Swindon & District Beekeepers

Hive News

October 2026 Edition

From the Chair's Desk

We have come too that time in the beekeeping season, when final preparations for winterising of our colonies takes place.

Remove all varroa treatments now and tidy up when you do your final inspection.

You should now focus on finishing liquid feeding of heavy sugar syrup and if needed move over to fondant as feed for the bees. The Ivy pollen flow will be coming to an end, so the next step is to protect the hives from pests, as in, mice, get that mouse guard fitted. Woodpeckers can also be a problem in some areas, chicken wire netting around the hive will help. Barry has made over covers for the Basset Down Apery to protect the Nucs, they may also act as an insulation for each colony.

Some may insulate the area above the crown board, make sure that condensation runs down the inner side of the hive and not drip onto the cluster of bees, . Check your colonies by hefting now to judge weight of stores, 25 to 30 kilos of stores are needed if we have a hard winter, better to much than the bees running out of their food.

If you are in an exposed site secure your hives to your stand system, ratchet strap systems seem to work best, as they can be tightened and released easily. You will have noticed that removal of the crown board now is difficult as the bees will have used the propolise to act as a draft excluder ready for the winter, so leave alone once all other work is done.

Asian Hornet Watch

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Download on the App Store

Dates for the Diary

Club Meetings 07:30pm Tawny Owl

29/10/26 - AGM + Quiz

26/11/26 - TBC

Bee & Brew 09:30am -TWIGS Apiary

14/11/26 - Club Apiary clean up

12/12/26 - Christma social

Twigs Open Days

05/12/26 - Twinkly Twigs 16:30 - 19:30

The yellow-legged Asian hornet (Vespa velutina) remains a growing concern in the UK. DEFRA and the National Bee Unit continue to confirm sightings and destroy nests, with 2025 recording the highest number to date and early 2026 monitoring now underway. Overwintered queens are emerging, establishing small spring nests that can rapidly expand and threaten honey bees and other pollinators. Public reporting is vital. Please download and use the Asian Hornet Watch App to submit sightings quickly and accurately.

The Apiary Angle

Twigs

With the beekeeping season now behind us, our focus has shifted to ensuring our girls are in the best possible condition to see them through the coming months. We have been checking colony stores regularly and providing feed where required. If you haven't already done so, now is the time to switch from syrup to fondant when feeding your colonies.

We have also been keeping a close eye on wasp activity. Recently, we removed a particularly active wasp nest near the apiary. Based on the first photograph, we thought it was a relatively small nest. As the second photograph shows, we were very much mistaken! The removal wasn't entirely painless either, as I took a couple of stings for the team. While we're pleased the nest has gone, we have still seen a resurgence of those pesky wasps around the hives and remain vigilant. The good news is that all seven colonies are doing well, including the colony that required treatment earlier in the season. They are looking strong as we head into winter.

At our next Bee and Brew session, we plan to have a general tidy-up of the apiary and clean or scorch any equipment that requires attention before being stored away. Any help members can offer would be greatly appreciated, and many hands will make light work of getting everything ready for the winter months.

The Apiary Angle
Basset Down Apiary

All of the colonies are doing well. Over the past few weeks, we have been providing syrup to those colonies that needed it, but will now be transitioning to fondant as we move further into the autumn and winter period.

As mentioned previously, we have noticed an increase in wasp activity around the apiaries, so all entrances have been reduced to a single bee space to help the colonies defend themselves more effectively.

Following the problem we experienced last year, when a hungry green woodpecker pecked through one of our nucs, we are also fitting protective covers. These have been designed to slide on and off easily, allowing quick access whenever feeding is required while still providing protection from unwanted visitors.

