MAY 2026

The BUZZ

Newsletter of the Huntingdonshire Bee Keepers' Association

Cells, Swarms & Chaos

SPRING HAS STUNG!

Photo: HBKA Apiary

SPECIAL 'QUEEN' ISSUE

- Queen Cells - spot the difference
- The Test Frame: How to Use It
- Queen Mating Failures
- Dates For Your Diary

A Message From Our Chair – Helen Swain

chair@huntsbka.org.uk

The unusually warm weather has continued into May and our members are seeing lots of swarm activity. The bees in the HBKA apiary are also gathering lots of nectar so I anticipate a bumper spring crop of honey this year. If you are not sure whether you have a queen in your hive - there are no eggs and you can't find her majesty - you can use a test frame of eggs to work out what is going on. This newsletter carries a detailed description of the method to use.

We have lots of social events coming up for your diary in the next few month. Please do make a note and come along, we especially welcome our new beekeepers as its an opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues and share beekeeping stories. These vents include the AGM and workshop day on the 23rd May, the popular HBKA Annual BBQ on the 11th July, a bee tea on the 12th September and the honey show on the 26th September.

The AGM and work shop day will include a talk on Yellow Legged Asian Hornets, a discussion about how to manage wasps, some tips and tricks for managing your hive and some tales from the archives on the history of HBKA. Bee1st will also be in attendance selling beekeeping supplies. Contact them on 07889 20112399 and pre-order kit and they will bring it with them on the day.

Members of the HBKA committee get voted in by members every year. We have a current vacancy for the position of apiary manager (this role could be shared). If you would like to nominate yourself for consideration for this role or any of the other committee roles please email chair@huntsbka.org.uk by the 18th May.

Helen

Exciting Opportunities

APIARY MANAGER (S)

We are seeking an **Apiary Manager** to oversee our colonies at Hinchingbrooke Country Park. This role offers a strong opportunity to advance your practical beekeeping experience by moving from solo apiary maintenance to coordinating a larger apiary. Crucially, this is a management and decision-making position rather than a role where you do all the manual work yourself.

Your primary focus will be inspecting hives, diagnosing health issues, and planning necessary treatments or feeding. You will supervise and co-ordinate a team of HBKA volunteers who are available to assist with the physical apiary work. The required commitment is a few hours per week (usually split across two days) during the active bee season, however this time commitment can be flexed around the individual.

Additional responsibilities include organising the twice-annual honey extractions (working with the volunteer team) and ensuring public education sessions—such as Sunday demonstrations are covered. While you do not need to lead every public session personally, you will be responsible for delegating these duties among capable volunteers.

This role can be managed by a single individual or shared by two people who wish to work together. If you have appropriate beekeeping experience and good organizational skills, please contact chair@huntsbka.org.uk to discuss the position.

Two important HBKA roles that are a great opportunity to develop your bee skills

HONEY SHOW JUDGE

Following the retirement of long-standing judge Peter Gould, the HBKA is seeking an experienced beekeeper to serve as our new **Honey Show Judge.** This prestigious position requires a true honey enthusiast with a deep practical understanding of the craft, capable of upholding the high standards shaped by Peter's dedicated tenure.

Working alongside Association President and expert judge David Hetherington, you will be responsible for evaluating all honey and mead entries at our annual show. Beyond determining winners for trophies and the coveted Best in Show, the judge must provide constructive, educational feedback to inspire and guide our exhibitors.

We seek an impartial steward with a passion for excellence and a refined palate capable of distinguishing subtle notes, viscosity, and aroma. We don't need official certifications , we prioritize depth of beekeeping experience and love of honey!

This is not a role for the novice. We are looking for an experienced beekeeper—someone whose hands have known the weight of a full super and whose mind understands the tireless work behind every jar of honey and bottle of mead.

If you are interested in becoming our next Honey Show Judge please contact Chrissie Barnes at chrissieb4@aol.com

When Do You Need to See Your Queen?

THE CASE FOR EVIDENCE-BASED INSPECTIONS — AND KNOWING WHEN TO TRUST YOUR BEES

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON ANXIETIES IN BEEKEEPING IS THE FEELING THAT YOU MUST FIND AND IDENTIFY YOUR QUEEN AT EVERY INSPECTION. YOU DO NOT. BUT THERE ARE MOMENTS WHEN SEEING HER MATTERS ENORMOUSLY — AND KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE IS THE MARK OF A BEEKEEPER WHO IS WORKING WITH THEIR COLONY RATHER THAN AGAINST IT.

The queen is the hardest individual in the hive to locate at the best of times, and the urge to search for her at every visit can cause more disruption than it prevents. A lengthy, repeated hunt disturbs the brood nest, chills young larvae, and tests the patience of both beekeeper and bees. The good news is that in the vast majority of inspections, you do not need to see the queen at all — you simply need to see evidence that she is there and performing well.

Reading the signs of a laying queen. Eggs are your most reliable proxy. A fertilised egg in the base of a cell tells you the queen was present and laying within the last three days — the only time an egg can be placed there. If you can see eggs, you have your answer. A solid, consistent brood pattern, with few gaps and a good spread of capped brood, tells you that she has been laying well for weeks. These are the daily dispatches from a queen you may never need to clap eyes on.

When you do need to see her? There are specific circumstances that require more than circumstantial evidence. If you are planning to requeen the colony, you will need to find and remove the existing queen before introducing a new one — a failed introduction with a live queen present is a costly mistake.

Similarly, if you suspect laying workers (indicated by multiple eggs per cell, scattered drone brood on worker comb, or a colony that has been queenless for several weeks), confirming there is no queen present is essential before attempting a remedy. Swarm control manipulations such as the Pagden artificial swarm require you to know exactly which box the queen is in.

Marking and clipping. If you intend to clip your queen's wing — a legal and widely practised swarm control technique in the UK — you will obviously need to handle her directly. Marking her with the internationally recognised colour for the year (white, yellow, red, green, or blue in rotation) makes every subsequent inspection faster and more certain. A marked queen is found in seconds; an unmarked one may take ten minutes of careful searching. The one-time investment of finding and marking her pays dividends for the rest of her laying life.

