

Becoming a Beekeeper

By David Williamson, Yorkshire BKA

As a new beekeeper that started out by 'going it alone' then realised the benefits of joining an association, David Williamson has learned much and hopes to pass on his knowledge to other new beekeepers.



Photo: Christine Knott

Before becoming a beekeeper it may be sensible to consider a few things such as:

- Do bees scare you?
- Do you have enough space to keep honey bees?
- What type of hive will be best for you?
- Will you be able to lift and move heavy boxes full of nectar, honey, bee bread and bees?
- Where will you get your bees from?
- And most importantly, do you know enough about honey bees in order to look after them properly?

If you are new to beekeeping and would like answers to these questions and more, then enrol on a beekeeping course; your local BKA may run one. Alternatively, an internet search should help you to locate a suitable course near you.

Try before you buy!

I wish I had been given this advice before I started beekeeping. I just thought: 'how hard can it be? All I need to do is to obtain a couple of hives full of bees, put them in the back garden, get some beekeeping gear and have a look at them now and again before harvesting some honey. Easy peasy right? Well no! Like any hobby it is never as easy as it first seems.

So, unfortunately, I started looking after honey bees before I had actually learnt how to do so; it is a good job that the bees knew what they were doing. I admit that I did not consider any of the questions that I posed earlier and I ended up with two WBC hives situated in a corner of my garden, plus two nuclei full of honey bees. I did not even know how to get the bees into the hives, or what to do after they were in. 'YouTube' helped me there, but I was really wary about handling the bees and I was not sure that I had installed them correctly.

The benefits of attending a course

Shortly afterwards I located, enrolled upon and attended a local beekeeping course, which I thoroughly enjoyed, and where I learned about honey bees and gained some invaluable experience of working with them.

My first session was exhilarating, although I did feel a bit weird while walking and standing around in my new spacesuit, wellingtons and thick leather gloves. I did not think anything could spoil the mood. I was happily chatting to a fellow student on the way back from the apiary, when I removed my hood and got stung in the neck by a honey bee that had caught a ride on my suit! This did not put me off becoming a new beekeeper, but now, when possible, I ask someone to check my suit for bees before removing the hood. I did not know that was a good idea at the time.

As for other things that I should have known before buying honey bees: bees do not scare me; I did not have enough space to expand my apiary; I chose the wrong hive types to start with; I can lift beehive boxes, but they are heavy; I should have bought local bees, but I did not, and I did not know enough about honey bees to become a beekeeper.

Experience grows from mistakes

I have made lots of mistakes, and I have learned from those mistakes, but I have also lost bees due to those mistakes. I have now become a better beekeeper due to hard-earned knowledge and experience, but, as I have advised above, I should have attended a beekeeping course before I obtained honey bees. Foreknowledge is a wonderful thing.

In the next few months I will tell you more about the mistakes that I have made and, hopefully, it will help you to avoid making the same ones.

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