

Your Chairman's June Thoughts

How has it got to Haymaking time and really no decent rain to make it grow? I have even had frost on my potatoes and probably lost my crop of "earlies". I was looking forward to a dinner of lamb chops, new potatoes and even our own peas. All with fresh Irish butter on top. What no Cheshire butter? Sorry members, I have a wife who thinks Irish is best.

But back to the C S A and I can only report welcome progress. This was capped with a visit to the Reaseheath new Farm at the May meeting. We all enjoyed it so much that we did not get away until 11.00 in the evening. You will see some more events during the summer mentioned in this copy of the Gate. Please attend. I am also told that our course leaders are looking at the lists to see whether it is possible to get them under way during our summer break. So if you receive a telephone call please assist and remember we are trying to follow up on names you have entered.

It is clear that your committee is now beginning to see some light on how we are to proceed. I have asked them to spend some time over the next two months trying to arrive at how they see the future of Cheshire Smallholders Association. It is intended that this should be the main item at our September committee meeting in order that we can present a firm programme at the Annual General Meeting in October.

As envisaged in our last Gate there is continuing cooperation with the staff at Reaseheath. We are entering into a joint venture to put on a Smallholders event on the 4th July with a mixture of commercial interest and local private smallholders offering information to us all. It will be a "Free" get together. The idea is to extend it in 2011 to a fully organised show. It will be the largest and most difficult idea we have ever followed up and we welcome all members to it. Mark your calendars for Sunday the 4th July 2010.

As I was finishing this I went into the kitchen and suddenly realised I had left the fresh mint off our dinner. I hope you are all jealous of the contents of our land, all home grown (except the butter). You too can have the same if you take part in the C S A events. Have a nice holiday.

Arthur T. Green. Chairman.

June 2010.

Forthcoming Events

Summer Barbeque - Saturday 3rd July

Our usual opportunity for food, drink and convivial company. Bring your own meat and drink and we will provide salad type stuff. Starts at 5:00 at Gill Lawson's in Kingsley. Email me if you require directions.

Visit to Acton Scott - Saturday 24 July

Meeting at Acton Scott, just south of Shrewsbury on A49. Bring your own picnic or snacks. Lunches are available at the old school house.

Acton Scott is an historic working farm, see www.actonscott.com, with many exhibitions and demonstrations reflecting life in the good old days. It was the location for the BBC's Victorian Farm series and has featured on many other TV programmes.

Anyone wanting to take up the reduced ticket price for groups at £5.00 per person, please contact Jane Hulse by June 30th on 01829 781 343.

Smallholder Show - Sunday 4th July - 11:00 am to 16:00.

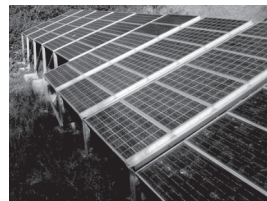
The committee have been offered the use of a large marquee at Reaseheath college and a considerable amount of support from college staff to organise a smallholder show. Despite the short notice we have decided that we will try to run a small event involving a number of appropriate trade exhibitors, organisations and speakers on topics of interest to smallholders. Please put the date in your diary and keep looking at the web site. I will send out more details once they are confirmed. Three trade exhibitors have already committed to attending. Depending on the interest from this show we will look at organising a larger event next year. It is clear that there is no event specifically for smallholders and aspirant smallholders in the North West of England and we are hopeful that we may start something off. If you have any ideas on how to make it successful or would like to help please let us know.

Proposed Courses

Jane Watkins hopes to organise some more butchery courses with Karol Bailey: bacon curing, sausage making and further lamb butchery. Anyone Interested in going on a course please contact Jane on 01538 306510 or Email benloyal@clara.co.uk.

Alternative Energy Lecture - Raine or Shine - Alex Pearson

The lecture on alternative energy was presented by Alex from “Rain or Shine” in March. There was a good turnout, which goes to show the interest in energy saving, as it becomes more important for the environment and your pocket. He stated that the three main sources Solar, water and wind were backed up by ground source heat pumps and air source heat pumps (still solar indirectly) and the humble wood burning stove.



Anyone generating their own electricity in a small system below 10 KW, is referred to as micro generating and is now supported by government, and energy companies. Payment for feeding into the grid any surplus electricity is currently 41.3 p per KWh so it can pay a small income as well as reducing your electricity bill.

The most cost effective method discussed was the solar- thermal installation, which consists of panels (usually roof mounted) of tubes, filled with a fluid which boils at low temperatures and transfers the heat to copper tips on the ends. The copper tips heat water passing through in a closed circuit into a special domestic hot water tank one coil inside is the solar thermal circuit and the second is the conventional Gas or wood burner supplied coil. The solar heating is obviously only available during the day, and so you would only get a full tank of hot water by afternoon. In this way you might have to consider using washing machines and dishwashers etc on timer to get the best out of the system and still have hot water topped up, for use during the evening. This type of system, it was said would save on average £250 per year for a gas customer and more for anyone on oil central heating. It would cost £3k - £4K to install.

