

The Chronicles of Bee'd the obscure

The diary of a novice beekeeper



Read this riveting account of one man's struggles against the vagaries of Nature, the Weather and the sheer cussedness of objects both animate and inanimate. Marvel at his patience, stoicism (especially in the face of Beejuice pain) and his determination to arrive at the end of the season with Honey — even if he did have to buy it at the supermarket.

What the Author says:

"This is a true and factual account except where I have stretched, manipulated, obscured or otherwise interfered with the truth. You can be sure that prevarication and obfuscation have reigned supreme never allowing the facts to get in the way"
"All names have been changed to protect the innocent (and the guilty)"

What the reviewers said:

The Daily Hive

"If there is one 'must read' book you should buy this year, this is not it. Read the Argos catalogue, the Phone Book anything but this..."

The Honey Express

"When you finally get fed up with watching paint dry and life seems utterly, utterly pointless you should pick up this book and let it demonstrate to you how right you are..."

The Stinger

"I picked up this book and could not put it down, one of the children had super-glued the back..."

Part the first

"The world needs more trees" I said, through a mouthful of toast.

"And more bees" she muttered.

"What?" I couldn't hear her for the crunching of toast and marmalade.

"I said, THE WORLD NEEDS MORE BEES!"

"Oh!" I thought about it for two more mouthfuls, "You're right and actually I would find it easier to plant bees than trees with only an ordinary garden at my disposal. A tropical rainforest is not on"

"Well" She said "I'm off to work, you think about it and don't forget to put the washing out"

So I sat and thought about it. It was October 2007. I was more or less retired, and a happily inept but enthusiastic gardener which was my main interest. When we had first moved to the wilds of Gloucestershire in the early nineties, there had been a number of bee hives planted in the dip in the field opposite us. We picked blackberries around the periphery, always careful to avoid getting too close to the hives because as everybody knows BEES STING! Thankfully we always managed to avoid that fate and so the bees and we lived in peaceful coexistence. I did notice that the bees were always in the garden happily crawling over the flowers and they seemed oblivious to my presence so that was alright too. When the old boy who owned the hives popped his clogs, his hives disappeared as well and I never gave it more than a passing thought. But, thinking on, I had noticed a drop in productivity in the garden over the years and when I had discussed it with my Queen Bee we had concluded it was the soil, the weather, lack of nutrients but never, ever lack of bees.

Anyway, it was time to put the washing out.

"Well, I wouldn't know where to start" I said, spearing another potato.

"Talk to Leslie" The QB said. "Who is Leslie?" I asked through a mouthful of dinner. "Leslie took over the old boy's hives from the field and I think she has five or six now, and don't talk with your mouth full" said the QB.

So I emailed Leslie who gave me a lot of information about where she had trained and what she had done. Lots of food for thought, but that can easily turn to procrastination.

And it did.

So, I did nothing.

2008 turned and the course was full. Well, never mind I will go back to my garden. Of course it isn't that easy, once an idea takes hold it can be very difficult to ignore and especially when everywhere one turns it is to be confronted with media stories about the plight of the bee. Plus, the only bees I could see were Bumbles and lovely though they are, I felt I needed more.

Back to Leslie "Try the local association, they run a course, it is inexpensive and I attended it as well as the Hartpury College course and, to be honest, I learnt more and had fantastic ongoing support from them"

So, I contacted the association by email and was astonished to find that firstly, they charged less than a quarter of the college charge, that the course was over ten weeks (night classes for six weeks followed by hands on at the Apiary) and secondly it was just down the road, well only eight miles away anyway.

That would do for me so I sent them my ten bob and duly received all sorts of tantalising bits of information. This is great, I do like new knowledge and even if I decide not to keep bees I will learn some good new stuff. A recommended list of reading arrived but it is no good giving me a list with lots of different priced books, my natural meanness kicks in and I dither a lot.

I called the Bee Guru (henceforth called BG) who actually suggested the cheapest as being the best. A book called 'teach your self beekeeping' by someone called Adrian and Clare Waring. And he was right. What a find! Accepting that I am a sad old man who should get out more I read it three times in December and I think at a pinch if left to my own devices on a desert island (fervently to be wished for by the Queen Bee) I could have kept bees just on the knowledge in the book.

Or so I fondly imagined.

January 2009 arrived, time for my education but along with the rest of Britain we were much preoccupied with snow and associated panics, resulting in the course being put back a couple of weeks to allow access to the car park at the village hall. Finally the day arrived and I presented myself together with some twenty odd others muffled in swaddling clothes or some such to be met by the BG and Mrs BG. We were a mixed bunch, old, young, fat, thin. handsome, ugly - but you get the picture, a typical cross section of British society.

The Bee Guru is a dapper, elegant man who obviously has an understanding wife because HE IS ALLOWED A BEARD and I AM NOT! Nor am I allowed to keep my hair in a pony tail like Francis Rossi of the Quo. Life is so unfair

But I digress. I must just go back to my working life for a moment, my last gainfully employed occupation was as a lecturer and trainer and as a consequence I have an acute appreciation of good technique in lecturing.

