

Surrey Beekeepers Association – Farnham Division Chairman's Report 2020

After many years of expanding our activities and services things came to a near grinding halt in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic.

Regrettably, we had to close our apiary at the Rural Life Centre and because of access and social distancing constraints, we took the decision to foster the Division's hives to some member apiaries. These will be returned to the Rural Life Centre apiary as soon as practicable. This meant the apiary site had to be mothballed, with minimum access, although we were eventually able to get in to cut the grass and keep things a little tidy and our thanks go to Roger Gault for taking this on. Nevertheless, the Colonies group led by Rosalind Clague provided 'virtual apiary' updates and arranged a number of interesting and well attended online sessions over the summer months, which enabled members to keep in touch and participate in Divisional activity. Thanks go to all those who organised and delivered these online events.

The pandemic also brought our community involvement to a standstill with the cancellation of all school visits, fetes, other public events and of course our presence at Rural Life Centre activities. In fact, throughout the whole summer months only one event was held, involving a small number of socially distanced participants witnessing a hive inspection.

On the education front we were able to complete the Beginners' theory course before the lockdown in March but the follow-on practical sessions had to be postponed; hopefully these will be able to resume in spring 2021. The queen rearing activity at the apiary, planned for the summer, was another casualty but instead our members were able to join an excellent online training course in queen rearing prepared and delivered by John Fail over three sessions.

Despite the Covid constraints we were able to continue with the provision of a range of member services including fondant, foundation, varroacides and extractor hire. My thanks go to David Fitzpatrick, Greg Cobb, Ian Clifton, Charles Durham, Neil Sellers, Lisa McPherson and Sabine Reyersbach for organising and assisting with these. Unfortunately, our Newsletter editor stood down during the year and with no one to take it on the Newsletter was suspended. In its place we have added material to the website and made more use of email to communicate with our members but if any member has an interest in resurrecting the Newsletter and taking on the editorship, do please get in touch. This shift has meant more activity for our communications team and thanks go to Elizabeth Knight, Margaret Lennard and Hilary Welton for keeping everyone in touch.

We were able to hold our planned 2019/20 winter talks before the lockdown and we had talks on managing varroa, pesticide impacts, hive monitoring, improved beekeeping through study and the reflections of a seasonal bee inspector. The programme ended with a very topical talk titled Corona virus and Bees. Thanks go to Di Cook for organising the talks. Jacqui Sellers kindly stepped forward to take over from Di and she is busy preparing for our 2020/21 talks programme, with planning based on the assumption that they will be delivered using one of the electronic platforms now widely in use rather than in person at the Tilford Institute. Details will be provided in due course.

In December Farnham Division hosted the Surrey Beekeepers AGM. South Farnham Academy generously permitted use of the South Farnham School facilities and Simon Cavill of Bee Good gave an interesting talk on the trials and tribulations of establishing and running a hive products skincare business. A big thank you to Jacqui Sellers, Nichola O'Sullivan and Victoria Billiald for organising the excellent refreshments for the AGM and for the refreshments provided at our other gatherings in the year.

As mentioned in previous reports the work of the Association is dependent upon the support of our volunteers and in response to calls for others to get involved it has been great to have new faces coming forward. This has not only spread the workload but has also enabled us to implement some succession planning within the Committee and team structure. During the year Oliver Chadwick retired from the Committee and Elizabeth Knight was co-opted in his place. Oliver will continue to support the Colonies and the Education groups but I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his long service and solid contribution to the Committee's work. At this year's AGM three other Committee members David Fitzpatrick, Margaret Lennard and Hilary Welton will retire and you will see from the AGM agenda that some new members have kindly volunteered to take their places. Margaret and David have been committee members and stalwarts of the Division for many years and both have given enormous amounts of their time supporting our activities for which I and all the Committee are hugely grateful. Although retiring from office I am sure we will see them continuing to be active members of the Division. I would also like to say a big thank you to Hilary for her work as our Division Secretary. Whilst Hilary has decided to retire from her Secretary role, I am pleased to report that she will continue to look after our website.

Finance. The Treasurer's Report will follow this but I can report that we ended the year with a healthy cash balance of £17,000.

Membership. The total number of members for 2019/20 was 203. At the time of writing we are in the middle of membership renewal for 2020/21 and a few members are still to complete their renewal. BBKA has established a new electronic system for membership and bee disease insurance but as it is still in its infancy, we decided to wait a year before adopting it in order to allow time for teething problems to be ironed out. Thanks go to Ellie Kibble our Membership Secretary and to Chris Rushton, our Treasurer, who have looked after our membership renewal process.

Honey Yield. A number of members have reported good overall harvests this year, with particularly strong spring crops, although for some this was followed by a below average summer crop. We were unable to have our usual FBKA extraction day because of Covid but apiary hive honey was extracted by those fostering them so that we will be able to continue supplying the Rural Life Centre shop, which has now re-opened. Covid has also meant the cancellation of the Surrey Show and our own honey show so it will be another year before Farnham has the opportunity to regain the Vincent Challenge Cup.

There has been a confirmed yellow legged hornet nest in Gosport, which is uncomfortably close to home so we must all be extra vigilant. Our Asian Hornet Action Team continues to monitor the situation closely and will be ready to assist if called upon. Di Cook handed the reigns of the AHAT to Julie Trice during the year. Di was in the vanguard of concern and action on the threat of the yellow legged hornet and established our AHAT well before many others in the country so I'd like to thank Di for getting us up and running so early and keeping us up to date on sightings and the latest information.

Who would have thought this time last year that our lives would be faced with such disruption, uncertainty and worry, and it looks as if there is a way to go before we are through it. In the scheme of things the impact on our Association is trivial and of course our bees are oblivious to the upheaval we are experiencing but let's hope that we will all be able to resume something a bit closer to normal in the not too distant future.

Geoff Redwood
23rd October 2020