

THE BAREFOOT BEEKEEPER

by P J Chandler

INTRODUCTION

I am writing this after six years of beekeeping, during which I have kept bees in WBC hives, skeps, home-made framed hives and top bar hives. I spent a year working with the bees at Buckfast Abbey, where I was privileged to be able to read the late Brother Adam's collection of beekeeping books, study his bee breeding methods and work with his bees.

Some will say that this is far too little time in which to gather sufficient experience in the art to make any worthwhile contribution to the ever-growing mountain of literature on the subject.

They are right, of course: I doubt that I will know enough about bees even in another ten or twenty years to feel truly confident about my pronouncements, but such is the woeful state of bees and beekeeping at the beginning of the twenty-first century that I offer these thoughts to those who care to listen, in the hope that we can do enough, quickly enough, to save the bees from what appears to be terminal decline.

Why do I, with not so much as a science degree, believe that I have the answers to the ills of bees?

Firstly, I do not claim to have all the answers. Few - if any - of the ideas presented here are unique to me, nor do I claim any particular originality for the techniques I describe later. The top bar hive design shown later is my own, but is really only a development of traditional African top bar hives. There is nothing new in beekeeping - only old ideas recycled in new clothes.

Secondly, I invite you to consider what I and others have to say before drawing your own conclusions. I believe, having seen the evidence with my own eyes, that current beekeeping methods - together with a toxic agricultural system - are responsible for most of the problems suffered by our bees. I also believe, having performed some crude experiments and having spoken at some length with others working along similar lines, that the way forward is to work more closely *with* the bees, developing a relationship based on mutual benefit and co-operation rather than simple exploitation. And if that sounds too 'new age' for some, let me also add that I am, above all, a practical man looking for real-world solutions.

My primary aim in writing about 'barefoot beekeeping' is to challenge the status quo and to stimulate both actual and potential beekeepers to think for themselves and to ask more questions.

My secondary aim is to describe a sustainable beekeeping system based on three simple principles:

1. Interference in the natural lives of the bees is kept to a minimum.

2. Nothing is put into the hive that is known to be, or likely to be harmful either to the bees, to us or to the wider environment and nothing is taken out that the bees cannot afford to lose.
3. The bees know what they are doing: our job is to listen to them and provide the optimum conditions for their well-being.

'Barefoot beekeeping' is for both urban and rural dwellers who want to keep bees on a modest scale, producing honey and beeswax (and, perhaps, propolis and pollen) for their own use and for friends and neighbours. This is not intended to be a blueprint for large-scale, commercial bee farming, which I believe to be part of the problem.

All equipment is designed to be built using low-cost materials by people with only moderate manual skills: if you can do a decent job of putting up shelves, then you can probably make a serviceable beehive. Bees are very forgiving of imperfect joinery.

Above all, 'barefoot beekeeping' is for people who love bees and understand and appreciate their vital role in the pollination of a huge range of both wild and cultivated plants.

Philip Chandler

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(I should mention - for the benefit of readers with a literal turn of mind – that the term 'barefoot' is merely a metaphor, intended to convey an attitude of simplicity in this approach to the subject. I do not suggest that you do your beekeeping sans footwear.)



WHY DO YOU WANT TO KEEP BEES?

If your main concern is to obtain maximum amounts of honey from your hives, regardless of all other considerations, then you are reading the wrong book. Not that this style of beekeeping cannot produce decent amounts of honey – it certainly can – but the emphasis here is on *sustainability* and *keeping healthy bees* rather than setting records for honey crops, which inevitably has a cost.

The essence of sustainability is to work well within the limits of a natural system: pushing any living thing beyond its natural capacity can only lead to trouble.

Let me lay my cards on the table right away: I believe that beekeeping should be a small-scale, 'cottage industry' or hobby and should be carried out in the spirit of respect and appreciation for the bees and the part they play in our agriculture and in nature. I disapprove of large-scale, commercial beekeeping because it inevitably leads to a 'factory farming' mentality in the way bees are treated, handled and robbed and a lack of consideration of its effects on biodiversity.