The photo- voltaic cells were also mentioned but they must be south facing with no shade. There are available in different sizes but the best panels are the smaller ones, unfortunately they are 50% more expensive.

Wind turbines can be good source of power but a large blade typically 5 metres long is really required and the power is only available when the wind blows. The rotor does not have to be a standard windmill type and a vertical axis version is available, but it is not as efficient.

As always there is the cost of the equipment and installation to consider, and there is no real energy for free, but we were informed that there are grants available to offset this, if you are considering fitting a system. So as always it is not as simple as it first appears and some research is required

via local councils and energy companies to check what is available before you go ahead.

All in all it was a good lecture with the usual question and answers session at the end, and thought provoking; maybe Lawrence can draw up some plans for the next issue of the GATE with the smallholders version of Fiddlers Ferry power station.

Gordon Murty



Pest Control Lecture - by Alan Williams - 26th April 2010.

Alan Williams is also the Chairman of the Montgomery & District Smallholders.

His job is controlling pests and he spends about 80% of his time catching mice and rats and about 20% of his time catching rabbits. However he also catches many other species of pest such as moles and foxes.

It is essential to control mice and rats to prevent up to 29 different diseases, the most important disease being Weil's disease that can be fatal to humans. Between 50% and 70% of rats carry Weil's disease. This disease is transmitted in the rat urine and can enter the human body through any small cut or abrasion. A lady suffered a small cut by trying unsuccessfully to open a bottle of beer by gripping the top in her hand. She later died from Weil's disease and it was shown that rats had been walking over the bottles. Rats and mice can also cause a lot of damage because they have to keep chewing to control the growth of their teeth. Damage to electric cables can cause fires.



There is a responsibility on landowners to act against infestation. Most authorities charge to de-infest (although East Cheshire currently will de-infest free of charge). If a neighbour can show that you have an infestation on your property that affects them, then they can ask the local authority to come and remove the problem at great cost to you!

Rats need food, habitat and water. Remove any one of these to eliminate the problem. However it is very difficult to remove access to water. Rats need water every two hours and since they have no bladder they are urinating almost continually. Consequently if you find a dead rat never pick it up by the tail because this will be the most infected part of the animal. Use gloves or a shovel and destroy the carcass by burying it or burning it.

Mice however can survive without water for six weeks. This is why mice can occupy the upper floors of a house whereas the rats stay nearer ground level. Food sources include compost, lawn cuttings and eggs. Habitats will include under chicken sheds and under decking.

Rats have poor eyesight, good hearing and exceptionally good sense of smell. Look for holes, damage and smells. Mice leave more of a smell than rats. Look for runs. Rats leave “smear” marks near holes they might make in walls. To get rid of rats or mice use either poisons or traps. Mice are relatively easy to trap. To trap rats, leave traps unset in a run for some time, say a week, only then put bait on the unset trap. When the rat is used to taking bait from the trap then it should be set to catch them. Trapped rats are best dispatched by drowning, i.e. immerse the whole trap in water. If you want to try shooting rats, use peanut butter to attract them. Snaring, gassing or putting creosote or petrol down the holes can work but poisoning is best. There is also the glue trap that attracts animals that are then stuck permanently to the glue in the same way that flies stick to fly paper. These need to be checked every 12 hours and are probably going to be banned because of the cruelty caused. Other species including birds can be caught.

Poisoned rats return to their nest to die which helps solving the problem of disposal of the body. Survey the area before putting poison down. There are three types of poison, the worst is banned, then there is a category that only the ministry can use and then there are poisons that can be bought by the public. Of these there are acute poisons that cause immediate death in a single feed and are not recommended especially for outside use, and the chronic poisons that are used widely. The level of poison builds up in the rat over time and eventually kills them. Trade names are Neosorex and Tomcat. Poisons are generally coloured blue so if a sample is taken to the vet with a sick domestic animal then the vet recognises it as poisonous. However signs of illness can be observed more easily in domestic animals before it is fatal. The remedy is usually an injection of vitamin K. It takes about two and a half pounds of the common rat poison to kill a terrier.



The poison should be put in Tomcat bait boxes or in horizontal pieces of drainpipe. Put out about two large spoonfuls of bait at a time. Keep renewing the poisoned bait fortnightly. Where it has been taken indicates the active runs. Under baiting can make rats tolerant to the poison. Make a plan and record where the poisoned bait has been put out and the dates when it has been renewed.



Mice can have ten litters per year and between eight and twelve in a litter. Two rats having four or five litters per year can produce up to 16,000 offspring per year. The life expectancy of a rat is two years.

