Beekeeping

The Journal of the Devon Beekeepers' Association



Yellow Legged Asian Hornet Week 7-13 September

Vol 92 No 7

September 2026

SALE DAYS

Our Annual Sale Days are back! Here are the dates - make sure to mark them in your diary and get ready to grab some amazing bargains.

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STOCKBRIDGE
Saturday 19th September

DEVON
Saturday 26th September

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Back Issues Previous editions of this magazine from 2018 onward, are available to download in PDF format from the DBKA website. Older editions can be obtained on request from: webmaster@devonbeekeepers.org.uk

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Front Cover Picture:
Open Hive
Inspecting a brood frame
A demonstration by Newton Abbot branch for Teign U3A
(See page 7)
Photograph by Keith Choules - Teign U3A

The next issue will be October 2026

Deadline Items for the next edition of the magazine must be with the Editor by 10 September 2026.

Your Branch Secretary or Executive Council Delegate can provide you with the log-in details for the members' area of the Devon Beekeepers' website.

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The Buzz Word

Warwick Newson - Chair DBKA



As we move into early autumn, I hope members can look back on an enjoyable and productive summer of beekeeping. September is an important month in the beekeeping calendar, and attention must now turn towards preparing our colonies for the winter ahead. Please check varroa levels, complete any necessary treatment using authorised veterinary medicines, and ensure colonies are queenright, healthy and strong, with adequate stores.

I hope many of you will join us for Devon Beekeepers' Day at Crediton on Saturday 26 September. Simon O'Sullivan our President has been working tirelessly to create an excellent programme of speakers, making this a valuable opportunity to learn, meet fellow beekeepers and share experiences. (and Cake)

Congratulations to all members who have passed BBKA assessments and Modules this year. I encourage anyone considering an assessment or Module next year to speak with their branch education team. Autumn is also the ideal time for branches to begin their winter programmes of talks, training and practical education.

Finally, my thanks go to our DBKA trustees, branch officers, tutors, volunteers and members for their continued work supporting beekeeping throughout Devon. Enjoy the remaining warm days at your apiaries while ensuring your bees are carefully prepared for the colder months ahead.

Warwick Newson *Chair*

Devon Beekeepers' Day (formerly President's Day)

Saturday 26th September at Boniface Centre, Crediton EX17 2AH

Ticket Price: £10 See page 8 for full programme

Online Booking Now Open through DBKA website (click on the orange icon) or at:

www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/devon-beekeepers-day-2026-tickets-1993011990514

Editorial

Robert Blackmore

Above you will see a notice for Devon Beekeepers' Day. Previously named President's Day, this has always been a very enjoyable and well supported event. Organised by the DBKA for the benefit of Devon members, the ticket price of a mere £10 includes a lunchtime pasty (*gluten free and vegan options available*), tea and coffee and the obligatory cake. On page 8 you will find details of the speakers and their topics which promises to provide an interesting and varied programme. There will also be a selection of beekeeping books available from **Northern Bee Books** and two of the speakers will be selling (*and possibly, signing*) their own new publications.
So don't delay - book today - you'd be mad not to … *(I've just got mine, so there's one ticket less for you lot to fight over)*.

This edition sees the last of David Packham's series of **In the Apiary**. I'd like to thank David for sharing his knowledge with us over the past year in his interesting and informative articles. I'm sorry to say we have no one lined up to take over, so, over to you?

Robert Blackmore *Editor* editor@devonbeekeepers.org.uk

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Find out more at **www.bbka.org.uk**

Death of a Bee

Photograph by Nick Pearce



I took this photo whilst on holiday in the south of France this August. It is of a Yellow-Legged Hornet cutting, with its mouth parts, the abdomen off of a captured honey bee! Gruesome!
It brings home to me what will happen if or when the YLH becomes entrenched in the UK.

What a great photo and not an easy one to capture. We are always interested to see your photos of bee, pollinator or beekeeping interest. Thanks Nick for sharing this one.

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Gardeners Meet Beekeepers
by Michaela Eckenberger

In June, Newton Abbot Beekeepers (NABK) hosted a visit from the Newton Abbot Gardening Group of the Teign U3A. Twenty-two gardeners came, with more wanting to come than we could accommodate.



All Photographs by Keith Choules

The visit started with a presentation about bees in the club house: Much to their amusement they were given the talk we give to primary school children, albeit slightly altered. After the talk it was time to get close to the bees.



With much laughter and anticipation two groups donned their bee-suits and keenly walked up to the apiary.

Here, the visitors were divided into small groups and NABK members showed them the hives, found queens and handed some frames to the brave ones.

Everybody was astonished at how heavy a full frame of honey was and how much work went into producing it by the ladies; having learned earlier how each bee only produces 1/12 of a tea spoon (or 0.8 grams).





Some poor drones were caught and handed around for the visitors to feel the buzz. Soon it was time for some tea, cake and chat with many more questions being answered.

The bees behaved perfectly and nobody got stung.
This was a very enjoyable meeting for the gardeners and beekeepers alike.

The U3A group leader warned us that there might be more gardeners wanting to come for another visit.

Devon Beekeepers Day

September 26th

A day of lectures, of meeting up with old friends, lots of honey bee talk, pastie lunch and probably the best selection of cake to be seen in the county. What more could you ask for?

Boniface Centre, Church Lane, Crediton EX17 2AH

Booking is now open through **Eventbrite**

Your speakers:



Lynne Ingram NDB

Lynne has kept bees for over 30 years, and runs 10 colonies in Somerset. She is a Master Beekeeper, holds the National Diploma in Beekeeping, and is an examiner for the BBKA written and practical exams. Lynne is involved in educating beekeepers, running study groups and curating the popular Somerset Lecture series. She is a knowledgeable and engaging speaker.

