

The Extractor



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Difficult weather

This has been a most peculiar spring and I'm ashamed to say that my three hives have swarmed four times. So as I come up to the first harvest, the honey is very unevenly dispersed among the hives. One has three capped supers, one has nothing and the third has just one capped super to extract. I've heard of some of our members who have had similar experiences.

The weather has had a wider effect as well. Several of the trees in our garden are showing signs of stress from lack of water - despite the rain! - and the chestnut trees didn't blossom. Now, they're forecasting a heat wave in July, so we should be prepared for a difficult year. **Editor**



PETER SMITH, Foreign Correspondent

Small Hive Beetle

History repeats itself. The Small Hive Beetle is really making itself felt in the US now and the same sort of discussions are appearing in the bee press about the pest as there were about Varroa several years ago. The pest is already in Continental Europe as someone smuggled some bees, with the beetles, into Portugal.

The beetle lays large numbers of eggs in the hive and the larvae create havoc by eating honey, pollen and brood. They then crawl out of the hive to pupate in soil and the emerging beetles can fly five miles to infect other hives.

Beekeepers in the US are coming up with all sorts of ideas on how to combat the pest - like spraying insecticide for three feet around the hive so that the emerging beetles are killed in the ground. However, one source says that the larvae will travel up to 100 feet from the hive in the right conditions (sandy soils) so a 3 feet diameter 'no go' area round the hive may not be a lot of good. There are also discussions about keeping hives in the shade (not considered good by one pundit) or in the sun (better!)

There is already talk of beetles' resistance to treatment, so it looks like a repeat of the Varroa mite. The Central Science Laboratory has prepared a booklet on the subject.

John Evelyn acquires a beehive in 1660

John Evelyn, the well-known garden historian, describes being given a beehive by one Dr. Wilkins, the Warden of Wadham College, Oxford.

“We all dined with that most obliging and universally curious Dr. Wilkins at Wadham. He was the first to show me the transparent apiaries which he built like castles and palaces and had so ordered them one upon another that he could take the honey without destroying the bees. These were adorned with a variety of dials, little statues, vanes etc, which were very ornamental: and he was so abundantly civil at finding me pleased with them that he presented me with one of these hives that he had empty, and which I afterwards had in my garden at Sayes Court – where His Majesty came on purpose to see and contemplate it with much satisfaction”.

Funny that supering didn't really catch on for another two hundred years! – Ed.

The Life of a Foul Brood Officer *Bob Hunter President of the MBBKA*

Bob became Foul Brood Officer for Bucks after he was made redundant in 1968 with a wife and young family to support. It seemed the ideal way to spend six months of the year - he had always wanted to be a farmer anyway. In fact he ended up doing the job for 19 years.

The Ministry of Agriculture had their headquarters in Stratford-upon-Avon at that time. The job consisted of visiting beekeepers to look for cases of American and European Foul Brood (this was the golden age before varroa). EFB was more unusual and difficult to prove. Open brood cells with dried, twisted larvae were sent away to be analysed by the National Bee Unit. If the report came back positive, the hives could be treated with antibiotic. But AFB was more common in those days

– sunken cappings with tell-tale holes. If Bob found AFB (and he did find 10 or 12 cases a year) he would have to destroy all the bees and brood in the apiary. The test was a piece of grass stirred around in the hole. The proof of the disease was a long toffee-like thread when the grass was withdrawn.

When Bob had to destroy an apiary he would arrive late in the evening. After dark, he would dig a deep hole to bury the bees (it should have been the beekeeper digging the hole, but Bob tended to do it if the beekeeper was a pensioner or a lady). Then he would close the hive entrances and pour a pint of petrol in through each feed hole. The bees would roar and then fall silent as the petrol took effect.

On one dramatic occasion early on, he stacked the hive bodies from six hives next to the hole ready for burning and lit the match. The watching beekeeper was astonished by a tremendous explosion. The whole lot, ignited by the petrol fumes inside, left the ground and Bob himself lost his eyebrows! Trying to look in control, Bob said something about “When you’re experienced, this is the quickest way to sterilise a hive body” as he hastily emptied the frames into the pit.

Bob never knew what he would find when he visited a beekeeper. Usually he would be welcomed, but there was the odd surprise - like the time he was directed to the house of a lady beekeeper one sunny day. He was told she would be in the garden so to go straight round to the back. He did, to be confronted by a lady with not a stitch on, who, standing up from her sun bed, calmly directed him to the house next door. He wonders to this day if he was deliberately “set up”.

Bob loved being a Foulbrood Officer. He says it was different in those days. People were at home more and would offer him a meal. It was “more like visiting friends than a job”.