

## Case studies for different support models for new beekeepers

### Case Study 1

Shropshire Beekeepers was formed in 1894 and has around 400 members mostly across central Shropshire, the most rural county in England, with the larger towns of Shrewsbury and Telford. So, our members are varied and widely distributed.

The last few years have included not only the pandemic but also the upheaval of moving our entire operation to a new site. Taking up the 99-year lease for a new apiary and training site, in Shrewsbury, through a Community Asset Transfer from Shropshire Council. The site has historical significance as it was a source of potable water to Shrewsbury from 1552 until 1947. As such, it came with conditions namely to be open to the public and to restore the visitor centre and historic buildings on site which had fallen into disrepair through vandalism. We have raised substantial amounts of money through local businesses, member donations, and charitable trusts to build new facilities – a training room, kitchen and extraction room in the Edwardian pump house, a car park, apiary, a shop, stores, orchard, meadows and gardens. It is really a unique and very special site.

Training took a back seat while we have developed our site and through the pandemic but, from 2022, we are back to two summer beginners' courses (a total of 40 trainees) and a taster day in September. We also have study groups for BBKA modules.



Our beginners' course is offered in two formats. One involves three Saturday sessions comprising both classroom and practical sessions in the apiary. The other is a series of six summer evening sessions. Each course has three tutors and several demonstrators for practical sessions. Both courses cost £125 and includes associate SBKA membership, a beekeeping book, sessions and access to the association facilities- like the cooperative shop. This gets our beginners started

For the rest of the season, the apiary is open and being worked on Wednesday and Saturday mornings by the beginners and their tutors - so they come along and help, watch and ask questions. There are 20 hives run by four bee teams - led by a tutor/mentor. We have a programme of beekeeping activities to demonstrate all the techniques, but it does depend on the bees and weather, so does not always stick to the planned programme. In this way, the beginners are fully involved as members of

the association and get practical experience, under supervision. They enjoy the company and forge relationships which often last years and support their beekeeping.

Our tutors are also mentors in the longer term because they maintain contact with their students. When the beginners' get bees, usually from members, we feel we should help them to put them in their hive and support them to get the bees settled. Then they can contact us. Each year group shares a WhatsApp group with the tutors/mentors to ask questions and seek help with issues they come across in their hives. This has worked well because of the use of photos- it increases discussion and gets whole groups of the beginners commenting and discussing. It exposes beginners to more chances to see and solve bee problems than they would get just with their own bees, or what they should be doing/looking out for in their inspections.

In the second season, we offer four more classes and some practical experience to prepare our beginners for the Basic Assessment and make sure no one feels abandoned.

All our tutors have achieved the Basic Assessment as a minimum, which gives us confidence about what we are teaching, and they also have many years' experience. Our mentoring is centred on our apiary site, this gives us a centre in a very, very large geographical area. Mentors build good relationships, good beekeeping practices and happy beekeepers.

## **Case Study 2**

We have developed our beginners' training to suit our Association - it might not suit every group but for our big area we do the training over two years in the classroom and two teaching apiaries. Over two years, our beginners do three "terms". They are then mentored in groups, by an experienced mentor in their own apiaries.

We start with a theory term in January and that's six alternate weeks in the classroom. Then come mid-May we do eight weeks of "practical" sessions in the apiary. Our beginners can get their bees from us if they want or they can find their own. The following January they are back for another six-week term of "classroom" sessions in alternate weeks. Then they can sign up for group mentor meetings. One of our big strengths is the way we do our mentoring - it's a sort of "group satellite" model.

The history of our association has shaped our approach. COVID changed how we did things, didn't it? When I did the Beginners course we had amazing tutors for classroom sessions and practical sessions in the apiary. But then you took your bees home and that was it. You could feel cast adrift. We have adapted things so that no one needs to feel that way anymore.



We still do the taught sessions - because they were carefully designed by really expert tutors and we have brought in new tutors to teach those, as others have stepped down. We also really wanted to carry on doing the practical sessions because they are so good. When I attended my practical sessions there were quite large groups in our apiaries. There were maybe, ten or twelve people in the groups and I'm quite vertically challenged. Also, it tended to be gentlemen who were very confident out there. "Yes, I'll inspect these frames."

Yes, I'll do this and that..." I was quite often at the back and I'll be honest, by the time I took my bees home I still didn't have a clue what I was doing - so that shaped my approach, I think.

