



Lester with one of his hives and the bees on the honeycomb
(photo: Andrew Tyzack)



The North Yorkshire Moors as they look in early August when Lester takes his bees there to take advantage of the purple heather to make heather honey (photo: Mike Kipling)

The plight of the honey bee



Emma Shipley meets a successful beekeeper who produces a range of Yorkshire honeys

More and more Yorkshire folk are taking up beekeeping to help ease a national crisis. Poor weather and disease have dramatically reduced the native population of honey bees in recent years and the situation is so serious that the Government has committed £10 million for research on the threats the bees face. These concerns have also led to a rapid rise in the number of people taking up beekeeping as a hobby.

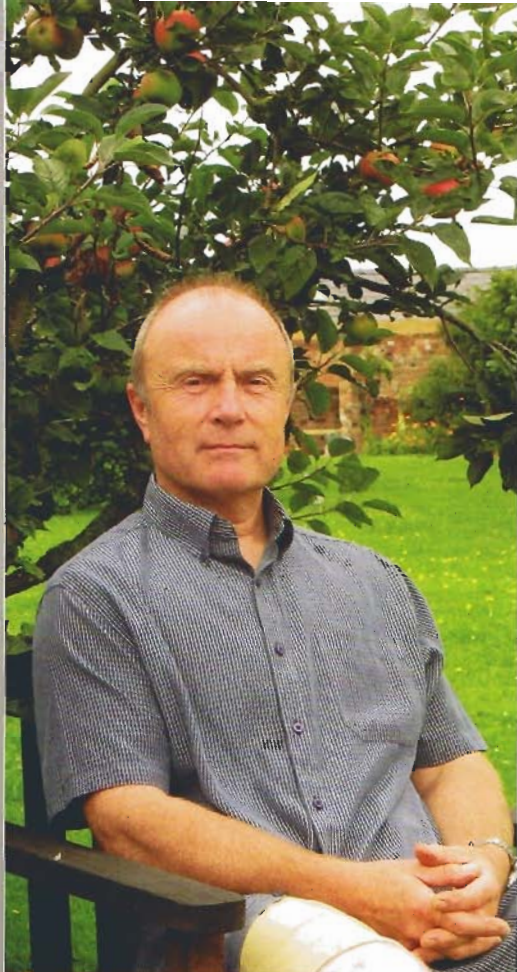
Beverley Beekeepers Association is just one of the organisations in Yorkshire that has seen an increase in members.

The beginner's course in spring this year was so oversubscribed that a one day intensive course had to be set up in July to cater for those who had missed out. In addition, people are already signing up for next year's courses, and while it used to be a small club with 50 members, the association has now trebled in size to more than 150 keen beekeepers.

Lester Quayle, the association's secretary, has been keeping bees for 22 years and has a small beekeeping business in Dunswell. He produces

honey for local farm shops and garden centres and also supplies beekeeping equipment. 'More younger people are keeping bees and there are more females taking an interest as well - it used to mainly be males. It's because of the growing interest in farmers' markets and knowing where your food is coming from. People have begun to see the benefits of natural foods.'

Yorkshire produces some excellent honey thanks to our stunning summer landscape. The purple heather moors, the patchwork quilt of yellow and green



Lester Quayle in his garden

fields and the distinctive blue of borage flowers are home to thousands and thousands of honey bees, who live for just six weeks in the summer because they work so hard collecting honey. So how is it made?

'The bees visit the flower and use their long tongues to dip in and suck up the nectar, which is 80 per cent water,' Lester explains. 'They carry the drop of nectar in their special 'honey stomach', go back to the hive and pass it to another bee by touching tongues. That bee then puts the nectar into the honeycomb.

'In the evening when they are not flying the bees start fanning their wings over the wet nectar and the water in the hive evaporates. This makes the nectar just 20 per cent water. The bees then make a cap over the hexagonal honeycomb with wax which is like a lid or seal, as they are storing the honey for winter. But there is more than they need - each hive can collect 100 pounds but they only need 25-30 pounds.'

Lester's bees produce four types of honey throughout the summer and each one has a distinctive taste and texture. Creamed honey is white and produced mostly from bees visiting

oil seed rape fields. It sets quickly and needs to be mashed so that it takes on the consistency of margarine. Borage honey is light, clear, runny honey and is produced from borage fields. Mixed flower honey is, as the name suggests, made by bees visiting a variety of plants including blackberries, horse chestnuts, sycamore, lime trees and dandelions. Finally, heather honey is dark in colour with a strong flavour and jelly consistency and is made from ling heather.

Lester moves his 60 hives around throughout the year to where the flowers are, to get the different types of honey. 'Over the years I have made friends with several farmers so I have hives dotted about on various sites across the Yorkshire Wolds in fields and woods,' he explains. 'In East Yorkshire there is a lot of oil seed rape in May and June so I take them to sites where they can fly up to three or four miles to a rape field.'

In late June Lester takes his bees to the borage fields. Borage, which has a distinctive blue colour, is grown for its small black seeds which are harvested to make starflower oil. The honey produced from these fields is a speciality of East Yorkshire as most of Britain's borage is grown here. This year Lester's bees occupied a field overlooking the Humber Bridge, before being moved to the North Yorkshire Moors.

'We take the bees there in the first week of August,' Lester says. 'The heather flowers for four weeks but it can be chilly at thousands of feet up

and there are cold winds. There can be three or four nice days with the rest being wet and rainy, so in those few days the bees can collect all they honey we will get for the time they are there.' For this reason heather honey, which Lester says has a beautiful taste, is the most expensive.

In September the bees are brought back home where each hive's population decreases from a peak up to 60,000 in the summer to just 10,000 in winter. 'The bees don't work in winter,' Lester says. 'They get in a cluster and vibrate their wings to keep warm. The bees on the outer edge slowly move to the middle while the warm ones in the centre move outwards, with the Queen bee always in the middle.'

Lester is passionate about beekeeping and would recommend the hobby to anyone wanting to have a go. But he does advise people to get some help before they start. 'People should contact their local beekeepers association for training and have a go in a safe environment. You can buy bees on the internet but you have to understand how to keep a colony and what to do with it. In Beverley we have a night school where people learn about making hives and looking after bees. We also have a one day intensive course of practical and theory, and a mentor scheme where a mentor lends the learner equipment and notes. The same courses can be taken all over Yorkshire.'

For more information on East Riding Honey visit www.eastridinghoney.co.uk

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Lester sells creamed honey, heather honey and borage honey in jars