The BG is a master. He held me and the rest of the students spellbound for two and a half hours and I think at that moment any one of us would happily have placed our head in the bee's mouth, there being no lions in Gloucestershire.

We were hooked and over the next six weeks we battled with queen cells, Varroa, frames and supers. We learnt about AFB, EFB, Nosema, wax moth and other horrors until we were thoroughly spooked, but all the time the BG was nearing the BIG SECRET - BEES are FANTASTIC, FASCINATING FUN!

Sunday 5th April arrived and it was a glorious sunny day, our first day on the bees! Eleven o'clock and I present myself with all the other aliens in our bee suits to START WORK ON THE BEES!

Ah, but first there is the little matter of the smoker, cough, cough, sputter, splutter. How come it starts so easily for the BG when I, a fully trained and paid up beekeeper can't get it to even flame properly?

Eventually we get going after first washing our brand new hive tools in a magic solution of washing soda and washing up liquid. Washing Soda? I didn't know it still existed, having not heard of it since probably 1955. The BG patiently explained to me the magic properties of washing soda on propolis and latex gloves and suitably educated I happily splashed around with everyone else in the stuff.

Now to the bees.

I have to make a small confession here. No, not fear or concern. It is about my eyesight. I haven't got any. Well not much anyway. And, as to seeing an egg one sixteenth of an inch, forget it! So I cheerfully lied my way through the morning whilst everyone else was billing and cooing over the cells.

BUT I DID SEE THE QUEEN! Thankfully she had a spot on her back the size of a dustbin lid so even I couldn't miss her. I returned home to the QB ecstatic and walking on air. What a fantastic experience! I could not stop talking about bees and I am happy to say that over the next four weeks I managed to educate half the population of Gloucestershire about beekeeping whether they wanted to know or not!

Part the second

"Blimey, Steve what happened to you?" I asked.

"Got stung on the eyebrow by my bees"

His eyebrow and upper cheek looked like someone had pumped it full of Botox from a cement lorry. 'Oh ho, this is getting serious' I thought. The only sting I had heard of so far was the Bee Guru who was stung on the end of his finger whilst lifting a frame of brood for examination. "Occupational hazard" he had airily explained. I could see a collective "Oh yeah?" on the faces of my fellow students when he said it. But Steve's eye was enormous.

Was this what faced us the first time we are stung? I wondered. Would I swell up like that? (Not that anyone would notice through a slight excess of adipose tissue) And what if I got one of those anaphylactic thingies?

Steve, one of the victims of the recession had bravely ventured out as a smallholder with a number of acres of land and, both to improve pollination and perhaps to generate some extra income had refurbished a couple of WBC's generating heated discussions early in the night class sessions about the relative merits of different hives.

As I didn't know my Dadant's from my Langstroth's it left me totally bemused (and, it still does) I smugly told Steve "Oh, I haven't been stung once" forgetting to add that I hadn't got any bees yet. "I am going to set a world record for not getting stung" I told him.

Funnily enough, although I find the bees very docile whilst I am on them (well trained perhaps? Them, not me) I am invariably followed by at least a couple of them when I move away from the hives - even back to the hut, and on a couple of occasions Alan has had to rescue me by putting violent hands upon them. Strangely, I noticed that the other students would hastily pull on their hoods whenever I approached the coffee table...

But - I was still sting free!

Monday evening. I was just about to relieve my plate of the burden of the last of my home grown asparagus when the phone rang.

Now, we have an unwritten rule in our house, when I am sat communicating with my plate I leave all other sorts of communication to the Queen Bee, after all for 99% of cases it will be one of her cronies to discuss village hall matters, senior citizen issues or other small village esoterica. She whispered "It's Mrs Bee Guru for you" Goodness me! I put on my best telephone voice and said "hello Mrs BG how can I help?"

"How brave are you feeling today?" She asked.

"What? Well as brave as I felt yesterday I suppose, why do you ask?"

"We have just had a phone call from a member of the public about a swarm in their garden, how would you feel about collecting it?"

My mind went blank for a couple of millennia and then with more confidence in my voice than certainly I was feeling, I gulped and said "Yes sure, why not? What do I need to do?"

Mrs BG gave me a lot of instructions and advice which immediately left my head never to return. "Ok, I will ring the man and sort it out direct, don't worry about a thing"

Don't worry about a thing? I must be stark staring mad. A raving idiot.

First - I DON'T HAVE A HIVE. Second - My acquaintance with bees has been tentative, casual and infrequent, and, Third I DON'T KNOW WHAT I AM DOING! The QB said "Calm down for goodness sake, you'll give yourself a heart attack" "I'M HAVING ONE" I squeaked. She ordered "Ring Leslie, she will know what to do."

I duly rang Leslie. Leslie is a calm, elegant woman with a very sweet nature and the patience of a saint. "Yes we can sort it out" she said. Thank goodness for that! I arranged to pick her up together with sundry articles, rang the current swarm owner and arranged to call and collect said swarm.

