm of bees selects their next home, and in the course of his work, realised that recommendations of what bees might choose as their ideal home would be of interest to bee keepers seeking to increase their stocks through swarm collection. He suggested an attractive home might be around 40L in volume, 5m off the ground, highly visible but fully shaded, facing south with a solid floor and containing scents attractive to bees. He proposed dimensions for the entrance as shown in the diagram reproduced from his book.

If I captured a swarm in such a box, I decided that I'd like to minimise the stress in moving them to a new home by using brood frames within the bait box so as to avoid having to cut out the combs. I use 14x12 brood frames, and I calculated that nine of these frames would represent around 40L. Constructing a box for the frames using scrap wood, I positioned the entrance as recommended. Concerned that the bees might prefer a largely empty cavity, rather than use foundation, I wired the frames and put starter strips in most of them, with small pieces of brace comb I'd collected from my existing colonies. As a lure I rubbed propolis over the inside of the box, and left a swarm attractant wipe



I placed the box on the flat roof of my shed, where I could easily lift it down again, facing south and shaded by trees. Pretty soon I was very excited to see scout bees examining the outside and inside of the box *exactly* as Prof Seeley had described – it was amazing to be able to observe and understand what they were up to.

A matter of days later, on 20<sup>th</sup> April, I was changing the oil on the car when I received a call from my wife, who I'd left reading in the garden nearby. It seems that the "sky had gone black" and there were "millions" of bees swarming in the garden – she was ringing me as she was now sheltering in the conservatory with my daughter.

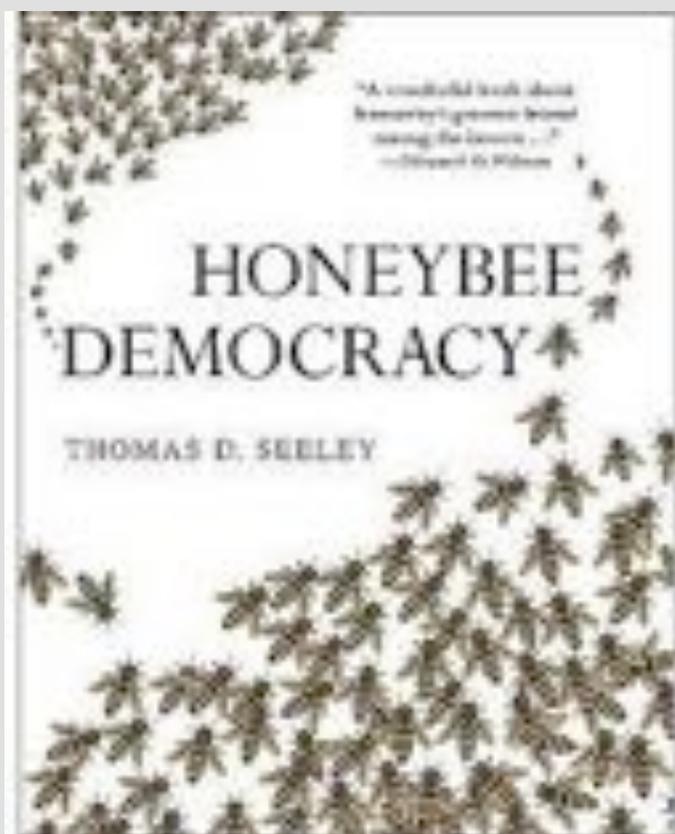


## Armchair swarm collecting continued ...

They handed me my camera through the window and I enjoyed the spectacle enormously, possibly more than the family did. After allowing them to settle in for a few weeks, I moved the swarm into a nuc box and to my out-apiary where I treated with Oxalic Acid. They continued to draw out their comb and soon put them in a full size hive. I clipped and marked the queen who had a trace of yellow paint on her, but unfortunately lost her when the bees tried to swarm again on 21<sup>st</sup> June after repeated periods of rain. It may not have been the rain that caused them to swarm - maybe I should have left them in the nuc box longer to draw the frames out completely. The queen cells I chose emerged successfully and allowed me both to re-queen and make a nuc from another colony, so all ended well.