The Truth About Honey?

Honey is the second most adulterated food in the world. This talk lifts the lid on the how, why and wherefore of honey fraud and adulteration, and the shocking impact it is having on the livelihoods of beekeepers around the world. We look at why this fraud continues, and what can be done about it. We also take a look at what is happening in the UK.



Chris Parks

Chris Parks lives on an organic farm in the Vale of the White Horse. His work ranges across arts and crafts, education and ancient technologies, folk music, storytelling, celebrancy and therapy. He works with schools, wildlife trusts, local authorities, mental health projects, special interest groups, communities and families. He researches beekeeping heritage, folklore and history and lectures to beekeeping associations. Chris keeps bees in many different types of hives, ranging from log hives to a bee house and he specialises in skeps, all styles being treatment-free allowed to swarm and never fed sugar. During the pandemic, Chris worked with the bee-themed podcast **Living Bee**. Chris works with the charity **Bees for Development** teaching skep making, mead making and skep-beekeeping.

Beeswax Through the Ages

Beeswax a major factor in the development in the evolution of the genus Apis and their ability to raise brood and expand stores, has long been a boon to humanity. Dubbin your boots, wax your hair put on your lipstick for a hike through beeswax history. From ancient medicines, magic charms and early metallurgy, through cobblery, saddlery and upholstery, to holy luminance royal seals and taxes, towards anatomical models, modern science and space exploration.

Ollie Visick



Ollie is a postdoctoral researcher with seven years' experience working with bees. His PhD research generated the first quantitative data on the size and status of free-living honey bee populations in the UK. He has also developed field-based approaches for assessing the quantity and quality of natural nesting cavities in trees, contributing to our understanding of how habitat loss may influence free-living populations in Europe.

Wild Honeybee Colonies - Density, Survival and Limiting Factors

This talk starts by exploring the density and survival of honey bee colonies in the wild, providing an overview of previous research in Europe and my PhD in southeast England. I'll then talk briefly about the project we are running in the South West, concerning the evolutionary origin of wild honey bee colonies. Lastly, I will discuss the factors limiting colonies in the wild, particularly the availability of suitable nesting cavities in trees.

Lesley Jacques NDB



Lesley became an accidental beekeeper after a swarm arrived in her garden in 2011. She very quickly became fascinated by the bees she was tending, and committed to learn more about them, working her way through the BBKA Module and Husbandry exams. She was awarded her Master Beekeeper qualification in 2022 and gained the NDB in 2024. Lesley is Vice Chair of Cheshire Beekeepers' Association as well as being a founder member of Mid Cheshire Beekeepers. Lesley is an examiner for the Basic and General Husbandry assessments and is actively engaged with the Association's advanced and beginners' level teaching programmes. As a scientist by profession, she takes a particular interest in the biology and botanical aspects of beekeeping, and in conveying this to others. Lesley lives in Cheshire with her husband Tony, and manages four apiaries with more colonies than she admits to.

Where do the bees go?

Anyone who keeps bees eventually develops a curiosity with the origins of their honey – where the bees forage, and what do they return with that gives the honey such variety of colour and flavour, as well as the different pollens that we see stored in the combs. Understanding where the bees are foraging requires good observational skills, and sometimes a bit of backyard botany to help interpret the evidence. This can help us develop a wider appreciation of the landscape around us, the forage plants that are available at different times of the year, and to make a better-informed guess at which of those plants our bees may be visiting.

This presentation looks in detail at some of those flower species that are important to our honey bees, how we determine our bees' foraging grounds and the origin of our honey.

During the lunch break you can meet up to talk bees or drop in to the hall and listen to our short presentations from our stand holders

Booking is now open through the **Eventbrite** link sent out to all members or go to the DBKA website **www.devonbeekeepers.org.uk** for the link.

If you would like to bring along a cake on the day it will be much appreciated.

In the Apiary - September

by David Packham

Introduction:

Before we consider September I'm just thinking of the summer we have had and of all those new beekeepers in their first or second year who might consider this year to be the standard. The honey harvest this year was beyond my imagination. I ran out of supers in June and was forced to extract honey just to free up supers and to ensure I could still reach the top of the super stack. I know of new beekeepers who have purchased a small nuc in the spring, taking off one or two supers for extraction. This year has been exceptional, it is not the norm, or perhaps it is the new norm. Well, there's a thought!



Photograph by David Packham

A good harvest but a bad back !

Reflection:

For me, September will be a quiet month; I removed the last of my honey crop in July putting aside one full super which I placed under each colony after treating for Varroa during the first week in August. To ensure that each colony was in good shape to survive winter I carried out my last inspection in the middle of August. I replaced the queens in 5 hives with ones that I had raised in the spring, and combined all my artificial swarms. I only mention these as a reminder to those who have yet to complete these little jobs.

For the varroa treatment I used Formic Pro, principally as it is only in the hive for 7 days. This allows me to complete my final major inspection. I have to give one warning on using Formic Pro and it is not a treatment I recommend to beginners. Used properly it is without doubt very effective and very quick as it is the only treatment that kills the varroa mites within the cells. But it is important to adhere to the manufacturer's treatment instructions to the letter as the margin of error is minimal. I hear lots of comments of queens being killed which thankfully I have never experienced but it is not unusual to see some dead young larvae.

After months of heavy lifting, managing some difficult colonies, not to mention suffering from beekeepers back, September brings a welcome change to a more peaceful and passive role.

