

I DON'T BEE- LIEVE IT!

Richard Barr begins a series of **short sketches** describing how events at his own **Norfolk holding** are 'breaking bad'

We inhabit a crumbling thatched house and a dozen or so acres of land in North Norfolk. We had the idea that our little smallholding could help us to become self-sufficient, with shelves full of honey and freezers brimming over with vegetables, fruit and legs of lamb. However, because of a lack of money and time (and, of course, skill), not to mention an overdose of soft-heartedness, things have not gone quite according to plan. My message is: Don't do as we say *or* do.

The cast of thousands, about whom you may hear more in the future, consists of two horses (both retired, ancient, bad-tempered and ill), two Wensleydale rams (who have long since given up any idea of fathering lambs, and who recently entered into a civil partnership with one another), twelve Wensleydale ewes (who have ceased to worry whenever they see a jar of mint sauce), one hen (there used to be more, but thanks to our local fox, illness and old age she is the only survivor), nine cats, a wonderful dog called Nia, approximately 250,000 bees, and a Green Goddess fire engine – admittedly not an animal, but it can be just as stubborn.

Now put our family (and me in particular) into the landscape and watch as the calamities unfold. Take today, for example...

After a busy summer, the front of the house had come to resemble a scene



from *Cold Comfort Farm*. Until recently a rusting Ford Ka languished with flat tyres amid a bed of weeds. There was a wheelbarrow with a large hole in it, numerous random stretches of garden hose, some bags of fuel left over from last winter, several empty sacks of birdseed and a gathering of garden tools that had not seen active service in years. An effort was made to tidy it up. The car was towed away and the detritus carted to the local dump (sorry – I should say 'recycling centre').

Next it was the turn of what passed for the front lawn. It had not been cut for weeks. My favourite kind of lawn is one in our village that is wall-to-wall concrete. Alas, there is no chance of concreting over a dozen acres, so the next best thing was to acquire a big, macho, ride-on mower that is about as wide as

