

The Faces Behind Our Food

Interview with Gary Troughton, Dolphinholme Honey

Interviewer: Anna Clayton

Johnny Bean also present

Duration: 16 minutes.12 seconds

Date and time: 19th September 2016 9:00am

Location: Lower Dolphinholme

Time (minutes.seconds)	Interview transcript
	Interviewer in bold , Gary in normal type Interjections in [square brackets], other sounds and notes in (these brackets)
0.00	(Sound of mic switching on)
0.01	Okay, so, could you just erm tell us a little bit about yourself, what you're doing here in Dolphinholme, and how long you've been raising bees and selling honey?
0.14	Erm, like I said I'm actually primarily a teacher, teaching overseas students at the University, erm, but I've only recently gone back to that, I used to look after my children pretty much full time and in doing so I started to look at what else I could do around here so the bees was one of the things that I was doing, and the other animals, erm and I've been keeping the bees. Well, like, like I said my dad gave me the bees to start with probably about 14 years ago but it's only recently that I've, I've, I feel like I know what I'm doing now.
0.58	Okay (laughs).
0.59	I used to let him guide me and show me what to do and that sort of thing but, er, now I'm fairly confident that I know what I'm doing and I make my own decisions.
1.08	Mmm. And what other animals do you keep, and how large is the small holding?
1.12	Got about 5 acres [yep], there's an acre of ancient woodland [aah] erm, and about 4 acres of fields. Erm, I keep pigs and we have various birds, chickens, guinea fowl, er ducks.
1.29	OK, and where do you sell your honey at the moment?
1.33	A large amount of it goes through Single Step in Lancaster, erm, some gets sold at our local shop in the village, at The Fleece, Fleece Inn, erm and others, just at er other people in the village that know that I sell it will buy it at the door.
1.49	OK. Erm, and so, why bees. Why did you start bee keeping – what attracted you to it?
1.55	Well, like I said in a way it was sort of hoiked upon me by my dad (laugh). He

The Faces Behind Our Food

	retired and decided to take it up. Erm, but also I've got a biological background, my degree was in a biological science and erm bees are struggling and they're fascinating creatures. Erm, so there's there's the maintaining and hoping to help nature erm aspect to this where erm you feel you're doing some good for the environment by keeping them, but also it's actually a really pleasant past time to have as well.
2.31	Yeah...OK. So, what do the seasons look like in the year of a bee keeper? What are the key events that happen?
2.41	If we start around about...in fact, I'm just preparing now for winter and making sure that they've got enough stores in before winter erm and that could be their own honey and if they're feeling a bit light erm you can feed them around about September time is the ideal time. You want the hives to be as heavy as you can around about now.
3.05	Er so that they've got the stores that will see them through the winter and then as it goes colder the bees go more dormant and will stay in the hive and live on those stores but obviously the cooler they are the less food that they need to, to eat.
3.21	And then coming around about er spring er what would happen naturally is er the bees er the bees will start to gear up and the queen bee will start to lay more eggs to make more broods so that you've got a large colony of bees at the right time for the flowers, the spring flowers. Erm, you can stimulate them to do that, but I've found that if I feed them well at this time of year I can leave them to just naturally do what they want to do at the timings that they want to do the following year.
3.57	Erm, so that takes you into spring. You get a first flush of flowers in spring and early summer er things like the apple blossoms and the hedgerow blossoms. Erm, that's where you get your spring honey from. And then there's typically a time around about, around about midsummer actually, where there's not a lot going on for the bees. Er, the...they find it more difficult to find flowers. And then again after midsummer you get a second flush of flowers where you get the later flowering plants. Erm, and that sort of takes you full circle really.
4.36	And at some point in all of that you make the decision to extract some honey, or maybe twice – maybe you get the spring honey and the summer honey and er around about, again, around about this time of year there's heather in the hills over there as well so they can get some heather honey. They're less than 3 miles away and bees can forage within a 3 mile radius [mhm] and the heather flowers quite late season so they can get that.
5.01	OK. So when you say you need to feed your bees well throughout the winter do you try and use their own honey, erm?
5.08	Erm I try and leave them as much of their own honey as I can erm but if I've taken honey off and they've not made enough, you can feed them a sugar, you