Moles can produce say seven to nine molehills per day. It is illegal to poison moles and so strychnine is banned. This is

because it can affect other species and hence the food chain for a range of animals and birds. Mole traps can work but an alternative is to use sound or vibration say from miniature windmills. This drives them away (into your neighbour's land!)

Foxes are best shot. Snaring foxes is not nice. Always shut the hens up at night, the one night you forget is the night the fox gets them. Playing Radio 2 in the chicken shed does not work! Badgers are protected but they will catch chickens.



Badgers will respect electric fences. Dragging a rag soaked in diesel around the chicken run can keep badgers away. If you do get close to a badger, do not touch it, they have a vicious bite. Squirrels can be caught in a cage by putting two nuts outside the cage and two

inside. Do not put your fingers through the cage to carry it; your fingers will be badly bitten!

Gas can be used to kill rabbits but this method is likely to be banned. Rabbits can be shot or trapped. To trap rabbits that move regularly to and from say a field into a wooded area use rabbit fencing that is dug into the ground and is high enough to prevent them jumping over and then provide pipe traps at regular intervals through the netting at ground level. The traps in the floors of these devices must be locked for some time to get the rabbits used to going through. Then set the trap to work and return after no longer than twelve hours. Ten or more rabbits can have fallen through to the steel chamber buried below. Hedgehogs and squirrels may also be trapped so the hedgehogs at least must be released.

Lawrence Beard.

Visit to Reaseheath 24th May 2010

The final meeting of the season was not the usual lecture, but a visit to Reaseheath College. This was a very popular choice as demonstrated by the large turnout, with many new faces. The visit was made all the more enjoyable because we had a conducted tour of the farm facilities starting with a



change of footwear into wellingtons provided by the college. The first part of the tour was around the dairy herd housing and milking facilities. The college looks after the MOET herd on behalf of Genus. MOET (multiple ovulation and embryo transfer) is a process for genetically enhancing the breed, over generations and the company who owns the herd is called GENUS. The result being the cows we were shown, which are among the best in the country for milk production. Animals here produce up to 60% more milk than the ordinary dairy cow. To obtain these levels of production careful breeding is coupled with a close monitoring of each animal with regards to milk output and feed intake.

We were shown the new milking parlour, from an American design called rapid exit, and we were all impressed by the cleanliness of the parlour. Each cow has a transponder fitted on its leg and a sensor on the cubicle picks up the transponder and so the milk output is known from each cow. This information is fed to the farm office computer to check on daily output, and give an alarm if there are any significant changes, these could indicate coming into season or medical problems, so even in this industry the computer has made itself an essential part of the job!

The large amount of investment was shown by the new housing sheds with automatic scrapers and drainage channels for the slurry, the individual cows had water mattresses to lie on and even a brush mounted to allow them to scratch themselves! But as we were told if you want to run the animals at maximum output they must be happy and in good health at all times, the slightest problem and the first thing to happen will be a drop in milk production. The cows are fed on silage and concentrate mix, to maintain a top quality feed, the concentrate is added to all the feed so that the energy intake is level throughout the day rather than a sudden “shot” of concentrate at milking time as happens in most conventional herds.

The college produces its own grass for silage, and we were shown the fields and the milking herd outside, although the thinking is that to achieve top performance you must have total control of diet, and you cannot do this if the animals are left to fend for themselves in a field of grass! Alan, one of the staff showing us around, said he was working with a PhD student who was studying if cows preferred to be indoors or

outside. He also said he was in favour of the proposed large scale dairy unit for Lincolnshire, as it would be a very well run set up and animal health would be “top notch”.

We were also shown the new £1.1M pig unit. Unfortunately we were not allowed inside as the bio security measures are so strict, starting with a gatehouse where everyone has to change into overalls and wellingtons that never leave the unit. The feeding of the pigs is totally automatic and we were told it has reduced the amount of “hands on” training that students can do. Strangely with the increase in production from the litters to an average of 16 piglets and finishing the pigs up to four weeks early, we were amazed to be told that it will never make a profit! Nonetheless, there has been a great interest in the unit from the major supermarkets and McDonalds.

After the tour which ended in the dark, there was the chance to have a “ploughman’s supper” for those who could stay late. Many thanks to Jane and John Hulse for providing the food. It was a great success and our thanks must go to the college and staff for the chance to see the future of farming in this country.



Gordon Murty

Plum and Cherry Relish

If you have got a spare bag of plums in the freezer, buy some cheap tinned or bottled cherries and try this relish that goes well with poultry, game or meat - we have it with cheese as well. The recipe goes like this:

1. Take 12 oz plums, halve, stone and rough chop them.
2. Drain off tinned or bottled cherries, and make sure they are stoned, to give 12 oz. fruit ; halve them.
3. Chop two shallots fine, cook these gently in 1tbsp olive oil until soft.
4. Add all the fruit plus 2tbsp dry sherry, 4tbsp red wine vinegar, 1tbsp balsamic vinegar, a bay leaf and 3½ oz. raw Demerara sugar.
5. Bring carefully to the boil, ensure sugar has dissolved, cook for about 15 min. until mixture thickens.
6. Fish out the bay leaf and spoon mixture into small jars and seal - 1/2 lb jars rather than larger ones.
7. Keep bottles in fridge and eat within three months - that’s no hardship; it disappears very quickly in our house.

