

About Beekeeping by Roger Patterson

Beekeeping in Britain is largely a hobby. There are commercial beekeepers, but the vast majority of them use beekeeping as part of their income and the number who rely entirely on bees is very small. These notes are intended to help everybody, whatever the reason for their interest.

If you ask a group of beekeepers their reason for keeping bees they will come up with a variety of answers and I list some common ones here:-

Hobby

As mentioned above most beekeepers are hobbyists, and a very interesting, relaxing, and rewarding hobby it is. You will never stop learning, and providing you grasp the basics you can stop where you want to. There is an opportunity to involve other people, as there are many things connected with beekeeping that don't involve getting too close to a beehive.

Pollinate the garden

Many beekeepers are keen gardeners and have noticed the decline in pollinating insects, bees in particular. A couple of colonies will certainly improve the pollination in your own garden and the surrounding area.

Honey for the family

This is probably the greatest reason why bees are kept. Depending on the area you could reasonably expect 40-60lb of honey on average per year, with good areas yielding 100lb or more per colony. Once you have a good supply of honey it is surprising what uses you will find for it. A jar of honey is a good thank you for a favour, it can also be bartered for eggs, fruit, vegetables, etc, and there are many similar uses.

Uses of hive products

Honey can be used to replace sugar in many recipes, and fermented into mead which is one of the simplest drinks to make. Beeswax can be used for making candles, polish, soap, cosmetics, etc. All these things can be made with equipment that is available in most households. Instructions and recipes are readily available.

Interest in nature

Bees themselves are very interesting, but so is the wildlife in and around the hive. Inspecting the inside of a hive roof when taken off the hive will often reveal a wide range of things, and the surrounding area is often worth exploring, especially if the bees are kept in woodland or a meadow.

Further interest

There are many things of interest that beekeeping will lead to including microscopy and photography.

Is Beekeeping for me?

There are surprisingly few restrictions to keeping bees. The beekeeper should be reasonably fit as there can be some heavy lifting to do, but this can be shared as there should be no shortage of offers of help. Most Beekeeping Associations (BKAs) have beginners who are willing to help others in return for learning. Obviously if someone is genuinely allergic to bee stings it would be foolish to take up, or continue with beekeeping. On the subject of stings it must be expected to get several in a season, and a beginner is likely to get a few more than an experienced person. Most stings are caused by poor handling and/or poor bees, both of which can be overcome, but accidental stings are common as well and a part of beekeeping. Some people are genuinely frightened of bees and unless this fear can be overcome it would be foolish to continue, as sooner or later there could be a serious problem.

I have been involved with teaching beekeeping for a long time and it never ceases to amaze me how some people even on their first visit appear to be “naturals” at handling bees.

Many gardens will accommodate a couple of hives providing they are sited sensibly, but don't risk problems with your family or neighbours. Some people have a fear of insects and may not share your enthusiasm, so please be responsible. Education can help to overcome any fears, but if this doesn't work a careful search of your own locality could provide you with a suitable site on a farm, or similar place where there is often a small area of waste ground. Many people in towns and cities keep bees, often unknown to their neighbours, and they often do well because of the flowers in parks and gardens.

Before investing in equipment you will have to dispose of if you decide beekeeping is not for you, it would be a good idea to attend several practical bee demonstrations, and these will be organised by local BKAs. If asked, take every opportunity to handle bees.

For a list of BKAs that are affiliated to BBKA (www.britishbee.org.uk/local_associations_about_us.php)

Time and Commitment

Beekeeping is seasonal and the amount of time needed varies. During the summer expect to spend, say, an hour on one colony, and 20-30 minutes on subsequent colonies per week for an inexperienced beekeeper, and half that for those who have been keeping bees for a year or so. A reasonably experienced beekeeper will only make fortnightly inspections, which further reduces the time needed.

Swarming and its control is the main problem during the summer and there are times when colonies must be inspected. It is no good putting inspections off until tomorrow, otherwise your swarm could be causing a nuisance to someone else, and possibly sour relations, as well as causing a possible loss of honey.

Winter work is generally maintenance of equipment which takes up little time, and there are no short deadlines.

What is the cost to start?

Beekeeping is difficult to cost because there are so many ways to start. It is certainly much cheaper than many hobbies, and if you take into account the honey that you haven't got to buy it becomes quite reasonable.

What Now?

If you have decided to pursue beekeeping as a hobby, then as already suggested it is a good idea to make contact with a local BKA. Many BKAs have a membership category for non beekeepers. This usually has a much smaller fee than a full member, but probably won't include various levies or insurance.

