

Riverhead Beekeepers – 1st Year.



Clearing the banked site.



Levelling the site.



THE BEGINNING!!!

“Well, of course, you are too old to take up beekeeping.” Not a bad start for the three of us as we visited about four different apiaries to get the feel of what beekeeping was all about. This statement was made by an experienced beekeeper who was well known for his knowledge and training courses!

Fortunately I had previously visited Sevenoaks Barwood apiary and found myself in the obligatory bee suit and shoved into the deep end almost from the start. I watched two hives opened and inspected and was beginning to relax and think that it was all very interesting when suddenly I was handed the hive tool and told to open up the next hive. My protests of, ‘I’m only here to watch – this is my first ever visit!!!’ were fortunately ignored. I was helped step by step and given good advice and assistance. By the time I had closed down the hive I had begun to realise the lure and fascination that the honey bee can have.

No other apiary gave us the opportunity to open a hive. Sensible or short sighted? Well, Sevenoaks Beekeepers cast the spell on me and also at a later meet on my partners in crime – whoops, sorry, - beekeeping. They also opened their first hive at Barwood. Despite many visits to one apiary, no ‘hands on’ involvement was offered.

Malcolm, Betty and I had discussed taking up beekeeping over a fairly long period. We were introduced to John and Miriam O’Connell of Orpington Beekeepers and they treated us like royalty when we spent a fascinating afternoon with them. We just wanted to take up beekeeping immediately – they were so keen, enthusiastic and informative. Any way, if for no other reason, we wanted to meet up with them again to luxuriate in the taste of Miriam’s lemon drizzle cake.

So we decided to go for it and managed to get a group of six potentially interested people. But this eventually came down to just us three and so we set out on a slow and deliberate mission to learn as much as possible – both theoretically and practically – before diving in head first to buy a hive and keep bees.



10,000 bees being prepared for the shake into the nucleus



The big shake down



Now for the queen.

Consequently the summer of 2018 was spent visiting local apiaries and then in early 2019 joined the evening classes at Yalding Beekeepers Society to gain as much knowledge that our 'old' brains could absorb.

Towards the end of February we were told at an evening class that we needed to get our order in immediately for a queen and 10,000 bees, or miss out. A sudden on the spot decision – this is it, 'Yes, let's go for it.'

The lead up to this point was involved as we had approached Riverhead Parish Council to try and get our bees sited on their allotments. We had an ideal place – right at the top of the plot in a corner with a hedge and trees on two sides and a large clump of bramble in front and to one side. It was just through the hedge from my own garden.

The Parish Council was positive but the first problem was with the insurance company which gave cover for the allotments. They insisted on a high premium for keeping bees and that we passed The General Beekeepers Husbandry Certificate which before entering the examination needs 5 years beekeeping experience. Consequently, at our suggestion the Parish agreed to separate the apiary from the allotments and were happy with the BBKA insurance. The project was saved.

The course was completed and the day arrived when the bees were set up for us at Yalding apiary - in our very own nucleus. We made the first of many frames – sharing our mishaps and successes. The speed at which our bees consumed the feed, increased in number and activity was amazing for us to see. The poor guy next to us had major problems with lost queens – about three, I think. But our bees just sailed through – until.....!!

We had transferred our bees into a National and the day arrived to close the hive down overnight and then the next day, transport it to Riverhead. Our Yalding colleague initially closed the wrong hive so we had to go back another day. 'Yes, one strap will do it and this large sheet.' Well, who were we to argue against a beekeeper with years of experience and one of our teachers. Ahem! Oh, dear!



The home made stand works – measurements were a guesstimate – and the bees settle in.



The Beekeepers of Riverhead Apiary is officially opened by John O'Connell – a bit late in February!



Our first day in our bee suits – so clean!!

We loaded the hive of bees into the back of the van and felt secure as the front cab was sealed from the back with the bees. Oh, no it was not!!! Just one mile away from home one or two bees started flying in the cab. Help get home quick!!

No, open the window. Keep calm and your eyes on the road! Maybe we should have kept fully zipped up, including the veils and looked like spacemen in a van! So if anyone does come across a lonely bee or two in the Bat and Ball area then please send them onto us.

The one strap policy had failed and quite a few bees had escaped. A quick reposition of the covering sheet helped and we loaded onto a wheel barrow to take the hive about 150m through my garden to the allotments. Just at the last section, a jolt in the grass path dislodged the hive and bees still further and it was touch and go to get it and them to the apiary and settled in.

We just managed it and so we saw the bees orientating themselves to their new home and settle in amazingly well. Phew!! We were lucky. It is no wonder we have all become highly stung!!

The apiary 'next door' to home has been very helpful to us. Being close to all our hive equipment and extra frames, supers, etc.; it has meant many a saved journey compared to the apiary being a drive away. .

Now to get down to serious beekeeping. What a learning curve. And much more to come!!!

Chris Stewart July 2020