THE BUZZ

Westerham Beekeepers'
newsletter

February 2026 Issue Eleven

Welcome: to edition 11 of The Buzz!

What a washout this winter is proving to be. I hope that your bees are all above water. At least the hosepipe bans are being lifted. For all of you whose colonies have survived (and I have had bad years in the past too) will be seeing the positive signs as the first snowdrop and hazel pollen is gathered.

We go into 2026 with another strong membership base. See Robert Ambroziak's report later for the numbers. The training apiary has gone into hibernation and there have been a couple of colony losses, but the new team will be getting things organized for a restart in April. See Michelle's report below. The breeding apiary has also had its blips but overall is looking strong for the spring ahead (when?). We will hear more from Steve in our next winter talk on the 25th of February.

For all of us that followed the YLH tracking in 2025, it has been very sobering reading. BBKA has a very practical plan for the year ahead, although it requires effort, and Topsy along with all of us will be grateful for any support you can offer, either in trapping or in supporting the branch's effort to keep the problem at bay for as long as possible.

Thank you to everyone who made it to the quiz night in January, which I believe was a first for the branch. We also opened the meeting to friends and family of members, and I hope it was enjoyed by all who attended. Let us know if we should run it again!

Thank you as ever for your continued support.

Mark Waddington

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Chairman's Chat:

Winter losses and how to examine a dead hive:

Winter losses happen. It's no fun and it isn't necessarily linked to any particular beekeeping practice. If you only have one or two colonies, it can be particularly disheartening.

As a branch we put a lot of effort into education on how to prepare your hives for winter, such as ensuring strong laying queens, hive insulation, uniting weaker colonies, adequate own stores as winter food, and so on. This is not the place for those topics. This is about how to try to understand what has happened and to

learn from it. We all have winter losses at some point.

To save you time on your favourite search engine – head for the following article on the National Bee Unit website:

Article

It is co-written by Wally Shaw and Frank Gellatly and is well written in plain English, and only four pages.

A few ground rules and things to consider:

• Close up the colony so that robbing cannot happen (and cause disease or varroa infestations to spread).

• Inspect as soon as possible, as things decay quickly and you won't be able to tell anything.

• Go through the frames carefully and note what you see. Things to look for:

- Heads down in the cells – usually indicates starvation or isolation starvation
- Dead brood – probably means queen failure as it shows an inadequate replacement rate of new bees.
- Disease – check your NBU disease references. If you aren't sure, feel free to ask or post on the WBK WhatsApp group.

• The most important cause you are checking for is disease, as this could affect your other colonies. Other causes are nice to know, and it can inform your winter preparations in future years.

• The authors point out that winter failure is sometimes weakness in later summer and autumn that was not identified.

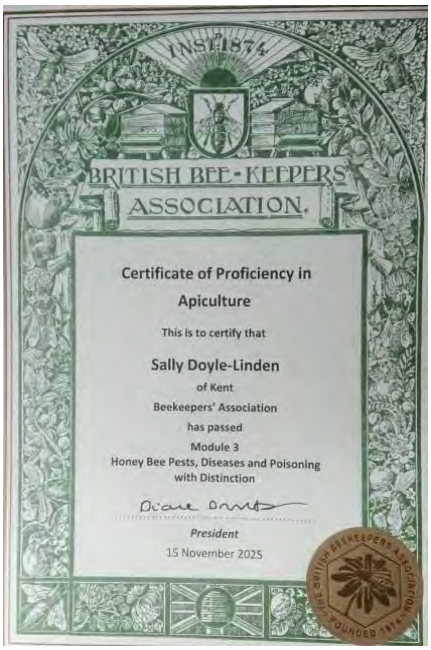
• Often (especially on social media), any unknown cause of death is put simply down to "varroa". This is not an adequate explanation and may be only because, as

varroa is endemic to all our colonies, that is the last evidence showing.

