

What makes a Great British Beekeeper?

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Here are the findings of a Study of Beekeeping Practices

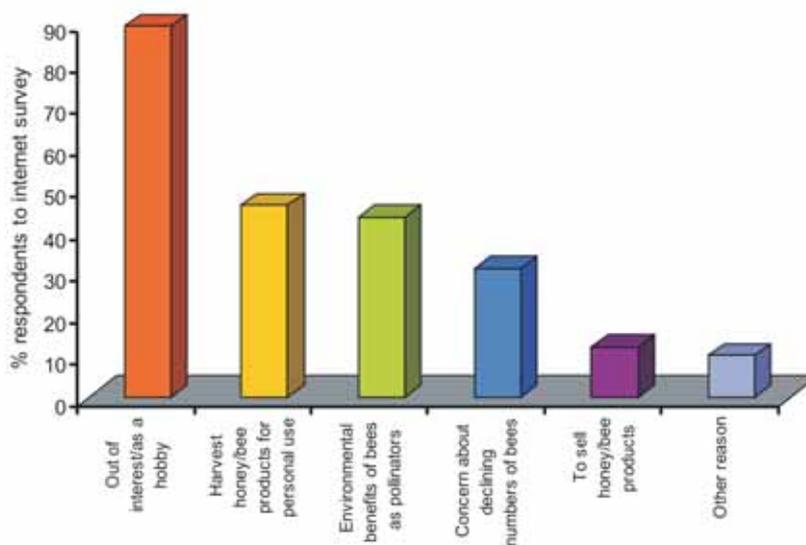


DO YOU have healthy bees? Honey bees can be infested or infected by various pests and pathogens and, of course, these impact on the strength and productivity of any affected hives.

However, the overall health and productivity of a colony are not just simply matters of whether or not a particular disease is present. Common sense tells us that the ability of a colony to thrive is affected by many other things and not least of these is the way in which bees are managed. Husbandry practices depend on the attitudes and experience of beekeepers themselves, which in turn are greatly influenced by the training, information and advice that beekeepers receive.

In 2009, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) commissioned People Science & Policy Ltd and East Malling Research to undertake a study that would improve our understanding of beekeepers' approaches to managing pests and diseases. In particular, we wanted to gain insight into how beekeepers access and respond to advice and information about beekeeping.

Reasons for keeping bees



The study approached over 900 beekeepers across England and Wales, who had various degrees of beekeeping experience, and also canvassed opinions of bee farmers. It posed detailed questions about what motivates them to keep bees, their attitudes to beekeeping and husbandry practices, what sources of information they prefer to use and whom they turn to for advice. Responses obtained throw light on where gaps exist in terms of access to information and training.

The following article summarises some of the report's key findings.

CONDUCTING THE SURVEY

The study used a mixture of

different techniques to obtain information from respondents:

- ◆ A series of semi-structured telephone interviews with bee farmers (20 individuals) and small-scale beekeepers who have been keeping bees for at least two years (30 individuals);
- ◆ An Internet survey of 906 beekeepers and 31 bee farmers;
- ◆ In-depth follow-up telephone interviews with 20 respondents to the Internet survey who were new to beekeeping (had kept bees for less than two years).

Even though the study worked with a large number of respondents, it is not possible to say that the participants were truly representative of the UK's

beekeeping community. Nevertheless, the study's findings are indicative of the community's views and experiences.

WHO ARE YOU?

If you are new to beekeeping (ie, have been keeping your bees for less than two years) then you are typical of almost half those who took part in the survey. If you are a female beekeeper, you are in select company, being outnumbered by male counterparts two-to-one. The overall age profile of



The full report is available at: http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Document.aspx?Document=PH0508_9067_FRP.pdf

‘... When I heard that the bee population won’t survive without any human input any more then I thought I’d better do something about it or see if I can help.’

