

Patterson's Page

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The COVID-19 pandemic has probably caused the greatest major disruption to beekeeping since WW2, but for very different reasons and with very different results. Within weeks, much of what had been planned by beekeeping organisations and beekeepers for the year ahead had to be cancelled. Some will be resurrected, some gone for good.

I have had many people ask me how I coped with lockdown, but my answer was always the same. I found different ways of doing what was needed, or other things to do. I had a lot of lecture and demonstration appointments cancelled, some of which were replaced by webinars, which have given beekeeping a new way of teaching, so perhaps one of the positives to come out of the pandemic. I fully admit that initially I was not too keen on the idea, but I have got to like them, with words like 'Zoom', 'Meet' and 'Team' having different meanings than I have been used to. To begin with, I found it rather strange speaking to several hundred people that I could not see. With an audience in front of me, I can gauge their knowledge by body language. If they are with me, I can discuss a topic in greater depth, but if it seems to be over their heads, I can give more background information. With a webinar I am unable to do that.

Like other BKAs, at Wisborough Green BKA we cancelled all meetings. We offered webinars instead and gave advice in other ways. Our equipment shop is run by a member who is classed as vulnerable, so we were unable to sell equipment, even from her home. Our shop is a valuable service, which shows its value at times like these when it is not available.

Our teaching apiary has about twenty full colonies that still needed managing. These have been done fortnightly on a rota system by me and three other experienced beekeepers. Luckily, swarming has been very low in our area, with only two of those colonies attempting to swarm. In West Sussex, winter losses were very low, but colonies were very variable in strength in the spring. I think the reason was because the weather in February and March was poor for flying, so the bees were unable to collect pollen. They did not rear as much brood as normal, so were retarded. Although some were very weak, they built up well once the weather improved in April, to the point where we ran out of supers in the middle of June. We put a dozen nuclei into last winter, all of which survived. These have been expanded to over thirty, all from within the overwintered dozen, mainly using my 'two-frame nuc' method, that I have used successfully for over forty years; see: <http://www.dave-cushman.net/bee/twoframenuc.html>. We mainly use our nuclei for mating queens, usually in conjunction with my own bees. With lockdown, I have been able to raise a lot of queens and, more importantly, cull those that may not be up to good standard. I have also been able to distribute queens to other beekeepers. I believe that teaching apiaries can be used for producing bees and queens for members, which is good for teaching and reduces the reliance on imports.

I have used some of the spare time to write two books, one on the myths and misinformation in beekeeping, the other on teaching apiaries. To the best of my knowledge neither of these topics have been approached before. The first may be seen as controversial, because it questions some mainstream teaching, but I hope that both books will be valuable to the beekeeping community.

I am becoming concerned about the future of beekeeping and the role of beekeeping associations. When I started beekeeping, many of the beekeepers were practical people who learnt by watching others and working things out for themselves. The modern beekeeper learns in different ways. Having taught beekeeping for well over forty years, I have noticed several changes. Obviously, the internet provides instant access to a mass of information. Experienced beekeepers are able to see that much of it is of very dubious quality that may not be appropriate to our needs. What someone in California does with golden Italian bees in double-brood Langstroth hives probably will not be suitable in some of our harsher locations. Inexperienced beekeepers will not know this, so they may well have heavy losses. In the past, if someone asked a question, they usually wanted to understand why they had a problem, to help them overcome it. I find the modern beekeeper often just wants an answer to a question, not an explanation. BKAs need to understand these changes and adjust their teaching accordingly.

There is definitely a new breed of beekeeper who thinks they can bypass the traditional ways of learning. They look at a few YouTube videos, thinking they know enough to start beekeeping. I had a call recently from someone who told me he had got all the kit he needed, based on information and advice he had obtained online and just wanted bees. He wanted local native bees and as Wisborough Green BKA was the closest to him, he wanted to get some from us. I suggested that he joins a BKA to get tuition, advice and support before buying bees. He quickly declined, saying that he had already gained enough knowledge, so there was no point. I was clearly getting nowhere, so was trying to end the call without being rude, when he asked me how you fit 14 x 12 frames into a top bar hive!

Other beekeepers have told me similar stories, which should concern us all. These people are out there in quite large numbers, with no sensible guidance. I think BKAs should be prepared for a reduction in membership numbers and attendance at meetings, especially at practical sessions. My fear is that these beekeepers may not want to spend two hours being taught, when they think they can learn the same in twenty minutes from a screen.

The best way to learn about bees is to get your head stuck into a beehive hundreds of times, not by consulting a monitor for a few minutes.