

SEVENOAKS AND TUNBRIDGE WELLS BEEKEEPERS BRANCH NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2025

Editor: Mary Staffurth

Tel: 01732 462931 / Email: marystaffurth@yahoo.com

Branch website: <http://www.sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk/>



Peter Hutton 1943-2025



Peter Hutton was my beekeeping mentor and I had known him since 1960. He was generous with his time for anyone in the craft who had queries or problems concerning bees and was always on hand to give advice and support. He was, for many years, our branch president. Some years ago, he led a deputation of beekeepers from Tunbridge Wells to its twin town of Wiesbaden. A small group of us visited two research stations, where we were shown the practice of artificial insemination of Carniolan queen bees. We were each given the chance to try this for ourselves. The Carniolan bee is very quiet and reluctant to sting, which makes them easier for beekeepers to handle. Before we left, Peter gave an address to the German hosts in German thanking them and he was given loud applause.

Peter ran beekeeping lectures at Tonbridge Adult Education Centre. He also assisted in displays and courses at Hadlow College. He gave talks to Axa Insurance employees at their offices and kept bees on the roof of their building in the centre of Tunbridge Wells. He had a vast store of knowledge and at one time ran about 200 hives to service his pollination contracts. He was one of those beekeepers who never wore gloves when handling bees.

Peter was skilled in many trades, although initially a cabinet maker, and he had a good understanding of several languages including Dutch, German and Turkish. He was well versed in statute law affecting bees and pesticides as well as common law and was a contributor to BeeCraft. He was married for 50 years to his wife Joy, and they had two children, Patrick and Victoria. He gave so much to the craft of beekeeping during his life, and he will be sadly missed.

Peter's funeral will take place on Thursday 13th March at Tunbridge Wells Crematorium at 12.15pm. No flowers just donations to Hospice in the Weald, Pembury Road, Tunbridge Wells.

Victor Webb

Where's Best for a New Apiary?

At our second Introduction to Beekeeping Day this year we had a full house of delegates. As always, our mission is to give prospective beekeepers an honest summary of the commitment required to become a beekeeper. The discussion generated a lot of feedback with some people concerned that keeping bees at their home addresses might not be a practical option. This is a growing problem as newer housing developments are built with ever shrinking outdoor space. We had an interesting discussion about sharing space, which has the added benefit of reducing the time commitment, especially for those who are still working and with family responsibilities.

We are looking forward to welcoming our new members to the branch apiaries as soon as the weather warms up a bit next month.

Liz Birchenough, Membership Secretary and Treasurer

Avoid Starvation



T S Eliot wrote: “April is the cruellest month” but from a bee’s perspective, March is far crueller. The availability of pollen sources from hazel and willow help to stimulate the queen into increasing her egg laying rate at a time of year when most workers, having survived since the autumn, are reaching the end of their lives. This can be a tipping point for many colonies, particularly those that had high varroa levels in autumn. Workers that had varroa feeding on their fat bodies will have a shortened lifespan. The number of bees in the colony could be at a minimum so, on cold nights, the colony might not be able to maintain a high enough temperature and it could collapse. On the other hand, some queens will have been laying profusely since the beginning of February and will now have plenty of young workers to feed more brood. Their biggest threat is not having enough stores. As beekeepers, what we need to be doing is ensuring they have food. Place a bag of fondant above the feed hole and resist the temptation to investigate the hive until the end of the month, when we hope the weather will have warmed sufficiently.

Now is the time to ensure that you have enough equipment ready in case you find, at an early inspection, that your bees are very active and need more room. If the queen has been laying at such a rate that there is little space left for colony expansion, then they are likely to try to swarm early. If, however, at the end of the month you have only a small brood then stimulatory feeding with syrup can be beneficial.

Cliff Hayward, Branch Chairman

Awakening at Hilbert Road

Five of the colonies were reported flying towards the end of February, with the warmer weather, so it seemed prudent to check on stores and top up fondant. Sadly, one of the polys has failed; we suspected this as there was no flying activity on warmer days. We have taken the hive down. There were plenty of stores but not so many bees. There was a very small area of patchy brood, no telling how old that might be. Given that this colony was a split from one of the others early in spring last year, I suspect a poorly mated queen who was unable to build up numbers.

Bees from the colony we call the Rolling Stones, in the quarantine area, have yet to make an appearance. It is considerably colder in the hollow, so this is not unexpected. It wasn’t warm enough to carry out any sort of inspection so we will let them do what they do until the weather improves.

Fondant was topped up in the remaining colonies, which all seem to be building up well. I will get some varroa boards in place soon so that we can establish how well the colonies are building up without opening the hives. The fondant stores will need checking regularly now to ensure that cold snaps don’t cause starvation.

Sue Knights, Hilbert Road Apiary Manager

Out-Apiary Offer

If you are looking for an out-apiary, there is a site on offer at Wildwood Vineyard, Eridge Road Rotherfield, Tunbridge Wells TN3 9EQ. It is a nice location but parking is in a layby and access is 200 yards down a bridleway with no vehicular access.

If you are interested call Paul Olding: 07891 034 956



Extractor For Sale

It is 9 frame (national size), stainless steel manual, manufactured by CMF, in good working order, complete with 3 x demountable legs and acrylic lids. £500 ono.

Please contact Liz Birchenough at membership@sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk

Join a Basic Beekeeping Course

After a break of many years, we are running a basic beekeeping course (*writes Cliff Hayward*). Although it is not specifically aimed at those thinking of taking the basic exam, it is designed to cover all the necessary requirements. It is worth taking such a test in order to reach a level of competency and understanding of bees that will help us as beekeepers. No matter what type of hive you use you can take the exam. It is carried out on someone else's hive because it is the beekeeper who is being assessed, not their hive setup. In fact, it is entirely possible not to have bees of your own and gain your experience through our training apiaries.

The course will begin with five weekly indoor seminars of theory followed by monthly sessions during the season at our teaching apiaries. Numbers will be limited to 10, to ensure full involvement in the sessions. The indoor part of the course will take place at Hildenborough Community Hall on Wednesday evenings from 7.30pm until 9.30pm, starting on March 12. Cost £75. There are still two places available. Please book with Liz Birchenough at membership@sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk

Swarm Request List 2025

If you have lost bees over the winter and would like to replace them with a swarm, please send your: Name, Address, Landline number & Mobile number by email to John Farrow at: stweditor@sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk



The High Life

We spotted this snow-capped hive in February during a skiing holiday high in the French Alps. It's not clear if there were bees inside but it had all the appearances of a working hive.

Mary Staffurth

Diary Dates

|Saturday 15 March at 2pm: Barwood Apiary Meeting
Sunday 23 March at 11am: Hilbert Road Apiary meeting

Send photos or articles for the newsletter to: marystaffurth@yahoo.com
Go to our website for all the latest beekeeping news: <http://www.sevenoaksbeekeepers.org.uk/>