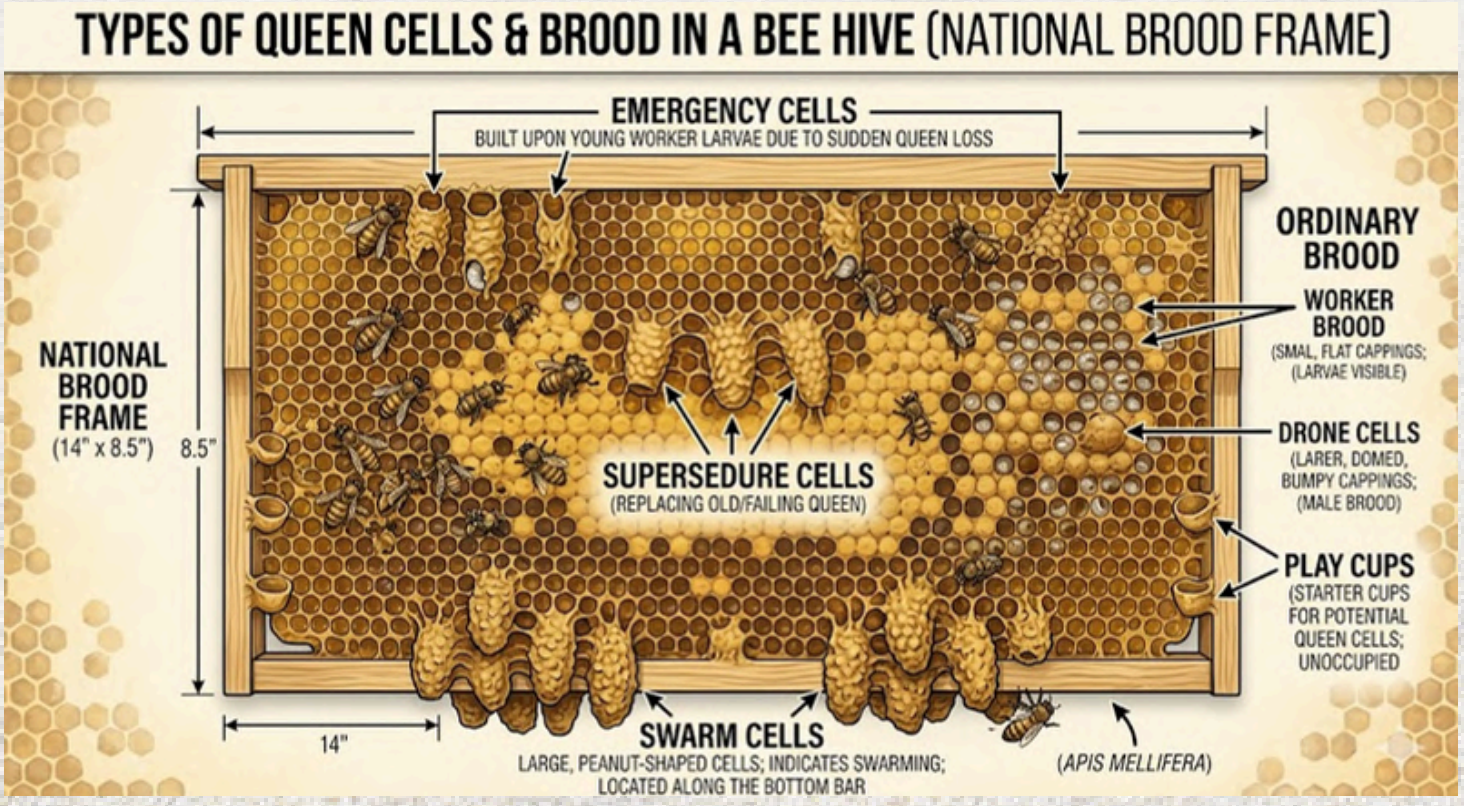
There are also quieter, more intuitive reasons to look. If a colony's character has shifted noticeably — from placid to defensive, or from productive to listless — seeing the queen and assessing her condition can be illuminating. An ageing queen, a drone-layer, or a queen with a damaged leg can all be identified on sight. Sometimes the colony's behaviour is the symptom and the queen is the cause.

The practical answer, then, is this: inspect for evidence of the queen at every visit, but search for the queen herself only when you have a specific reason to do so. Build the habit of reading eggs and brood rather than hunting a single bee across forty thousand. When the time comes that you genuinely need to find her, you will do so with calm purpose rather than desperate urgency — and that is when beekeeping begins to feel like a genuine craft.

Reading the Comb: Queen Cells Explained

WHAT YOUR BEES ARE TELLING YOU — AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

SPOTTING A QUEEN CELL CAN SET THE PULSE RACING. BUT NOT ALL QUEEN CELLS ARE THE SAME, AND MISREADING THEM IS ONE OF THE MOST COMMON — AND COSTLY — MISTAKES A BEEKEEPER CAN MAKE. UNDERSTANDING EXACTLY WHAT TYPE OF CELL YOU ARE LOOKING AT, AND WHY YOUR BEES HAVE BUILT IT, IS THE KEY TO MAKING THE RIGHT MANAGEMENT DECISION AT THE RIGHT TIME.



Every honeybee colony is, at its heart, a queen-rearing machine. The workers are capable of producing a new queen from an ordinary worker larva simply by bathing her in royal jelly and housing her in a specially constructed wax cell. The colony does this in three distinct circumstances — and it builds a noticeably different cell each time. Learning to tell them apart is one of the most valuable skills a beekeeper can develop.

Queen cells are among the most architecturally impressive structures in the hive. They are considerably larger than worker or drone cells, typically two to three centimetres in length, with a distinctive peanut or acorn shape and a heavily ribbed surface. Once you have seen one, you will not mistake it for anything else. The challenge is not spotting the cell — it is understanding what it means.

Emergency Queen Cells: The Colony in Crisis

When a colony loses its queen suddenly — through disease, accidental death during an inspection, or some other misfortune — the worker bees respond with impressive speed. Within hours they will begin converting existing worker brood cells into emergency queen cells, selecting larvae that are ideally no more than three days old (the point at which a larva must commit to its caste). The workers tear down the wax around these cells and begin building outward, constructing a queen cell directly over the existing comb.

How to recognise them. Emergency cells tend to appear scattered across the face of the brood comb rather than in any predictable location, because their position depends entirely on where suitable larvae happened to be when the queen was lost. They often look slightly rougher or more irregular than other queen cell types, with a somewhat hastily constructed rim at the base. You may find anything from one or two to a dozen or more, depending on how many young larvae were available.

What it means for the beekeeper. Finding emergency cells is a warning. Your colony is queenless and knows it. The first priority is to establish whether the queen is genuinely absent — look carefully for eggs and very young larvae. If none are present and the bees are behaving in the characteristic agitated manner of a queenless colony, your hive needs intervention. You may choose to allow the bees to raise their own queen from the emergency cells, introduce a mated queen from another colony, or add a frame of eggs from a strong hive to give them a fresh choice. Be aware that emergency queens are sometimes — though not always — of lower quality, since the larvae used may not have been at the optimal age.

"AN EMERGENCY CELL IS YOUR COLONY SENDING YOU AN URGENT MESSAGE. THE QUESTION IS WHETHER YOU RECEIVED IT IN TIME."

Supersedure Cells: A Quiet Revolution

Supersedure is the colony's planned and orderly replacement of a failing queen. It tends to occur when the existing queen is ageing, diseased, injured, or otherwise performing poorly — perhaps her laying pattern has become patchy or her pheromone output has diminished. The colony does not panic; it plans. Workers raise one or two — occasionally three — new queen cells, typically in the centre of the brood frame where the young brood is densest.

How to recognise them. Supersedure cells are usually fewer in number than either emergency or swarm cells, and their central position on the face of the comb is characteristic. They tend to be well-formed and point outward from the comb face. Crucially, the existing queen will often still be present in the hive — indeed, she and her successor may coexist for a short period before the older queen disappears.

What it means for the beekeeper. Supersedure is generally the most benign situation for the beekeeper. The colony is managing itself, and if left alone it will usually resolve the succession quietly. Many experienced beekeepers choose simply to leave the colony to it. It is worth checking that the queen cells are undamaged and that the colony is otherwise healthy. One common intervention is to leave only the best-formed cell and remove the others, reducing the risk of the virgin queens fighting before mating, though opinions vary on whether this is necessary. Supersedure colonies rarely swarm, which makes this the most straightforward queen cell scenario to manage.

Swarm Cells: All Hands on Deck

Swarming is the honeybee colony's primary means of reproduction, and swarm cells are the advance preparation for this momentous event. When a colony becomes populous and the queen's pheromones can no longer suppress the swarming impulse throughout the hive, the workers begin constructing queen cups — the precursors to full queen cells — along the bottom edges and lower margins of the brood frames. As swarming

Swarm cell (April 2026. Photo: KS. Shortly after this photo was taken at our HBKA Apiary the hive swarmed.