Winter Feed:

For those who have decided not to, or were unable to leave a full super as winter feed for the bees, now is the time to start feeding. Remember a normal colony will require about 40lb (18kg) to ensure they have enough feed to last until spring. Personally, I favour late September and early October for completing the feeding process when hopefully it will coincide with the ivy flowering. I look forward to seeing the foragers returning home with that distinctive yellow pollen and high-sugar nectar which are essential for building late-season brood and winter stores. Although honey produced from ivy nectar can contain up to 70% glucose, compared to the roughly 35% found in standard honey. This causes it to

set rock hard similar to, but worse than, Oil Seed Rape and therefore may be difficult for the bees to access without a water source. In Devon this doesn't normally cause a problem as the weather shouldn't prevent the bees flying to collect water. But feeding syrup when the ivy is in flower is an added safeguard.

Queen Introduction:

As I was preparing to introduce my new queens this August, I was reminded how problematic queen introduction can be. I thought it might therefore be useful to consider the best way to maximise the chances of success.

First and foremost, the colony must be queenless. I realise that this sounds obvious, but I recall visiting a number of apiaries as a Bee Inspector where beekeepers had purchased new queens because they believed their colonies were queenless. On inspection, although there were no eggs, it was clear that each colony still had a queen as there was a nice patch of newly prepared polished cells just waiting for the queen to start laying. She was simply not laying at that moment.



Photograph by David Packham

A well-marked queen

It can help, particularly if one is introducing a queen from a distinctly different strain, if the colony is hopelessly queenless, that is to say the colony has no means of producing their own queen; i.e. there are no eggs or young larvae. Although, I do recall that on one occasion and it only happened once, a hopelessly queenless colony accepted the new queen only to supersede within a couple of weeks. This happens very rarely and normally only when a new queen is from a distinctly different strain.

A further clue as to whether a colony is truly queenless is the development of laying workers. In a normal healthy hive, both queen mandibular pheromone and open brood pheromone suppress ovary development in workers. When both are missing, the biological brake is released and the number of workers laying diploid eggs increases. This is exacerbated as the lack of pheromone also stops the worker police from doing their normal job of removing the eggs of laying workers. So if the colony is queenless and there is an absence of open brood I would expect to see evidence of laying workers.

For a colony to accept a new queen, there must be no queen pheromones indicating that another queen is present. This includes a young queen that has not yet started laying, or an older queen that has temporarily stopped. Equally important, there must be no queen cells. Workers recognise the presence of queen cells and will usually prefer to wait for their own queen to emerge rather than accept a ready-made stranger. Colonies with laying workers are also unlikely to accept a new queen, as the workers effectively perceive themselves as queenright.

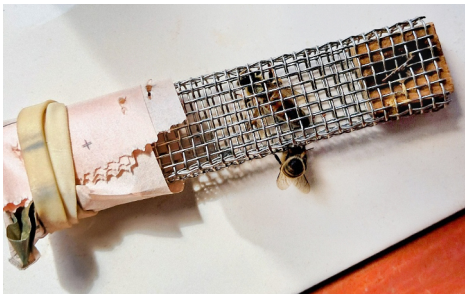
There are several other factors that can either improve or reduce the chances of successful introduction:

- It helps to have plenty of young nurse bees. These bees are less aggressive than older foragers and are responsible for feeding and caring for the new queen.
- Colonies accept a new queen more readily when there is a nectar flow. If there is no natural flow, feeding light sugar syrup can help simulate one and encourage acceptance.
- Ideally, the new queen should be in a similar physical condition to the one she is replacing—healthy, well-fed, in full lay and if possible, of the same race. In

→

practice, this is often difficult to achieve. Queens may have travelled through the post and are rarely in peak condition on arrival. In many cases, they are intentionally selected from a different strain to improve the colony.

- There are several types of introduction cage available, but I would recommend the simple Butler cage. I remove any attendant workers that accompany the queen and secure the Butler cage with a piece of newspaper held in place by an elastic band rather than using candy.



Photograph by David Packham

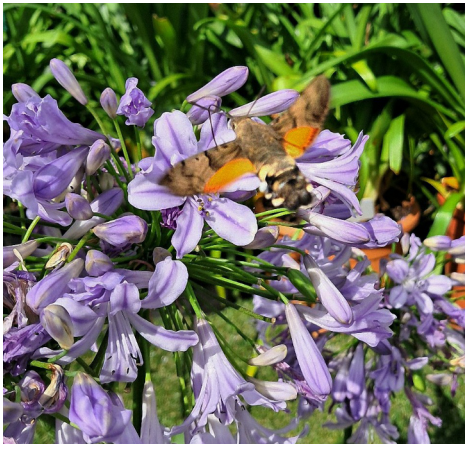
A butler queen cage with queen ready for introduction

I still use the Butler cage that Brother Adam gave me when he showed me his method of queen introduction. He explained that removing the attendant workers forces the queen to beg for food from the nurse bees. By the time she is released, she has already been fed and accepted by the colony, greatly improving her chances of survival.

My preferred method is to make up a two-frame nucleus from the colony that is to be requeened. After leaving it queenless for a couple of hours, I introduce the queen in her Butler cage. This small nucleus contains very few, if any, flying bees—the individuals most likely to reject an unfamiliar queen but have plenty of young nurse bees, which are much more receptive to accepting and caring for her.

Conclusion:

I believe that it is widely acknowledged to have been a good year for all insects to thrive, especially butterflies and moths too, I have observed the wonderful Humming Bird Hawkmoth darting around many garden flowers, Agapanthus in particular. It is likely to be an exceptional year for the Painted Lady butterfly, a once in a decade event when this fragile and beautiful insect migrates in large numbers a staggering distance from Africa. In my own garden I have seen an increase in many types of butterfly and also noted more Tiger moths, always quite startling to see their bright and colourful markings.