The view of a new beekeeper.

respondents indicates a relatively mature beekeeping population – 66% being over 50 years old.

You may well enjoy listening to Radio 4 (otherwise Radio 2 and Classic fm are popular choices) and the chances are that you read a broadsheet newspaper, such as *The Times* or the *Telegraph*, at least once a week. You are almost certainly a member of a beekeeping association.

WHY DO YOU KEEP BEES?

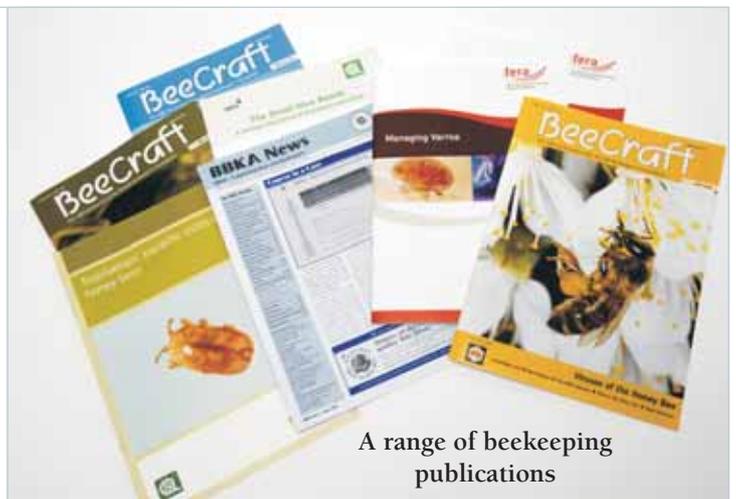
It seems that the key motivation for people taking up beekeeping (apart from those within the bee farming community) is general interest – as a hobby, rather than as an extra source of income.

Although being able to harvest honey is certainly an important incentive, it is also clear that the benefits of pollinating bees and concerns about their declining numbers are powerful motivators. This is especially true for those who have only recently started beekeeping – you are twice as likely to give environmental factors as your reason for keeping bees, compared with those with more experience.

HOW HAS BEEKEEPING CHANGED?

Beekeepers with more than two years’ experience reported that beekeeping has become more labour intensive; it is no longer possible to be a ‘leave alone beekeeper’ because of the increase in pests and diseases, in particular varroa.

Beekeeping today is described as ‘more sophisticated, more technical, more expensive and more regulated’. If you are an experienced



A range of beekeeping publications

beekeeper, you are likely to feel relatively pessimistic about the future prevalence of honey bee pests and diseases and their impact on beekeeping.

‘I used to keep bees; now I am a beekeeper,’ is a commonly expressed sentiment.

WHERE ARE YOU TURNING FOR ADVICE?

Beekeepers are hungry for information and draw on a wide range of sources. Most are keen to keep their knowledge up to date and attend courses, talks and training events. Information preferences reflect

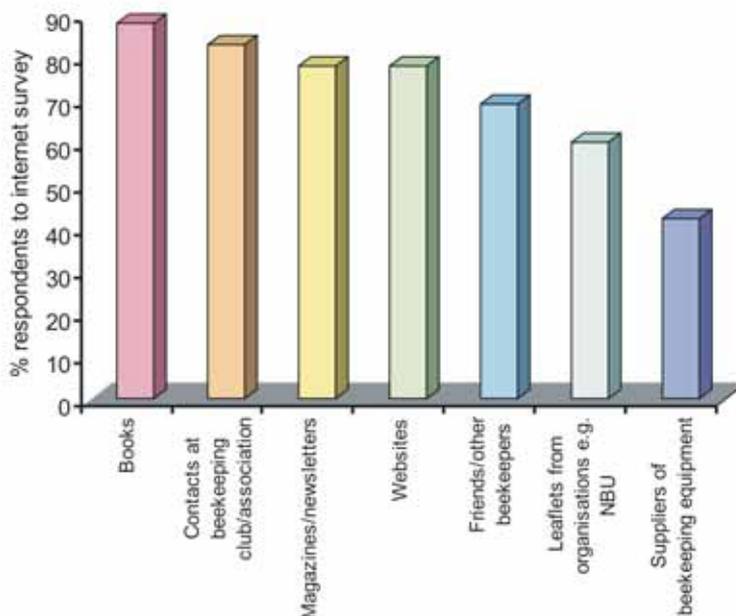
beekeepers’ levels of experience: new beekeepers prefer to get information from other beekeepers while more experienced beekeepers, who are likely to have a greater degree of confidence in their practical skills, tend to use written sources of information (journals, newsletters and websites) for advice about issues such as dealing with pests and diseases. Two-thirds of beekeepers who use magazines and newsletters are *Bee Craft* readers.