I presented these experiences at a Bristol branch winter talk, and the consensus from the ensuing discussion was that many of the parameters recommended by Prof Seeley are not hard and fast. In his research, it was not that any recommendation was critical, just that, had the bees found an identical box 5m above ground, rather than the 2.5m I used, they may well have chosen the higher one, but you could not be certain. If I started again, I would not bother to make my own box; I would make a temporary solid floor with a small entrance and use an unmodified 14x12 brood box packed out with a three frame thick dummy. If you want to try this at home, readers might choose to use a standard brood box which is around the 40L volume. Prof Seeley's "The Lives of Bees" came out after I'd made my box, and makes clear that wild swarms choose a range of cavity sizes, although he found around 40L is the most popular.



In 2020 I plan to use my box again, but on a 1.5m stand in the back garden - the family and visitors, although supportive of my apparent insanity, might prefer not walking past an active hive on their way to the front door. I also plan to try out another suggestion made at my talk: to use old brood frames with most of the comb cut out to leave small starter strips, the smell of old comb being an effective lure. I hope it can work again and feel relaxing in the garden is a better way to collect swarms than balanced at the top of a ladder! It may well also save my neighbours the inconvenience of having bees take up residence in their chimneys.

**Paul Moorhouse**

# **A conversation with Stephen Brain - the ABKA president**

## **So what started you off in beekeeping?**

The bank manager. I'd always had a slight interest in beekeeping as I thought it was honey for nothing! Back in 1988 was a time when house prices were zooming through the ceiling because double mortgage tax relief was coming off. Everyone wanted to move house before the deadline and were prepared to pay any price. We were also moving house and got caught in the ensuing crash afterwards where nothing sold (including our previous house) for 5 years. We ended up owing a LOT of money to the bank who had a dilemma as to what to do. They had enough sense to realise that nothing could be liquidated to get their money back so the bank manager slightly flippantly suggested I kept bees. As there was a beekeeper down the road (Roly Hazel) I approached him and it all started.

Just to complete the story we did end up paying off the 5 loans we had at the time but it took a long time.

### **What did you find most difficult initially?**

Asking for advice. The culture is incredibly different now and beginners are supported very well but back then I didn't really know who to ask and felt awkward about it. In fact people were always helpful when asked, it was more a fault on my side. Of course we didn't have all the training we have now either so the learning process was longer.

## **What for you have been the greatest pleasures being a beekeeper?**

Wow - how much space have you got? I think the first one is meeting a lot of really nice people and seeing a lot of really nice places. In the early days we met at members houses and some were quite an experience. For 10 years I stored the Avon Millenium equipment for shows etc and it was always great meeting folk from all over Avon as they came to collect or deliver.

For me, helping others through the courses or demonstrating hands on with the bees has been fantastic. Also the freedom the branch has given me to run various courses and events such as the microscopy course or the woodworking sessions Phil Clemente and I started.

For a number of years Phil and I bred nucs for beginners and this was also great fun. I really enjoyed the queen rearing. Queens were easy. Getting enough workers was always the challenge.

My time as chairman of Blagdon gave me great pleasure. I had a great team around me and it was also the time of our 50th anniversary so we put on a big event for the public.

Passing the BBKA written modules must be mentioned although perhaps "pleasure" wasn't quite the right word at the time. I will be eternally grateful to Ivor Davis and John Badley for inviting me to join their study team and together we took and passed 8 modules in 2 years. As far as I know it has never been repeated in Avon even though it is now only 7 modules.

## **In the years since you started keeping bees what have been the greatest changes?**

Much more training material available. The Introduction to Beekeeping training material now rolled out across the country was largely developed by Ivor Davis and I count it a privilege to have been one of the presenters on the very first course back in 2009.

Disease. We knew varroa was in the area but it was first officially confirmed at a branch meeting at my house when a bee inspector went through my hives. At the time we never realised how much it would change the face of beekeeping.

The support from the public. I keep thinking the interest and support will tail off but there's so sign yet.

## **I always ask this one just to show that even the most experienced beekeeper can occasionally make mistakes. Can you remember your silliest mistake?**

Yes but I'm not telling you that one.

