

**WBKA Convention 30<sup>th</sup> March 2019**  
**“Varroa Has Lost its Sting – Our Experience of Treatment Free Beekeeping”**



Thank you very much for coming to this presentation. I regard it as a privilege to be asked to do this.

My name is Clive Hudson, I live in Snowdonia, North Wales and together with my wife Shân we are starting our 34<sup>th</sup> season of beekeeping. We overwinter about 20 hives at three apiaries.

I have just given you a number of facts about myself and our beekeeping; I give you one more -



- we have not treated our bees against Varroa with any treatments whatsoever for 10 years – we keep bees Treatment Free. That one fact provides the confidence for me to stand here and share our experience with you. By the way, I've put pictures of our bees behind some of the written information.

It is not easy stating exactly what is going on with honey bees and Varroa - I am a hobby beekeeper, an enthusiast maybe, but not a scientist.

There is, however, a lot going on and I will try to show you information that supports what we are doing.



Over the years different ideas have been proposed as to why some bees are able to cope with Varroa; these include:

- Hygienic Behaviour
- VSH (Varroa Sensitive Hygiene)

- Superinfection Exclusion (Having higher levels of the 'B' variant of DWV – (Deformed Wing Virus) which combat the more harmful effect of DWV 'A' variant (this is the REViVe Project)
- 'Uncapping/ Recapping' – a recent discovery where bees may be disrupting the breeding Varroa
- Evolution

It may be these are all changes in the behaviour of bees that have had the time and the chemical free space to evolve to coexist with Varroa.



In the last year or so, however, I believe some clarity has started. For me this is crystallised by a definitive statement from Tom Seeley – after a lifetime of studying Treatment Free wild bees in the Arnot Forest, USA, this knowledgeable professor has stated:

"Colonies of European honey bees can survive without chemical treatments for Varroa".

It is now becoming clear that left to themselves – i.e. with no chemical treatment – locally adapted honey bees are evolving to coexist and to thrive with Varroa. Science is gradually catching up with the bees! Colonies that are being treated to kill Varroa are not being given this opportunity. There is no treatment that eradicates all Varroa; therefore, it follows that Varroa in treated colonies are continuously breeding from mites that survived treatment.



What is the history of our own Treatment Free beekeeping? I summarise this as follows:

1985 – 1998 - Traditional beekeeping with no Varroa  
 1998 (August) – first Varroa found in our hives; treated with Bayvoral/Apistan  
 2006 (Autumn) – last treatment with Bayvoral/Apistan as resistance developed  
 2007 (Spring) – thymol in cooking oil, applied on tissue  
 2008 (January) – oxalic acid, 5ml per seam of bees. (April) – thymol crystals, 2tsp on sacking strip  
 2009 (March) – our last treatment with thymol or any other treatment, on some hives only  
 2009 – 2019 - Traditional beekeeping with our bees coexisting with Varroa!



Why did we stop treating? For three reasons:

1. Concern over the chemicals we had been using:  
Apistan/ Bayvoral were no longer recommended as Varroa mites developed resistance to the active chemical. We did not like the winter application of oxalic acid and evidence of its damage to bees. Nor did we like the way bees reacted to thymol, and our detection of thymol taint in honey.
2. The observation that the presence of Varroa mites and Varroa damaged bees was decreasing in our hives, season on season. This was particularly on our minds during the 2009 season when we treated some hives with thymol crystals and not others, and could observe no obvious difference in the colonies as the season unfolded.
3. Realising local wild/feral colonies had not died out. This applied to visual examination of colonies taken from fallen trees, and out of buildings in the course of building work. These revealed healthy bees and brood with no obvious damage from Varroa.

Finding strong wild colonies that were obviously receiving no treatment for Varroa was persuasive information.

Two more examples:



The first is a large colony we took from a roof in 2011. This photo shows the brood comb when first exposed in the dormer roof.

