Heidi Hermann watching a swarm entering a top bar hive.

THE NATURAL BEEKEEPING TRUST

Its History, Philosophy and Aims

Heidi Herrmann
Trustee, NBKT

THE Natural Beekeeping Trust was established in 2009. I would like to thank this magazine's editor, John Phipps, whose acquaintance I made on Facebook, for the invitation to tell you about the background to setting up an alternative beekeeping charity in Britain.

We were a group of beekeepers in Sussex with varying degrees of expertise in bee management, acquired in training courses delivered by the British Beekeeping Association, and subsequent practice on bees. In Britain, up to 2009, that is where one went for instruction in beekeeping. In one's early years of beekeeping, you may remember, one has a sense that one is progressing from year to year. So, we were all progressing, as it were, tending around twenty-five colonies in National and Langstroth hives between us.

What we also had in common was an interest in biodynamics.. Strange though that sounds, given the relative scarcity of this approach to farming (sometimes referred to as "premium organic"), for anyone living in our village, Forest Row, developing an interest in it is almost inevitable! Our two community owned farms are the pride and joy of the region. People feel privileged to have access to fresh, locally-produced food and appreciate the openness of the farms to the public. A further striking feature of our farms is their outstanding attention to animal welfare. We all love to see happy cows grazing in lush fields, and pigs roaming free in mixed woodlands, not to mention chickens ranging freely to their hearts' content. As beekeepers, we were happy indeed for our bees to forage on hundreds of acres of organic land offering an abundance of blossoms through all seasons. In all respects these were ideal conditions to give birth to a movement of "free-range" beekeeping.

The turning point in our lives as "conventional" beekeepers came in 2006 when the US phenomenon of colony collapse disorder was widely reported in the media. Like many others, we had been blissfully unaware of the ruinous state of agriculture in the USA; the pictures of gigantic trucks travelling the highways taking bees to "serve the pollination industry" on vast monoculture crops far away from their local origins filled us with deep dismay. On examining the detail of the shocking scenario of millions of colonies vanishing from their hives, one could not escape the impression of agriculture as a form of warfare against Nature. Equally disturbing was the fact that the collapse of honeybees on such an unprecedented scale was variously referred to as "mysterious"! From what one could glean about the way vast areas of land are farmed in the United States, with heavy input of pesticides and enormous monoculture crops, it seemed perfectly obvious that bees were driven to the limit of what they could take.

Colony collapse disorder, as it was quickly termed, certainly served to draw the world's attention to the bees, whose suffering and potential demise was covered by the media to such a lavish extent that we can safely assume that nearly every child and adult today is aware that bees are essential to the pollination of a large number of the crops on which we depend for our survival.

What prompted me to inquire more deeply into the nature of bees in those days when the scientists of the world had

THE NATURAL BEEKEEPING TRUST

Gareth - one of our Trustees hiving a swarm and examining a colony.

embarked on searching for the culprit behind the disappearance of so many bees, was actually not a new insight into the bees' economic significance or their centrality to humanity's future: it was a visit from a government bee inspector. I shall forever look back on that occasion with gratitude. My colonies were found to be suffering from varroa infestation. This wasn't altogether surprising, as *Varroa destructor*, we had been told on our beekeeping courses, was the bees' number one enemy. I had clearly neglected my bees! We were prescribed a remedy consisting of synthetic pyrethroids. I promised to administer it to my colonies forthwith, having every intention to be a responsible beekeeper. Imagine my surprise when I found, on receiving the medicine by post, that the product for "curing" my bees was produced by the same company against whom German and French beekeepers were battling in court, on account of mass bee poisonings in both countries. The company's pest-control products used on crops attractive to bees, so it was claimed, spelt disaster for the bees. And now, reading the small print, the same company was dispensing bee medication? Sensing that this was a tricky issue, I consulted with my bees. This is a practice I had learnt from the gentleman who introduced me to bees in the first place. And, believe it or not, I got a sense that my bees would not welcome these fairly acrid smelling strips in their nests. Talking to the bees, telling them things, and even seeking their advice was fairly common practice in the olden days Personally, I find it fruitful, and have since met many other beekeepers who keep in close touch with their bees over important matters. Whether the bees said yay or nay I cannot say with absolute certainty, but I decided against the product on the evidence of its provenance. Of course, it was equally clear that I was not going to deliver them up to the ravages of Varroa destructor.