With much trepidation I arrived with Leslie together with white sheet, brood box, smoker et al to hear one of the sweetest sounds on this planet. I think the quiet hum of a swarm must, at least for me, be one of those sounds like whales singing or skylarks whistling that calm and quiet the soul. Am I waxing poetical? Perhaps, but I had never heard (or even seen) one before.

My swarm was hanging from the low branch of a pretty apple tree in a small orchard. The owner explained that his only reason for calling was that his very young son used the orchard as his play area and he was worried, naturally, about stings. I explained that swarms were usually very calm and quiet as they had 'bellies' full of honey and their only interest was in a new home, and anyway we would be gone in an hour or so.

I am sure I am not the only one to have noticed that women beekeepers appear to have more empathy with bees than men. Is it a girl thing? Anyway, whatever the reason they always seem to be gentler and more patient than men.

There is one small snag that I have now discovered about this feminine empathy. Leslie was not leaving until-every-last-little-lady-was-in-the-box. But what about my asparagus? I inwardly groaned, it was going to be a long evening.

Truth to tell had I been there on my own, I confess that once we were down to the last million or so I would have packed up and legged it as fast as a spiv spying the Bill on Oxford Street.

It was not to be. Peering through the gloom to ensure there were no abandoned little souls we finally got them into the back of the car and returned to Leslie's where she gently put them into her garage for the night.

I returned home absolutely blown away by the whole experience, it was a joy and balm to my soul. I couldn't wait to tell the QB, my kids, my grandkids, my neighbours, the postman. Surprisingly none of them seemed to quite share my enthusiasm...

Saturday and a phone call from Leslie not exactly in a panic (Leslie doesn't do panic) but with a certain amount of urgency in her voice "I have had a phone call from Barbara Oakham, she has a swarm in her nut tree in the garden, and the problem is, I can't deal with it right now because of tomorrow can you help?"

Leslie was preparing for a major event in her life on Sunday and she had diverse members of her family from sundry parts of the world staying with her, I knew that she would want to respond to Barbara but was torn between desire to help and her duties as a hostess. "Leslie, don't worry about a thing, I will deal with it, forget about it and get on with your family"

Leslie heaved a sigh of relief and put the phone down. Now, what the hell do I do with the swarm? I have no spare kit. I don't have a skep or, indeed much else besides. I rang Barbara to establish the swarm was still there, yep it was. "Ok Barbara I will be along very shortly to collect it and don't worry about it"

I made up a cardboard skep, scrounged a net curtain from an obliging neighbour and pinched a white sheet from the Queen Bee "You are not going without me" She said "I wouldn't miss this for the world"

I didn't know whether she wouldn't miss seeing a swarm for the world or the prospect of seeing her husband getting a good dose of beejuice but I didn't pursue it. It was a blisteringly hot day, which had a major influence on the events that followed and I viewed the prospect of wearing the bee suit with misgivings, still, caution is the watchword so I will wear it.

But I still haven't solved the question of what to do with the swarm once collected. Nigel is a beekeeper with some years of experience who had lost his colonies earlier in the year and was desperate to replace them. I called him. No answer, so leaving a message on his mobile I set off with the QB to do the deed.

The swarm was still in place in a hazel tree in the middle of a lawn on a south facing slope. I lit the smoker which I think was more of a good luck charm than any real help and the QB jerked the branch and the swarm obligingly fell into my arms. Well, not literally, but into my cardboard skep anyway. I put it down on the white sheet and with a bucket borrowed from Barbara shook the rest of the bees into it and placed it on the sheet facing my box. The rest of the swarm began to march into my box, so that was alright, I had got the queen!

The sun beat down mercilessly and the sweat was dripping off my forehead and onto my glasses. I couldn't see a thing. Thankfully my mobile rang and I dived round the corner into the shadow of the house to answer it. It was Nigel who was

away for the weekend "but don't worry about that there is a bait hive set up in the garden just use that and I will back tomorrow". So that was that, we could place the swarm at Nigel's. I went back into the Saharan Sun.

Fortunately with Leslie not there to see I could leave the last sixteen or so bees behind and clear off out of this sun. "What about all those hundreds of bees still flying around?" said the QB. "Oh don't exaggerate there is only a handful and they will find their own way home" I airily answered. "We can't leave without them" "But we will be here for hours" I protested. To no avail. Clearly, the QB had been infected by Leslie disease. So I grumpily stumped off into the shade to await the bee's pleasure.

About a fortnight later they were all in the box and we could leave for Nigel's. Now, correct me if I am wrong but surely the books say that hives are best kept on level ground, with good vehicular access and preferably close to your equipment source? Yes, I thought so. So siting it at the top of a precipitous field 40 miles from the house isn't a good idea? No, I thought not

I struggled up the hill with the box wrapped in its net curtain. The bait hive was a WBC. My favourite hive. Not. What the hell do I do with it? I had never seen one in the flesh before. Anyway I opened the roof and found a hive not unlike my National inside, so I removed some of the outer leaves until it was exposed. I opened it and wearily dumped the box over the brood box. Approximately eleven bees fell in and the rest neatly dropped into the space between the brood box and the outer leaves.

