

# NORTHERN LIGHTS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTH DEVON BRANCH  
OF THE DEVON BEEKEEPERS ASSOCIATION

**FEBRUARY 2013**

[www.northdevonbees.org](http://www.northdevonbees.org)



## Chair Chat

Happy New Year to everyone – I hope your bees come through the winter well and that you all have a very good year.

The bees might not be doing much but it's amazing just how much work needs doing in January and February.

I'm catching up on the cleaning and mending and giving my beehive a good spring clean.

The AST is checking the bees every week and making sure the bees have enough food. So far we have managed to get through the floods, but everything is very wet and muddy.

I hope to see you all at the winter talks; and don't forget our first day back to the club house is 5<sup>th</sup> February.

I hope it's dry on the 5<sup>th</sup> as we are cutting back trees and chopping up fire work. I perfect way to work off all those mince pies and Christmas cakes.

For those who do visit the club, I have to remind you that our parking is very restricted and the opposite field has been too wet to use. So please remember that we have neighbours and we must leave access to their houses clear.

Our Landlords Col and Mrs Maxse have been very supportive of all our endeavours and very sympathetic about the difficult year the bees have had. We are very grateful for their kindness. There have been bees on the Estate for many years and we are lucky to have such a beautiful spot. Keeping our neighbours happy and our apiary clean and tidy will be everyone's way of thanking them.

All the best for 2013,

*Barbara*

## Events

5 Feb	1st Meeting at Horestone
14 Feb	Talk on Queen Rearing, Castle Centre, 7:30pm
14 Mar	Talk by David Charles, Castle Centre, 7:30pm

## Horestone Re-opening for 2013



We will meet again on Tuesday 5th February provided the roads are neither flooded or feet deep in snow. Martin will send round a reminder and update on the state of the roads shortly beforehand.

As agreed by the AST, we will meet at 12:30pm for a brief update with Barbara, the co-ordinator, aiming to be out in our apiary by 1pm. The apiary will be open from 11am and everyone is welcome

to come and browse in the library or join us for the morning work session.

On the day Cliff will be bringing his chainsaw and log splitter so wear old clothes to help bring in the wood to feed the stove so we can enjoy the afternoon tea/coffee and cakes in warmth.

We look forward to meeting up again

*The AST*

**SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR 2013 ARE NOW DUE—see page 2**

# Don't forget to pay your subscription for 2013 . . .

I just thought I would make my self known to you all. I am the new membership secretary Charmain Woolley; I took over from Denise Oldaker in December and I hope I can carry on the good job that she did over the past years.

I moved from Kent to Devon in February last year with my husband, Jon and my son Sam. We have been keeping bees since 2009, formerly members of Medway and Mid Kent Beekeeping Associations, and we hope to continue to keep bees happy and healthy in Devon.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind anyone who has not paid their membership subscription for 2013 that they are now due. If they remain unpaid you will not receive the Northern Lights Newsletter after February, also more importantly you will no longer be covered by insurance for your bees, please be aware.

Please feel free to call or email if you need any information regarding your membership. Wishing you all a very happy and bee friendly new year.

*Charmain*

## Julie's Jottings

It will be Candlemas ( 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb) or Imbolc to those of a more pagan spirit by the time you read these notes and 'half our winter still to go' as Hope Bourne says in 'Living on Exmoor' and it is certainly true for my bees on the fringes of the moor. Imbolc is time for planting ideas and leaving them to germinate, a time of hope but a time when our bees are at their most vulnerable as we watch and wait for the reassuring sight of pollen going in, a sure sign of brood rearing inside however dark the days. Some of you will be trickling thin syrup in to stimulate the Queen's laying but many of us prefer to 'go with the season' and let the bees build up at their own pace only putting on candy or fondant if hives are perilously light.

