

A Strategy to Increase the Number of Beekeepers

Introduction

The public face of beekeeping is associated with an older generation. The younger beekeepers that are present are masked by family and work commitments, leaving their elders to stand in the spotlight at shows and school visits. One particular thirty-something beekeeper demonstrating at a show was greeted by a young mother with the words 'You're a bit young to be a beekeeper, aren't you?'. The impression is set, therefore, that beekeeping is an older person's sport. Although there are commercial beekeepers, the vast majority of those who keep bees do so as a hobby. Both time and money are involved in beekeeping. While people are working full time and caring for a young family neither their time nor their money are their own and easy options for entertainment are sought. It is as the children grow up and the parents head towards retirement that they begin to claim back a little of each of these commodities and indulge in their own interests at last. As they indulge themselves, how can we persuade them to turn to beekeeping?

The start of something good

There are many definitions of 'young' and 'old'. Ask the question of beekeepers 'How old were you when you took up beekeeping?' and the replies are varied. I asked just this question of some members of my association. The replies spoke of young families and work commitments getting in the way of an early start. The two youngest starters were twenty and thirty, the rest taking up the hobby in their forties or fifties.

Exposure to bees as children influenced many. Observation hives were kept at schools, or the children were rewarded for good behaviour with a net curtain and a visit to the headmaster's hive. In many cases beekeeping was in the family - an observed grandfather, a helpful uncle, a patient mother. Our budding beekeepers were finally influenced to take up the 'Sport of Queens' via a variety of means - a chance conversation with a London City beekeeper at a hospitality meeting; enthusiasm of friends and family; a desire to satisfy an insatiable appetite for honey; an intrigue into gadgets; an advert in a local paper; a request from the Baptist minister for a place to keep his hives.

A child's life

How young can beekeepers start? Many wartime children whose families were actively encouraged to keep bees both during and after the war have become today's beekeepers. My own memories do not stretch quite that far. My earliest memory of bees was my baby sister's

screams as she sat on one in the garden. It is as children that we learn our fears and apprehensions. Try to encourage an eight year old to look inside a hive and you soon realise they have been moulded socially to be fearful of insects and creepy crawlies. Get a three year old interested when they are still fearless and perhaps you can break the social stigma and fear of nature.

Modern day children live in the environment but many are neither stimulated by it nor encouraged to react with it. There is little chance of interaction with bees as children sit in front of a television, computer or games console. Little chance of interaction as they sit inside an air-conditioned car with windows closed against nature, unless in a frantic attempt to remove a bee accidentally trapped in with them. Gardens are no longer suitable for bees as they are too small and neighbours too close. Allotments are gaining popularity again but a hive placed on one often induces a fear of stings by other users with the result that the beekeeper is told to move on. Many people cannot distinguish between a wasp and a bee, or between a sting and a fly bite, and if stung or bitten will blame the inhabitants of their neighbour's hive.

Realistically there will be few beekeepers starting in their teens. Preoccupied with surging, unpredictable hormones there are far more important things on a teenager's mind. I was sixteen when my mother (then in her early forties) first put beehives in our garden. At the time I thought nothing much of the bees other than to avoid one-to-one contact with them. At the time I was only interested in boys and their one-to-one contact was sought with fervour.

In our twenties we struggle to build a career, pay a mortgage and start a family. It is understandable then that beekeeping is not the first thing on our mind. As we travel through our thirties and forties we become the parent generation. We have a growing sense of our own mortality and a heightened empathy with Mother Nature. It is now that the stimuli we had as children dictate the path we take. Our childhood influences and interests are reborn.