As with all similar organisations there are some BKAs that are better than others. It would make sense to visit several in your area, not just the closest, and join the one that most appeals to you. It is probably better to travel a bit further and get better tuition and service. Ideally a good BKA will have an apiary with several colonies for teaching purposes, and meet regularly. Make sure people other than the demonstrator are allowed to handle the bees, and the demonstrator takes time to explain things to you. See what the winter lecture programme is like, and that it is bee related. Some BKAs are vibrant, welcoming and friendly, and may have a high proportion of younger members, yet others may be very insular. It is possible to become a full member of one BKA, and an "Associate" of another, and this may suit you for a number of reasons.

It might be useful to build up a mental note of a few members, and their abilities, and this can often be done by observation. It is not always the person who has been keeping bees for many years who knows the most. There are some good young people coming into beekeeping at the moment, and many of them are learning the theory very quickly.

I would not go charging ahead and buy anything before speaking to a successful beekeeper, as many people have bought a lot of kit only to find it doesn't suit them or they don't need it. The bee catalogues are full of a lot of things you could easily do without. Beekeepers in general are friendly and helpful, so you could probably borrow or improvise if you actually need something.

It is my view that beekeeping should be fun, not the chore some people try to make it. I hope these words will enthuse you and encourage you go to the next step.

If you have taken the decision to become a beekeeper, well done, welcome to beekeeping.

How do I start?

As with all subjects there are widely differing opinions on every aspect of beekeeping and although I have firm views myself I will try to reflect as wide a view as possible.

You must have had some interest in bees and honey before looking at these pages, and you have probably got some knowledge that may have been gleaned from a variety of sources but beware, as much information has been media generated, and may be a little distorted.

Despite the general perception of a beekeeper the truth is that a cross section of beekeepers is probably no different than a cross section of any other group of people. At the time of writing there is a surge in interest in beekeeping, and it seems to me the average age of beginners is quite a bit less than it was in the recent past.

All you need to keep bees is to be reasonably fit, have somewhere to keep them, be able to understand the “basics” which will help you understand much of what happens inside a colony, and the ability to work out how to deal with problems based on the knowledge you have already learnt.

How do I learn?

This is a major problem to a non – beekeeper. There is so much information available and a lot of it is rather poor, with much being factually incorrect. There are many differing views on the same subject, so what does the would - be beekeeper believe? I would suggest you look at factual things that are consistent wherever you read them, and gain enough knowledge to make your own mind up.

Books

This is the obvious course for most people. Many BKAs have a library, and there are often books for sale in a variety of places including beekeeping specialists and eBay. Unfortunately many beekeeping books are rather poor, often copying the same mistakes that have been made in others. If the same “information” is in several places it is reasonable to expect the reader to believe it. Sadly, several books have been written by people who have little or no practical knowledge of beekeeping. Probably the safest thing to do is to look at the recommended book list for the BBKA Basic Assessment (http://www.britishbee.org.uk/examinations_and_assessments.php) and read them. These are reviewed on a regular basis by the BBKA Examination Board, and new books that are high standard added, and others that are poorer or out of date deleted. When you have progressed you could select books from the module section.

It is difficult writing a bee book for a beginner because it will have a limited life, so most are of intermediate or advanced standard. Don't think beekeeping is difficult because you don't understand what you are reading, as there is a lot to take in. Be prepared to leave sections that don't apply to your needs, and concentrate on what you will need to get you started. There are several management systems and each author has their favourite. For that reason it wouldn't pay to mix different ways of doing things. Pick one method and stick to it until you learn more. The key is to actually understand what is happening in the colony which will help you follow the method e.g. learn the life cycle of the queen before trying a swarm control technique.

Internet

There are many websites, and as with books there are good and bad. In general stick to British sites as some of the information on foreign ones may not be applicable e.g. treatment for disease. For bee facts Dave Cushman's website (www.dave-cushman.net) is accurate and informative.

Magazines

Most magazines are of a general nature, some having sections for beginners. BBKA News is bi-monthly and is included with your BKA full subscription. Bee Craft is monthly. They are both probably more suited to those who have already started beekeeping, but have articles on a wide variety of beekeeping subjects. There are several other magazines and they are widely advertised, although some may be of a specialist nature.

Leaflets and booklets

There are several leaflets from a wide variety of sources including BBKA which are of a general nature and the National Bee Unit (NBU) although these are generally disease related. Many are downloadable from websites.

