



A Strategy to increase the number of beekeepers

Introduction & Geographical scope

This essay is to outline a strategy for increasing the number of beekeepers. For the purposes of this document it will be assumed that the strategy is aimed at England – although the ideas and strategies outlined may apply to the rest of the British Isles.

This essay also confines itself to a discussion about hobby beekeepers as opposed to commercial bee farmers.

Current numbers of beekeepers in the England.

There were 9,178 beekeepers who are members of the BBKA [1] as at September 2004, a rise of 500 over the previous year. It is generally thought that there are perhaps another 10,000 who are not members of the association. [2]

Recent history of beekeeping membership trends

Until the last few years, beekeeping numbers have been marked by a steady and gradual decline. This has been brought about by a number of significant changes in the circumstances for keeping bees. These include

- A general trend away from country activities.
- A trend towards more instant pursuits – beekeeping does take application over a number of years to be successful and this goes against current trends in leisure activities
- More urban rather than rural living.

These long term trends have then been added to by

- Varroa

And even more recently

- Pyretheroid resistant mites

These latter two factors have greatly reduced the numbers of existing beekeepers and made it very important that the remaining members actively encourage new people to take up the craft. In addition Varroa has all but eliminated feral colonies.

Why take up beekeeping

Before one can look to increase numbers of beekeepers it is necessary to think about why people take up beekeeping. Reasons for this include:

- ‘My grandfather kept bees and I have always wanted to but never had the time until now’
- ‘My family and friends keep bees’

It would be reasonable to assume the numbers of people in this category are stable (or in the case of the first point – declining as the numbers of grandfathers who are remembered as having kept bees has declined with the long term reduction in beekeepers.)

A second set of reasons include:

- A perception that beekeeping is a natural pursuit
- I have just bought a property with some land
- I have just retired and have some time
- Increased leisure time and a desire to spend more time outdoors
- A feeling that honey and other hive products are natural and should be encouraged
- Wanting to do something completely different

These second reasons I contend are the ones that give us the opportunity to increase the numbers of beekeepers.

We must not neglect the first group of new recruits – but it is reasonable to assume we will continue to attract this group of people – but equally we must assume that these people will keep our numbers static at best. The second group however represent a whole new pool of potential additional beekeepers.

How do we attract this second group of people.

Attitudes of existing beekeepers.

There can be an attitude amongst existing beekeepers that beekeeping is a vocation. It is not a craft to be entered into lightly and you should be prepared to keep bees ‘for ever’. This is typified by comments of sort

‘How do I know they are capable of keeping bees’

‘They will drop out after a couple of seasons’

The answer I would give to the (no doubt very experienced) beekeeper is that you need to find out – by asking if the beginner has had any training – and be prepared to offer it yourself. It could be said that beekeepers should not only keep bees, but keep / help novice beekeepers as well – they had to learn from someone - it may have been their father – but many people nowadays do not have that luxury and it can be argued that passing on their knowledge to a new member is more important for the long term future of beekeeping than the keeping of good stocks of bees. A well trained beginner will be a longer lasting legacy than 20 good colonies.

Publicity and accessibility of information

We need to accept that we compete with a variety of pursuits in the modern world. We have to make ourselves heard. A lot of this is not specific to beekeeping but ways include

- Good publicity material – made available from national, regional and local levels. Remember we are trying to attract new people, so it has to be simple and informative and lead people onto the next stage – it is not designed to be a lesson in basic beekeeping.

A good leaflet should include

- Some basic facts about keeping bees
- Hive and other honey products
- The benefits to the environment of beekeeping in general
- Some good simple photos – the leaflet needs to be in full colour
- How to get started – contact details at national and local levels.

Remember the target audience and stress the linkage to the aspirations of these people.

Web Sites

The importance of the internet cannot be stressed enough. The author's experience of how people register for basic introductory courses indicate that a clear majority make their first enquiry after looking on the internet.

Again remember the target audience – we are trying to reach those people with whom we have had no contact - people who have friends and family who are beekeepers will find us anyway. These people often have no idea about how to go about finding out about beekeeping the local area.

Historically people might have gone to the local library and looked at posters. This requires a special trip and is not likely to yield what they want to find. By using the internet and an appropriate search on Google for example you can find the name of a local BKA in anything from 15 seconds to 2 minutes!!