Beginners are looking forward to learning the craft of beekeeping and acquiring their first bees but were the choices ever as difficult as they are now, so many ways to keep bees and so many different boxes to keep them in. When I began beekeeping we hotly debated the pros and cons of National versus WBC but now there are Topbar hives, Warre', Beehaus 'Omlets', Rose hives, a fascinating renewed interest in Skep beekeeping including the Sun hive, like a double skep, promoted by Heidi Herrmann (co-founder of the Natural Beekeeping Trust) and many more all claiming to be the

perfect 'des-res for bees. Confusing as all this may be I think it shows a welcome trend towards more concern for the bees well-being than the beekeepers own greed and convenience.

In a very poor season my experiment with a Rose hive (boxes all the same size and no queen excluder) have convinced me about a practice I have long questioned ie the use of a queen excluder, surely the most frustrating thing a beekeeper can do to his/her bees. It has been fascinating to watch the pattern of the developing brood nest, funnelling up through the boxes surrounded by insulating food stores and not forced sideways in a block formation. I'm glad to find I am not entirely alone in this enthusiasm as talking to an old friend and very experienced beekeeper ( for years a Commercial hive user) that he has converted all his hives to Rose boxes.

As we approach the new season there are so many threats to our bees, pests and diseases, changing patterns of weather and forage, pesticides and interfering beekeepers and so many decisions to make. Whatever we do let us all put our precious bees first, learn to better understand their true instincts and needs as we care for them. So put your equipment in order, order lots of bees friendly seeds to sow and do a sun dance to bring us all the sunshine we so badly need.

*Julie*

## Bee Quotes

*'If the bee disappears from the surface of the earth, man would have no more than four years to live.'* Albert Einstein

*(a famous quote, arguably true, but he never actually said it)*



BITZ4BEES will be reopening on Tuesday 5th March from 10:30 to 12:30.

Come early and buy your beekeeping requirements before the 2013 price increases take effect.

Look forward to seeing you all. *Derek and Cliff*

## Horestone Mince Pie Day



## Member's Apiary: *Sylvia Barber at Armerwood*

I have been keeping bees on the edge of Armerwood for nearly 8 years. It is a beautiful spot and I often see red deer and roe from our kitchen window. It probably isn't the ideal site for bees as the woods are north facing and the site is 1000 feet above sea level. Someone once told me about an old saying "bees in a wood never did any good" – but I have managed to keep them going for 8 years and usually get a small amount of beautiful run honey. The spring forage is plentiful with willow, followed by bluebells and then wild raspberries. Summer forage isn't quite as good but we grow blueberries and as many forage plants as I can stuff in the garden.



I bought my first 2 colonies of bees from a retiring beekeeper at Watersmeet. Luckily for me they were good tempered and easy to handle. Since then, mainly through artificial swarms, I have ended up with 10 colonies. This is probably rather too many - I think 6 would be more suitable to the site. I also bought a nucleus from Chris Utting, caught a swarm from South Molton and bought a Jed Marshall queen.

Last year I tried my hand at queen rearing at home, and helped Jeff and Kay with queen rearing at Horestone. I bought a Jenter box and Cloake board and worked out a timetable. Unfortunately the weather interfered with the plan so in the end I didn't use the Jenter box but attempted grafting larvae. The bees produced half a dozen queen cells which were transferred to mating apideas, 5 of them mated successfully but the 6<sup>th</sup> was a drone laying queen.

At Horestone we did use the Jenter box – the queen initially refused to lay in it, the weather being too cold, but she was more obliging when we tried a 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle.

All in all it was very interesting and I learned a lot both in my apiary and with Jeff and Kay at Horestone. Considering the appalling weather I think we did quite well - and hopefully the weather will be better next year and we can try again.



## of Bees and Saints . . .

Watch out for February 14<sup>th</sup> and the blocked letterbox, the garlands of red roses and the swooning swains, for it is St. Valentine's Day – patron saint of lovers, epilepsy and ... beekeepers according to some. The Saint Valentine we commemorate is actually an amalgamation of a number of martyrs all named Valentine and all of whom died in the early centuries following Christ, but the hagiographies are curiously quiet on the subject of bees and of Valentine being a beekeeper. So why the association? Does it come from the exchange of honeyed love tokens and sweet nothings (later introductions) or the fact that mid February at the beginning of Spring is alive with the buzzings of the birds and bees or is Valentine another of the Church's "honey-tongued" advocates for peace and a Christian way of life?