Photograph by David Packham

Hummingbird Hawkmoth

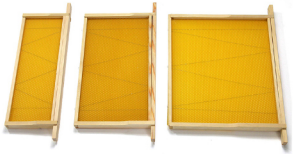
Undoubtedly, it is bound to be a good season for the ever predatory Asian Hornet. September is a month when they could be most prevalent, therefore vigilance is required, particularly around ivy flowers which may well attract them, as well as hover flies, wasps and our honey bees. I mentioned last month the importance of setting up a bait station. We must try and stop mated females from overwintering.

As my time writing these monthly observations draws to a close, I can say that it has encouraged much reflection and examination of my practice which I feel has inevitably benefitted my beekeeping skills. I hope that it has been as enjoyable and illuminating for you too and that you will take away some small pieces of information that will be of interest in your future beekeeping.

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135th Honiton Show
by Paul Hammond

The Honiton Show regularly attracts 20,000 visitors and this year was no exception despite the very hot weather. The Bee Marquee is located at the top of the showground with local visitors from Honiton able to travel to the show by the regular courtesy coach adjacent to the Bees and Honey Marquee. The Honiton Show Bees and Honey Marquee is organised by the East Devon and Exeter Branches.

Visitors to the show were met by stewards who were able to tell them what they would see in the Bees and Honey Marquee.

Moving around the show; the judging of the competition entries took place with Jack Mummery mentoring a new judge Brad Davis from Hampshire, for the Honey and Wax Classes. The Cookery Judge was Helen Bithrey. The judges were ably assisted by Honey and Wax Steward Caroline Taverner and Emma Twaddle the cookery steward. The entries for the competition classes were sufficient for the show to qualify for the award of the National Honey Show Blue Ribbon. In particular, Jack Mummery praised the standard of the Novice entries at this year's show.





Moving on to the taste of honey; the stewards had a number of samples available from the honey area with members of the public able to make a choice for themselves.





Popular with the children was Imogen undertaking face painting. And for everyone, there was a continual stream to a TV from inside a beehive. Also on display was the children's art competition from local schools and guide groups. Three of the prize winners attended the prize award ceremony later in the afternoon.

The cake competition was next and this was popular with the public. We had a large number of entries and the Victoria Sandwich cakes were auctioned off by Nigel Boulton at the end of the show.

Next was the Honey Sales team led by Wendy Wayne. All of the honey was identified for the public to purchase honey local to their area.





Adjacent to the honey sales was Liz Westcott displaying and selling her bee and wax products.

Another very popular area was the flying bees display. Finding and identifying the queen bee is always a point of interest for the children, but the adult visitors are keen to see the queen laying area and the honey storage. Understanding the many and various roles of the bees in their relatively short lives provides further points of interest.





East Devon provided the next area with an information display encouraging those thinking of keeping bees and their local organisation. Also prominent was a stand about the threats of the Yellow legged Asian Hornets with much interest from the public visitors.

An extremely popular area was the stand led by Janie Smallridge providing an opportunity for children to roll a candle from beeswax.

Moving on; for a number of years we have invited the public to judge the photograph competition. We had 22 entries and the winner was Alasdair Bruce. This was very popular with the public and we had hundreds of voting slips to count!

The Prize giving this year was undertaken by David Packham who is very well known to many of the stewards present. David gave a short speech in which he reminded us that he has been a beekeeper for 46 years and is a retired seasonal bee inspector.

The trophies were won by:

The Fred Barratt Shield, Heather Burnett for the honey classes 1 - 8

The Evelyn Pelham Memorial Salver, Shirley Cowell for six matching jars of honey ready to sell

The Basil Salter Wax Challenge Cup, Heather Burnett for the wax classes 9 and 10

The Griffin Cup, Heather Burnett for three jars of honey and a beeswax block

The Robin Kirkcaldie Memorial Cup, James Loescher for 3 jars of honey the novice class 19

The Uplyme Cup, Evan Haines for the highest number of points in the cookery classes

The Honiton Show Cup, Heather Burnett for the highest number of points in all classes 1 - 24

The Branch Cup, was won by East Devon Branch for the branch with the highest points 1 - 25

The National Honey Show Blue Ribbon Award, for best exhibit in the show, James Loescher for his entry in class 19 the Novice class with three matching jars.







Photographs feature Heather Burnett, Shirley Cowell and James Loescher

Overall this was a very successful show, in no small way due to the efforts of the stewards. Their efforts on the day in the hot weather was a credit to all. We are all looking forward to next year's show which will be held on Thursday 5th August 2027.

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Hive Insulation in Four Graphs?

by Martin Myhill

Having read David Packham's article in the Summer 2026 DBKA Beekeeping Magazine regarding hive insulation, I report here on explorations using *Broodminder.com* sensors (temperature, humidity and weight) installed in my own hives since March 2025 – hives which, incidentally, are located less than five miles from David's - if anyone wishes to compare the temperature data.

I have been keeping bees for eleven years, the first nine of those in my garden, and nowadays on a solar farm. I was taught beekeeping by David and he retains my everlasting admiration and respect. I have also helped with local community hives and the Exeter BKA apiary hives since 2015. To date, I have only ever suffered one hive loss (to varroa in 2016) although I've lost a few nucs to wasps. My bees are kept in cedar, 14x12, national hives with open mesh floors and originated from a single swarm I caught in 2015. I have never purchased any bees or queens.

I do not have space here to talk about *Broodminder.com* and have no affiliation with that organisation. There are many other helpful observations derived from my use of those sensors, so perhaps that's for another article.