Beekeeping Associations (BKAs)

Many BKAs have regular demonstrations with bees during the active season, and follow up with bee related events during the inactive season. Take every opportunity you can to handle bees, and watch others closely, as you can often see why some people are better handlers of bees than others by the way the bees behave.

This is where you should get a good grounding, and if the tutors are good your own handling and colony management techniques will be developed. The vast majority of teaching is now done by local BKAs who often rely heavily on volunteers, and for that reason the quality can vary considerably. Habits, both good and bad, are acquired in the early stages, and the bad ones are often difficult to lose.

Beginners Courses

These vary widely, some being excellent and giving you a wide range of information. Don't be afraid to contact the tutor or organiser before booking, ask some searching questions about the course content. In a brief

conversation you ought to be able to find out if the course will suit you. If it has been run before there should be people who you can speak to about it.

Don't judge the suitability or quality of a course simply by price, as the cost of such things as venue and tutors will vary considerably. There should be a reasonable cost to a well run course as the preparation required is significant. For that reason be prepared to spend a sensible amount.

There are some teaching establishments who put on beekeeping courses. In general I would advise anybody to stick to courses that are organised by a BKA. Many use their Beginners Course as the first step in progressing their members to the advanced level.

Do it yourself

The modern beekeeper has a lot more to deal with than those in the past. On your own it is much more difficult to obtain the latest information, but it is possible. For that reason I would strongly suggest joining an organised group.

Should I join a BKA?

Without any hesitation I would say yes. In the past it was possible to do what was called "Let Alone Beekeeping" where many beekeepers put 3 supers on a colony in April, and took them off in August and extracted any honey. Very often if the bees gave no honey they weren't fed and if they did, they were, and that was all the attention a colony got until next April. For a number of reasons this is no longer possible, so the modern beekeeper has to be much more knowledgeable and responsible. It is much easier to learn when you are part of an organised group. A good BKA will have members with a wide variety of experience, knowledge, skill and ability, and will have well organised practical demonstrations and relevant lectures. Some have a mentoring system.

Please remember that all BKAs are amateur organisations, and continue to function due to a few dedicated people giving up a lot of time for others. The time and effort required to organise well run facilities is far greater than just to chug along doing the minimum, so please recognise that and put some effort in yourself to help lighten the load on the stalwarts. There are many things a beginner can do to help if given the right guidance.

There are many benefits in joining a BKA that is affiliated to the BBKA and these are listed:

(http://www.britishbee.org.uk/local_associations_about_us.php)

What Should I know?

The basics

Every beekeeper should know the life cycle of each caste. This will help you to assess the problems a colony may face, and will help you to understand what happens when a colony swarms. Swarming is a natural process of every colony and you must know the life cycle of the queen in order to understand the various swarm control techniques that are available.

Diseases

Bees have a few diseases, and these should be understood. There are two notifiable diseases, European Foul Brood (EFB), and American Foul Brood (AFB). As their names suggest they are both brood diseases, and are both quite rare, and that is the problem. Many beekeepers never see them, so when they do have an outbreak they are often unable to recognise it, and if nothing is done their bees could be a source of infection to others for some time. Recognition is important and there are excellent photographs in the booklets supplied by the National Bee Unit (NBU) which is part of The Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA). There are Bee Inspectors who visit beekeepers to check for both these diseases. The best approach is to recognise what healthy brood should look like, and if there is anything wrong that you can't handle, then call in your local Bee Inspector.

Varroa is in every colony and must be dealt with in some way. It is essential to understand the life cycle in order to use the various treatments. Monitoring for mites should be studied and practiced, firstly to tell you when to treat, and secondly to indicate if the treatment has been successful.

There are some diseases that require a microscope for detection. Many BKAs will have them and members who can demonstrate their use.

Exotic Pests and Diseases

From time to time there will be threats and these will probably be well publicised by BBKA and NBU. Recognition will be important and notification may be a legal requirement. There are currently two notifiable exotic pests. Make sure you and your local BKA have the latest information.

What do I need to acquire?

The appliance catalogues are packed with equipment, most of which you could easily do without. You may well be encouraged to buy things you will only use a few times before discarding them. I have detailed below the minimum I think is necessary for somebody keeping a few colonies.

Consider these items as tools of the trade. With globalisation there are items that may be cheap, but are often of inferior quality. I see little advantage in buying something that will easily break or cut someone. Before you buy, check out the goods of several dealers for quality and price, and this could be done at such events as the National Honey Show, or BBKA Spring Convention, where there are usually several suppliers.

