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Why I . . . keep bees

Helen Jones talks to Andrew Mockridge, a specialty training registrar in anaesthesia and intensive care medicine, about how beekeeping helps him deal with the stress of a tough day

Helen Jones

“When I was a medical student I had an allotment and I started to keep chickens. I felt the next progression was to keep bees,” says Andrew Mockridge, a specialty trainee at Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust. He now manages seven hives in his large front garden, producing honey to sell in local shops.

It all began with a beekeeping course with a local beekeepers’ association. “It was a weekend of theory mixed with practical elements. It was basic, but probably just enough to enable me to take the important bits in. It was followed up by group sessions over the rest of the season to build up our husbandry skills. I’ve also read a few books and I spoke to other beekeepers. Learning never stops and I always fall back on other beekeepers when I need an opinion,” he says.

Beekeeping doesn’t take up a great deal of his time. Between October and March, bees need very little attention, he says, but as the weather improves and they become active again, he attends to his hives for about two hours a week.

His bees produce around 1000 jars of honey a year, although it is dependent on several factors, especially the weather. “I sell it locally to shops—one of the local bakeries is crazy for it—and to colleagues who continually ask for it,” he says. Perhaps surprisingly, Mockridge doesn’t particularly like honey, but says, “It’s always nice when people buy your honey and tell you how much they enjoyed it. They always think local honey tastes better than honey from the supermarket.”

His main reason for keeping bees, however, is “because it’s a peaceful and educational hobby, where you are making a true difference to the environment.” It also gives him a sense of wellbeing and helps him to unwind from his day job and the training that he’s currently undergoing with Midlands Air Ambulance.

“Beekeeping allows me to relax and helps me to de-stress, particularly after a bad shift on the intensive care unit—yes, even with the chaos of having lots of bees flying around my head. I get excited when I’m about to open the hives—seeing how big the colonies are getting and how well they are storing honey. I’m directly seeing the contribution I am making to their growth and therefore we have this lovely mutualistic relationship. Bees are selfless creatures who work as hard as possible to survive and I feel we owe them our time and care.”

As an experienced beekeeper he rarely gets stung by his bees. “It’s happened once this year and I probably deserved it because of my clumsy handling that day.

I had some local swelling to the sites of the stings when I first started. Now, I don’t get any reaction,” he says.

As well as looking after bees at home, Mockridge helps care for three hives on the roof of his trust’s headquarters. “The plan is to train a number of staff, who are all novices, to care for them,” he says. “It’s about creating a community and giving people a chance to be involved where they may not have the space or baseline knowledge to keep them in their own gardens—yet. We’ve been lucky to have had donations from several large beekeeping suppliers which should keep the project alive for many years to come.”

As for the future, he says, “The roof is large and so we have lots of space to expand. It would be nice if some colleagues could keep their own bees up there at some point, but we need to see how the project pans out. We hope to have enough volunteers trained so we can look after as many hives as we can.”

How to get started

- Join a local beekeeping association. They are invaluable resources for learning and development and provide a lot of support, says Mockridge. You can find your nearest association at www.bbka.org.uk
- Speak to a beekeeper to find out what it’s like. Most are passionate about bees and very helpful and there are often a few enthusiastic beekeepers around, so ask around your department or hospital, he says
- Get a good book. “I would recommend the Haynes manual of beekeeping—it’s well illustrated and full of practical advice”
- Always have a mentor if you do decide to keep bees—you’ll need support and advice along the way