



The  
**Manx Bee**  
Improvement Group

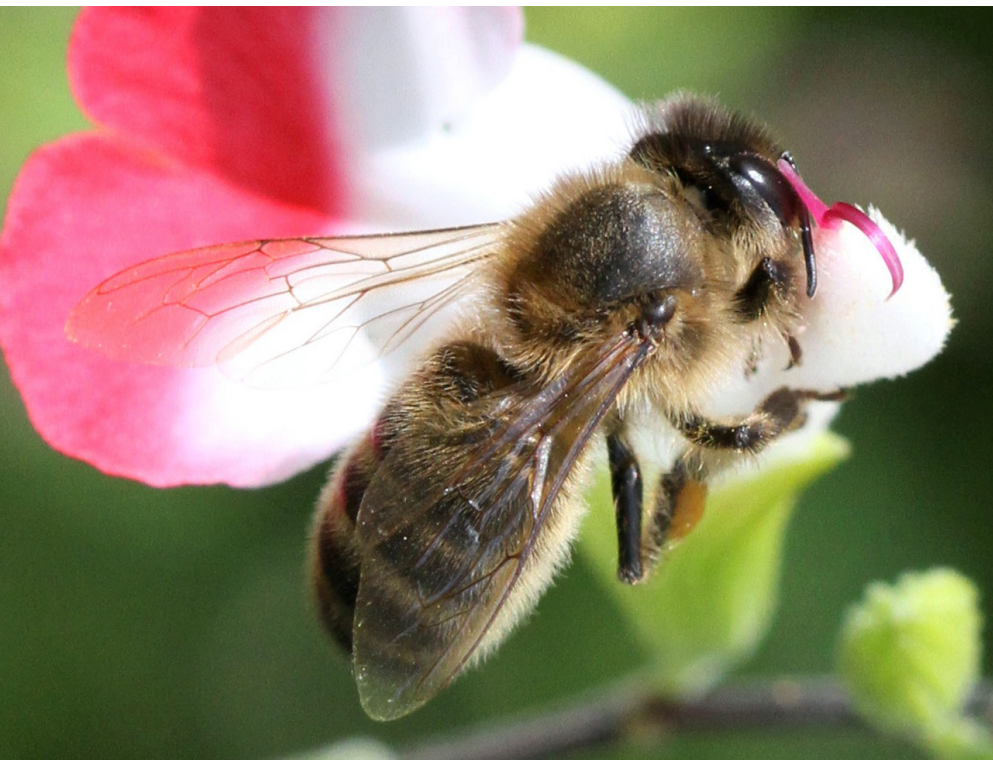
The quest to improve the  
**Manx Dark Honey Bee**



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# The quest to improve the Manx Dark Honey Bee



The Isle of Man is fortunate to have a healthy population of honey bees, but there is more work to be done to protect against ongoing health threats to Manx colonies.

With about 800 Hives the Isle of Man is one of the few places around the world where the honey bee is not infected by the *Varroa destructor* mite nor either of the Foul Broods, American (AFB) and European (EFB).

What is probably less well known is that while the importation of honey bees has long been prohibited, the genetic influence of sub species of foreign bees can still be seen in some colonies as a result of bee imports made many years ago. Whilst the original Manx Honey Bee is regarded as resilient and generally easy to handle, introgression with exotic strains is considered to have added aggressive traits.

The quest is now on to improve the Manx Dark Honey Bee and to gradually eliminate the influence of foreign strains by careful selective breeding.

## A brief history

The Isle of Man Beekeepers' Federation was formed in the early years of the last century. The Ramsey District established the first Beekeepers' Association. This was followed shortly afterwards by the Western, then by the Southern Districts. Influential figures in those early days were Police Sergeant Trevor Rimmer and a Mr Blakeman, who donated the Blakeman Skep - a prize still contested by Isle of Man Beekeepers at their annual Honey Convention.

Prior to the late 1970s, the importation of bees into the Isle of Man had become accepted practise, with Mr. Joe Bridson of Glen Maye importing Italian bees and Trevor Rimmer importing hybrid bees from EH Thorne (Beehives) Limited.

