



The Beginner

Bob has been keeping bees for two seasons. He started with a taster session held by **Reigate Beekeepers**

"Not only did the taster session give an outline of some of the theory, it was a chance to open up a hive and try handling the bees. I'd recommend that experience to anyone thinking of taking up beekeeping, not everyone likes having insects crawling over them, or the fear of getting stung, but it is far more likely you'll find yourself hooked forever."

The next step was a beginners course, also run by **Reigate Beekeepers**....

"I took the beginners course over the winter of 2010-11. There were a number of sessions each covering a different area of the craft, from the basics of the honey bee life-cycle to how to process the honey when you get it. For me it was a great supplement to reading the various recommended books and I found it a supportive group to help me decide how and when I wanted to start my own beekeeping. There are a lot of choices, so it was very useful to be able to discuss them. It was at the end of the course that I joined **Reigate Beekeepers** as a member."

Most new members take advantage of the sessions at our teaching apiary during the active season...

"Theory and books are all very well, but what really gave me the confidence to handle bees was being able to do it each week under the supervision of more experienced club members. As a beginner at the teaching apiary you are allocated to a group that looks after the same hive for the entire season. You can watch your colony build up, learn how to manage it correctly through the active period, and then to prepare it for winter. These apiary meetings are not just for beginners however, there are intermediate and advanced sessions too; it seems everyone is always learning something, and helping others learn."

When it comes time to get your own bees, you can purchase a colony, but as a member of **Reigate Beekeepers** you can also request to receive one of colonies retrieved by our swarm collection team (a donation to club funds is appropriate). We have a system by which the beekeeper's own hive is taken to the site of the swarm, and the experts get the bees into the box so that the novice only needs to collect it at sunset when the bees have stopped flying.



You never forget your first bees

"I decided to start with a swarm because I was keen to get started, and buying bees is expensive. It is such an exciting day when you get the phone call to tell you that there are bees in your box and you can collect them that evening. My first was in a small garden behind a terraced house in Reigate. I was apprehensive, but not worried, thanks to the training I'd already received. I had one false start, when I went to collect my first swarm, they had absconded, but being keen and green, and not ever having collected a colony before, I didn't realise, I thought they were all inside. I learned a lot from my second swarm, in fact it turned out that they didn't have a mated queen, so I got to learn all about 'laying workers'. The third swarm I received later in the season, but I managed to build them up, and was very proud when they survived the winter. So it wasn't a straight-forward first year – but I learned a lot, and took great advantage of the opportunity to get advice from experienced beekeepers at the apiary meetings."

Once the active season is over, **Reigate Beekeepers** organises winter meetings with varied speakers...

"Even though there weren't weekly inspections to do, I found it useful to be able to talk with other beekeepers about plans for the next season, and to seek reassurance that things with my own bees were as they should be. The arranged speakers are always interesting, and made me even more eager for the new season so I could try new techniques."

Reigate beekeepers are encouraged to take the BBKA basic assessment in their second season. The club provides teaching at the apiary sessions, a 'mock' test, and then arranges the assessment itself.....

"The basic assessment is not all that scary. By the time of the test, I'd done most of the topics covered for real. I found a bit of extra learning was required, especially on diseases, but our mentor had plenty of material to guide us on what to cover. It was useful that our group in the training apiary were all people working towards taking the test at the same time; everyone was very supportive."

So Bob's second season was 2012, when the bad weather made things difficult for bees and beekeepers alike....

"I started out the season with my plan to increase to four colonies, and of course to have a crop of lovely honey. However, after the warm March when the colonies built up well, came wet and cold weather which continued (it seemed) for most of the year. None of the theories seemed to work, it wasn't a case of "when you see X happen, you do manipulation Y". A very experienced beekeeper told me "There's one thing you can be sure of this year, none of the usual rules apply".



One moment you have a single colony, then...

The support of other beekeepers, sharing tales of woe, or hope, and debating possible courses of action, was invaluable. As were kind offers of practical help, the gift of a queen saved one of my colonies, and later in the season the offer of a colony when I had no brood at all saved me again. It was incredibly enjoyable though, learning more, deciding what to do with each situation, and then seeing positive results.



Uniting colonies with newspaper in a difficult year

I carried out techniques such as introducing a new queen to a colony, uniting two colonies into one, and a Bailey comb change. At the end of the second season, I had three good colonies, 15 pound jars of honey, and a certificate to say I'd passed the basic assessment. I was pleased, and encouraged, looking forward to next year. So it wasn't a straight forward second year, but now I know that every year will be different and there will always be new things to learn, and hopefully things I can share with others too.

"Bees are amazing, and beekeeping is complex, that's why it's so rewarding. I'm very grateful to **Reigate Beekeepers** for getting me started."