Mike Taylor.

How to Catch a Sheep

It is about 23 years since we first began keeping sheep and we had prepared for our great foray into livestock by joining CSA and attending courses on lambing and sheep maintenance. We were comprehensively equipped, having bought a bucket, a feed trough and four hurdles and eagerly awaited the lorry bringing our first ewes with lambs at foot. Unfortunately, it was not just the ewes that had been taken for a ride. Some wily livestock dealer had selected for us a bunch of toothless old ewes that had obviously spent their lives in Colditz brushing up their escape skills.



Come the day when we first noticed that a ewe was limping, we prepared to catch the brute. The hurdles were erected in the middle of the field, a bucket of feed was placed at the centre and we stood to one side waiting to close up the pen once the unsuspecting animal went for the food. We broke off the wait about three hours later, having caught nothing except pneumonia, and we went for lunch. When we got back, we realised we had left the feed bucket, now empty, in the open pen. Not wishing to spend the rest of the day hanging around, we then attempted to drive the ewe into the pen. Now a sheep with a bad foot is still 50% better equipped for running than a human, and the roundup was suspended after about 20 minutes because of a twisted ankle (Maggie) and severe chest pains (Mike). It was at this point that we made two decisions. The first was that the sheep could damn-well wait until at least three legs weren't working. The second was that we should get some practical advice on rounding up sheep. We turned to Peter Howell at Arley, an amazing character who was then about 60 and lambed around 400 ewes each year whilst holding down a full time job at Arley Hall and running a profitable mole-catching business on the side. He moved the hurdles against a fence and walked calmly round the field driving the sheep in front of him against the wire until they minced into the pen and just stood looking at him. He tipped the ewe up one-handed, trimmed the foot and let her go. It had taken 31 seconds. We gave him a bottle of wine which, at £3, works out at an hourly rate of £348 - we would willingly have paid double!



Mike Taylor

A year in the life of a smallholder

As I write this in May 2010, it's hard to relate back exactly one year as so much has happened and I do not keep a diary. The major event has been the completion of the house renovation. This has taken us three and a half years to do and involved the complete gutting and refitting, of every room in the house. This did mean, literally "camping out" inside a brick shell at the start, and slowly improving as each additional room became useable. Since Gill and I have done it all ourselves, including constructing 16 sash windows, all electrics and plumbing, we have only used a plasterer to final skim the walls and ceilings it has no doubt saved a lot of money but as anyone who has tried it will know it always costs more than you think. And takes a lot longer than you hoped.

We have previously used one field to supply the silage crop each summer; this is not enough to see us through the winter but allows us to only buy a smaller amount than we would otherwise need. The crop last year was much reduced compared to previous years, and although not a scientific experiment, it showed the difference made by not putting any nitrogen on in the spring. I estimate without nitrogen we only had 1/3rd of the grass at the same point in the year. We were lucky in that a neighbour had surplus grass, that she wanted topping to keep under control and also spray for weeds. We offered to take over the grass and pay for the cutting and wrapping so we ended up with enough silage in the end to keep us self sufficient all winter. We hope to be able to make the same arrangement this year, and this will allow us to take control of the grassland management in a more professional manner. We spray our fields each year for weeds, and reseed patches as required, if we know that we will be having the use of additional land we can look after that as well, and try to make some really good silage this year. I was keen to invest in some form of aeration equipment for use behind the tractor, as after the winter on our heavy soil with out-wintered cattle I think it would pay big dividends in the future. The price of a new pasturator was a bit more than I would like to pay, but by chance a 10ft Aerator was shown in the monthly machine sale at Chelford in February, so having outbid the rest of the assembled crowd, we are now the proud owners of an 11' 6" Pasturator. This difference in size being enough to make it a bit awkward if you have any 10ft gates to go through!

As I have mentioned we utilised the hardiness of "rare breed" native cattle this year, and have left the Shetlands outside all winter. This has been a big help in that we have not had to "muck out" every day as we did in previous years, and we did not need any straw. This is the first time we have done this and the additional work required to repair any poaching in the fields will have to be judged afterwards. But it seems to be a winner at the moment. Each of our four cows had a calf but unfortunately one died, the three remaining ones seem to be thriving, and were placed for sale on the

Shetland cattle society website. Our resident bull did have time to service some of them again, so we will see. He unfortunately took on a very much bolder stance in the autumn and was starting to show a very aggressive side, he started breaking out and was too much for us so we had to get rid of him. If you have a full time job and are not always at home it's no good having rogue animals.