Supersedure cell (April 2026. Photo: KS

"A ROW OF SEALED SWARM CELLS ALONG THE BOTTOM BAR IS NOT A PROBLEM WAITING TO HAPPEN — IT IS A PROBLEM ALREADY IN PROGRESS."

becomes imminent, these cups are stocked with eggs and developed into sealed queen cells.

How to recognise them. Position is the key indicator: swarm cells are built predominantly along the bottom bar of the frame and tucked away in gaps at the sides. They hang downward, giving them a distinctive pendulous appearance. They are often found in groups, and a colony preparing to swarm may produce anything from five to twenty or more. The original queen is almost certainly still present and laying normally — she will leave with the swarm, typically just before or shortly after the first queen cell is capped.

What it means for the beekeeper. This is the scenario that demands the most urgent attention. Once swarm cells are sealed, swarming can occur at any time, and a colony that swarms loses a significant proportion of its population and honey-producing potential. Management options range from making an artificial swarm — physically splitting the colony to replicate the swarm process under controlled conditions — to all but one queen cell, ensuring adequate space by adding supers, and conducting more frequent inspections during the main season. The presence of charged (egg-containing) queen cups, even before they are fully developed, should be taken as an early warning.

Beyond the Cell Type: Other Clues to Read

Identifying the cell type is only half the picture. A thorough inspection should also consider the age and condition of any queen cells present. A sealed cell that is still plump and intact represents an active development. A cell that has been opened at the tip by workers typically means the virgin queen has emerged successfully; one chewed open from the side

usually indicates the workers have destroyed it because the colony decided it was surplus.

The broader condition of the colony matters too. A colony with swarm cells that is also very heavily populated, short on comb space, and containing a prolific queen is much more likely to follow through with swarming than a colony with a few cells and plenty of room to expand. **Always interpret queen cells in context - for example if you have cells in the middle of your frame and around the edges, this does not mean your bees are both superseduring and swarming. If all the signs indicate swarming then they will all be swarm cells.**

Word on Handling Queen Cells

Queen cells are fragile and should be treated with great care during inspections. The developing queen larva is suspended in royal jelly and is sensitive to orientation — a cell that is inverted even briefly may result in the larva drowning. When moving or transporting a frame bearing a queen cell, always keep it vertical. Avoid pressing the cell or holding the frame in a way that might subject the cell to vibration. If you need to cut a cell out for use in another colony, use a sharp, warm knife and leave a generous margin of wax around the base.

Final Thoughts

Queen cells are not problems to be automatically destroyed. They are communications from your colony, and each type carries a different message. The emergency cell says: we are in trouble, please help. The supersedure cell says: we are taking care of this ourselves, trust us. The swarm cell says: we are about to do something you probably want to manage. Reading them correctly, and responding appropriately, is at the heart of good beekeeping.

Regular, systematic inspections — at least every five to seven days during the swarm season — are the single most effective way to stay ahead of the colony's queen-rearing plans. Know what you are looking for, know what it means, and you will be better placed to work with your bees rather than against them.

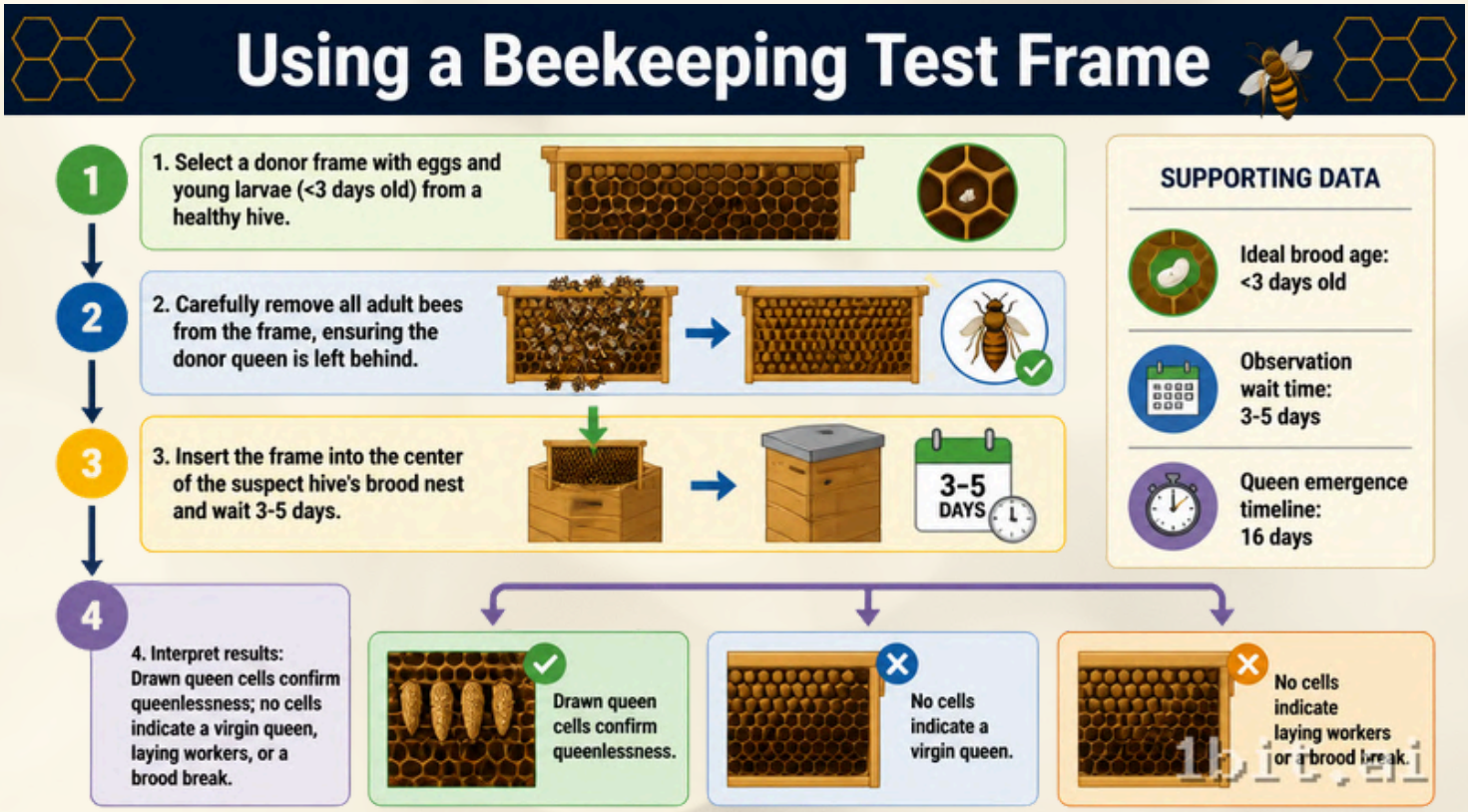
Play Cups

A play cup (also called a queen cup) is a small, shallow, acorn-shaped wax structure built speculatively by workers on the face or lower edge of the comb — an empty cradle with no egg or larva inside. Colonies routinely maintain a handful at any one time, and their presence alone is no cause for concern.

The crucial difference between a play cup and the three queen cell types is one of commitment: a play cup contains nothing. The moment workers deposit a larva and begin feeding it royal jelly, it becomes a true queen cell. Think of play cups as the colony keeping its options open — it is only when one is charged with an egg or young larva that you need to start working out which of the three scenarios you are dealing with.

