

# SEVENOAKS AND TUNBRIDGE WELLS BEEKEEPERS BRANCH NEWSLETTER

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## There's a Floor in our Plan!



We have started our season at Hilbert Road with a bit of a tidy up and the obligatory cleaning of equipment in preparation for the busy times ahead. We have seen some winter losses, the smaller colonies that maybe should have been united at the end of last season have failed to pull through. The remaining colonies appear to be very strong and although the weather has not been warm enough to carry out an inspection, there is a lot of activity to be observed at the entrances. Bees leaving and returning with a purpose, loaded with bright yellow and orange pollen.

The hives have been reconfigured now that the days are getting longer and, hopefully, our queens are laying well. The floors have been replaced with clean ones, queen excluders placed, and supers returned to their summer positions over the brood box.



Note to all: remember to look back following any inspection. What have you forgotten, left off, or messed up? In our case, a floor stuck at the bottom of the super was positioned above the newly placed queen excluder. Clearly 'a floor in our plan' (thanks Chris).

*Sue Knights, Hilbert Road Apiary Manager*

## Weather Plays Havoc

For the past three days a blackcap has been at our bird feeder. I hope it has simply learnt that there is a ready meal to be had but I am concerned that the visits are due to a desperate need for food because of a lack of the usual insects.

February is reported to have been the driest since records began, and it doesn't seem to have stopped raining since! An exaggeration, I know, but March is traditionally the time when we can make our first brief inspection. Last year followed the same pattern: a late spring with first inspections in April but at least there were days when the bees were flying and actively bringing in pollen. So far, I have seen little activity from the hives with pollen being brought into only one colony. As I said last month, it is very much a waiting game. Any interference in such low temperatures is likely to be detrimental to the bees.



When I arrived at Barrwood Apiary for our third meeting of the season I found that the stacks of stored comb being treated with acetic acid had blown over. These stacks came from colonies that had died over winter although certainly not through starvation as these supers were full. A higher than normal rate of winter loss seems to have been reported by many beekeepers. It will be interesting to see the official rate once it is published by Beebase. At least the stack seemed to have come to no harm and, being well ventilated, could be put away in the shed. The time was spent cleaning and sterilising equipment as at previous meetings. On the bright side, we are now well prepared for the season when it does finally arrive. I remain

optimistic that maybe like last year, once the warmer weather arrives, it will remain until September.

*Cliff Hayward, Chairman & Barrwood Apiary Manager*

## **Telling the Bees** **Brian Wood (1936 to 2023)**

When we took up beekeeping, in the early nineties, Brian Wood was a very active member of the branch (*writes Mary Staffurth*). He had a good knowledge of beekeeping, which he was keen to share. At the end of one of our early visits to the Barrwood Apiary a bee got caught in my hair as we walked back to the car. 'Stand still,' said Brian before administering a sharp tap that killed the bee and saved me from getting a nasty sting on the scalp. We would often joke about the time he hit me on the head. For several years Brian was the Barrwood Apiary manager and would always turn up with his dog. On one occasion, when he went to lock the shed at the end of the meeting, the key had mysteriously disappeared. He had, as always, attached it to the dog's collar, but despite a thorough search, no-one could find where the dog had left it.



Brian was a carpenter by trade and skilled at making all manner of beekeeping items. We had one of his home-made wax extractors. He was a regular exhibitor and prize-winner at the branch honey show. In 2009 Brian's gadget to hold frames for cleaning and replacing foundation won first place the paraphernalia section. In 2007 Peter Hutton awarded him the Chairman's Cup for his work running the Barrwood apiary and for his very interesting talk on making and using simple beekeeping equipment.

Brian was a steward on the KBKA stand at the Kent County Show in Detling for many years and was also a long-serving member of the branch committee.

Brian lived in Fairseat, where he was often called on to gather swarms or offer advice on honeybees. His honey was also appreciated by fellow villagers.

This picture of Brian was taken in 2019 by Tom Poole, the son of his neighbour. The photograph was prize-winning and was displayed for several weeks at the Turner Gallery in Margate. It is published here with Tom's permission.

There is an interesting biography of Brian on the Stansted and Fairseat History Society website:  
<https://stanstedhistory.org>

## **Sevenoaks Climate Fair**

Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells Beekeeping Association has been invited to host a stall at the Sevenoaks Climate fair on Saturday 29 April. We will be promoting the value of pollinators to the environment, not just honey bees, with wild flower seeds, posters and leaflets from Sussex University.

We will also be selling branch honey, of course.

Come along to meet businesses, charities and community groups who are passionate about solving the climate emergency and learn how you can reach net zero. There will be talks, stalls, workshops, food and drink and much more! It will take place at The Vine Gardens from 10.30am to 4pm. Entry is free.

*Sue Knights*

## **Lawn Mowing for Pollinators**

Would you like to participate in a citizen science project? We have been contacted by Martin Morrison, who is a PhD student at Royal Holloway, University of London. His area of interest is pollinator conservation and citizen intervention. He is researching the best way to mow your lawn to make your garden a better place for important pollinating insects. The study will take 15-20 minutes per week during May.