We might buy in some additional store cattle for the summer, as we usually have more grass than we need, but unfortunately most of our land is on a steep hill so cannot be cut and cropped by machine. Our personal preference is for Belgian Blue crosses, but they are very popular and command top prices. The blues we have had in the past have always been really good natured and friendly, you can buy them in the spring and sell them on easily in the winter so using them for grass control and at the same time hopefully making a profit.

The winter has been a long one this year and we only just made the end of March deadline for the hedge cutting and tree lopping we wanted to do. I have made a conscious effort to cut any branches that overhang the roads, or will overhang if allowed to continue to grow. I am not too sure where we stand legally on this, are we liable for any damage to road vehicles or not? Do the local council undertake to survey and maintain clearance for roadways at their expense? As you drive around there are many trees that seem to be left unchecked, and are brushing against large vehicles. I decided that to save any hassle from would be claims, we should take the lead and do it ourselves. The result was a decent amount of logs for next year and a large bonfire from the scrub; hopefully we will not need to bother again for a few years. Now where can I get a cheap log splitter?

The Shetland calves have all sold. The two females went to the Scottish Wildlife Trust in Fife, for use in conservation grazing, and the bull to North Yorkshire. The Bull took longer to sell as the demand for males is a lot less than it is for females, and he was on the point of going for meat. Then out of the blue someone made contact and agreed to take him at short notice, so you never know! This was a relief since he was from a blood line that the society was keen to keep going, so it all worked out in the end, and we are confident that at least one cow is due to calf again, hopefully a heifer.

Now that spring has finally arrived and we are down to just four cows, all grazing around the house, we can take a short "breather", and have taken on the landscape gardening at the front of the house. As well as putting in a new drain for the surface water from the downspout and a new "soak away" for the septic tank. Strange how when someone at work asks "have you done anything special over the weekend" it's easier to reply "not really" and leave it at that.

Gordon Murty

Hedgerows and Hedge laying day

Having been advised about the hedge laying day, we decided to attend and take advantage of the “free to Cheshire residents” course. It was a very good day and participants had the choice of extra days “hands on” hedge laying on a local farm leading to the issue of a certificate if required.

Not having the luxury of a spare three days, Gill and I attended for the first day only. This took place in the Kingsley village hall and consisted of a variety of speakers, covering subjects related to hedgerows, like managing for wildlife, use of local varieties and a talk by the Cheshire county archivist on field boundaries and hedgerow records from the past. All this as well as what should have been the main talk on hedge laying, and a visit to see examples of recent hedge laying work.

The simple field hedgerow was soon shown to be “not so simple”, the use of modern flail machines and other quick fencing solutions, have let many hedgerows fall into disrepair, a very different situation to the historical hedgerow that had to be kept “stockproof” at all times.

It was pointed out that although many landowners have their hedges cut every year, and at first this seems to be responsible ownership, keeping everything neat and tidy. But in fact it has a bad environmental impact, because it prevents the generation of blossom and fruit within the hedgerow, as many hedge species only flower on the previous years growth, which is removed by the flail machine. Therefore denying birds a food source, and denying them a good roosting place as they prefer a high position. Suddenly the nice neat hedge left by the contractor seemed not so nice. A 2 or 3 yearly cycle of hedge trimming was advised, or rotation of alternate sides to allow growth to go unhindered.

The hedge itself should always be managed looking ten years in advance at all times! Repairs should be carried out to plant up gaps and pruning to ensure growth is encouraged were it WILL be needed long term. It was also explained that planting small plants to repair gaps is not always the best idea as they will not thrive shielded from the sun by adjacent hedges. It may be better to cut away apparently good hedgerow, in order to create a better “growing area” for the replacement plants. It was also pointed out that sometimes you have to accept that the damage/decay might be too far gone to patch up, it is then better to rip out and replace a large section. At all times think of the situation 10 years from now.

There was also a speaker who urged anyone buying plants for the hedgerow to ensure that only locally sourced plants were used. This you might suspect was to support the local nurseries, but was actually to ensure the local hedges were successful, as the “gene pool” built up over time could be quite local in nature, and adapted to soil and climate. Don’t just order

over the internet or from national advertisements; buy from locally grown sources. Keep the Cheshire hedgerow Cheshire by nature! Maybe this could open up a whole new avenue to the RBST.

All this and a slideshow by the county archivist and you realise how old many hedgerows are. If you have any on your smallholding visit the county website by looking up “Victorian Cheshire maps” in your search engine. You may find yourself looking at that “old hedge” in a different light.

Gordon Murty

So you want to keep bees?

