



BBKA - The History

The History of the British Beekeepers Association

- 1874 – British Beekeepers’ Association (BBKA) was instituted “For the Encouragement, Improvement and Advancement of Bee Culture in the United Kingdom, particularly as a means of bettering the Condition of Cottagers and the Agricultural Labouring Classes, as well as the advocacy of humanity to the industrious labourer – the Honey Bee.” In 1890, its governing body comprised its President, Vice-Presidents and Officers being the Presidents of its 26 affiliated County Associations, the vast majority being peers of the realm. How things have changed since that Victorian era.
- The BBKA was initially established as a London-based beekeepers ‘club’. Within a decade it had evolved into an organisation addressing national issues, with Lincolnshire, Surrey, Devon & Exeter, Dorset and Shropshire county associations as its early members. This was at a time when regional government at county level was given coherence by central government.
- 1879 – the BBKA initiated its link with the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE), although it was not to move its HQ to Stoneleigh until 1982.
- Since its foundation, the BBKA has been particularly active in education, among its officers’ early publications were Modern Beekeeping – a Handbook for Cottagers and its Chairman, T W Cowan, wrote many authoritative publications, including The British-Beekeeper’s Guide Book and The Honey- Bee: its natural history, anatomy and physiology and Wax Craft.
- 1882 – BBKA examinations commenced with a focus on the new movable-comb methods. These examinations were open to both men and women. The Technical Education





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Act of 1889 enabled the BBKA and county associations to obtain grants for their educational work in apiculture

- 1895 and for many years thereafter, the BBKA was at loggerheads with many of its members and with government regarding the control of the American and European foulbrood diseases, for beekeepers were divided as to how far central government should be involved in disease control. In 1906, there was panic in beekeeping circles due to extensive colony losses caused by the acarine mite (the so called 'Isle of Wight' disease). In 1922, the bee research unit at the Rothamsted Experimental Station was established as a consequence of BBKA lobbying. It was not until 1942 that the Foul Brood Order was published by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, making those diseases notifiable and subject to inspection.
- 1914-18 and 1939-46 – during those two world wars, the BBKA made successful representations to government to secure extra sugar rations for beekeepers, as honey was recognised as an important foodstuff.
- 1910-1930 – the BBKA was dominated by its General Secretary, William Herrod-Hempsall (HH), who had served under T W Cowan. HH was open-minded to new developments, convinced of his own remarkable abilities, but resentful of those who differed from him. He was also employed by the Ministry of Agriculture, which caused conflicts of interest. His brother, Joseph, with whom he worked closely, joined the British Bee Journal as its Editor in 1914 and subsequently became its proprietor, then BBKA Assistant Secretary in 1921 and succeeded HH as Secretary in 1930, resulting in further potential conflicts of interest. Throughout this period there was tension and division between the BBKA and its member association. Some counties formed their own specialist groupings and several associations left the BBKA and other divided between supporters and reformers.





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- 1943 – By this time, separate national beekeeping associations had developed in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, leaving the BBKA to represent beekeepers in England and Northern Ireland, The remaining associations were demanding a more effective body to represent their interests and at a BBKA Council meeting in June 1943, the Chairman (W H Richardson), the Vice Chairman (William HH) and the Secretary (Joseph HH) resigned on the spot and, furthermore, the HHs withdrew the facilities they offered at their office and the use of the British Bee Journal as the BBKA's official journal. Reform of the BBKA was essential and drafting of a new Constitution was initiated. C Cowper- Feldman was appointed Secretary, a post he was to hold for the next 12 years.
- 1960 - a new Constitution was adopted, after 17 years of heated discussion between the various county associations and membership factions and their representatives. However, fortunately the post-war years proved to be boom years for beekeeping and in 1953 there were 80,000 beekeepers in England and Wales with 396,000 colonies. The 1960 Constitution's governance structure and processes were essentially the same as those currently in existence. The last major update of the Constitution was approved in 2007 and this update addressed such things as payment of capitation and membership classes and their rights.
- Loosing the British Bee Journal created a hiatus which, in 1947, was filled by Bee Craft. This journal was established by a group of associations and the shares in Beecraft Ltd are now vested in the BBKA's member associations. The BBKA itself has no ownership or control over any part of Bee Craft.
- The National Honey Show Ltd (NHS) developed independently of the BBKA during the early 1920s, the BBKA holding its summer Honey Show wherever the RASE agricultural show was held. In 1949 the BBKA agreed with the NHS to organise and fund a 3 day lecture programme within the National Honey Show.





