



Sweet Success

Bee-keeping has undergone a remarkable revival. Taste, principles and fascination have played their part. But reinvention, new uses, new ideas and new markets – all have driven us to put the usual conserve and condiment to one side – and reach for the product of the distinguished honey bee. **Robert Dangerfield** looks at two successful bee enterprises

From dairy farm to honey pot

A jar of the pukka stuff commands a double-digit sum. It's now added to a variety of premium consumables: spirits, confectionary and sauces, for example – and, for a three-digit sum, Fortnum's will sell you a whole hamper of products containing it. Honey's come a long way from the inglorious gloop or beige paste we smeared on a slice of Mother's Pride. Its sales overtook jam in 2014. Our modern diets have increased demand to more than 20.3 million kilos: sales worth more than £100m – as a topping for porridge, granola or yoghurt, in barbeque sauces and dressings and in the Bake-Off revival for pastries, cakes and biscuits.

It's received royal approval, of course, as HRH the Prince of Wales has inadvertently been part of a fashion for drinking tea sweetened with honey. And the product's perceived health-giving properties are widely known, even if some are unproven. It's boomed on a reaction against processed white sugar and, credit-where-credit's due – the conservation message has played its part too. Everybody loves a bee – until it lands on them, anyway.

Let's not forget two more bee-related products. Mead might be perceived to be the obsolete, honeyed ancestor of all our fermented drinks. Long thought to be the choice of monks and hippies, today, thanks to Game of Thrones, Harry Potter and Larp (Live action role play) – not to mention how delicious it is, it's today's fastest growing alcoholic tittle – describing a wide range of honey-based liquors – from sippable wines and spirits to quaffable ales and beers. The second set of bee-related consumables is balms: for lips, hands and elbows – a market that has grown exponentially – and which has developed natural, added-value segment, based on beeswax. If only furniture-polishing could experience a similar revival.

Honey is big business: just ask a wood-turner about honey-dippers

From the perspective of the landowner, honey presents a unique set of questions. It's not a primary agricultural product – often a bonus. But the service provided in pollination of crops or orchards is essential. Step in then the professional beekeeper who provides a service – and harvests a product too. And, of course – be it an art or a science – beekeeping isn't for everyone. It takes a lot of nous and a thick skin, not just for sting protection, but because colonies can die – or (apparently) depart – at the drop of a beekeeper's netted hat.

We have no wild honeybees in the UK. The threat of the varroa mite,



IT'S A FINE MEAD VINTAGE FROM SAM COOPER'S NEW QUAY HONEY FARM

the Asian hornet and pesticides may be real, but it's the vagaries of the British climate which is the real enemy for the humble honeybee.

Even a committed honey farmer like Sam Cooper, 42, who owns and runs the New Quay Honey Farm in West Wales has this advice to share: "The secret's to manage different income streams."

His 40 acre honey farm was converted from a dairy in 1995. Here he has a shop, a tea-shop, a meadery and an exhibition.

It's a beautiful site. A wooded dingle with traditional stone buildings. Sam's parents ran about 40 dairy cows until the mid-90s.

"The land's quite poor here," he explains. "Shale-based heavy clay with poor drainage. It's not even great for bees. The cold westerly sea mists and breezes... you need to be in the east, really. But it was quite a transition."

"In a two-year period we renovated the haybarn into a meadery and an adjacent former chapel into a shop and tearoom."

"It started off as a beekeeping supplies agency. That was pre-internet," Sam explains, reminding us how the online revolution and social media have broken traditional consumers' dependence on the local supermarket.

"This is tourist-country," he says. And you can imagine the 30-40,000 visitors Sam receives messaging their social networks via Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram or good old fashioned email: "You've gotta come here!"



'You can't rely on bulk honey sales'



HONEY IN NUMBERS

Between 10-15,000t of honey is estimated to be produced in the UK

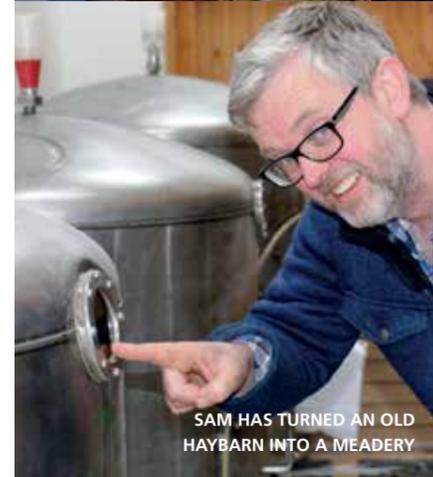
The EU is the second biggest world producer at 237,000t behind China at 502,000t, but also is the largest importer at 200,000t

There are thought to be about 280,000 hives in the UK kept by some 44,000 amateur keepers

Around 40,000 bee colonies are managed by around 200 professionals

Approx 20.3m kg of honey is sold by UK retailers

Retail honey sales are worth more than £100m



SAM HAS TURNED AN OLD HAYBARN INTO A MEADERY



MARK GALE AND COLLEAGUES AT THE SURREY HONEY FARM

DIVERSIFICATION

Most of New Quay Honey Farm's product is sold in the farm shop – a vertically integrated operation – enhanced by related products: gifts, country and bee-themed books, toys and other products. It's a hungry animal. Around 400-500 hives extending out into the Teifi and Aeron valleys serve the farm. Producing up to 20,000 litres of mead, the farm has one of the land's largest operations of its type. A team of three full-time and two more part-time support the business. "You're very vulnerable to poor staff in a business like this – I am very lucky," Sam muses.

