

Allotments are back in fashion - Hempland Lane Allotments, York, North Yorkshire



DIARY OF A BEEKEEPER by Nick Mansell

Based at Hempland Lane Allotments, York, North Yorkshire

I have always been fascinated by honey bees, not just because I enjoy eating their produce most days for breakfast but their whole ecology and importance to plant life and food production.

I had a regular supply of honey from an elderly beekeeping friend who would enthrall me with the trials and tribulations of his hobby but never got round to trying it for myself.

That all changed last Christmas when my children bought me membership of the York Beekeepers Ass and a 7 week course in beekeeping held at the Yorkshire Farming Museum. I was committed.

In early July I felt ready to acquire my first colony of bees. Other beginners were purchasing ready made colonies from bee suppliers, paying up to £200 for a nucleus of a laying queen and five frames of bees.

My chance came one day when I heard of a swarm of bees that had appeared in a garden not far from where I live. They were mine if I wanted them and they were free provided I had a site and a hive to put them in. I had already

considered the possibility of keeping them on my allotment and had obtained permission from the City Council Allotments Officer to do so provided I ticked all the requirements. Other beekeepers helped me with parts for a hastily assembled hive and I had already purchased the other essentials such as a suit and veil, gloves and smoker. Having captured the swarm in a box I transferred them to my hive at the bottom of my plot and gave them a welcome meal of sugar syrup. They began foraging the next day. I then got the local bee inspector from FERA at Sand Hutton to give them an inspection and he declared them fit and healthy. They were only a small colony of about 5k bees when in the height of summer a single colony can reach 50k. I had to build them up quickly and since then have been inspecting and feeding them ever week. Although small in number they could consume a litre of syrup every week.

Even though I have still not spotted the queen, I know she is there as the colony has about tripled in number. During the summer months worker bees only live for 6 weeks, the first 3 in the hive performing cleaning and feeding duties in the cells and second foraging for pollen and nectar. They will fly several kilometers to find suitable supplies but this hard work results in them dying of exhaustion at an early age. They have now built up about 5 frames of honey supply in the last 4 months but all this will be needed to sustain them through the winter. I have continued to feed them weekly which helps to keep the queen productive (she can lay up to 2k eggs a day).

Hempland allotments are an ideal environment for bees with an abundance of food from surrounding gardens, together with lime and horse chestnut trees by the beck. But equally important is the benefit to allotments by pollinating our peas and beans and all of our fruit trees and bushes. They are harmless and docile unless provoked and should be welcomed as friends onto our site.

As winter approaches they will be clustering inside the hive and hibernating until Spring but must be strong and healthy to survive. Cold and damp is their enemy as they must maintain a temperature of 96 degrees to get through it. I have already detected the presence of the dreaded varoa mite which is partly blamed for the dramatic drop in numbers over recent years but if the treatment can control them to an acceptable level then you may see Hempland honey on sale in the site shop next year.