What Is a Test Frame and How to Use One?

ONE OF THE MOST RELIABLE TOOLS IN A BEEKEEPER'S ARSENAL ISN'T A GADGET YOU BUY — IT'S A FRAME OF BROOD YOU PREPARE YOURSELF.



A test frame is simply a frame which must contain eggs and larvae no more than three days old — taken from a healthy colony and introduced into a queenless hive. The bees' response to it tells you, with remarkable clarity, whether your colony has a laying queen or the means to raise one.

How Do You Know You Need One?

Suspecting a queenless colony is the most common reason to use a test frame, but knowing when to act takes a little patience. Signs that should put you on alert include:

•A colony that seems unsettled or unusually noisy when you open it

•A marked reduction in egg-laying with patches of older, capped brood but nothing fresh

•The absence of a visible queen during an inspection

•Early signs of laying workers —typically eggs placed on cells walls rather than the base (note multiple eggs in the bottom cell typically indicate a queen as she gets going and not a laying worker).

Don't rush to intervene after a single inspection. A queen can be hard to spot, and colonies can briefly appear queenless - for example, during a natural supersedure, after swarming or a natural brood break (especially when the nectar flow stops). Wait four to seven days after your initial concern before deploying a test frame, unless the signs are unambiguous.

Preparing Your Test Frame

Select a strong, healthy donor colony — ideally your best stock. You are looking for a frame that contains a good spread of open brood, with visible eggs and young larvae at various stages. Avoid frames with predominantly capped brood, as older larvae give the bees less flexibility in raising emergency queen cells.

Inspect the frame carefully before removing it. Ensure the queen is not on it — check thoroughly, as introducing your donor queen into a queenless hive by accident would be a costly mistake. Gently brush or shake any bees from the frame back into the donor hive, so you transfer the brood but not the colony's nurse bees.

Inserting the Test Frame

Place the prepared frame into the centre of the brood nest of your suspect colony. Position it between existing frames of brood or food — the bees need to be able to keep it warm and tend to it properly. Replace the hive roof and leave the colony undisturbed.

Ideally wait three-five days before your first check.

Test Frames (cont..)

A TEST FRAME IS ONE OF THOSE BEAUTIFULLY SIMPLE TECHNIQUES THAT GIVES YOU REAL INFORMATION RATHER THAN GUESSWORK. USED CORRECTLY, IT REMOVES THE ANXIETY OF NOT KNOWING AND PUTS YOU BACK IN CONTROL — WHICH, AS ANY BEEKEEPER KNOWS, IS EXACTLY WHERE YOU WANT TO BE.

What to Watch For

When you return, the bees' behaviour will tell you what you need to know:

Queen cells are being drawn — This is your confirmation. If the colony is queenless, the workers will begin drawing queen cells on the young larvae within 24–48 hours. You may see the characteristic peanut-shaped wax being built around selected cells. This is a healthy, positive response.

No queen cells appear — If after 48–72 hours there are no queen cells and the brood looks untended or chilled, the colony may already have a virgin queen present (who suppresses queen-rearing), or laying workers may be complicating things. A second test frame may be needed.

The frame is ignored or destroyed — Occasionally a colony with laying workers will tear down introduced brood.

If queen cells are successfully drawn and you choose to let the colony raise its own queen, mark your calendar. From the point the egg was laid, you have roughly 16 days to emergence, then a further 10–14 days for mating flights and the onset of laying.

Patience here is essential — opening the hive too frequently during this period risks damaging a virgin queen or disrupting mating. We recommend leaving your hive undisturbed for three weeks.

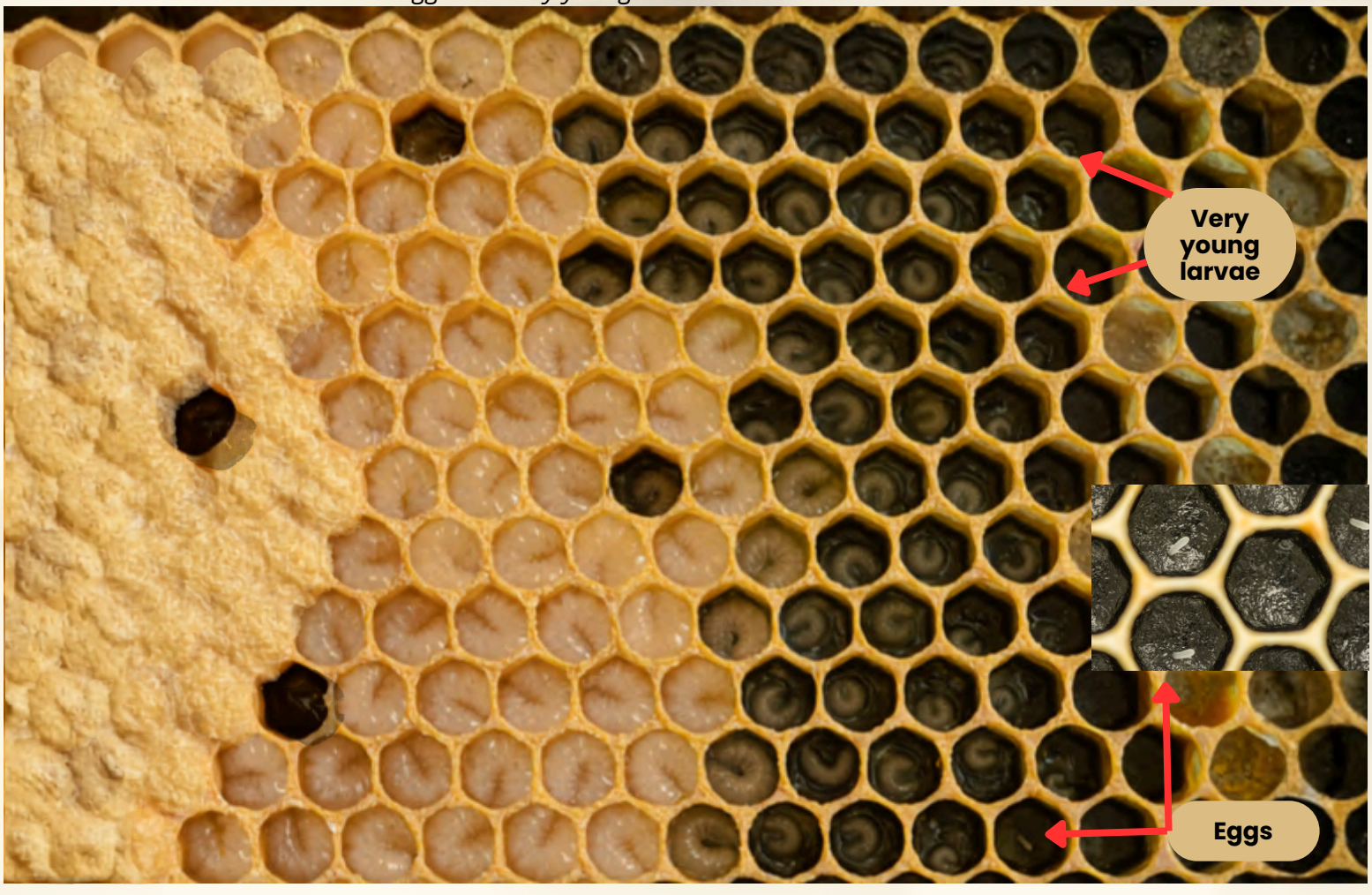
A Few Things to Be Mindful Of

• Always check for your donor hive queen before removing the frame — twice if necessary

