WATA General Meeting 10/11/2025

Meeting Minutes

1. **Welcome and update From Mike McNamara**

- As is well known a particular focus of the committee is waste management. The council have agreed that the committee can organise and oversee managed bonfires outside of the usual bonfire restrictions to burn wood from across the site. Unfortunately, the first one had to be cancelled due to the weather but has been rearranged for the 3rd of December, so there's still time to get any wood to the collection area by the back gate. To ensure no animals taking shelter under the pile are not injured the wood will be transferred to a secondary site where it will be burned. Tenants can help themselves to the ashes left following the bonfire.
  Rubble can be added to the big pile by the main entrance for use by the council to fill potholes in the roads.
  We will shortly be organizing a system for the collection of scrap metal from across the site. The idea is to provide bays by the main entrance near the pile of rubble where tenants can dispose of metallic rubbish from their plots.
- The committee will be employing the services of a couple of tenants who are landscape gardeners to strim the vacant pots which can then be covered with weed suppressant until Caroline and Debbie commence plot viewings in the New Year. Several tenants have indicated they will be giving up their plots by the end of the year, increasing the number of vacant plots from 8 to around 14 when viewings do commence.
  As a result of the 2nd round of plot inspection 7 tenants have received termination notices so these plots will also be vacant by the New Year bringing the total number of available plots to around 21.
  There are currently 71 people on the waiting list.
- A working party has been organised for this weekend (10.30 start) to tidy up the main entrance area. Strimming and removing saplings to make the area more inviting to tenants and visitors. We will be buying some planters and a bench, and the council have agreed to give us a new notice board.
- We met with the council to run through proposed changes to the tenancy agreement. We thought they were for next year but turns out they are for 2027. The new tenancy agreement is more detailed, easier to read and very clear what the council expects from tenant in line with The Allotments Act (1950). There will also be links to council policy documents.
  The council are moving to an electronic system for signing the tenancy agreement. In the new system when tenants sign, they will be confirming they have read the tenancy agreement and agree to abide by the conditions. The inspection criteria are based on the tenancy agreement so if tenants are clear regarding what is expected, ultimately the overall condition of the site should improve.
  Provision has been made regarding the keeping of hens and rabbits on site and the requirements, assurances and safeguarding processes tenants will need to have in

place if they wish to keep animals. The committee is against the keeping of animals on site, but it is a legal requirement of the 1950 Allotments Act. Tenants at the meeting expressed concern about the potential rise in the rat population when this goes ahead. The committee will bring this up at the next meeting with the council.

- As of 16.30 today the balance is £3,692. We're looking to spend some of this money on new CCTV cameras and the bases and poles to mount them on. We've also been getting quotes for plot signs to standardise plot signs across the site. We will be buying weed suppressant to cover vacant plots. We are also applying for lottery fund money to remove the asbestos from the shed on D/F row near the toilet. Replace the roof and put solar panels in. If tenants have suggestions on how we could best spend this money for the benefit of tenants across the site, please email the committee.
- One tenant noticed people were filling in potholes using stones, and it seemed to be working well. He suggested we spend some of the money buying a ton bag of small stones for this purpose before the bad weather comes in the winter. Mike agreed this was a good idea although he does already have about a half ton of stones already collected. Another tenant suggested getting scalpings as they have better adhesive properties. Mike agreed to investigated further.
  The council has got no further forward with a long-term solution to flooding at the main gate but may be able to implement a short-term solution in the New Year.
- The council have agreed to come down harder on tenants who habitually speed around the site. Mike has caught the same tenant speeding 3 times now and the council have written to the tenant for the second time. The committee feels it should be a 2 strike and you're out policy where speeding is concerned.
- One tenant asked whether the committee would consider bays for excess green waste that won't fit into compost bins on a plot. Mike explained branches or anything wood based could be taken to the communal bonfire site but there is no current plan for the communal disposal of pernicious weeds.
- Plot boundary demarcation has now started on behalf of the council. The boundaries will be marked according to where the borders should be according to the council records. The borders surrounding plots must be kept clear as stated in the tenancy agreement. Rows A and B have been completed so beware not to drive into the stakes when parking cars and do not remove any stakes. If a tenant thinks they're in the wrong place, please contact the committee who will arrange to meet up with the tenant. Once the work is completed there will be a new arial map and each plot size can be accurately measured.

