

Why I Keep Bees

By Ann Chilcott, Scotland

Each year the BBKA sponsors the National Honey Show essay class and here is the essay by the 2018 winner, Ann Chilcott. The essay title for 2019 is 'The Difference Between Queen Breeding and Queen Rearing'. The essay needs to be no more than 2,000 words, excluding references. So why not put pen to paper during these winter months and enter.

Imagine a hot sunny day in June and a cotoneaster hedge, its tiny pink flowers barely open, vibrating with honey bees almost completely covering the shrub. That's how it was for me in 2004, but the warmth, colour, perfume, and the lulling hum were all real. It was then that I thought, "Hey, little bees, you could be living in my garden and working for me."

Little did I know that the roles would reverse and I would be working for my bees? Fifteen years ago, I would have naively explained that the bees covering the cotoneaster fascinated me and that I wanted them to be working hard for me making honey. Later I would be amazed to discover that I'd got that part wrong and that I would be continually striving to improve conditions for honey bees and their other insect colleagues in the pollination business. Early during my beekeeping odyssey, it suddenly registered that bees and other pollinators are seriously under threat and that I could be part of the worldwide movement of humankind making a difference to bees through the promotion and conservation of their fragile habitat and the education of their keepers.

I keep bees because I can. I'm one of the lucky ones, for not everyone can be an active apiarist. For a start, you need to be patient and able to work calmly around bees. Time and energy are needed to plan and carry out the work required during the active seasons and fortunately I have enough of these resources.

Honey production for market requires having more equipment than just the basics: hives; hive-tools; wooden hardware and personal protection, because honey extracting and processing equipment is also necessary. Additionally, it relies on maintaining strong and healthy honey bees while keeping them at home during swarm season. So, you really need to have a good grasp of basic bee biology and behaviour to manage bees for honey production and winter survival. Beekeeping is neither cheap nor easy but it is so rewarding and pleasurable.

Growing up on a remote sheep farm in the Scottish Highlands gave me some insight

into how the land is worked and how animals fit in and are managed according to the local geography and conditions.

From when I could walk without falling over, my mother and I strolled down the three-mile glen towards the shop admiring the wild flowers and trees in all seasons. I learned to identify them all, and the birds too, I worked on the farm when I wasn't attending school and, when my chores were done, I explored every corner of the farm on my pony, thus feeling truly connected to the land.

One powerful lingering childhood memory is eating warm honey straight from Dan's bee hive. Dan was a shepherd and when he wasn't on the hill he tended his bees and often shared a honey comb with my family during the season. The frame was kept in our cool larder on the large plate that usually held the Sunday roast, and it was such a sweet treat.

Despite a wish on leaving school to come home and be a farmer, I was encouraged by my parents to pursue a more traditional career and back in the sixties most young women heeded their parents. So, on retiring from a career in the caring profession, I was able to get close again to the land and truly re-connect with it in a meaningful and useful way through beekeeping.

As a tyro I attended local beekeeping meetings and read all the books I could lay my hands on to learn more about the fascinating insects that were progressively changing my life. If I hadn't kept bees I would never have gained a Higher National Certificate in Countryside Management and I wouldn't have volunteered with the Forestry Commission as a Countryside Ranger. I wouldn't have been searching for a beekeeping course at the then Scottish Agricultural College's advertising stand at my local farmer's summer show either. They regretted that they didn't have a beekeeping course but suggested that I might like to know more about other general courses relating to the land. Taking the bait, I signed up immediately for the next best thing to a beekeeping course, embarking that summer of 2006 on a remarkable journey

of discovery involving modern agriculture and land management.

Becoming a distance learning student was fun and a diversion from the stresses endured during my then public health nurse role. When the course ended two years later I knew how to go about studying beekeeping and so there was nothing between me and my end goal of becoming a competent knowledgeable beekeeper, except a lot of hard work and a few exams sedulously prepared for.

A few days ago, I found a beautiful letter in my mail box written in pencil on pink girly paper and it made my heart sing. Also, inside the envelope was a carefully drawn picture of large bees against a brilliant blue sky with fluffy white clouds and underneath on the ground is a row of brightly coloured flowers.