•Don't introduce a test frame in very cold or wet weather — the colony may struggle to maintain the brood temperature needed to raise queens successfully

• One test frame is usually enough — adding more won't speed up the process and risks chilling brood

Photo: Ideal test frame contains eggs and very young larvae

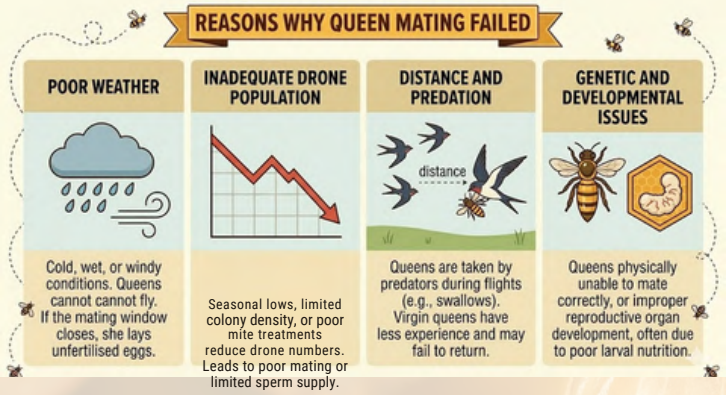


Queen Mating Failure

WHY IT HAPPENS AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR COLONY

Queen mating is one of the most precarious events in the beekeeping calendar. Unlike most of what happens inside the hive, it takes place entirely beyond your control — out in the open air, dependent on weather, timing, and the presence of healthy drones. When it goes wrong, the consequences for your colony can range from frustrating to devastating, depending on the time of year.

Why Does Mating Failure Happen?
A virgin queen typically takes her mating flights between five and fifteen days after emergence. During this window, she will make several orientation flights followed by one or more mating flights, during which she mates with multiple drones — usually between ten and twenty — high in the air at drone congregation areas. Once mated, she stores the sperm in her spermatheca, a small organ that will supply her for the rest of her laying life. The diagram below shows the most common reasons why a queen mating may fail.



How Do You Recognise Mating Failure?
The first sign is usually a delay in laying. Under normal circumstances, a mated queen will begin laying within one to two weeks of emergence. If you inspect a colony and find no eggs well beyond this point — particularly if the queen is visibly present and moving freely — mating failure should be your first suspicion.

The clearest indicator is drone brood in worker cells, sometimes called a "pepper pot" pattern — scattered, domed cappings across the comb where you would expect continuous worker brood with no gaps. This is the signature of a drone-laying queen: one who is laying unfertilised eggs that develop only into drones.

You may also notice the colony becoming progressively smaller, increasingly unsettled, and in some cases, the presence of laying workers developing alongside or in place of a failing queen.

"A newly emerged queen is full of promise. But between emergence and her first eggs lies a window of uncertainty that every beekeeper should understand."

What Does This Mean in Summer?
A mating failure identified in summer gives you the most options and the most time to act. The colony still has a viable population of bees, foraging is active, and there is time to requeen before the season turns.

Your options include:
•Introducing a mated queen from a reputable supplier
•Uniting the failing colony with a strong queen-right colony using the newspaper method
•Introducing a ripe queen cell from another hive, having first removed the drone layer

Act promptly. Every week a drone-laying queen is in residence, the worker population declines as bees die and no new workers are raised to replace them. A colony left too long becomes increasingly difficult to save, as laying workers can develop and make requeening substantially harder.

What Does This Mean in Winter?
A mating failure heading into autumn or winter is a far more serious situation. As the season closes, drone populations collapse, suppliers stop shipping mated queens, and the colony's window for natural recovery shuts entirely.

A drone-laying queen going into winter means the colony will dwindle rapidly. With no fertilised eggs being laid, no new workers are produced. The existing bees age and die through the autumn, and by the time winter arrives the cluster may be too small to survive the cold — even with adequate stores.

If you identify a drone-laying queen late in the season, your realistic options are limited. Uniting with a strong queen-right colony is usually the best course — it saves the bees and their stores, and strengthens your overwintering colony. Attempting to introduce a mated queen late in the season can be done, but acceptance rates drop significantly as temperatures fall and colonies become more defensive.

The lesson is clear: late summer inspections matter. Catching a mating failure in August still gives you meaningful options. Catching it in October rarely does.

Prevention and Vigilance
You cannot control the weather, but you can manage the risks. Ensuring your colonies have access to drone-producing neighbours, raising queens during the peak mating season (May to July in the UK), and keeping detailed inspection records all reduce the likelihood of a mating failure going undetected until it is too late.
When raising queens — whether from swarm cells, emergency cells, or grafts — always mark your calendar from the point of emergence and set a firm inspection date. If a queen has not begun laying within three weeks of emergence, investigate immediately.

Update from the HBKA Apiary

The past weeks at the HBKA Apiary have been eventful, to say the least. Ongoing improvement works at Hinchingbrooke Country Park are a welcome development in the long run, but they have created some immediate headaches — finding a parking spot and then hauling water, frames, and equipment across to the apiary has tested our mettle but we hope now to have some help from the park rangers who have promised the services of their buggies to aid heavy deliveries.

More significantly, the proximity of the forest school next door to the Apiary has caused real difficulties during inspections. With the bees in notably feisty mood — as is entirely typical during swarm season — we were forced to abandon one inspection entirely after reports of children being stung nearby. It is a situation we are keeping a close eye on as the season progresses.

On the swarm front, the Apiary has been as busy as everywhere else this year. As we sat planning our visit to one of our hives to do some swarm control, we were treated to the rather spectacular — if slightly alarming — sight of one colony issuing a swarm and disappearing high into the trees alongside the apiary, well beyond any reasonable hope of collection. A second swarm followed over the weekend from a hive that had been bristling with queen cells during that curtailed inspection, a reminder, if one were needed, of what happens when circumstances prevent us from completing our rounds. We did take off eight frames of capped honey so the bees have certainly been taking advantage of all the blossom and good weather.

On a more positive note, we were delighted to welcome a new intake of beginners to the Association recently. Helen is working hard to arrange practical sessions for the group, though given the current conditions at the Park — lively bees, logistical constraints, and the forest school question still to resolve — she may have her work cut out.

As ever we are keen to have members volunteer some time for the Apiary especially during the upcoming busy summer months. If you can spare some time please email the apiary address. We can be flexible around schedules!

email:
apiary@huntsbka.org.uk

From Our Archives

AND OTHER MORE ANCIENT MUSINGS....

This short article caught my eye given the topicality of swarming right now! This is from our September 1991 HBKA Newsletter and refers to a Court of Appeal case from 1939 concerning the property rights over swarming bees! Mr Kearry, owned a swarm of bees that left his premises and landed on a hedge in the garden of Mr Pattison. When Mr Kearry tried to retrieve said bees, Mr Pattison refused him access and the bees later flew elsewhere. Mr Kearry sued for £4 arguing the bees remained his property. The Institutes of Justinian were published in 533AD showing that ancient beekeepers faced similar issues that we do today. In the UK (Common Law): The principle remains remarkably similar. Bees are considered wild animals, and a beekeeper retains ownership of a swarm only as long as they are in active pursuit of it and not trespassing without permission.

Sept 1991

The ownership of swarms

The first matter to be considered is the ownership of swarms, which follows Roman Law. The Roman Law provided that bees remained yours as long as you kept them in sight.

