



Animal &
Plant Health
Agency



Spending a lot more time with bees...

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Seasonal Bee Inspector

This year will be my third season as the NBU Seasonal Bee Inspector for Wiltshire, Southern Region, and what an amazing, unusual and unexpected time I am having.

After more than 30 years working as a pharmacy technician, I took early retirement in 2019 and was looking forward to spending more time with my bees. Little did I know that I would soon be spending a lot more time with bees – though mostly not my own.

The job of seasonal bee inspector (SBI) in my county involves working four days a week from May to August, so I thought it would allow me to be semi-retired. I applied, even though I wasn't sure if the job was for me or that I had the right experience. I was elated when I received an invitation to attend an interview at the National Bee Unit (NBU) headquarters in Sand Hutton, near York.

Interview for a dream job

The interview process was to have three stages and after each stage you would be told if you had passed – those who had not would be on their way home. It seemed rather daunting.

The first test was to describe what we saw in 30 images. Some showed obvious examples of brood disease, but others were much harder to identify. After a nervous wait

while our tests were marked, I was relieved to be told that I was through to the second round.

Next came a practical test. I spent about half an hour in the NBU apiary where, under the watch of two inspectors, I had to open a colony and answer questions about what I was looking for, what I could see and other beekeeping matters.

I passed the second round and progressed to the final stage: a formal interview with a regional bee inspector and the NBU National Bee Inspector. This was a one-hour in-depth discussion about my knowledge of bee diseases and treatment methods as well as my own beekeeping experience. They were particularly interested in my professional experience working in sterile environments manufacturing chemotherapy treatments – something that had parallels with aspects of honey bee disease control. The ten candidates who started the day had been whittled down to four and I was delighted and a bit surprised that I was one of them.

After the recruitment day there was a long wait before an offer was made, so I had plenty of time to consider whether this was the job for me. Initially I wondered if I wanted to be a bee inspector, but having studied for the interview, found out a lot more about what bee inspectors do and met some of the amazing people who work at the NBU, I realised that I really wanted the job. When the offer came, I was shocked and delighted. I had just landed my dream job.

First day nerves

Officially, the job began in March 2019 when I attended the NBU's annual conference in York. It was a complete culture shock. The place was very busy with all the NBU employees, including inspectors, laboratory technicians and administrative staff. I wasn't on my own; there were 11 new inspectors and we all looked a bit nervous and very much like the new kids in school. We were issued with laptops, phones and our inspecting equipment. If you've ever had a visit from a bee inspector, you will know how much equipment we carry with us.



This was an opportunity to meet all the regional bee inspectors (RBIs) and seasonal bee inspectors (SBIs), the head of the NBU and the national bee inspector. We attended interesting lectures from various departments looking at the statistics of the previous years' European and American foulbrood (EFB and AFB) outbreaks and other pests and diseases. There was so much to learn. It was almost overwhelming, but fascinating.



After the conference, I set up my home office and tested the equipment that I had been given. Two weeks later I was back in York with the other new inspectors for formal training. It was becoming very real. We had intensive sessions on the identification of AFB and EFB, small hive beetle, *Tropilaelaps* and the Asian or yellow-legged hornet. We were taught various treatment methods including the safe use of LPG (liquid petroleum gas) torches to scorch contaminated wooden hives. Administrative procedures had to be learned as well as the use of BeeBase, an essential tool for the inspectorate.



Back in our respective regions, we each spent a month accompanying an existing bee inspector on their rounds. I was buddied with Kevin Pope, SBI for Dorset. Kevin, a hugely experienced beekeeper and inspector, showed me the ropes, introduced me to some of the beekeepers in his patch and helped me come to terms with the necessary documentation. As there was an AFB outbreak in my county, I was able to accompany Kevin and some other inspectors to check all the local hives and deal with the infection.

After that I was let out on my own to visit beekeepers in my county of Wiltshire. I had already learned a tremendous amount and been given some great advice by my much-respected predecessor, Robert Carpenter Turner, but was realising that this was only the beginning. The training for bee inspectors never stops and there is a programme of continuous professional development. We also work towards a formal City & Guilds qualification.

Year one ... an inspector calls

As an SBI, my job is to visit beekeepers within my county and check their bees for notifiable diseases and pests. I visit back-garden beekeepers, club apiaries, professional bee farmers and beekeepers who have many colonies and apiaries but who are not classed as bee farmers. Sometimes visits are in response to calls from beekeepers worried that they have found something suspicious in their colonies. Luckily, these days most people can take and send images with their mobile phones – that takes a lot of the guesswork out of diagnosing potential problems. If a photo isn't enough or I think there is a problem, I will visit the beekeeper. Our target is to visit at least three apiaries each day, conducting thorough disease inspections on a minimum of 15 colonies. Some days I drive for many hours – Wiltshire is a big county.

When not responding to calls from beekeepers, I choose areas for selective visits, usually those near to disease hotspots. BeeBase shows where there have been disease incidents and the location of other apiaries in the area. Making arrangements can be very time consuming. Ideally, I visit several beekeepers within one area on the same day but co-ordinating times that work for everyone can be quite difficult. Fortunately, most people are happy to receive a visit and to be assured that their bees are healthy.

At first, I was a little worried about how, as an SBI, I would be received. Firstly, I thought some people wouldn't like to have their bees inspected – after all, beekeeping can be quite a private activity. Furthermore, I was suffering slightly from impostor syndrome – I knew that many beekeepers would be far more experienced than me. Luckily, my experiences have been very positive. Most people are very welcoming, and I have learned so

About the NBU

After the second world war, a government unit was set up to look into best farming practices, including looking after honey bees and other livestock. The NBU, formed in 1979, has gone through various changes and today is part of the Animal Plant Health Agency (APHA), which in turn is part of the Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (Defra).

