

NHBKA May 2013 Newsletter

'Ne're cast a clout till May be out' and 'Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May' are common enough sayings but perhaps we are always over-optimistic about the month of May, even if the May reference is to the hawthorn that has just started to bloom. So it came as rather a surprise to be standing outside in a hail storm at our first apiary meeting of the year with distant thunder in the background. A visit to Pat Veasey's is always welcome and even if the bee business was conducted in weather that left much to be desired, the après-bee was splendid. Our meeting was well attended, in fact the age range probably exceeded three score years and ten as Vincent's son was there in a very smart new bee suit. We had a couple of new members too; so thanks to Lynn and Lucille for braving the weather. Frank Everest talked us through the Plan ('always have a plan!'). Frank had moved a wood-pecker damaged brood box with deep national frames to Pat's, and the first piece of work was swapping all the existing frames into another serviceable box. An examination of the drone brood and the debris on the floor showed no signs of varroa.

The next piece of work was a practical demonstration of an artificial swarm using Pat's colony. The queen was unmarked so the half brood box was set aside and the main brood box examined first – no queen. Frank then started on the half brood box, setting aside the first two frames after examining them. The bees in the half brood were quiet; a good sign the queen was present. As the frames were examined one by one, they were set together in pairs. If we didn't find the queen on the first pass, we should find her in the middle of one of the sets of pairs of frames on our next attempt. If you do this to find the queen, leave a reasonable gap between the pairs of frames to prevent the queen running between them. By the time Frank started to examine the last two frames, the attended company was beginning to feel rather cold and wet, so it came as a relief when the queen was found on the last frame and marked. She was put into a new brood box together with a couple of frames of stores and bees (and no queen cells as none were present), and placed on the site of the original colony with an empty super on top for feeding purposes. The remainder of the original colony, now roaring away having detected that their queen was missing, was placed away from its original site. The flying bees (if there were any flying, which was doubtful) and any subsequent flying bees from the original colony would return to the new box that had the queen. Artificial swarm complete – and so to the refreshments and several very welcome hot cups of tea. The sandwiches and cakes were excellent but I particularly liked the Mary Berry Ginger and Treacle Traybake! Dr John Hill and Miriam very sensibly avoided the inclement weather and arrived in time for the tea.

Frank's artificial swarm wasn't the only practical demonstration of the subject of one of our indoor meetings. Vincent Wright recently attended a colony of bees that had taken residence under a flat roof. The owners were reluctant to remove the bees but much less reluctant than the roofer who was to repair the roof. Bees had been using the space for several years without any problems, but it seemed that the bees may at some point have left or died and been replaced by a swarm three years ago. Vincent was able to demonstrate one of the techniques that he described in our last indoor meeting - starving the bees out. He was accompanied by a small number of willing volunteers (including our Chairman) eager to put theory to the test. Working from a platform, the fascia board was removed to expose the entry point, then Helen blocked up all the holes but one, leaving a single point of exit for the bees. This exit was connected by a pipe to an empty half brood box on top of a spare hive, separated from a brood chamber containing some brood and stores by a Porter bee escape. The whole arrangement was left on the top of the flat roof so any flying bees would enter the hive, being unable to return to the roof space. Over the next 6-8 weeks, all the bees in the roof space will hatch and hopefully exit into the hive. The result – one happy roofer.

The sound of the first cuckoo is used as an indicator of the start of spring, and is keenly anticipated by subscribers to letters pages, but perhaps beekeepers should use the first swarm of the season instead. Congratulations go to Gary Hammond who managed to box a swarm last week.

We have met with some success in our search for alternative out-apiary sites and recently went to view an

ideal rooftop site at a business premises in Letchworth. Another alternative for possible queen rearing is in the grounds of one of the hotels in Stevenage. Prior to the siting of any hives, we agreed to give an introductory presentation on bees and beekeeping to members of the staff and Helen completed this recently with a storming performance to three groups in one afternoon.

Don't forget the events that are happening over the next couple of weeks; The Letchworth Food Festival on 18th/19th May, The Herts County Show on 25th/26th May, and Stevenage Day on 9th June. We will have members helping at all these events.

The next apiary meeting is at the end of June at Standalone Farm. Please let me or Helen know if you will be attending.