The fairly intense search which followed this decision led in some interesting directions. For example, a group of Swiss beekeepers had started on an experiment of zero-harvesting and minimum hive interventions in the hope of eliciting the bees' own defences in the struggle against the foreign invader. Soon after, we heard of a teaching apiary in Germany called Fischermuehle[1] that was said to be pioneering a new treatment against the dreaded varroa mite. Thanks to the fact that my work as a conference interpreter frequently took me to the continent, it was decided that on behalf of our group of beekeepers around Forest Row I should enrol in a ten-day intensive course over a whole active bee season to be introduced to beekeeping in accordance with the Demeter Standards of Bee Husbandry[2]. Even though we were well aware of the benefits of organic farming and very appreciative of our local mixed farms' plentiful offerings of clean forage to our colonies, we had not come across the bee husbandry ideals embedded in the biodynamic approach.

Strikingly, in the theory part of the course, enormous emphasis was placed on the inhabitants of the hive forming one cohesive whole, a being of sorts, and the German language even had a word for that being, the Bien. There was much discussion of the needs of the Bien for a life free from stress. The "integrity of nest scent and warmth", described in 1946 by Johannes Thuer[3] was frequently referred to, and how the pheromonal balance of the hive was detrimentally affected by the use of smoke and frequent brood nest intrusions. Intrusions! Up to that point it had not occurred to me that my weekly inspections of the hives throughout summer were anything but a must-do for the responsible beekeeper. And when our group, mainly consisting of beekeepers with some experience, assembled around a hive in the hundred-hive-strong apiary, nobody was given, or offered, a suit to wear. No, we were instructed to observe the comings and goings at the entrance for a considerable time. No smoker was in evidence. Were these people mad? Within minutes of finally partially opening the hive, we were surrounded by hundreds of bees buzzing above our heads while the tutor calmly lifted out frame after frame for a quick look and explanation of what could be seen, and finally placed further frames on either side of the nest to allow for expansion before closing the hive. It was literally my first face-to-face encounter with a great many bees. Nobody got stung. In the course of my time there I witnessed a great many such serene encounters between bees and their keepers. Oh, well, they have different bees there, I hear you think. No doubt they have different bees, but that, I know now, is not the whole story. More of that later.

Back home I shared what I had learned with my beekeeping friends: the bees are all together in one hive, there is no queen excluder, the bees draw their own combs without the use of foundation, colonies reproduce by swarming, indeed, swarming is welcomed and good care is taken to find and house the swarms, bees overwinter on their own honey and hives should be constructed from natural materials.The hive is a wholeness. The intimacies of colony life are studied by regular observations at the hive entrance, examination of the hive debris and intensive theoretical study of bee biology. Brood nests are regarded as the

THE NATURAL BEEKEEPING TRUST

Brightly painted hives blend in with a garden's colour scheme . . .

hive's inner sanctum and examined only with good reason. Finally: the method of varroa treatment is oxalic acid evaporation. These concepts form the cornerstone of biodynamic bee husbandry in Germany.

We felt inspired to put them into practice straight away. Of course this could not happen overnight in all respects, as all of our colonies had been started on foundation. The first thing that went were the queen excluders. And in the year following, swarms were offered frames with starter strips only. The first entirely bee-built combs were a wonder to behold. The results of oxalic acid evaporation during the broodless periods were striking. This treatment worked. Our enthusiasm was somewhat curbed when the next visit from the government bee health authorities revealed that oxalic acid evaporation was illegal in the UK. This, I must confess, merely served to estrange us a little further from beekeeping orthodoxy. Chemicals in the hive that were likely, by their very nature, to lead to resistant mites, were legal, as was a certain pesticide manufacturer's use of the British Beekeeping Association's logo on their products. But the considered treatment of choice employed by a major teaching apiary in Germany was outlawed. Something clearly needed to happen to offer beekeepers interested in more sustainable approaches to beekeeping, gardening and farming an alternative port of call, as it were.