It appears that newer beekeepers often place great trust in the advice of more experienced beekeepers that they have met at local association meetings. This is an important observation because it highlights the clear role that experienced beekeepers have as sources of information about tried and tested husbandry practices.

ARE YOU MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR BEEKEEPING ASSOCIATION?

The overwhelming majority (98%) of the survey respondents are members of a beekeeping association. Although lots of you join, it seems that your

Sources of Information used by Beekeepers

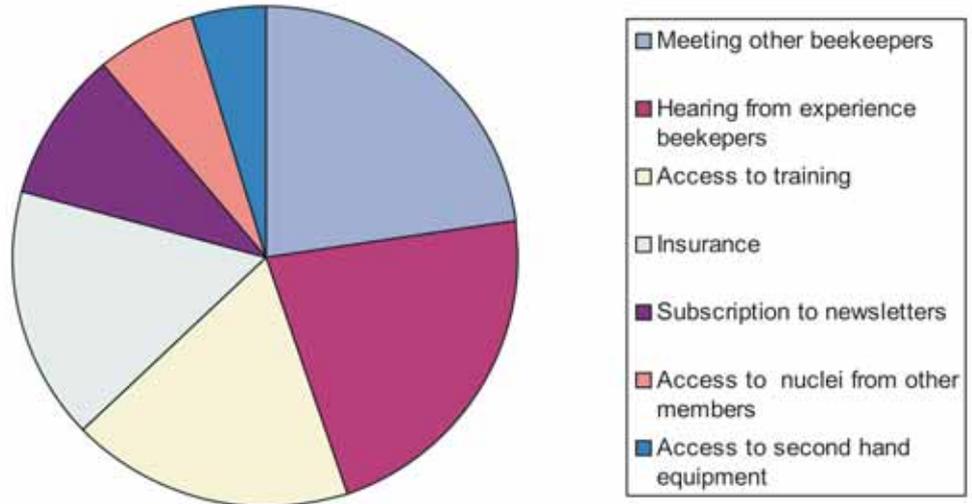


reasons for signing up are diverse and depend on your level of beekeeping experience. Experienced beekeepers find membership of association to be 'invaluable', mainly because of the access it affords to informal networks. Many new beekeepers describe beekeeping associations as their most important source of information and appreciate the local support these provide.

HAVE YOU HEARD OF BEEBASE?

BeeBase is a sophisticated IT system that supports the bee health programme. It includes custom designed databases comprising mapping, Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and spatial analysis capabilities. BeeBase contains all the apicultural information relating to the statutory bee health programme in England and Wales. It provides information on the activities of the National Bee Unit (NBU), legislation, honey bee pest and disease recognition and control, interactive maps, current research areas and lots of helpful contacts. Many beekeepers find this an extremely useful resource and recognise the role that BeeBase has to play in the beekeeping community....

Motivations for joining associations



... It was therefore surprising to learn that a quarter of beekeepers who took part in the survey are not aware of BeeBase. The main reason given for registering on BeeBase was 'to gain access to information and advice', while the most frequent reasons given for not registering were that the beekeeper had not yet 'got round to it', 'did not see the benefit', or may have believed that their association or local Bee Inspector had registered them on BeeBase.