Other silly mistakes include spilling the marking fluid over a queen and quickly dunking her in syrup I had handy to clean her up. Another was not doing my homework on an apiary site in the country and not realising there was a house the other side of a kitchen garden wall which had a pond. In spring I had one colony which was bad tempered which I was going to sort out later in the spring. It was going over to the pond for water and stinging the house occupants. I moved the bees that day and went over with a jar of honey to placate the people and had a most unpleasant conversation. At one stage I wondered if I would get out in one piece. Needless to say I did not leave any honey with them.

## **For those who are just starting out as beekeepers: what key advice would you give them to help them on their way?**

Join your local branch

Consider carefully which type of hive to have and keep two hives, not one. Obtain a nuc box – it has so many uses.

Learn all you can. Remember your branch is not the only repository of knowledge and some branches can have some weird ideas, so take advantage of outside opportunities to learn. Be careful of the advice from forums on the internet.

Be humble. From time to time I do have to spend some energy trying to correct the damage done by over enthusiastic beginners who think they know it and start telling everyone how to do things!

Do the Basic and consider doing the modules.

Have vision and go as far as you can in Beekeeping. You could be a world honey champion or Trustee or President of the BBKA or a senior honey judge or chair of the BBKA Exam Board. All those have come from Avon in the past and could do so again.

# Remarkable progress on The Dave Maslen Building.

David Thorne of Bristol Beekeepers brings us up-to-date

It seems absolutely ages since our committee took the decision to stay at Honeycombe Farm and to press ahead with the replacement of the old Batley building which had served the Branch well having been put up 60 years ago.

Discussions on its replacement had been going on for years and 2 planning applications had been made and approved but had lapsed.

We therefore set up a small sub-group (also done before!) and once again applied for planning permission as a precursor to raising the necessary funds for the project. It was in April 2019 that permission came through!

## Fund Raising

We had a few thousand pounds put away in our development account but nowhere near enough to fund the expected £45000 cost. We were fortunate to get some great advice from the wife of one of our committee members who had some experience in fund-raising. We used a funding profiling site to identify a shortlist of potential benefactors. That list pointed us towards a number of Trusts which administer the Landfill Tax and it was from one of those sources that we secured a net grant of £22500.

## Planning Hurdles

Before we could start our project we had to sort out:

- An Arboricultural survey to identify trees which might need special protection and risks to existing roots etc.
- A survey of the old building roof to identify and analyse any asbestos problems.
- A planned schedule of works and visit by an archaeologist to watch over the process of excavating the base for the new building.

## A replacement building

Estimates were then obtained for laying the concrete base - a massive 15 x 7mtr slab - and research done to source the low maintenance self-assembly type of building which we needed. We found the solution by visiting Omega Steel Buildings in Worcestershire. The building which we chose was a galvanised steel frame construction, the walls and roof consisting of insulated metal faced panels. Our site has limited access and we had to ensure that every piece of the massive "Meccano" set could be carried in by hand from the road.

## Groundworks

These were started in mid-October. It was a huge task involving the demolition and removal of the old building, with a separate specialist company responsible for removing the asbestos roof, the excavation and relocation of vast amounts of top-soil, delivery of many loads of substrate and metal reinforcement to form the base and about 8 loads of concrete.

The last bit was a miracle of organisation. One of our neighbours, a well-known motor dealer gave us permission to use their crashed car compound to site a concrete pump so that we could pipe the concrete some 60 metres across our orchard!



## Delivery of the building

On 2 separate delivery days teams from our membership (and also a few non-beekeepers who had arms twisted!) carried in the building, piece by piece, and attempted to keep the bits in some kind of order ready for construction!





### **Putting up the Building**

A small group of 4 or 5 led by our project manager Tim Hewer set about putting it all together. We didn't make many mistakes though on one or two occasions we found that we had put girders in the wrong way round and we had to resort to YouTube to see how we should install the roller door! The building supplier support was excellent too and no question remained unanswered. Apart from the guttering the outside of the building is now complete. It took about 4 weeks to put it up.

### **The rain, the rain, and more rain!**

We exceeded all expectations by getting the building up so quickly and were very fortunate to have done so before the endless rain set in. The groundworks had made a dreadful mess of the entrance to the apiary and around the building and we had arranged for our contractor to return at the beginning of January to lay stone pathways, but we had to postpone that because of standing water. We will have to be patient and wait until the water finally drains away.



So far we've achieved wonders....miracles take a little longer .