As a result of sensor readings in March 2025, I fitted all my hives with permanent roof insulation (another story). On 10 October 2025 I insulated the outsides of two of my three hives using weatherproof 'Oxford' insulation. As an exploration, I left one without it. The hives were comparable - each had a full super of honey above the brood box to supplement their main stores and were roughly identical in size and both with 2025 queens laying well. Frames were 'warm way' and I used a pinned, reduced entrance (courtesy of the late Ron Brown's **Beekeeping**) and varroa boards in place throughout the year. In Figure 1, I've used *Broodminder.com*'s graphics to show the internal hive temperature for one insulated and one uninsulated hive covering the period from 1 September 2025 until 31 March 2026. The sensors are located above the middle of the brood box in each hive. The external weather temperature is shown for context (dotted orange line) and I have indicated 10 October. So which is the insulated hive?

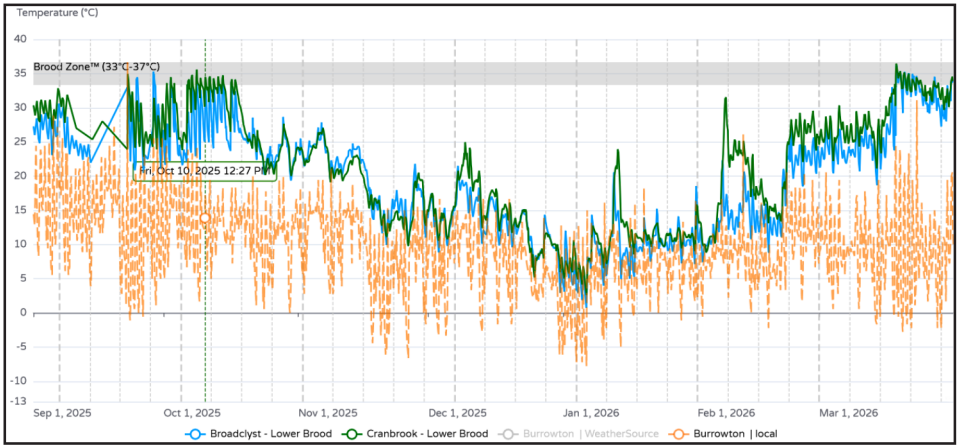


Figure 1 – Temperature

Yes, it's 'Broadclyst' - the hive with the BLUE line on the graph. I expected the insulated hive to be the warmer one but perhaps the insulation made that effort slightly less

necessary for the bees – or was that hive comfortable anyway with a slightly lower temperature through most of the winter? It started that way pre-insulation. ‘Broadclyst’ also had higher humidity (Figure 2) albeit within acceptable limits but it is well known that damp presents a greater winter hive challenge than cold.

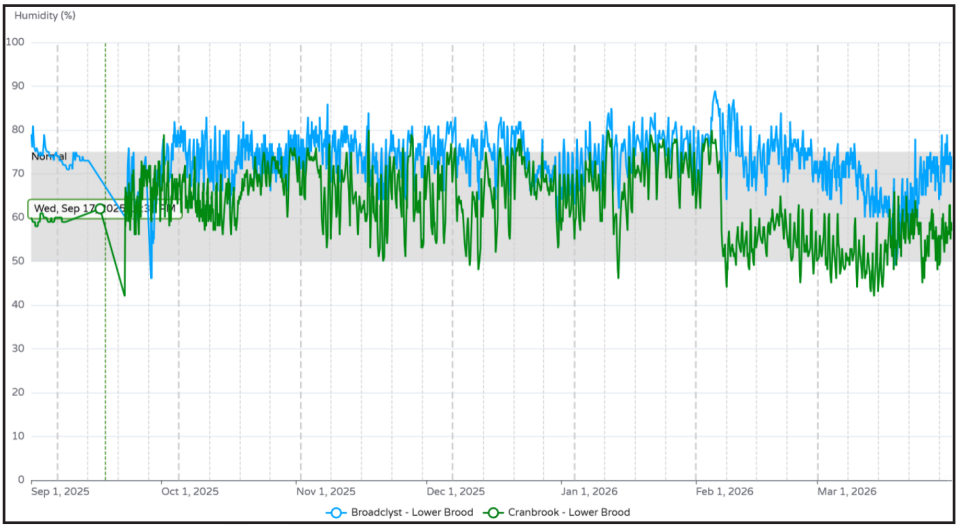


Figure 2 - Humidity

Broodminder has many clever features. One of those is an estimation of the brood in each hive based on a number of sensor-driven algorithms. As I use very large brood boxes, this isn’t always fully accurate – usually an overestimation of around 10-20%. However, the trends are consistent (Figure 3). The uninsulated hive ‘Cranbrook’ (green line) came out of winter earlier and faster.

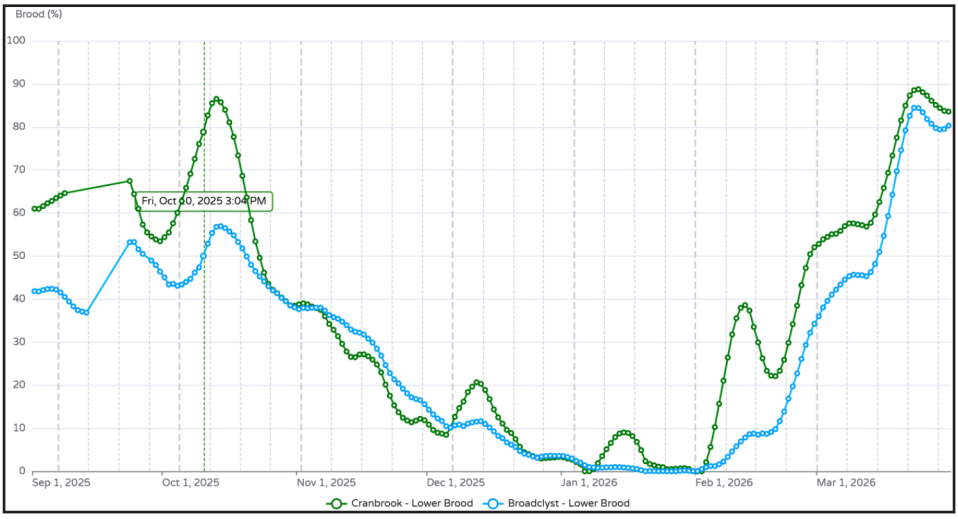


Figure 3 – Estimated brood percentage

Finally, what about hive weight? I installed a half-scale under the front of ‘Broadclyst’ earlier in 2025 and a full scale under ‘Cranbrook’ – but only in March 2026.

