

Disastrous Beekeeping Purchases.

A mustard coloured Land Rover may not be an obvious 'beekeeping purchase', especially when it is clearly called a Camel. However, with young children, a mortgage and just started into 15 years of buying into a medical practice, a low cost vehicle was the only option. As a family we are both blessed and eccentric; home is in Cumbria, half a mile down a track through woods and fields with mains electricity but water collected from a spring and the roof of the house. The Land Rover was an essential part of the jigsaw giving us the ability to cope with bad weather and move belongings to and from the house because, living here, we have to be self sufficient in all things but most importantly, the Camel was to be our beemobile. Bumblebees had been a passion since early childhood but honeybees came into our lives soon after we bought our dream house. We moved in during a wet April in 1987 and were so very cold we really wondered what we had done but by May we were surrounded by cowslips and early purple orchids and looked out of our windows through sun dappled woodland just breaking into springtime pale green leaf – we had to have honeybees here. Beekeepers are a strange mixture, many a life long feud goes on between beekeeping associations and yet, as individuals, you could not hope to meet a kinder person than a beekeeper. Our first hives were advertised on a supermarket notice board, two white WBC's bought from an elderly couple who, sadly, were giving up their hobby and moving to a small and easily maintained home. For just £40 we bought two white hives of lifts, floors, brood boxes, 3 supers for each, queen excluders, crown boards and roofs. The feeders, smoker, huge array of beekeeping equipment and most importantly the home made stainless steel hive tool engraved with weights of honey obtained over the years were thrown in for nothing. The hive tool is my most treasured beekeeping possession and I dread losing it. My husband likes hook hive tools and their grey, plain, stainless steel blends effortlessly into the background. I lose his sharp new hive tool every year, it is so good for scraping off propolis that I just borrow it occasionally and when it has vanished he buys another new sharp one – for me, the system works well.

The honeybees arrived soon afterwards, a gift from a beekeeping friend. Her Peugeot 205 passed the kitchen window beside the track; silhouetted, she drove by swatting at escapees, weary of their long journey up the M6. In that other age we did not have to trouble with varroa and I started my beekeeping in September with one colony to get to know and feed up for winter with my copy of Ted Hughes open on the other WBC roof and my hive tool holding the pages down, it was all much less complicated then. The bees thrived; Ted Hughes described how to make an artificial swarm so by summer the next year bees filled both hives. We won the Novice Class in the honey show with gleaming medium honey, in my inexperience and haste after work it was warmed gently to pour it into the jar just before the show and held out of the car window to cool it off completely on the way there. In that first year I also quickly learned that nobody says, 'Mummy can I have ... ?' when you have your head in a beehive – I was a confirmed beekeeper.

As everyone knows, that means you need an out apiary with more hives and then you need a beemobile to get there, one of those vehicles smudged with propolis and scented with smoker. More beekeeper kindness, the hives, Nationals this time, came from a commercial beekeeper and I immediately made back the investment by selling the May honey crop they contained. With them I inherited two out apiaries in damson orchards in the Lyth Valley where we live. The apiary on top of the huge old limekiln is essential Land Rover territory and so the idyll came to an end.

My husband, source of new hive tools, could not resist the bargain. Only two thousand kilometres on the clock, long wheelbase, Camel Trophy logos, winch, roof rack with ladder and a huge snorkel on the front – ideal for Cumbria. It seemed good and slightly fitting that it had only been a medical support vehicle crossing the Gobi Desert, not hammered too hard by the Camel Trophy challenge proper. Critically it had only travelled those two thousand kilometres, it came home early because of 'a bit of engine trouble', something to do with all that sand but they would fit a new engine for us – truly a bargain. The boys were thrilled and have never tired of being seen in this unique vehicle and I went along with it all with just a nagging doubt; perhaps just the funny colour. As a student with my first car I had had a mini clubman that shade, they called it 'Harvest Gold'. Much as I loved the car, I had secretly called her 'Puke' and I was just a little bit relieved when a red mini came into my life.