### **What next?**

Much depends on money but we have the resources to complete the groundworks and a basic fit-out of the interior, i.e. walls, toilets and some electrics, with a structure into which we can later install the hot water cylinder and battery storage above the other sections. We hope to get this done before the start of the 2020 season. Long term we hope to finish off with a facility which includes a large briefing/classroom with reference library, a kitchenette, a honey preparation room, accessible toilets, and large areas of storage for our grounds maintenance and beekeeping equipment. Whilst we have a generator, power and hot water will be provided by solar energy including battery technology when funding permits.

# The Asian Hornet: A report back from the special day held by Somerset Beekeepers

Report by John Wrigley



Most beekeepers will know by now that queen hornets start what's called a primary nest, generally at low level. The queen uses her own body heat to raise the first larvae.

Bearing in mind she also has to go and collect food for them, it's obvious this is a time of considerable stress and presumably many fail in this attempt. As the first workers emerge they take over nursing and foraging duties while the queen concentrates on egg laying. The nest is expanded to meet growing needs. This is the same model generally followed by bumble bees and is well known.

The initial group of workers take longer to develop and are smaller than those that follow due to the slower pace of food gathering and reduced brood temperature. Consequently development of the nest is slow over the first few months. At some point however the colony is large enough to decamp and build a secondary nest - high up in trees is typical. A primary nest might be as large as a grapefruit. Secondary ones often reach beach ball size with 5000/6000 hornets. Late in the season beehives are often attacked as other sources of food decline and the hornets need ever more protein to raise several hundred new queens for the following year.

## First hand experiences from Jersey

Beekeepers in Jersey have had to become expert at finding nests and destroying them. 2019 saw 73 nests destroyed on what is quite a small island and they know some were missed. These missed nests become obvious during autumn. Finding nests is not easy as they are often very hard to spot, even when you've nailed down which tree they are in. The Jersey approach is to use a standard bait (Suterra) and time how long it takes a hornet to return. Each hornet is marked with a honeybee queen marker pen - fortunately hornets are quite docile when away from their nest.

Close observation is made of flight lines and baits are moved nearer the nest till it's found. Easy - er no. One nest took four days to find when it was directly above the bait station and the hornets flew off in all directions!

Jersey folk have found the hornet is very adaptable and quite often doesn't do what books suggest.

1) They've found an example of a nest not moving from a primary nest site - it simply kept on growing.

2) Secondary nests are usually high up but not always. One as found underground in a soil bank on a quiet lane. A council worker went over the top of it with a strimmer. He soon legged it though! Meanwhile even non-beekeepers have become good at spotting hornets on the wing. It's a small island so whether there's a road across to the mainland UK is doubtful, but we can hope.

Currently Jersey is very keen to have people go over and assist in hornet spotting. That offer is in place for 2020 too. It doesn't include destroying nests. That is a job for experts with the right gear. Nests are defended vigorously so anyone approaching a nest is at serious risk. Bee-suits are ineffective as the hornet has a long sting.

In addition to members of the public beekeepers have other allies. There are a number of other groups interested in controlling hornets, if not eradicating them. Tree Surgeons are not keen to find a nest high in a tree when suspended on a rope. Birders are also very concerned. Early in the season hornets generally prey on other insects and grubs rather than bees. This directly impacts many smaller birds, The Tit family are obvious examples. There's no doubt we need to spread the net wide if we are to spot initial hornet incursions on the mainland.

## Research into hornet control

There is hope of biological control and there are some projects funded within the EU over the next few years. It's very early days yet but one possibility is a fungus that hornets might be encouraged to carry back to the nest. A number of hurdles remain to be overcome though. Firstly we have to ensure the fungus doesn't directly attack anything else. Secondly, after the colony dies in Autumn it is often pulled apart by insectivorous birds. What might the impact on them if the dead hornets are loaded with fungus spores?

**OBITURY:  
DAVID JACK who died in January was 96.**

David was a founder member of Keynsham Beekeepers in 1963 and was one of the founder members of Avon Beekeeping Association back in 1974.

He was active as a committee member both with Avon and Keynsham through these years and was the Chairman of Keynsham between 1978 and 1982 and then 1988 to 1994. He was also Chairman of Avon from 1979 to 1981 and was president between 1993 and 1994.