The Apiary Angle
Basset Down Apiary

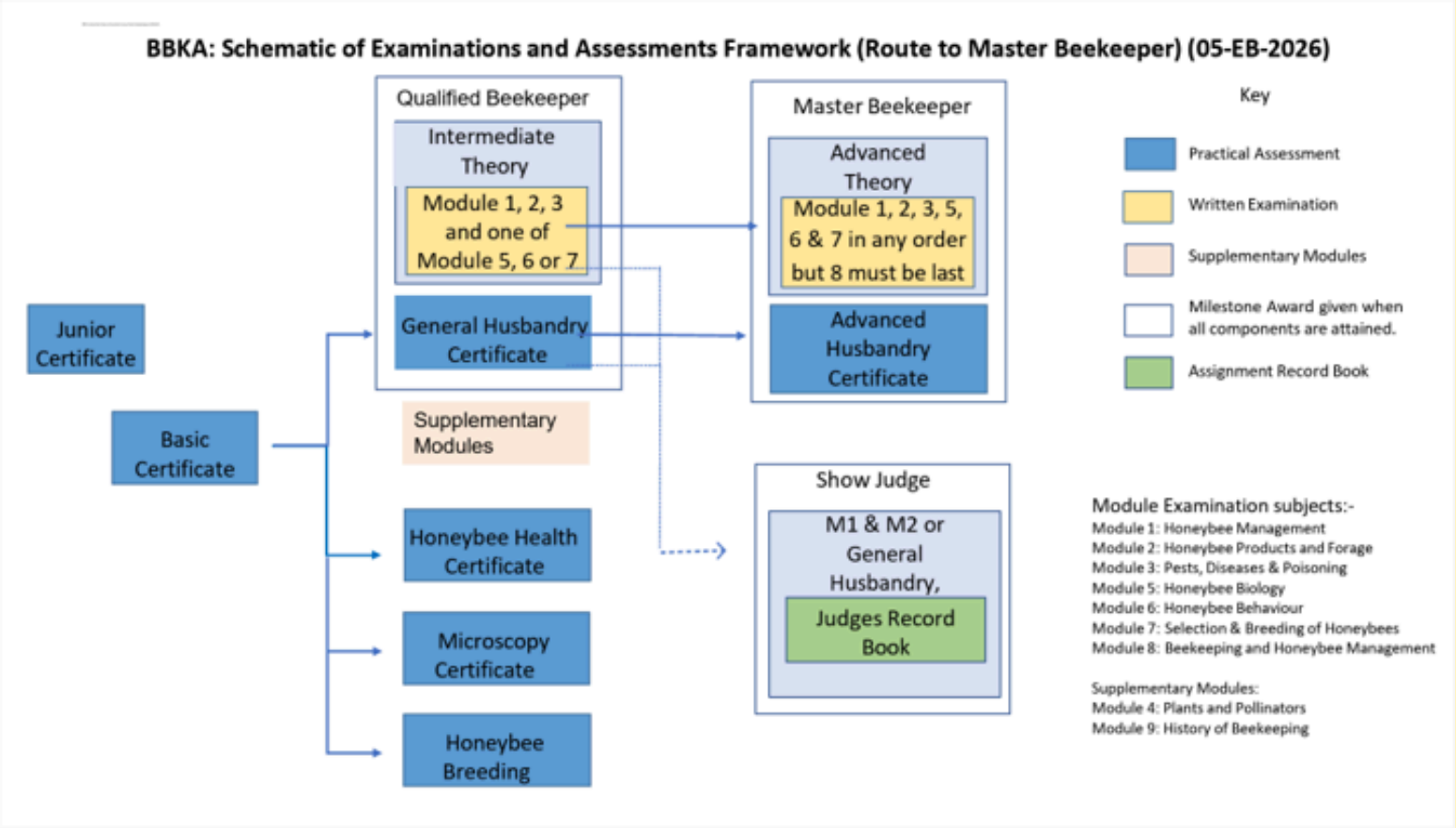
On a more positive note, last weekend we took delivery of a shed that was very kindly donated to the club by Stephen Greenaway's son. We are extremely grateful for this generous contribution. Our next task is to get it erected, although given the current weather conditions, we think it may be wise to leave that for at least another week. Thank you to those who spared their time to give us a hand moving it.

