

Patterson's Page

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I have long resisted much of the huge array of beekeeping gadgets that are available in catalogues, online and at shows. I believe many are unnecessary or can easily be improvised by using or modifying something else. I have attended every West Sussex BKA auction since the first one in 1975 and been the auctioneer for many years, so I have seen a lot of kit that beekeepers accumulate; much of which I have never needed to use.

Recently, I had a conversation with a group of beekeepers when one said something like: *"The problem with beekeeping is the amount of equipment you need, the cost involved and somewhere to store it"*. I tend not to leave comments like that unchallenged and pointed out that I am involved with many more colonies than the average beekeeper, often some distance from home, yet I manage quite well on minimal equipment. Apart from standard hive parts and a few bits and pieces to make manipulations easy, most of my kit is usually kept in my car. The most used items are in a small shortbread biscuit tin. It contains a marking pen, scissors for clipping queens' wings, queen cages, metal foil for protecting queen cells and a couple of grafting tools. Oh, I nearly forgot one of those spring-loaded queen catcher clips. This is a recent addition that I admit is unnecessary, so why do I have it? I find the 'Posca' marking pens very good, but the paint is water-based and takes a few minutes to dry. I always clip and mark queens by hand and have never used any of the gadgets for doing so. I used to put the queen straight back in the hive after marking, only to find the spot appeared to have worn off by the next time I saw her.

At a Wisborough Green BKA apiary meeting I was demonstrating queen clipping and marking when a worker bee landed on my hand and licked the paint off the queen I was holding, something that has happened several times since. It then became obvious that the bees removed the paint before it was dry, not that it had worn off. I thought the simple thing to do was to put the queen in a clip catcher for a few minutes for the paint to dry, then leave her on the top of the frames, so I did not forget about her, before releasing her. This has worked quite well, but a few queens were not in the clip when I went to release them.

When you get closer to the end of your life than the beginning it is often difficult to remember what you have done, so I assumed I had already released the queen, but it happened often enough that I decided they had to be escaping somehow. On a purpose-made item I assumed the holes in the clip were small enough to prevent the queen from passing through, so I guessed the gap near the hinge was the cause. I was invited to give a demonstration at a teaching apiary, when the cause was revealed. The holes were large enough for a queen to pass through and I managed to take a photograph that I share with you.

I ask the question why items are made and sold freely that are not fit for purpose. Perhaps I should also ask myself why I bought something to perform a task that I could easily have used a queen cage for and now do. I did learn one thing though. Judging from the amount of paint on the inside of the clip it shows a need to let the paint dry before releasing the queen into the colony.

Many beekeepers use this type of clip catcher once they see a queen; they put her in the clip, do the manipulation and then release her. There must have been thousands sold, so if you have



Queen escaping through a hole in their clip catcher. Photo by Roger Patterson.

had a missing queen perhaps you now know why. I must point out, however, that to the best of my knowledge there is only a problem with this clip and all others are probably satisfactory.