Are you sure? My bees have kept me really busy these last few months (late March, April & May). What with trying to prevent their starvation on the one hand and swarming on the other we’ve had to cope with an unprecedented number of (my own) swarms! It’s been a crazy year! All 8 colonies came through the winter intact but I now have 16! I only mention this level of activity as many of you will be coping with lambing and its aftermath at this time of year. In August and September, harvesting the honey crop is fun but it demands hours of your time and your patience (sticky stuff in places you least expected it!).



Perhaps you want to do your bit for the honey bee after all the media attention of the past year, but for your own peace of mind and the health of our volatile honey bee population you should know what you’re letting yourself in for in terms of time and money. Beekeeping will not be a cheap addition to your smallholding portfolio. Start-up costs for new kit - £500 and that’s just for the hive and its components, a bee suit, smoker and hive tool.

August onward is not a good time to be buying bees anyway so use the time to get well informed. Get onto the BBKA and the Cheshire Beekeepers’ Association websites and find out about lectures, training, conventions and honey shows in your area. You will be warmly welcomed to branch meetings where you will find many people attending nowadays are new to beekeeping’. From May to July, branches hold apiary meetings where we are taken through a member’s colonies. You gain useful insights with commentaries from experienced beekeepers on what seems to be happening in each hive. It’s a chance to see what eggs, brood and larvae look like, and there’s always someone who’s ace at spotting the queen! It’s amazing how many of us can’t, but we still

manage to get on with the job by looking for other signs of health, well-being and queen-rightness in a hive.

Once you join your local branch, sign up for the Basic Beekeeping Certificate course run by your branch/association. This is a practically based course and will involve one meeting a month. The life-cycle and workings of the honey bee and the colony are explained, with forays into the trainer's apiary to handle the bees and see the colony build up month by month. You then take the practical assessment. I found after years of floundering that this was a great confidence booster. The other BBKA module I took, run by Cheshire Beekeepers, was the Bee Pests, Diseases and Poisonings. I would thoroughly recommend this as essential to being a responsible beekeeper.

Since the arrival of the varroa mite and the misuse of pyrethroid treatments, our bees have been exposed to a whole range of debilitating viruses that have done serious damage to the honey bee population. As beekeepers we monitor levels of the varroa mite in our colonies, trying to keep it below harmful thresholds. We have a variety of methods in our Integrated Pest Management Strategy for varroa and other pests and diseases, trying to keep any chemical intervention to appropriate and minimal levels. As we are dealing with a food product we need to ensure no treatments are used during the honey flow that could leave residues. So nothing new there then for the smallholder!

One of the most important decisions you have to make is where you are going to site your beehive/apiary. You need to ensure your bees' flight paths are not going to trouble your livestock, yourselves and the (litigious) general public. Our apiary is in a corner of our field, screened off by sheep netting with wind netting attached to it. This encourages the bees to fly up and away rather than straight out at sheep's eye-level! It so happens during the busy beekeeping season our sheep are away on their summer holidays. This means good forage for the bees plus I don't have to cope with inquisitive sheep as I'm clutching all my paraphernalia and juggling with the latch as I struggle into the apiary enclosure!

With bees, it's really a matter of location, location, location! Quite by chance, my bees are in a pretty useless corner of our field, not directly under trees but in a sheltered position close to the canal. They can access a very varied diet from the flower gardens of Thelwall, waterside plants and shrubs, parkland trees and the farmland around us. The fact that all my colonies came through the winter is not only the result of a more effective pest management strategy practised last year, but is the result of the variety of food sources around here. The other great bonus was the really hard winter of 2009/10 - killed off some nasty bugs,

allowed the trees and shrubs to have a proper rest so now we have a glorious show for us and a decent food supply for the bees.

If you want to keep bees, then please use your local beekeepers' association. Do not be seduced into buying equipment or bees on the internet without any prior knowledge. Avoid designer beehives (in plastic and polystyrene), imported bees and queens. You will probably find what you need locally and more cheaply through your local association - plus access to 'after-sales service'! If you think managing a flock or herd is challenging - managing is probably quite the wrong word for dealing with a superorganism!

Maggie Taylor

Recommended reading: Celia Davies. 'The Honey Bee Around & About' Bee Craft Ltd. 2007

Also 'The Honey Bee Inside Out' 2006

Monthly Meetings

Meetings are held in room L3, Leverhulme Centre, Reaseheath College, Nantwich on the last Monday of each month from September through to May except December. See Gate and the web site www.cheshiresmallholders.org.uk for details of lectures.

Meetings are 7:30 for 8:00PM. Come early for a cup of tea, a chat and when we are feeling generous - a biscuit. Entry £2.00.

The Leverhulme centre is the first building on the right from the B5074 entrance. The car park barrier should be up so you can use the car park on the left if the small one in front of the centre is full.