2. A Talk on Beekeeping by Tony Lack from Wokingham Beekeepers Association

Tony is the learning and development officer for the association and has around 15 hives. He's been keeping bees for around 5 years.

There are bees, hornets and wasps. Hornets and wasps are carnivores. Approximately 60 million years ago a wasp decided not to eat meat anymore and over time this led to what we now call bees.

Bumblebees share their life cycle with wasps, but the honeybee's life cycle is different.
For bumblebees, hornets and wasps, at this time of year a newly mated queen will go into a form of hibernation and find a hole to spend the winter in. Come the spring, when the weather warms up, she emerges and forages for pollen and nectar and makes patties on which she lays eggs. When these new wasps emerge, they will protect the queen and go out to forage. The colony will grow into an established colony during the summer. In August / September the queen will switch to lay new queens instead of workers. These queens will leave the colony to get mated and then find a hole to overwinter in. The entire rest of the colony will die.

Honeybees (bees) are different. They will have stored enough honey to ensure the queen survives the winter. Queens can survive for up to 5 years. The whole colony will stay in the hive over winter, looking after the queen. Modern hives can hold 60,000 bees although the population does go up and down depending on the time of year.

Without bees we would not have peas and beans, soft fruit like apples and pears and pumpkins and squash. We also wouldn't have flowers such as sunflowers, lavender, thistles and sweet chestnuts. Flowers critical to bees is dandelions so remember this next time you're weeding.

When bees arrive back after foraging their sisters (all the workers in a hive are female) will unload them. The foraging bee regurgitate the nectar from their honey croup and pass it to a worker bee. The worker bee will bring it into the hive on their tongues which they will wave around drying out the nectar (down to 70%) and forming honey.
If 2 foraging bees arrive at the same time and one is bringing nectar from dandelion and one apple. The worker bees will ignore the bee with apple and unload the bee with dandelion as it's higher in sugar content.
Another flower critical to bees is blackberry blossom. This year was terrible for bees because blackberry blossom came much earlier in the season and the bees weren't ready. Blackberry blossom provides the honey which forms the winter stores so the colony can survive until the following year.

Beekeepers have a window in which they need to crop the honey and it's between blackberry (Hawthorn blossom) and ivy season. This is because once bees start collecting nectar from ivy it turns the honey bitter.

Inside a hive there is one queen whose only job is to lay eggs. Each egg is 1/10 the size of a grain of rice and she can lay one every 20 seconds, approximately 2,000 eggs a day. The weight of the collective eggs laid in a day is more than the queen weighs.
50,000 – 60,000 worker bees in the summer, all females. The rest of the hive are made up from 1-2,000 drones, the males. No males overwinter in the hive. Any drones in the hive in the run up to winter are expelled and die. The queen can choose the sex of a bee when she lays each egg and only females are produced over winter. Bees rarely leave the hive in the winter as they must keep their body at 11 degrees or die. They can leave the hive in winter but must keep flying. If they stop to forage, they'll die in the cold. Come April and May the following year when male bees will be needed for mating the queen will start to lay eggs which will produce drones. The

only job the drones have is to mate. Many more drones are produced than are needed so a large percentage have a wasted life although they do help keep the hive warm due to their large size. If a hive loses all its drones the temperament of the hive will change as the female bees enjoy looking after the drones.