BBKA Qualifications 2027

Ready for Your Next Step in Beekeeping?
If you've successfully managed bees through at least one full season, you're probably much closer to achieving the BBKA Basic Certificate than you think. Throughout 2027, Swindon Beekeepers Association will cover many assessment topics through Apiary Meetings, Bee & Brew sessions and practical demonstrations.

Why take the Basic Certificate?
- Gain confidence
- Demonstrate a recognised standard
- Improve practical skills
- Progress to advanced qualifications

BBKA Qualification Pathway



BBKA Assessment and Examination Dates & Fees 2027

BBKA
The British Beekeepers' Association

BBKA Examinations Board
Assessment and Examination Dates and Fees 2027
Final v. 01.10.2026 (06-EB-2027)

Support Educate Inspire

Practical Assessments	Applications Period (2027)	Date of Assessment	Entry Conditions*	Fee	Notes	Results issued
Junior Certificate	4 Jan to 30 Apr	Last assessment date 31st August.	Must be under 18 years old	£0	Held at school or branch apiary	Up to 6 weeks post assessment
Basic Certificate	4 Jan to 30 Apr	Last assessment date 31st August.	Recommended to have kept bees for one year prior to taking assessment **	£40	Held at branch apiaries **	Up to 6 weeks post assessment
Honey Bee Health Certificate	4 Jan to 30 Apr	Last assessment date 31st August.	Must hold the Basic Certificate	£25	Held at branch apiaries. ** Cannot be taken after passing the General Husbandry Assessment.	Up to 6 weeks post assessment
General Certificate in Beekeeping Husbandry (GH)	4 Jan to 28 Feb	Assessment by mutual agreement of candidate and assessors.	Recommended to have kept bees for five years and to hold the Honey Bee Health Certificate.	£125	Held at apiary of candidate.	Up to 6 weeks post assessment
Advanced Practical Beekeeper Certificate (APBC)	4 Jan to 28 Feb	8-11 July 2027 - dependant on Candidate numbers. Portfolio submissions deadline midday 21st May 2027	Must have passed GH 2 seasons prior and hold either BBKA Microscopy Certificate or the Disease Microscopy Certificate (see below)	£150	Held at BBKA apiary, Stoneleigh.	Up to 6 weeks post assessment
Bee Breeding Certificate	4 Jan to 28 Feb	Assessment by mutual agreement of candidate and assessors.	Must hold the Basic Certificate	£200	Held at apiary of candidate.	Up to 6 weeks post assessment
Microscopy Certificate	4 Jan to 30 June	25-26 September 2026	Must hold the Basic Certificate	£90	Held at BBKA HQ, Stoneleigh.	Up to 6 weeks post assessment
Certified Disease Microscopy Course and Certificate	As advertised	For more information or to apply please contact sec.exams@bbka.org.uk.	Must be eligible for APBC.	£75	Held at BBKA HQ, Stoneleigh.	Up to 6 weeks post assessment
Show Judge Certificate	4 Jan to 31 Dec	For more information or to apply please contact sec.exams@bbka.org.uk.	Must hold the Basic Certificate and Module 1 and 2 **OR** the General Husbandry Certificate.	£45	Final Assessment held at National Honey Show annually in October	Up to 6 weeks post assessment

Written Examinations	Applications Period (2027)	Date of Examination	Entry Conditions	Fee	Notes	Results Issued
March 2027	4 Jan to 8 Feb	20th March - Supplementary modules excluded	Recommended to have kept bees for one year. Candidates may take a maximum of two modules per exam cycle.	£55 per Module	Module 3 will be charged at £10.	20th May 2027
November 2027	1 July to 30 Sept	13th November - All modules offered				13th January 2028

* Assessments and Examinations are open to Registered, Partner, Junior, Honorary and Direct Members
** Different rules apply for Direct Members. Please contact members@bbka.org.uk for more information.

https://britishbeekeepers.sharepoint.com/sites/BBKA/DATA/Exam Board/Document Index/Indexed Documents/Editable Copies/[06-EB-2027 Exam Board Dates and Fees 2027 final v. 01.10.2026.xlsx]Sheet1