Oh, bloody hell, what do I do now? The sweat was dripping from my nose into the box giving the bees a saline bath. From a distance the QB asked me what was going on. "Oh, nothing much" I said breezily. "I am just making sure the queen is in the box" The bees seemed to spill out everywhere and it seemed the only thing to do was wait to see if she was in residence.

I walked far enough away to allow me to remove my veil, I don't think I have ever felt so hot and thirsty. After a couple of centuries had passed I could see bees fanning their nasenov glands on the front porch. "Aha! We have a queen!" I shouted triumphantly to the QB and explained the significance of what I could see.

A couple more centuries passed and I deemed it time to close up the hive, only problem was there were still a couple of million bees between the box and the outer leaves. Right, the only thing to do is put on the crownboard but leave the roof slightly off so everyone could escape and go to the front door.

We stumbled wearily down the hill and home for tea and bed.

I awoke with a start at five fifteen in the morning worrying about the swarm. The last thing the QB had said to me last night (apart from good night darling, of course) was "Do you think they will be alright?" "Who?" I mumbled sleepily. "The Bees" "Oh blast the bees, I am going to sleep" I said. But I couldn't and didn't.

I quietly dressed, collected my veil, smoker and hive tool and drove around the hill to Nigel's. I roped up and using my crampons and ice axe, climbed to the top of his Everest-like field. Well, if ever the bees stopped to look they would see a fabulous view across the wilds of Gloucestershire, I thought.

Six o'clock. I could hear a quiet hum from the hive and thought I had wasted a journey. I carefully took off the roof and to my horror and chagrin found the complete swarm hanging to the underside of the roof. Now what? I had my hands full of roof and the crownboard was still in place. With amazing dexterity and fool's luck I managed to slide the crownboard off and dump the bulk of the swarm into the brood box, I put the roof upside down in front of the hive and stepped back to wait. This time I wasn't moving until I WAS ABSOLUTELY SURE she was in the box!

And so it goes.

Nigel was delighted and rang me on his return to say thanks.

Monday afternoon, I was sitting on the patio deciding if I had enough energy to walk all the way through the house to get another beer from the fridge when the phone rang so, yes I did have enough energy to get a beer because I had to answer the phone. It was Nigel. "You'll never believe it the bloody bees have swarmed again! I was looking at the hive and I thought it was a bit quiet and when I looked in it was empty. I was just about to rappel back down the field" (at least that was what I thought he said but I might be wrong) "when I heard a hum from the hedge in the next field and there they were so I got a cardboard box" etc. etc. etc.

Part the third

11th June will go down for me as a RED LETTER day. Tonight I collect my bees!

Now, I should perhaps explain that my innate meanness meant I was not going to spend a second mortgage on buying properties for bees. Indeed, when I first started Googling the whole subject it was when I got to the eye-watering prices of hives I nearly returned to join the sublimely indifferent public. I mean, I fully understand that the role of the hobbyist is to cough up as much of his hard earned cash for his passion as possible so that the retailer can buy his second Ferrari but all I wanted was a small box or two to bung some insects in!

However the BG had kindly pointed me in the direction of that nice Mr Thorne and I had been able to buy a hive from his 'Bees on a Budget' offer - which actually satisfied another small interest of mine which is building things. So, kitted out with, if I may say so, a beautifully built national I had ordered a Nucleus from the association and finally, after waiting a lifetime it was ready. However, the week before, the BG had thrown a spanner in my nicely ordered works when he announced that the association had a surplus of colonies and was willing to part with four for a mere bagatelle, so I had nipped around to the back of the shed and 'phoned the QB, gently reminding her that it would be my birthday the following Sunday (nothing like a bit of emotional blackmail to get a result) and she had reluctantly agreed to my buying a second colony.

I ought to introduce my son-in-law, David who plays a large part in the leisure and pleasure part of my life. Leisure, because we share close interest in many things, Cricket, Motor Sport, Gardening and an ambition to try every real ale in England. Pleasure, because he has provided (via my daughter, of course) three very nice grandchildren.

Well, although his beekeeping knowledge is very secondhand having only come from me, he wanted to come with me to collect the bees (which actually suited me very well because it meant I had a complete ignoramus to hold my hand and he wouldn't know when I messed it up) So, we collected two colonies - one in a borrowed hive (the queen is called Mabel and she is an August '07 queen and the new queen in the nuc is called Norah). I asked that nice Mr Thorne to send me another 'flatpack' so that I would be able to give back the hive belonging to the association. We got home as darkness fell and duly installed the two colonies onto their stands, David insisting on taking lots of flash photography to record the event.

At last! I was a fully fledged beekeeper!

Sunday arrived and I duly fetched up at the apiary for my 'mock GCSE'. I was to be the first of the group to take a mock assessment with the BG, I had whispered that it was my birthday and I would like to shoot off as we had a house full of family to celebrate my sixty fourth (what's to celebrate?)

I put my suit on and rushing a little didn't put my wellies on, contenting myself that the elasticated legs of the suit would protect me.

Big mistake! I hadn't been on the bees with the BG for a nanosecond when the first lady dug herself into my ankle, not able to reach her I got a full dose of beejuice. Two nanoseconds later I inadvertently trapped another lady under the front of my hood and she took exception to that giving me another full dose on the point of my chin.