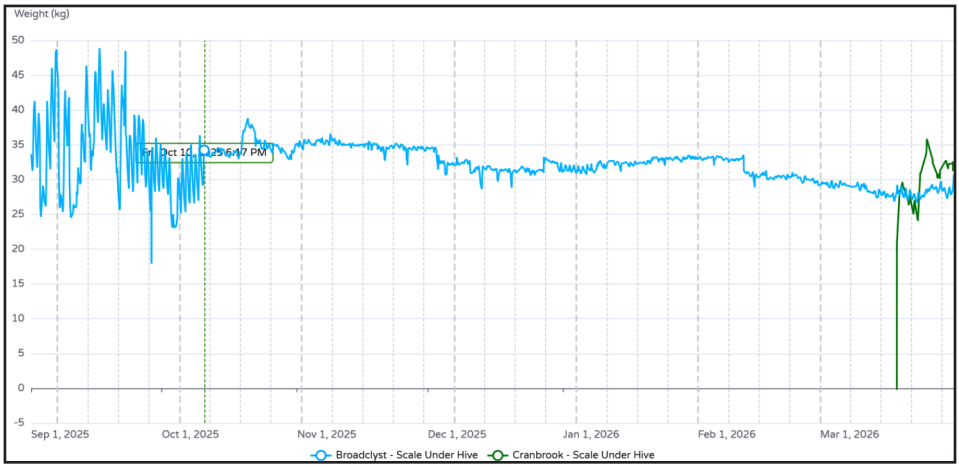


Figure 4 - Weight

The obvious impact of the insulation was on the amount of INTERNAL daily weight variation (bee movement?) within the insulated hive. One of the features of the half-scale is that it only picks up one half of hive weight and the bees were clearly either moving around or moving stores pre-insulation. This more-or-less ceased from the moment the insulation was added.

What can we learn from this?

Bees will adapt to their circumstances when they can and in this mostly damp and mild winter, there weren't extreme temperature challenges - even if my sensors reported internal readings as low as 2°C around New Year when the bees had clustered in a corner away from the sensor. Certainly, two hives don't provide enough data to draw scientific conclusions, but like many aspects of beekeeping, there are options. There's a wider discussion here. Twice, I've heard Derek Mitchell speak convincingly about the shortcomings of thermo-insulation in modern, wooden hives. Equally, I've observed prolific wooden hives across Scandinavia even if polystyrene hives are now very popular there. We know from the incredible work of Prof Tom Seeley the type of hive locations bees seem to prefer- but rarely will they find perfection. There are always choices and beekeepers can help with the ones they understand. My uninsulated hive remains my most productive in 2026 and clearly didn't suffer in that respect – but what would happen in a long, harsh winter? Hopefully you can draw your own conclusions. Will I insulate my hives this autumn? My answer is 'probably' (as I've already purchased it for this exploration) but I'm not convinced it's necessary in East Devon with our warming climate.

One of my autumn tips is to put a crown board under the brood box (feed holes open) to deter wasps and shelter against winter gales. Let's see what the sensors show next year.

Reporting Yellow-Legged Asian Hornet Sightings

Using the smartphone app is the preferred and most effective way

Email: **alertnonnative@ceh.ac.uk**.

Online Form: **https://risc.brc.ac.uk/alert.php?species=asian_hornet**

Devon County Co-ordinators:

Simon O'Sullivan: **grannysmeadow@hotmail.com**

Judith Norman: **judith.norman@me.com**

Gerry Stuart: **gerrystuart@hotmail.co.uk**



Image: Haim Charbit/Pixabay

The Forest Estate Agency
by Graham Kingham

For rent, long lease. Bespoke oak tree des res accommodation at the edge of the forest, newly formed by our resident fungi, high up, south-facing aspect.

The wild honeybee of England still resides in woodland areas, which are their preferred home. They live in the hollowed-out cavities in both live and dead trees. The Greater Spotted Woodpecker may create these cavities, making holes in softer woods, like Willow or Poplar, but generally favours wood that's already dead, as they feed on invertebrates that feed on dead or dying wood. Also, it's easier to make a hole in dead trees. They beat their beaks against hollow branches or tree trunks at a 40 hits per second, making their nesting holes in late spring. Green Woodpeckers, the usual suspects if hives have been attacked, are mainly ground feeders.

The other main method of cavity formation is the natural rotting of the internal supporting wood over time due to fungi. Birds, insects, bats and some mammals will also use these sheltered spaces.

Over their lifetimes, trees will lose limbs due to natural stresses and strains, often breaking off by a process called cleavage; this leaves a neater area of exposed cells that can help protect the wound.