Sheep Feed Trough

This is a design for all those people who never throw anything away! Pallets are asking to be recycled and I have found that there are a lot of pallets one metre wide. Do not burn these or throw them away, use them to make your sheep feed troughs. The attached drawing shows these 1-metre pieces of wood to be 100 mm wide and about 15 mm thick. None of these dimensions are critical and you can easily adjust the design of the trough to suit most sizes of timber from an old pallet. I have also been fortunate to have the off cuts from some rafters to make the end blocks. The other essential material that I don't like throwing away is all the small lengths of wire left over from the ends of sheep fencing. To obtain free horizontal ends to sheep netting one invariably has to take off a lot of the short vertical pieces. These are ideal for constructing feed troughs as described below.

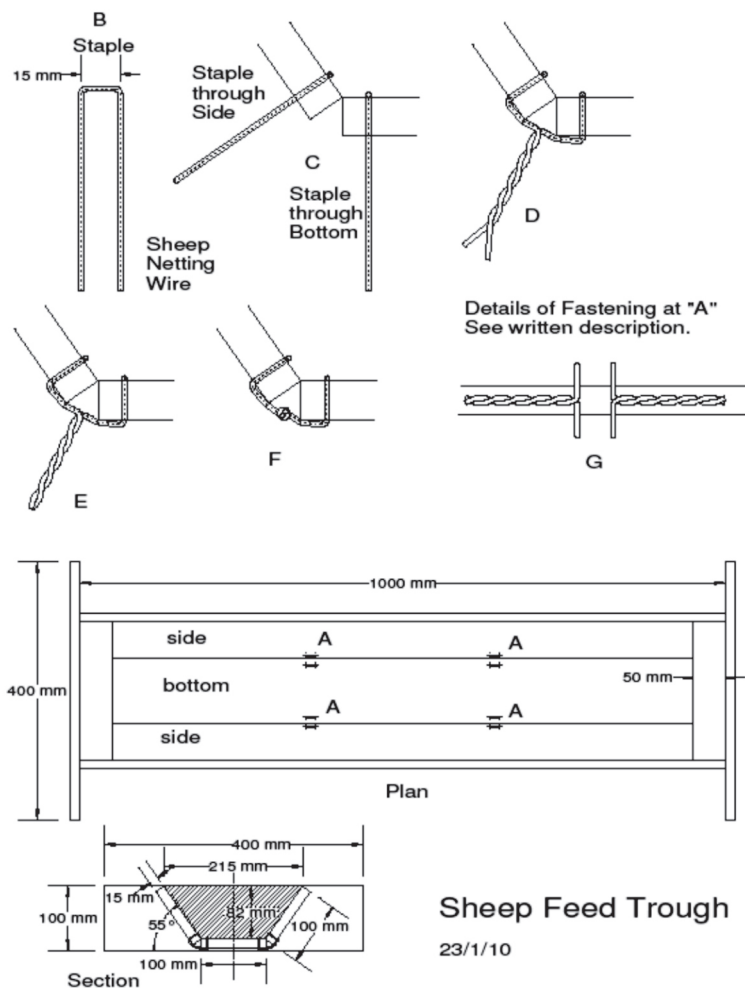
My drawing shows the end blocks are about 50 mm thick and are cut at an angle of about 55 degrees. This angle is not critical of course, but cut the blocks in pairs so the angles match at each end of the trough. The two sides and the bottom of the trough are taken straight from the dismantled pallet. Some pieces of wood from the old pallet can be damaged when drawing out the nails. Cut these down to 400 mm for the ends of the trough. (I would allow you to use the discarded pieces for kindling!) Assemble the ends and sides to the blocks using galvanised nails.

You will have noticed by now that this construction requires the corners of the sides and bottom to meet tightly to stop the feed falling through. This is where the pieces of fence wire are used to make the fastenings shown at "A". Using a vice and a hammer make eight staples as shown at "B". The only dimension to concentrate on is the pitch of the two legs that I have shown as 15 mm. It doesn't matter if the legs are slightly different lengths. Choose points at about the one third and two-thirds positions along the trough, and drill two two mm holes 15 mm apart and at about 10 mm from the edge of the wood for these staples. At each fastening, one staple goes through the side and one through the bottom as shown at "C". Twist the legs of the side staple with the corresponding legs of the bottom staple as shown at "D". The twisting action draws the side and bottom together. Then cut off the surplus wire as at "E", and finally turn the twisted sections into the "vee" space between the side and bottom. See diagrams "F" and "G". This puts the sharp ends out of harm's way. Also note that there are no sharp corners in the trough and the tops of the staples lie along the trough making it easy to scrape clean.

Having drawn the sides and bottom together, I have found several of my troughs can hold rainwater. I have thought about drilling drain holes, but holes smaller than creep feed would surely block so I haven't tried this yet. The only other comment to make is I recommend NOT creosoting the trough.

I am sure the added flavour to the nuts would not be appreciated! Similarly Cuprinol wood preservative may contain harmful chemicals not suitable for animal consumption and should not be used.