THE NATURAL BEEKEEPING TRUST

The Natural Beekeeping Trust was established to "assist anyone seeking advice and tuition in bee-friendly practice and to demonstrate sustainable bee husbandry in the context of organic/biodynamic horticulture and agriculture". By that time we, as co-founders of the Trust, had been keeping bees for eight to ten years. We were beginners, in other words. To our delight our new initiative was met with a very warm response. Our courses in sustainable bee husbandry were the first in this country, and thanks also to high profile coverage of our activities in various mainstream media, the idea of keeping bees primarily for the bees' sake gained some traction, especially among people hoping to start beekeeping. We were awarded charitable status within a few months of public activity as "natural beekeepers". We were by no means the only initiative exploring different approaches to bee husbandry. In another part of the country the stage for natural beekeeping was set by the activities of a beekeeper called Phil Chandler who made a strong plea for "barefoot beekeeping" in a publication of the same name as well as a website.

Understandably, the Trust's activities were met with suspicion and hostility in traditional beekeeping circles at first. We challenged some of the cherished notions of mainstream husbandry, and probably in not too diplomatic a manner at times. However, our courses proved extremely popular, even attracting many from abroad for their relative rarity in English-speaking countries. Increasingly, we were able to share our ideals for bee-centred husbandry with existing beekeepers, and that continues to the present day. As I mentioned at the beginning, we all love to see happy cows roaming in the fields, and it would seem that more and more of us aspire to seeing happy bees foraging on organic land, and remaining healthy without being propped up by constant medication.

Put simply, our approach, and indeed that of other high profile natural beekeepers such as Dr David Heaf, the author of the ground-breaking book "The Bee-friendly Beekeeper"[4], is based on the premise that, if bees are given the right living conditions and left unstressed by constant interference, they are able to achieve a state of balance with their pests and diseases. After some years of our trustees practising bee husbandry closely aligned by what we understand to be the innate needs and preferences of the bees themselves, we are gratified to know that the notions underlying our husbandry choices have gained much ground. Together with many others, we are now maintaining our hives without any treatments whatsoever. Whilst we have not created a new body of standards, our husbandry recommendations go far beyond the requirements of the biodynamic standards referred to above. The latter were conceived more than thirty years ago, representing the gold standard of bee-centred husbandry at that time. The bees' situation, indeed that of the whole of nature, has changed for the worse since then. The fact that an increasing body of scientific work carried out in recent years serves to confirm the principles of natural beekeeping is undoubtedly contributing enormously to the growing acceptance of many an idea considered outlandish not so long ago [5].

Supporting the natural behaviour and movement of the colony at every phase of its growth seems the right way forward for a mutually beneficial relationship between man and bee. The time when the worth of the honeybee was measured in terms of the size of the honey harvest will hopefully be behind us in the not too distant future. Growing numbers of people simply wish to keep bees for the pleasure of their company. Regarding the latter we can say emphatically that it is worth aspiring to for all the delights it brings. These far outweigh the more short-lived satisfaction of the honey harvest, which has dominated our collective approach to beekeeping for far too long. How thankful we can be to the bees for showing us the perfect balance of give and take in every aspect of their wondrous colony life. How can we emulate their example for the sake of the future of this earth?

The Natural Beekeeping Trust's work has been inspired, supported and furthered

THE NATURAL BEEKEEPING TRUST

A NBKT apiary gathering.

by many bee-loving people all over the world. We also gratefully acknowledge the growing interest in sustainable husbandry and 'ethical' honey in the general public. The future of the bees concerns us all, and will largely be determined by how we collectively show ourselves ready to meet the challenges of an earth ravaged by human depredation. The Trust's advocacy encompasses a clear stance on the use of pesticides as well as co-operation with Britain's major environmental organisations to encourage bee-friendly gardening and farming policies. We look forward to continuing our work in a spirit of fruitful exchange and mutual support with all who share our ideals for a better world for bees.

Our special thanks are due to Guenther Mancke, a venerable old bee master and renowned sculptor who opened our eyes to the wholeness of the hive like no other, and has been most generous in sharing the wisdom gained over a long life of studying the intimacies of bee colony life.

A big moment - a Sun Hive with its first swarm is installed under a verandah.

(1) Mellifera e.V http://www.mellifera.de/
(2) www.biodynamic.org.uk
(3) Pdf of Johannes Thuer publication on www.bee-friendly.co.uk
(4) The Bee-Friendly Beekeeper - A Sustainable Approach, David Heaf, publ. Northern Bee Books 2010
(5) An extensive list of scientific references: http://www.naturalbeekeepingtrust.org/science-behind-natural
naturalbeekeepingtrust.org
naturalbeekeepingtrust.wordpress.com

Some beautifully made Sun Hives.

A wonderful sight a colony installed in a Sun Hive with the bees making good use of the flight board.