Exam success:

Well done (in all cases AGAIN) to the following superstars for their continued success in the BBKA exams:

Linda King: Module 1 Honeybee Management



Sally Doyle-Linden: Module 3 Honeybee Pests, Diseases and Poisoning - Distinction

Steve McGrath: Module 7: Selection and Breeding of Honeybees - Credit

Help with the branch activities:

I wrote to you earlier in January with an appeal for support on many of the activities that we run as a branch. We are looking for people who are willing to support on:

- Breeding apiary
- Training apiary
- Summer Fetes and other events
- Newsletter

We are increasingly running these activities with small teams of willing and interested members, who work together to get things done. It shares the load and makes it more fun, while keeping everything running nicely.

My phone has not been ringing off the hook with offers of help. Can I please ask you to give the request some more thought. One of the great things about this club is how we collaborate to keep it working well.

Please make yourself part of that if you can. I or any of the committee members would love to hear from you if you are willing to help.

In other matters, please note that Members SHOULD be receiving their Beecraft according to their subscription wishes. If there is a problem, please contact Keith Masters.

Mark Waddington

Winter Events:

Recent Events:

Quiz night at the Carpenters Arms, Limpsfield Chart - January 2026

Members and a few family and friends joined together for our first winter meeting quiz night. Steve McGrath had prepared for the event with two rounds of questions – one general knowledge and one vaguely linked to beekeeping. He also supplied his full set of coloured pens, straight from his hive records, for the answer sheets.

The four teams studiously answered all the questions with limited relevant knowledge between them. Luckily, all teams got some questions correct and we all learnt a few new facts to take home. The Quizmaster skilfully maintained order and minimised cheating; a good night was had by all.

The winning team (with 16 out of 20) was Cell Dwellers (speak loudly and without authority), even though they thought Apis mellifera ligustica, the Italian bee, was native to Sweden. The bee native to Sweden is the same one native to the British Isles, Apis mellifera mellifera.

Commiserations to teams B minus with 14 points (Michelle, Marshalls etc), Show me the Honey with 12 (Rudds and Robinsons) and Fingers on Buzzers (Robert, James, Shaun etc) with 11 points.

Interesting fact from the quiz:

A sting in the trunk: Elephants are very partial to a feast of Acacia leaves. However, African farmers noted that if an

Acacia tree was populated by a free-living bee colony the elephants would stay well away, leaving the tree and its neighbours untouched, exhibiting a pronounced innate aversion to our favourite insects. That gave them the idea of protecting their farms from elephant raids by employing bee fences - 10-metre wooden posts connected with wires or string with live and dummy hives set into the fence every 10 metres. They work very well, giving the farmers extra income from the honey produced and are now used in countries including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, India and Thailand.

Photo: Save the Elephants

Find more information here:

Save the Elephants

Steve McGrath & Sally Doyle-Linden

Remaining Winter's Events Dates:

We hope you continue to enjoy our winter gatherings, that have changed somewhat in format as we try to bring in a new approach.

Wednesday 25th February 2026

Steve McGrath: Varroa tolerant breeding, the story so far.

~~Wednesday 25th March 2026~~

Yannick Wurm (Queen Mary University, London) "Pollinator health for the 21st century"

NB. The March date is to be confirmed as Westerham Hall has double-booked us.

Again, please save these dates for your diaries and let us know if you have any specific requests or ideas for future meeting themes. Our talks are normally held at Westerham Hall, Quebec Avenue, Westerham, TN16 1BJ starting at 8.00 pm with doors opening at around 7.30 pm.

Mark Waddington

Things to do: Jobs for the months ahead:

As there doesn't seem to be much of a break in the rain, now is a good time to make a head start on preseason prep. March is generally when the apiary starts becoming active for the season ahead, depending upon the weather, so it is a good time to start your preparations.

Here are some recommendations of jobs for the upcoming months:

February:

• The Bees will consume around 24lb (11kg) of stores in February/March, so continue hefting your hive to check stores and add fondant where necessary. (Don't open up the hive just yet)
• Check that your hive entrances are clear of dead bees and or debris.
• Undertake a Varroa count. – Check hive floor and give it a clean before placing back.
• Prepare your Hive records – Get new sheets or book ready. You can download a hive record card from Our Westerham Beekeeper's website.
• Put out your YLH traps and check them regularly (YLH Queens emerge at 12C).

