A Day in the Life of a Bee Inspector

by Nigel Semmence, NBU Southern Region Bee Inspector

The National Bee Unit (NBU) Inspectorate of England and Wales is part of the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera) based at Sand Hutton, just outside of York. Just like honey bee castes that comprise three different types of bee (the queen, worker and drone), the inspectorate also consists of three ranks, but we had better not carry that analogy any further. The head Bee Inspector is Andy Wattam and he is termed the National Bee Inspector (NBI) and eight Regional Bee Inspectors (RBIs) report to him. Each RBI has between four and ten Seasonal Bee Inspectors (SBIs) reporting to them, giving a total of fifty two SBIs. The eight RBIs are responsible for set regions and are dispersed around the country as shown in Figure1.

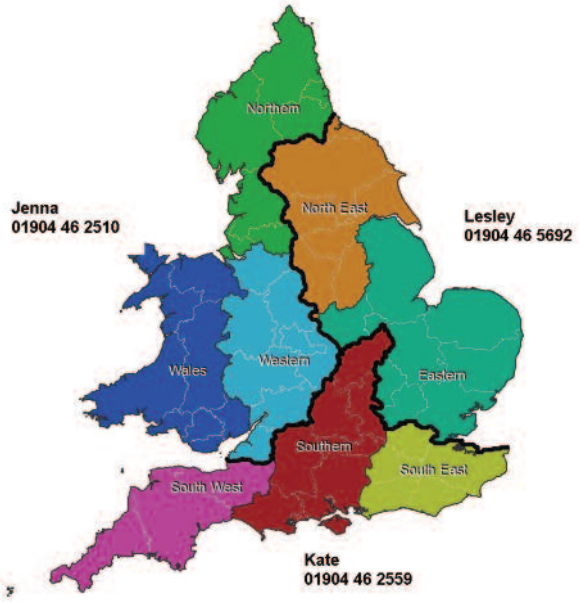

Fig 1. The NBU Inspectorate regions. All images are courtesy of The Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera), Crown Copyright; images supplied by the National Bee Unit at Fera.

I am the RBI responsible for the Southern region, which includes eight counties, over 5,000 beekeepers, and approximately 21,000 colonies. During the summer months I have seven SBIs working with me, and between the eight of us we inspect over 1,100 apiaries and approximately 5,000 colonies per year in the Southern region.

My biggest dilemma when asked to write this article was 'which day' do I write about, as the role of a Bee Inspector is extremely diverse. As an RBI I attend many meetings, ranging from training events at York, to Bee Farmers' Association area meetings. I give talks at a wide range of events including many beekeeping association meetings, run bee health days in collaboration with associations and run apiary demonstrations and safaris. I do some inspecting and the remainder of my time is filled by office and management duties and, of course, answering emails and telephone calls. These calls include queries about bee health and reporting notifiable disease but also, like many of you, in the summer I get lots of questions about solitary bees and bumblebees.

One of the key roles of an RBI is training SBIs in the many aspects of law and government rules that apply to the Bee Inspector. These include: the Bees Act 1980, the Bees Pest and Disease Control Order 2006, the Data Protection Act, the Regulators Compliance Code and the Civil Service Code. This training is done at the annual Bee Inspectors' training event at York, which takes place at the beginning of the season (i.e. early April) and is backed up throughout the season by regular team meetings within each RBI's region.

RBIs are employed all year round and SBIs work during the summer months, typically from the start of April to the end of September. Each SBI covers a smaller territory than his/her respective RBI and spends a greater proportion of their time inspecting. For information, the list of RBIs can be found on BeeBase (the NBU's website and database) at: https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/public/Contacts/contacts.cfm and this shows which counties they cover. During the summer months the SBIs are also on this list; enter your postcode in the 'find my nearest inspector' to get their contact details. Very few of the SBIs are employed full-time during the season and the average SBI works for four days per week.

The NBU inspectorate

There is a sixty-one strong inspectorate team. The head Bee Inspector is termed the National Bee Inspector (NBI) and eight Regional Bee Inspectors (RBIs) report to him. Each RBI has between four and ten Seasonal Bee Inspectors (SBIs) reporting to them, giving a total of fifty two SBIs. The eight RBIs are responsible for set regions and are dispersed around the country.