Lawrence Beard.



Good News

If the current financial problems allow.

In our recent meetings with the staff of the “Enterprise Hub” at the College, under the heading of Reaseheath Agricultural Development Academy, Lucy Shenton has advised us that there are now Grants available to either put on special courses or even to reduce substantially the costs of attending some of the training events they organise.

The Hub manages a number of projects that are funded by NWDA to support business improvements in the rural sector. This includes free business support, grant and technical advice and support delivered through one-to-one workshops or training sessions. Lucy leads for agriculture and similar situations.

This Livestock Northwest programme runs until 2013 and is aimed at improving performance in the livestock sectors. This is done through various arrangements but focuses on animal health and welfare, resource efficiency and nutrient management. All events are free to attend. Activity has mainly focused on dairy, beef and sheep to date. If there is a demand in Cheshire for pig and poultry events, the project is able to fully support delivery.

In addition RDPE grant funding will become available this year that is able to support development of new training courses, as well as attendees. Funding will cover 70% of courses costs. RADA is able to provide bespoke training courses-if there is specific demand.

Please contact Lucy Shenton on 01270 616457 or on Email at lucys@reaseheath.ac.uk. Alternatively contact your Chairman Arthur Green on 01270 841288, Email at green405@btinternet.com.

I hope the money lasts, but it is worth a try. Arthur Green

Membership

Just a reminder that membership fees (£10 for family membership) will be due in September. Contact Lawrence if you want to pay via standing order. Payment by SO will mean that you will not miss any editions of Gate!

Straw Bales as Growing Bags

As smallholders we probably have the odd old bale of straw lying around (although perhaps not this year!) and I recently came across an article in a magazine explaining how these can be used as an alternative to growing bags. Suitable plants grow well in them and because they are heavy and stable, large plants are supported better. They are also a sustainable way of growing plants and can be used even where there is no soil e.g. a patio or corner of the yard providing it is a sunny, sheltered spot. Only plant them up after the late frosts. Bales of hay are not suitable as they become soggy and rot too fast.

Mid to late May is the best time to start. The bale needs to be saturated with water first and as it will become rather heavy, it is best to do this in its final position. Plastic sheeting can be placed underneath to help with moisture retention. The bale will then start to slowly rot down and this releases nitrogen to help promote plant growth. It will also generate quite a bit of heat making it ideal for plants such as cucumbers, melons and squashes. Sweet potatoes and Swiss chard have also been successfully used with this method. However it is not only vegetables that can be grown in straw bales but also ornamental plants such as cannas, grasses and morning glories.

Once the bale has been thoroughly soaked, planting holes (about three to a bale depending on final plant size) should be carefully cut with a knife, removing the straw as you go. Then put a little compost and granular fertiliser into each hole and place the plants in. If a cold night is forecast cover with fleece until the plants are established. Once the plants are growing well they will need daily watering especially in hot weather and also feeding once or twice a week.

By autumn the bale will start to disintegrate and it can be dug into the ground straight away to rot down over winter, or composted.

It may be a little late to try this year but I am going to save a couple of straw bales next year and give it a go. If anyone does try it this year or if you have done it in the past let me know and I can do an update in a later edition.

Gill Murty

Other Stuff

Gate The next Gate will be produced in September. Please send me any articles, pictures, adverts etc for the next issue by the end of August 2010. (phone 07773780722 for email address).

WebSite www.cheshiresmallholders.org.uk
If you have any articles or adverts for the web site let me know, pictures of your activities always welcome. I update the web site every few weeks so keep on looking at it for latest news.

Selected Charity

Our selected charity is Send A Cow which provides training, animals, trees and seeds for families in Africa in order to enable them to become self sufficient. Have a look at their web site www.sendacow.org.uk to see where they spend our contributions. Send some chickens or a beehive as an unusual present or if you are feeling generous send a cow.

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Members Adverts

Pedigree Ryeland Sheep - Ryeland and coloured Ryeland ram shearlings for sale from Gill & Tony Moore, Nr Warrington, Cheshire. 01925 730530

Land Wanted - Nr Macclesfield for growing fruit and veg. Contact Dresina - 07790604580

Shepherd - Doug Edge is a member and freelance shepherd who can help with all aspects of sheep care including shearing, foot trimming and all aspects of sheep work. He comes with a recommendation from other members. If you need help contact him on 07967961112

4 Berkshire boars for sale, ready now. Contact Theo for more details
On 01606 301331 or email theo.town@yahoo.co.uk

Sheepskins - Jane Watkins is taking some sheepskins to Nicky Port's Organic tannery in Herefordshire to make sheepskin rugs, and would be happy to take anyone else's down too (for a small contribution to fuel!) Check out her website: <http://www.organicssheepskins.com/> for more info. There are no pollution issues with this method. If you are interested please contact Jane on 01538 306510

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