When COVID happened we made the decision to have no more than four students in a practical group and you'd have two at one hive and two at the other, and the tutor would go backwards and forwards between the two hives. So we could have the students stood one to each side of the hive, to maintain the social distancing. And they loved it. They absolutely loved it. They were getting much more chance to handle the bees and they were getting much more attention from the tutors. When we started the practicals the next season, I kept the four-student format but brought in trainee tutors. So we now have a tutor and an assistant or trainee for every four students. So they're getting one to two in every session. So for every 24 students, we have 12 tutors.

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When they have done the practical sessions and the second lot of classroom sessions we move on to mentoring. We mix up the beginners because we put them in geographical groups - so they can meet easily. We have four people and a mentor as a "mentor group". They meet once a week, in the season, at each other's apiaries. They go to a different one each week; they will all go to Jack week one and Fred week two and Jane, week three and so on. They usually have a WhatsApp group and can contact the mentor at any time. They get to solve problems together.

The benefit of the "mentor groups" is that they're getting more experience than just looking at their own bees each week. They're seeing each others' and how they've got everything set up. But they're also seeing how they each handle things, so they're getting different insights. It's good for them to make up their own minds and develop their own beekeeping skills. I think the bonding and the support that they're building up within their mentor group is really, really valuable, because they're learning to rely on each other, rather than just looking to an "expert". So, that's why we did this. We try to get students that are all in the same sort of area and a mentor that's near them as well. So that's sort of a logistics thing, but it also means that they can stay in touch as long as they want. But the structured mentoring every week tends to drop off after maybe the second or third season.

Not every beginner beekeeper takes up the offer of mentoring - but most do and their feedback is always very positive. The old bee buddy system we used way back had lapsed. This is a different way of doing things and it suits us.

It's always been a challenge to get enough mentors but by using groups we need fewer. We expect mentors to have the Basic Assessment. Quite often you'll find people that are willing to tutor are willing to mentor as well - people with a giving nature. Those people tend to be the same ones who volunteer or help do the shows and things like that. I ask around for mentors. I tend to put something in our Association quarterly magazine and I buttonhole a lot of people face to face because they find it harder to say no.

We are a big Association - maybe 300 active beekeepers (and nearly 400 members in total) and we are spread over a huge area. Our area is largely rural but with suburban and urban areas. This approach to training works because we limit the number of beginners to 24 a year and make sure we give them good support to develop their confidence to do the Basic Assessment.

### Case Study 3

We have around 170 members and have a beginners' course which attracts quite large numbers – between 12 and 40. We have a beginners' programme carefully planned and it goes through teaching, mentoring and preparation for the Basic Assessment. The area we cover is quite large so we try not to have everything concentrated in one place.



Our beginners start with eight classroom sessions which include beekeeping through the whole year and also practical frame making and disease. We work to the Basic Syllabus and the practical frame making session is particularly enjoyable. Meeting the Bee Inspector makes the disease session really meaningful for participants. Following the “classroom” sessions, we have two practical round-the-hive sessions in the tutors' apiaries.

The people who lead the sessions are our tutors (who will often become mentors). They do these sessions with guidance notes so that we all cover the same things. Because we've had so many beginners in the past, we got to a point where we can't really get that many people round the hive, so we had the bright idea of asking for experienced beekeepers who would be willing to do the two practical sessions for us- they are part of our tutor team and they do the practical sessions in their apiaries with three or four beginners each. We want our beginners to get a good view, build on the relationships started in early sessions and be able to ask as many questions as they want. In a way, it's a transition to mentoring.-



Following the two practical sessions, people are assigned to someone who's nearby and becomes their mentor. The relationship is different for each mentor, really. Some rely on the phone and WhatsApp and others do visits. Mentoring lets beginners ask questions and get demonstrations when they encounter a new technique. Extracting honey, swarm control, and such-like. The mentor can go to the apiary if it's an emergency or advise remotely. For example, I invite my mentees to come and collect swarms if they've never handled a swarm before. Or sometimes the mentee goes to the mentor's site and helps and does things like merging colonies, for example. The relationship between mentor and mentee is focussed on the earlier stages of beekeeping- of a year or so but, but a beekeeper is not just for Christmas. Sometimes it's a lifelong relationship. The mentees always have a source of support.