Sam's honey-pot, however is his exhibition. It's not just the row of four 'telephone-boxes,' each containing a natural bee-nest – with access to the outside – in which one can see a colony in all-its-glory. It's also Sam's own presence. His devotion to his subject is captivating and contagious – and leads his customers into the retail and teashop as a drone is driven to the flower.

Bees with byte

Mark Gale, from Chessington, Surrey has a management consultancy career behind him. But he's a lifelong beekeeper – and follows his father and uncle in the same passion. No connection with the Gales honey brand so common on our supermarket shelves, Mark's label is The Surrey Honey Farm.

"I can't produce enough to meet demand in my principal consumer outlet," Mark says. He's supplying a premium horticultural destination in the leafy and well-heeled London commuter belt. In production are around 50 hives on the Beaverbrook Estate near Leatherhead, a National Trust landholding at Polsden Lacey and ground owned by the engineering design consultancy W S Atkins, near Epsom. This yields up to 4,500 conventional jars of honey – about 3,000lbs of the sweet stuff.

Mark's not looking to take on the commercial producers. "There's more to it than the business imperative. Much more: I'm looking at completely new audiences and innovative ways to spread value."

New markets exist for apiarian activity. "There's a strong market for honey as a high quality natural product, but new openings exist in educational, therapeutic and motivational channels."

Using a set of simple but accurate monitors, information is fed to on-screen dashboards and cameras. Schools can devour the information to teach IT skills. Mark says: "Kids monitor the health and performance of a hive. The seasonal cycle of a bee colony offers perfect information to bring alive what to some people can be a dry subject."

"My business manages the hives and we have advantageous and sympathetic locations for them." This diversification is called BeesMax – and it does not end there.

"I'm also working with large corporates. Their interest is in that area of business known as CSR (corporate social responsibility). But it's also a great employee motivation initiative."

The message barely needs repeating: common goals, common values

and standards, common responsibilities – a total commitment to the needs of the colony and to its culture, processes and the team. "This is understandably appealing to technical corporates with a thousand-plus employees." Many, of course, are surrounded by grounds planted with flowering shrubs, bulbs and herbaceous perennials. "Even better," – Mark's eyes twinkle – "if schools and corporates work together in a mutually beneficial sponsorship which scores goals in education, CSR and bio-conservation."

Mark is developing a project to regenerate and reverse the decline of wild bees. "We might need to fight off the well documented scourge of varroa and the Asian hornet, but a massive problem is the absence of habitat and homes for bees."

He says pesticides and herbicides can reduce a bee colony's numbers sufficiently such that it becomes unviable. A colony of 200,000 bees in July might naturally decline to as few as 5,000-7,000 in the winter. Below a certain level, according to conditions, the colony can collapse. A late, long winter, such as this year's will not help.

"Re-pollination strips may be helpful," Mark says. "A big part of the problem is the low supply of suitable places for new swarms to move into – and this is why swarms find themselves where people don't want them. We simply don't have large numbers of old, big, hollowed-out trees around – bees' natural home – anymore. What's needed is a 'low-cost community housing scheme' for bees."

His answer is to encourage people, communities, schools or companies – to sponsor his 'Blue Box' rehoming system. "I've set a modest target to establish a network of 100 of these rehoming boxes by September 2019. Each location will have the capacity to monitor the health of a colony and feedback the information to the central database. It will be the first time bee colonies will be monitored in this way – and the information it will generate will be incredibly valuable."

To achieve this, Mark's Surrey Honey business is looking to expand taking on three full-time bee-keepers as well as linking up with hobbyists. "And I'm looking

for partners for location of hives and blue boxes and for making use of the bee colony data." ■



LIFELONG BEEKEEPER
MARK GALE

'Swarming bees are acting like a computer on reboot. Everybody has some idea of how the social insect community works, but at this critical time when swarming happens – the colony is being reformed'

COULD YOU HOST A BEE COLONY ON YOUR LAND?

You can be part of a drive to fight back the decline in the bee population – and help schools learn more about beekeeping – but moreover apply IT skills to monitor colonies' performance bringing together the digital and natural world. You can support BeesMax, a not-for-profit initiative in which you can be part of a network of potential sites for bee colonies in a Blue Bee-Box – all managed by the scheme. Find out more: www.beesmax.org