March:

• Observe your hive entrance, watching for flying bees bringing in pollen.
• Heft – March is often the month when colonies die from starvation. Add

additional feed if needed. (Use fondant until the weather warms up enough for you to use sugar syrup)
• Once the weather starts to warm up it is time to begin removing mouse guards and woodpecker protection. Sometimes we get a late cold snap, so be careful not to remove additional insulation too soon.

April:

• Easter weekend is a good time to plant bee-friendly flowers.
• If the weather is warm enough, it is time to switch to spring feed - sugar syrup instead of fondant.
• Spring Clean:
  - Prepare and clean brood frames, make up new frames ready for replacing old, damaged comb.
  - Prepare supers and queen excluders.
  - Check all your equipment.
  - Clean hives and make any repairs.
• Once the temperature reaches a steady 15C you can carry out first inspections:
  - Hive health check – Status of the queen, brood pattern and stores.
  - Swarm intentions and make a swarm management plan.
  - Super up for the early spring flow.

Nicola Spreckley

Training Apiary:

Hives and nucs are being regularly checked for food and blocked entrances by the volunteer team at the Training Apiary. Hives which are light on food are being fed fondant.

I've been hearing winter losses are high this year. There have also been a lot of cases of what is known as Marie Celeste – colonies where the bees have just disappeared. I hope your bees are okay but, if not, you are not alone as I have lost both my colonies. The Training Apiary has also had winter losses.

Two of our colonies had queens which weren't doing well during the summer. Uniting them was an option, but as they seemed to be picking up at the end of the season they were left as two colonies. Unsurprisingly one of the colonies was one of the first to succumb to the winter, but the other colony is holding on. The surprise loss was our strongest colony.

Photo: Michelle Ernoult

Work parties at the apiary have stopped for the time being due to, what feels like, never ending rain. Some of the volunteers have taken equipment home to clean and repair. We also had a big order of frames at the end of last year and lots of members have taken 10 or 20 frames to make up. If you've got time to make up a few extra frames alongside your own please let us know.

It seems a long time off, but the plan is to resume Training Apiary meetings the second Sunday in April (12th) and run every fortnight. Obviously, this will be weather dependent.

Is anyone thinking of taking either the BBKA Basic Assessment or Honeybee Health Assessment? Closing dates for applications is 30th April 2026 with assessments to take place during the summer. Please get in touch if you'd like to take either of these assessments and we will arrange some training.

Good luck to all those taking BBKA Modules on 21st March.

Michelle Ernoult

Yellow-Legged Hornet Update:

We need to continue to monitor for Yellow Legged Hornet (YLH) queens in order to protect our bees from predation by hungry YLH workers during the summer. We have a number of members already monitoring but need many more to give effective coverage, so please do try to help.

Photo: Selby Beekeepers

Why should we monitor?

The National Bee Unit isn't doing any queen trapping this year (too much effort for the return) so it is largely being left to beekeepers.

Dover BKA (on the front line and with most experience of all BKAs) are doing spring queen trapping around known nest sites and easy-to-monitor sites like gardens.

Guernsey has been very successful in keeping their YLH numbers down by spring queen trapping.

So, we will do spring queen trapping in our patch, at as many sites as we can manage.

We need to focus particularly on previous nest sites in Oxted and Godstone.

How should we monitor?

Using black (selective) lids on Bonne Mamman (jam and marmalade) jars or the Vita Pharma traps given out last year.

Photo: Topsy Rudd

These should be baited with any of these

- Trappit
- Beer or lager with sugar dissolved in it (will need heating slightly)
- Jam and water with baker's yeast in it (again will need heating gently to get the yeast to activate)

All of these are more effective when warm so put in the sun (if it ever returns).

We supply the lids and Trappit free to members so please ask me or any member of the committee if you want a trap and bait.

When and where should we monitor?

Start trapping when the temperature reaches 12 degrees for a few days – I will send out a reminder when these conditions arise.

YLH queens like camellias and rhododendrons (as they flower early) so

place traps near these shrubs if you have them.

Place traps where you pass by regularly and can check daily for insects (European hornets can get stuck and can only live for 8-12 hours in a trap so need letting out).

What do we do if we see or trap a YLH queen?

