



May Newsletter

2026



The hawthorn is out....and the oil seed rape...and the laurel...and the horse chestnuts...

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Welcome

How are your bees? Sad to say, I have heard even more reports of winter losses. Many again with a mysteriously empty hive that had plenty of stores and been treated. I've heard varroa blamed, but I've been pulling drone brood apart for 2 weeks now and not found a single one.

This month we have our usual 'Seen around the internet' and 'Tips for May' columns together with Association reports. I've written a short piece on my experience attending the BBKA Spring Convention over the weekend - yes it's that time of year again and the season has officially started.

Although I lost a few hives in the Winter (one to wasps in November!), the remainder are incredibly strong and until a few days ago were piling the honey in. It's been a bit colder recently (just 2C at 0615 on Sunday) and these cold temperatures have definitely slowed the bees down a little. A friend is trying to use a Bailey comb change to get his bees onto clean frames, but reports they appear to have little interest in drawing wax at the moment. At these nighttime temperatures I'm not surprised. The forecast for the next 10 days is warmer though so things should pick up, particularly as there is blossom everywhere you look. The ornamental cherries have been very good, but are starting to go over, the blackthorn is also mostly finished but the hawthorn is now stonking. Along the ridgeway, there is a blaze of yellow from the oil seed rape and, driving past it this morning, it looks a lot healthier than last year's crop. There are also quite a few fields of beans scattered around and as I whizzed past I thought they were in flower. Finally, this morning I noticed that the candles on the horse chestnuts on Steventon village green are all out and it looks to be a bumper year. Get those supers ready.

Despite my comment on the difficulties in drawing wax, I know many of you with bees that are happily drawing supers out and are filling them. One Vale member I know of has already started extracting. I do have some supers on, being slowly filled, but my main concern at the moment is swarm control - I had to split 3 colonies last week.

As I said last month, in August I will have been editing (and mostly writing!) this newsletter for 5 years. I think that is a good stretch and I have probably said most of what I know, often more than once. So, I have decided I need to hand the Editorial reins over to someone else from August onwards. Please email news@valeanddownlandbees.org.uk if you are interested in taking over this role. I'm sure there is someone out there who would enjoy doing this. (only 3 more from me including this one)



Horse Chestnuts flowering on
Steventon Village Green, 21 Apr 26

John

Dates for your diary

<u>Newbury & District</u>
Saturday 16th May , World Bee Day - Thatcham Discover Centre Sunday 31st May, 2–4pm at Oare Apiary , Members Meeting Saturday 13th June , Highclere Village Festival Sunday 28th June , Members Meeting Sunday 26th July , Members Meeting
<u>Vale & Downland</u>
Every Saturday at Red Barn 1-2pm Beginners with bees, 2.30-4pm open members session Sunday 17th May , Member Apiary visit - Helen Davison Stanford in the Vale 22nd - 24th October - National Honey Show

Seen around the internet

Winter Losses. It's not just Oxfordshire/Berkshire that has experienced heavy winter losses. This article mainly based on the losses in the southwest estimates many losses at around the 50 - 80% mark. This is reflected in many online nuc sellers already reporting they are sold out of overwintered nucs. Bizarrely, those still with bees are having to do early splits and will soon be over-run with bees. Perhaps members of both associations with excess bees could gift some to those who have lost everything. I'm sure they would be very grateful

<https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2026-03-20/how-the-recent-wet-weather-is-threatening-uks-bee-population>

More on Winter Losses Another article appeared today in the Guardian. It's strange how many people have lost bees without any obvious cause.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2026/apr/22/country-diary-a-beekeepers-lament-why-did-none-of-my-bees-survive-winter>

Asian Hornet. The reports have started to come in, with 8 sightings already this year. You can keep an eye on what is happening here:

<https://www.nationalbeeunit.com/about-us/beekeeping-news/yellow-legged-hornet-2025-rolling-update-2>

Varroa and Amitraz resistance In this useful article from last year, Tribes BKA (based in Galway) summarises some of the latest thinking on varroa and ways of treating. It looks like Amitraz (you may know it as Apivar) is now ineffective due to genetic changes in varroa that make them resistant. The answer seems to be to avoid synthetic miticides and use organic acids such as oxalic or formic acid as well as thymol. Biotechnical controls, such as induced brood breaks are also worth considering (but are a bit 'fiddly' to do). Read more here:

<https://tribesbeekeepersassociation.com/the-latest-on-varroa-mites-what-we-now-know/>

SFI 2026: New Caps on Pollinator Actions. The updated Sustainable Farming Incentive introduces a 25% area limit on actions like "Pollen and Nectar Flower Mix" to ensure land remains in food production (but this means less help for bees and other pollinators). Several payment rates for herbal leys and winter bird food have also been reduced. Perhaps a member who is also a farmer could write us an article on what these schemes are and how they work?

