

THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Truth about Bees

By Don Honey, Newbury and District BKA

So why would anyone want to keep bees? Everyone knows that bees can sting, and in the worse case scenario, can cause anaphylactic shock and possibly death!

If beekeeping is to become more popular and appealing to a wider market then surely promoting the hobby should be encouraged. If you are not convinced by my rantings about the beauty and benefits of the WBC and how they would enhance any garden, then you could, at a push, talk about your own personal choice of hive. Either way you can put the case, either by talking about honey and wax production, bee conservation, pollination or whatever has turned you on to keeping bees.

Too Many Myths

You don't have to be old and have a beard to be a beekeeper. Certainly if we want to encourage the female persuasion to become beekeepers, then clearly we need to dispel this myth sooner rather than later! But where does it all start? The answer is looking us straight in the face. It is "US" beekeepers who need to spread the word. As a graphic designer, I've spent my working life promoting

all sorts of businesses, often with vast budgets. But to be truthful, the best advertising is by word of mouth, and it's free. I know the Government, universities and other agricultural establishments play their part, but surely if you are as passionate as I am about beekeeping, then a word or two to promote the hobby is worth a try. I unashamedly want to promote my beekeeping book "Buzzing with ideas" in an attempt to encourage more "Ordinary" people to consider the hobby. It's coming up to Christmas and there are an awful lot of people out there who are really difficult to buy for. So think outside the box and buy a beekeeping book, even if it's not mine! But if you don't fancy risking getting some funny looks by doing this, then at least talk about our hobby every time you sell or pass on a jar of honey. Or after Christmas, make a New Year's resolution to try and make a convert or two.

The Ugly

The reality of keeping bees is that at some point you will get stung. Take a look at the result of me having trapped a bee in my suit. There is no room for complacency, but



One little bee sting can do this

similarly if you stick to a few basic rules, then this need never happen. One of the reasons for me taking up the hobby was that it did have an element of danger in it. I equate it to my other passion of scuba diving where I don't need to spell out its dangers, but the rewards of seeing the most beautiful of creatures makes it all worthwhile. I'm sure your own reasons for keeping bees and how you got started are just as fascinating. It's no use saying that anyone can keep bees, because we all know that there are some dubious beekeepers out there, but that should not stop us from saying that bees will not sting unless provoked. I spend most of my bee watching time with no protection at all and feel confident to be within a few feet of the hive. We know the bees have more important things to do than waste a sting on us. In the interest of "Health & Safety" I now state categorically that I do not condone my actions. I wonder if we should all start to wear hi-vis jackets over our bee suits because this is the world that we are potentially living in! Another ugly side to beekeeping is the ridiculous suits we wear. I do hope that one day someone in the fashion

All photographs by Don Honey



Every garden should have an apiary



Just keep out of the bees flight path

industry will design a more glamorous outfit that will stop my wife saying "Does my bum look big in this" when she helps me with inspections. The only saving grace is that in a group of other like-minded hobbyist, one can be anonymous and we can all perspire profusely together!

The Bad

And when you do get a reaction when enthusing about this fabulous hobby, do not get put off course when challenged about varroa, hive beetle, crop spraying, exams, and all those other negatives that make the headlines. For most of us the likelihood of encountering just one of the diseases that are

so often reported in the media is pretty unlikely. So let's not be negative, but tell of your own personal experiences. There are lots of bad practices that I'm sure we have all seen, none of which should be acceptable, but this should not inhibit or diminish our core aim to increase awareness and participation in beekeeping. So now that we have come clean about the DANGER and UNGLAMOROUS side to our hobby, it's time to talk about the good side.

The Good

That first taste of the golden harvest is never better than when it is your own. Even now I remember that first experience of licking my fingers while uncapping a super frame dripping with the sticky stuff. It seemed smooth and sweet like no other taste, and almost as good as chocolate! And it was free, with no additive, it was local and had no air miles other than the trillion miles per gram the bees had to travel to make it (I made that figure up, but some researcher, somewhere has worked out that a lot of flitting from one flower to another is needed). The reality is that in the first year of owning bees one is unlikely to get that experience, although I did get 20 pounds off my first colony. Future years will yield more honey than you will ever need for personal use and you will end up with a surplus. It is so nice to be able to give a jar of your own honey to family and friends, and even more enjoyable

if sold for a profit. I have yet to come across one person who was not happy to receive this gift, and often, like *Oliver Twist*, ask for more. I hope that research will prove that beekeeping has health benefits to us. A report commissioned by the National Garden Scheme said that tending a plot of land can play a powerful role in promoting physical and emotional health. In the meantime, all I can say is that beekeeping gives me immense pleasure. If I have a regret, then it is that I did not start the process at an earlier time in my life. So you may consider, as I have done, to buy a child sized bee suit, rather than yet another plastic electronic game or gizmo for the children in your life? In the meantime, you could get them to have a go at my "Spot the difference" game. You never know, they might get their mums and dads to read some of the other stories in *BeeCraft* and get the bug. There's no prize for guessing how many differences, unless you find more than the eight I put in the photo.

The Future

Despite my wife insisting that I say "It's been an odd year for the bees" every year since I've been keeping bees – I feel pretty confident in saying that each year is "odd" and "different" and further increases my thirst for more seasons and more experiences.



Eight differences to spot