

To Bee or not to Bee

Chapter 1.....'A year without '

In the Spring of 2013 on a warmish Sunday afternoon during a rather sedate allotment committee meeting I am summoned by one of the plot holders 'someone at the gates wants a word with you about bees'. I apologise to the rest of the committee and leaving them to make a major decision as to what colour to paint the container. In wanders Sue, who introduces herself as a member of Stockport Beekeepers Association (SBKA) and asks me if we have considered having bees on the allotment site.



'Err no....never thought about it' 'not sure we can have them...don't they sting?' I reply. Sue enthusiastically informed me about how important bees are to pollinate the allotment crops & local gardens, the plight of the honey bee, the honey we could sell and yes, they can sting.

Not being deterred by the latter after being stung many times as a kid trying to catch bumble bees in a jar during the long hot summer holidays, I entered her phone number under Sue Bees in my mobile & said I will get back to her after a chat with the committee. Returning to the committee meeting, they had now narrowed the colour down to black or white as the cheapest options and with warring factions on either choice, I add yet another item to the now prolonged agenda....bees.

Surprisingly, an instantaneous unanimous decision was made at committee level to agree to look further into beekeeping on the site and a meeting arranged with Sue to meet plot holders to answer questions and have a look around the site for a suitable situation within the allotment to house these all important honey bees.

None of the plot holders attending this meeting had any knowledge or experience of beekeeping, so were initially a little cautious, but we were aware of the plight of the honey bee after a bad winter in 2012. Sue duly arrived with the 'demi-god of Stockport beekeeping' Roy, who answered questions with ease and knowledge way beyond our humble understanding, yet fascinated us with the complexity of these diverse and intriguing little insects.

The next step towards our ownership of bees involved a discussion with Amanda at Stockport MBC, our landlords, who informed us that providing we could meet their criteria then an agreement could be given. This involved a consultation with plot holders, local neighbours and Roy from SBKA. Plot holders were quick to respond with a definite yes and response from neighbours along Dial Park and Cruttenden Road was initially positive, until I received a phone call from Amanda. 'One of your neighbours has objected to your proposal, that the beehives will be too near to her house and she already has too many bees in her garden. She's also complained to the local councillor'...that's one way to get an allotment officer to quickly contact you. Being considerate to all neighbours Sue, our Chairman John and myself attempted to allay the ladies concerns without success, so it was back to the drawing board.

The first concern was that a suitable area had to be found on the site that would leave both the plot holders and bees in peace. On a small site this can be difficult as you can hear other plot holders from one end to the other....no secrets here on Dial Park. The ideal area for siting of the hives had to be discounted as the neighbouring plot holder had young children known for their 'inquisitiveness' so another area was selected. So what to do next?

One of our committee members, Maureen, well known for her interest in nature (including weeds), offered part of her plot to house the bees. Problem sorted. However it's under shelter of trees, so not ideal.

Then it was back to the criteria required by the Council which included:

- A toilet for the bees as they are known to defecate on drying clothes and cars.

Bees also don't like the smell of leather, including watch straps, soap, beer or sweat so that ruled out the hairy bikers as tenants.

- Screening is to be at least 10ft to increase the flight path of the bees - although at that height it's likely the bees will be stunned by the air traffic into Manchester Airport!
- An experienced beekeeper to call on - that wasn't a problem, we've got Roy.
- Only a gentle strain of bees to be kept on allotments. That excluded the African killer bees we were thinking of!
- Check if any plot holders have an allergy. We already knew that some had an allergy to pulling up the weeds, but bees?...yet another email to send.

We met & exceeded Stockport MBC's criteria so approval was granted in June 2013.