Consider the following quotation: 'Bees are naturally wild. Hence if a swarm settles on your tree, it is no more yours, until you have hived it, than the birds which build their nests there. Consequently, if it is hived by someone else it becomes his property. A swarm which has flown from your hive is considered to remain yours as long as it is in your sight and easy of pursuit; otherwise it belongs to the first person who catches it.'. This passage from the *Institutes of Justinian* Bk II I 14 was quoted in the case of *Kearry v Pattinson* (1939 1 K.B. 471.

It is noteworthy that almost 1700 years have passed since the times of the Emperor Justinian in the 3rd century A.D., and it still summarizes English law today. The ownership of a swarm is not absolute; it is qualified to the extent that honeybees are classed as wild creatures and their ownership is conditional upon their being detained or confined. They do not, however, fall into the category of dangerous animals which, in law, must be confined at all times.

In the case of honeybees the cessation of the intention of returning to the hive is normally considered as the termination of ownership. A queenright swarm, by its very nature and purpose, has no instinct to return to the hive, but, nonetheless, following Roman Law, ownership remains as long as the swarm in within sight, or easy pursuit, of the beekeeper, and is followed with reasonable speed.

And yet more ancient musings....

Charles Nettleship White was the founder of the HBKA and we wrote about him more extensively in last month's newsletter. He was a regular correspondent to the British Bee Journal. Here we can see back in 1883 Huntingdonshire had plentiful numbers of beekeepers although many were still practicing beekeeping from skeps and older fashioned equipment. Charles White was himself a prodigious inventor and writer of beekeeping interest. He invented the 'Ivo Hive' one of the earlier moveable frame hives (here illustrated in his book 'Pleasurable Bee-Keeping, 1895).

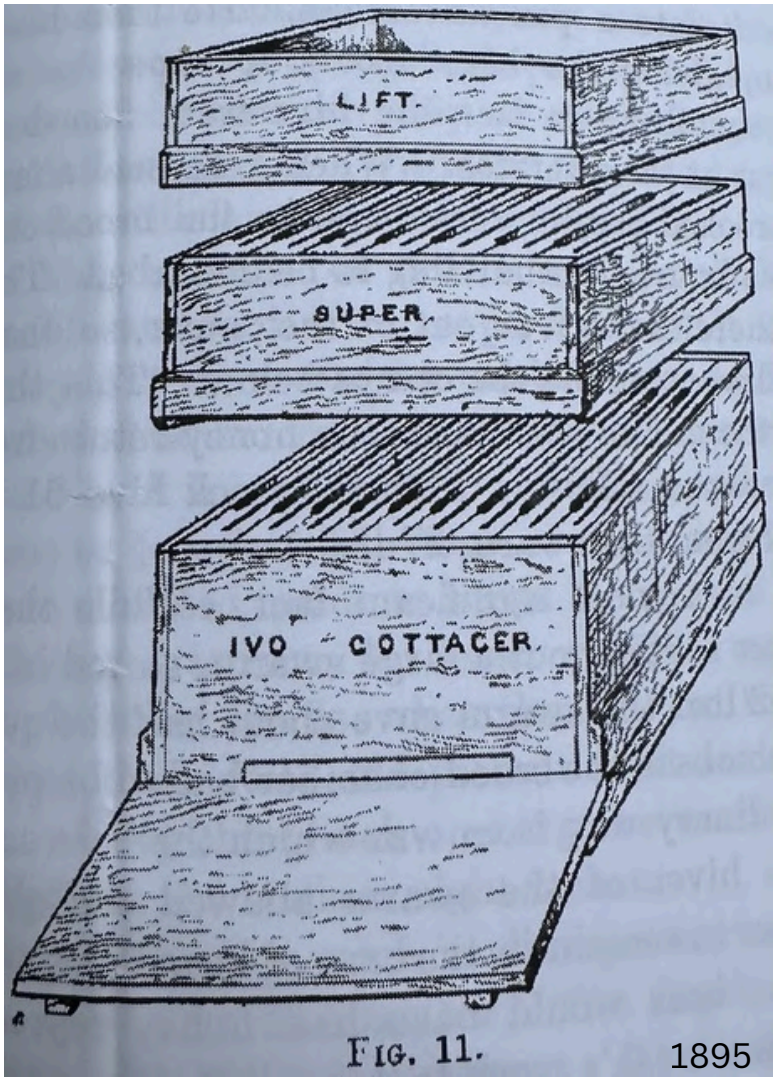


FIG. 11. 1895

1 May 1883

Hunts, Somersham, April 21.—The weather of the present month, with the exception of the last few days, has been very dry and warm, bees have consequently been very busy. In and around Somersham, within a radius of over five miles, there are at the least 250 stocks of bees, but one stock, excepting my own, only in a bar-frame hive, and that of home manufacture. In and around Huntingdon there are many advanced bee-keepers. I visited the apiaries of Mr. Allen, Godmanchester, and Messrs. Sharp and Howard, Huntingdon, to-day, and was pleased with what I saw, particularly the many inventions of Mr. Howard, one of which was a capital substitute for distance pins, &c., viz. a thin piece of wood 1¼ inches long screwed near the ends, but at right angles to the frames. When extracting, this piece of wood is pushed in a line with the top bar of the frame. I have now visited most of the bee-keepers in this neighbourhood, and have found many strong stocks, more moderately strong, and some very weak. The mortality amongst bees has been great this spring, even in the apiaries of advanced bee-keepers stocks have been lost.—C. N. W. *Somersham.*

The Mr Howard referenced is likely to be John Howard (1791-1878) and his son James Howard (1821-1889). They were the inventor of the 'Holburn Hive' and known for producing high quality moveable-frame hives and associated hardware like wax extractors. On the following page we can see an advert from the 1912 Gamages General Catalogue (a pioneer of mail-order business). Gamages operated their own apiary in Finchley to serve as a demonstration site for the equipment they sold. Both J.H. Howard and C.N. White regularly advertised their wares in the Bee Journal (seen opposite) as well as in the Gamages catalogue.

RICHARD BROWN'S PORTABLE APIARY,
(Registered No. 44063.)
Will be exhibited at ST. IVES FLOWER SHOW on THURSDAY the 5th of AUGUST.
CONSISTS of Four complete Bee-hives of Ten Bars each, Association size, arranged with Double Walls outside, which will retain the heat and add to the comfort and health of the Bees through the winter.
Mr. JOSEPH PARREN, Builder, of Earith, is the maker of the Apiary, and will take Orders for it.
RICHARD BROWN, Earith, Huntingdonshire. (153)

J. H. HOWARD,
EXPERT B.B.K.A.
Manufacturer, THE APIARY, HOLME, PETERBOROUGH.
By authority—Simmins' Hives, Crates, Sections, &c.
ASSOCIATION STANDARD SAW-CUT BAR FRAMES, 1/- per doz.
Send for Illustrated Guide and Catalogue, Post Free. (93)

C. N. WHITE, First Class Certificated Expert, The Schoolhouse, Somersham, Hunts, is open to Engagements in any part of England, at a day's notice. Stocks in straw Skeps, 14/-, packing included; English or Ligurian Stocks, with or without Bar-frame Hives, Nuclei, and Queens, also for sale. Reliable answers to Queries on Bee-management, by return, three stamps.