<https://defrafarmining.blog.gov.uk/2026/02/24/sfi26-details-definitions-and-what-to-expect/>

Thermosolar Hives anyone? This article in the Oxford Mail describes a beekeeping group in Charlbury who are using an innovative 'solar' hive to heat boxes to a level that kills varroa, but not bees. I saw this (or a very similar hive) being demonstrated at the Telford beekeeping show and of course I wanted one - but balked at the price. Perhaps someone with deeper pockets than mine could buy one to let us know how well they work - or does anyone know these Charlbury beekeepers?

<https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/15338231.southill-solar-farm-group-say-thermosolar-beehive---first-uk---save-honeybee-vanishing/>

I found the company behind this on facebook - just search for 'Thermosolar Hive'. They have postings from the Telford Show.

Tips for May

My top tips for May:

- **Weekly checks are essential** as swarm season fires up
 - Even with weekly checks, it is possible for a colony to seal a queen cell and swarm between inspections. Clipping your queens should help here as they generally won't swarm until a queen hatches (day 16) rather than when a queen cell is sealed (day 8)
- Decide on what your primary **swarm control method** will be and prep your kit. The more hives you have, the more kit you need to have ready.
- Manage your **oilseed rape honey**. OSR can set in the frame in the same week it is collected, especially in a cold snap. Check regularly and be prepared to extract

early. Once set it is impossible to extract. A shake test will tell you if the honey is ready or make sure you take your refractometer to the apiary with you.

- **Manage cold snaps** Colonies are expanding very rapidly but may still lack the level of stores needed to get through more than a few days of bad weather. Keep an eye out and be ready to give feed to get them through a sticky patch.
- **Monitor Mites.** Big slabs of brood provide an ideal breeding ground for varroa. Start monitoring mite levels and be prepared to act. If mite levels are high and it is warm, a shook swarm will both get your bees onto nice fresh comb and provide an opportunity to treat with oxalic acid in the broodless period. Every time I have done a shook swarm I have been very impressed with the result....but it really does seem criminal to destroy all that brood. I'm always conflicted by it.
- **Use your spare time to make up spare frames.** There is nothing worse than needing to do a manipulation and finding you haven't got enough frames ready
- **Forage Watch:** There is now a lot for bees to collect pollen and nectar from.

Flowering Cherry: going over

Dandelions

Oil Seed Rape

Hawthorn

Horse Chestnut

Laurel

Early garden plants



So many dandelions....

Newbury & District BKA - Louisa Houghton & Rebecca Hall

Communication, community and connection at NDBKA

Enjoy the Conversation - navigate the information

We're excited to begin our monthly members' meetings at the Association Apiary this month. Please join us on **Sunday 31st May, 2–4pm at Oare Apiary** (full directions will be emailed separately). These gatherings are a fantastic opportunity to spend time together around the bees, share ideas, and learn from one another in a relaxed and supportive setting.

As we head into the busy season of swarm control, nectar flow, and whatever else nature throws our way, it feels like the perfect time to reflect on how we communicate and learn as NDBKA members.

There's a familiar phrase in beekeeping: ask three beekeepers one question and you'll receive three different answers. Rather than being frustrating, this is something to embrace. It reflects the diversity of approaches, experiences, and environments that shape how each of us keeps bees.

At our meetings, we want to encourage positive, open, and respectful conversations—where ideas can be shared freely, and everyone feels welcome to ask questions or offer their perspective. At the same time, it can be helpful to have a few simple ways to navigate the wealth of “information” we encounter.

When listening to a speaker or fellow member, consider the context behind what's being shared. What is their approach, and at what scale do they keep bees? Are they working a similar environment to yours? And are their views grounded in research, personal experience, or individual preference? Each of these brings value, but they aren't always directly transferable.

It's also worth reflecting on the content itself. Is the advice supported by research or official guidance? Does it assume a particular hive type or style of management? And what are the risks or trade-offs involved? In beekeeping, most decisions involve balancing benefits and compromises.