St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, known as "the Mellifluus", a founding father of the Church, is considered by many to be the patron saint of beekeepers. Legend has it that a swarm of bees settled on his head when a baby, leaving just a drop of honey on his lips when they left. This gave rise to his natural eloquence and possibly an affinity with bees. He is often depicted in art with a beeskep, that symbol of the Church and the bees its devout workers, but he too has as dubious a connection with actual beekeeping as St. Valentine.

The Eastern Orthodox Church also has a patron saint dedicated to bees, honey and beekeepers. It is Saint Charalambos the Martyr, who was viciously tortured to death for his beliefs in Thessaly around the year 200 c.e. Strangely, his feast-day almost coincides with that of Valentine's – on the 10<sup>th</sup> February when honey is consecrated in the local churches for coating specially baked loaves of bread imbued with protection against illness and famine. Saint Charalambos is believed to cure illness and disease which is why, presumably, honey is connected with his blessing.

Closer to home, members of the Early Church Communities are more likely to have had direct experience with keeping bees than either Valentine or Ambrose or even possibly Charalambos and there are in particular two who may be con-

sidered a more obvious choice for beekeepers' attentions.

In the late 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century, a young Irish monk known as Modomnoc (dear or little Dominic) studied at the monastery of St. David at Menevia in Wales. As was the custom for many early communities, the monks practised self-sufficiency and for many years Modomnoc cultivated the gardens and kept bees. When the time came to return home to Ireland, swarms of bees accompanied Modomnoc to his ship and there settled on the mast. St. David saw this as a blessing and sent the bees with Modomnoc to Ireland. Near Balbriggan, County Dublin, at Bremore, Modomnoc, possibly with another Saint – Mologa - built a church and garden, today known as "the church of the Beekeeper". St. Modomnoc's Feast Day is celebrated on February 13<sup>th</sup>.

At the same time as Modomnoc was setting up his bee garden, a holy woman known today as St. Gobhnait (Gawb-net) founded a women's community in Ballyvourney, County Cork, where she also kept bees, using the honey to treat sickness and heal wounds. Her name is often translated as "Deborah" (which means honeybee or bee sting), and her association with bees was strong. There are several legends describing how Gobnait drove out cattle raiders from the area by sending swarms of bees to "attack" the invaders; others mention how her skep turned into a bronze helmet and the bees into soldiers. Yet another describes how her skep became a bronze bell which later became known as Gobnait's Bell. The little church dedicated to her at Ballyvourney has a Well visited by pilgrims and a large statue of the Saint standing on a beehive. Every year, on her Saint's Day, the parish priest takes out a 13<sup>th</sup> century wooden figurine of Gobnait for veneration and healing purposes. Her Saint's Day being February 11<sup>th</sup>, is situated strangely close to that of St. Valentine and St. Modomnoc but both are also close to that of Saint Brigit, or pagan Brid whose day falls on the 1<sup>st</sup> February, known to Celts as Imbolc - the beginning of spring and all new beginnings. So forget the commercial love hearts this year and bake honey cakes in honour of an ancient and valued tradition – that of beekeeping.

*Cathy*

## A View from York



As some of you know, I was persuaded to take on editing NL so that I could keep in touch during my year's sabbatical in York. Having spent days and days putting my first edition together, I now realise now how much work Sylvie (and Mel) put into producing NL over the last seven years. My first edition has been a joint effort - I could not have done it without Sylvie's support and help. Also thanks to all the contributors; without their input there would be no NL. Contributions to the next edition are very welcome.

The photo is of my new allotment in York - looks like I might need to do a bit of work before the veg and bee-friendly plants can go in.

*Jeff*

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**Member's contributions are very welcome: by 23rd of the month prior to publication please.**