

Patterson's Page:

Some Changes I Have Seen in The Last Half-century

This June I will have kept bees for fifty years. Although in some ways there have been few changes in that time, in others there have been many. In 1963 at least 50% of our members worked on the land in some way, as general farm workers, cowmen, foresters, gardeners etc. and as they were on low wages, many had ten to thirty or more colonies. They augmented their income by selling honey at the gate. In general these were people who had a lot of 'stock sense' and it does not matter whether you are dealing with cows, poultry or bees, the principles are the same. They were practical people and, as few had time to read books, they probably did not know any more than the 'basics', but they knew enough to get by. Virtually all of them were good handlers of bees, as around 25% did not wear any protection at all and virtually nobody wore gloves. Bee suits did not come in until the late 1960s and it is my strongly-held view that they have contributed to the lowering of handling standards.

The modern beekeeper is much more knowledgeable, partly because they need to be and partly because information is much easier to find. They are not so practical though and in cases where something would previously have been repaired it will now be discarded.

In my area there were mainly WBC or 'cottage' hives, with the occasional National. WBCs were a mixture of telescopic lifts, as we have now, and straight-sided ones with plinths. Each manufacturer made to their own design so it was often difficult to get parts to fit. Even the supers and brood boxes varied. Cottage hives had a single-walled brood box with ten British standard frames. There were many designs and the current Thorne's 'Centenary Hive' is an example. With some, the supers had a plinth around the bottom, as the Thorne's version does, but this made super removal difficult. Many beekeepers simply used WBC supers instead. Calico quilts were used instead of crown boards, which became popular later. They laid flat on the frames, creating ideal places for greater wax moth larvae to burrow into the split top bars of frames that were mainly used at that time. Now the most popular hive is the National. In 1963 there were still a lot of hives that had been made during or after the war, when lower grade materials were used, but for a number of years afterwards all hives were made of knot-free material until the later move towards 'seconds', which I approve of.

There have been a few changes in equipment, some better and some worse. Foundation is now sold in plastic bags that keep it fresher than the old method of interleaving with tissue paper. The old sheet

queen excluders were made of zinc with slots twice the length of the short slot now available. Zinc is quite a soft metal and the slots distorted, often allowing a queen to gain access to the supers. This rarely happens now. We now have plastic excluders that I have found to be very satisfactory, although the earlier ones degenerated and became brittle. The general move to having items manufactured in the low-wage economies has meant some lowering of standards of equipment, and at the BBKA Spring Convention I have seen poorly made equipment that would have been difficult to use even if you could avoid cutting yourself!

County Beekeeping Instructors (CBIs) were employed by councils to teach both beekeepers and non-beekeepers about

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beekeeping. Until their posts were disbanded in the 1980s/90s when financial cuts took place they provided an excellent service. Their own beekeeping was of a high standard and they did much of the lecturing at events, such as conventions in other counties. Volunteers with much less experience now have to do that work and although generally they do it well, some simply do not have the same level of experience or knowledge. Also many lectures are now of an academic nature, not practical, and I think that is a pity.

I started beekeeping immediately after the severe winter of 1962/3 where many colonies were lost. Those that survived were incredibly tough and much better than the bees in general use today. Sadly many beekeepers turned to using imported queens and bees, and these did not suit our climate well and many quickly died. I remember the West Sussex CBI telling us he had never seen so many colonies die of nosema and they were mainly the Italian bees that had recently been imported.

Oil seed rape (OSR) changed beekeeping in the areas where it was first grown, which were mainly the southern counties. In the early years the flowering period was much longer and the honey crop much more certain. A crop average of 30lb/colony quickly became 100lb plus with, of course, the necessity for two extractions. It is now grown throughout the UK as the modern varieties have a shorter growing time along with shorter flowering, which I think has contributed to reduced honey crops. Beekeeping in general has not changed very much, with some of the older books having some sound information that is still relevant, although the reader needs to take into account the changes, such as OSR and varroa.

Outside changes have made many differences, including health and safety and food standards regulations. We often complain, but I have not seen honey sold in Brylcreem or pickle jars for a long time! Of course improved communications have been a great benefit. In 1963, probably only 50% of beekeepers had a telephone, but now we all can receive or access information instantly. Certainly this has helped learning, as we can soon find the information we are looking for, providing this information is sound; sadly some of it is not.

One thing that has not changed much is the Bee Inspection service. The 'Foul Brood Officers' as they were called, did largely the same work as they do today, although it is now much more efficient. The combs used to be sent by post for microscopic examination, now the lateral flow device (LFD) will confirm infection in the field. This service is generally accepted to be one of the best in the world and we are very lucky to have it. This is backed up by BDI (Bee Diseases Insurance) that has changed very little. Varroa has changed beekeeping forever and it is a pity we did not take it more seriously. Although we had a ban on imports, it was too late, as the mite was probably here already, unnoticed.

Local BKAs still perform very well but, as with other volunteer organisations, their success reflects their resources at the time. Wisborough Green BKA has been fairly stable, but other associations I have seen have had many ups and downs. Beekeeping politics and personalities often have a lot to do with it, and the occupants of key positions can make a big difference. A welcoming person will have a different effect than someone more aggressive, the latter being remembered much longer than the former.

The National Honey Show was held in Caxton Hall with no other attractions until lectures were started. Although the honey show has not changed much, the lectures, workshops and trade

stands have turned it into a full day out. The BBKA Spring Convention was started as a very small affair, but labelled a 'Great Day Out'. It has increased in size over the years to become one of the largest beekeeping events in Europe.

There is currently a huge increase in the number of beekeepers, which is the second peak I can remember, the last one being the self-sufficiency boom of the 1970s. That only lasted about five years, but put a lot of strain on BKAs who had to deal with many people who simply were not cut out for a practical pursuit where their hands would get dirty. These peaks provide an opportunity for a small number of people who think they can make a name for themselves (or a killing!) and that will always happen.

It would be obvious for me to look back and ask if beekeeping has improved. The answer has to be equivocal. I have always thought that beekeeping should be fun, and to a large degree it still is. For me, varroa and the queen problems we have seen in the last twelve to fifteen years have tipped the balance, as I can see what they have done to both the bees and a major part of my life. I now feel I need to do a risk assessment just to light a smoker, but at least I can read the newsletter more easily because it has not been through a Gestetner* three times!

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**Editor's note: a Gestetner was a duplicating device often used for amateur publications like BKA newsletters.*

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