Disastrous Beekeeping Purchases

Once upon a time when I was much less knowledgeable in the ways of bees I made a wonderful money saving deal which cost me dearly.

It was probably only year two in my beekeeping life but one of the things I had mastered was the collecting of swarms as a means of acquiring free stocks of bees. The difficulty was that the number of swarms I collected used up my available equipment faster than I could afford to replace it.

The chaps in my pub kept asking, "How are the bees?" Not that I believe they would have understood the answer it's just that they didn't quite know how to take a man who kept little stinging insects as a hobby. So one Monday night I decided to answer the question with my problem of the lack of brood boxes. People really are interested in bees and my problem was relieved by one of the lads, John the joiner, offering to "knock a couple up" if I showed him what they where like.

The next day he called and I showed him a national brood box which he measured and sketched. I took the roof off to show him the internal arrangements. The bees were quiet enough and although he did look into the hive as the buzz rose in pitch he decided that that was enough and he could see how it all went together.

On Friday evening I saw John in the bar and he told me that he would bring the brood boxes over in the morning. I bought him a pint and looked forward to resuming swarm collecting.

During the week I had busied myself making and waxing up frames so that I was ready when John delivered two brood boxes. They fitted exactly on the floors and a roof sat neatly on them. I paid him willingly, although a little more than I had expected. Still it was less than the major dealers would have charged, there was no carriage and it is nice to support local tradesmen, isn't it. I filled the first box with ten frames, I actually thought I would have got eleven frames in. And ten in the second box, must be right.

A few days later when both were filled with swarms my thoughts turned to the fact that the harvest would pay for the brood boxes. That summer those bees joined the rest of the apiary by apparently going on strike and producing little or no excess. That was also the year I learned beekeepers had a saying, "There's always next year"

Next year brought a visit by the seasonal bees officer checking for foul broods. Varroa had not, by then, graced our shores. He worked steadily through the hives until he came to the new ones. Off came the roof, the super, queen excluder and, deftly using his J hive tool, all the top bars on the brood frames.

"You've nailed these up wrong. The nails go through sideways not down from the top"

"Oh dear" I said meekly.

Again plying his hive tool he tried to loosen a frame by levering it sideways. Nothing happened. Peering into the hive he said "Oh I see what's happened. Better come and have a look at this."

By the light of his torch I looked down at the ends of the frames as he directed. I had learned by now about the "bee space" and where I was looking there wasn't any.

Propolis is the bee's glue of choice. Collected from trees by bees towards the end of their life it is taken to the hive and immediately used to block small gaps. I was looking at what used to be small gaps. Lots of them.

John the joiner had taken the external measurement of eighteen and one eighth inches, noted the general construction and made two hives exactly to those specifications. The problem was that he hadn't noted the thickness of the wood used. Instead of the walls being three quarters of an inch thick, they were one inch thick. The knock-on effect was to rob the internal space of half an inch. The brood frames which should have hung leaving a comfortable three eighths of an inch at either end now hung leaving only one eighth of an inch at each end. One eighth of an inch is a space which, being of no use to a bee, they fill with propolis. And that is exactly what the bees had done to both sides of both ends of ten frames in both hives. The same reasoning applied to the width which is why I could only get 10 frames into the box.

"Well if you can ever get them out I'll come and examine them. Good luck."

I quickly rang a dealer for 2 new brood boxes plus frames plus wax. That hurt.

Eventually the bees were tempted out into new boxes and I managed to remove some of the frames intact from the wrong sized boxes. I rose above the disaster and learned from it such as how to nail frames up, that was a silly mistake. John the joiner has made me more equipment after I gave him the plans and has made himself a couple of hives too. Since then he is greeted with the familiar "Now then John how are the bees?"

Isn't there a saying about clouds and silver linings.

