

The British Beekeepers Association

BBKA – supporting bees and beekeepers



Dealing with honey bee swarms or colonies in property by David Teasdale

This document addresses the situation where honey bees are found in property. Whilst this paper discusses honey bees and beekeepers do not normally deal with colonies of wasps, as they require specialist treatments, much of the information can also apply to other flying insects e.g. wasps.

Honey bees swarming is a natural event and can occur at any time during the Spring and Summer. When honey bees swarm, a large proportion of the honey bees leave their nest in search of a new location to start a new colony and that place can be anywhere that is warm and dry.

The types of places can include:

- Inside roof spaces
- Behind fascia boards and soffits
- Between the ceiling and floor boards
- Wall cavities
- Sheds
- Garages
- Out buildings
- Compost bins
- And many more places

In other words anywhere that offers honey bee's protection from the elements and room/space to expand.

A swarm of honey bees occurs when a proportion of honey bees leave their nest (colony). They usually form a cluster in or on any suitable place, which might be a tree, gatepost or on an object. When they are organised into a cluster, they will fly to their new "home".

A colony of honey bees is an established and mature/growing entity which can consist of up to forty thousand honey bees i.e. substantially larger than a swarm of honey bees. It will contain bees, bee's wax comb and stores of honey and will take up a sizable amount of space.

Swarms of honey bees can usually be safely removed by a suitably qualified/experienced beekeeper if they are contacted in time. If the honey bees have left their post swarming clustering place and taken up residence in the fabric of a building, that can be more difficult (if not impossible) to be safely dealt with by a beekeeper. Professional pest control personnel will be required to undertake the work either solely or in conjunction with a beekeeper

If the honey bees are not causing a nuisance or a threat, they can be left alone. Some properties are known to have had honey bee colonies within their fabric for many years without causing any disturbance or problems to the property owner.

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If the honey bees are considered by the property owner to present a risk or a disturbance to them, beekeepers will always provide help and advice. Whilst suitably qualified beekeepers are normally able to remove swarms of honey bees and are insured for all normal beekeeping activities, the insurance does not extend to working at heights or undertaking building works to gain access to honey bees. Those are jobs for professionals i.e. builders and pest control personnel. Beekeepers cannot put any member of the public or themselves at risk by undertaking swarm collection in dangerous or hazardous environments.

Whilst no one would wish to see a colony of honey bees destroyed, if they cannot be safely removed and they present a risk or disturbance to the property owner, the only option may be to have the colony destroyed by professional pest control personnel and there are many suitable private and Council agencies who can undertake that task. Following the work, it is essential to sanitise the area where the honey bees entered the property by using a strong smelling detergent or liquid similar to Jeyes Fluid to neutralise the pheromone (smell) marker left by the bees.

It is also recommended that the property is then inspected and work undertaken to repair or fill the access point(s) to prevent any more ingressions and where possible the removal of all colony debris. Colonies that have inhabited an area for some time can create a large amount of bee's wax comb and honey stores which can act as an attractant to other pests and rodents. If that task is difficult or impossible to achieve, then the minimum is to effectively block any access holes that the honey bees were using to enter the property.

Honey bees can gain access to property through the smallest of holes or cracks in the fabric and it is therefore suggested that regular property preventive maintenance is undertaken. Honey bees are more difficult to deal with once they have started their colony inside the fabric of a property.

Whilst honey bees in the fabric of a property cannot usually be dealt with by a beekeeper, honey bee swarms and colonies can also be found in sheds, garages, out buildings and empty compost bins. The main sign is visible wax comb. However, bumble bees nests can also commonly be found in compost bins, compost heaps and under sheds and they also produce wax but the shape is a mixture of nodules rather than combs therefore the identification of the insect is recommended and the information contained within the section of the BBKA website will help in that task.

If they are honey bees and providing they can easily and safely be accessed without necessitating any structural work or causing any structural damage, there is a better chance of them being removed. Again, all actions undertaken by a beekeeper has to be tempered with the assessment of risk and possible damage to property for which the beekeeper is not insured.

As previously stated, beekeepers where possible, will always help or offer advice within these parameters.

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