We choose our mentors from volunteers who have the basic assessment and at least 3 – 4 years of experience and we have guidelines which spell out the expectation to be professional and be understanding. The volunteers are pretty self-selecting - they know they need a few years' experience.

We have a whole association WhatsApp group and a separate one for the beginners. At first the beginners are in one group where we support them and they support each other and ask lots of basic questions. As they build up experience we merge the two groups. By Christmas of their first-year beginners are part of the general association WhatsApp. We also have bee buddies- people to offer support when beekeepers are away or ill. The support for people getting going does not end after their first summer. In the year after their beginners' course we do four sessions by Zoom and a practical session to give them the confidence to do the basic assessment. In fact, we just gave out the certificates recently of people who passed their Basic last year.

Mentoring is important in supporting people to be problem solvers. Sometimes you need a pair of eyes there to help you see what is going on. It is easy to forget how baffling a beehive can be if you are not used to it and be well informed. We are happy to mentor them until they feel confident enough to do the basic assessment and beyond. Good communication and support when they need it is what helps most- we are creating the mentors of the future.

#### **Case Study 4**

As a small association, our resources in terms of experienced beekeepers for activities like education and mentoring are limited: of 150 members around 40 are active in branch activities. I am one of the people leading on education and mentoring and I work with other associations to develop my own learning.

We have a pattern, involving mentoring, that we like new joiners to follow. Most of them do our ten-week winter training course which includes nine taught evening sessions. It ends with a building-a-hive session at our apiary. We normally have about 20 people a year on the course. We try and provide dedicated mentoring to beginners for a year.



We have two apiaries: an Association Apiary and a dedicated Beginners' Apiary with up to 9 spaces for beginners to keep their bees in their first year and in this apiary get mentoring support each week. Following the beginners' course, we will sell them a nuc of bees, raised the previous year in the branch apiary. The people who set up their bees in the Beginners' Apiary are assigned a mentor and they meet with their mentor every Saturday morning in the season. They have about an hour session where the mentor takes them through all the stuff they've covered in the course as it occurs in the hive, so it'll start off with teaching how to do an inspection, handle the tools and handle

the bees, and then as the season progresses, swarm control or splits or anything that the beekeeper wants to do. Our new beekeepers keep the same mentor and develop a trusting relationship with them.

People who choose not to keep their bees in the beginners' apiary, or who did not join our course, may have their bees at home. They do not join the Saturday morning mentoring sessions, but they are welcomed to the Association Training Apiary sessions on a Saturday afternoon. We encourage them to come in and work on those hives with us, and we will take them through techniques and skills. So people will come to the Saturday afternoon session and say "right, I'm going through my bees and I've found this" and we'll talk about the situation and we may well have one of our hives which has got the same thing happening. We'll take them through the sort of things that you would aim to do. Though we don't undertake a formal mentoring in people's home apiaries, they can get advice at Association Apiary sessions, on the telephone or by e-mail. Informally, we offer advice on apiary sites when people get started. Experienced trustees who support the beginners' course may offer to go and have a look at the proposed setup and help with a couple of inspections.

We don't just abandon our beginners in the following year. Obviously, by then they've built up a relationship between mentor and mentee and they keep in touch and continue to get help, but not at the level that they've done for the first year; we guide them to be independent.

We assign a mentor to any beginner who wants one in the beginners apiary, so the perennial challenge is to increase the number of people who volunteer to mentor and are competent to mentor. It's a heck of a commitment: every Saturday morning and Saturday afternoon through season. We get offers from maybe 8-12 people a year. We don't have enough people or time to commit to do mentoring in home apiaries, which may be miles away.

The other challenge is promoting consistent practice, because mentors may have slightly different ideas on how they do things. We expect all our mentors to have the

BBKA Basic Assessment, which helps to ensure that BBKA best practice is what we are aiming for. All mentors try to encourage beginners to take their basic in their second year. We have around 5 to 10 successful Basic Assessments a year. We would love to have time to do a big mentor preparation meeting at the start of the season, to standardise output, but we have not yet achieved this.

Another challenge to our training and mentoring is people who come to us who have just bought bees and know nothing about it, but then expect us to help them out. We are seeing a good many “lockdown bees”. We don't want people to end up with swarming bees and disease issues, so we try to help and offer advice, but we have limited resources for this.

