



The booming world of amateur beekeeping

Britons are doing their bit to counter the mysterious worldwide decline of bees — they are starting to keep their own

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“I need to talk to you about the bees,” said my fiancée recently, sitting up in bed with a sense of urgency. “There aren’t many left, so we need to help them.” Any bees in particular, I asked? “All of them,” she said. “We’re running out of time.”

The night before, she had attended a lecture by journalist Alison Benjamin, who, with Brian McCallum, has published *A World Without Bees* (Guardian Books), which outlines how bee populations across the world are dwindling at an alarming rate. Benjamin argues that this is not only bad news for bees, it could be catastrophic for us humans, too: bees play a crucial role in pollinating plants — from food crops to trees — helping them to reproduce. Put simply, no bees means no humans.

So here we are, on a sunny Monday morning at Harewood House in Yorkshire, northern England, preparing to do our bit for our busy, buzzy friends. Like similar clubs across the UK, Harrogate and Ripon Beekeepers’ Association is running beginner courses throughout the year, responding to a surge in interest.

The course begins in the classroom, in what was once the stable block of this sprawling country estate. Our host, John Annett, the former education officer for the club, shows us the components that make up a hive, and gives us an insight into how it all works.

What to me just looks like a stack of wooden boxes contains a carefully organized community. The bottom box — or base of the hive — is the bees’ entry and exit. On top of this is the main area of the nest, where the young bees — or “brood” — are raised.

Although you will find honeycomb in this part of the nest, it’s not for human consumption. “This is for the young and the rest of the hive to feed on,” says John. “If you start helping yourself to this, the colony may starve.”

Instead, the stuff you can harvest is contained in the “super” — another layer that lies above this main section. This is surplus honey, which the bees can happily survive without. “A brand new hive costs about £90 [US\$140],” says John, “but you can get them a lot cheaper than that.”

The most interesting part of the morning is finding out how bees communicate with each other. The bees buzzing around your flowerbeds are females, sent out to collect food for the hive. Once they find a good stash, they’ll head back to the nest and perform the “waggledance” — a set of movements that conveys the exact location of the pollen-packed plants. Their co-workers follow these directions and continue harvesting the crop. Over a year, a fully functioning hive can produce 50kg of honey.

Casting my eye around the room, I find that the group is fairly mixed. There’s 47-year-old Diane, from nearby Thornthwaite, who’s awaiting her first delivery of bees in a month and is here for a crash course in how to look after them. “We already grow our own vegetables,” she says. “So keeping bees is a logical extension of that.” Meanwhile, 52-year-old Mike Frazer says he finds beekeeping “incredibly peaceful.” Assuming they don’t swarm, that is.

Although at 32 I’m the youngest, Annett has noticed a surge in the number

of people in their 20s and 30s enrolling on the courses. “Right now, we can’t keep up with demand,” he says. “We’re increasing our membership by around 50 people a year; bearing in mind that we only have about 300 members, this is a huge year-on-year increase.”

It’s a trend that’s being replicated throughout the country, with the number of beekeepers nationwide increasing from 10,500 to more than 15,000 in the last two years, according to Christine Gray, from the British Beekeepers’ Association.

This growing popularity is partly due to environmental concerns and the wish to be self-sufficient. However, the trend has been accelerated by the likes of celebrity chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall talking about it on his TV program, *River Cottage*, and BBC radio’s *Farming Today* team cultivating its own hive.

While beekeeping sounds like a lovely idea for those with a garden, what about the rest of us? “You really don’t need much space to keep bees,” says John, who points to the example of 14-year-old Philip Shields, who has made his name producing Hackney Honey from hives on the roof of his inner-city east London home.

According to John, almost any outside space will do. “Bees tend to do very well in cities because there’s so much biodiversity. The sheer range of flowers that people grow in gardens provides great foraging for them.”

The other issue that often stops people keeping bees is lack of time. According to John, however, “the less you muck about with them, the better. You only really need to check them once a week.”

The one-day course I’m on aims to give a brief overview of how bees work and

how to look after them — including how to prevent them from swarming. There are 12-week courses UK-wide, which include classroom sessions and practical training. Trainees are paired with a mentor and given their own hive to look after, which they get to keep at the end of the course. Not bad for £110 (US\$170).

After lunch in the cafe next door and a wander around the picturesque grounds, we finish up in the classroom and head to the nearby hives for the exciting bit: a chance to put on our veils and get up-close and personal with a live hive.

Despite assurances that bees are generally quite mellow, when my turn comes to lift the lid I’m surprisingly nervous. Endangered they may be, but with 50,000 of the blighters squirming around in front of me, “cute” and “fluffy” are not the words that spring to mind.

As I take out one of the frames, the bees start crawling over my hands and buzzing around my head. Not that they can get near me: I’m topped up to the eyeballs in protective clothing.

Believe it or not, bees have personalities and all it takes is a queen with an attitude problem to skew the mood of the whole hive, and your chances of getting stung increase dramatically. The next day we call in on the club’s chairman, Mike Rowbottom. “Although you’ll probably get stung a couple of times throughout the year, it hurts less than a nettle sting,” says Mike, who promptly gets stung, as if to prove the point.

This time, when I break the wax seal, the bees calmly carry on with their business while I help myself to the fruits of their labor, but I’m still not sure whether I am willing to take the plunge.



The ancient art of beekeeping is enjoying a renaissance in the UK, fueled by concerns about the provenance of food and the desire to do something for the environment. PHOTOS: AFP



ON THE NET:
britishbee.org.uk
thorne.co.uk
beekeepingtimes.com