Take a photo of it and report via the Asian Hornet Watch app – available on the App Store for both iPhones:

App-Store – iPhones

and android phones:

App-Store – android phones

Photos and videos can also be emailed to alertnonnative@ceh.ac.uk – include the location (what three words) and contact details.

Please also notify me as the local YLH Coordinator by phone or WhatApp (07855 300352).

Keep the hornet or its body as it may be required for testing by DEFRA.

If ID is confirmed, NBU will follow up.

Where do we record our trapping?

Please register your trap(s) location(s) on the AHCatch system at:

Register

An overview of the AHCatch mapping database system is given here

Database

Instructions for registering on this system as part of the Westerham group will be sent out by email.

Those members also registered on the eR2 system, please keep updating your site once your trap is active.

Where can we find more information?

This BBKA site has a video to help with ID and a recording of the sound of a YLH:

BBKA Video

A saying heard recently was "You may think you don't have the time to monitor now, but you'll have plenty of spare time once the hornets have killed all your bees".

Topsy Rudd

Membership

Thanks to everyone who has renewed their membership for this year, and welcome to all our new members. To date we have a total of 120 active (i.e. paid-up) members, of which:

- 71 are full Registered members
- 41 are Local ('Friend') members
- 8 are Partner members

Hopefully all Registered members have been receiving monthly copies of BeeCraft and BBKA News. Please let me know if you are missing these or have any other membership-related issues.

Note: the new subscription year for these publications started in January (2026), whereas the year for BBKA (and Westerham BKA) membership started last October and runs through until the end of September.

If you are a Friend member and plan on obtaining bees this year, please consider upgrading to full BBKA Registered membership. This brings various benefits, including;

• Beekeeping examinations to the highest level
• £10m third party public liability insurance
• £10m product liability insurance
• Annual Honey Show, Spring Convention & Exhibition
• Bee disease insurance (BDI)

• Monthly magazines – BeeCraft and BBKA News
• BBKA Membership, entitling you to additional benefits
• Online resources - education/training, forum, etc.

Finally, if you haven't done so already, please take a few minutes to complete the BBKA Asian Hornet Training:

Questionnaire

Note: the training is just for your own information. Your details are no longer being added to the BBKA online map (despite what the first page of the training exercise suggests!). The map now only shows the YLH Coordinators' contact details.

Robert Ambroziak.

Angela Davis's winning Honey Cake Recipe

Ingredients:

For the cake:

115g unsalted butter
120ml flavourless/grapeseed oil
180g brown sugar
2 tsp vanilla extract
2 large eggs
120ml clear honey
315g plain flour
2.5 tsp baking powder
1 tsp ground cinnamon
Pinch of salt
60ml Greek yoghurt
60ml full fat milk

For the whipped cream:

600ml double cream
1tsp vanilla bean extract

For the butter cream:

230g unsalted butter
230g icing sugar
45ml clear honey
2tbs full fat milk

Method:

1. Preheat oven to 180C and grease and line 2 x 20cm cake tins.
2. In large bowl beat butter, oil and sugar until pale and creamy.
3. Mix vanilla, eggs and honey together and mix into butter mixture.
4. Put flour, baking powder, cinnamon and salt in a separate bowl and gradually add to butter mixture.
5. Add yoghurt and milk towards the end of step 4. mixing at low speed.
6. When cake batter is smooth, divide between the 2 cake tins.
7. Bake for 25-30 mins.
8. Cool on wire baking rack.
9. To make the whipped cream: whip cream and vanilla until thickened. (Don't over whip)
10. Divide into 4 and place in fridge until ready to assemble.
11. To make the butter cream: beat butter until smooth and creamy, then gradually add the sugar, honey and milk beating slowly until fluffy and creamy.
12. To assemble: cut cakes in half horizontally. Place one base on a cake stand, cover with 1 portion of whipped cream. Repeat with next cake layer and cream and the third and cream. Add final cake layer. Cover top and sides with butter cream and decorate with final whipped cream.

Angela Davis

'Instant' Pickled Onions

Photo: Mark Edwards

Take 1 & 1/2 medium red onions peeled and sliced thinly and place into a clean empty honey jar.