Our beginners' course charges around £100 which covers the cost of putting on the course, literature for each beginner, and mentoring for the year. We want to support people to know what they are doing, treat bees well, prevent disease and really understand what being a responsible beekeeper entails. When they have learned the basics, what they do is up to them, but they know that bee husbandry carries certain responsibilities. Beekeeping affects other people, so beekeepers need to look after them properly. And of course there are legal obligations.

We want to pass knowledge around so that's why we do training and mentoring. I enjoy being part of the team that does that and it means I try to keep my own knowledge up to date. We do satisfaction surveys, of course, but our success is really about the contact we keep with our beekeepers. They are part of an informal network of support and discussion long after their first couple of years.

### **Case Study 5**

My interest in beekeeping started 10 years ago having been on a course provided by a beekeeping association elsewhere in the region, whilst this was interesting it was almost exclusively lecture based over a 6-month period with only 2 sessions in an apiary. Having completed this course, I felt completely unprepared to take on beekeeping and there was no formal ongoing support for the novice beekeeper.

As a result of this I enrolled on the Anglesey beekeepers' course. This was and is a more balanced course over a 2-year period with both presentation based and apiary sessions. There are multiple apiary sessions, that over the 2-year period, cover sessions from April to September ensuring that the novice beekeeper sees the colony in all stages of development. In July of the first year the beginner has the opportunity to purchase a nucleus colony of locally produced bees. The course also provides mentors for the new beekeeper.

My mentors were a couple who had been beekeepers for a prolonged period of time and were involved in the running of the course – their involvement has been invaluable in my development and evolving my confidence as a beekeeper. The purpose of mentoring on the Anglesey course is to provide a ready source of advice and practical assistance when required for the 2 years of the course and beyond. It

also helps integrate the beekeeper into the association and forge social links amongst beekeepers on the island.

Possibly the first task a mentor performs is visiting the new beekeepers potential apiary site and discuss setting this up. Mentors also help in the breeding of new colonies for the beginners, but it is in the second year that I felt the help really started, having someone to be able to discuss colony manipulations and troubleshooting with was vital in developing my confidence and abilities at this stage and I felt it made the difference in taking the first steps towards competent beekeeping. The ethos was always that the mentor was not there to do your beekeeping but to guide you through learning to understand what was happening in the colony and the options you had in managing the colony at each stage.

Although my mentors were very experienced, actually the feeling in the training scheme is this should not always be the case and many mentors are in the first few years of beekeeping – the benefit of this is that these mentors frequently understand the difficulties a new beekeeper is having better than a beekeeper who has more years of experience and can be more relatable for the beginner. They will also have completed the beekeeping course more recently and are frequently more up to date in beekeeping management! There is a pyramidal structure to mentoring on the island and new mentors in turn will have more experienced beekeepers to turn to for support.



I started mentoring after a period of 3 years of beekeeping after the course initially helping at taster days and on the beginners course practical sessions. For the first couple of years, I relied on support from my mentors in giving the best possible advice but over time developed more independence and confidence in the support I could give.

I have a working background in adult education and this has also been useful in helping me mentor. The process can be very satisfying for both mentor and mentee and can lead to supportive ongoing friendship within the association, I am still in contact with many of the beekeepers I have mentored over the last 5 years. I currently mentor from 3-5 new beekeepers each year – usually in the same geographical part of the association in which I am based and have recently mentored new beekeepers in the same village, a couple have recently moved to the area (and inherited bees with their house) and another starting beekeeping in the latter stages of pregnancy, different challenges in each situation.

From starting mentoring 6 years ago I now help deliver the training course, support new mentors, help organize association events and sit on the association committee. It seems an extrapolation but mentoring is an important step in



establishing links that involve new members in the association structures and foster ease of integration. Demonstration days frequently have trainers, mentors and mentees all present and talking with the public with the emphasis that the new beekeepers perform an active role in talking about beekeeping – having their mentors there helps support them in doing this and develop their knowledge levels.

Some of our mentors are active in the examination processes, some are not and we find this the best balance – beekeeping exams are not for all and the quality of the beekeeper is not invariably linked to the number of exams they sit. We aim for and find the best balance comes from enthusiastic, knowledgeable, dynamic beekeepers irrespective of examination attainment. We do encourage mentors to come and observe the teaching sessions to ensure the information given remains consistent and always point out to new beekeepers we teach one way of beekeeping that works well on Anglesey, but this is not the only way!