

Disastrous beekeeping purchases

Oh dear! Disastrous beekeeping purchases? My essay could be titled: "Angry young man meets disgusted of Tunbridge Wells." Jimmy Porter, you may be disgruntled but there was no need to invent such a cruel device to both man and bees. No escape from the disastrous consequences when your invention landed *my* hands!

My complaint against you, Mr Porter, really starts with an idle conversation between two innocent beekeepers – one an "absolute" expert who had been keeping two hives for all of one season and myself – a near expert who flicked through Ted Hooper's book which was a Christmas stocking gift and who got his bees this spring. Now what could be simpler? Put a few bees in a box at the bottom of the garden; take a few of my City friends down to admire them after a few beevies at my upmarket dinner parties and scoop off lashings of that beautiful amber nectar a couple of months later.

I am salivating now as I imagine the butter-soaked, piping-hot toast with golden honey running down my chin and sucking my sticky fingers. There would be hundreds of beautifully labelled-jars lining the shelves of my purpose-built honey shed which houses my exceedingly expensive electric extractor. I invited my beekeeping neighbour over to have a look. He seemed most impressed.

But I digress. Let me start at the beginning. My beekeeping was going brilliantly. I really don't understand why all you beekeepers make such a fuss of this simple pursuit. I spent thousands on my pristine new hives (White Box Cartons I think they are called) and got my gardener to set up an apiary under some large chestnut trees at the bottom of my two-acre property - near where I do target practise with my airgun. My bees were delivered in a stiff cardboard box one night around dusk. I was a little busy that night and put the box in the garage for a couple of days. I expect if bees had brains they would think it was rather a privilege to be in the same room as my Porsche!

So, I admit, they ended up being placed rather hurriedly at the end of the garden in early May. Hardly worth donning my new camouflage green bee suit to do it – so I didn't. You bee bumpkins say the year begins in September when you feed the little guys, check for disease and see they have adequate brood and stores for the winter. Well, the way I did it I did not bother with all that nonsense. Mine arrived, in a nice cardboard box in May.

I then only managed to open the heaving, humming mass once during June. They seemed a pretty tetchy bunch and I got stung a couple of times. I also had a couple of complaints from neighbours about bees and the children got stung a couple of times while they were in the swimming pool. The day I opened them was pretty hot and, to tell you the truth, I was pretty sweaty in my bee suit so I just had a quick peak – did not bother to lift the frames out of the big box on the bottom, just looked. They seemed fine.

I had meant to open my WBC (in the lingo now!) again and "check the brood". Maybe I could even have looked for the queen cell – whatever that might be. I remember reading something about stores and space but was it really important? I should have looked out for swarming but my expert friend said that was not usually a problem in the first year. Every weekend I was busy. I work in the City, you know. My weekends are precious; not to mention that the weather has been pretty iffy this year. That long, dry June meant my garden looked quite bear but I trust the bees flew elsewhere to

find food. I am sure I read somewhere that they can fly eight miles for forage. You, Mr Porter, being such an expert, will know the answer to that.

Anyway, I managed to get down there last weekend and the superannation box (I think that's what you call it) was pretty heavy. I didn't actually go into the bottom box because the bees seemed quite angry and I wasn't really sure what I was looking for. But the super was definitely pretty heavy. It nearly killed me heaving it back on top. I wondered whether I should put another one on and made a mental note to ask my friend.

So I telephoned him later with the good news about the heavy box and he said: "You need a Porter Bee Escape. They make taking the honey off a doddle."

I reached for that Bible of Beekeeping – the Thorne's catalogue. It says: "This new plastic escape with accurately spaced stainless steel springs slides apart easily for cleaning. The springs are easy to adjust if necessary and will not rust or corrode. A very old and tested way of clearing your honey supers." £1 a pair – peanuts to a Merchant Banker like me. I might as well order a hundred. They would be useful in years to come when I expand the apiary.

Oh and while I was on the blower to that nice girl Gill at Thorne's, I ordered a hundred jars. I am sure to need that many at least. I heard that neighbour got ninety pounds from one hive last year and I must be better at it than that country bumpkin! My hive is pristine compared to his! He has been keeping bees for more than 40 years and he really could do with some new kit. Even his suit is tatty and boringly white – though, I must say it is always clean.

