

MID-CHESHIRE BRANCH REPORT 2023

The new year started with full optimism with our branch AGM in **January**. Karl Colyer stepped down as Chair with Steve Purkis taking over the role. We would like to thank Karl for his valuable help and contribution through the year as Chair. Ian Turley and Sarah Johnson remain in their roles as Secretary and Treasurer respectively. An additional four members joined as general committee members. As part of the proceedings, we were entertained by Mid-Cheshire's own "Dick and Dom" in Nick and Jonny giving us all a few very amusing pointers in what not to do in your first year of beekeeping!

Mid-Cheshire is continuing its steady growth having an official membership figure of 92 members.

In **February**, we had a treat at our branch meeting from the future (now) BBKA Chair Diane Drinkwater with her take on "Be Prepared - How to be more organised through the year". I think even the experienced members picked up a few tips and suggestions (Never have too many hive tools!). The event was extremely well attended with 35 members in person and few more watching the recording later.

The informal "Bee Chat" continued in both January and February to get people interested in the coming season. These were still proving to be a good place to introduce people to beekeeping in a very informal way, without the pressure of attending a full branch meeting.

In early **March**, we again held our branch Beginners' Meeting attracting a massive 50 people to the event – more than we could fit into the room! The meeting at the Blue Cap included a short introductory talk by Steve Purkis with the room laid out with various pieces of kit to allow lots of questions and the new beekeepers the chance of experiencing all the equipment needed. This was followed up in **April** with Nick and Sarah Johnson hosting a practical hands-on DIY session in skills to "Let's Build a Hive". In this session we were giving new and experienced beekeepers the chance to assemble flat pack hives and frames, while also explaining the purpose of each of the parts – something that is never easy to pick up when you first start!

April also proved to be a major milestone month for the Mid-Cheshire branch where, through Bob Beards' careful sourcing and negotiations, we opened a club training apiary for the first time at Grozone Community Garden in Northwich. We had a formal opening event where Cheshire President Pam Hatton kindly performed the opening, cutting the ribbon on what will hopefully become a very successful place for us to teach practical beekeeping. We opened the apiary with two hives and small inherited abandoned colonies, with the hope to progress to a regular number of four to six. We looked forward to using the apiary in the coming months, but unfortunately this was not to be for this year.

To help with the cost of establishing this new apiary, we have been fortunate to obtain a significant amount of funds from a Sponsorship by J Parker Plants & Bulbs. This has allowed us to purchase the required equipment needed to start the new apiary.

In **May**, we attempted to continue our beginners' theme on the early Coronation bank holiday with a hands-on practical session at Nick and Sarah Johnson's apiary in Antrobus. Unfortunately, the very poor weather meant that this could not take place on the Monday but was fortunately quickly re-arranged for the following Saturday when the spectacular sunny weather and some calm bees were enjoyed by 25 keen new and novice beekeepers.

Regular inspections of the new apiary bees started only to find that as the size of the colonies increased, so did the poor temperament of the bees, a trend that unfortunately continued through

the year delaying the use of the apiary as a process of re-queening and merges was undertaken which lasted the rest of the year.

June started the first of our summer branch apiary visits where 30 people visited Mark Phillipson's Apiary. What a great apiary set up Mark has, ideal for demonstrating his method of queen rearing and passing on his very knowledgeable tips of the trade.

June also started a busy time for the branch in supporting external organisations and events. The first of these was the Cuddington and Sandiway Gala where Steve Purkis and Stuart Forbes, along with an observation hive, braved scorching temperatures at Cuddington Playing Fields to entertain the crowds and in the process win the prize and trophy for best stand (well the bees did).

Later in June, Mid-Cheshire branch continued to hold The Honey Show at the Royal Cheshire Show with nearly 100 entries and exhibitors from most of the branches. We were delighted that we were adjacent to the Bee Education tent which was organised by David Curbishley. There was plenty of information on bees and pollinators, an observation hive as well as a great display of honey, wax products, photographs, mead and confectionery on the show stand. This made a large area dedicated to beekeeping and we were thankful to everyone who helped on the stand and talked to a huge number of visitors.