After that things went rapidly downhill, although I managed to not embarrass myself too much with the BG. As I returned to the hut to complete a written questionnaire I absently brushed a bee from my right ear, or rather didn't. Sting number three. I returned home feeling a little bit sorry for myself, three stings and they weren't even my bees! Bang goes my world record too. Never mind, birthday boy will be in the bosom of his family and all will be well.

I arrived home to gales of unsympathetic laughter at my golf ball ankle, my double treble chin and my cauliflower ear.

Wasn't it Winston Churchill who speaking of us and the Americans said that we are 'two nations divided by a common language'? Well, if proof were needed it can be found in 'Beekeeping for Dummies'. My Grandchildren thoughtfully bought this book for me for my birthday in June and it turned out to be a surprising read, largely because the methodology used by the Americans is so far away from our own, but also because of its unbelievably patronising tone.

It really is a book for dummies, I would like to say that I learnt nothing from it but that would be a lie (maybe I am more dummy-like than I thought) I learnt two really useful things from it, the first is that if you push down with your other hand when levering upwards under crown boards etc. you equalise the pressure and are less likely to 'crack' the boards and secondly YOU DON'T NEED A SUIT! (At least for most operations anyway) So, as I hate the suit anyway, I have been wearing only a veil and my lab gloves (plus of course my wellies - once bitten twice shy!

Treading where Angels normally avoid.

David called me to ask if I could help. "Helen, the wife of a colleague of mine has recently had a mild stroke, from which she was recovering" He explained. "She can't work for some time and her husband had bought her a beehive to help with her recuperation, however Mike says she seems to be having some problems, would you be willing to have a look at it for her?" How could I refuse? A damsel in distress, a knight in shining armour (or at least in a bee suit) and the prospect of a couple of beers later on. "Of course I will, where does she live and when should I come?" I asked. "Marston Meysey and come tonight, I will meet you there and explain more" said Dave.

I collected my bags, barrels and boxes and trundled off. I met Dave just short of the Lady's bungalow. Dave told me "Mike bought her a hive after research on the web, they then bought a couple of books and a DVD to learn from." "And that's it?" I asked. "What about training?" "She hasn't had any" He answered.

We went inside and he introduced me. She was a very nice lady but clearly was very nervous around the bees and really didn't have a clue. The hive, a beautiful WBC in cedar and obviously a very expensive bit of bit of kit (I learnt later that Mike had paid an eye watering £650 for the hive and a nuc of bees.) She was pretty clueless and getting herself into trouble.

I mentally blessed the BG and launched into a potted lecture on keeping bees and gently persuaded her to join her local association at the earliest opportunity which she promised to do. Because of her nervousness around the bees I decided not to wear my suit (Dave put it on instead, the coward) so armed with only a hat and veil and some latex gloves I confidently approached the hive. I opened it up to find the most beautiful blond bees I have ever seen, not that I have seen a lot actually. But anyway there they were and almost immediately one of the blonds flew up onto my chest and promptly pumped me full of exquisitely painful beejuice. Ouch! Actually double ouch because her sister joined her and gave me another dose for good measure.

I swiftly smoked my shirt to hopefully disguise the venom scent and coughing and spluttering lifted out the frames. I couldn't make a fuss about the stings since I was trying to demonstrate to her that beekeeping was safe and fun. As if. There could not have been more than a couple of thousand bees in the hive and certainly no queen. They must have swarmed within days of arriving and were now probably ensconced in some lucky but undeserving local beekeeper's hive! How sad.

This incident only reinforced to me the wisdom of seeking proper training before embarking upon the management of fifty thousand or so recalcitrant insects.

Happily the story ended well. The supplier provided another queen and last heard of, queen and lady beekeeper were doing well with every prospect of the colony surviving the coming winter.

Back home and that nice Mr Thorne had delivered my new hive which I duly assembled. I took the precaution of treating the parts and laid them out in the sun to dry. It was a lovely warm day and I awarded myself a cold beer which I took to the patio.

Beer finished I went around the house to see how my boxes were drying. Blow me down if there wasn't a swarm hanging from the bottom of one of the boxes! What do I do now? When in doubt the book says stop, have a cup of tea and think.

So, that's what I did.

Right, time to deal with this situation, first I need to check if it is my own swarm or a newcomer. Well I can't find the queen but as she is clipped she can't have gone, can she? So logic dictates that she must be there and therefore the swarm is waiting for her to come out so I will bung them back in the box.

I opened the crownboard and dropped the whole swarm in. They went ballistic and flew all around me going mad. Have I done the right thing?

That evening they had all gone back in so that was ok, wasn't it?

Simon and Sarah, my neighbours called me from the garden " We can hear buzzing coming from the hedge in our field, next door" I ran round into the field and there right inside the hedge was the swarm. I had absolutely no chance of getting it out, none at all. It was, as it turned, out a prime swarm from my hive and they duly flew off, I sadly watched them go and went to look at the hive. Mabel the queen was still there, bless her, busily laying eggs and there seemed to be plenty of bees and lots of brood, so maybe nothing lost?