At this time, early in our Treatment Free experiment, some experts were telling us the viral load would build up in our bees and they would not last beyond three years at the most.



The next slide shows the honey comb further into the roof space. It was a large colony – filling two 5gal containers - and sad it had to be removed.



The second example, in a woodland, was found after a violent summer storm that felled a huge 80 foot oak tree, and revealed a metre long cavity containing a wonderful honey bee colony.

Unfortunately, the strong wind that split the trunk was followed by torrential rain that killed the bees and the brood that had been scattered around the site.



This colony, in 2015 and 17 years after Varroa arrived, showed evidence of being established for a long time. In particular the debris beneath the colony was a foot in depth and layered, indicating its accumulation over many years. So, colonies in buildings and trees are surviving without treatment.

I would like to stress three points:



Firstly, we do have Varroa mites in our hives. Their numbers are low, as confirmed last season by measurements on our hives by Dylan Ellen, from Bangor University, as part of his doctorate research programme.

Secondly, there is nothing special about our bees or our beekeeping. Our bees are our Locally Adapted Bees; we are very happy with them and I'm pleased that the Welsh Beekeeping Association advocates the breeding and keeping of Locally Adapted Bees. You may guess, correctly, that I am not in favour of the importation of alien honey bee subspecies.



Thirdly, we are not alone! Members of our BKA are mainly Treatment Free.

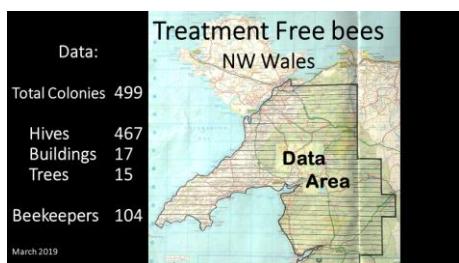
Back in 2010 there were warnings of a possible catastrophe with beekeeping complete with a catchy acronym CCD, Colony Collapse Disorder – remember that? Along with many of you, I would guess, Shân & I were concerned.

Winter Losses Surveys summary of data 2010 – 2015									
Winter	Survey Participants			Colonies					
	Total	Treating	Not Treating	Total	Treated	% Loss	Not Treated	% Loss	
2010 – 2011	14	10*	5*	71	44	27	27	11	
2011 – 2012	40	11*	31*	355	180	8	175	7	
2012 – 2013	53	8*	46*	251	75	41	176	32	
2013 – 2014	65	12*	55*	396	81	9	315	6	
2014 – 2015	77	17*	65*	500	97	8	403	8	
			Total	Total	Average	Total	Average		
			1573	477	19	1096	13		

\*some participants treated some colonies and not others

Full article in BBKA News Dec. 2016

For 5 years we carried out a Winter Losses Survey of local beekeepers – our attempt to try and find out ‘what was going on’. To our great surprise we found that many other beekeepers were already experimenting with non-treatment. In our last survey year, 2014 – 2015, out of 77 beekeepers participating 65 were not treating, and over the five survey years we collected data on 1573 colonies where the winter losses averaged 19% for treated colonies and 13% for untreated colonies. (The survey results were published each year in the Welsh Beekeeper Magazine and are summarised in an article in BBKA News December 2016, and the stats. analysed by Dr Dorian Prichard and also published in BBKA News)



This is our current data on Treatment Free colonies in the area we know, and is possibly the most important document I can show you. A lot of bees...I won't estimate the number of bees - a calculation so beloved of journalists – but, a lot of bees living completely Treatment Free, regardless of their nest home or the beekeeper: Powerful information, I think. This data, I add, is from beekeepers we know personally. This is our knowledge, this is our experience of Treatment Free beekeeping.



To see Treatment Free beekeeping at a National level, take a look this map from the website of the Natural Beekeeping movement who advocate keeping bees' treatment free. I am not a member but it does illustrate the widespread distribution of Treatment Free beekeeping across the UK.

