



January Newsletter

2026



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Welcome

'Season's Greetings' to members of both associations. Special welcome to Louisa Houghton who is the new Newbury newsletter representative. As I write this (19th), we are two days away from the shortest day and it has been very wet and gloomy - until today. Beneath a brilliant blue sky, we went out and hefted all our hives and gave them a Winter dribble of Varromed. I haven't used this before, having always used Apibioxal, but Varromed's formula of both Oxalic and Formic acids caught my attention and I thought I would give it a go. Unfortunately, I've lost 2 hives (out of 17). One was a very weak hive that I really should have shaken out in the Autumn - on opening I found ripped comb and a few dead wasps, so I think they succumbed to the relentless wasps we have seen this season. I have had several other reports of wasps taking down hives into late November which is crazy. Bring back proper cold Winters! The other had a full super of honey left, so I was quite surprised, but the queen was 4 years old, going into her 5th season, so perhaps I was being a little overoptimistic. There was no evidence of an attempt to

supersede, nor wasps, so a loss I will never truly get to the bottom of. Otherwise, the bees are 'banging' to use a popular phrase on TikTok. Very full hives with active bees. It was interesting to see how much difference a bit of sun makes. Those in the sun were flying like it was Summer (the outside temperature was 13C) and those in the shade quite tightly clustered. Toward the end of the last season, I treated myself to some clear crown boards, and it was great to be able to lift the roof off and see where the cluster was without disturbing the bees. Though obviously I did then disturb the bees (but I could see where best to place the hive tool to crack the crown board) when I put the treatment on. To say some of them were not happy to see us would be an understatement. We also probably saved one hive that had its entrance blocked by dead bees. Once cleared they poured out and checking showed a healthy number of seams of bees inside. Just goes to show the importance of regular Winter checks. But, best of all, I was beekeeping again, even if only for one day. It really is hard to describe to a non-beekeeper the feeling of, almost joy, you get from a good day out working your bees - but you all know exactly what I mean.

This should get to you just before Christmas, so I hope you all have a great time and eat far too much. See you all in the New Year.

Yours in beekeeping

John

Dates for your diary

<u>Newbury & District</u>
First Tuesday of the month, 7:30pm-9:30pm at St Mary's Church Hall, Shaw cum Donnington RG14 2DR 6th Jan - Hive Autopsy with Dylan Gussman 3rd Feb - Single source honey tasting with Ben Tichband 3rd March - Managing swarming season with the Swarm Team 7th April - Pests & Predators tbc March Frame building - date tbc
<u>Vale & Downland</u>
Venues to be confirmed - from 7.30pm unless stated otherwise Friday 23rd or 30th January - Winter Zoom talk date tbc (awaiting confirmation from speaker) Friday 20th February - Asian Hornet Update & Spring Trapping - AHAT Team Friday 27th March - Talk tbc (awaiting confirmation)
Saturday 21 February - The Beekeeping Show, Telford 17th - 19th April BBKA Spring Convention

Lars Chitka Update! I have reported on Prof Lars Chitka's bee research before as well as recommending his book 'The Mind of a Bee'. Lars has now branched out (somewhat) playing the lead role in a film that has just won the "Best Film Award" at Festival Internacional de Cine Animal y Ambiental. The film is called "The Last Bee" and Lars plays the part of an 'unhinged and uncompromising scientist' trying to save the last population of bees that survive in a remote part of Mexico.

Trailer is linked below and the film is out later this year:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxsApQQV9eM>

While researching this I also found a link to Lars group "Killer Bee Queens" (no I'm not making this up). Their album "Strange Flowers" is about, you guessed it, bees, including the tracks "*The Beekeeper's Dream*", "*Dying Killer Bee Queen*" and the unforgettable "*I Stung Gwyneth Paltrow*"....

You can listen on Bandcamp here:

<https://killerbeequeens.bandcamp.com/album/strange-flowers>



© Killer Bee Queens

It might not be for everyone, but I loved it. Enjoy!

Ancient Bees For something completely different, this study provides a rare glimpse into the prehistoric nesting habitats of bees. Researchers working in the Dominican Republic have discovered the first known fossil evidence of ancient bees nesting inside cavities within fossilised bones and owl pellets...