The Faces Behind Our Food

	can feed them a sugar solution which will see them through er to the following spring.
5.25	Erm and what's the difference between the sugar solution and honey?
5.29	Erm (pause) I would imagine...like I say I try and keep them, I try and let them do it their own way in as natural way as possible, because honey is obviously their natural food. Er, chemically, sugar isn't a lot different but it's erm if you've used er you use granulated sugar it's purely a solution of sucrose whereas erm honey will have all sorts of other properties within it as well. I suppose it's...from the bees' point of view it's like the honey is their food and sugar is just a fuel really, it's not dissimilar to why do we prefer honey to sugar on our porridge or whatever, it's, it's you know there's a lot more to honey than there is to sugar. But if I've, if I've, if they've got, if they're a little bit light but they've got some honey in there at least they've got some honey and the sugar can just, er, keep them going.
6.24	OK. Erm, and so why do we need to build hives to keep bees? Why can't they just be on their own in the wild?
6.32	There are actually erm diseases, that, apparently now there are now no wild bees, no wild bee colonies at all. And there are various diseases that erm that the bees just can't, erm, just can't cope with in the wild. So, I'm led to believe that virtually every colony of bees in this country are kept in hives.
6.55	So your role becomes more important?
6.58	Yeah, yeah.
6.59	Yeah, OK. Erm and so have you noticed any changes in the bee keeping year during your bee keeping...career...or [Erm] time?
7.10	Not really, no, no, erm there are problems in certain parts of the country with what they call sudden colony collapse where the bees just die, erm and there's no major reason. Personally, again, from my scientific background and it's only anecdotal, so, you know, it's not a very scientific way of looking at it but I, I wonder if it's low, if it's erm, pesticides accumulating in the hive and I know people are looking into it. But we're quite lucky around here you see it's a grass growing area, erm, so the farmers don't use pesticides and that sort of ties in with what I'm saying about trying to subscribe to the organic ideals. I don't use pesticides either because I'm mindful of the bees. Erm, but I think it's a bit like the old DDT and the peregrine falcons. If, if, if bees are going to plants that have got some pesticide on them and it's a low level amount that doesn't kill the bee but they're taking it back and its accumulating in the, in the hive, in the honey, then it doesn't surprise me that you can get these sudden collapses.
8.20	Mmm.
8.21	It's quite a controversial thing really at the moment.

The Faces Behind Our Food

8.24	Yeah. So you touched just then on organic. So you're not organic certified here [No]. Can you just talk about erm why that is, like the barriers that you face as a smallholder.
8.34	It's just not cost effective. It costs quite a lot a lot of money to be certified and erm the amount of turnover that I have it's just, it would be a huge proportion of my, my potential income.
8.47	Okay
8.48	It's just not cost effective.
8.50	But you still adhere to the organic [inaudible – rules?]
8.52	I adhere to the principles [yeah] and the ideas they're trying to stick with, yeah
8.55	Yeah, great.
8.57	So we often hear from campaigning groups such as Friends of the Earth that bees are in trouble. Can you tell us a little bit more about this, why bees are important for us as humans, erm and what we could do as individuals to help support the bee?
9.13	Well, erm, bees pollinate plants that have flowers on them. Erm, there are two types of plants – there are, there are wind pollinated plants which are basically your grasses and that sort of thing. And then pretty much everything else that we eat are pollinated - they've had a flower at some point that needs pollinating. So things like apples, tomatoes, plums. They've all been pollinated by an insect and usually that insect is a bee. Erm, I forget the exact statistics, but a huge amount of what we eat has been pollinated by insects, and if those insects cease to exist, erm, then the foods that we love and enjoy would cease to exist. We'd be basically living on cereals.
10.00	Mmm
10.01	Erm (pause) you said what threats are they under. I've, I've alluded to it. They, they have erm a parasite called varroa that er damages their wings. It's a small mite that lives mainly on the grubs as the grubs develop, erm and that's part of the hive management is to manage the varroa. Erm I think any beekeeper would be arrogant if they suggested they didn't have any varroa in their hive, but you've, you've got to keep that to a minimum and manage it. And er, if you keep a healthy colony they do very well at managing it as best they can. Erm, and there are various, various things that you can use erm that can encourage the bees to, to manage the varroa. Erm, and then there's also other diseases that they can get as well, but varroa is one of the main ones. And then, equally I mentioned sudden colony collapse, where they just, the bee keepers go into the hive, it seems to be doing well, and the next time they look all the bees are dead. They've got stores, there's bees, what's happened? Erm...