There are also many examples of Treatment Free Traditional beekeepers; for example, check out Ron Hoskins, over 20 years Treatment Free and with an informative website of his Swindon Honeybee Conservation Group.



Also, see this map from COLOSS (Colony Losses Surveys) showing Surviving Populations of *Apis mellifera* across Europe.

Survey on Varroa destructor survivors: <https://goo.gl/forms/xETmwgeQDjhRqg312>



We have always been happy to share our experience with other beekeepers and that includes our Bee Inspectors. On 11<sup>th</sup> July 2013 we had a visit from a trio; our local Inspector, the Regional Bee Inspector for Wales, and a colleague in training. They inspected 23 colonies and were able to report that our bees were healthy.



Over the years we have offered to help with a number of research projects and this photograph shows a visit from Prof Stephen Martin from Salford University who is heading the previously

mentioned REViVe Project on bee viruses. We are currently helping Stephen with his research into Uncapping/Recapping and its probable association with Varroa tolerant bees.



So, what is our experience of Treatment Free beekeeping? The answer is - absolutely fine! For the last ten years we have been keeping bees exactly as we did before Varroa arrived. And, as it happens, last year- 2018- was amazing! The bees loved the hot weather and our honey crop was probably our best ever.

I am aware that I have referred to a number of research projects and articles; if you would like more information on these please refer to our website at [beemonitor.org](https://beemonitor.org/)

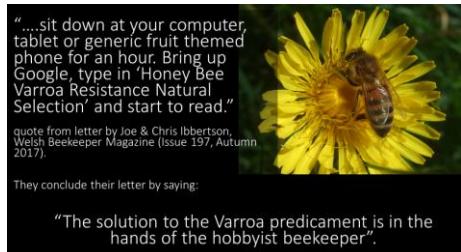


Throughout this presentation I have tried to show that beyond our own experience there is abundant evidence to support Treatment Free beekeeping. I give two more quotes:

"Are we going to throw more and more chemicals at the problem thereby inhibiting the process of developing tolerance through natural selection?" That quote is from the Technical Officer of the WBKA at our Anniversary Conference last July. Thank you, Wally, for that thought-provoking question.

Secondly, Tjeerd Blacquière and colleague, from his paper, 'A Plea for Use of Honey Bees' Natural Resilience in Beekeeping', "Surprisingly "natural selection" appears to be effective after only a few years of refraining from control of Varroa".

Dare I venture to give advice? I'm not sure, because my main reason for coming here today is to simply share our experience with you. But..., if pressed, I would suggest the following: if you are in your first year or two of beekeeping, and being mentored by a beekeeper who advocates treating, don't change anything quickly. If you are an experienced beekeeper and interested in keeping bees Treatment Free, why not start your own experiment and cease treatment in some hives?



If you are interested but not sure try this advice:

“...sit down at your computer or tablet or generic fruit themed phone for an hour. Bring up Google, type in ‘Honey Bee Varroa Resistance Natural Selection’ and start to read.”

This quote is from a very inspiring and informative letter by Joe & Chris Ibbertson (Welsh Beekeeper Magazine, Issue 197, and available online). They conclude their letter by saying the following:

“The solution to the Varroa predicament is in the hands of the hobbyist beekeeper.”

Now- I’m pleased to tell you I have a surprise, because Joe & Chris have agreed to join me to discuss any questions that may arise. *{Joined by Joe & Chris}*

As well as thanking Joe & Chris, I want to say they have some differences from me, and I think they are very special for a number of reasons;

They are young!

They keep bees in an area surrounded by arable farmland

They have treated bees near to them

They are from a BKA that recommends treating

They are from the heart of the UK in Northamptonshire

And, they are also, very enthusiastic and successful Treatment Free beekeepers

I do realise Joe & Chris are from beyond Offa’s Dyke, but I do think they are very special because, notwithstanding their situation just outlined, when they started keeping bees’ 9 years ago they checked the research and they started their beekeeping Treatment Free from the very beginning.

Please give a welcome to Joe & Chris...