However by 1978, beekeepers and the Isle of Man Government had become increasingly aware of the risk of varroa penetrating the Island from imported bees, so imports were restricted solely to those from the United Kingdom and the Channel Islands, both of which were varroa free at that time.

Not long afterwards, however, an observant Federation Committee Member, Mr Herbie Quirk, alerted the Committee to reports that varroa was rapidly advancing across Europe from the east and he began to lobby the Government for a complete ban on the importation of honey bees.

His call was heard and taken up by Mr. William "Wee" Quirk, a Member of the House of Keys (the Manx Parliament). Interestingly, Wee Quirk was also an established beekeeper, as was his father before him, and he proposed to the House of Keys that a total ban on the importation of bees be passed into Manx Law.

His advocacy was successful and in March 1988, four years before varroa was first detected in the UK, the Isle of Man's "Importation of Bees" Order was passed, banning the importation of bees, followed shortly thereafter by the [Bees Act, 1989](#).

As a number of pests and diseases that have devastated beekeeping are likely to be introduced not only on bees, but on bee products and second hand equipment, it was prescient that the Bees Act prohibited these practises.

The fine for contravention was set at £2,000, and increased to £5,000 five years later. In addition, to strengthen the protection of Manx bees, in 1992 the Government appointed local bee expert, Harry Owens, Bee Inspector, a post he holds to this day.

Acarine (Tracheal Mite) and *Nosema apis* are present in colonies, but at very low levels. Generally bees are able to live with them. *Nosema ceranae* has not been detected.





## **Recognition of Import Ban by the European Commission**

While the Isle of Man Government was confident that the varroa mite did not exist on the Island it was essential to obtain formal recognition of the Island's "free status" by the European Union. It was only able to achieve this status by following the specific criteria laid down in [EU Council Directive 92/65/EEC](#); the Island had to scientifically demonstrate the varroa mite to be absent.

Work began with the National Bee Unit in the UK to derive a suitable method and the Island's Bee Inspector was trained in sampling procedures.

This sampling and testing work, based on World Organisation of Animal Health guidelines, took three years.

The finding that the bee louse, *Braula coeca*, was widely present in hives across the Island was not a concern because this louse is not a danger to bee health.

The Isle of Man's application was presented in person by Chief Veterinary Officer Stuart Jaques to the EU Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed. A copy of the application is available [here](#).

The Standing Committee's [decision](#) eventually passed into EU Law on 16th February 2015, thus finally ensuring - after almost three decades - that the Isle of Man's ban on the importation of bees was legitimate in EU Law!

"Nothing would have been achieved without the unswerving support and encouragement of the Isle of Man Beekeepers Federation" wrote Stuart Jaques – an acclaim that will resonate with Manx beekeepers all over the Island.

The island's importation ban is even more significant now Small Hive Beetle has been discovered on mainland Europe!

## **But there is work to do - We cannot rest on our laurels**

In February 2015, the Isle of Man Beekeepers' Federation launched a bee improvement initiative, with the express purpose of maintaining and improving the health and characteristics of the indigenous Manx Dark Honey Bee. The belief is that the Island's indigenous bee, being better able to cope with the islands often inclement weather, is more resilient to disease whilst at the same time being productive and easy to handle.

With the encouragement and assistance of Roger Patterson, Vice-Chairman of the Bee Improvement & Bee Breeders' Association (BIBBA) and BBKA Link Trustee, colonies on the Isle of Man are currently being examined and assessed to identify docile and healthy queens, showing Manx Dark Honey Bee characteristics from which to breed.

## **The quest to improve the Manx Dark Bee has begun in earnest!**



Prepared by Johnny Kipps, Peter Long and Daren Ward for the  
**Manx Bee Improvement Group**

Who would like to extend thanks for their contributions to -

Stuart Jaques, Isle of Man Chief Veterinary Officer

Harry Owens, Isle of Man Bee Inspector

Roger Patterson, Vice-Chairman BIBBA and BBKA Link Trustee for the Isle of Man, and

Alan Smith for the beautiful pictures of honey bees.

