

So You Want To Keep Bees?

About the author:

Alastair is a beekeeper of 23 honey seasons. He doesn't think he is anywhere even close to being a good beekeeper but is pretty certain that he's not the worst! He is on his third stint on the Jersey Beekeepers Association (JBKA) council, this time as Vice President. This document is his personal view of the situation with respect to people starting out to becoming beekeepers, and is not necessarily an official JBKA view.

The JBKA receives lots of messages "I'd like to keep bees", "I'm interested in keeping bees. How do I start?" The following information has been put together to inform and forewarn prospective beekeepers of some of the challenges ahead on the journey to becoming a competent beekeeper. Challenges aside ... there is no doubt that working with bees can also be rewarding on many levels and often leads to a life-long passion!

A few points to start:

- There is a lot to learn. This doesn't mean that you can't keep bees and care for them well enough quite quickly, but beekeeping is a constant learning process ... a craft and the moment you think you have it sussed ... believe me, the bees will likely throw something at you that was unexpected.
- Bees don't look after themselves Yes to a point, but as a beekeeper, just like caring for other livestock, they need managing at certain times of year, particularly from April through to July when they often need some attention every week. As a livestock, of which you are the manager, there are certain legal requirements to keeping bees as well.
- Beekeeping is not for everyone. Many people like the idea of keeping bees, but when they get to their first beekeeping experience, standing over an open hive, they realise that maybe it's not for them. Somehow that experience of being surrounded by buzzing insects, even if they are in a good mood, let alone in a grumpy one, sometimes triggers a reaction of "I don't want to be here"! And yes ... bees sting. You will at some point be stung and it hurts! I recommend that before you invest in time and equipment, you try to put this possible fear to one side and ask the JBKA or friendly beekeeper if you can have a trial/taster session. I'm not suggesting that you go and get stung, but that you do experience an open hive.
- This is YOUR beekeeping journey. No one is going to drag you along it. You have to want to make it yourself, want to become a beekeeper, and in the end, how good a beekeeper you become will depend on, in part, some innate ability that some people seem to have and others don't, but also the effort that you put into it. There are all sorts of resources out there and many people that can help, but you will have to put the work in, ask questions, ask for help, hustle and charm more experienced beekeepers for some of their time and build connections to the beekeeping community etc. Be assured that whatever situation or problem you may be faced with, someone out there will have seen it before and have an opinion on how best to deal with it!

So ... the journey of becoming a beekeeper

Theory

It's a pretty good idea to do some homework first and study the basics. Often a good time to do this is over the winter when there is little practical beekeeping to be done. The idea being that by the time spring comes around, you are ready to go, armed with some basic, theoretical knowledge and eager to put it to practical use.

There are a number of ways to study the theory.....

Beginners Classes: The JBKA run “Introduction to Beekeeping” courses. These will have some element of theory to them, as well as a practical element. Practical classes can usually start in mid-April when the weather has warmed a bit. It would be a good idea to register your interest in any such beginners classes with the JBKA by emailing the secretary at jerseybeekeeper@gmail.com

Books: There are a bewildering array out there. Quite simply I’d start with *Beekeeping for Dummies by Howland Blackiston* and *The BBKA Guide to Beekeeping by Dr Ivor Davis*. From there, and once you start asking others what books they found helpful, you’ll find that there are plenty of other good books ... and you’ll soon have a small library of them.

Online classes: If you look online there are loads of YouTube clips etc. Some, that I really like, are by Stuart at The Norfolk Honey Company. He does loads of short video clips covering a huge array of beekeeping questions including a whole section on the Beekeeping Basics.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLdk31EYOI9csWWuC8InK0AFbnBTrJh_xE

Information websites: One of the best is Dave Cushman’s website <http://www.dave-cushman.net/> You need to know what information to look for, but if you do, then this has it all. And if you don’t know what you are looking for, it’s quite fun to dip into it rather randomly, exploring the multitude of subjects within beekeeping.

In general, for new beekeepers a couple of things to be mindful of are these:

- To start with, pick a couple of good books and that’s it, or one source of YouTube videos. There’s an adage in beekeeping ... “Ask 10 beekeepers a question and you’ll get 12 different answers”. There are lots different techniques in beekeeping, so to start with, stick to reliable and safe ones: the basics from just a few sources and later on you can experiment with new ones.
- It’s best to select information sources that are based in your country. Beekeeping terminology, and the way that they do things, is different in other countries. It’s not to say that it’s wrong, it’s just different, often based on different climates and different equipment, but it can really confuse the novice.