ENGAGEMENTS required, from Aug. 8th or 15th to Aug. 23rd, by C. N. WHITE, Certified Expert, Somersham, Hunts. n 50

COMB HONEY FOR SALE.—Two Hundred 1-lb. Sections beautifully sealed. What offers? Apply A. S. BRAND, Sawston, Cambridge. n 51

J. H. HOWARD,
MANUFACTURER, THE "MODEL APIARY,"
HOLME, PETERBOROUGH,
LECTURER AND CERTIFIED EXPERT,
SOLICITS APPLICATION FOR HIS
CATALOGUE (POST FREE),
IN WHICH FIRST PRIZE APPLIANCES AND ALL IMPLEMENTS PERTAINING TO SUCCESS IN BEE CULTURE ARE SHOWN.
THE "IVO" HIVE is manufactured by J. H. H., under special directions and permit from Mr C N WHITE.

Gamages General Catalogue (1878-1972)

1912

9/6

No. 1.

THE "GAMAGE" HIVE—Dovetailed

Exact as illustration, and is certainly the finest Hive ever made at the price. It consists of a Floor Board on legs, Brood Box containing 10 Standard Frames, a Dummy Board, 1 9-in. Telescopic Lift, which gives sufficient room to tier two racks of sections, and when reversed forms a double walled Hive for wintering. Roof as illustrated, and one set of adjustable entrances and one Quilt.

Price ... 9 6

If fitted with full sheets of Foundation wired in, 12/-

If with Section Rack, 5/- extra. Full Sheets 4/6. Painted 3 coats Oil Paint, 2/6 extra.

This Hive should not be classed with those shown at a few pence reduction.

Any Hive listed herein can have the roof covered with Grey Government Duck Canvas, painted both sides with non-absorbent fluid paint, which renders them absolutely Waterproof.

TO ORDER ONLY.

1/6 extra.

22/6

No. 3.

GAMAGES' BEGINNER'S COMPLETE OUTFIT

Consists of the "Holborn" Hive, fitted with full sheets "Weed" Foundation throughout, 1 "Holborn" or "Perfection" Feeder, 1 "Holborn" Smoker, 1 Excluder, 1 Bee Veil, Books on "How to make Bees Pay" and "Modern Bee-keeping."

Complete in Crate for 22/6 Carriage paid. 2/6 extra.

If painted 3 coats Oil Paint, 2/6 extra. Requires no recommendation whatever, it sells because it is "Gamage" value.

12/6

No. 2.

THE "HOLBORN" HIVE

Similar in build to our No. 1 Hive, but not Dovetailed. It is made from well-seasoned Pine, and of superior finish. The fittings are precisely the same, but with a Section Rack and the Queen Excluder added. Price ... 12/6

Frames and Sections fitted with full sheets of "Weed" Foundation, wired in, 16/6

Painted 3 coats Oil Paint, 2/6 extra.

Special Prices to Schools, Colleges and Institutes for Complete Outfits of Bee Appliances for Natural History Tuition

APPLY FOR TERMS.

14/6

No. 4.

THE "FINCHLEY" HIVE

Is a specially strong made Hive and made from well-seasoned Pine. It has been greatly improved in many ways and now ranks as a middle-rate Hive. It is exceptionally well made, has double walls, back and front, and will take 12 Standard Frames and 2 Dummy Boards in the Brood Box. It is fitted to Brood Box with metal runners and is sent out with a 9-in. lift, which has detachable section-rack, adaptable for shallow Frames, in addition to sections.

Complete with Section Rack, 1 Quilt, 1 Dummy and Queen Excluder, it is considered very fine value at the price it is offered. As above, 14/6

With full sheets, "Weed" Foundation in Frames and wired in, 18/6

If Painted 3 coats Oil Paint, 3/- extra.

All the above Hives are made in our own workshops, and when painted by us are treated with a waterproof antiseptic priming which renders them absolutely impervious to rain and steam, the underpart of Floor Boards and legs are creosoted. When next you are in London call and see our Roof Apiary.

The Wider World of Bees

In the The Wider World of Bees, we highlight UK information, updates and research that could influence your beekeeping. Whether adjusting habitats or refining varroa treatments, these stories offer actionable insights.

Varroa-resistant hybrid bees in California

A study from the University of California Riverside found that a unique hybrid honeybee thriving in Southern California is showing remarkable resilience against Varroa mites. Colonies led by locally raised hybrid queens carried around 68% fewer mites on average compared to standard commercial colonies, and are far less likely to require chemical treatments. Intriguingly, the resistance appears to begin early in life, with larvae that are less attractive to the parasites in the first place. (Scientific Reports, 2026)

Honey authentication using DNA sequencing

A paper published on 13 April 2026 in the journal 'Science of Food' has highlighted the growing problem of honey adulteration in the global market and the need for better tools to detect it. Researchers Clement Pellegrin, Thomas Linsinger, and Lourdes Alvarellos examined the potential of Next Generation Sequencing (NGS) — a cutting-edge DNA analysis technique — as a means of verifying honey authenticity. As the honey market has grown into a substantial global industry, so too has the incentive to adulterate products, and existing analytical methods have struggled to keep pace. The study positions NGS as a promising solution, capable of identifying the true botanical and geographical origins of honey in ways that older methods cannot. For beekeepers and honey producers who take pride in the quality and provenance of their product, it is encouraging to see science developing the tools to protect that integrity.

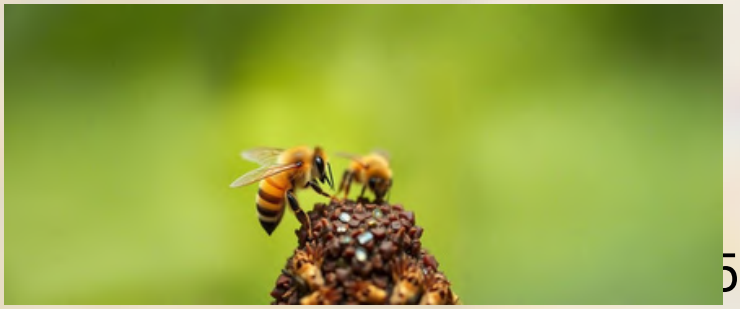
(Source: Pellegrin, C., Linsinger, T.P.J. & Alvarellos, L. (2026). npj Science of Food, Volume 10, Article 129. Published 13 April 2026.)

Bees Can Count!

Honeybees have long surprised scientists with their cognitive abilities, but a study published in late April in the prestigious Proceedings of the Royal Society B has added fresh weight to the argument that bees are far more than simple instinct-driven insects. Researchers at Monash University, led by Dr Scarlett Howard, confirmed that honeybees possess genuine numerical cognition — in other words, they can actually distinguish between quantities, not simply react to differences in visual patterns as some critics had previously suggested. The team addressed those criticisms head-on by designing their experiments around the bee's own unique sensory and perceptual world rather than imposing a human-centric framework, and the results were clear.

What makes the findings particularly satisfying is that they close a longstanding debate. Sceptics had argued that earlier experiments showing bees could "count" were flawed — that the bees were merely responding to subtle differences in the visual appearance of stimuli rather than the actual number of objects. This new research ruled that out by accounting for how bees actually see and process the world around them. As the researchers noted, "the bees always surprise us with how they move through the world, interpret our questions, and make decisions." For beekeepers, it is a timely reminder that the creatures we work with every week are cognitively remarkable — and perhaps deserve even more of our respect and fascination than we already give them.

(Source: Zanon et al. (2026). Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, published 22 April 2026.)



recipecorner

Pear and Halva Loaf with Pecans, Honey & Maple

I couldnt resist this recipe as it looked so amazing. I did have to google Halva and found it easily available online and in most supermarkets. Its based on a recipe by Sam Linsell (Drizzle & Dip) and Donna Hay.