Equally important is your own situation. What are your goals—honey production, conservation, learning, or simply enjoyment? How comfortable are you with different levels of intervention? And what local factors matter most, such as regulations or pest and disease pressures in our area?

Finally, remember that beekeeping philosophies are not fixed. As conditions change—whether through climate shifts, evolving forage, or challenges like Yellow-legged Asian hornets or varroa—so too should our thinking. It's always worth revisiting and refining our approach over time.

Our Association Apiary meetings are a chance to enjoy beekeeping together, build confidence, and learn from the rich mix of knowledge within NDBKA. There's no single “right” answer—but by sharing thoughtfully and listening openly, we can all become better, more adaptable beekeepers.

Upcoming apiary visits

One of the highlights of the spring/summer season is the chance for us to get together at some of our apiaries. It's a great opportunity to get up close and personal with colonies and we always come away with new ideas and lessons learned.

We're currently finalising this season's schedule, more details to follow! For now, please put the following dates in your diaries:

Sunday 31st May – 2pm – 4pm at Oare Apiary
Sunday 28th June
Sunday 26th July
Sunday 23rd August
Sunday 11th October

Association extraction equipment hire

With the weather warming up, our colonies are getting busy and thoughts turn to extracting the honey harvest. We have some great equipment to make the job easy for you with options to suit beekeepers and their budgets!

The Manual

1. Manual extractor on its own - £15
2. Manual extractor bundle - £20

Includes:

- Settling tank
- Stainless steel double strainer
- Electric uncapping knife
- Uncapping fork
- Electric uncapping tray

The Electric

1. Electric extractor on its own - £35
2. Electric extractor bundle - £40

Includes:

- Settling tank
- Stainless steel double strainer
- Electric uncapping knife
- Uncapping fork
- Electric uncapping tray

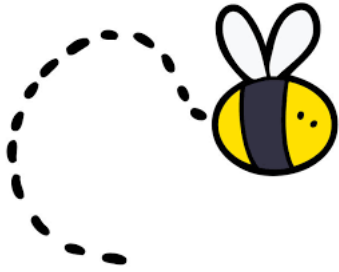
If you'd like to hire any of the equipment, please reach out to **Louisa Houghton** at equipmenthire@newburybeekeepers.org.uk or **07876 575 603**. Full instructions (should you need them) will be provided!

Volunteers needed!

The events we hold as an association are a critical way for us to connect and engage with the public, highlighting our work and putting education at the heart of everything we do. We need your help to be able to take part, so whether it's giving a hand with the set up or being present for a morning or afternoon to be an extra pair of hands, if you can volunteer some of your time, please let us know.

- World Bee Day - Thatcham Discover Centre Saturday 16th May*
- Highclere Village festival - Saturday 13th June*
- The Swallowfield Show - Sunday 30th August and Monday 31st August 2026
- Newbury Show (including our honey show) - Saturday 19th September and Sunday 20th September*

If you'd like to get involved, please take a couple of minutes to let us know when you're free to volunteer [here](#) or email chair@newburybeekeepers.org.uk.



Share your stories!

If you have a great beekeeping story you'd like to share, we'd love to feature it! Please email **Louisa** at equipment@newburybeekeepers.org.uk.

Vale & Downland BKA - John Broadbent

News

The season has started with a bang. We now have 5 beginners (6 from Saturday) with their own bees on the beginners' apiary, some already on 2 supers and showing early signs of swarm preparation. Everyone seems very excited by their bees, which is great. On the main apiary, the 4 that survived winter have already been complemented by a couple of splits into Nucs and 2 more Nucs are on their way from Becky's Beezzzs to get the numbers up. On inspecting the 14 x 12 we found lots of bees but no queen (or brood). She must have died recently as these are not winter bees. Trustee Simon Rogers has very kindly donated an overwintered colony which we placed in the old hive position, before shaking out the 14 x 12. They all seem to have happily moved in with the new hive as it is now very full of bees. We are now in the process of moving it 3 feet at a time to a spot in the main apiary. At the current rate we should have it in place sometime around 2028....



Members Session 11th April. Colonies building up quickly. Thanks again to Matt for cutting the weeds back (and for taking the picture)

Saturday Afternoon Member Sessions

Saturday afternoon main member sessions will now run every week from 2.30 - 4pm - everyone most welcome. Once we have colony numbers up we will do some demonstrations of common manipulations such as Bailey Comb Change, Shook Swarm, etc. Hive 6 is already part way through a Pagden. If anyone wants us to work through a particular manipulation, just let any of the Trustees know. We can easily do a Snelgrove and we also have a Horsley Board, which I've never done so would be fun to try. Each of these boards are based on similar principles and it is useful to know how and why they work.