Protective clothing

I have put this first because I believe it is very important. I have seen many beekeepers handle colonies with no protective clothing at all, but in general they have been very good handlers of bees (probably because they have learnt how not to get stung). This in my opinion is rather foolhardy as a sting in the eye is something most people could do without. As a minimum I would suggest an old fashioned hat and veil once you have become proficient, but until that time I suggest the beginner seriously considers a tunic rather than a bee suit. These are comfortable and often have large pockets in the front. Make sure the cuffs are elasticated, and the hat and veil are detachable as they are easier to wash.

Make sure your trousers are tucked in your socks to prevent bees from entering. This will probably be more comfortable than Wellington boots.

Gloves could either be with gauntlets as supplied by the appliance dealers, or household rubber gloves. Bees will probably sting through most gloves so you won't get a high level of protection.

Gloves do make handling more difficult and there are some operations where you may need to take them off. I have seen many beginners quickly dispense with gloves and they usually quickly become good handlers. There is nothing like a sting or two to focus the mind!

Hive Tool

Make sure you purchase a good one with a thin end which will be much easier to use, and kinder on your boxes than some of the thick ended ones that are available. Make sure it is comfortable in your hand and with no sharp edges.

Smoker

If you are buying new then look at all those available, as there are very few really good ones. Many are poorly made, with the metalwork sharp and likely to cut you. Make sure you are comfortable with it and it doesn't tire you out as the bellows are often very stiff to operate. In my view stainless steel is the best material for smokers.

Hives

The first question you will need to ask is which type to buy. The appliance catalogues will list about six different hives, and there are probably another four or five fringe options. Many a beginner has started with a type of hive they have subsequently cursed, then got rid of. There are many things that influence a beginner's choice and these include price, materials, advice, availability, and what appears to be logic based on what might be written.

Many people start beekeeping because they have been given an opportunity where they inherit hives, or someone is giving up. These offers are sometimes too good to miss and are often without much initial cost, in which case I suggest you continue along these lines until you have enough experience to make a sound decision.

Before making a decision you may regret it would be a good idea to try to handle bees in all kinds of hives if possible. If you can't find anybody with a certain kind of hive, then don't worry too much, as it may be that others have done the selection for you. Ask yourself a few questions; such as are they readily available new or second hand, or will the frames fit the hives of your colleagues.

At the moment the most popular conventional hive is the "National" made from wood, but there are some other options you may wish to consider. Polystyrene hives are becoming available and they have been popular elsewhere notably Germany and Scandinavia, where they have been used for a long time with some suppliers now listing only polystyrene hives. You will need to make sure they are compatible with wooden hives if you wish to run both, and those from different manufacturers are not always compatible. If the colony has Foul Brood disease they can't be flamed out in the same way wooden ones can, although chemical sterilisation and cleaning is now approved for these hives and the Fera Foulbroods Guide should be consulted. I suggest you seek advice from manufacturers, users, and your local Bee Inspector, as those who deal with these hives are likely to give you more reliable advice than those who don't. There is becoming quite an interest in Top Bar Hives (TBHs), and I suggest you read up on their use and the reasons for doing so. There are also long hives that have been made to various designs over the years.

A beehive is only a tool that suits the beekeeper, as bees don't mind too much what home they are given. If you had any other hobby such as photography or tennis, you would probably select your camera or racket with some care, and I suggest you do exactly the same with your choice of hive.

For a variety of reasons there is often a desire to make one's own hives especially early on, and this may be due to cost or someone else trying to be helpful. Hives can quite easily be made with normal woodworking tools and a reasonable amount of skill, but some knowledge must be gained first. Drawings are available for all hives and should be used rather than copy existing parts which may be wrong. The internal and height dimensions are fairly critical although the external dimensions are not fussy. It would make sense to make sure everything is compatible with bought equipment otherwise there will only be annoyance and frustration later.

Homemade hives can be made out of almost anything providing they are not permanently damp when in use. There are many opportunities to use recycled materials and with a little common sense and a sharp eye you will often see discarded materials. External grade plywood makes good hives, but will be heavier than timber. Avoid chipboard or sterling board. If you are able to make a decent job of it, then I would certainly encourage you to make your own, as it adds to the interest, and the use of recycled materials is commendable.

Hives and equipment are often available second hand, and although there are usually few problems it would pay to discard any drawn combs, and to flame out the woodwork to reduce the possibility of spreading disease.

Bees

The types of bees and the hives they are kept in probably cause of more beekeeping arguments than anything else, but it is actually quite simple. The more prolific bees need a large brood chamber and the less prolific need a smaller one. Don't be fooled into thinking the more prolific the queen, the more bees there are in a hive, therefore the more honey you get, because it doesn't work like that, or not over a reasonable timescale it doesn't.