The queen will lay and egg. If the queen fertilises the egg, it will be female. If she doesn't it'll be male and essentially a clone of the queen. 3 days later a tiny larva emerges. It then becomes an eating machine and grows rapidly. For the first 3 days it is feed royal jelly made from mixing the extract from hypopharyngeal glands and thoracic glands. Future workers and drones are then fed bee bread which is a mixture of honey and pollen. Future queens will be fed royal jelly for 2 more days, it's the extra sugar in the royal jelly that changes the structure of the bee to form a queen. Queens are only produced when needed. Most fertilised eggs become worker bees. After 6 days the larva gives off a pheromone and the workers know it's time to seal the larva in its cell. It then completes metamorphosis into a young adult.

Queens mate only once but will mate with around 13 males. This will provide her with enough sperm for 3-5 years. She stores the sperm in a gland called a sperm theca. The queen can choose whether to fertilize an egg or not. Fertilised eggs become female and unfertilized eggs become male. Occasionally, a fertilized egg will produce a male which is called a diploid male as it has twice the number of chromosomes to a normal male which only has one.

The drones will congregate in an area every few miles across the country. They leave the hive around noon each sunny day and fly to the drone congregation area. Approximately an hour later a virgin queen will leave the hive and fly as fast as she can though the drone congregation area so only the fastest, strongest drones can mate with her. Once the drone has mated, he will die. If a male is unsuccessful, he'll be thrown out of the hive and die.

When a worker bee emerges, she'll spend 3 days cleaning cells. After this she'll spend a few days feeding the older larvae bee bread. Once she can produce royal jelly she'll feed the young larvae. When she can produce wax, she'll help built and repair the comb, carry food and act as an undertaker. If a bee dies in the hive she will take it outside. After around 3 weeks she'll become a guard bee and protect the entrance of the hive. If a bee from a different hive enters the hive it will smell different. The bees will fight but after a few minutes of fighting the bee will smell the same as the other bees and the fighting will stop and the bee is accepted. If a wasp enters the hive 8 guard bees will crowd around it. The guard bees will disconnect their flight muscles from their wings and vibrate them around the wasp, killing it by overheating it. The guard bees will also die but the hive is protected, and the guards are easily replaceable. After 3 weeks of guard duty the bees will be able to sting and leave the hive to go foraging until they die shortly after.

Tony then played a video of him checking on a hive. Part of the process is to spot when a colony is about to swarm and removing the queen to a new hive with some food and workers, essentially splitting the colony and removing the need to swarm. He will also check the colony is healthy and has enough supplies for the winter. He will also harvest some of the honey. He

described how a hive is put together. There is a barrier between the bottom level and upper levels. Worker bees can get through the holes but not the queen or drones as they are too big. If the drones had access to the honey at the top of the hive they would eat it. Honey is stored at the very top of the hive. Cells have multiple uses; they can be used to store pollen or honey or for use by the queen to lay eggs. Honey capped (sealed) in a cell will last in perfect condition for an immeasurable length of time. Apparently, honey found buried with the pharaohs is still edible. Modern beekeepers put a use by date of 3-5 years on their jars. Bees will use tree sap and turn it into propolis which acts as an antiseptic glue for use in the hive. They will use it to make the inside of the hive waterproof.

Monks were the first beekeepers. They used the wax to make candles and polish. They soon discovered honey could be used to make mead.

Bees communicate with each other. When a bee returns, she'll move up the frame sharing her food. The way she moves up the frame is in relation to the sun. Directly towards the sun is straight up. She will alter direction based on where the sun is now rather than when she was foraging. She'll waggle while she does this which shows what type of pollen or nectar is available, how far away it is, the quality and how plentiful it is. She's trying to recruit other bees to go foraging at the same site.
Just before the colony swarms the bees will run around inside the hive a few days before. The decision has already been made to swarm. The workers will feed larvae royal jelly for longer creating new queens. The worker bees will stop feeding the queen as much food and chase her around the hive biting her to keep her moving. This is to make her fit for the flight. Half the hive will leave the hive one sunny day and swarm to a point about 200m away. The scout bees leave to look for a new home. When they return, they'll do the waggle dance. They're trying to recruit the other scout bees to have a look. If they like the look of the new site they'll return and do the same waggle dance until eventually all the scouts agree on a site and the colony all flies to the new home.