Members Apiary Visit

Trustee Helen Davison has kindly offered up her apiary for a members visit on Sunday 17th May. More details will be sent out nearer the date, but please make a note for your diary. We used to do these visits a lot, but it stopped during COVID and we never got them going again. The idea is we go to Helen's apiary, have a look at some bees, chat about what is happening with our bees and (maybe) have a cup of tea. It's great to see how other people set up their apiary and run their bees. If you feel you could host such an event, please let me know as we would love to do more of these.

Education

It looks like we will now have 2 members doing their Basic Assessment this year and 3 the Honey Bee Health. You may see us doing some training sessions at the Red Barn over a few Saturdays. Please don't try to join the group as time is already tight to cover all the topics. Perhaps next year you will sign up for one of these?

I'm sad to report that our regular Basic Assessor (and Honey Show Judge) Ian has decided to retire after some health issues over Christmas - I am working to find a new Basic Assessor. In the meantime, I'm sure that all members will wish to join me in wishing Ian well - he has been a great friend of the association. Our HBH assessments will be done by Jenny Morgan from Reading BKA. Jenny did our HBH assessments last year and made sure it was a positive experience for all the candidates. She is the head of the BBKA Exam Board and a Master Beekeeper, so we are really lucky to have her available to pass her experience on.

AHAT Update from Simon Rogers AHAT Leader

After our meeting in February, we had a number of members asking to be allocated a square to monitor for the Yellow Legged Hornet. Happy to report, no confirmed sightings for the YLH's, plenty of queen Wasps though.

I've had feedback regarding the YLH tracking system. Notably, the constant need to update what is happening with traps, in allocated squares. This is still new to all of us and we are still learning. Talking with the BBKA YLH co-ordinator, there are planned upgrades and changes to the tracking reporting system itself. No timescales as yet, as to when these will come into effect.

All those Yellow Legged Hornet queens that successfully overwintered, will now be in the process of making embryo and in some cases, where the weather has been favourable, primary nests. There have been viable sightings across the country so far this year, more will surely be following. Where YLH's were confirmed last year, mass trapping has been undertaken by the National Bee Unit and the local beekeepers. From my point of view, the North Wales nest is the one I'm



Ed Note: The Gard Apis monitoring trap in my garden has caught several queen wasps, but no other bycatch has been seen. This is an improvement on my efforts last year when, using a different kind of trap, I caught so many moths that I eventually took the trap down

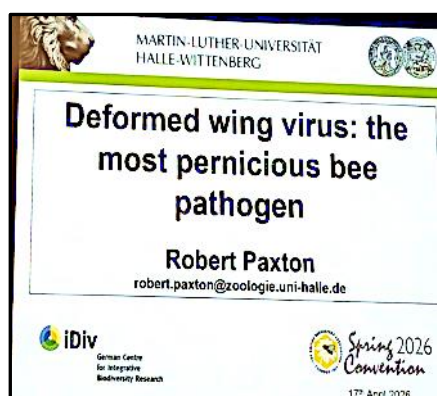
interested in the most. Given it was spotted by the general public in a remote location, this is very likely where we are at risk of any incursions.

For those members who have confirmed they are willing to carry on being registered monitors, thank you. We still need more members though, to come forward and be willing to be part of the AHAT team. Therefore, **I'm planning to have an open session on the AHAT team, at Red Barn on the 9th of May. Looking to start at 10.30, covering any updates across the country and discussing our associations plans for the coming season. For those wanting to join the team, great to have as many of you onboard. If you could please drop me a note, just to confirm that you'll be joining us on that day.**

BBKA Spring Convention - John Broadbent

Early on Friday 17th April I set off to take part in yet another Spring Convention. As per the last few years, it was held at Harper Adams University in Shropshire. This is a great venue for the show, with big halls for the trade show, large lecture halls for the keynote speakers and lots of classrooms for workshops and talks.

I felt the programme was better this year, with more of the classes being labelled as 'Intermediate' rather than 'Beginner'. The guest speakers were also very good, attracting large audiences. Speaking of which, subjectively it seemed there were more



Interesting Talk on DWV -
Unfortunately Professor Robert Paxton was stuck on a plane, fortunately Professor Stephen Martin stepped in to give the talk at no notice and was flawless
Slide © Robert Paxton

attendees this year. I know that BBKA numbers have recently risen from 24,000 to 30,000 so maybe this is responsible for the increase.