In any beginner’s theoretical learning, I would expect subjects such as the following to be covered:

- Honeybees – biology & lifecycle
- Equipment – hives, tools, suits, kit
- General management through the seasons
- Swarming – purpose, what happens, signs and how to control it
- Disease – common ones, diagnosis and treatment
- Harvesting honey – processing and other products from the hive

Once you have done a little of the theory, then it is time to get some practical experience, perhaps try to find a mentor, join the Jersey Beekeepers Association, consider what kit you might need and think about where you might put your bees.

Practical

Ideally, as soon as it is warm enough you will start to put some of the theory into practice and begin to build your practical hive assessment and handling skills.

It’s not impossible to do the practical side yourself with your own bees, but it would be a VERY steep learning curve. I myself started by “inheriting” three hives. I had a little bit of practical help for a few sessions, but in the main it was me, on my own, with a book in one hand, my hive tool in the other, looking into the bee hive and wondering what to do next. I would not recommend this way of gaining practical experience.

Ideally you would gain practical experience as part of a beginners course, of some sort. During these practical sessions, experienced beekeepers should take you through all the basic elements of safely opening up a hive, so that you can “read” what is going on and make sensible decisions in the management of the hive.

Outside the environment of a structured course it may be possible to find an build a relationship with a beekeeping mentor, perhaps someone who also has their own hives that you can assist with and therefore learn “on the job”. Whilst the JBKA is supportive of the mentoring process, it is often not so straightforward to find willing mentors, and work may be required to find someone. Possible avenues to do this are:

- contact the JBKA secretary (jerseybeekeeper@gmail.com) and get a note out in one of the newsletters that you are seeking a mentor.
- Post to the JBKA Facebook page
- Post to other Facebook pages .. Parish community pages etc.

All being well, you should find a mentor that you can build a long term, friendly relationship with. They get an extra pair of hands and you gain valuable beekeeping experience and perhaps eventually receive bees through a split or a swarm from one of their hives. When it works, it’s win-win for both mentor and pupil.

Equipment

There is a bewildering array of equipment available from all sorts of sources, and you can spend a fortune on it. The main suppliers are:

Thornes - <https://www.thorne.co.uk/> -

Maisemores - <https://www.bees-online.co.uk/> -

National Bee Supplies - <https://beekeeping.co.uk/> -

Modern Beekeeping - <https://www.modernbeekeeping.co.uk/> -

Old Castle Farm - <https://www.oldcastlefarmhives.com/shop/> -

Abelo - <https://www.abelo.co.uk/> -

There are also Amazon and Ebay for kit.

Many of the above will supply value-for-money starter kits with the basic, bare minimum of kit. This might consist of:

- Hive – This should consist of a floor, brood box with frames and wax foundation, queen excluder, min one super with frames and wax foundation, crown board and a roof. Hives can be supplied more cheaply in a flat-packed format but will need constructing – hammer, glue and nails job, but requires some basic wood working competence.
- Protective Suit/Jacket & gloves
- Smoker
- Hive tool

There are different types of hive, all with their pros and cons. Personally, my recommendation is to start with a cedarwood “National” hive: probably the most common type in Jersey.

With protective clothing ... I hate being stung, so I wear a full protective mesh suit from Old Castle Farms. This was £280 or so a few years ago. Being a ventilated mesh suit it is cool in hot weather, and suitably thick to keep those stings out!

With gloves, I suggest that new beekeepers wear what they feel comfortable and confident in. I started with heavy leather gloves but now wear marigolds as you have far greater “feel”, they are washable in sterilising solution between opening hives and they are cheap!

Some new beekeepers buy their kit 2nd hand. But a word of caution with American Foul Brood in Jersey you should be sure that all and any used kit has been suitably and thoroughly sterilised. Personally, I do not think that the risk is worth it.

Finally, if the 2nd hand kit has been used and ever contained bees before, when you move it to your location/store, you will need to register yourself and your store location with the Department of Environment. See: <https://www.gov.je/Industry/FarmingFishing/FarmingLivestock/Bee/Pages/BeeKeeping.aspx> It is a legal requirement for anyone who owns a hive with bees, or a hive/equipment which has **at any time contained a colony of bees**, to register with the Department of the Environment.

