



MAKING A BEE LINE



'Is there honey still for tea?' asks Richard Barr

At first it was as terrifying as being inside a tornado. Yet seldom was there more than a breeze and almost always it would happen on a day which radiated humid warmth. All around was the raw energy of many thousand excited insects, each one of which had the wherewithal to deliver a painful sting.

Before I became the beekeeper's assistant (regular readers will know that it is generally my lot in life to be second fiddle - see previous Places&Faces*), I knew little about bees apart from the pleasure of spooning honey onto warm toast.

One day a box arrived. More accurately the box arrived in my car and I was driving it. Throughout the journey it made a gentle hum, like the smooth sound of an expensive refrigerator singing to itself in an expensive kitchen (and not at all like our fridge that sounds like it is permanently gasping for breath).

The box had been strapped firmly shut but I was still relieved no longer to be sharing a confined space with it. It contained twenty thousand (give or take a few thousand) bees and one queen; even a few of them flying around in my car would have seen me abandoning it in the middle of the road and running across the fields.

You can buy bees as a colony. Because bees are as loyal subjects to their queen as we are to ours, they will stay with her and they are relatively easy to transfer to a hive.

The hive had been made ready for the first colony. It had all mod cons (which for bees meant sheets of wax held in place by wooden frames). The new bees were then encouraged into their new home, but not before they had been gently smoked.

No bee keeper can be without a smoker. This looks like a blow torch and is stuffed with hessian or leaves which are then lit to produce smoke, kept going by a small set of bellows attached. Apparently during forest fires, bees will gorge themselves on honey in case they have to vacate their colony and relocate. They then cannot sting so easily and become (relatively) calm.

So was started our apiary on a patch of lawn that was not too near the neighbours. Bees, I found, are generally harmless and much nicer than wasps which tend to sting just for the hell of it.

But their reputation is for the fierce defence of their hives, and there are many Norfolk tales of money and valuables being placed in bee hives in the certain knowledge that most burglars would prefer to break into houses rather than to be stung. Note to prospective burglars: I am not going to tell you if the family silver is in our hives but I don't recommend you try to find out.

Every now and then the bees seem collectively to have a bad day and gratuitously they will sting anyone who comes near them. This is particularly so if you are wearing dark

clothes and have not washed recently; they think you might be a bear and up to no good. One unfortunate delivery driver received two stings for doing no more than ringing the door bell. We had to placate him with strong coffee, some ointment and several jars of honey.

Tip: if you do get stung, the bee that carried out the attack emits a pheromone which then encourages other bees to join in. You cannot out run a bee but the best bet is to hide in some bushes or under a low tree. The bees will then think you have become a plant and stop bothering you.

Swarming is a natural process to enable colonies to reproduce. A huge cloud of bees leaves the hive with a deafening noise. Somewhere in the middle is the queen. A hatching queen is left behind in the hive with half the colony. Eventually the swarm settles - usually on a branch, and generally high up. Bee keepers love swarms because they can gain a colony free of charge.

Whenever our bees swarm there is a general alert. My legal cases come to a halt. The household chores stop in mid stroke and we all don our 'space suits' - sealed overalls which go over normal clothes and make us look as though we have come to deal with a radio active spill.

If the bees are on a high branch our Green Goddess fire engine is pressed into service as a high platform.

The queen and as many bees as possible are shaken into a cardboard

box which is then upended onto a sheet near to an empty hive. If the queen is put into the hive, the worker bees obediently run over the sheet in a brown wave into the hive.

On the basis that they are residences for the queen, each of our hives is named after a royal palace - Buckingham Palace, Kensington Palace, Balmoral and so on.

The object is to produce honey. This is a deliciously sticky experience. The frames, now with hexagonal cells built by the bees and brimming with honey are removed (usually along with a few bees) and brought inside, where the tops of the cells are sliced off prior to being loaded into an extractor.

This is like a spin dryer - except it has to be turned by hand (an aching experience). Slowly the honey oozes out of the frames and down into the extractor where the amber nectar (the real thing not that stuff that is imported from Australia) is poured into buckets prior to being filtered and put into jars.

It can then last for thousands of years without spoiling. Honey found in the tombs of the pharaohs was still edible, but the pharaohs did not have our family and friends to contend with. Our honey does not last nearly as long - it is too delicious to keep and is rapidly eaten, so the moral is to get in early when we are doing our extraction or the answer to the question in Rupert Brooke's Old Vicarage, Granchester. (Is there honey still for tea?) will be a resounding 'no'.

BEE facts

- It takes about 41,000 bee miles to fill one jar with honey. In that time the bees will have visited about 1.5 million flowers.
- Bees have air conditioning in their hives: workers fan the hive to keep it at a constant temperature.
- Bees communicate the location and distance of sources of nectar by performing a complex dance.
- Bees will fly up to three miles or more from their hive in search of nectar.
- If you have a major event in your family (like a wedding or a funeral) you are supposed to tell your bees. I wonder if they would have any good advice if we told them about the problems with the Euro.