The Camel could be loaded with quantities of beekeeping kit, although irritatingly, two Nationals just do not fit side by side between the wheel arches; the vehicle is thoughtlessly just an inch too narrow. For a little while, all of a month, she made it to the limekiln but then there was an alarming bang and the crankshaft 'went' as they say. Still under the meagre 3 month warranty of a second hand vehicle we finally managed to insist on a new engine. Engine number 3 in less than three thousand kilometres. Meanwhile the bees thrived and we spent many years with a dozen or so hives, the bees gathered us half a ton of honey one year, a good amount in sheep grazed Cumbria where we do not have arable crops. Beekeeping provided countless projects and talks for the boys as they grew their way through school and we even have a perfectly made observation hive that was submitted for GCSE technology. In that time, like everyone else, we too learned to live beside varroa but in retrospect, its arrival marked a huge turning point in this perfect hobby.



Beemobile at the limekiln apiary



How many beekeepers does it take to replace a crankshaft?

As they say, one thing leads to another. The projects and taking the bees to Beavers and Scouts and into schools as the boys have grown have lead to an increasing commitment to teaching and the Camel, when it moved, was always a wow in school. Meanwhile, the world has changed. I learned about the 'greenhouse effect' in my school biology lessons but for those of us who believe it is happening, climate chaos has become very real and it seems to me it is important to teach children and adults alike about pollination and where their food comes from. An offer to teach for the Field Studies Council came along and the Camel, after a long period of malaise waiting for another crank shaft, was just back on the road and test driven ready to take us, three beehives and our huge load of paraphernalia required to teach on a course off down south. It was like the circus coming to town. Small matter that the fan belt broke on the way and we spent a precious few hours of our journey hunting down a replacement. We arrived by the skin of our teeth, just in time, the

new tutors on the block. We whisked the beehives across lovely ancient fields, never ploughed and full of anthills and flowers, to set them up on their stand ready for teaching.

The sun shone, our participants gelled and even the guy who introduced himself to everyone by saying, 'I don't know why I am here, I don't think I like bees' became a convert and indeed, was the first attendee to become a beekeeper. With the weekend beekeeping course over and a deemed a great success we left the bees to go inside before closing the hives. Meanwhile we drove to take our now grown up, university student son out for a supper, a meal which came free of charge because the food order accidentally left on the plate was revealed stuck to the bottom of the pizza. Relaxed and well fed at no cost, on our way back in the dark to close the hive doors we heard the all too familiar almighty bang and once again ground to a halt. Quite understandably the road rescue organisation said 'either we take you east to your bees or north west to Cumbria but not both'. We hatched a plan but Camels do not fit on ordinary road rescue vehicles and the kindly low loader driver who was franchised to rescue us said 'I will take your bees to Cumbria, but no bees in my cab' and took the long route. Bereft of our four-wheel drive we ran across fields at 3 in the morning carrying summer weight beehives over the anthills by the light of a head torch and loaded the circus back in the Camel, climbing up and down from the low loader. On the way home, our knight in shining armour regaled us with tales of crazy road users he had rescued.

With the boys completely grown up and left home we look to our retirement, still a few too many years off but we want to keep our links with young people and keep fit and active. Perhaps we should have a dog? Fate intervened, 17 acres of land came up for sale beside our house and kindness came to the fore again. With an home done ecological survey and a business plan enclosed with the sealed bid we were successful despite making the lowest offer and now we have a bee sanctuary full of bumblebees, we have huge old hedges and woodland to coppice, fields full of flowers and a teaching apiary so we really need a mobile beemobile. The Camel is in need of major surgery again – a whole realignment of her insides, a transplant and for the time being we have a pickup with the luxury of bees on the outside. This summer the story has a happy ending and our Camel has been towed to a new owner wanting to perform both transplant and plastic surgery ready to show her.

So what is the message to aspiring beekeepers? Beware, if you keep bees, they may take over your life and we know what story about crazy people our knight in shining armour tells the car drivers he rescues as he ferries them home.



Morning after the night before on the way home from the bee course



Off to become a beauty queen.