Swindon BKA Challenge 2027

Can we achieve 10 Basic Certificate passes in 2027? If you have kept bees for at least one season, why not make this the year you gain your first BBKA qualification?If you feel and would like to do your Basic Assessment or any of the BBKA modules and assessments next year please contact me, Barry Roberts – education@sdbka.co.uk

This year we had 2 members successfully complete their Basic assessment, congratulations and well done to:

Fiona Marsh and **Colin Jones** both achieved credit. It has been a good year, we have had members pass their Honey Bee Health assessment, Module 1: Honey Bee Management, Module 2: Honey Bee Products and Forage, Module 5:Honey Bee Biology and Module 7: Selection & Breeding of Honey Bees.

As a BBKA Member you can do online training units on the BBKA Member Hub.

There is a wide range of video-based units about aspects of beekeeping. You will need your BBKA number and postcode

Swindon BKA members learning together during an apiary training session. Regular attendance at apiary meetings and Bee & Brew events helps build the knowledge, skills and confidence needed for BBKA assessments.

Short Winter Courses 2026/27

Practical Knowledge Stronger Bees Brighter Futures

Two practical one-day courses over the same weekend, across nine UK locations. Led by two well-known, experienced & practical beekeepers - Karl Colyer (Cheshire) and Roger Patterson (West Sussex).

Day 1 – "Early Years"

You've 'survived' your first few seasons and want to move from reactive troubleshooting to managing your colonies with real understanding and confidence – this course is for you!

Day 2 – "Sustainable Bees & Queens for Everyone"

A focus on how to raise robust, gentle, locally adapted bees suited to our British climate – reducing the need for imports! – an ideal course for intermediate+ level beekeepers.

REGION	DATE	VENUE
Cheshire	21st & 22nd November 26	Goostrey Village Hall
South Yorkshire	5th & 6th December 26	Bradfield Village Hall
Warwickshire	12th & 13th December 26	Stratford-on-Avon Racecourse
Essex	16th & 17th January 27	Writtle ARC
Somerset	30th & 31st January 27	North Petherton Village Hall
Nottinghamshire	6th & 7th February 27	Rolleston Village Hall
Northumberland	20th & 21st February 27	Hexham Community Hall
South Wales	27th & 28th February 27	Llandybie Memorial Hall
Scotland	6th & 7th March 27	Blair Drummond VH

- **Courses are free – see website for details.**
- Please bring packed lunch and refreshments.
- Car parking available at all venues or nearby.
- Full details & booking of tickets:

https://bibba.com/winter-courses-2026-27/

Better Beekeepers Brighter Tomorrows

The Autumn Bee: What Happens Inside the Hive Now

Open a hive in July and you are looking at a factory running flat out. Open the same hive in late October and you are looking at something closer to a survival capsule, fewer bees, almost no brood, a warm ball of bodies pressed around a queen who has largely stopped laying. It is tempting to read that as the colony winding down. It isn't. What is happening in September and October is one of the most dramatic physiological transitions in the insect world, and it is happening inside the bodies of individual bees. The bees in your hive right now are not the same kind of animal as the ones that filled your supers.

Two bees, one species

A summer worker is built to be spent. Bees emerging in spring live roughly 25–35 days; midsummer foragers often manage less than that, wearing out their flight muscles and wing margins in a few weeks of hard work. The bees emerging now are built to last. Winter bees properly called diutinus bees, from the Latin for "long-lasting" routinely live six to eight months, and marked individuals in northern colonies have been recorded surviving beyond 200 days. That is a tenfold change in lifespan with no change in genetics. The same genome, read differently.

The differences are physical and measurable. Compared with summer bees, winter bees carry higher levels of the storage protein vitellogenin, much larger nutrient reserves in the fat body, enlarged hypopharyngeal glands that were never used to feed larvae, and low levels of juvenile hormone. Their immune systems also behave differently. When researchers challenged summer and winter bees with bacteria, winter bees mounted a more intense response, with higher expression of antimicrobial peptides. In short, the autumn bee is fatter, less hormonally driven, better defended, and in no hurry to go anywhere.