“Dear Mrs XXXXXXXX,

My name is Connie and I am six. Please can I come to see your bees? I have been learning about bees at school and I'm really interested. If that's okay please can you ring my mummy or daddy on xxxxxx. Love from Connie”

Connie and her daddy came to see my bees two days later and she was thrilled to wear the little bee suit that I keep for such

occasions. In fact, Connie wants to be my assistant and will be my apprentice next season. During our hive inspection, Connie held a frame of honey stores from which we took a teaspoon of honey for her to taste fresh from the hive later as we drank homemade elderflower juice. We sat just a few feet away from the apiary listening to the gentle sounds of thousands of wing vibrations thrumming like snippets of bee conversations. Sharing bees with young people ultimately has a positive outcome for both when you consider that our children grow up to be, among many professions, farmers, environmentalists, beekeepers, economists and policy-makers and this is a strong reminder of why I keep bees.

However, it would be disingenuous of me to let you think that my reasons for keeping bees are based on pure altruism for this is not so. I've fallen in love with bees and beekeeping is an avocation that brings me more joy than I can ever fully explain. I look ahead to each new season with excited anticipation and wonder, for every year the bees and the seasons, or both, come up with something different, that requires me to work out new ways of managing them. I'm continually learning and marvelling at the complicated behaviour of thousands of bees working in harmony while I pursue the most worthwhile pastime I can think of.



Holiday Parks Flying the Flag for Honey Bees

By Claire Hartry, ??

When you are next thinking of heading out into the countryside on a camping, caravanning or holiday home trip, why not visit a park that is doing something to help honey bees? Thanks to an on-going link-up with the David Bellamy Conservation Award Scheme (DBCAS) this is really easy to do.

2019 is the fifth year of the BBKA's Honey Bee Friendly Park Project partnership with the DBCAS, which works with 570-plus parks across the country to help them become more environmentally friendly. Most of the parks in the scheme have taken the Honey Bee Friendly Pledge. This commits them to doing what they can to provide the forage plants that bees need, to provide homes for bees and to spread the word about bee conservation. Last year, more than 400 parks did enough for their David Bellamy assessors to class them as Honey Bee Friendly.

Among the great work that is being done are projects to plant wildflower meadow areas. Last year, the scheme recorded an average of half a hectare of wildflowers per

park or almost a football field's worth each. Many park teams have also been busy learning about beekeeping, working with their local beekeepers and even becoming beekeepers themselves. For example, at Tregatillian Park, in Cornwall, the teams sell produce from their allotments to buy bee-friendly plants for their owners' gardens. The collection point for the people to get their free pollinator plants is also an information site providing guidance on planting, bees, wildlife and flowers. The park has also been busy planting trees, improving the meadow areas and doing lots of other bee-friendly habitat creation work.

“We wanted to enhance natural habitats to encourage bees and other beneficial insects,” says Park Warden, Haley Bailey. “Luckily, there were areas of the park that were unused and were perfect for this new project. It has been a great success, we've seen more species of animals, from bees and dragonflies up to deer, visiting the Park.”

Meanwhile, at Riverbend in Wales, the park team have lovingly restored a traditional telephone box into a wildlife

information point. They have also turned a formerly unkempt corner of the park into a beautiful, communal bee and butterfly garden that boasts a wealth of plants that attract bees, butterflies and other insects.

“We built an area with sleepers, raising it three feet off the floor, and filled it with lavender,” Park Managers, Angie and Lindsey explain. “Then we started on the surrounding area and filled as much as we could with plants and flowers that butterflies and bees love. About three months later our garden was in full bloom – you would not believe how many butterflies and bees have visited.”

Bee-friendly park locations

To show your support of what the parks are doing, why not choose a Honey Bee Friendly Park when you next venture out into the British countryside? A list can be found on the BBKA website and on the David Bellamy Award website at <http://www.bellamyparks.co.uk/findbees.html>, which contains full information about the scheme. Look out for the Honey Bee Pledge Logo and Honey Bee Friendly Certificate when you visit.