

September Bee Blog 9

The Association's visit to Iain's hives near Port William on the last Sunday of August proved inspirational for the next few weeks. His bees threw up some interesting problems, like what do you do with a weak, though not queenless, colony at this time of year? Answer, you give it some frames of brood **with bees** from a strong colony, and disguise the incomers by spraying them all with air freshener! You're never too old to learn.

The following day I started preparing to bring HN1 and HN2 back from the heather moor. The clearer boards, fitted with Porter Escapes meant the supers were empty within 24 hours. They were ferried back home for extraction and the following day the hives themselves were back in their permanent home on the farm. Although the heather was still in flower, the autumnal weather in the first week of September meant there was no chance of the bees collecting more honey.

And so to extracting. For me this is always prefaced by the pointless game of guessing just how much honey you will be able to extract. I always get it wrong; too much or too little, usually the former. Heather honey is thixotropic (think none-drip paint), so it can't go into a conventional extractor. It sticks in the combs like **** to a blanket. Therefore it has to either be stirred to make it runny, or you have to squeeze the honey out of the comb with some kind of press. I do the latter. To save the combs I scrape the honey and cappings off the foundation, using a Smith Cutter/Scraper, which shifts about 90% of the honey into the filter. It then goes through a second filter in a fruit press, and the golden crop is ready to bottle.

I have a love/hate relationship with honey extracting. On the one hand it is simply wonderful to see the product of all that bee effort transferring from comb to ripener to filter to jar. On the other hand it's very, very messy. No matter how careful you are, the sticky honey finds its way onto your clothes, your hands, all the tools you use and eventually into your home. Inevitably the last exercise I find myself doing after extracting is going round the house with a damp cloth wiping honey off kitchen utensils, door handles, kitchen units, carpets and the bottom of my shoes (not necessarily in that order!).

In preparation for winter, I've put my anti-varroa plan into action. It's very simple; this year I am using Apistan strips, two of which are hung between the brood frames for about 6 weeks. Last year it was Apiguard and next year I'll try a different treatment in order to avoid breeding varroa which are resistant to anything.

As hobbies go, beekeeping is not cheap. When setting up from scratch you can easily spend a thousand pounds on a couple of hives and all the kit that goes with them. But unlike birdwatching or potholing, beekeeping as a hobby has the potential to generate an income. At this time of year (technically the end of the season) I try to roughly calculate my profit/loss account. This year it's a profit and I'm not ashamed of it! Apart from honey jar labels, varroa treatment and petrol, my outgoings are negligible. On the other hand, by splitting hive HN1 in May, I created a new (strong) colony worth around £230. And this year's honey crop (mainly heather and also mainly from HN1), is worth at least £300. So even taking into account money I spent previously, like honey jars, which is spread over several years, I am well in pocket and well chuffed. Thanks, I have to say, largely due to an excellent year weather-wise. And not a single sting.

Mother Nature's last gift. Theoretically, heather should mark the final time in the year when the bees can collect nectar and pollen. But round here, near Creetown, nature has one last gift to offer the bees in the shape of ivy blossom. It covers the hedgerows, it smothers trees and it embraces the drystone dykes. This year the ivy came into flower just as the bees returned from the heather, and the amount of blossom is just staggering. Likewise the number of insects gorging themselves on it, not only the bees, but hoverflies and clouds of butterflies, mainly red admirals. Ivy honey may taste foul, but its pollen and its nectar are of huge benefit to the bees.