Link here:

<https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/science/paleontologists-find-first-bee-nest-fossils-made-inside-fossilized-bones/>

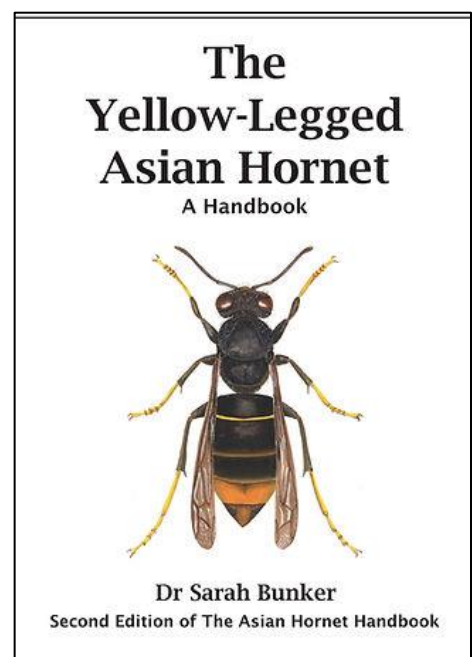
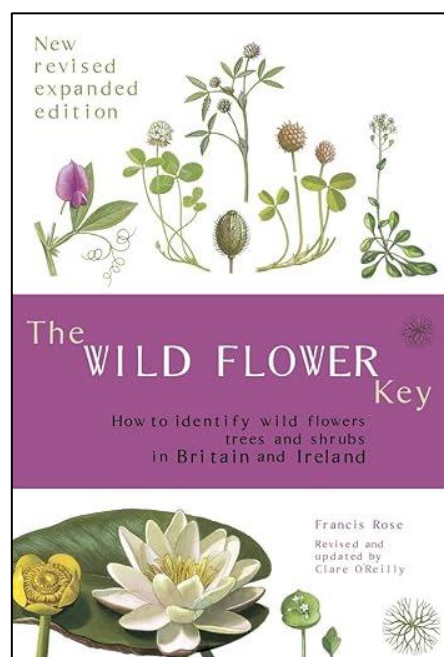
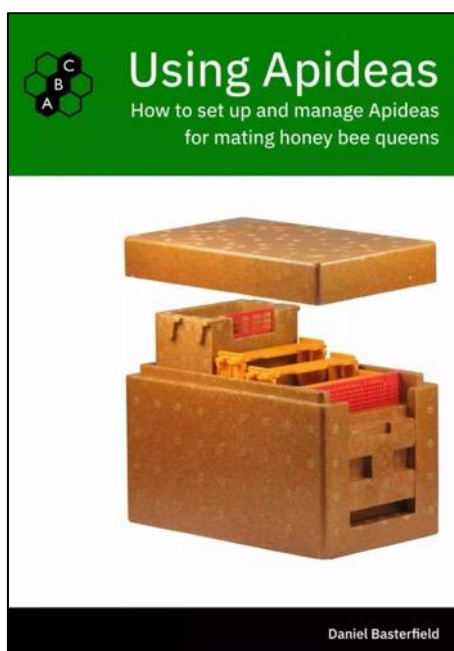
Something Positive about Rodents! We need to look after all pollinators, not just honeybees. We often view mice as pests in the apiary (please tell me you have your mouseguards in place), but a study released in December 2025 reminds us of their ecological importance. Research on North American native bumblebees has shown that they preferentially select abandoned rodent dens for their nests. The study suggests that for a queen bumblebee, "there is nothing cozier than a burrow dug by a chipmunk". So fit those mouseguards but leave the areas around your apiaries a little scruffy - as if you needed an excuse!

