

## What's in a name?

Now that we are bedding our colonies down for the winter, what can a beekeeper do to fend off boredom and withdrawal symptoms? Apart, that is, from cleaning and storing equipment, dealing with hive products, going to conferences ...

In quieter moments it is an ideal time to relax with a good bee book and find out more about the fascinating creatures we look after. There is a huge range of books plus many other resources about honey bees and pollinators; some are ideal to read or view for pleasure while others need a more committed approach to take in the details.

Those who are interested in any particular aspect of beekeeping may start to take notes of things they want to remember but, for most people, this effort peters out because it tends to be a rather random approach. Some beekeepers may consider studying for a BBKA module exam but, of the 25,000 + members of the BBKA, only a tiny minority actually apply to take the practical assessments and written examinations. Why?

At a recent meeting of the South West Beekeepers' Forum there was much disquiet about the highly academic nature of the current BBKA exam system. The BBKA framework for examinations and assessments is complex and presupposes that members wish to go on a journey culminating in becoming a Master Beekeeper.

Appreciation was also expressed of the dedicated work done by those on the Exam Board, especially in having to adapt to a post-pandemic world and the demands of the digital age. However, it was generally felt that, far from encouraging most beekeepers to learn more about their hobby craft, the BBKA system discouraged them from taking part in any structured learning.

Association education officers and tutors work hard to enthuse branch members about improving their understanding of honey bees and raising standards when handling colonies. But study groups usually use module syllabi and correspondence course papers as the basis for their meetings. Thus the nature of the written examinations still dominates and is a block to engaging post-beginner beekeepers.

So, what's in a name? For some time, and especially since I became Devon Education Officer, I have been bothered by phrases like "Basic Assessment", "Module Exams", "Correspondence Course" and "Examination Board". They all emphasise preparing for tests and qualifications which immediately alienates people whose first aim is to be better beekeepers.

In Devon we could change the approach by having a more attractive and relevant programme. This could be based around:

- focused themes rather than wide-ranging exams;
- practical application rather than isolated theoretical knowledge;
- a planned sequence of learning which has clear, simple goals;

- using participants' previous experience as a starting point;
- having a group of tutors with a variety of experience and teaching styles.

Would you be interested in such an initiative, starting in spring 2023?

The first theme I propose would be Honey Bee Health and the lead sessions would be held by Zoom. The idea is to make these available to any beekeeper in Devon but local branches could support the project in a variety of ways of their own choosing.

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