Vitellogenin: the molecule that buys time

Vitellogenin is best known as an egg-yolk protein, synthesised in the fat body of the abdomen. In honey bees it has been repurposed into something far more interesting: a general-purpose store of protein and lipid, a signalling molecule that helps govern behaviour, and an antioxidant that appears to directly slow ageing.

It is the centre of gravity of winter bee physiology. One review describes vitellogenin as "central in winter bee physiology," accounting for the whole diutinus syndrome the high lipid and protein content of haemolymph and fat body, the swollen hypopharyngeal glands, and the extended lifespan. Molecular work has found that vitellogenin and a related gene, vg-like-A, are specifically elevated in long-lived winter workers.

The mechanism matters because it explains why autumn nutrition is not optional. Vitellogenin is built from dietary protein, which for a bee means pollen. A bee that goes through its larval and early adult stages without good pollen cannot load its fat body, and a winter bee with an underfilled fat body is not really a winter bee. It is a summer bee facing six months of winter. There is a second reason vitellogenin is central: it is the currency the colony will spend in February. Brood rearing in late winter happens before any forage is available, so the protein that becomes the first spring larvae comes out of the bodies of the bees standing in the cluster right now. The autumn bee is simultaneously the insulation, the heater, and the larder.

Why brood patterns collapse in October

The trigger for winter bees is tightly bound up with brood. Evidence consistently links the appearance of winter bees to the decline of brood rearing in autumn. The logic is elegant: nurse bees burn their vitellogenin reserves producing brood food. Fewer larvae to feed means nurses retain what they have built, and a bee that keeps its vitellogenin becomes long-lived. Brood is the drain; closing the tap creates the reserve. So the dramatic October change frames of sealed brood in September, a few patches in October, often nothing by November is not a failure of the queen. It is the mechanism by which the colony manufactures its overwintering workforce. At the end of autumn, brood production declines until it ceases entirely, and although the colony looks inert, the process being triggered is exactly what determines winter survival.

Two environmental cues drive the timing. Recent work shows that both photoperiod and temperature matter: longer days and warmer conditions increase the probability of brood rearing, with temperature exerting the stronger effect under short days and photoperiod mattering more as days lengthen. At the other end of winter, the resumption of brood rearing in late winter is mainly driven by temperature but modulated by day length. This is also why a mild autumn can be unhelpful: warmth keeps the queen laying, brood keeps draining nurse-bee reserves, and the winter bee cohort is weaker or later than it should be.

The cluster is not a huddle, it is a machine

The standard image of winter bees is a passive huddle conserving warmth. The reality is more active. When ambient temperature falls below roughly 15 °C, bees form a cluster and begin social thermoregulation. The mantle, the tightly packed outer layer, functions as insulation, and this has long been regarded as the decisive factor in cold survival.

But insulation alone cannot explain a warm core. Bees inside the cluster produce heat endothermically by vibrating their flight muscles without moving their wings, and the density of these actively heating bees is highest in the core and falls towards the mantle. Depending on colony strength and whether brood is present, the cluster holds itself somewhere in the region of 15–30 °C. Broodless clusters run cooler and cheaper; the moment brood appears, the colony must hold brood-nest temperature and its fuel consumption climbs.

The result is that a honey bee colony behaves less like a hibernating insect and more like a small warm-blooded animal, using its collective body mass and a sheltered cavity to maintain a regulated internal temperature. And because that regulation is so tightly controlled, it is diagnostic. In one study, the thermal amplitude inside the nest distinguished colonies that would survive from those that would die with 96.8% accuracy, and detected collapse phases with 83.9% accuracy. A colony losing thermal control is a colony losing its grip, often weeks before it looks dead.

The queen's changing signal

The queen is not just laying less; she smells different. Queen mandibular pheromone is a blend, and its components shift across the season. Analyses of pheromone residues found clear seasonal variation, 9-HDA and 9-ODA were lower in January than in other months, HOB declined from July to January, while HVA, associated with mated queens, rose sharply and crucially, these shifts tracked the season rather than the queen's reproductive quality.