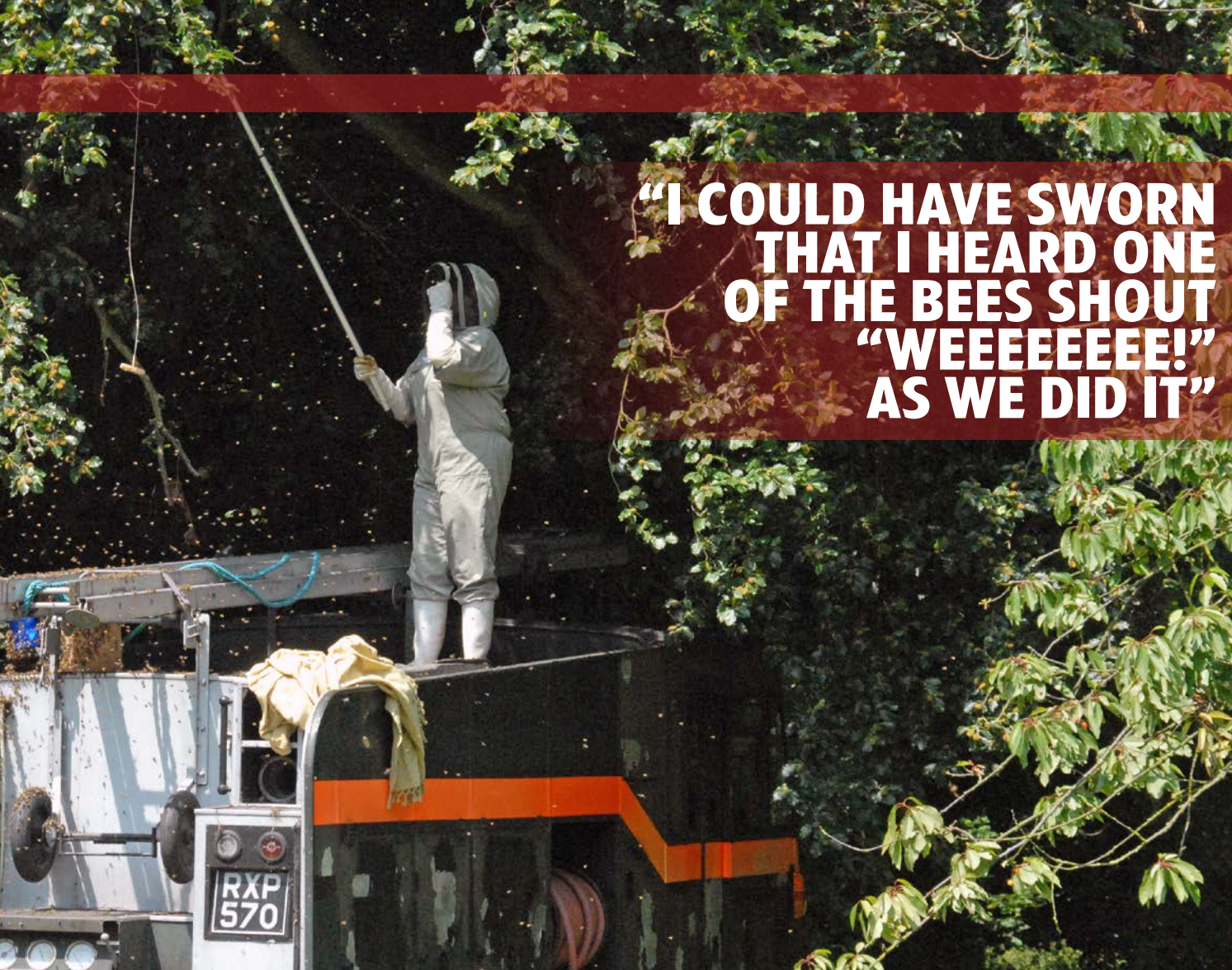


a combine harvester, capable of cutting swathes through rainforests and making light work of small trees.

In the manner of a rally driver I dodged round the trees (the ones that are too big to demolish) and was soon giving the grass a short back and sides. That was when it all started to go wrong. On this lawn there are also three beehives which, on a warm September day, are fully active.

We have had bees for several years now, and like most of our other livestock they live a charmed life. We also seldom collect honey from them. I have become relaxed in their company and today was passing within a few feet of the hives, wearing shirtsleeves and no other protection. Skilfully (I thought) I dodged the hives, and as I grew in confidence, I started to cut closer to them.

Suddenly there was a mighty jolt and a hive flew through the air, landing on its



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roof ahead of me. Almost immediately a menacing cloud of bees formed. I put my foot down and fled the scene with a few bees already in hot pursuit. Looking back I could see that the hive had been sitting on a long plank of wood (buried in the grass) which had provided an effective lever with which to launch the hive into a low orbit as the mower ran over it.

But what to do now? I could just ignore it and shrug my shoulders when the inverted hive was spotted, but that would be unkind to the bees, and besides, I am very bad at lying. There was nothing for it but to face the wrath of several thousand bees and one wife. If truth be told, I was more afraid of the latter. She was in the middle of making delicious damson jam (despite my efforts, our damson tree did produce a fine crop). She was not well pleased.

We both struggled into our bee suits and went out to survey the damage. Fortunately, the bees had done a good job of gluing the hive together with propolis. Gingerly we eased it the right way up, checked that the frames were all back in place and put it back on its planks. I could have sworn that I heard one of the bees shout “Weeeeeee!” as we did it.

The bees seemed to accept that their

short roller coaster ride was part of the fun of a warm Sunday afternoon. My wife went back to her jam, and I to my mowing – though I decided to leave a wide area of grass near the hives uncut.

Excitement comes each year when the bees decide to swarm. As many readers will know, it is important to ‘catch’ a swarm. One invaluable tool in this process has been our sixty-year-old Green Goddess fire engine (bought in a moment of madness when we thought it might help to save the house if ever the thatch caught fire). It has not seen any real firefighting, but is useful for providing a high platform from which to capture more awkward swarms.

But sometimes the Green Goddess is not there when it is needed. I came out of the front door one bright sunny morning to see my wife lying on the grass. Even to my unobservant eye there was something amiss about her taking a nap in the grass so early in the day. Further investigation revealed that she was not alone. Lying beside her was a stepladder with a bent leg, and on top of her were about 20,000 bees and a cardboard box.

Eventually she sat up, with the bees putting on a good imitation of the stars that orbit cartoon characters when they

are clubbed on the head. She had been trying to catch a swarm and had climbed to the top of an unsecured stepladder, holding the box above her head. You can imagine the rest.

Even with the mother and father of all headaches, it still took a week to persuade her to go to her doctor, who ordered her to hospital immediately with the most effective referral letter in medical history: “*Please see this lady who has suffered a head injury. Her husband is a clinical negligence lawyer and her daughter is a brain surgeon.*” – both true.

Within a nanosecond of our arrival at A & E she had been shown into a cubicle, where a consultant was waiting for her, who not only took charge of her case but also personally wheeled her to the radiology department for a CT scan. Fortunately, she was given the all-clear, but that referral is a technique I would definitely recommend if you are a penniless lawyer and cannot afford to go private.

As for the rest of today, I managed to avoid more disasters with the mower – at least I am not admitting to mow – and the outside of the house looks, if not respectable, certainly less like a municipal recycling centre.