Photo: Mark Edwards

In a small saucepan add:
150 ml cider vinegar
150 ml water
Bay leaf, pinch of chilli flakes, 1tbsp honey, a few cloves, & some coriander seeds

Infuse the liquid for at least 5 mins on gentle simmer & pour over the sliced onions, adding a pinch of sea salt.

Allow to cool and place in fridge over - night. The onions will be ready to eat the next day. Maximum fridge shelf life about four days.

Mark Edwards

BBC Radio 4 The Honey Trap -The Food Programme

After concerns that honey from overseas is being watered down with cheap rice and corn syrups, Sheila Dillon investigates the scale of global honey fraud. It's a story of complex international supply chains with the world's food security at its heart. Listen to The Food Programme here:

BBC The Food Programme

BBC Archive: Beekeeping for the King of Libya

Photo: BBC

In 1965 Fyfe Robertson reported from the mountains of Cyrenaica in Libya on a British woman who looked after the royal Cyrenaican bees of the King of Libya. King Idris employed Miss Olive Brittan as the Royal Beekeeper after the Second World War. Fyfe meets Miss Brittan for a honey taste-test, hears the benefits that make juniper honey so popular with the King, and takes a tour of the beehives. Watch the archive here:

BBC Archive

Breeding Apiary:

What a wet winter it has been. Which of course is potentially worse for our bees than a cold one. Speaking to other beekeepers, there are some fairly horrific stories about colony losses coming out of the southwest. Roll on spring.

Down at the breeding apiary, we have lost one hive and one nuc, meaning our winter loss rate is around 15%. If it stays there, that will be lower than the regional

average of previous years and will mean we are well set for the season ahead.

Winter losses are one of the major reasons that beekeepers buy in new queens or nucs in early spring, keen to get started again when the weather improves. There are multiple reasons for winter losses, with varroa cited as the reason when none other can be discovered. I wonder whether two potential reasons are over-looked in a lot of cases – genetics and local-adaption.

Bees bought from one of the big UK bee sellers are often imported or derived from imports. Those imports are suited to very different climates and forage availability than our own bees. And even if they are UK raised bees (often still from imported original queen lines) are they suited to our local climate and forage? My own belief is that unsuitable bees – imported genetics or a lack of local adaptation - are a key underlying cause of large winter losses. Of course, even locally-adpated Apis mellifera mellifera bees may not survive our winter, but they're in a better place to do so if other factors don't come into play.

A good-sized colony at the breeding apiary on a warmer day in early February. Photo: Steve McGrath

The Dave Cushman website, an excellent resource for beekeepers, has an admirable description of our native *Amm* bees:

Amm Bees

All of this reminds me of the rationale for our bee breeding project: to raise varroa-resistant, locally adapted and near-native bees. We think the bees we raise will be hardier and more resilient than any from outside the area, and of course able to manage varroa themselves.

To learn more about the project and the plans for the year ahead and beyond, please do come to my talk to the club on **Wednesday, February 25th at 8pm** at Westerham Village Hall. The plans for this year are exciting.

Steve McGrath

Planting for bees:

Welcome to a new series for this year in which we take a look at some of the plants you can plant in your own garden or spaces to support your bees and all the other pollinators.

Any club member can contribute to this section in future editions, so any green-fingered beekeepers with great tips, please let the events team know.

A honeybee foraging on snowdrop pollen. Photo: Steve McGrath

When there is a dry day, my bees have been out and the foragers return with yellow and orange pollen ready to convert to bee bread for the steadily growing brood nests inside their hives. At this time of year, that's almost certain to be coming from snowdrops and crocuses, favourites for honey bees. Any bumbles venturing out will also enjoy the crocuses.

You might think you should wait until late summer or early autumn to plant snowdrops as bulbs, but planting them "in the green" as soon as they've finished flowering is a good time as you can be sure they're healthy. You can buy them in, or if you've got established clumps already, then gently dig them out and split the clumps, returning some to the same position and transplanting others to establish in new areas. The traditional older varieties are the ones you want. Some of the modern varieties, especially the doubles, have much less pollen available. (I am lucky to have good swathes of snowdrops in my garden planted by previous owners, but one of the best snowdrops displays I have seen locally is actually on the verges and banks outside our current Chair's house – lucky bees).