Finally in June, we had a stand at the Arley Flower Festival where Dave Wright, Ian Turley, Josh Hampson, Jane Turley, Nick Johnson and Sarah Johnson and a three-frame observation hive of bees wooed the crowds.

Progress at the new apiary was slow, due to the poor temperament of the bees, with the plus side that the new comb and foundation was being drawn and progressing well in the warm weather.

Early **July**, saw Ian Turley, Stuart Forbes, and Ken and Mel Houghton represent the branch, bees and beekeeping at a charity event supporting "Passion for Learning" near Chester. The event was well attended with a huge interest in our stand. Stuart was very excited and pleased to meet the beekeeper and visit the estates apiary and its collection of WBC hives.

Later in July, we were hosted by Lesley Jaques at her Harford apiary, showing off her new stands of apidea mating hives.

Progress was slow in the apiary on the bee front as the re-queening process was being affected by the weather, but one hive was successfully merged with a calmer one so hopefully they will be ready for 2024. On the infrastructure side, we managed to purchase and erect a nice bee shed to store all of our equipment and extras.

Our **August** branch meeting had a new treat in visiting Radbroke Hall for the first time, where Josh Hampson and Cheryl Flatman showed us around their work apiary.

We closed off our seasonal apiary visits with a trip to Ken Houghton's garden apiary. Unlike most of August, the weather played nicely and everyone enjoyed the late summer social.

August also completed our summer branch representations at events where a number of us together with bees spent two soggy days at the Cheshire Game and County Fair.

Interest at all the external events was amazing and we look forward to welcoming some new members to both our branch and the wider Cheshire Association.

At the apiary, we acquired another hive of bees with a kind donation from Ken Houghton. These were also re-queened to aid with temperament.

In **September** Lesley Jacques gave a detailed account on “Bee Nutrition” to 20 at our local branch meeting.

Later in the month Sarah Johnson used her extensive show experience and skill to demonstrate how to prepare for and take part in a Honey Show. Tips on preparing honey jars, candles and wax and what to do and what not to do.

Rolling into **October** Buckfast Abbey gave our branch a mind-blowing exposé into “Honey Bee Hormones” via zoom. I think we all left the call with greater knowledge and a fascination at the complexity of the Honeybee and the hive, even if we did not understand all the science and terminology.

At the Cheshire Autumn Convention Honey Show, Sarah’s tips and knowledge sharing came to fruition when the Mid-Cheshire branch managed to win the County Shield for the very first time, claiming a number of first prizes across the various classes. Lesley Jaques then went to the National Honey Show and claimed first prize in two microscopy classes – a very remarkable achievement.

In the apiary, the remaining re-queened hive finally showed signs of laying a full 12 weeks and 3 test frames after emerging. We go into winter hopeful that we will have three calm hives in early spring.

In **November** we had a new venue for our annual Branch Honey Show at Toolerstone House with another tremendous turn out with our judge Joyce Nisbet presiding over 100 entries. She again provided an excellent running description on the judging process, luckily with no dog hairs or “evil” honey this year. A big thanks to Stuart Forbes for the organisation and to Lesley Parker for stewarding as well as expert judging by Joyce.

We rounded-off the year with a superbly enjoyable meal at Blue Cap in **December**, organised expertly by Jo Zielinski, during which members and their guests discussed the highs and lows of their beekeeping season and their plans for 2024.

Mid-Cheshire Branch were also invited and participated in a Christmas Market, again at Toolerstone House, where we sold lots of honey and some beeswax to those attending and again promoted the branch and beekeeping, but this time without any observation hive!

As a branch, 2024 approaches again with a lot of optimism and excitement as we approach the major milestone of being able to provide our own practical hand on training, albeit at a very small level to start. Our branch numbers continue to grow and have for the first time passed the 100 mark in the official figures with 103 members. Our main aim now is to consolidate and continue to improve with membership growth and with our key objective being the training apiary.

A real success story has been the Facebook group, but more particularly the support WhatsApp group which has seen topics ranging from the very basic “I need some help” type question to exploits of a grafting and queen rearing process. May this continue in the future and Happy Beekeeping.

Ian Turley