The following day, the QB was delivering eggs to Sarah when she noticed a 'buzzing from the hedge' and called me out. My heart sank, not again? Sure enough there was a swarm, smaller this time and so reasonable to assume it was a first cast. The good news, however, was I could reach this one!

So, nipping back for my trusty box and nylon curtain I returned to an expectant audience of neighbours. Well, clearly I had to perform and make sure that I collected this one properly, the good news was that I had a new hive which I had prepared for Mable and although it was freshly treated and I hadn't planned on using it yet I could at least give Mable's daughter a home! I managed to collect around 80% of the swarm first go and putting them down in the box on the ground waited to see if I had caught the queen. Sure enough all the girls slowly made their way into the box and put themselves to bed.

So far so good.

Now I made a big mistake. The book says that the queen that flew off would be the old queen and that she would have left a sealed queen cell behind with a new queen ready to hatch. BUT, Mable couldn't fly and so the swarm must have a new queen (I think) SO the answer is to move Mable to the new hive complete with brood frames and food and put the new swarm (plus queen) into the old hive with new fresh frames. Good old tolerant Mable took it all in her stride and set off to build a new colony in her new home. I put Mable's daughter (now known to be called Clarissa) into the old hive and following much good advice left her to her own devices to fly and mate or not but definitely not be disturbed by me.

Why didn't I just put Clarissa into the new hive? The answer is I panicked, I am inexperienced. After all I am a mere man.

Part the fourth

The next few weeks saw all three colonies busily doing their stuff so all was right with the world but, worrying as ever I could see that I would need to combine Mabel and Clarissa before the winter set in. The problem for me is that playing God, even with a few bees does not sit easily on me and anyway Mable, who logic dictates should be the one to go, is still such a busy little bee...

Earlier in the year Mrs BG had asked which of us novices would be taking the Basic. This is sort of an eleven+ exam for new beekeepers. Now, truth to tell I had already decided not to take it for several reasons: I can't see beyond the end of my nose, I can't remember anything beyond five minutes ago and, I don't know enough to pass. But. Mrs BG was looking straight at me when she asked and so, stupidly and full of misplaced bravado I said airily "Sure, why not? After all it makes nonsense of the training if we don't do it"

I listened to myself with my stomach sinking into my boots. "Why the hell do I not learn to keep my big mouth shut" I thought to myself. If my memory was better I would remember all the sticky straits (mixing my metaphors) I had got myself into over the last sixty years, but there is no fool like an old one especially when his mouth moves at light speed and his brain at snail pace.

Anyway the due date arrived and I turned up at the apiary with my smoker et al, ready to do battle with the examiner who turned out to be a really pleasant and gentle lady. I was second to go and watched Steve get a grilling and then go to the bees.

I should explain that we have 18 hives which sadly are numbered but not named and as with most creatures they each have their own personality ranging from gentle to horrific. Hive 2 is a favourite of most of us, the bees are gentle and tolerant whereas 10 and 3 are known to be a little 'temperamental'. Happily Steve was on a good hive and not surprisingly did a really good job.

My turn. The examiner begins by asking a few questions followed by a visit to a fresh hive where the student describes his actions and answers a few more questions whereupon, depending on how well the student thinks he has done he either beams a big smile at the others or disappears behind the shed to be violently sick.

She asked me some simple and easy to answer questions to lull me into a false sense of confidence and then asked me what Braula is. I don't think she was too taken with my suggestion that it was the name of a Scandinavian heavy metal band. She wasn't too thrilled with my habit of calling the bees 'ladies' either, clearly, a no-nonsense woman. I didn't dare tell her that my queens had names as I think she would have thrown me out.

Now to the bees.

My hive was to be 17. Did I mention 17? No? Well on the scale of badness 17 sits somewhere down around Hades and I swear that I have seen horns and a forked tail on the queen. Just my luck. But she obviously had gone on holiday and taken the devil's disciples with her because it went like a dream. The only small bee in the ointment, to coin a phrase, was when she asked me to collect a sample of bees for analysis. No matchbox! "Oh yes there is" She said as she pulled one from her pocket. I duly took the required sample of bees. Let me see, that's thirty isn't it? We opened my box to find... three. Oh well we can't all be perfect but I guess that's my Bee PhD out of the window.

The year moved benignly on. We made regular visits to the apiary and I literally learnt something new every week. Of course I promptly forgot it again a day later which prompted the QB to suggest that maybe it was the same thing I was learning every week? Apparently bees are not too fussed about rain and happily the weekly visits to the apiary coincided with the sunny bits and so we were able to increase our stock of knowledge whilst the bees increased their stock of honey. Which of course bring us to the whole point of the exercise.

The collection of honey.

Now, I know not to expect too much from my first year, after all before the bees begin making honey for me they have a whole host of housekeeping duties to attend to like making cupboards to put it in and nurseries for babies, gluing up draughty bits and generally prettifying the whole house. So I was glad of the opportunity to volunteer for honey extraction duty at Albert's. A very experience beekeeper, Albert's son Alan has followed in his footsteps and they were hosting the extraction as Albert owns every piece of honey extraction kit known to Man.

