

Our First Year with a Flow Hive

Christine and Mike Golesworthy



Introduction

- We have now retired from running our own flooring company. We have two children and five grandchildren and live 10 minutes away from BBKA apiary with a big garden.
- We are not advocating the use of Flow Hives, we are merely describing our own experience so far. Why a Flow Hive for us?
- I always knew we would be beekeepers one day, it was more a question of when, not if. While we were contemplating it, having not long retired, our daughter Louise found the Flow Hive in its initial promotion on YouTube and we knew we had to give it a try! As you now probably know, it's a relatively new concept in beekeeping avoiding the traditional honey and wax extraction method. Instead, the technique is to turn a long key that cracks open each Flow frame, splitting the capped cells and releasing the honey downwards, through a tube directly into jars or containers, in situ. What could go wrong?

- So we decided to launch our beekeeping activities this way in early 2016, bought our first Flow hive, built it, bought a second one, built that, ordered two nucs of bees from Maisemore and booked ourselves onto a training course here at Bath BKA.
- We were met with both encouragement, genuine interest and some scepticism on the course from the more experienced beekeepers. It might be OK in Australia, but would it work here? What about oil seed rape going solid within days? You'll have no wax. Questions and remarks that worried us quite a lot.

Initial findings

- Anyway, as we knew very little about beekeeping when we started out, we discovered that the Flow hives we had purchased were Australian Langstroth 9 frame size, smaller and therefore incompatible with the standard English 10 frame Langstroths. We had a problem with accessories as nothing would fit our Flow hives except the frames. Extra queen excluders were too big, small supers that we wanted to use as extra brood boxes were too big, ekes too, and syrup feeders all had to be modified by Mike. We didn't realise that most English hives are Ordinary Nationals until we went on the course here. We began to wonder if we had made the right decision at all.

Help is at hand

- We ploughed on and during our first season we went through all the trials and tribulations that come with inexperience, including capturing a swarm, avoiding swarms, queen loss, grafting etc etc. Luckily, we have had great support from Pete, Nigel, Steve, Tim and Tracey to name but a few who have helped us here at Bath BKA with problems we have faced.

Harvest time

- So in August last year, it was time to consider harvesting any honey we might have and putting the Flow frames to the test.
- The next photo is a filled and capped Flow frame. They are taller than a typical Ordinary National frame. There are six Flow frames in our supers and each frame can be harvested separately.



Our Flow Hive in Action!

- One warm evening in August, Nigel (our then BBKA Honorary Secretary) and Steve (BBKA Honorary Treasurer), our daughter Louise, Mike and I gathered round dressed in our bee suit finery to witness the wonder of Flow Hive honey extraction. Videos on YouTube had shown children in their flip flops licking the honey from their fingers as it flowed directly onto their bread. Could this possibly happen for us?
- Needless to say, we were both excited and worried. Mike had pushed a flexible tube through the lid of a very large jam jar which we attached to the Flow Hive portal, turned the key in the top of the Flow frame that contained the most capped honey and held our breath.....



YES!!!

- We could hardly contain our excitement (and we were extremely relieved in view of the fact we had two very honourable BBKA gentlemen to witness this!)) as warm, golden liquid started to trickle down the tube into the jar! Very soon it was pouring in and from three frames we harvested about 12lbs of honey from a new colony, without a single bee in sight from this hive and three adjacent ones. Amazing! And boy did it taste good! We all enjoyed an immediate feast of bread & honey with a cup of tea in our kitchen to celebrate. And we could have done it in our flip flops after all.
- The next photo is Louise decanting warm honey (we don't use the jar collar any more) and then Nigel and Steve sampling the goods!







Winter Preparation

- After the bees had cleaned out the honey and sorted out the wax from the Flow frames, we removed the frames to store for the winter and put a small standard Langstroth super on for the bees to make the most of the autumn for stores for winter. Don't forget that Mike had to adjust each one to fit!
- In November I was encouraged to enter the Bath BKA Honey Show in the Novice category. Mike was in hospital having his first full knee replacement and I was busy finishing decorating the sitting room for the carpets to be laid before his return home. So I hastily decanted some honey from our big jar into a 1lb jar and rushed up to Bath Apiary to hand it in. It may have had a few air bubbles in, but I just hoped they might disappear before judgement time!
- We won 2nd Prize!

Show time

2nd

Bath Beekeepers Association Autumn Honey Show

SECOND PRIZE

Section: Novice Class: 1

1 Jar of Run Honey (light)

Exhibited by: *Christine Golesworthy*

5th November 2016

Judge: Mr Bob Needs

- We successfully overwintered the bees but the early fine weather in 2017 and Mike's second full knee replacement, caught us out.
- One hive swarmed very early. We gave the hives more space by moving the overwintered small super underneath the brood box and put the Flow super on top straightaway. This helped a great deal, along with clipping Queens. We had a few problems with queening and again, Pete helped us out with very sound advice. We now have four hives.

