



# Bees and Neighbours

Lancaster Beekeepers advisory leaflet No 3

Bees are fascinating creatures with a very interesting life style, which makes beekeeping such a rewarding hobby. However, not everyone sees it that way! So, unless great care is taken in siting apiaries and manipulating bees, complaints may well be made.

## Legal rights

Beekeepers have a right to keep bees. Their neighbours have a right to enjoy their property in peace. Poorly sited apiaries and badly managed bees may well be a nuisance to them.

A court is much more likely to give consideration to what a neighbour sees as a nuisance than what the beekeeper regards as harmless behaviour. Bees drinking water from a garden pool may well be deemed a nuisance even though the beekeeper can establish that this is a harmless action. It could also be argued that bees foraging on neighbours plants cause a nuisance.

The fact that the bees were there before the complaining neighbour holds little importance in a court of law.

## Avoid confrontation

If you are new to beekeeping talk to your neighbours beforehand and explain your interest. If you already have bees and your neighbours complain, take time to understand exactly what they are complaining about and assess what can be done about it. Share some honey with them and emphasis the value of bees to the environment and their fruit trees. However, you need to be realistic and recognise that if you have the sort of neighbour who is going to continually complain, beekeeping will never be a pleasant experience for you. Avoid the aggravation and find a site for an out-apiary.

**Remember, when confronted with an angry neighbour never meet aggression with more aggression.**

The main causes of complaints by neighbours about beekeeping result from:

## Stings

Unfortunately the only fact most people seem to know about bees is that they sting. Clearly the nearer a person is to an active colony of bees, the greater their chances of being stung, so reduce the possibilities of non-beekeepers being stung by:

- not keeping bees in small gardens or close to homes
- sheltering apiaries behind fences, hedges or walls
- only keeping docile bees
- only manipulating colonies whilst neighbours are at work.

## **Overflying**

Under normal conditions bees usually fly about 5 metres above the ground although in windy conditions they often fly very low because it needs less effort, only rising to fly over obstacles. They do, however, fly lower whilst flying out from and returning to their hive, and it is usually these lower flight paths that cause problems.

The problem can be largely overcome by:

- sheltering the apiary with hedges, fences or shrubs
- raising boundary fences or allowing hedges to grow to about two metres in height
- facing hives away from neighbours property.

Temporary barriers can be made from sparrow-proof netting as bees are reluctant to fly through it.

## **Swarms**

To the non-beekeeper, having a swarm of bees land on their property can be an alarming experience. Whilst beekeepers cannot guarantee the prevention of swarms, the chances of them happening can be significantly reduced by:

- clipping queens
- using effective methods of swarm control
- making sure that hives are not over-heated in summer
- having adequate spare equipment
- seeking help from an experienced beekeeper *before* there is a problem.

## **Apiary size**

The greater the number of colonies kept, the greater the chances of complaints arising from any cause. There have been several cases brought to court where beekeepers have kept enormous numbers of colonies in their gardens.

The number of colonies that can reasonably be kept in an apiary will depend on its size and location. As a guide:

- most modern, suburban gardens are too small to be suitable
- larger gardens, say the size of a tennis court or larger, could safely house up to six colonies
- few urban gardens could safely house more than six colonies.

If in doubt, seek advice from an experienced beekeeper.

## **Drinking bees**

Like every other creature, bees need to drink and often choose to drink from the edges of ornamental pools. Although this is a harmless activity, the sight of a number of bees drinking in this way may cause alarm to neighbours.

The best way to avoid this is by the beekeeper providing an adequate source of water for his bees. One way of doing this is to cover a large flat dish with small, rounded pebbles and then half filling the dish with water. The bees will land on the pebbles and drink. Another way is to fill a large plant pot full of wet peat and stand it in a reservoir of water. The bees will drink from the wet surface.

The dish or plant pot should be placed in a sunny spot *and not allowed to dry up*.

### **Cleansing flights**

When bees emerge from their winter confinement one of their first activities is a cleansing flight, which can result in anything nearby being spotted with faeces. Neighbours may not appreciate this happening to their laundry or cars!

This problem can be reduced by correct autumn feeding and high barriers around the apiary to ensure that bees on cleansing flights circle near their hives.

### **If all else fails**

Beekeepers who are members of a local beekeeping association which is an area member of the British Beekeepers Association gain the protection of a third party insurance policy. This provides coverage against all third-party claims arising from their beekeeping activities involving injury to persons or damage to property.

If the situation between the beekeeper and a third party deteriorates to the point of legal action, then, assuming he is a member of a qualifying association, he must inform the BBKA at once. This is very important as any delay could result in loss of compensation under this policy.

The BBKA has a legal adviser who can give help on the law in this area, but any beekeeper threatened with legal action must engage the services of a solicitor. The BBKA will not engage in legal action on behalf of a beekeeper. Remember, weigh up the situation carefully. Litigation is always expensive and best avoided if possible.

### **Join a club**

Lancaster Beekeepers is a charitable company and an Area Association of the British Beekeepers Association (BBKA).

Members of Lancaster Beekeepers are covered by the insurance policy described above.

**[www.lancaster-beekeepers.org.uk](http://www.lancaster-beekeepers.org.uk)**

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