The vast majority of bees in the U.K. are what I describe as "British Standard Mongrels", being a mixture of both indigenous and imported races. Their colour, prolificacy of the queen, frugality, quietness on the comb, and temperament can be variable, but in my experience most bees can easily be selected for whatever trait the beekeeper wishes.

In the U.K. there are few commercial bee producers, and many experienced beekeepers would question the wisdom of obtaining bees other than those from your own area.

It would make sense to speak to your local BKA and see if a member could let you have some bees, or make it known that you would like a swarm if one became available. Seasons do vary and some years there is an abundance of swarms, yet others there are very few. If you do get to hear about a swarm then make sure they are actually honeybees. Before August they could be bumblebees, after August they could be wasps, and we have all been caught out. Ask where they are and seek a description. If they are in the top of a holly tree, in a chimney, or a similar inaccessible place then you would be wise to leave them alone. If you have never

handled bees before then seek help. There is a very slight risk of a swarm being infected with foulbrood and it is wise to take the usual precautions

It is often suggested that beginners start with a nucleus, which is a small colony with 3-5 frames of bees. The theory is that it is easier for a beginner to handle a small colony, but the problem with this thinking is they won't stay small for very long. If you have made several visits to your local BKA they should have started you handling small colonies, then progressed you onto a full colony when you are competent to do so, so there would be no problem in obtaining a full colony if it was available.

Second hand bees and hives – a warning

Although the risk is slight there is always the possibility that second hand equipment may be infected with Foul brood. It is easier to spot if there are bees involved, but difficult if the bees are dead. It might be worth making enquiries if you are offered any. It would always pay to invite an experienced beekeeper to look at equipment you are thinking of purchasing. The risks are very slight, but not worth taking.

Other equipment

There is little else that will be needed in your early stages. If your choice is to run your bees for extracted honey then extracting and honey handling equipment will be needed at some stage, but the more progressive BKAs will have these items for loan or hire.

Your bees will need to be fed, so feeders of some sort will be required. The simple contact feeders are reasonably priced.

Other Stuff

Stings

You must expect to receive stings as they are a part of beekeeping and unavoidable. Even if you take every precaution when handling bees there will be times when you receive accidental stings. Swelling is a natural reaction and does not mean you are allergic. In general the more fleshy the area the more it will swell. It would make sense to cover your head at least when near a hive, and always smoke a colony before touching it in any way. If you wear rings I would suggest removing them when handling bees.

Bee Fever

Now you are hooked it is possible that enthusiasm may cloud your judgement, as it has many others.

Beekeeping is so fascinating it is understandable that beginners want to increase the number of hives quickly, but beware, beginners luck was invented for beekeeping! I always recommend that everybody keeps at least

two hives, so there is always a backup if something goes wrong with one of them, but to get into double figures as many have before they have even learnt the basics is plain stupid. I think you should understand what is going on inside a hive and develop good handling skills before expanding your enterprise too greatly.

BBKA Exams

There are people who are exam minded and those who aren't, but the BBKA exam structure will show that it covers a wide range of topics and I believe they should be considered. In my view the BBKA Basic Assessment is good for those who are in their early beekeeping years. It has a practical element which involves opening a colony of bees and answering various questions on what is seen, and a theoretical element that is verbal. There is no written paper. A glance at the syllabus will reveal that the candidate will need to learn about a wide range of topics, though not in too great a detail. In fact all of it is relevant to managing bees and as much as anything will show the weaknesses in the candidate's knowledge. Even if you go no further I would recommend sitting the Basic.

Conclusion

I have tried to give unbiased guidance, something not everybody does. I have tried to give encouragement to those who need it, but at the same time not pushed those who have any serious doubts. A box of bees in the wrong hands can be a problem, but in the right hands can give so much enjoyment for a very long time.

There are many people who come into beekeeping when they have retired saying beekeeping is something they have always wanted to do. Without wishing to appear ageist that is too late, because they have missed so much pleasure and fascination. There is so much to learn and the younger you are the quicker it is, so if you are genuinely interested, like handling bees, and you have natural ability then do it as soon as you can.

There are many myths in beekeeping and they are perpetuated by prejudice, lack of knowledge, and people who simply believe the written or spoken word, rather than use their own eyes. Good beekeepers are practical, thinkers, quick learners, and have open minds.

Downloaded from the British Beekeepers' Association website (<http://www.britishbee.org.uk>)

Copyright Roger Patterson BBKA 2010