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- By 1955, the BBKA had negotiated with the British Standards Institution, nine relevant standards for hives, bees and honey grading glasses.
- By 1979, all the major county associations were members of the BBKA, which enabled the BBKA to address the wide range of issues that could not be easily dealt with at local level such as insecticide spraying and better beekeeping education. To improve communications with member associations, BBKA News was launched as a free quarterly publication available to all members.
- For much of its existence, the BBKA had occupied offices in and around London in the homes of its General Secretaries. In 1964 RASE offered the BBKA a site at Stoneleigh for a national bee garden on which it built a pavilion for meetings. This eventually led to the building of the National Beekeeping Centre at Stoneleigh in 1982.
- 1990 marked the arrival of the varroa mite in the UK, which had a major adverse impact on bee colonies and many beekeepers gave up beekeeping in the 1990s, because there appeared to be no effective treatment. Some years later, pyrethroid treatments were developed, but the mites have developed resistance to these treatments and other forms of control of this parasite have been developed and applied. The foulbrood diseases continue to be a problem, but beekeepers are better educated to recognise these diseases and call in the Bee Inspectors to eradicate each outbreak.
- Membership of the BBKA dropped from 15,000 in 1990 to just under 9,000 in 2001. This was primarily due to many people giving up beekeeping because varroa control was difficult and a difficulty in encouraging new members or reflecting the importance of honey bees to the environment.





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- New training materials were produced in 2002 to help Associations introduce beekeeping to the public and encourage beekeepers to gain the BASIC qualification in beekeeping.
- Beekeeping organisations across Europe were concerned that agricultural pesticides were killing large number of bee colonies and succeeded in banning some pesticides. The BBKA took a different approach and worked with the agrochemical companies to promote specific pesticides and the safe use of pesticides. This approach caused a lot of concern with members and although the policy was endorsed at three Annual Delegates Meetings (ADM) in 2010 the BBKA decided to stop the endorsement but still work with these companies. At this stage the temporary bans in Europe had been lifted.
- In 2003 the BBKA determined that members of Associations would be better served if BBKA News (now published 5 times a year) could be mailed directly to members rather than bulk distribution through Associations. This necessitated the introduction of a members' register for the first time.
- The register caused some difficulty with Associations but by 2005 this had been resolved and now the register is maintained on a regular basis and is the most up to date register of beekeepers across the country.
- In 2004 the BBKA was determined to encourage groups of beekeepers that had left the BBKA to consider re-joining. In the last 6 years 8 Associations have joined the BBKA.
- Membership in this time gradually increased to just under 11,000.
- In 2006 the BBKA realised that if beekeeping was to be able to deal with the problems facing honey bees across the world then Research needed to be undertaken into the causes and treatment of disease and how to manage bees more effectively. This was at the same





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time that honey bee colonies were dying at rates greater than 30% in USA and the classification of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD).

- The current Chairman and later President Tim Lovett lead the campaign to get the government to take beekeeping more seriously and increase significantly the funding of research. A proposal for research was produced by some of the leading members of the BBKA and the NDB (National Diploma in Beekeeping). After major campaigning by beekeepers which included a petition to Downing St with 140,000 signatures and a demonstration in Whitehall by members, Parliament set up an All Party Parliamentary Group on honey bees and together with other agencies a fund of £9.5 million was established for research into pollinators (including honey bees).
- The campaign continues as there is still much research needed
- The campaign has raised awareness of the importance of beekeeping to the environment and for pollination. The outcome has been a rapid increase in membership and at the time of writing has reached nearly 21,000.
- In 2008 following lobbying by the BBKA and other bodies the Government decided to develop a honey bee health strategy. This was produced in 2009 and proposed a plan and project involving all beekeeping groups in the UK, led by Defra. Concerns about the structure and ability to action work meant that the BBKA withdrew from this group. After about 9 months the BBKA returned to join the group after some assurances about how the project would continue. Whilst the BBKA was outside the project it determined to develop its own initiative on improving the quality of beekeepers (one of the issues that was identified in the Bee Health Strategy). The project was given the resources and responsibility for developing new training materials to help Associations run courses in beekeeping at various levels of competence consistent with the examinations and assessment framework developed by the BBKA and NDB.





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- The BBKA has also encouraged members to gain qualifications in beekeeping and coined the grades of Proficient and Master Beekeeper for those that pass specific levels of beekeeping competence.
- Today the BBKA is working with the NDB to provide every opportunity for beekeepers to learn about their craft and pass assessments. The work is part of the Healthy Bees Project supported by Defra and is seen as a key element in delivering the Healthy Bees Plan

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