Clive Shipley (current Keynsham Branch Chairman) writes:

*I believe I met him at the Bristol Apiary as I was a Bristol member and at the time Dave Maslen was the Apiary Manager of Bristol Beekeepers, David Persuaded me to join Keynsham Branch and where we were based at Elsbridge House on the Bath Road (A4) Keynsham.*

*David Jack bumped into me in the Co-Op supermarket (I believe) and suggested that it would be a good idea for the Apiary to move to my property as I had plenty of space and I found myself agreeing! I don't think he would have taken no for an answer and the Keynsham Branch has been there ever since.*

*In the winter we had meetings at David's house to undertake theory study and his wife, Adeline, was very hospitable making tea and welsh drop cakes, Adeline was Welsh and we believe David used to talk welsh himself and was self taught. He used to be a representative for a cotton company, Sylco we think, and would surprise Welsh companies by being able to talk to them in Welsh.*

*David was always willing to help, give advice and Keynsham beekeepers was very important to him.*

*David was a great story teller and for those that knew him at Saltford these stories would often get repeated so you got to hear them several times! There was one particular one about a gold Rolls Royce but we can't remember the details, although it was quite a spectacular tale.*

David also worked with Dave Maslen for a time setting up a business in selling beekeeping equipment. Dave remembers him as someone who was always very willing to help in setting up new beekeepers and advising them and giving of his time and expertise. He also remembers a story about the golden Rolls Royce but not the punch line. He explains with a wry smile 'David was a very interesting beekeeper who always did things in his own way'. He will certainly be missed.

## SIMPLE & GOOD IDEAS



Using old tyres on which to place your hive stands.

This idea has been given us by Keith Brand and looks like a good way of making sturdy and lasting stands for your hives.

If you have any simple and good ideas for your bees let here's the place to share them.



## Brigit Strawbridge Howard is the speaker at the AGM in Bath on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> March.

Brigit is a bee advocate, wildlife gardener and naturalist. She writes, speaks and campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of native wild bees and other pollinating insects. Recently she has had a book published. Find out more below:



**About the book:** Brigit Strawbridge Howard was shocked the day she realised she knew more about the French Revolution than she did about her native trees. The thought stopped her—quite literally—in her tracks. But that day was also the start of a journey, one filled with silver birches and hairy-footed flower bees, skylarks, and rosebay willow herb, and the joy that comes with deepening one's relationship with place. *Dancing with Bees* is Strawbridge Howard's charming and eloquent account of a return to *noticing*, to rediscovering a perspective on the world that had somehow been lost to her for decades and to reconnecting with the natural world. With special care and attention to the plight of pollinators, including honeybees, bumblebees, and solitary bees, and what we can do to help them, Strawbridge Howard shares fascinating details of the lives of flora and fauna that have filled her

The extract below is from an interview conducted with Brigit ahead of the Abergavenny Food Festival:

### And finally:

The Avon Beekeepers association (ABKA) would like your help.

We need new committee members who will help move the association forward and introduce new ideas. Although most members commit themselves to their particular branch (Bath, Bristol, Keynsham, North Somerset, Weston) the ABKA is the essential link with the BBKA and can provide the network to help make the branches more effective.

It only involves 3 or 4 meetings a year. Let us know at the AGM if you would like to join or contact Rob Francis, newsletter editor.

### How did you first become inspired by sustainability, and bees specifically?

If I go back about 15 years, when my children were in their mid-teens and I was spending less time mothering, I suddenly became aware of all manner of environmental issues and what was going on in the wider world.

At that time, I moved down to Cornwall with my then-husband and bought a smallholding that we renovated specifically to make more sustainable. The aim was to show other people how easy it could be. We were followed by a BBC crew filming *It's Not Easy Being Green* and I immersed myself in the world of sustainability – in a way that you wouldn't usually, to such a degree.

I then became aware of **colony collapse disorder**, which was a phenomenon happening in the United States. Vast amounts of honeybees were leaving their hives and not coming back, and the headlines in the newspapers were quite apocalyptic.

So, for me, it developed to be all about bees. I became aware of the enormous amount of different species of bee and other pollinators, and I started watching them in my garden. I just fell back in love with the wildlife around me that I'd been blind to for so many years.