



A Strategy to Increase the Number of Beekeepers.

In search of increase, ADBKA's solution to a membership crisis.

Background

The first time I went to an Alnwick and District Beekeeping Association (ADBKA) meeting it was difficult to be impressed.

I had responded to an advert in the local paper, seeking people who had an interest in beekeeping and had been invited to the first summer apiary meeting at a member's house.

It was a cold, wet Saturday afternoon in June, and in the road outside the venue, cars were being flagged down as an extremely wet gentleman handed out leaflets claiming that the association was not operating in accordance with its constitution.

All of the members turned up that afternoon, 14 inside the house and one outside, the mood was fairly sombre no one really wanting to talk about past problems, I assumed it was a case of 'least said soonest mended'.

It seemed that beekeeping could be fairly intense, beekeepers obviously took strong positions usually in support of their own entrenched views and the opportunity of consensus between members was obviously sometimes difficult to find, beekeepers appear to forget that beekeeping is a hobby to be enjoyed, and on the scale of life's problems of significance, beekeeping problems at the association level must rank fairly low.

Of course beekeeping is a craft performed on ones own which means there is little incentive for the solitary beekeeper to try and create a thriving association, after all it could be argued that it is of little benefit to the sole independent beekeeper to be interested in committees, constitutions or for that matter to work with others.

So it was from this start in 2000 that I joined the beekeeping fraternity and a nicer bunch of people I couldn't have met.

Putting past problems behind us.

Membership continued to be a problem, a new committee were committed to expand membership, with adverts aimed at people interested in beekeeping being placed in local libraries, newspapers and shop windows, but these didn't exactly elicit a flood of interested enquiries but they did stop numbers from falling further.

It was agreed that we lacked training facilities, of course each beekeeper had their own apiary but it would seem that some beekeepers are not keen to let others see their equipment or methods, and with such a low membership we had no funds to build our own, with only 14 members we couldn't even sell a full domino card or hold a decent raffle at meetings, even if everyone turned up

Provision of facilities was imperative, so it was decided that we should try and raise the necessary finance through a grant and opportunities were explored with various fund providers, with the Local Heritage Initiative (LHI) being excited by our ideas.

NOTE as part of our obligation we must note that the LHI is a partnership between the Heritage Lottery Fund, Nationwide Building Society and the Countryside Agency.

To ensure the proposal met both Heritage and Conservation criteria we linked with Northumberland Wildlife Trust and submitted a joint application, with ADBKA completing the documents and retaining management control.

The funds made available from this successful application in 2002 allowed the association to plan and start building a training apiary, buy 20 bee suits and other equipment.

We had committed to the LHI that we would attract 5 new beekeepers per year, so we had no option but to work hard for this membership increase.

Implementing our plans

In the application, we had to identify a suitable apiary site with reasonable access, good parking and within the catchment area of our hoped for growing membership. Northumberland north of the area covered by the Newcastle Beekeeping Association is large, in excess of 2500 square miles and with a low population, a central site would have been perfect, a site centred on the coastal plain was found and accepted.

A small team, it could hardly be much else, cleared the site, rebuilt fences, built hive stands, a shed and 'floated' a donated but derelict metal Portaloo across the river which bordered the site on three sides.

Of course 'floated' didn't quite work as the toilet sank like the Titanic and with much huffing and puffing, the team, managed to beach the toilet and transport it to its final resting place.

We started with 10 hives and bees of any temperament (in many cases dubious would be a good description) that we could obtain for nothing.

Our written promise to anyone interested in keeping bees on joining the association, is that we will lend them a bee suit, equipment if necessary, and will provide a colony of bees without charge (our free bees scheme), in addition everybody is allocated a mentor on top of our weekly apiary visits.

We increased our advertising, every half decent story got published in our local papers as were all our meetings, and our attendance at village and county shows increased, 10 in 2005, as we invested in further observation hives, we decided that we needed to have a positive and prominent profile if we were to meet our targets.

Membership began to creep up, new members having used our suits then decided to buy their own which we ordered on their behalf, buying well recognised suits at trade prices that were passed on, except for a 5% surcharge that went into association funds.

We found also that trainees needed help with equipment and we negotiated good prices and ordered centrally to their benefit, of course still adding 5%.

Ordering in bulk generally got the goods without the carriage charge, and we are prepared to split into smaller packages to suit single hive owning new starters, a service not normally available from the suppliers without cost penalty.