When bees are foraging, they are looking for nectar but will get covered in pollen. This helps the plant with pollination. Some plants have multiple flowers. In some species once pollinated the flower will die back, others species will change colour, all so the bee knows which flowers have already been pollinated and which still need to be. They will also forage for tree sap to make propolis, water to dilute the honey and act as air conditioning to cool the hive through evaporation in the summer months. After foraging the bee will brush the remaining pollen down their bodies where it is gathered on the back legs and taken back to the hive. It's stored in cells and the cell will take on the colour of the pollen. Yellow in summer is dandelion. Red and black is dahlias. Trees are green. Snowdrops are bright orange. Pollen is used as protein for growth. Once adult status is achieved, they only need sugars to survive.
Wax is produced from between scales on the underside of the bee's abdomen. The wax is produced, and the bee will pick it up and chew it to make it malleable and then use it to build or repair the comb. The comb is edible but honey with the comb is very expensive. Tony sells honey for £8 per jar. Jars containing comb is sold for £20.

Bees will also forage for honeydew honey which is formed once nectar has passed through an aphid and forms a droplet on the aphid's backside. Honeydew honey is very popular in Germany.

Bees can fly at 15 miles per hour over 27 square miles. 3 miles in every direction, although they won't always range this far. One bee will make 10-15 trips each day. Bees who forage for tree sap and water will not forage for nectar or pollen.

As well as the usual brain structure a bee has a collection of nerve cells or secondary brain that controls flying, another controls digestion and a third the stinger organ if the stinger is used. The stinger has barbs on it so when used it embeds in the wound. When the bee flies away the stinger organ is pulled out of the bee which dies but the venom will continue pumping through the stinger into the wound. The queen's stinger has no barbs so she can use it to sting multiple times. Once she emerges, she will use her stinger to kill the other new queens that have emerged ensuring survival of the fittest.

Honey is not just used as food; it is also used in wound healing. A bandage covered in honey wrapped around an oozing wound will pull out the infection and dry the wound.

Honey made in China has sugar and corn starch added to it so is not pure honey. The rest of the world will not buy honey from China as it's so fake. China now exports no honey. Tony thinks it is Sri Lanka that now exports the same amount of honey that China used to but doesn't have a single beehive. Make of that what you will. If a jar says the honey is sourced from EU and non-EU countries, it's fake honey. Very little of the honey available in shops is 100% pure honey.

Yellow legged hornets came across from China in a shipment of pottery to a garden centre near the Pyrenees. There was one mated queen. They spread to Jersey, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Greece and they have arrived in England around Dover, Newcastle, Weymouth and Southampton. They fly and hang around the entrance to a hive facing outwards. They will pick a worker bee out of the air, rips its head, wings, legs and abdomen off and takes the thorax back to the nest as food. The other bees see this happening and will not leave the hive which starves to death in a few days. When nests are reported the national bee unit will destroy it. This time of year, it is difficult as the newly mated queens are hibernating. Come spring she'll emerge and build a small nest and raise a few young. She'll then move and build another nest dropping new queens along the way so they could spread quickly. The sting of a yellow legged hornet has been known to kill a human in France, so the bee unit has very robust protective equipment.

<u>Questions</u>

1. What happens to the bitter honey created once the ivy season arrives. The bees will use this for their own use as the beekeeper will have harvested the sweeter honey.
2. A few years ago, much was made of the properties of royal jelly. Beekeepers can crop royal jelly form a hive by removing the queen. The colony will then try to raise new queens and there is a lot of royal jelly created which can be collected.
3. Is it worth putting out a sugar solution if as good allotment holders we remove all the dandelions. This is not a good idea as the bees will become lazy and stop foraging.

4. How do you go from clear honey to set honey. It's called the dyce method. You take a jar of honey and leave it in the cool. It will crystalize. The crystals are broken up with a mortar and pestle This is added to honey that is heated to 40 Degrees Celcius and left to cool down. The 2 are mixed. This will form small crystals and is soft set honey.