Location of your Apiary

There is a great leaflet produced by the BBKA – [Bees, Neighbours and Siting an Apiary](#)

Many people probably start with the idea of keeping bees in their garden. However, any site should be considered carefully. One of the most important factors in siting your apiary is to think of others. Every potential site will be different but three groups of non-beekeepers who might be affected by your choice of location are your neighbours, anyone who might be passing by and your own family.

The issues that they might experience are being stung by aggressive bees and being inconvenienced by a swarm – a natural process of colony reproduction but one which the beekeeper should seek to control. There are certainly actions that can and should be taken to mitigate the risks of these issues.

Beyond that there are considerations of access, shelter, prevailing winds, sunlight/shade, damp, security of the site, space around the hive(s), kit storage, presence of livestock/pets, etc.

In Jersey, we are lucky that occasionally landowners offer their space to beekeepers. Out-beekeeping is not for everyone, and requires a bit of planning if you can't easily "nip back to the store" for that piece of kit that you wish you'd taken.

Finally, as per Equipment above, wherever you site your apiary, you must, by law, register yourself and the apiary site with the Environment Department.

Obtaining Bees

Currently the JBKA does not have the necessary infrastructure to supply bees to anyone who wants them, when they want them, and there are professional no producers and suppliers of bees in Jersey. However, there are several ways in which you might obtain bees.

- If you have a mentor, it is likely that bees will become available via them. This may be as a result of a swarm from one of their hives or as a result of a split to control swarming. Your mentor may also have contacts into the wider beekeeping community so that they will hear if any bees become available.
- The JBKA may have some scheme to provide bees, particularly if you are on a course with them. Enquire via jerseybeekeeper@gmail.com
- You may be able to receive a swarm. The JBKA has two swarm coordinators whose role is to receive reports of swarms, normally between May and July, and ensure that they are collected safely and promptly. Swarm collectors are volunteer beekeepers with enough experience to collect swarms safely. Having carried out the work to collect a swarm they often want to keep it, but they ARE encouraged to donate it to a new beekeeper. There are a few considerations in being eligible to receive a swarm, but without going into them here, the important thing is to contact the JBKA secretary at jerseybeekeeper@gmail.com and get your name onto an "I'd like bees" list.

- You may also be able to receive or purchase a “nuc”. A nuc is effectively a mini-hive, and should be complete with a healthy laying queen, and enough healthy worker bees and food resources to ensure that with appropriate management, it will continue to thrive and develop into a full sized colony. There are a few beekeepers who do produce nucs by raising extra queens and splitting their own hives. This process is never guaranteed of success, so it’s not possible to say for definite whether any nucs will be available at any particular time. Any nucs that may be available are often mentioned on the JBKA Facebook page or in the JBKA emails. Being on the “I’d like bees” list will also ensure that you have a good chance of hearing of any opportunities. Obtaining your bees in this way is a private transaction and the JBKA is not responsible for any part of the “contract” that you might agree with any nuc supplier.
- If the JBKA is running a queen rearing course, there may be excess queens available that can, with assistance, turn into a viable colony. Contact the secretary to enquire.

Some beekeepers seek to import bees. I believe that this should be discouraged as it risks importing disease. It is also a complex and expensive option and is tightly controlled by legislation administered by the Department of the Environment.

Future Learning

Beekeeping is a lifelong learning process. I would encourage all beekeepers to attain the minimum qualification of passing the British Beekeeping Association (BBKA) Basic Assessment, something that you should be able to do comfortably after one or two beekeeping seasons. The JBKA will be able to assist you in this and is often able to run some revision groups to help people pass this assessment.

Thereafter ... well, there are lots of further practical and written tests in the form of modules, that can be taken that ultimately lead to becoming a Master Beekeeper. Currently there are no Master Beekeepers in Jersey.

Further information can be found here - [Examinations | British Beekeepers Association](#)

Other learning opportunities:

- Online lectures – the BBKA and various UK regional beekeeping associations often host online lectures ... one benefit of Covid! The Somerset BKA sometimes has particularly good ones.
- There are of course endless books and online resources.
- The JBKA has held Queen Rearing courses .. with mixed results .. but the intention is to help provide the skills to Jersey beekeepers to allow us to produce our own queens, negating the need for any imports.
- There are occasional apiary meetings to see how others do things and learn new techniques.

After all the above You are probably now well on your way to becoming a competent beekeeper, or you’ve decided that beekeeping isn’t for you!

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