

Taking the Basic Assessment

When I started beekeeping about 20 years ago I was fortunate to join a group with experienced beekeepers that were willing to help me learn how to keep bees. They were generous with their time and shared their knowledge to encourage new beekeepers. This gives a good start to enjoying beekeeping but, because of the problems with Varroa and other threats to beekeeping, it is now necessary to learn more and keep up-to-date with new developments.

As time passes beekeepers usually become more proficient and learn more from books and study groups. The BBKA backs this up with training manuals, advisory leaflets and 'train the trainer' courses that support local associations. The National Bee Unit also provides excellent leaflets on the management of disease.

The BBKA and many associations are charities with specific objects of educating beekeepers. We also get public liability insurance at a reasonable price because we are attempting to improve the quality of beekeeping of our members. One indication of this is the number of members who have gained their Basic Assessment qualification. This is below 20% of all members and it suggests a lack of interest in showing that we train to be better beekeepers. The Basic qualification is much like the driving licence - but for honeybees. Once you have taken it (and the pass rate is well over 95%) it shows that the beekeeper is competent to keep bees.

I hear many stories of people who join local associations for a couple of years, go to the beginners' courses and come to meetings for a while and then leave. They think they have sufficient knowledge to keep bees. This is a shame because these people are at best poor beekeepers, but they also lose the opportunity to keep up-to-date with developments on good husbandry and retaining the health of colonies. My experience has shown me that there is so much to beekeeping, and more pleasure can be gleaned from the craft by understanding how bees operate and how to care for them.

BBKA is encouraging beekeepers to take the Basic Assessment and with the help of the Examinations Board, we are going to try to increase the proportion of members who have taken this to 50%. Please help us, and if you have not already, resolve to take the Basic next year. It is never too late; one of my local members took it when he was 87 after keeping bees for over 50 years. He did it to encourage new

beekeepers and he passed with flying colours!

In the next three issues of BBKA news I will be giving you tips on how to prepare for the Basic and we will be running a 'master class' after the Spring Convention at Stoneleigh on Sunday April 20th to help candidates with last minute preparations. So, there are no excuses. Make it your New Year resolution to take and pass the Basic in 2008! I will give you as much help as possible and you can help to raise the status of beekeeping and our Associations at the same time as learning more about our wonderful craft. This edition of BBKA news has the first section on general beekeeping. The second will discuss bee health and the last will consider general theory about bees and beekeeping.

Passing the Basic – Part 1 general beekeeping

■ Get a copy of the syllabus. It is available on the BBKA web site http://www.bbka.org.uk/freefiles/syllabuses/basic_all.pdf

■ If possible, take the assessment on a colony you know – one at the Branch apiary where you can get some prior practice with the bees

■ The Assessor needs to be sure that the colony is in good condition for an assessment and will only use a Branch apiary colony if it is

■ You will need to light your smoker and keep it burning

■ It is fine to use a gas blow torch to light a smoker. Dry wood chips, paper, cardboard will stay alight for a long time with the occasional puff

■ You need to hold your hive tool correctly

■ Do not put it down but keep it in your hand without using your thumb and fore fingers to secure it

■ When you approach the hive stand away from the entrance behind if the frames are the 'warm' way or to the side if they are the 'cold' way

■ Make a few puffs of smoke at the entrance and about the roof and then wait a while before opening the hive

■ Use the hive tool to crack open the hive without too much disturbance

■ It is better if the hive was opened the day before so that the parts of the hive do not stick together

■ You need to know the names of hive and hive parts (roof, crown board, supers (castellated or normal), queen excluder, brood

chamber, brood frames, floor and hive stand)

■ Is the hive a commercial, national, WBC, Smith, langstroth or deep national?

■ If you do not know ask a colleague before the assessment starts!

■ When you get to the brood chamber you will need to take out brood frames and inspect the colony

■ If the hive has been opened recently the frames will be easy to remove. If you have a dummy board in the brood chamber it will make it easier to get the first frame out without 'rolling' the bees. If not push all the frames to one side of the brood box to give maximum space to remove the first frame

■ Leave the first frame to one side

■ In a frame holder or propped near to the entrance of the hive but only if there is little or no brood on the frame

■ Now take each frame out by moving it to the gap in the brood box and lifting it vertically

■ You must do this carefully so that you do not disturb the bees too much

■ You need to be able to recognise:

■ Workers

■ Drones

■ Sealed brood

■ Open brood

■ Eggs – practice and if necessary wear good glasses

■ The queen – it is not necessary to find the queen

■ Keep an eye on the bees while

you go through the colony and give an occasional puff from the smoker to encourage the bees to stay in the hive

■ Learn to take the smoker close at hand or between your legs (if it has a cage) so that you can reach it at any time

■ The assessor will ask you questions as you go through the colony. Answer the questions directly but do not stop concentrating on your task

■ If you cannot remember a specific word the assessor will probably help you to remember it

■ Return each frame in the order you removed it and squeeze the frames together to retain the space for getting the next frame out

■ You will be asked to take a sample of bees for disease diagnosis

■ The easy way is to draw a part open matchbox over the face of a frame of bees and close it before removing it from the frame. You can practice this to get it working properly

■ Once finished you will be asked to put the hive back together

■ Do this carefully, using the smoker to get the bees away from the edges of the hive and down between the frames.

That is all there is to it. The best way to prepare is to have a quick practical session with an experienced colleague and make sure the hive you will use is in good condition and has been opened recently.

Ivor Davis

Examination Certificates Refreshed

The original Examination Certificate design has changed little since its introduction in about 1915. The original letter-press plates became worn with use even before the artwork was copied electronically in the late 1990's, so the old certificate was more than ready for an overhaul. The plates have been cleaned and the impressions taken, digitised and further tidied-up so that the unique design of bees and foliage has been restored to its original clarity and adjusted to fit the high quality A4 laid paper on which it is printed. Gone is the brash green of the most recent certificates; back comes the antique green of tradition with the addition of a gold border and seal authenticated by embossing the BBKA logo – a certificate to be proud of whether put in pride of place or confined to the smallest room! Comments from those who have received a new certificate have been very complementary with the phrase "most frameable!" being heard a number of times.

All future successful candidates will receive the new certificate, as will Honorary Members and Associations reaching key dates such as one hundred years. However, if you'd like to replace your own certificate with the new design or if you have lost your original, a new certificate can be purchased from Val Francis, the Examination Board Secretary for £5.00 (inc P&P – cheque payable to BBKA). You will need to write to Val with details of your qualification, preferably enclosing the old certificate or other proof you may have to make the checking process easier. Honorary Members and Associations should contact the General Secretary for theirs.