<https://www.goodgoodgood.co/articles/new-animal-study-bees>

Tips for January

- The best tip I can give you for January is - minimal intervention. The bees are at their most vulnerable about now. By all means heft, add fondant if necessary and make sure the entrance is clear. But that's it.
 - If you have left your Winter treatment until January, that's fine, but try and choose a bright sunny day, have everything ready to go and keep the hive open for as little time as possible.
- Last chance to get those mouseguards on before it gets really cold and those pesky mice move in to that nice, sheltered hive.
- Likewise, the cold makes life hard for woodpeckers. The hive is like an all you can eat buffet. If you have Green Woodpeckers in your area, woodpecker guards are strongly advised - your call. You can make a very simple one from some chicken wire mesh and a couple of garden canes across the top to hold it in place and in shape.
- If you find a small pile of dead bees at the front of your hive, don't panic. This is quite normal at this time of year. In the Summer, most bees die out foraging, but in Winter they die in the hive, whereupon the Undertaker bees hoik them out of the entrance. Just make sure there isn't a pile inside the entrance blocking the way out.
- If you followed last months tips, then you are getting a bee related book for Christmas. Relax, put your feet up with some hot chocolate or a glass of Sherry and enjoy a good read.

Below, a few of the books that I have enjoyed reading this year..that you might like too...

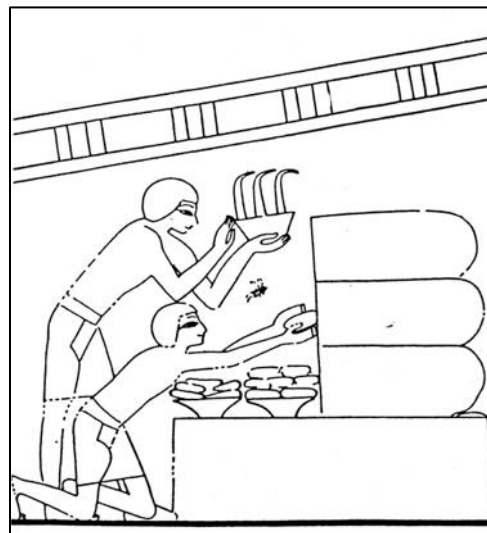


This month I'd like to introduce what some may consider to be Eva Crane's magnum opus - *The Archaeology of Beekeeping* (1983). This is the definitive text describing how humans have interacted with bees through time. Dr Crane travelled to over 60 countries while researching this book often living in primitive conditions, including travelling by dugout canoe and dog sleds. Her aim? To document traditional beekeeping practices before the knowledge was lost to the modern world.

Key Findings

Horizontal vs Vertical. Dr Crane discovered a fundamental divergence in hive evolution/. In the Mediterranean and Near East (e.g. Ancient Egypt c. 2400 BC), hives were horizontal cylinders made of mud, clay or wicker. These mimicked the fallen logs of dry climates. In contrast, Northern Europe developed upright hives that mimicked the spaces found in standing hollow trees of the damp temperate forests

Mesolithic Rock Art. She catalogued rock paintings in Spain and Africa dating back to 6000 BC. These images depicted honey hunters climbing ropes and ladders, surrounded by halos of angry bees to harvest honey combs from cliff nests



Beekeeping in ancient Egypt c.
1450 BC



Ancient Technology She also noted that Ancient Greek potters (c. 450 BC) created ceramic hives with deliberate internal scratches to give the bees purchase for comb attachment - was this the first understanding of bee space? If so, this knowledge was lost for centuries until rediscovered by Langstroth in 1851.

Spanish horizontal pottery hives
c. 250 - 175 BC

Again, I'm very grateful to the Eva Crane Trust for allowing me to reference her work

To learn more about ancient apiculture:

<https://www.evacranetrust.org/uploads/document/699dce0e6922bab7ee2ee94e409110dad608df09.pdf>

Newbury beekeepers' winter programme packs a punch!

When it comes to beekeeping, learning sits at the heart of our individual journeys to become better beekeepers. Getting together and sharing ideas, challenges and lessons learned helps keep our Association a strong and supportive community.

Overview

Looking ahead to 2026, we have some fantastic speakers lined up for our winter programme* Here's what you need to jot down in the diary:

WHEN: First Tuesday of every month (Jan - April)

WHERE: St Mary's Church Hall, Shaw cum Donnington

WHAT TIME: 7:30pm to 9:30pm

WHY: These winter talks are the perfect way to share information and network, getting ready for the season ahead.

Speakers and topics

Hive Autopsy' with Dylan Gussman – January 6th

Dylan will share more around how a colony overwinters, and if you do lose a hive, the best way to carry out a postmortem to understand what went wrong, and how to use the results to improve overwintering success in the future.