Catering is good and food is charged at student prices, which is obviously appealing to beekeepers.

I stayed overnight on Friday so that I could attend for 2 days of talks as well as the Trade Show, which only runs on the Saturday. I stayed at the Telford Premier Inn which, if you book well in advance is cheap, clean and close by the University.

I attended a couple of the main lectures, one on Deformed Wing Virus and one on propolis. Both were very interesting, delivered by top scientists in



the field. I learned loads from both lectures and am now tempted to use a propolis wash on the inside of my boxes (It reduces fungal infections such as chalkbrood considerably). The level of detail and sheer complexity of some of the trials carried out never ceases to amaze me.

I attended some interesting workshops on subjects as diverse as 'Fun with Boards' and preparing runny and set honey. Another on queen selection was also interesting. You do need to be ready to book on the day tickets are released though, as popular workshops fill up very quickly. I'm pleased to report that at the end of the fun with boards session there was a prize draw and Vale Member Matt Frost won a brand-new Snelgrove Board from Thornes. I'm looking forward to his article on how he gets on with it....

One very useful service available at the trade show (and at the Telford Show) is wax exchange. A friend asked me to exchange a block of wax for some packs of Commercial foundation, and I handed over about 10lbs of wax (I think) and £34 and got 6 packs of commercial foundation which individually were priced at £28 a pack. It is definitely worth processing your wax for exchange. It doesn't have to be candle quality. You can either do a straight exchange, and get less packs, or pay a wiring fee, which I am told is the best value way of doing exchange.

The only thing missing from the trade show were bee farmers selling bees and/or queens - the BBKA membership passed a resolution at the ADM banning the BBKA from supporting the sale of bees (to prevent imports). I've said before that I don't agree with this and at Telford, which does allow this, I had some great conversations with queen rearers/resellers which certainly firmed up my views on who I would or wouldn't buy queens from.



Literally as I was about to press send, Matt sent me a picture of his new Snelgrove board in use. It's always good to see when members try new things.

BBKA Winter Loss Survey

Please consider filling in the BBKA loss survey - details below:

I am pleased to announce the launch of the BBKA 2025/26 Winter Loss Survey. With increasing anecdotal reports of significant winter losses this year, it is more important than ever that we gather robust national data. I hope as many of you as possible will spare 5–10 minutes to complete the survey. Please note that questions marked with * are mandatory.

www.bee-survey.com/762947

We recognise that some local associations have already run their own surveys; however, even if you have completed a local version, please do take part in this national survey as well. Your contribution is essential to building an accurate picture of colony losses across England and Wales.

Again this year, the BBKA will work with COLOSS, the international non-profit based in Bern dedicated to improving bee health. Survey results will be published in *BBKA News* and will contribute to the global COLOSS study on threats to honey bee populations. Where appropriate - and only following full review and approval by the BBKA Board of Trustees - the BBKA may also support recognised researchers by sharing anonymised, aggregated data solely for research that the board feels will benefit bees and beekeeping. Using the standard COLOSS questionnaire allows comparison with other countries and helps us better understand the relative risks of colony losses linked to decisions such as varroa treatment and colony migration. The full survey data privacy policy can be found [here](#).

This survey will close on Friday, 15th May 2026.

Many thanks in advance for your participation – I look forward to sharing the results with you!

Kind regards,

Clare McGettigan

British Beekeepers Association (BBKA), Vice-Chair

<https://coloss.org/>

Adverts

Michael

Settling tank with filters, reasonable offers only please. 8 brood boxes and 19 super boxes made up, new and unused, £30 and £25 respectively. Contact Michael on 07815 731202.



Andrew

One nuc with bees, on national frames. £130. Call 07582630981 for more information

Newbury & District BKA

- One pre-owned manual extractor (our old NDBKA kit no less). Still in good working order. £20 to a good home! Takes nine BS National frames.
- **If interested, please call Louisa on 07876 575 603**

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 johnthebeeman8@gmail.com 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

WBC floor, 5 lifts and roof

I have a WBC 'outer' available for free to anyone who wants to pick it up from me in Steventon. It's quite old, unpainted, but very useable. Please someone save me from taking it to the tip.

Call John on 07588 824338

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.