



Dark Bee Revival Project

Between 1916 and 1925 the numbers of the indigenous British Dark bee, *Apis mellifera mellifera*, were decimated in England and Wales by a severe outbreak of the acarine mite (*Acarapis woodi*). This outbreak is often referred to as the 'Isle of Wight disease'. To replace this huge loss of the country's major pollinator, large importations of bees occurred from around the world including USA, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. These bees were largely of

Apis mellifera lingustica from Italy and *Apis mellifera carnica* from Central Europe, which quickly interbred with the many of the surviving dark bees to produce hybrids not always well suited to local conditions, especially in the North, and often of uncertain temperament.

1992 saw the arrival from Southeast Asia, of the parasitic varroa mite, which is now endemic throughout mainland Britain. Although most beekeepers have changed the ways in which they keep their bees, in order to minimise the damage caused by varroa, around 20% of UK colonies are lost each year to varroa related issues. This is on top of the 20% annual losses due to natural over-wintering causes. Although new regulations now attempt to control the importation of bees from countries outside the European Union, the UK bee population is still being topped up by major imports of bees, not always from known sources!

2007, 2008 and 2009 were disastrous for UK beekeepers in many regions. The poor weather prevented the bees from foraging and kept them largely hive-bound, resulting in severe outbreaks of the endemic disease *nosema apis* and the recently imported *nosema ceranae*. Colony losses across the UK were estimated at around 50% although in some parts of the country, including the Lancashire, losses were nearer 80%. At the same time, across the country, there was an unprecedented surge of interest in beekeeping and new beekeepers wishing to acquire stocks of bees.

The Dark Bee Revival Project aims to address this challenge by:

- developing a strain of healthy, high purity dark bees, of docile and of predictable temperament and well suited to the local environment to meet the demands of local beekeepers and reduce the need to import bees from outside the area with the inherent risks of bringing in disease and further unwanted hybridisation
- providing high quality practical and theoretical training for new, developing and experienced beekeepers in order to materially improve the quality of local bee husbandry.

To achieve this, the Club has acquired a 2.6 acre site and developed and equipped a breeding apiary and training apiary. Worked started in February 2011 and was completed in March 2011 at a cost of £34,000. The first colonies of bees were introduced in May 2010 and further stocks added in April 2011 with the assistance of a grant from the Naturesave Trust.

During 2010 43 people attended practical training at the apiary and 18 new colonies of bees were formed. Over 100 people are expected to take part in courses during 2011 and the target is to raise at least 40 new bee colonies.