Beekeepers need to know that it is their own responsibility to register on BeeBase – no one will ever do so on your behalf.

If you would like to join the other 19,500 registered beekeepers across England,

Scotland and Wales, visit www.nationalbeeunit.com

If you register as a beekeeper on BeeBase you can:

- ◆ request a free apiary visit from your local bee inspector

- ◆ be alerted to pest and disease problems in your area
- ◆ have secure access to your own (and only your own) inspection history and apiary information, via the web

Bee Craft digital





- ◆ find out about beekeeping training events near you.

All these services are free of charge.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT MODERN BEEKEEPING PRACTICES?

Are you ready to try out the latest techniques as they emerge, or would you describe yourself as more of a traditionalist?

Nearly all of the beekeepers who took part in this study are conscious of the benefits of keeping up to date with the latest husbandry advice. Old methods are not always perceived as the best methods. In fact, this openness to new ideas is striking and is driven by beekeepers' widespread awareness of the threat from varroa, in particular, and other pests and diseases in general.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT USING CHEMICALS IN YOUR COLONY MANAGEMENT?

The survey shows that nearly half of respondents aspire to chemical-free

beekeeping, but this cleaner and greener attitude is especially true for beekeepers with less than two years' experience.

If this profile applies to you, perhaps your reluctance to use such substances reflects the environmental concerns that drew you to beekeeping in the first place. If so, do you think you may modify your view as you gain in experience?

HOW ARE BEEKEEPING PRACTICES INFLUENCED BY AVAILABLE ADVICE?

One of the main factors influencing husbandry practices is the degree to which the individual beekeeper is integrated into the beekeeping world. For example, the amount of contact that you have with other beekeepers (the more the better) and whether or not you are aware of and use BeeBase will impact on choice of practice.

The message here is 'it is good to be connected'. Experienced beekeepers are well integrated into the beekeeping world; perhaps because of this, they tend to use a wider variety of control and monitoring

methods, including more complex biotechnical control methods. They are also more likely to try Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

ARE YOU THINKING OF BECOMING A BEEKEEPER FOR THE FIRST TIME?

If the answer to this question is yes, then an important take-home message from this study is 'get some training'. Two-thirds of respondents had some sort of training before they owned their own hives, either through local beekeeping associations (72%) or from other beekeepers (30%).

The vast majority of beekeepers who have received training found it really beneficial.

Some beekeepers in this study, who didn't get any training before obtaining their bees regretted their decision and admitted, on reflection, that having more knowledge before they got started would have been helpful.

Keeping bees is a big commitment and not something that should be taken on lightly. It is not

GET SOME TRAINING!

Training: 'It is an insight into what is required from you. It made you realise that it wasn't just a romantic idea about opening up a hive and getting out honey, it is a commitment and an expense.'

possible to be a 'leave alone beekeeper' and expect to have healthy honey bees.

WHERE TO FIND FURTHER INFORMATION

BeeBase is regularly updated with the latest news and information at: www.nationalbeeunit.com This website gives a great deal of information about the NBU and its work. There is also a general email address:

nbu@fera.gsi.gov.uk to which you can send any enquiries about honey bees. For enquiries regarding Bee Health Policy and Regulatory issues, please contact Bee Health at: beehealthinfo@fera.gsi.gov.uk ◆

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CONCLUSIONS

In the opinion of the many beekeepers who took part in this Study of Beekeeping Practices:

- ◆ it is very important to keep up to date with bee husbandry advice
- ◆ it is a good idea to get some training, especially before you get started in beekeeping
- ◆ beekeeping associations and NBU inspectors are good sources of on-going training and information
- ◆ it is good to talk – chat to other beekeepers and join a beekeeping association if you haven't already done so
- ◆ register on BeeBase and use the website to get information.