Of course it is the inspecting that brings the Inspectors and beekeepers together. A day of bee inspecting itself can vary greatly, ranging from inspecting just one bee farmer's apiaries, to visiting four or five beekeepers each with a few colonies. Each inspection can bring its particular challenges but unframed hives and encountering more colonies in the apiary than were mentioned when the appointment was made, can both cause some headaches and rescheduling. As has been mentioned in previous articles, our inspections are risked based and guided by the regulator's compliance code. During routine inspections we are looking for notifiable diseases, specifically European foulbrood (EFB) and American foulbrood (AFB). We also give advice on other diseases and bee husbandry as required.

As perhaps there is not a typical day in the life of a Bee Inspector, I will choose an interesting one which helps to highlight the diversity of the role and the difference between the three levels of inspector. In June 2012 three of the regions (Southern, South West and Midlands) ran a cross-region exotic pest exercise in the

Avon valley near Bristol. Apart from the notifiable diseases, AFB and EFB, we are also responsible for inspecting for exotic pests that are not present in Europe, such as Small hive beetle (SHB) and *Tropilaelaps* mites. We base inspections around risk points where exotic pests could enter the country such as airports, ports, freight depots, imported honey packers, large scale plant importers, fruit and vegetable wholesale markets, and apiaries where the importation of bees have occurred. Inspections for exotic pests take a similar form to statutory inspections but also involve a thorough examination of the internal floor and walls of the hive looking for SHB and its eggs and larvae. Drone brood will be examined for mites and floor debris collected and sent to the NBU at York for microscopic examination for parts of exotic pests.

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In the weeks prior to the exercise we had contacted some local beekeepers and informed them of the exercise and asked for their cooperation. Most were very keen to participate and a few days prior to the exercise, colleague Bee Inspector Adam Vevers and I visited some apiaries and placed small laminated pictures of Small hive beetle and larvae in the colonies. We tried to hide these in places which would not be obvious and although some were

Fig 2. Briefing of inspectors.

placed on frame sides others were tucked away on mesh floor inserts or on the underside of frame feeders containing syrup. I know this sounds a little bit ludicrous: grown men and women looking for photos of small beetles but the point of the exercise was not so much to test the ability of our Inspectors to find plastic laminated photos but to test the ability of the RBIs to organise the inspections in an unfamiliar environment and area, relying on mobile phones to report finds.

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On the day of the exercise the inspectors arrived at a local hotel and a control room was set up. This was manned by myself and by two office-based NBU colleagues, Lesley Debenham and Kate Parker. The Inspectors were briefed on the parameters of the exercise, put in pairs, and given a list of apiaries to inspect. They were paired up as one had to telephone beekeepers as they drove between inspections to arrange timings of the subsequent inspections.

Fig3. Inspecting in the rain.

In the control room, Kate, Lesley and I received calls from the Inspectors and monitored their progress. Routinely, Lesley and Kate do not see inspections and so they split the day up and while one was supporting me, the other accompanied a pair of Inspectors. Similarly, Andy Wattam joined us for some of the time in the office and spent the remainder with the Inspectors. However, in the event of a real incursion of an exotic pest, Andy would probably be present at the National Disease Control Centre in York, coordinating the emergency response plan and passing information to the public, beekeepers and Defra. At the end of the day a debriefing was held in the control room. The inspections had gone well and each team of Inspectors achieved about four apiaries each and found all the fake SHB. There were the usual difficulties of navigating in unfamiliar territory and the vagaries of mobile phone signal and of course, as is usual with beekeeping in the UK, the weather played a large part as it was atrocious and rained heavily during most of the day. Our thanks must go to the beekeepers of the Avon valley who put up with this intrusion admirably and must be recommended for their cooperation and understanding.

I hope this article has given you a small insight into the life of a Bee Inspector. Personally the two great joys of the role of a Bee Inspector is the diversity of the role along with the chance to meet a wide range of beekeepers while carrying out inspections of colonies. Each beekeeper may differ greatly in their methodology of beekeeping and range from the bee farmer to the natural beekeeper; however, all share a passion for bees.

It is extremely important that all beekeepers register on BeeBase, the NBU's data base. If we do not know where 'at risk colonies' are located, then our chances of effectively monitoring and controlling for foul brood diseases and the arrival of exotic pests may be seriously jeopardised. It is your responsibility to make sure your details are recorded on BeeBase. To register as a beekeeper, please visit https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/beebase/public/register.cfm