If you would like to take part, please search for "mark brown lab optimow" in your browser where you can find further information and the sign-up page.

Mark Brown is Professor in Evolutionary Ecology and Conservation in the Department of Biological Sciences Centre for Ecology, Evolution and Behaviour at Royal Holloway.

*Liz Birchenough, Membership Secretary & Treasurer*

## Preparing for the Swarming Season

**Tuesday April 18 at 7.30pm** at Weald Memorial Hall

One of the most difficult aspects of beekeeping is preventing your colonies from swarming particularly as most manuals tell you to first find the queen. Why is it that you can never find a queen when you need to? Some methods of swarm control that do not require you to find the queen will be explained.

## Finding Varroa Resistant Bees

Westerham Beekeepers have been involved with varroa monitoring for some time as part of a citizen science project guided by Professor Steve Martin from Salford University. In his talk at our March meeting, Steve Riley, from Westerham Beekeepers, presented some very interesting findings, with much to think about in the way we manage varroa.

With a few tiny exceptions, varroa is endemic in the UK. Approximately 70-80% of managed bees are susceptible to varroa, meaning they need beekeeper intervention to control infestations and survive. The purpose of this project is to try to identify the characteristics of varroa resistant colonies, which can control infestations without intervention, and use these as preferential breeding stock so that resistant traits become more widely spread through the bee population. A resistant colony is one where the level of varroa will fluctuate through the year, but the level of infestation going into winter will be the same as the spring level without treatment.

The perennial problem is that where beekeeper intervention is required, generally with some form of medication, the varroa will gradually develop resistance and get stronger while the bees are continually weakened and are reliant on beekeepers for survival.

## Checking the Varroa Board

The project has highlighted two behaviours you can monitor to identify if your bees are varroa resistant. But first, the traditional method used to spot check the development of varroa in the hive may be giving misleading results. I am sure we all have used the standard method of putting a varroa board in place under the floor at intervals during the summer and counting the debris after a few days. If you see very few varroa, everything is fine – well, sadly, the opposite may well be true. If you see very few varroa, there is a good chance the brood is completely infested and all the varroa is safely tucked away with your developing brood, it just depends what was happening on the day you put the varroa board in place.

**Tip 1:** put your varroa board in place and leave it there all year, checking it as part of your inspection routine.

## Inspector Bees

When you inspect, what should you be looking for? The study has identified two related behaviours typical of resistant colonies. The first behaviour is called uncapping and recapping. This is where the house bees will continually inspect the sealed brood cells and can detect the odour of an infested pupae through a tiny puncture in the lid of the cell. If infection is suspected, the bees will cut round the cap, like a tin opener and lift it off to inspect the pupae. If all is okay, the lid will be replaced. This process will be repeated regularly. During your inspections you will see the lids of the recapped cells are slightly dented, rather than the perfect smooth cap we are taught to expect. You may even see a puncture mark or two. The second behaviour is that when an infected pupae is found, the bees will remove it and kill it. This is why you need your varroa board in place. The skeletal remains will be white antennae parts on the varroa board. If you see this, your bees are showing varroa resistance. During your inspections you may also see empty cells in the middle of the developing brood pattern. This is where a pupae has been removed.

There is a very interesting youtube video made by some scientists in the US showing this behaviour. It is called VSH behavior in Honey Bees (VSH - Varroa Sensitive Hygiene)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rthp0PIFwD4>

**Tip 2:** during your inspections look very closely at the caps of your sealed cells, looking for dimpling and possibly puncture marks and occasional empty cells.

**Tip 3:** if you think you have naturally resistant bees that's great, but about three in every four of our colonies will not be resistant, so it is in these ones that we want to control reproduction, for example by drone brood removal to prevent drones with susceptible traits mating with young queens.

*Liz Birchenough*

## **In Need of Bees?**

If you have lost bees over this winter and would like a swarm as a replacement, please email John Farrow: [stweditor@sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk](mailto:stweditor@sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk) and send your name, address and postcode, mobile/landline number and email address.

## **Branch Meetings**

**Hilbert Road Apiary - Sunday 2 April at 11am:** Colony health check, queen marking, and how to find a queen with Sue Knights, Hilbert Road Apiary Manager.

**Hilbert Road Apiary - Sunday 16 April at 11am** with Sue Knights, Hilbert Road Apiary Manager.

**Evening Talk - Tuesday April 18 at 7.30pm** at Weald Memorial Hall: Preparing for the Swarming Season

**Barrwood Apiary – Sunday 23 April at 2pm:** Colony health check, queen marking, and how to find a queen with Cliff Hayward, Barrwood Apiary Manager.

## **Bee Market and Auction**

The West Sussex Beekeepers' Association is holding a Bee Market and Auction for its members and non-members. The event will take place at Chichester College's Brinsbury Campus in Pulborough, West Sussex on **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> April 2023**. Auction details, Guidance Notes and Entry Form are available to download from the WSBKA website - [www.westsussexbeekeepers.org.uk/auction.html](http://www.westsussexbeekeepers.org.uk/auction.html)

*Send any photos or items for next month's newsletter to: [marystaffurth@yahoo.com](mailto:marystaffurth@yahoo.com)*

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