The purpose of the NBU is to identify notifiable bee diseases (European foulbrood and American foulbrood) and to look for non-native species (such as the small hive beetle, *Tropilaelaps* and the Asian hornet – all pests that could enter the UK at any time) that affect the honey bee and other native pollinators. The NBU also researches best practice for beekeepers to control pests and diseases. Of course, varroa continues to be a problem to bees, so the NBU also advises beekeepers on how to manage this parasitic mite.



much from some of the very experienced beekeepers that I have met. Some people are a little nervous that I may tell them off or give them a lecture, but it is not my job to tell anyone how to keep their bees – only whether their bees are healthy. If I am asked for advice, I will give it, but my primary role is to look for notifiable diseases and pests and help eradicate them if found.

Throughout my first season the regular meetings with Peter Davies, the RBI, and my fellow Southern Region SBIs were invaluable. As we work mostly on our own, it is useful to meet colleagues face to face to swap information and advice. I am always impressed with the depth of my colleagues' knowledge and their desire to share news and views on the latest research and initiatives. They all care very deeply about helping beekeepers and improving the health of our bees.

During 2019 the NBU ran a series of Bee Health Days in our region. These were arranged by local clubs but were open to all beekeepers. We gave talks on bee diseases and potential threats like small hive beetle, *Tropilaelaps* mite and the Asian hornet. We also gave demonstrations on good practice, good apiary hygiene and had frames of EFB and AFB for beekeepers to look at. These days were a great opportunity to meet more beekeepers and helped me feel part of a team that was working hard to make a difference to the quality of bees and beekeeping in the UK.

Then in September we were notified of an Asian hornet sighting in Christchurch, Hampshire. Until then I had seen only dead Asian hornets, so I was excited to be involved. I helped set up bait traps in gardens and we all took turns monitoring them. It wasn't long before I saw my first Asian hornet. We recorded its flight paths to determine where its nest was. This methodical work requires excellent eyesight as it is easy to lose sight of a hornet in flight. We met up to collate our findings and map our evidence. The location was narrowed down to an area of parkland, where the team found the nest. It was destroyed but kept as intact as possible for analysis, which subsequently showed that the queen had come from France. It was an exciting end to my first season as a bee inspector.

Year two ... inspecting during a pandemic

Well, 2020 was a totally different season. Covid-19 meant there wasn't the usual York conference at the beginning of the year. We held our meetings by Zoom and, though they were very informative, there wasn't the same sense of being part of a team or the opportunity for informal discussions. I missed that because working as a bee inspector is quite solitary and I had enjoyed the sense of camaraderie meeting with colleagues during the previous year. Despite covid, inspection work had to continue.

- 1 American foulbrood was found at an apiary in Avril's county soon after she began work. More experienced colleagues were called in to help deal with the outbreak.
- 2 Bee inspectors training at the NBU apiary
- 3 Avril attended a suspected colony poisoning. Here she collects a sample of dead bees.
- 4 APHA headquarters at Sand Hutton, near York. The NBU apiary is near the green polytunnels on the far left of the image
- 5 Avril, suited, booted and ready for inspections

Beekeepers are encouraged to sign up to BeeBase, the National Bee Unit's website. BeeBase is an excellent source of beekeeping and honey bee health information. By signing up you will receive important alerts about health concerns in your area and can arrange a visit from your bee inspector. www.nationalbeeunit.com

The bee inspection service is classed as key work for the identification and eradication of notifiable diseases and pests.

My second year was nothing like my first. To inspect colonies, I had to work on my own without the help of the beekeeper. Normally the beekeeper will help with the lifting, so it was physically quite hard work doing that by myself. In some cases, beekeepers would attend to give me access to land but often it was a solitary business. It wasn't all bad and there were some amusing situations. In one case I inspected colonies at the bottom of a garden while the beekeeper leant out of an upstairs window of the house. Our conversation had to be shouted across the garden; goodness knows what the neighbours thought. It was sad not to be able to meet and talk to so many beekeepers – and I had to turn down a lot of offers of tea and cake.

In October there was another Asian hornet sighting, this time in the Gosport area. After our experience the year before, we worked very well as a team and located the nest quickly. It was a rare and enjoyable opportunity to meet up with my colleagues.

Year three ... what's in store?

I am now preparing for 2021, and who knows what this will bring. I can look back on two incredible years that I could never have expected. I have met amazing people and visited apiaries in beautiful and unusual places. I have learned so much about beekeeping from the NBU and from talking to a huge range of commercial and amateur beekeepers and their different methods. Bees can of course be cared for in many ways and it's not my job to tell anyone how to do that.

If I could make one request, it would be that every beekeeper signs up to BeeBase. It is confidential, and no one outside of the inspectorate can see your information. It helps us to contact you if there is a disease outbreak in your area, and to let you know if there have been reports of starvation. It is also a great source of beekeeping information and advice to help you identify and treat bee health problems. There is lots of advice about dealing with varroa – the number-one threat to bee health in the UK. Having signed up to BeeBase, please keep your records up to date. It's amazing how many people give up beekeeping but don't tell us that their hives aren't there anymore.

This season I look forward to meeting new beekeepers and no doubt will be calling on some familiar faces. My contact details are on BeeBase, as are those of all the bee inspectors. If you suspect foulbrood, don't hesitate to send a photo or give one of us a call. We will be happy to put your mind at rest or come along with our test kits. There are many conditions that look like foulbrood but which are not, so don't assume the worst. I look forward to meeting you all again soon.

Happy beekeeping!