We found that by advertising widely for second hand equipment we got a very good response and after collection sold this to trainees at knockdown prices, the benefit going into association funds to help run the apiary, this also had a further spin-off benefit of continuing to raise our profile, its amazing how many people read the small ads.

Targets were being achieved what next.

We began to work on the social side of the association; name badges were introduced to help make it easier for new members and those members like the writer whose short-term memory was beginning to drift.

Tea, coffee and biscuits were available at the apiary on most Saturday mornings although we must reduce the incidence of 'followers' that make tea drinking a hazardous occupation.

Small groups in 2005 are now beginning to stop afterwards at the local hostelry with a number of working relationships beginning to prosper.

We decided to hold an Annual Summer Garden Party which is well attended, we hold a February Social, and produce an association calendar, these have all helped to create the right atmosphere, and conditions where new members can meet old.

In addition 'Alnwick-dotes' a quarterly newsletter introduced in the last 18 months helps members stay abreast of the latest news and advice, but still attempts to poke a bit of fun.

We have managed to reduce the workload at the apiary as membership has risen with teams of members cleaning frames; building hives, clearing the river and the site etc, although it has become quite expensive for the bacon sandwiches to keep them at it on cold spring mornings.

As our reputation continues to spread we are now being asked to do more talks to local societies (four this year) and we see this as giving further opportunities to increase membership.

There are now hives, at their request, on two Wildlife Trust sites as we have tried to raise our profile within their organisation and we have built a stand on a heather moor where we organise a collection of hives for those members interested.

Our local agricultural college has held beekeeping courses for the past 3 years with many of the students joining ADBKA, and all new members are encouraged to attend, and this has had many positive benefits.

Our Autumn/Winter programme has monthly meetings from September though to April, we have been forced to find a further venue for this season (our 3rd venue in 3 years) as we are in need of ever larger facilities, all our venues have been on licensed premises, not because we want to encourage drinking, but because we want to encourage interaction between members.

What of the future?

As we continue to grow, new members are bringing fresh ideas and we see opportunities to integrate them into new sub-groups that will begin more co-operative ventures.

We have plans to keep our association fresh and attractive to existing and potentially new members and in 2006 we will hope to:

- Continue to expand purchasing on behalf of our membership; in 2005 we have bought £4600 of equipment.
- We will identify a further heather stand in the southern part of the county for 2006 to broaden the appeal of migratory beekeeping, and make it easier for those wishing to take part to do so.
- We will begin a programme to improve our stocks of calm and non-swarmy bees that we will make available to those members interested.
- We will begin to use Instrumental Insemination to assist with the breeding programme objective, equipment currently on order.
- We will purchase a microscope, recording and projecting equipment that will help with training and education of our members, and those other groups interested.
- We will spend nearly £300 to improve our library with new books and videos.
- We will further increase sales of association honey to help fund further improvements in our facilities
- We will fund education for two members
- We will investigate resurrecting a honey competition, 2 local flower show committees have approached us for entries, allowing us perhaps to polish redundant trophies.
- Our hives at the training apiary now number 14 and will be increased to 20 in 2006 because we wish to continue to hold training days every Saturday from May to July and we have found it difficult to work with the 10 hives we originally planned without constantly disturbing the bees.

We don't think there is anything unique about what we do, there are many who will read this and say that their association do all of these things but perhaps they haven't yet reached the point of collapse as ADBKA nearly did.

ADBKA was fortunate to survive in 2000 and a good committee helped put together a series of actions that many other associations practice as well.

The catalyst for our change was sufficient finance, and the series of commitments that were needed to obtain that finance, that sprung us to action.

Has it worked? Membership is now nearly 80 and we expect this to rise, and despite moving on 3 years since 2002 our average age is down to 53 years from nearly 65, with our youngest beekeeping member 16 years old

The secret we believe is to reach those interested, find members prepared to commit some time, create a good social atmosphere welcoming to both beekeeper and partner, and membership worthwhile even to those not coming to meetings.

We take observation hives to as many local shows as will have them, not just the big county shows, we try and make the stand interesting, we produce our own leaflets, provide honey cake and associated recipe, candle making for the kids and sufficient beekeepers and wives on the stand to cater for those visiting.

We offer regular training, free bees, provide help as close as practical to the trainee, make ourselves available by phone and e'mail and make equipment available at extremely attractive prices.

To continue to grow we believe it is essential that we continue to improve our 'offer', at ADBKA we are committed to do so and hope to continue to prosper as a result.