

# How do I start beekeeping?

## Introduction

As with all subjects there are widely differing opinions on every aspect of beekeeping and although I have firm views 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 not be correct.

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, and be able to understand the basics which will help you understand much of what happens inside a colony.

## 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 beekeeping associations 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. 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 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regular basis by the BBKA Examination Board, and new books that are high standard added, and others that are poorer or out of date deleted.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. 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 understand the method.

## **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 <http://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)**

Most BKAs have regular demonstrations with bees during the active season, and follow up with lectures during the inactive season. Take every opportunity you can to handle bees, and watch others closely, as you can often see why some 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

## **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 they 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. 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 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 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 on the BBKA website.

## **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 Defra. 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.

## **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. 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 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 had become proficient, but until that time I suggest the beginner seriously considers a tunic rather than a beesuit. These are comfortable and often have large pockets in the front. Make sure the cuffs are elasticated, and the hat and veil are detachable.

- Make sure your trousers are tucked in your socks to prevent bees from entering.
- 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.

## **Smoker**

If you are buying new then look at all those available, as there are very few really good ones. Many are poorly made and the bellows are very stiff to operate. Make sure you are comfortable with it and it doesn't tire you out.

## **Hives**

The first question you will need to ask is which type to buy. The appliance catalogues will list about six different 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 good 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 hive is the national made from wood, but in recent years there are some other options you may wish to consider. Polystyrene hives are becoming available, but you will need to make sure they are compatible with wooden hives, and if the colony has Foul Brood disease they can't be flamed out in the same way wooden ones can, and there may be a disposal problem. I strongly suggest you seek advice first. There is becoming quite an interest in Top Bar Hives, and I suggest you read up on their use. 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.

All hives are different sizes and suit different kinds of bees, and that will be a consideration as well.

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.

## Bees

The types of bees and the hives they are kept in probably cause more beekeeping arguments than anything else, but it is actually quite simple. The more prolific bees need a large broodchamber, 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 to 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.

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.

## **Secondhand bees and hives-a warning**

Although the risk is slight there is a possibility secondhand equipment may be infected with either of the Foul brood's. 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 BKA's 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.

## **Anything else?**

### **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 candidates 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>

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