Ingredients

Loaf

- 100 gms salted butter
- ½ cup honey
- ¼ cup maple syrup (or extra honey)
- 2 large free-range eggs
- ¼ cup milk
- 2 tsp vanilla extract
- 150 g halva crumbled
- 1 cup plain flour
- 1 cup whole wheat flour
- 1 Tbsp baking soda
- ½ tsp salt
- ½ tsp baking powder
- 2 – 3 large pears about 500gms in total peeled, cored and chopped
- ½ cup pecans finely chopped

Crumble:

- 40g melted butter
- ½ cup nut or plain flour
- 2 Tbsp brown sugar
- 2 Tbsp cocoa nibs
- ¼ cup pecans
- Sea salt flakes

Nutritional Info (approximate per serving/slice)
- Calories: 315 kcal
- Fat: 17g
- Carbohydrates: 38 (sugars 23g)
- Protein: 5g
- Salt: 0.6g (approx.)

Prep and Cook Time
Prep time: 20 mins
Cook time: 1 hr 30 mins

Method

- Preheat the oven to 160C (325 F and line a large loaf tin (21cm x 11cm) with baking paper.
- Melt the butter in a small pot and cook for about 4 minutes until it starts to go brown. Pour this into a bowl and allow to cool slightly.
- Add the honey, maple syrup, eggs, milk and vanilla to the bowl and whisk until well combined.
- Add the dry ingredients and crumbled halva and whisk until smooth.
- Stir through the chopped pears and pecans and then empty the mixture into the lined loaf tin and spread it evenly with a spatula.
- Make the crumble by mixing all of the crumble ingredients in a bowl and then spreading this over the surface of the loaf batter.
- Bake the loaf for 1 hour and 35 – 45 minutes and until the cake is done. The loaf should be firm to the touch and when a knife is inserted in the middle and it comes out clean. If it is not done continue to bake until it is. Cover the top loosely with a piece of tin foil to prevent over-browning if necessary.

Photos: Sam Linsell - Drizzle & Dip

MONTHLY TO DO'S MAY

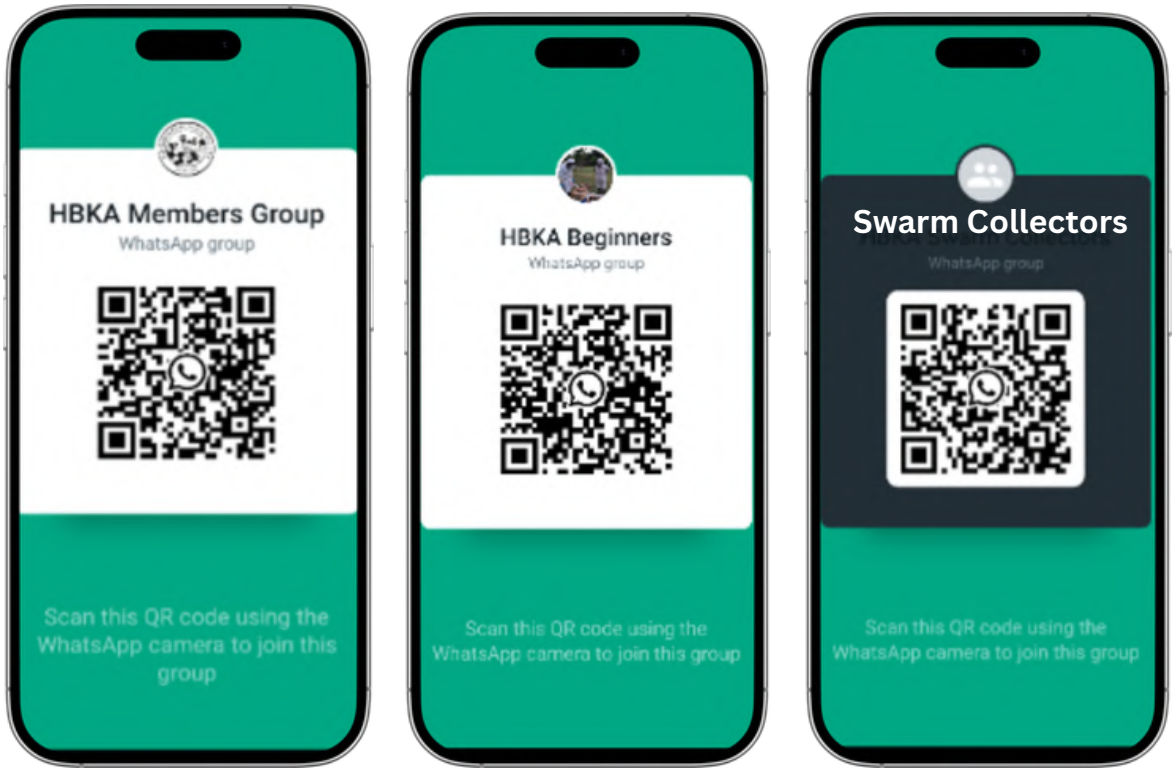
- Inspect every five to seven days without fail throughout the month
- Check for charged queen cups and queen cells at every inspection
- Add supers before they are needed, not after — don't let the bees run out of space
- Have an artificial swarm plan ready and the equipment to execute it
- Assess brood pattern at each inspection — it should be dense and consistent
- Check for signs of European Foulbrood, which peaks in spring
- Monitor Varroa levels if not done recently
- Look for signs of chalkbrood during any cool, damp spells
- Remove feeders if still in place — nectar should be coming in strongly now
- Add supers as needed; in a good May the main flow can fill them quickly
- Ensure supers have drawn comb ready where possible to encourage bees upward
- Note the condition and laying pattern of your queen at every visit
- If making splits or raising queens, May is ideal with plenty of drones available for mating
- Keep spare brood boxes, floors, and frames on hand for swarm control splits
- Clean and sterilise any equipment coming out of winter storage
- Keep a record of every inspection
- If near oil seed rape crops, get supers off and extracted promptly — OSR honey granulates rapidly in the comb and can become almost impossible to extract if left too long

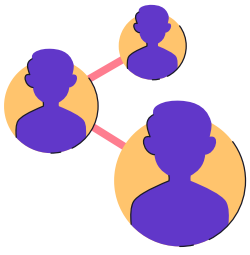
SAVE THE DATE

Date/Time	Event
23rd May 10am - 4.00pm	HBKA AGM and Spring Workshop, WI Huntingdon (doors open 945 for coffee before our meeting starts)
11th July	The annual and very popular HBKA BBQ - the highlight of our social calendar with deserts to die for. If you ask nicely Paul may even be persuaded to demonstrate his bee dance - hosted by Paul How and Stuart Dobson and family - a great opportunity to share bee stories with other beekeepers.
13th -19th July	Bees' Needs Week
12th September	Bee Tea hosted by Jackie & Ian Taylor Baldwin, Ramsey
27th September	Annual HBKA Honey Show, The Raptor Centre, St Ives

Stay CONNECTED

There are numerous ways you can stay in touch with what's happening in the HBKA. We have this newsletter which we send out by email (and hope to make available digitally in the near future); we have our website where you can find a treasure trove of resources HBKA Website and we have our WhatsApp groups where you can find instant news and views from your fellow members. There are some great chats as members swap ideas and thoughts on everything from wasp control to winter storage bags! We have a general members group, one dedicated to swarms and another for our beginners. Scan the QR codes or use the links provided. Please note that your phone number will be visible to other members of the HBKA Members Group.





Do you have news, photographs or information that would be good to share with your fellow beekeepers? Share top tips, ask questions or seen something interesting in your hives? Email us at newsletter@huntsbka.org.uk