The next step was to find out what we needed as a committee. We decided that, unlike most allotment sites that housed bees belonging to a beekeeper usually in exchange for some honey and the pollination of the plot-holders plants, we wanted all plot holders to have the opportunity to learn about beekeeping. This would involve educating everyone who was interested and them passing on their learned skills and knowledge to the general public, making them aware of the plight of the bees and how we benefit from their pollination, not just from collecting honey. All plot holders were asked and initially 5 volunteers wanted to learn more and agreed to attend. SBKA's theory course involved spending over 9 weeks at Stockport College. Unfortunately, due to it's

popularity we were too late to be accepted onto the course starting January 2014, but we wanted to go ahead in preparation for 2015. Luckily SBKA had a cancellation at the last minute and as next on the list I was invited and delighted to attend.

The next question was 'How much will this beekeeping cost?' After studying various beekeeping magazines, brochures and chatting with beekeepers we arrived at a staggering £3000. The long list including beehives, bees, equipment, suits, protected area, storage shed, training courses and lots of things we had never heard of. What do you do with an uncapping fork and a mouseguard? Allotment associations are the best recyclers in the world, but with income of less than £1000pa how could we come up with that kind of money?

We had received grants before for improvements to the site so we contacted Mark, funding officer with Stockport Homes. Mark was so enthusiastic about our 'to bee or not to bee' project that he agreed to help submit applications to Forever Manchester, who liked our approach. Our applications were successful, with a shortfall funded by Stockport Homes.

With funds promised, work started on the area which needed clearing and a protective cage was built to keep intruders out but gave the bees freedom to fly.

Luckily, we have some handy lads on our site who willingly jumped in with both feet with myself 'elected' as project manager supervising the build.



Considering my knowledge on building matched that on beekeeping, I think I was elected to keep out of the way. So after my first attempt at hammering in a metpost & breaking the drive-in tool, I was retired & left the job to the professionals.

Due to Winter approaching, we were told it would be Spring 2014 before we could move any bees in. So the Winter was spent building hives, and for those who had

never even seen a National Hive before, this was a daunting task. With the usual 'blokey' attitude of 'If it looks right then don't bother with the instructions', bits were spread around the allotment site awaiting construction, & when finished the usual questions... 'Whats this bit for & why have we got gallons of glue left over?'. Work also started on building a communal clubhouse for storage, learning and somewhere for plot holders and beekeepers to keep warm and dry. A kettle and camping cooker were also supplied for well needed (and well deserved) brews, with something a little stronger to add on those short Winter days.

Approaches had been made to beekeepers if they had any wintering bees, with the general response of 'We will have to see if they survive the Winter', and with comments like 'I lost 4 of my colonies last Winter due to the weather'. By chance, in September, I bumped into Luis a beekeeper in Poynton (also of Great British Bake Off fame) who mentioned he may have a colony for us 'providing they get through Winter'. Concern set in that we could have a lovely 'beespoke' home ready, but no bees to occupy it.

As Spring 2014 approached, I attended SBKA theory course with the main learning points being:

1. Bees do sting
2. Bees do not read the training manuals

The course was excellent and highly recommended as it's tutored by local members of SBKA, wholly enthusiastic about looking after the bees, their health and spreading their knowledge (particularly where not to get stung). Every Monday night I would come home from college buzzing with another bee gem for my wife... 'Did you know that male bees die after mating with the queen?' and 'A healthy colony can hold around 60,000 bees!'. Her enthusiasm abounded when I took home a jar of Roy's honey and a candle made from a wax foundation....can I learn about cosmetics? Sorry love, that's not a bloke thing.



Unfortunately, the course finished after 9 weeks. With certificate in hand, and a beginners knowledge of beekeeping... but still no bees. Then a phone call from Sue.....'Luis says we can pick up the bees next Saturday 22nd March!' Excitement filled the air until, after coming down to earth with the thought of 'How do you pick up bees?' Dressed in bee suits, thick gardening gloves, water sprays to hand and with luggage straps around a hive we took a leisurely early morning drive back from

Poynton, avoiding the usual Stockport potholes to arrive at Dial Park with the bees safe and left in Luis' hive until acclimatised for 24 hours. The last thing we wanted was to open the hive and then have the colony all fly back to Poynton.

So finally after a year's planning, fund raising, learning & building, we now have the bees...what next?

Find out in the next instalment

