

NHBKA February 2014 Newsletter

The first meeting of the year is a clear signal that the new beekeeping season has started. With no meetings in December and January, and only a few things to attend to in the apiary, we've had little contact with our bees and with each other over the previous couple of months. We start with a blank sheet to record what will happen as we progress through the coming bee season. It will of course match the detailed plans we made during the winter!

Helen opened the meeting by welcoming new and prospective members, and visitors from Welwyn and St. Albans, particularly David Wingate, the recently elected president of Hertfordshire who is keen to foster ties between branches in the county by visiting the different branch associations.

There will be some changes in our branch committee this year as a number of the members are standing down from their current positions and we will be electing their replacements at the AGM in March; the posts of Chairman, Treasurer, Swarm Officer, Disease Officer, and one of the two Herts Executive members, and possibly the Vice-Chairman will become vacant.

New members are always interested in beginners' courses and as we do not have a formal training course at the moment, Helen noted some of the other opportunities that may appeal to new beekeepers. We will continue inviting beginners to the training apiary at Odyssey, but these sessions will not start until the bee season proper gets underway. Other training opportunities are available at Buzzworks, who run a 12-week beginners course, and Welwyn, who run a 6 day beginners' course (4 indoor, 2 outdoor at an apiary). Welwyn also run a preparation course on 5th March and 19th March for anyone taking the BBKA Basic Assessment this year.

The first presentation of the evening was a very comprehensive look at queen rearing by Andy Johnston, one of our experienced beekeepers; an appropriate subject given the main item in the March edition of BBKA News. He introduced the subject by warning that the queen rearing was more involved than all the rest of beekeeping put together. By the end of the presentation, I don't think any of the audience would have disagreed.

He began by describing his situation in 1979 when he had Bedfordshire mongrel bees. His first approach was to cull any colony that did not match his criteria, but breeding from a mongrel bee stock was never going to succeed in producing bees with particular characteristics. He decided to resolve the mongrel problem by buying pure bred queens. These were expensive island bred Carnica bees. But even pure bred queens will mate with anyone's drones if you don't do anything about it. A queen will be out of the hive for 10-20 minutes on her mating flight, at 15mph she will have covered a distance of more than 3 miles. The criteria Andy uses to assess his colonies are stinging, following, running and jumping (where the bees are unsteady on the comb and will run up off the comb onto an uncovered hand placed just above the exposed frames), and susceptibility to chalk brood, and nosema. Andy uses a rigorous selection process for his drones, selecting only those from colonies free from chalk brood and nosema. Chalk brood is queen related so it is important to find a queen with no chalk brood. Nosema attacks the epithelial cells and prevents the bees digesting pollen. Andy showed a slide which illustrated the dramatic deterioration of the ventriculus of a bee with nosema.

Andy described several methods of obtaining queen cells. The Alley method uses a strip of cells containing eggs and larvae cut from a comb. This is introduced into a queenless colony and the resulting queen cells introduced into nucs (nucleus hives), leaving a single queen cell to develop in the queenless colony. The Doolittle method involves transferring or grafting of small larvae (24 hours old) from a breeder colony into artificial queen cups and is useful for a beekeeper with only a few hives wanting to raise 10 -12 queens. The frame containing the artificial queen cup is placed in a queenless colony and the resultant capped queen cells used in nucs or queenless colonies. There is also the Cupkit System that comprises cup holder attachments to stick onto wooden bars and plastic queen cups that snap into these holders. The queen cups can then be easily detached with little disturbance to the developing queen inside the queen cell. The Cupkit system also has a unit where the queen can be caged to lay eggs directly in the queen cups.

There are various kinds of nucs (is there anything in beekeeping that doesn't involve choice?). Apidea are small mating nucs made of very light, expanded polystyrene with small moulded plastic frames. Andy preferred to use Kieler mating nucs, which have twice the capacity of the Apideas. Andy described the process of obtaining young bees to populate a nuc; using a double brood box, splitting the colony, leaving the top brood box empty of bees overnight to achieve a box of young newly hatched bees.

Andy recommended a couple of publications 'Rearing Queen Honey Bees in a Queenright Colony' by David Wilkinson and Mike Brown, and 'Queen Rearing Simplified' by Vince Cook, and also the principles of Poul Erik Sørensen who established European breeding programs using Buckfast bees in Denmark.

Andy also mentioned several other issues that the new queen rearing beekeeper might find useful or need to be aware of; the BIBBA (Bee Improvement and Bee Breeders' Association) queen rearing timetable that allows you to enter a start date and then calculates the dates for the actions needed to be taken by the beekeeper; the fact the peak queen cell number for a colony reduces as the year progresses; that you should move colonies out of nucs when there is a viable worker comb;.....

After a completely absorbing talk it was a relief to have a break and enjoy the tea and cakes. The evening entertainment continued with a presentation of frames and their different properties and uses by Frank Everest and Derrick Richardson, a sparkling performance by two old hands. The queen rearing talk may have been a frame too far for our newer members, but the pro's and con's of the various frames on offer was relevant to all.

Frames are a nuisance to bees, they are quite happy to do without (i.e. top bar hives or in the wild), and frames are all about the convenience of the beekeeper and can be used to increase the size of brood, and increase the quantity of honey. Passing the baton (or perhaps frame) seamlessly from one to the other, Frank and Derrick took us on a frame tour; National, Modified Commercial, Langstroth, Dadant, with examples of the frames being passed round the hall. Various advantages were mentioned; the Modified Commercial only needing a single brood box because it used deeper frames; the use of a double brood box facilitating the checking for queen cells. The bees desire to glue frames together with propolis is reduced by using the self spacing Hoffman frames which have one part of the side bar chamfered to reduce the frame contact (and thus the propolis), but even the Manley frames that were shown had little evidence of propolis because they had been firmly pushed together in the hive. At several points Frank mentioned that his extractor wasn't able to accommodate a particular type of frame; by the end of the evening he had the sympathy vote of the audience and if a collection had gone round he might have found his extractor problems solved.

A reminder to all those who haven't paid their subscriptions; the payments to our Treasurer, Chris Mercer, were due at the end of February and our capitation representation must be completed early in March. Payment details have been sent you all and the subscription information is on the web site, <http://www.bbka.org.uk/local/northherts/>. If you have renewed already you will have received a BDI receipt with the details of your subscription payment. If you have any queries regarding subscriptions, please contact Chris, me or Helen.

Our next meeting is the AGM on Tuesday, 18th March at Howgills. Part of the programme will be a Bring & Buy stall and the keenly contested honey competition (you did keep a jar back didn't you). Hope to see you all then.