Woodland management methods have evolved, and the idea of being neat and tidy has found its way into modern practices; however, nature is not so like-minded, preferring to

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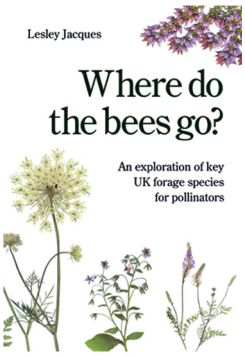
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tear off a limb, leaving a stub that will heal away from the trunk, rather than a saw cut across the branch. Demonstrating this incompatibility between human and natural pruning is the tendency for branch stubs to die back to a healthy growth point. A modern cutting technique is to lop the branch closer to the trunk, allowing new wood to form around the cut and creating scar tissue called a callus. This is called target pruning. On smaller branches, it is possible to cover the whole wound area, known as occlusion. However, it is the larger branches that provide an entrance for fungal spores or the woodpecker; hence, the tree's age is important, as it offers a large enough cavity for a nest.

The importance of air in decomposition

New research has shown that most decay fungi are already latent inside the tree, waiting for the right conditions, rather than entering through wounds. When a tree is wounded, oxygen enters the wood. Before injury, the wood is hydrated, which causes anaerobic conditions. Fungi respire, so the oxygen entering the tree allows them to colonise it. Some fungi go even further, pumping water out of the tree to create a favourable substrate.

Species preference

The conifer trees do not hollow out well, so they do not offer the bees an easy home. The Scots pine is an exception, as is the Yew tree, which is one of the largest long-living species in the UK.

Picture 1

A Horse Chestnut tree. The white arrow and the middle red arrow are possibly pruning wounds. The doughnut-like growth around the edges is called reaction wood; this is the tree growing new wood rapidly to try to seal over the hole. Squirrels often chew this reaction wood to prevent holes from closing, maintaining an open cavity. There were no resident honeybees in this particular tree. The Horse Chestnut tree is a favourite of the honeybees for collecting propolis.



Picture 1



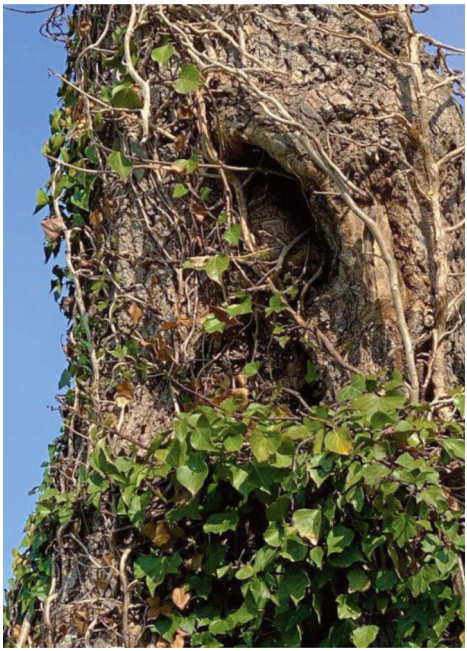
Picture 2

Picture 2

A closer view of the protected cut, showing the callus area, another name for reaction wood.

Research has shown that honeybees send out scout bees to investigate new hollows and return to entice more scouts to inspect their find, preferring cavities typically ranging from 20 to 60 litres, then collectively deciding on whether to make this their new home.

Oak, Sweet Chestnut and Beech trees seem to be their preferred choice when available. One reason, as stated above, is their size, but trees do have a location preference, particularly the amount of shade created by other trees around them; hence, Oak trees, which are not shade-tolerant, are often found in open parkland or field spaces. Honeybees have preferences, not thriving in still, damp, fungal places.



Picture 3



Picture 4

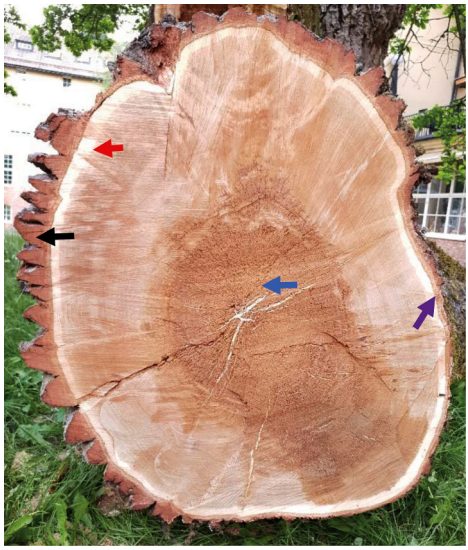
Pictures 3 and 4
An Oak tree with small entrances and an Ash tree, both with wild colonies in.
Right-hand image by kind permission of Dr Ollie Visick.

Understanding how a tree cavity forms
As outlined above, a tree is a living organism that has a symbiotic relationship with many fungi, particularly the mycorrhizal mycelium around its roots. The tree has an outer covering of dead bark and a live inner layer. The bark protects it from the sun and helps prevent water loss; next to this is a layer of cells, the cambium, the growth area, that divides as the tree grows in response to the swaying of its upper branches. The cambium divides, producing vascular bundles of transporting tissues that carry nutrients and hormones up and down the trunk, increasing the girth each year. As this grows, it forms a matrix of rings that we can count to estimate its age. When these internal rings die off as it grows, they become lignified, meaning becoming woody, forming the heartwood.

This is wood that contains tannins and other compounds that resist decay. These are the trees in which we see a distinct colour change between the heartwood and the sapwood, the living part of the tree, such as Oak, Sweet Chestnut and Pine. Many trees are diffuse-porous and don't form heartwood. These trees are generally less durable and resist decay by keeping wood cells hydrated, so less oxygen is available for fungi. These species include Beech, Birch and Willow, and are the same colour throughout the cross-section.