Anyway the box of Porter Bee Escapes and the gross of jars (144, actually) were delivered in the week. Last weekend I donned that designer camouflage suit once again and pulled on my beautifully clean green wellies to go to the hive and fit these little, rather cheap and nasty looking, plastic things. Took me half my time to light the smoker. That Bumpkin gets his going in seconds. I am sure any idiot can light a fire in a can. Made a mental note to sort that one out. Perhaps, I should buy some special fuel? Oh! And I forgot to ask my friend if I should put another box on the hive. Well, I thought, there would be plenty time to do that later and I wasn't sure if I had enough frames to put in another box. Check that later too. I was sure I would be better organised next year.

Next problem was fitting your damned inventions to the throne board (or is it the tiara board?). I needed a hammer in the end. Didn't stoop to calling Bumpkin for help. I clumsily lifted the super box off. The bees buzzed around my suit. Had I zipped up my suit properly? Those bees were right in my face. I placed the throne board on then lifted the heavy box on to it. I hurriedly put the roof back. I was in a bit of a rush. I could hear the kids in the pool and I had promised to join them. But should I have put another throne board on top? What do you think, Mr Porter?

I meant to go back and attend to the hive in a couple of days but ended up late home from the office (one has to take drinks with clients, you know). When I went back at the next weekend – well Sunday evening actually, I expected the box to be empty. You claimed it was "an old and tested way of clearing the super." On that information and as, again, I was in a rush so I didn't don a bee suit.

Well, as soon as I lifted the roof and, before I had time to turn round and put it on the ground, I realised the superannuation box wasn't empty! It was heaving. There were more bees in it than when I started!

Here could you just clear up a point for me, Mr Porter? Does the shiny side go up or down? This may be where I went wrong. I blame you, though, for the books claim they are easy to fit.

The noise was tremendous! The bees welled up. Thousands – maybe millions – of upturned angry abdomens with, what seemed like giant, scorpion-sized stings is an image I will never forget. The maelstrom mass seemed to have been trapped in the box. Those bees had a whole week of pent up anger as I have never seen it before. I stumbled and almost fell over the roof. I then tried to run down the garden but the wrath-drunk, pulsating swarm poured down the lawn behind me.

I crashed into the trees, flaying my arms in the air to fight off the angry wild beasts. They were caught in my hair and in my clothes. Maybe it was my Lynx aftershave that made matters worse. I put it on to attract the birds – not the bees!

I had to jump into the swimming pool to escape. You can only imagine the effect this must have had on my poor children. I can assure you that none of them will become beekeepers. The ambulance men said that jumping in the pool probably helped to cool the stings. My wife, you understand, panicked at the sight of me careering down the garden with a halo of bees and dialled 999. The hospital was most kind and told me I had a “non-allergic reaction”. Maybe no allergy but pretty itchy a week later and my swollen face is a bit of a conversation-stopper with City clients.

My normally meek-mannered wife has decreed that “the bees must go!”. Kindly Mr Bumpkin, who turned up to help the police collect the angry bees, has agreed to remove them from my land and only charged me £100! He said the itching is caused by the protein in the venom reacting with my fat. He said once I had the first sting the pheromone went out to all the other bees to sting me. Interesting but painful. He has also offered to remove my top-notch extractor free-of-charge. I think this is most generous of him as there is so much work involved.

Now Mr Porter, after that disastrous beekeeping purchase, can you suggest a hobby that would suit me better?

Yours faithfully D I S Gusted, Tunbridge Wells

Many of you, dear readers, will be imagining Mr Porter's reply. It would probably be based on the five morals of this fictitious tale:

1. Beekeepers should be aware of the dangers of the growing number of people who are taking up our wonderful hobby without proper training or understanding of the commitment involved.
2. Their disastrous purchases could provide a source of cheap, second-hand equipment for real beekeepers. This equipment is usually in pristine condition. The downside of this for many beekeepers making a living out of selling hardware is that it could flood the market.

3. Local beekeepers' associations may need to consider how to deal with this influx of people who only keep bees for a short time. They should have plans for rehousing rescued bees from situations like this.
4. Notice our fictitious banker never mentioned his local association or the need for insurance and only made a passing mention of the dangers of spreading disease.
5. The local beekeeper, Mr Bumpkin had to step in when the emergency occurred. Many of you will have found yourself in this position.

So, in conclusion, this man should never have bought a hive in the first place – that was his disastrous beekeeping purchase.