Interest and influence

There are many ways to encourage people's interest in bees of all types. They may not become a beekeeper immediately, or ever, however if they show empathy with nature then this will be passed down to the following generations and future beekeepers. Just as people influenced us to take to bees, so we are the ones who must influence the next generation. Just as each person is unique, so will be his or her reason for taking an interest in something new. For beekeeping it may be a love of honey, the lure of nature, an interest in gadgets, a desire to invent something new, an interest in hive products, or a fascination with bee photography. The list is long. There is no need to be a great public speaker or an exhibitionist, although if you are then you might enjoy visiting schools with an observation hive or a box of bumblebees to show the children. At home there are alternatives to keeping

hives. On a small scale bumblebee boxes and solitary bee tubes can be given as presents to children, offering them the jewel of their first exposure to this world in miniature that, like a precious jewel, will be valued and stay with them as they grow. Being present at shows or village fêtes is also a fantastic way of gaining interest and should not be overlooked. Children love to make wax candles and to see the bees at work in an observation hive.

Ask the woodwork class of a local school or college to fashion hives, bumblebee boxes and solitary bee tubes. Then offer the students visits to see their constructions in use, or indeed set them up in the institutions' grounds. Ask the science department of a local school to keep bumblebee boxes to allow a study of their behaviour. The organisation 'Bees in the Curriculum' helps children, teachers and parents come to value bees. It does this by providing up-to-date teaching materials that use information about bees and insects to cover a range of aspects of the curriculum. Encourage a school near you to use it and that first introduction to bees could be as memorable to today's children in the future as my baby sister's sting is to me today.

Exposing ourselves

Children and adults alike are greatly influenced by role models. Harry Potter and the sport of cricket are just two current vogues. These become part of our culture, albeit temporarily, and offer numerous conscious and subconscious influences. Many a non-gardener can name a famous gardener through the plethora of gardening shows that adorn our televisions. These programs transfix the viewer, feeding ideas and influences deep into a relaxed and open mind. How many beekeeping celebrities can we name? Television is an untapped resource for beekeepers that we are only just beginning to utilise. The few celebrities that we do know who are beekeepers, such as Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall of River Cottage and Bill Turnbull of Breakfast News, should be exploited in order to bring bees to the forefront. Already bees are used in advertising as a symbol of natural goodness in foods, and hives are used as a symbol of a new home for mortgage companies. Let us jump on this bandwagon and increase our exposure. We beekeepers have been too quiet for too long.

Gardeners are fortunate enough to have a wealth of material available to them and we can use this to our advantage. Already there are magazines such as Country Smallholding that have a regular slot written by beekeepers for beekeepers. Let us encourage the popular amateur garden magazines to do the same. We must work with television garden makeover programs to include nesting tubes for solitary bees and ornamental beehive style compost bins in their designs. With the informative garden programs, we should encourage them to regularly explain the relationship between plants and bees and to feature prominent gardens that themselves have beehives, such as West Dean Gardens in West Sussex and Hughenden Manor in Buckinghamshire.

Summary

The public face of beekeeping is associated with an older generation, and there is no single answer to the question of how to encourage new beekeepers. Like many things in life, popularity fluctuates with fashions, and beekeepers today are fortunate to be riding the upward wave. Relative youngsters are slowly turning to beekeeping of their own accord and we can use this to portray a fresh face to beekeeping. In today's uncertain working climate people seek other ways to make a living, or to relax from the rigours of work. Allotments are making a comeback as we become more aware of biodiversity and our effect on the environment. Let us reach out to this desire to be at one with nature, influencing the children as they grow and the adults as they ponder their future. Beekeepers need exposure, whether one-to-one, at a village fête, or through the untapped mass media.

We live life in the hi-tech fast lane where money and status play great influence. Social and peer pressures control our thoughts and feelings. A large number of adults vie for children's attention in order to influence their future. We need to offer an enthusiastic seed of encouragement that will stay with them as they grow. Whilst small-scale work at local level will encourage their interest, it is the medium of television that has the most to offer. If used well it can remove any stigma associated with bees and bring them to the forefront of our culture. As the children mature and come to recognise their own place in humanity, perhaps they too will turn to beekeeping. We will be much older and wiser by then, watching our protégés develop, and when we finally reach the time to hang up our hive tool we must remember that growing old is essential if you want to live a long time. Growing up, on the other hand, is entirely optional.