Single source honey tasting with Ben Tichband – February 3rd

Come along and learn more around single source honeys from Ben's collection and there'll be the chance to have a taste too!

Managing swarming season with Swarm team – March 3rd

How to manage a successful swarming season in your apiaries. What to do if you find a swarm and need to call the Swarm Line, as well as useful information around how you can sign up to be coordinators, collectors and receivers of swarms.

TBC Pest and Predators- April 7th

A look at some of the most prevalent predators threatening apiaries, how they attack, and what defences bees and beekeepers can put up to repel invaders.

Frame building – Date tbc

In March we'll be hosting our annual frame building morning at St Mary's Church Hall, Shaw cum Donnington. This is a lovely, informal get together where you can come



Understanding why your bees died can be difficult and frustrating

along with your unmade frames and sit with other members, hammering away and chatting. It's loud, but it's fun! And if you don't have your own kit, we always have some to spare, along with loads of help, advice and cups of tea.

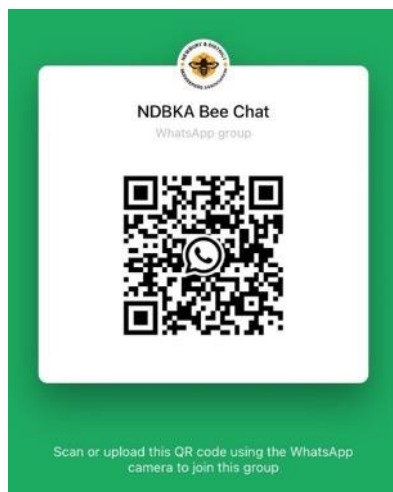
Staying connected as an Association

There are loads of ways to connect with us and keep up with all the events and meetings we have planned for the year ahead.

Facebook – If you're a member, you can join our Newbury & District Beekeepers Association group. It's a friendly forum where we exchange beekeeping tips, share reminders of what's coming up and celebrate all the many adventures we have throughout the year.

Instagram – Look for us under newburybeekeepers for updates on courses, events, swarms and loads more.

WhatsApp – Join our *NDBKA Community Groups*. It's easy, just go to Communities, and take your pick! *NDBKA Chat* is for general help and advice, *NDBKA Swarm Collectors* is for folks helping coordinate and collect swarms during the season, and then *NDBKA Swarm Recipients* is a group for people hoping to be allocated a swarm. Finally, *NDBKA buying and selling* is a great way to buy and sell any used or surplus kit.



Vale & Downland BKA – John Broadbent

After the excitement of last month's report on the Honey Show, we have had a very quiet month. At the recent Trustees we discussed some issues that may be of interest:

AHAT Coordinator. Trustee Richard Moore has stepped down from his role as AHAT Coordinator after 2 years. Thank you, Richard, for getting the ball rolling. Former Trustee Simon Rogers has agreed to take on the role, so thank you Simon.

Programme Secretary. After failing to recruit a new Programme Secretary at the AGM, current Trustee Helen Davison has agreed to take this on - we really wanted to have some talks for you to come to so we can all meet up. Helen is working on guest speakers (I won't name them yet until we are sure), but the programme is as follows

Friday January 23rd or 30th. This will be a Zoom talk as is normal for our first meeting. It gets you a talk to listen to (and interact with), but you can do it from the comfort of your own home. Afterwards we will have virtual tea and biscuits. We have offered our preferred speaker a choice of dates to maximise the chances they are available. We will update you as soon as we know for sure.

Friday 20th February. The AHAT team will lead a meeting on what is happening with Asian Hornets in our area. We will brief you on what happened in 2025 and what we are planning for 2026. The dreaded insect got close to us last season and if any queens have successfully overwintered, we might see them in 2026. By the time of the meeting, we should have an update on plans for Spring trapping and have a range of commercially available traps for you to examine. We are also negotiating to take part in an innovative monitoring programme that uses AI and a camera over a bait station to provide automated detection and warning of an Asian Hornet visit. (For a preview go here: <https://www.buzzcopper.org/>). If we are unable to get one in time for the talk, we will be making one later in the season

Friday 27th March. We are trying to entice someone from the Oxford Bee Lab to come and talk to us, but if not, we are exploring several other speakers to come along.

