

A Closer Look at Chesterfield and District Beekeepers

Mike Ashford

This association rose to the challenge of increasing interest in our craft

AT CHESTERFIELD we aren't really different from all the other associations. We think that we are better, but then so does everyone else.

At the end of the last century the members who started keeping bees after the Second World War and in the 1950s were retiring and they were not being replaced. So we had to work hard to attract new members and to keep the members we had.

Our methods were simple: we presented a friendly face to the public and we provided education and training. It worked, our numbers increased about 19% year on year and we were soon out of danger with a young, vibrant association. It was both rewarding and really nice to be part of.

INTEREST IN BEES EXPANDED

Then a challenge loomed like a harvest moon over the apiary. Bees were perceived as threatened, as a prime indicator of biodiversity, and were essential to our survival. Bee interest expanded and there was huge public curiosity about honey bees – requests for information and presentations, demand for training and for bees, and a dramatic increase in Association membership –

and in 18 months we have increased from 85 members to 160.

What a challenge! What a marvellous opportunity! Our hobby was suddenly BIG.

We therefore needed to:

- ◆ increase the amount of the training we do while maintaining the quality.
- ◆ satisfy a new demand for information. We were seeing students who didn't necessarily want to keep bees but who wanted to know about bees and beekeeping. Our principal course 'New Beekeepers' was something of an overkill.
- ◆ respond to public interest and desire for information. Our stands and displays were attracting lots of children who had learned about bees and other social insects at school and they wanted to know more and to see and touch bees. Their mums and dads were becoming potential beekeepers.

We were already doing quite a lot:

- ◆ We were running a New Beekeepers Course each spring for 15, then 20, then 40 students.
- ◆ Our members have always done talks for interested groups:



President Alan Barnes hands over a cheque to Steve Mazurek of Mazurek Optical Services

Scouts, WI, nature groups, garden clubs, and so on. The requests for talks were increasing.

We presented ourselves (and sold honey and products) at public events. Ashover Show is always our biggest effort. It has more than 12,000 visitors and half of them come to look at us. We also work with Chesterfield Museum at the Revolution House in Old Whittington and we go to Nature Days in country parks and reserves.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

But, we needed to do more. And we needed equipment to support our efforts. We had been relying on using our not very exciting gazebo and filling it with exhibits and goods on loan from members. Our training, too, relied on what members could bring. It had served us well, our members are

experienced and competent but it just wasn't enough for us to meet the challenge.

So, we went looking for funding. After some false starts, Brian Morris of Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire Links Council for Voluntary Service steered us to the Derbyshire Community Foundation who were really helpful. Not only did they have some funds available for community projects but they were also willing to give us advice and guidance. In May 2009 we made our first bid on their Grassroots Fund. We didn't get all that we asked for but we did get a generous grant and bought:

- ◆ A big gazebo (3 m by 6 m) and a matching little gazebo (3 m by 3 m) each with a white roof with our name and logo big and bold. We learned about the white roof with experience from



The small gazebo with Steve Mazurek and most of the committee. Goods bought are on the table

borrowed gazebos; a coloured roof can make the displayed honey look really unappealing.

- ◆ A DLP projector and a good laptop computer to drive it.
- ◆ A good sized portable screen.

- ◆ Eight tables to stage things on.

That got us started and, in 2010, we trained 30 new beekeepers and 40 students attended taster days. We also had a really successful day at Ashover Show. The projector has been a great help to the

trainers and it has helped us to improve the quality of the presentations at our monthly meetings. An unexpected bonus is that we can show films on DVD anywhere, any time.

The gazebos are great. For small events and for a bit of shelter at outdoor meetings we use the little one. For medium shows we use the big one and at Ashover we use both. They have had lots of outings and we can now do practical beekeeping in the rain; we just erect a gazebo over both the hives and the audience.

THE AVENUE WASHLANDS

While we were busy modernising our activities we had been invited to become involved with the Avenue Project near Wingerworth. The Avenue was a coking plant and had been very polluted.

The project, sponsored by the East Midlands Development Agency, has recovered the ground and a large part of it is the Avenue Washlands Nature Reserve, 16 hectares of newly created reed bed, marsh, ponds and grassland in the valley of the River Rother, which is managed by the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust.

We have become involved in our own small way: we are establishing an apiary to support the nature reserve, and we organise our education and training in the excellent training centre established as part of the project. It's great.

In early 2010 it was time to make our second bid for funding. Derbyshire Community Foundation was very helpful again and,

although we didn't get everything we asked for, we were treated generously in straitened times. We have been able to meet most of our urgent needs for education and public presentation. We have been able to buy:

- ◆ beekeeper smocks to lend to students on our courses
- ◆ a set of Beekeeping DVDs that Derbyshire Beekeepers' Association made and which our members find helpful
- ◆ and we bought our Secretary a good printer to match the laptop. With so many members he couldn't really rely on goodwill any longer.

MICROSCOPES COMPLETE THE PICTURE

Then we needed a microscope for serious work. The committee had been talking about it for several years. None of us is trained as a biologist but we had all been impressed by the value of microscopy when we were at the National Bee Unit and at BBKA Spring Conventions.

A few members have microscopes and we had some idea of what we were looking for. However, it was all quite confusing and difficult. Suppliers and other users were helpful but we struggled to define just what we wanted to do and we were baffled by the array of equipment on offer.

We needed an adviser. We found one in Stephen Mazurek. Steve is the Managing Director of Mazurek Optical Services

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which services and repairs microscopes for serious users: universities, government departments and the like, throughout UK and the Republic of Ireland. They are also distributors for microscopes, cameras, accessories and software.

Steve produced lots of instruments for us to examine and gave us tutorials that explained what they were for and how to use them. We did a lot of thinking and decided that to support our association activities we needed:

- ◆ a compound microscope enabling examination at 100 times, 400 times, 700 times, 1000 times
- ◆ a stereo dissecting microscope
- ◆ a camera to work with

these and to permit us to project microscope images through our laptop and DLP projector.

Mazurek Optical Services then brought along and demonstrated a selection of equipment, new and refurbished, from their range. We chose two microscopes and a camera that suited. We were offered a very competitive price.

ALAN HINCHLEY BURSARY

We had exceeded our available funds and we knew that Derbyshire Community Foundation had no more in their pot and neither had anyone else. Then Janet Hinchley came to our aid. Janet was married to

Alan Hinchley who was our President for many years. When he died she created an educational bursary for us in his memory.

Unfortunately none of our members had been able to take it up so Janet converted it into a grant to allow us to buy the microscopes that we wanted and which, she was sure, would have delighted Alan. We are very grateful for her generosity.

Now we have nearly everything we need to meet the challenge for training and providing information. We can also provide much better services to our members and to the public of northern and eastern Derbyshire and an impressive microscopy service to members. We are

planning a Nosema Day – bring 30 dead bees and we will teach you how to check for disease.

All we have to do is to turn potential into achievement. We are well on the way with lots of education and public activities planned for 2011.

THANKS

It has been an intensive and difficult exercise but we are delighted with what we have achieved. We would like to thank everyone who has helped us. The main players have been mentioned but there were lots of others. No one ever said ‘You can’t do that’ and everyone we met was helpful and encouraging. We are extremely grateful and will do our very best to make it all worthwhile. ✨



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