

June Bee Blog

For me one of the many rewards of beekeeping is sharing knowledge and experience, especially with novice beekeepers. So when I got a call to help a newbie with a swarming problem I was happy to help.

In essence she had caught a swarm of bees in a street in Newton Stewart. She bravely carried it in a cardboard box to her new apiary a few miles away. There she already had two empty WBC hives in a lovely abandoned walled garden. There were two problems; she had no idea whether she had the queen, but worse, the bees had settled in the cavity between the inner and outer walls of her double walled WBC hive.

The first job was to try to transfer the bees onto the undrawn combs in the brood box. I tried every trick in the book including smoke, essence of almond and even collecting bees by the handful and tipping them onto the frames. But nothing could persuade them to stay. I suspect that there was some kind of smell on these frames to which the bees objected.

Luckily they were incredibly docile and also, luckily, my beginner had a second brood box, also with new, undrawn frames. We swapped the two boxes over, shook the bees onto the new frames and this time they seemed to stay. We put a feeder of sugar syrup on and left them to it, to be checked for a queen in a few days.

Three days later.....time for the moment of truth. Was the swarm viable or not? No queen, no future. The bees were flying when we arrived and they were covering four frames. The first of these frames was beginning to be drawn, the second was already drawn and was filling with food, and on the third frame, the queen! She was small and very black but looked in good shape after her ordeal. We quickly marked her, and she and her retinue will now be left alone. In two weeks we'll check for sealed brood. So a satisfying success story for a change. I've christened this colony Walled Garden One (WG1).

If there's one lesson to be learned from this, it's that WBC hives are not ideal for beginners. The boxes are tricky to manipulate, they are not square like Nationals and nasty things can happen in the cavity between the inner and outer boxes. None of the components are interchangeable with other hives, and they are exceptionally difficult to move. For a newbie they may look very pretty, but WBC hives add a complication to an already challenging situation.

June 11. It's now two and a half weeks since I artificially swarmed my own HN1. In one box was the original queen on two frames of brood, with a few frames of food. In the other hive ten feet away was an unsealed queen cell with two frames of brood and the 'nurse' bees. Time to see what's happened.

Brilliant...the old queen in HN1 is now laying on SIX frames, which is fantastic. This colony probably won't produce any summer honey but should be strong enough to go to the heather moor in August.

In what is now HN2, more good news. There's a virgin queen! She's small, she's very black and she's running round the frame quickly like virgin queens do. Plus there are an awful lot of drones hanging around the hive, which suggests her mating flight is imminent. I close this hive up very quickly as I don't want to disturb things at a critical time.

Brian Wilson of the ***Beach Boys*** died today. So sad, his death really moved me. And its relevance to this bee blog? Well some musicians provide the soundtrack to key moments in your life. Brian Wilson was making his fantastic music just as I was starting to keep bees. '*Good Vibrations*', RIP Brian.

June 19. It's been over a fortnight since we housed WG1 swarm in its new walled garden home, so time to check progress. What we're hoping is that the bees have drawn out at least four frames of new comb and that the queen has come into lay. And that's exactly what we found. Masses of beautiful white wax, and the first larvae just hatching from eggs. Which means the queen started laying around a week ago. Nothing left now but to let the bees get on with it, till the next check in August.

And as for my own bees? It's June 24 and over a month has passed since I artificially swarmed HN1. The 'parent' colony (the pretend swarm) remains very strong. But the new queen in HN2 is not laying. I can see her and she is bigger than fourteen days ago, which suggests she has mated. But no brood. Meanwhile the colony is looking a bit 'thin', not having produced any new bees for weeks. So I have taken the unusual step of 'stealing' a frame of sealed brood from HN1, shaken the bees off

it and then given it to HN2. And if all goes pear-shaped I can still re-unite HN2 with HN1.

But no such need. Four days later my queen's teenage years are over. She's no longer a virgin. In four days she's filled both sides of two deep frames with eggs. What a star!