The other difference from a poster in the library is what they can find out before they make contact. A telephone number and a date of the next meeting is not an showcase for beekeeping. A well designed website is however. The prospective member can browse the pages of the local BKA and very quickly get a feel for what they do. To make them feel welcome the site should include

- A list of events during the year, with photos of recent meetings
- A link to a few sites – for example appliance manufacturers – so they can see the sort of costs involved in starting

- A recent newsletter
- Details of the local introductory course (see below)
- Details of how to get in touch

The website is important as a means of communication with existing members but its primary purpose is to attract new members to the craft in the area.

Other publicity

There are a variety of other methods of attracting people. These include

- Attending local shows – By selling honey and other hive products you encourage a discussion about the benefits of locally sourced honey as opposed to supermarket honey. – Taking an observation hive will attract even more interest. A recent new recruit said the trigger for him was seeing an observation hive when he was small – and although it was some 30 years later when he started beekeeping this remained in his mind over the years.
- Have a stock of introductory leaflets in the local outlets for members honey. People who buy local honey often show an interest in the bees themselves
- Send press releases to local newspapers – newspapers are keen for local interest stories. You can glean the email addresses for the local papers (do not forget the free newspapers – they are widely read) and it is very easy to prepare a press release and email it to 5 local newspapers. If only one prints it it will give free publicity. If it generates a phone call from a reporter who wants to come along and take a photo then so much the better.
- Contact local radio – again they are keen for local stories and they will catch a different audience.

Education

Having successfully got the interest of new people, the next stage is to set them off on the right footing. The worst thing we can do is to sell them a huge hive of bees and let them get on with it. The chances are they will give up as quickly as they started.

People need to feel there is an appropriate entry route into beekeeping and the local branch can provide this. A suggested route might be

- A introductory course – either over a series of evenings or a more concentrated weekend course – following the BBKA ‘Introduction to beekeeping’ syllabus for example. This is theoretical but designed to give very basic grounding. Remember these new people often know nothing about bees or beekeeping and it needs to cover such basics as what it will cost to start and what is the time commitment. It is important that this course is open ended – it is designed to invite people to consider taking up the craft – and there is no stigma associated if they decide not to do so at the end. – If it is perceived as passing or failing (i.e. wanting to keep bees or not) at the end this will deter people from coming in the first place

- A series of follow up practical sessions to build on this theory at a members apiary.
- An opportunity to buy a small colony of bees from a local member. Equipment can be sourced as new or from existing retiring members, but the actual bees are different. Bees should be supplied from a know source of appropriately docile bees. Honey production is unimportant at this stage – docility is everything for a new member. Giving them the first swarm of the season is not going to work – chances are they will swarm again before the summer and the beginner will give up. If a local member has a good strain then produce 5 frame hives for beginners.
- Make it clear to new members that the ‘normal’ pattern of membership is that after one or two years maximum they should progress to take the basic examination. If this is seen as the norm in the branch it will promote a higher standard of beekeeping in the area, and these new members will be more likely to succeed and progress to become established beekeepers themselves.
- Provide each new member with a mentor – a person to whom he can turn when things do not seem to be going right, and make it clear to the mentor that it is their responsibility to contact the new member periodically – people in trouble sometimes do not want to admit it is all going wrong.

Once again it is important that this route is sign posted in the publicity – this can done very easily on the website – a page about how members are supported through their first season.

The Role of County associations and the BBKA nationally.

Most of the above strategies are based at local level – it is here that the members will be recruited and retained. The role of County associations and the BBKA is support the local endeavours. This can be done in the variety of ways including

- Highlighting best practice in local branches
- Printing and providing centrally produced publicity material more cheaply than can be done at local levels
- Providing national publicity – TV, radio and national newspapers
- Providing an efficient referral service for potential recruits

Conclusions

New people can be attracted to beekeeping – beekeepers are held in very high esteem by the public and by making the craft accessible, both initially and during the first season, the numbers of beekeepers can continue to grow for the future.

References

1. BBKA year book 2005.
2. Informal discussion with major appliance manufacturers as to numbers on their mailing lists
3. BBKA year books 2003-2005