That matters because queen pheromone is not merely an identity badge. It is a primer pheromone that shapes worker development, including delaying the transition from in-hive duties to foraging, precisely the kind of effect you would want in a bee destined to stay home until March. Other primer pheromones follow seasonal cycles too: ethyl oleate, produced by foragers to slow the maturation of younger bees, varies in titre and biosynthesis across the year, and has been examined directly as a signal in the diutinus transition.

The picture emerging is of a chemical conversation, not a switch. Declining brood pheromone, shifting queen signals, changing forager signals, falling temperature and shortening days all feed into the same endocrine outcome: low juvenile hormone, high vitellogenin, long life.

What beekeepers can actually do

Everything above collapses into one practical idea: the quality of your winter is decided by the quality of the bees emerging in late summer and early autumn, not by what you do in December.

Get mites down before the winter bees are reared. This is the single highest-leverage action. Mite populations peak in late summer, and mites feed on and transmit viruses to precisely the developing brood that is meant to become long-lived bees. A bee damaged as a pupa cannot build a full fat body. The standard advice is to reduce mite loads before winter bees are created, which for most regions means acting in late summer rather than mid-autumn. In UK practice, that often means taking supers off in late August so management can begin immediately.

Monitor rather than guess. Measure infestation before you consider treating, and check again after the late-summer so you know the load your colony is carrying into winter; a further check on a broodless colony is worthwhile.

Protect the pollen supply. Winter bees are built from protein. Incoming pollen in autumn feeds the nurse bees that provision the winter cohort, so leave pollen stores in the hive and be cautious about stripping frames bare. Finish feeding early enough to be stored and capped. Colonies short of stores need 2:1 syrup, or fondant if temperatures have already dropped. Syrup given too late cannot be ripened, and processing it costs the colony the reserves you were trying to add.

Reduce the volume they must heat. Fewer boxes, a sound roof, no draughts. Thermoregulation is metabolically expensive, and every unnecessary cubic centimetre is fuel burned.

Back a good queen. A queen laying a strong, even pattern into early autumn produces the cohort that overwinters; low mite pressure plus a high-quality queen is the combination that lets a colony rear healthy, long-lived winter bees. Then leave them alone. Opening a cluster costs heat the colony has to rebuild. Once the cluster forms, heft and observation beat inspection.

The idea worth keeping

A summer colony is a population. A winter colony is closer to a single organism, one warm body with a shared metabolism, running on fat reserves laid down in October, holding a queen at its centre, and budgeting carefully towards a spring it cannot yet detect.

Which reframes what autumn beekeeping is for. You are not preparing a hive for winter. You are provisioning the bodies of individual bees that must still be alive, and still carrying spare protein, six months from now. If there is one thing worth carrying out of this month, it is that the decisive work happens before the cold does.

Written by Matthew O'Dell

The Honey Spoon

(Recipe of the month)

Sticky Honey & Mustard Sausage Traybake

Serves 4

Ingredients

- 8 good-quality pork or Veggie sausages
- 500g baby potatoes, halved
- 2 red onions, cut into wedges
- 2 peppers, roughly chopped
- 2 tbsp runny honey
- 2 tbsp wholegrain mustard
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 tbsp cider vinegar
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- A few sprigs of fresh thyme
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Method

1. Heat the oven to 200°C, 180°C fan, Gas 6.
2. Put the potatoes into a large roasting tin, drizzle with a little olive oil and season. Roast for around 15 minutes to give the potatoes a head start.
3. Add the sausages, red onion and peppers to the roasting tin and toss everything together.
4. In a small bowl, mix the honey, wholegrain mustard, cider vinegar and crushed garlic to make the glaze.
5. Pour the glaze over the sausages and vegetables, turning everything until well coated. Scatter over the thyme.
6. Return to the oven for around 30 to 35 minutes, turning the sausages and vegetables halfway through, until everything is cooked and beautifully caramelised.
7. Serve straight from the roasting tin with some seasonal greens on the side.