Picture 5

A cross-section of a recently felled Swedish Oak. The black arrow points to the bark. The purple arrow indicates the phloem layer, which transports sugars, and the cambial layer; these are very close to one another and only a few cells wide each. The red arrow marks the boundary between the forming sapwood and heartwood. The white wood is the live sapwood. In an oak like this, there may be only about 15 annual rings still functioning. Everything inside that line is heartwood (blue arrow), mostly dead cells, except for the medullary rays, which extend into the tree like bike spokes and are used for food and water storage.
Image. Wikipedia. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.



Picture 5

The Importance of Fungi

Fungi are nature's recyclers, helping to break down cellulose. The fruiting bodies of bracket fungi can be seen on the outside of old trees. Many other fungi will be present inside the tree, where they will live and, over time, may cause hollowing. These are often found in many veteran species. Different fungi have different modes of decay. Wood is made from cellulose, hemicellulose and lignin. White rot fungi break down lignin first, leaving a white, pulpy cellulose; these fungi include Ganoderma, often seen in oak trees. Brown rots break down cellulose first, leaving a cubical brown rot with lignified wood remaining; this includes chicken of the woods and beefsteak fungi. However, most pathogens do not kill their hosts. Quite often, once a hole has been created, it tends to rot downwards over time; this top entrance can be drafty and let rising heat escape; this could be one reason why honeybees prefer smaller holes that they can propolise to reduce their size, and that are situated at the base of the cavity.

Most cavities are inspected when the tree is felled, but a new method has been developed by Dr Ollie Visick in his latest research into tree cavities occupied by honeybee colonies: a non-invasive 3D scanner. This is producing some amazing results. Nature is not perfect nor tidy in its ways, but the resulting disorder provides a diversity of habitats. Something for everyone.

My thanks go to Matt Shute, Arboricultural consultant and Ancient and Veteran tree specialist at East Devon Tree Care, for sharing information on how trees hollow out.

Citations:

Journal of Insect Conservation (2024) 28:153–163 https://doi.org/10.1007/s10841-023-00530-7 ORIGINAL PAPER Ancient, veteran and other listed trees as nest sites for wild-living honey bee, Apis mellifera, colonies Oliver D. Visick · Francis L. W. Ratnieks.

Oliver D. Visick & Francis L. W. Ratnieks (11 Sep 2025): Non-destructive measurement of tree cavity volume relating to nest sites for wild honey bee colonies and other species, Journal of Apicultural Research, DOI: 10.1080/00218839.2025.2556076

DOI: 10.1002/ece3.10609 REVIEW ARTICLE Density of wild honey bee, Apis mellifera, colonies worldwide Oliver D. Visick Francis L. W. Ratnieks

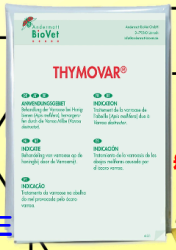
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Yellow Legged Asian Hornet week: 7 - 13 September
Plymouth Honey Show, Sat 19 September
Devon Beekeepers' Day, Crediton: Sat 26 September
National Honey Day: 21 October
National Honey Show 2026, Sandown Park: 22-24 October

Useful Addresses

Yellow Legged Asian Hornet reporting - Use the app (*preferred*) or email:	**alertnonnative@ceh.ac.uk**
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BBKA Find a Local Swarm Collector	**bbka.org.uk/find-a-local-swarm-collector**
National Bee Unit (NBU)	**nationalbeeunit.com**
Devon Apicultural Research Group (DARG)	**www.dargbees.org**
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Torbay	*tbbk.co.uk*	07721182094

Diary Dates

Members may attend meetings of any Branch, but it is advisable to check the details with the Branch Secretary first. Contact details are on page 26.

September			
Saturdays	14:00	Newton Abbot	Saturday afternoon weekly hive inspections to commence (weather permitting!) All Welcome
Tuesdays	11:00	North Devon	Every week from now through to October at the Horestone site. Bring a packed lunch and join us!
Saturdays	14:00	Torbay	Branch Apiary Meeting, Cockington Apiary, near the Drum Inn
Saturday 5th	14:00	Tiverton	Meet the Bees, Branch Apiary Knighsthayes Court, Tiverton
Sunday 6th	09:30	Plymouth	Seed Swap - Plymouth Branch Apiary
Saturday 12th	10:00	Newton Abbot	Apiary Autumn Maintenance followed by the summer social, we will have a BBQ in our paddock area.
Wednesday 16th	19:30	Tiverton	Dan Basterfield. Talk in person on 'Foraging behaviour'. Uplowman Village Hall
Saturday 19th	10:00	Plymouth	Plymouth Branch Honey Show Harewood House, Plympton, Plymouth. PL7 2AS
Sunday 20th	14:00	Tiverton	Branch Apiary Meeting, Knighsthayes Court, Tiverton
Saturday 26th	All day	Okehampton	Boniface Centre, Crediton - Okehampton Branch will be assisting with DBKA Devon Beekeepers Day
October:			
Saturdays	14:00	Newton Abbot	Saturday afternoon weekly hive inspections to commence (weather permitting!) All Welcome
Saturdays	14:00	Torbay	Branch Apiary Meeting, Cockington Apiary, near the Drum Inn
Tuesdays	11:00	North Devon	Every week from now through to October at the Horestone site. Bring a packed lunch and join us!
Thursday 8th	19:30	Okehampton	Talk by Simon O'Sullivan, Various approaches to combating the Yellow Legged Hornet threat, Whiddon Down Village Hall
Wednesday 21st	19:30	Tiverton	David Packham. Talk in person on 'Stratagies for Healthy Colonies'. Uplowman Village Hall
Tuesday, 27th	19:30	Torbay	Talk by Clare Densley & Martin Hann - Winter Preparation at the South Devon Food Hub



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