Bees evolved to live in colonies distributed across the land according to the availability of food. Forcing 30, 50, 100 or more colonies to share the territory that, perhaps half a dozen or fewer would naturally occupy is bound to lead to concentrations of diseases and parasites that could not otherwise occur and that can only be dealt with by means of chemical interventions, which, I and many others believe, weaken the bees' natural defenses.

Bees love to feed on a multiplicity of flowers, as can be easily demonstrated by the variety of different pollens they will collect if sited in a wild place with diverse flora. Transporting them to a position where there is only a single crop of, say, oilseed rape within reach prevents them from exercising their desire for diversity and causes an unnatural concentration within the hive of a single pollen, which is most likely lacking in some of the elements they require for full health. Yet migratory beekeeping is practised in just this way on an industrial scale in some countries, especially the USA.

From a conservation point of view, unnaturally large concentrations of honeybees can also threaten the existence of other important and, in places, endangered pollinating insects, such as bumble bees and the many other species that benefit both wild and cultivated plants.

Sustainable beekeeping is small-scale by definition. It is 'backyard beekeeping' by people who want to have a few hives at the bottom of their garden, on their roof (there are a surprising number of roof-top beekeepers in our cities) or in their own or a neighbour's field or orchard.

Probably you want to produce modest quantities of honey for your family and friends, with maybe a surplus to sell at the gate or in the local market. You will have by-products; most obviously beeswax, which you can make into useful stuff like candles, skin creams, wood polish and leather treatments, so beekeeping could become the core of a profitable sideline.

And you are interested in bees for their own sake, I hope. If not yet, I have no doubt that you will be soon.

You may have been to an open day hosted by your local beekeeping association, or read a book or two, or perhaps you have taken the plunge already and bought

a second-hand WBC or National hive and captured a swarm or obtained a 'nuc'¹. You may have browsed through the catalogues of beekeeping suppliers, wondering at the enormous number of specialized gadgets and pieces of equipment you seem to need and wondering where you would put it all and how you would pay for it.

In this case, you will be truly thankful to know that my mission throughout this book is to show you that, (a) beekeeping does not have to be as complicated as some would make it out to be and (b) you need *none* of the stuff in those glossy catalogues in order to keep healthy, happy and productive bees.

None of it at all.

You will recall that the sub-title of this book is '*A simple, sustainable approach to small-scale beekeeping*' and that is what I have in mind throughout and I would like you to keep in mind: *simple, sustainable, small-scale*.

The system I will describe here is about as simple as beekeeping can get, while maintaining provision for inspections, comfortable over-wintering and non-destructive harvesting. Everything you need is in one box – the beehive – which you can make yourself if you follow my instructions. You can buy or make yourself a veil. If you are nervous, you could even get a beekeeper's suit or a smock, but any light-coloured shirt will do as well. A hive tool can be handy, but a strong, sharp, flat-bladed knife will also work.

Some of the things you will *not* need include:

- frames
- foundation wax
- supers
- centrifugal extractor
- bottling equipment
- de-capping knife and tray
- bee escapes
- mouse guards
- queen excluders
- fancy feeders
- space suits
- bee blower

and you probably won't need gloves or a smoker, but if you already use them, or are nervous of bees, then by all means use them if they help you to feel more confident.

What you will need is a hive – probably two or three or more in time – and I will show you how to build them cheaply and easily, using only hand tools if you prefer, with only rudimentary woodworking skills.

Bees are fascinating creatures and among the many beekeepers I know or have talked to – even commercial men - I can't think of any who keep them just for the income they generate.

So be warned: if you start keeping bees and develop a real interest in them, it will be with you for life. And I doubt very much that you will regret it for a moment.

¹ A nucleus hive usually comprises 3-5 frames of bees in a proportionately sized box, with a laying queen.

The Barefoot Beekeeper is available from www.biobees.com

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The free supplement, 'How to Build a Top Bar Hive'
is available from the same site.

