The Isle of Man Beekeepers Federation was born in the opening years of last century when in 1904 the Ramsey District established the first beekeepers association on the island. This was followed shortly by the Western District and then by the Southern District.

Influential figures in those early days were Police Sergeant Trevor Rimmer and Mr Blakeman, (who donated the Blakeman Skep, a prize still contested by Isle of Man Beekeepers at our annual Honey Convention.)

Prior to the late 1970s, importation of bees into the Isle of Man was an accepted practise, with Joe Bridson of Glen Maye importing Italian bees and Trevor Rimmer importing Thorne’s Hybrid bees.

Imports were restricted to the United Kingdom and Channel Islands in 1978 as beekeepers and the Isle of Man Government became aware of the increasing risk of disease. As the island received reports of varroa crossing Europe from the east, one of the island’s influential beekeepers, Isle of Man Beekeepers Federation committee member Herbie Quirk pushed hard for a ban on the importation of bees.

The call was taken up by a local member of the House of Keys (the Manx Parliament), William “Wee” Quirk, also an established beekeeper as was his father before him, who proposed the ban be passed into Manx law.

This 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, followed shortly thereafter by the Bees Act, 1989.

This enabled the prohibition of the

*…… importation into or movement within the Island of bees and combs, bee products, hives, containers and other appliances used in connection with keeping or transporting bees, and of any other thing which has or may have been exposed to infection with any pest or disease to which the order applies;*

The fine for contravention was set at £2,000, and increased to £5,000 five years later.

To strengthen the protection of Manx bees, in 1992 the Government appointed well known bee expert, Harry Owens, as the island’s Bee Inspector, a post he holds to this day.

On his watch, only one contravention of the importation ban has come to light; Harry relates that shortly after the Act came into law, he had a call from beekeeper Ian Qualtrough to advise that a local market garden supplier in Castletown, Peaches, had out of the blue been sent a package of bumble bees, highly regarded as pollinators for tomatoes, by a commercial breeder. Harry dealt with the bumble bees whilst the Attorney General decided Peaches had acted in innocence, and no fine was imposed.

Whilst one case of deformed wing virus disease and Nosema Apis was found – and treated – on the island, there hasn’t been any sign of Nosema Cerana, thank goodness. Acarine the Trachea Mite is present in colonies, but generally the bees can live with this parasite, few colonies succumb to it.

As has been well publicised, the Isle of Man is one of the very few places on earth not infected by the parasitic mite, Varroa Destructor or either of the Foul Broods ( AFB or EFB). And, if the IOM Beekeepers maintain their constant vigilance with the help of the Department of the Environment, Food and Agriculture (DEFA), that’s the way it will stay.

But although we’ve never had Varroa, to actually be awarded the much desired “Varroa-free status” by the EU has been a very long, tough road requiring huge persistence over more a number of years!

“The Department acknowledged the need to protect local bees, with Varroa known to weaken colonies and increase the risk of spread of virus diseases; however, nothing would have been achieved without the unswerving support and encouragement of the Federation” writes Stuart Jacques, the Chief Veterinary Officer of the Isle of Man.

While the Department was confident that there had been no case of Varroa on the island, formal “free status” can only be recognised under the specific criteria laid down in EU Council Directive 92/65/EEC.

Apart from passing laws making the disease notifiable and demonstrating suitable inspection and enforcement measures, there is a requirement for any applicant region to scientifically demonstrate Varoosis to be absent.

Work with the National Bee Unit (UK) derived a suitable method, based on that described by the OIE (World Organisation of Animal Health) and the Bee Inspector was trained in the sampling procedures.

The sampling work and testing took three years. An additional finding that the “bee louse”, Braula coeca, was widespread in hives across the island strongly supported the application, because Braula is easily eradicated by chemicals used to control Varroa.

The 14 page application document was discussed with European Commission officials and laid before the Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed on 11 September 2014. Chief Veterinary Officer Stuart Jaques made a well-received supporting presentation to the EU in person, which is available [here](http://ec.europa.eu/food/committees/regulatory/scfcah/animal_health/docs/2014091112_varroosis_iom_gb.pdf).

The [decision](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2015.045.01.0016.01.ENG) was passed into EU law on 16 February 2015, and this finally, after almost three decades, ensured that the Isle of Man’s long-sighted bee importation ban was finally legitimate in EU law!

Complementary to the island’s Varroa free status, in February this year, the IOM Beekeepers Federation launched a bee improvement initiative, with the express purpose of improving the Manx Bee. The belief is that the indigenous bee is likely to be more resilient to disease, better able to cope with Manx weather, whilst being prolific and friendly.

With the assistance and encouragement of Roger Patterson of BIBBA (Bee Improvements and Bee Breeders Association) who is also BBKA Link Trustee for the Isle of Man, as many colonies on the island as possible are being inspected and assessed to find the best colonies from which to breed.

The quest for the optimum Manx Black Bee is on!