Meet the Flow Team

- In May 2017, we were fortunate to meet Stuart, the founder & co-inventor of Flow when he was on tour and visiting Somerton Bee Keepers Association. He was very humble and described the journey of how he and Cedar applied for crowd funding in the hope of manufacturing and distributing the Flow hive. It was born out of Cedar's desire to make his life easier when he was looking after quite a few beehives in the hot Australian sun
- The money kept rolling in for them and in no time, they were able to get cracking. He admits there were a few problems to start with and during the Q&A session we asked him why he had chosen the 9 frame size to manufacture. He admitted it was probably a mistake & that the 10 frame would have been better. He realises the difficulties we had been experiencing. Incidentally, Mike and I were the only people there to have Flow hives up and running and in our second year. For your information, Ordinary National Flow supers and frames are now available to fit standard English hives.
- The next photo is me sitting on the stage with Stuart at Somerton after his talk.

Stuart Anderson – Founder and co-inventor



Mirabai and Binky

- In June 2017 we were approached by Stuart's step daughter Mirabai & her photographer boyfriend Binky to come to our apiary for the day to film us and interview us for a series of "Meet the Beekeeper" two-minute documentaries they are making literally about Flow hive owners throughout the world to be shown on the Flow website.
- They arrived one day in August, they were with us all day and filmed us taking off some honey with our granddaughter. Yes, we had bee suits on. No, we haven't seen it yet. We probably talked absolute rubbish so if you see it, please don't judge us too harshly!
- The next photo is them in our garden, with our hives in the background

Mirabai – Stuart's Step-Daughter & video producer
with Binky - Photographer



Giving Help with the Flow Hive

- Two new members from this club asked if they could come to the house and learn about the Flow as they were thinking of getting one. They arrived on a cool, damp day in late August after Mirabai and Binky's visit, and the bees were very fractious. The summer weather had been quite wet and we found it difficult to choose a warm, dry day to suit us all.
- However, we managed to show them how to inspect the hives despite Mike being stung a lot, and we took some honey off, so they were very pleased. We discussed the pros and cons and I think it helped them reach a decision.

The Pros & Cons of a Flow Hive

Pros

- It is so easy to collect the honey, you can put it straight into jars on site. Mike brings me each big jar of warm honey that he's collected, tells me the hive & frame number & I decant it into warm sterilised jars in the kitchen straightaway. We won 2nd prize for runny honey in the Novice section of the Show in November 2016 (did I mention that??) and all I had to do was put a label on the jar.
- It doesn't take long to collect the honey. For speed, you could collect honey from as many frames that are ready as you like. Six frames ready, six big jars! We've watched Cedar on YouTube filling 1lb jars straight from the hive, swapping with empty ones as soon as they are full.
- It's not messy.
- You can extract from individual frames during the season, but be wary about the bees filling them back up again as you may not want to end up with not quite full frames before the winter.

- You can take frames away to harvest if you want to, turn the key indoors with a jar under, no problem.
- We think we can detect a slight difference in flavours between each frame of honey.
- As the wax stays on the Flow frame, the bees merely recycle and repair it. They don't waste valuable time and effort on wax production.
- The bees stay on the frame and are not disturbed though the process. You will see this clearly on the video that follows.
- No bee escape is required to clear the bees before extraction.
- The honey is clear and generally needs no further processing or straining. We haven't seen any body parts!

The Cons

- Sizing challenges for extra equipment – we bought early into the concept. Ordinary National Flow frames are now available so there shouldn't be any sizing challenges for these hives.
- It's very heavy and cumbersome when full of honey when inspecting the hive – each frame can produce 3 kilos (6.50lbs), times 6 frames = 18 kilos or 39lbs per super. New Flow Ordinary Nationals have 7 frames, so that's 21 kilos or 45.50 lbs, so that's even heavier. In our first year we harvested 11lbs from 3 frames that weren't full, and in our 2nd year we harvested 53lbs from 3 hives, having experienced a swarm & queen issues. The fourth and newest hive didn't produce anything.

- Oil seed rape – the oil seed rape was easy to extract as we did it quickly while it was still warm & we put it straight into warm jars. A small amount of honey did set in the frames, which we overcame by warming in the oven. It is possible to spin the Flow frames by the way, but I can't see a reason to want to.
- It's expensive, but the plastic frames are supposed to last a long time (20 years?)
- Very little wax is collected, so if you want wax for products, you are out of luck, because the wax cappings are not scraped off at all. The bees recycle it.
- You still must check each frame before collecting the honey for maximum capping. About 2/3rds full can be OK.

The Future

- So there you have it! We would do it all over again. We were impetuous but now the Ordinary National Flow frames are now available and the equipment in England is compatible. You'll need to check on sizes if you have Langstroths and you fancy a Flow super
- We are thinking of making a long hive using the Flow frames. It will be lighter work for us and possibly less disruptive for the bees.
- The Flow inventors are busy trying to make it even easier.

Videos

- The following videos show us in our garden extracting our first honey in August 2016, with Nigel and Steve, Louise our daughter, Mike and me. Some comments about quantities of honey collected might be from Nigel and refer to his Ordinary National hives.
- There will be a demonstration from Mike on how the Flow frames work, some honey straight from the hive is here for you to have a taste and a Q&A will follow.
- Thank you for your time today, we hope you enjoyed it!



Demonstration and tasting



Questions





Thank You