

# There's Trouble at Mill!

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It's the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, the sun is out with a gentle breeze. The weather is perfect for a full hive inspection My Bee Mentor (MBM) is back from his trip and we are both looking forward to seeing what is going on. As the weather was so nice we sat and chatted about the recent bad weather of course, MBM asked how the hive had fared and what I was hoping to see when we open it up.

"I would like to actually catch a look at the Queen, there has been signs that she is present but not seen her in person." MBM said we will light his tobacco Smoker for this inspection because the bees had become a bit crabby recently. Bee suits zipped up, checked and we headed on down to the hive. Little did we know just what was about to unfold!

With two brood boxes and two supers on we had to make a plan before we opened the hive up. Just a quick look at the supers to see if there was anything being stored, to be honest I didn't think there would be much as the weather had been so poor recently and yes the top super was empty, the second had signs of the comb being drawn out on the centre frames but nothing to write home about.

We had decided to go straight to the bottom brood box first, this way it would minimize the disruption to the bees and they would get the chance to settle down after we put the top brood box back on and inspect that. Except I couldn't lift the top brood box off, it was just too heavy! We hadn't taken the first super off, minimize disruption again, but on taking that off we could see that the brood frames were mainly full of stores. That said we still had to lift this off and we would get round to checking it after we had done the bottom brood box. A super full of honey can weigh about 25lbs so a full brood box of honey could weigh about 50lbs. MBM asked if he could give it a go and yes to my slight embarrassment he lifted the brood box off and placed it safely on the upturned hive roof. He later confessed that he did struggle a bit himself and that there are easier ways to do this.

Okay this is where all the fun begins!

The bottom broods box was as busy as ever, full of worker bees and drones all still quite relaxed. On reaching the 4th frame we came across our first capped queen cell or as they call it charged. We put the frame back and continued as we would come back to it after checking the rest of the frames, we then found another capped queen cell and another and another, in total we found eight queen cells in this brood box. The frames in this box had one tell tale sign and that was there was no new brood just empty cells in the middle of the frames. There still was some capped brood and some capped drone brood to be seen around the edges. Last week's inspection I had seen uncapped larvae in the cells but had I missed that there were no eggs in the cells and perhaps I had misread the hive as it was so full of bees? My notes are all about what I had seen and not what was missing, something I feel I will have to address in future inspections.

What indeed had happened to the Queen, had the colony swarmed and she had bolted or maybe she had died from exhaustion laying all those eggs, the hive was still very full of bees? To be fair that really didn't matter at this point as we now had to deal with the current situation.

We decided to remove six of the capped queen cells, leaving two in the hive. Except whilst removing the cells one of the queens hatched in my hand. Having a queen hatch from her cell was definitely a WOW moment. There she was a virgin queen in my hand, whilst this was a brilliant thing to witness and be a part of we still had a job to do and now we had a virgin queen to deal with.

MBM wasted no time, he grabbed a queen cage from his kit bag and we carefully popped her in. Ten metres away from this hive was a empty bait Nuc, taking two brood frames, that didn't have queen cells, that still had some capped brood, with plenty of stores around the edges and without knocking the working bees off we loaded them all into this nuc. The plan was later that evening I would open the nuc's entrance and no doubt the forage bees would fly back to the main hive but there should be enough to get this new colony up and running once the queen had mated.

Interestingly out of the eight queen cells in the 1<sup>st</sup> brood box, four of the capped cells were empty. Sadly one of the capped cells was damaged beyond salvage during removal from the frame.

With two charged queen cells left in the 1<sup>st</sup> brood box and replacing the two frames we took for the nuc with empty ones with wax foundation we could only hope that this would work out right for this hive. This also meant that when we closed up we would have to leave both the main hive and nuc alone for at least a month for the bees to settle.

So now to the second brood box, MBM lifted it back into the top of the other one and I started the inspection. The first few frames were full of nectar and I think the third was all capped honey. Some of the frames did have a bit of brood in them but not much; it wasn't until I was just half way through the frames when I found an empty queen cell. The cap of the cell was hinged open still attached and there in the middle of the frame with her head in a cell looking for some food I guess was the virgin queen. I quickly called MBM over as he was closing up the nuc and we successfully caught her in the now empty queen cage. I would like to say that was it but I spotted another queen on the next frame and we also popped her into the same cage, the two queens really didn't seem very happy at being together but it was all we had. MBM must have thought I was messing around when I found another queen cell with the queen just emerging, she was a little harder to catch as she was quite small and luckily MBM had found an old queen cage used to post queens in the mail hiding at the bottom of his kit bag, we now had three queens.

At this point the hive had been open far too long and we needed to finish the inspection and close the hive up, the spare queens would have to wait for a bit whilst we decided what to do. MBM thought it better we put a queen excluder between the brood boxes as there was very little brood in the top box and the bees had been mainly using it as a food store anyway. This would make things easier in the long run with the added bonus if we did get to extract any honey from this brood box we would have drawn out brood frames, which are excellent for new hives. Just as long as we are gentle with them in the honey extractor. There was not a lot of room left in the top brood box so we put on a honey super that had a few drawn out frames just in case.

Closing up the hive had never been such a relief but there was still the question of the three queens. Having spare unmated queens is not a bad problem to have as they can be very useful to other local beekeepers that might need a new virgin queen. I say three but in the time we took to close up the main hive the last small queen had somehow wiggled herself free out of that old postal cage and

there was only one queen alive in the other cage. Whether it was in a hive or in a queen cage the strongest will win out.

This last spare queen still needed a home; she had already shown that she was a strong queen so we thought if we put her in the nuc this might improve the chances of the new colony surviving. Granted this wasn't the best option but what with all the bee wrangling we had just done this was the simplest.

It is now the 27<sup>th</sup> of June and the weather has been just woeful, I've lost count the amount of times I have stood at the window looking at the rain and wondering will it ever stop. Yes there certainly has been a run of very hot days recently and maybe just maybe the virgin queens have managed to get out and mate, but I daren't open the main hive or nuc to check not until at least 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> of July and that will also depend on what I observe as the bees fly in and out of the hives. On the good weather days there has been a fair bit of pollen coming into the main hive and there is some bee activity at the nuc but as of yet I've not seen any pollen coming in yet. Either way I will have something to write about in my next monthly blog.

As always take care now and bee safe.

Chris.