I had several happy hours up to my knees in honey and sticky wax and learnt a great deal about the process. It was topped off with an unexpected and very welcome lunch prepared by Mrs Albert. I drove home inspired by a full belly and what I had learnt. So, time to put it into practice.

When I initially assembled the hives I had also added new supers so that the bees could create comb and even, perhaps, maybe, fill it with wondrous honey? Both Mable and Norah set to it with enthusiasm and when I made my weekly visit to the hives I kept a close eye on progress and sure enough the girls were working away, in fact I got a bit carried away and popped another super on each one to encourage them further but they made it clear by totally ignoring them that this was a step too far. Anyway come July and the full honey flow as we professionals like to term it and the air is alive with busy little ladies flying back and forth collecting goodies for my honey. I even had a tentative stab at hefting the hives and they felt like, well, hives actually but no matter, they must be filling the comb up with honey mustn't they?

Happily the branch has its own extractor thus avoiding the necessity for me to test my innate meanness again (and it is only a fiver to hire!) One small drawback, it cost me fifty quid in petrol to go and fetch it. But, I now have it and the QB and I spent many happy weeks assembling it and re-assembling it until it worked.

Now to the supers.

We had quite a lot of rain in August and as the Bee Guru was heard to say later. "The rain had probably cost us around a third of the crop as the bees were eating it as fast as they were creating it"

'Do the math' That ugly American expression created by people too lazy to talk properly but, in this instance I reluctantly concede to their description. Two supers times eleven frames less say, fifty percent for newness, wet weather and that innate cussedness that Nature is so good at should mean what, five, six, seven pounds of Honey?

Using the skills learnt at the Apiary I had duly used my bee escapes and so the supers were 'empty' of bees apart, that is from the two that stung me. I took the supers, unopened, to the kitchen where I had prepared my surgical instruments. I opened the first super and took out the first frame. No Honey. I took out the second frame. No honey. I took out the third frame... but you get the idea. Out of a total of twenty two frames there were two with a miserable dribble of honey. The QB could not contain herself. Howling (the only word to describe it) with laughter she left the kitchen leaving me to my misery and abject humiliation. Of course now I can console myself with the words of the BG and I realise that my bees, particularly hungry, had not eaten thirty percent of the crop but ninety nine point nine five of it but in the kitchen on that day I could only console myself with a pint of the blessed Bateman's XXXB.

With such a small crop was it worth extracting? Well, yes, because I needed to return the supers to the colonies for cleaning and even one and a half jars was better than nothing I just wished I hadn't told the world repeatedly through the year that I didn't intend to take any honey this year but leave it all for the bees. Well, the extractor worked perfectly even if you did need a microscope to see the results. The taste was fantastic and I gave a jar (almost full) to my Grandchildren who twenty four hours later had completely devoured it. A good thing I didn't have thirty pounds or so, I thought to myself.

Happily Albert and Alan rewarded me with a jar of the Apiary honey for my extracting efforts and so I was able to placate the QB with some. Of course she could not resist the temptation to point out to me that my jars of honey were probably the most expensive in the world and made Fortnum and Mason's £10 jars seem like a bargain (but I'll bet it doesn't taste like mine) I returned the supers to the bees and ten nanoseconds later they were clean and I could take them off for the winter.

Part the last

Having successfully achieved my goal of harvesting honey I now had to work out what to do to help my bees survive the winter.

Trying to think ahead I had two major tasks to conclude. First, combine the hives and second to feed and treat for the winter. This is how it went warts and all.

I need to digress here for a moment. Despite using the combined eyes of the Queen Bee, my son in law David, and diverse grandchildren we had never set eyes upon the mythical Clarissa. If she existed she was not clipped and it was only the evidence of brood which told me she was there. The problem with that diagnosis is my eyesight did not really allow me to say with any certitude that there really were eggs in the comb. On the other hand the blessed and reliable Mable was going great guns, my reasons for wanting to combine were twofold. First, I did not believe either colony was strong enough to last through the winter on its own and second, I needed to return the borrowed hive back to the apiary, you will appreciate that my innate meanness meant no more buying hives, at least for the time being.

Over a period of a week I moved the two hives closer together in the prescribed manner. On the appointed day and with the help of the QB I opened Clarissa's hive and carefully placed a sheet of the Daily Telegraph over the brood chamber then I lifted Mable's box and put it on top. I confess my head was reeling with all the instructions about which way round to put them and I freely also confess that I funked the task of finding Mable and doing her in. I had decided in my abject cowardice and not altogether convinced of Clarissa's existence to let things be decided by fate or nature or, well, anybody but me. I know, I know, but that is what I did. After a few days bits of chewed newspaper were being thrown out of the hive so they were obviously combining, happily or not. To cut a short story shorter there were no major dramas except to say that there was a larger than normal incidence of dead bees around the combined hives for a few days possible coincidence or possibly the result of internecine warfare amongst the Mable and Clarissa tribes. They settled back to 'normal' and I went back to trying to spot a queen.

