

About Beekeeping

Beekeeping in Britain is largely a hobby. There are commercial beekeepers, but the vast majority of them use beekeeping as part of their income, and the number who rely entirely on bees are very small. These notes are intended to help everybody, whatever the reason for their interest.

If you ask a group of beekeepers their reason for keeping bees they will come up with a variety of answers and I list some common ones here:-

Hobby

As mentioned above most beekeepers are hobbyists, and a very interesting, relaxing, and rewarding hobby it is. You will never stop learning, and providing you grasp the basics you can stop where you want to. There is an opportunity to involve other people, as there are many things connected with beekeeping that don't involve getting too close to a beehive.

To pollinate the garden

Many beekeepers are keen gardeners and have noticed the decline in pollinating insects, bees in particular. A couple of colonies will certainly improve the pollination in your own garden and the surrounding area.

Honey for the family

This is probably the greatest reason why bees are kept. Depending on the area you could reasonably expect 40-60lb of honey on average per year, with good areas yielding 100lb or more per colony. Once you have a good supply of honey it is surprising what uses you will find for it. A jar of honey is a good thank you for a favour, it can also be bartered for eggs, fruit, vegetables, etc, and there are many similar uses.

Uses of hive products

Honey can be used to replace sugar in many recipes, and fermented into mead which is one of the simplest drinks to make. Beeswax can be used for making candles, polish, soap, cosmetics, etc. All these things can be made with equipment that is available in most households. Instructions and recipes are readily available.

Interest in nature

Bees themselves are very interesting, but so is the wildlife in and around the hive. Inspecting the inside of a hive roof when taken off the hive will often reveal a wide range of things, and the surrounding area is often worth exploring, especially if the bees are kept in woodland or a meadow.

Further interest

There are many things of interest that beekeeping will lead to including microscopy and photography.

Is beekeeping for me?

There are surprisingly few restrictions to keeping bees. The beekeeper should be reasonably fit as there can be some heavy lifting to do, but this can be shared as there should be no shortage of offers of help. Most BKAs have beginners who are willing to help others in return for learning. Obviously if someone is allergic to bee stings it would be foolish to take up, or continue with beekeeping. On the subject of stings it must be expected to get several in a season, and a beginner is likely to get a few more than an experienced person. Most stings are caused by poor handling and/or poor bees, both of which can be overcome, but accidental stings are common as well and a part of beekeeping. Some people are genuinely frightened of bees and unless this fear can be overcome it would be foolish to continue.

Many gardens will accommodate a couple of hives providing they are sited sensibly, but don't risk problems with your family or neighbours. Some people have a fear of insects and may not share your enthusiasm, so please be responsible. Education can help to overcome any fears, but if this doesn't work a careful search of your own area could provide you with a suitable site on a farm, or similar place where there is often a small area of waste ground. Many people in towns and cities keep bees, often unknown to their neighbours, and they often do well because of the flowers in parks and gardens.

Before investing in equipment you will have to dispose of if you decide beekeeping is not for you, it would be a good idea to visit several practical bee demonstrations, and these will be organised by local BKAs. If asked, take every opportunity to handle bees.

Time and commitment

Beekeeping is seasonal and the amount of time needed varies. During the summer expect to spend, say, an hour on one colony, and 20-30 minutes on subsequent colonies per week for an inexperienced beekeeper, and half that for those who have been keeping bees for a year or so. A reasonably experienced beekeeper will only make fortnightly inspections, which further reduces the time needed.

Swarming is the main problem during the summer and there are times when colonies must be inspected, and it is no good putting inspections off until tomorrow, otherwise your swarm could be causing a nuisance to someone else, and possibly sour relations, as well as causing a possible loss of honey.

Winter work is generally maintenance of equipment which takes up little time, and there are no short deadlines.

What is the cost to start?

Beekeeping is difficult to cost because there are so many ways to start. It is certainly much cheaper than many hobbies, and if you take into account the honey that you haven't got to buy it becomes quite reasonable.

What now?

If you have decided to pursue beekeeping as a hobby, then as already suggested it is a good idea to make contact with a local BKA. Many BKAs have a membership category for non beekeepers. This usually has a much smaller fee than a full member, but probably won't include various levies or insurance.

As with all similar organisations there are some BKAs that are better than others. It would make sense to visit several in your area, not just the closest, and join the one that most appeals to you. It is probably better to travel a bit further and get better tuition and service. Ideally a good BKA will have an apiary with several colonies for teaching purposes. Make sure people other than the demonstrator are allowed to handle the bees, and the demonstrator takes time to explain things to you. See what the winter lecture programme is like, and that it is bee related. You are looking to learn about beekeeping, not weaving or fire engines. Some BKAs are vibrant, welcoming and friendly, and may have a high proportion of younger members, yet others may be very insular. It is possible to become a full member of one BKA, and an "Associate" of another, and this may suit you for a number of reasons.

It might be useful to build up a mental note of a few members, and their abilities, and this can often be done by observation. It is not always the person who has been keeping bees for many years who knows the most. There are some good young people coming into beekeeping at the moment, and many of them are learning the theory very quickly. Be careful not to look to build up a relationship with anybody too soon, as you may find you have latched onto the "Association Bore".

I would not go charging ahead and buy anything before speaking to a successful beekeeper, as many people have bought a lot of kit only to find it doesn't suit them or they don't need it. The bee catalogues are full of a lot of things you could easily do without. Beekeepers in general are friendly and helpful, so you could probably borrow or improvise if you actually need something.

It is my view that beekeeping should be fun, not the chore some people try to make it. I hope these words will enthuse you and encourage you go to the next step.

If you have taken the decision to become a beekeeper, well done, and welcome to beekeeping.

Downloaded from the British Beekeepers' Association website: <http://www.britishbee.org.uk>

Copyright Roger Patterson BBKA 2008