Beginners' Course

This year's Beginners' course starts on 13th Jan and runs through to 28th March. If you spot someone new at a meeting, please do go over to say hello and make them welcome. I'm sure they would like to talk to you about your experiences with beekeeping.

Saturday 28th March is the end of the course build/familiarisation day at the Red Barn. Please put the date in your diary as we will be looking for helpers. More details nearer the time

General Husbandry

One member has already expressed interest in taking General Husbandry this year. Does anyone else fancy this? Preparing for and taking the Assessment is a great way to up your beekeeping game. It will certainly challenge some of your ideas and make you think "Why do I do that?" Just drop an email to education@valeanddownlandbess.org for more info or to register an interest.

To take General Husbandry you should have 5 years' experience and have an apiary



Part of the General Husbandry Assessment is to demonstrate your successful Queen rearing

setup with 5 queenright hives that the assessors will come to and get you to demonstrate a range of manipulations. It's quite scary, so good preparation is the answer to steadying the nerves and producing a good performance. A positive way to view it, is that it is a chance to showcase your skills and knowledge hard won over time. By the time I had finished mine,

my garage beekeeping store had never been so tidy, and my apiary layout was immaculate - what's not to like?

BBKA Annual Delegate Meeting

The BBKA ADM will be held on 10th January, many thanks to Anne Andrew, who has volunteered to be the Vale Delegate this year.

Key Points:

- Stephen Barnes has stood down as President, the only nominee for the position is Diane Drinkwater
- Nominations for Trustees are Clare McGettigan (Leeds), Mark Hunter (Avon), Lucie Chaumeton (North London), Luke Whyatt (Wimbledon) and Linda Beaumont (Huddersfield). There are 5 places, so my guess is they will all be elected.
- Nominations for the Exam Board are Gary Brook (Hertfordshire) and Jenny Morgan (Reading). There are 3 vacancies.
- The following propositions have been put forward:

	Nominating Association	Seconding Association	Brief Summary of Proposition
1	BBKA Board of Trustees		Increase to capitation fees.
2	Lincolnshire	Nottinghamshire	Share best practices, resources & training materials for key volunteer roles within associations.
3	Kendal & S. Westmorland	Cumbria	Standardised operating practices for YLAH coordinators
4	Kendal & S. Westmorland	Cumbria	Monthly online meeting for YLAH coordinators
5	Lancashire & NW	Harrogate & Ripon	The BBKA remains an Association of Associations.

My experience of these meetings makes me think that the cost increase will generate lots of hot air and discussion. 2, 3 and 4 shouldn't have anything contentious in them. 5 is a bit odd, the BBKA sent out a questionnaire earlier in the year offering a range of services to Associations. Nobody seems quite sure why. I expect this one will raise lots of amendments, confusing votes and then be parked for 'study'. We shall see.

If you want to know more, you can go to the download area of BBKA website and download all the ASM documents. If you have any strong views ("Nominee X is a great person/absolute boulder/rotten egg etc) or have thoughts on the propositions, please drop your thoughts in an email to admdelegate@valeanddownlandbees.org.uk

Ben Tichband - SIPA Honey Bees Limited

We have Buckfast mated queens, virgins, Nucleus and full colonies for sale. We can supply on National or 14x12, alternatively as packages for top bar and other hive types. All our bees are raised in our own West Berkshire apiaries. We offer a 10% discount to members of NDBKA and VDBKA. info@honeybeenucs.co.uk

John Belcher

Please call John Belcher on 01189842321 or 07929586037 or email john.r.belcher@talktalk.net for bees, hive equipment, extraction supplies, feed, and general requirements for beekeeping, mostly in stock in Pangbourne RG8 7LB or available online from supplier.

Beckys Beezzzs Ltd

Nucs of bees, UK Bred mated queens, beekeeping equipment, bee feed & treatments beckysbeesonlineshop.co.uk 01264 351104

Please note: All Newbury & Vale members can place an advert free of charge for up to 3 months. Adverts should preferably be 5 lines or less.