A phone call from a high official of the County Association "Congratulations Bee'd you have passed the Basic" "Me?" Well, you could have knocked me down with a bee wing. Since my performance at the assessment could only be described as meagre I can only assume that the lady tester was totally smitten with my devilish charm and wit, and therefore forgave me my ineptitude. I thanked His Beeness and cock-a-hoop went off to phone the world who, I must say reacted with sublime indifference. Still, I am now a, well, basic beekeeper at least!

Time to feed the bees with sugar and treat them with Apiguard, I followed

exactly the regime laid down by the Apiary and was happy to find a very low incidence of Varroa, which is good news going into the winter.

Not so good news however, were the results of feeding.

Despite following the rules and feeding them at night, being careful to avoid any spillage the days were marked by furious bouts of robbing. I could tell they were all robbers because they had striped jerseys and face masks although I didn't see any bags marked 'swag'. The only solution was to move the hives to somewhere else. So, calling on my buddy and son in law David I arranged to take the hives over to his garden which is about eighteen miles away on top of the Cotswold escarpment. I duly taped up the entrances and strapped the boxes and once it got dark the QB and I carefully lifted the hives and put them in the back of the car.

By the time I got to Dave's it was as black as the hobs of hell but with my trusty torch and the headlights on we soon had the hives installed in their temporary home. With a careless flourish I whipped off the tape from the first hive and was attacked by an extremely unhappy regiment of bees, I don't think I have ever moved so fast in my life. Believe me, there is nothing more frightening than an attacker that you can't see and three stings later I decided to put my suit on to finish the job. It was no good asking Dave to help, he was doubled up in laughter in the dark somewhere having taken the precaution of borrowing the QB's suit.

I left the hives at Dave's for a couple of weeks but, strangely, he reported the same massive activity at each of the hives that I had experienced here, so perhaps it wasn't robbing but simply the excited activity of feeding bees? I don't know and here lies the problem with lack of experience. Good training is vital but so is experience and I lack it (in spades). I decided to bring the hives back and complete the feeding and Varroa treatment at home. I took an especially exaggerated care to ensure no stings when I opened them by wearing a borrowed suit of medieval armour from the British Museum, it was a bit tight and got a bit rusty but it was very handy for jousting.

So, feeding went on and following on from experience at the apiary I found it easier to judge the hefting trick. Both hives now heavy and treated I could contemplate the winter. Not so the bees. We had an amazing warm and settled period of weather resulting in frenetic activity from the girls and, I assume, a big increase in stores from Ivy pollen and I don't know what else.

It seems funny to consider the year over in October but the bees obviously feel it is.

By November they are making only sporadic forays into the countryside on warm and still days, otherwise staying at home and stuffing themselves with warming pollen soups and honey puddings. Still at least it gives me something else to worry about.

Will the stores suffice? Is the Varroa under control? Have I protected sufficiently against woodpeckers, mice, wax moth, badgers and acts of God? I am tempted to 'open up and have a look' but so far I have resisted, perhaps if we get a really, really warm day I might but then again...

So, final tasks for the year:

Prepare bee candy-check

Strap hives against rogue elephants- check

Protect supers against wax moth- check

Install mouse guards- Ah, not check.

Casual and careless to the last.

I thought, it's dark, they will be asleep, I will just pop on the mouse guards with a couple of drawing pins. So down to the shed I go, collect said guards and make my way in the dark to the hives. As I placed the first pin into the hive a bee shot out and promptly stung me on the finger. Ouch! I dropped the mouse guard and so bent down to pick it up, just knocking the corner of the hive. Out shot another bee and gave me a dose of beejuice on the other hand.

No suit. No gloves. No boots.

Oh well...

Things I have learned:

- 1 Not everybody likes bees!
- 2 Not all bees like everybody!
- 3 By the time the weather is hot enough for shirtsleeves it is already too hot for a bee suit!
- 4 It is very difficult to fit foundation in a frame when the temperature is 28°C
- 5 The 30% of pollination made by bees is not in my garden
- 6 Chewing aromatics like mint and parsley seems to lessen the bees' interest in me
- 7 Beekeeping is stress free and stressful
- 8 Bees do sting but only:
 - When you are clumsy
 - When you are inattentive
 - When you are rushing
 - When you are careless
 - When they are in a bad mood
 - When they are in a good moodAnd sometimes I swear, just for the Badness!
- 9 Bee stings do hurt but really no more than a rose thorn, the difference is the rose doesn't leave half a pint of beejuice in you.
- 10 Bees do fly in the rain (albeit only to scurry home) and I don't think they like it
- 11 Despite fears to the contrary, beekeepers are not vegan, tree hugging do gooders with a hidden agenda to rid the world of fascist pigs like me but are actually a gentle and appreciative cross section of ordinary humanity.
- 12 Bee'd's Law of Beekeeping: When you need to find the Queen she is always somewhere else.

Despite my propensity for accidents, I have had a marvelous year. I have discovered the Bee Guru's Big Secret and I need to say thank you to him and to Mrs BG for making it such fun and so productive.

Roll on next year...Watch this space!