All pollinators appreciate the winter flowers of Viburnum. Photo: Steve McGrath

The mahonia that flowered through the winter is now nearing an end, but some other plants that are also popular around this time in my garden are the hellebores (Christmas rose), the winter aconites, and my favourite, Viburnum. The latter is covered in pollinators on a warmer sunny day, from my bees, to the bumbles, to early emerging butterflies. I have a Viburnum × bodnantense 'Dawn', and it flowers from roughly November through to March, with scented flowers. A true winter star. There are lots of different varieties of Viburnum to choose from, some deciduous, others evergreen and they have different flowering periods, from winter to early spring.

The other plant I am ordering at this time of year is African Blue Basil, so it arrives in May. This herb flowers from June right through to the first frosts. It just keeps going and going, and the bees love it. Every day after about 9 am, it is covered in both honey and various types of bumble bees, contentedly sharing it. You can use the leaves as you would Basil, although it has a stronger taste. Unfortunately, you can't grow it from seed and so you have to order your first batch as plugs online and then you can propagate it yourself and over-winter in the greenhouse ready for planting out after the last frosts have passed. But it's one I am sure to have because it is buzzing all summer and well into autumn.

Bumblebees and honeybees share the purple flower spikes of African basil. Picture: Steve McGrath

Steve McGrath

For so work the honey bees, creatures that by a rule in nature teach the act of order to a peopled kingdom

William Shakespeare's play-Henry V: words of the Archbishop of Canterbury in Act 1, Scene 2

About Westerham Beekeepers:

Westerham Beekeepers is a branch of the Kent Beekeepers Association. Our aim is to promote the craft of beekeeping by helping to educate both beekeepers and the public. While we are mostly practising amateur beekeepers, membership is open to interested members of the public. We meet during the winter months in Westerham, usually for lectures by visiting specialists and our own members. During the active beekeeping season, we meet for demonstrations by experienced beekeepers in our members' apiaries. Find our Website here.

Advice for Beginners & FAQs here.

Contact Information:

Mark Waddington – Chairman & Events Programme - contributions for newsletters and ideas for winter talks & summer visits wbka.events@gmail.com

Robert Ambroziak – Membership members.westerhambeeks@gmail.com

Michelle Ernoult – Training Apiary Manager wbkatrainingapiary@gmail.com

Topsy Rudd - Branch Secretary & YLH Co-ordinator westerhambeekeepers@gmail.com

Keith Masters – Treasurer masterskeithmasters@hotmail.com

Alban Brindle – Swarm Co-ordinator agbrindle@hotmail.com

To join the **Westerham Beekeepers' WhatsApp group** contact Mark Waddington

To join the **Training Apiary's Facebook group** contact Michelle Ernoult

To join the **Swarm WhatsApp group** contact Alban Brindle and for **Swarm Reporting** contact Alban Brindle on 07919 843 546, or the nearest contact from the BBKA website if Alban is not available.

Committee Members:

Mark Waddington – Chairman & Events Programme

Topsy Rudd – Branch Secretary & YLH Co-ordinator

Keith Masters – Treasurer & Branch representative on KBKA Council

Michelle Ernoult - Training Apiary Manager & Education Officer

Robert Ambroziak - Membership Secretary

Alban Brindle - Swarm Co-ordinator

Peter Cobley – Branch representative on KBKA Council

Steve McGrath – Breeding Apiary Manager

National Bee Unit Inspectors:

Regional Inspector: Thomas Bickerdike thomas.bickerdike@apha.gov.uk or 07775 119464
Seasonal Inspector Southern Westerham Area: Helen Hadley – 07741 168555
Seasonal Inspector Northern Westerham Area: Danyal Conn – 07584 202700

Last Word: Haemolymph – Bee blood

Honeybees have an open circulatory system, containing haemolymph that surrounds their tissues; where haemolymph does not pump through veins but freely circulates in their body cavity.

Haemolymph does not transport oxygen but transports nutrients and hormones to various body tissues. Haemocytes in bee haemolymph help defend the bee against pathogens, parasites, and foreign substances. Haemolymph distributes nutrients throughout the bee, and the immune components within it form one of the primary immune systems.