The Faces Behind Our Food

11.08	Is this as much of an issue in the UK as...I know America has a bigger issue with colony collapse [I think...]
11.16	I'm er as a beekeeper I'm in touch with DEFRA or rather DEFRA are in touch with me and er I invariably I get a visit. Er, I've not had a visit this year actually, but the last few years I've had a visit by the beekeeping, er, the the man in charge of beekeeping in the area. And I think, like I say we are lucky in this area, but there are areas in Britain where colonies are collapsing [mm] em and like I say people are looking into it, but I wouldn't be surprised if that ties in with use of, of pesticides. You're no doubt familiar with the neonicotinoids. Erm, the argument there is they actually coat the seed of the plant with this neonicotinoid, erm, and their argument – the argument of the producers – is that you're therefore you're not spraying pesticides, but that that neonicitinoid is then throughout, systemically throughout the plant, so it will be in the pollen, it will be in the nectar. And the pollen, the pollen is the source of protein for the bees – they collect pollen erm to feed their young and the nectar is basically their source of carbohydrate [mmm]. So, it doesn't it doesn't surprise me that it's building up [mmm]. But like I say I've got no scientific basis for that [yeah] but it really wouldn't surprise me [yeah].
12.35	So what do you enjoy most about beekeeping? And what do you enjoy least?
12.40	Er, The stings are a bit of a drawback! [laughs] Er, I got stung by a wasp the other day though and Jesus that hurt a lot more [yeah] than a bee sting, a lot more. Er it's been a long time since I've been stung by a wasp. The bee, the bee stings are uncomfortable but you, you learn to live with it. Erm, I've got five hives at the moment and realistically, if I was to go through them I probably would expect to be stung once or twice by them...erm.
13.10	What I like the most is you tend to choose a very nice time of day and weather wise to go through them. And it's it's a really peaceful hour and a half or something that I spend just pottering around and [mm] going through them. And then of course the honey is also quite a bonus as well [yeah].
13.31	Erm, I imagine life in the North West for a bee is quite hard. Does (giggle) do they [it's no] struggle with the weather? (laughter) It's no harder than life in the North West for a human being. [Okay]
13.42	Erm, actually (sigh) I suppose they can struggle with the weather. Erm, they, they typically are tree-dwelling beings, erm and so you'll see my hives I keep them, I keep them suspended erm above the ground to, to try and raise them above the damp ground. Erm, if it's, if it's bad weather they can't get out and about to forage. But also as well the best winters would be the winters that would be just really nice and cold, and er and they would, they would hunker down and, and er not so much I don't think I'd use the term hibernate but they will go dormant and therefore use up less of their stores. The problems we have here is that the winters are often quite mild, er and mild enough for the bees to be active and therefore they will need to eat their stores, erm and it's finding that

The Faces Behind Our Food

	balance and, and making sure that they're prepared well enough for winter. Like I say I've already been doing that [yeah].
14.47	Em, and are there any other opportunities or challenges facing your bees and your honey business that we haven't covered?
14.55	Erm...the I suppose, opportunities is I could get as big as I wanted, I could have more and more hives, but it's just a matter of time then. Erm...I haven't I wouldn't have the time to really have many more hives. But every year you see, is at certain times of the year usually around about May time when the hive's doing really well, the queen that's in there will swarm and go with about half the colony. Erm and they do that because the hive's already preparing, making what's called queen cells, and erm you can see these queen cells. And just before a new queen hatches the old queen will go. Erm and so you can you...you can manage that yourself. You can actually take the queen and some of the bees away and er and the hive will then detect that it's at a smaller density. Or if you're unfortunately you've already swarmed but you can find the swarm you can put that into a new hive as well. So, I could have as many hives as I wanted really, it's just a matter of logistics and managing them
16.04	[Mmmm. Okay, thankyou.] Is that alright? [Yeah, perfect.]