

GORMANSTON

Meeting Ireland's Best

Jennifer Berry

Over the past 15 years, I've attended and presented at numerous beekeeping meetings from Georgia to California, Maine to Texas. I've also had the privilege to attend meetings held internationally in places such as Bolivia, England, and more. There is no doubt that these opportunities have been the highlight of my extension duties while at UGA, however, some of these meetings were better than others, and sadly there were a few that left me feeling unfulfilled to say the least. That said – what is it that separates the great meetings from the not-so-great? I'm of the opinion that good folk, good food, good drink, and good music are always a good start. I understand that most meetings, especially at the local level, are unable to put out the red carpet for just an hour, once a month. In contrast, the larger state meetings, often lasting a few days, have more flexibility.

Planning a meeting is much like planning a party – first and foremost you want your guests to enjoy themselves! In both cases it is often beneficial to employ an overarching theme. Is it a costume party, birthday party, cocktail party, shower, backyard BBQ, formal sit-down dinner, or casual shin-ding celebrating your bosses' retirement. For a beekeeping meeting, your "theme" is pretty much decided for you: it's a beekeeping meeting. However, depending on the length of the meeting, you may be able to play around with the individual evenings to spice it up a bit. For instance, at our 2006 EAS meeting here in Georgia, the Friday night banquet's theme was a "southern ball," where folks dressed up in their finest "Gone with the Wind" attire.

Next, one must decide who to invite to lecture at the meeting. Most topics allow for plenty of qualified candidates to choose from; however schedules do fill up fast so it's often smart to extend invitations at least a year in advance. I'm *already* working on speakers for 2014 for our Young Harris Bee Institute. If the meeting calls for multiple speakers try to select ones with varied backgrounds and expertise. You don't want five lecturers all talking about honey bee biology or mead making.

After your speakers are in the bag, start planning what food and drink will be provided. You may be able to use the theme of the meeting to help determine what and what not to serve. For instance, you wouldn't serve



Gormanston Castle.

kegs of beer and hot wings at a baby shower, but for an outside BBQ, it would be just fine. Another indulgence which should not be neglected, is the presence of *appropriate* music. Music adds background elegance which immediately sets the mood and relaxes folks, unless of course it's Guns and Roses or AC/DC.

Our primary reason for attending these meetings is to learn more about bees, however, it also offers the opportunity to establish new connections, see old friends and make new ones, or discuss the latest new widget or converse about some innovative management practice. Though facilitating information is the predominate priority, one should not do so at the cost of eliminating a chance to enjoy the company of others within a group linked by a common interest. Therefore, make sure to devote attention and planning to help cultivate a social atmosphere at your meetings as well.

As mentioned earlier, I've attended my fair share of meetings over the years, but one in particular truly exceeded my expectations. The Federation of Irish Beekeepers' Association, Gormanston Summer Course, in my opinion, sets the standard for what makes an enjoyable, informative, and well-rounded meeting. Not only is it held in Ireland, (which doesn't hurt) but it's hosted by Gormanston College, which touts a beautiful campus amongst a breathtaking landscape. Additionally, the college is equipped with its very own castle (it is Ireland folks . . .), not to mention the feral colony inhabiting one of the castle turrets. All of that aside, what really separates this meeting from the rest is the people. Both the organizers and attendees all seem to ooze with excitement and passion – you can't help but recognize they are really enjoying themselves.

The Gormanston Summer Course maintains a superior reputation not only among Irish beekeepers but throughout Europe as a whole. The college gets its name, Gormanston, from a tiny village located in the County of Meath, where the Summer course is held. Roughly 20 miles north of the Dublin airport the town consists of no more than a few homes, the college, and two pubs; the Huntsman and the Cock, of which the latter claims to be the oldest pub in Ireland. The college campus makes up the majority of the town and encircles the Gormanston castle located at its center. It's a fairly new castle by Irish terms, built only a *few* years ago back in the



Lecture hall at Gormanston.

14th century. The castle was constructed by the Preston family, who managed to hold onto their estate and the surrounding lands until the 1950s. The original patriarch of the Preston family was awarded the title of Viscount Gormanston. Viscount or Viscountess (for female) is a title given to European nobility, which according to ranking, is above that of a Baron but just below an Earl. The title is currently held by Jenico Preston, the 17th Viscount Gormanston, whom resides in London. However, the family sold the castle in the 1950s to the Franciscan Order of Friars, who founded Gormanston College initially to serve as a boarding school for boys. After the Franciscans purchased the Castle they soon built a large addition which is now a public, coeducational, secondary Catholic school under the trusteeship of the Franciscan Province of Ireland. When school is out for the Summer, the college is open for groups and organizations to hold various camps or courses.

The first Summer course was organized in 1947 by the Federation of Irish Beekeepers' Association (FIBKA) and was held at the University College Cork (UCC) with Mr. H.J. Wadey, editor of *Bee Craft*, as guest speaker. Between 1947 and 1960 the host-site for this annual course hopped around the country until finally settling at Gormanston in 1961. Since that time, the FIBKA has held their annual Summer course solely at this location,



Judges at the Gormanston Honey Show.



Richard Jones of IBRA and Jennifer Berry.



Cows and castles.



Single women in search of men.

now totaling 52 years!

Every year since its inception, the organizers of the course extend invitations to international guest speakers. This list includes individuals from all over Europe, Canada and the United States. To mention a few, past speakers include: Dr. E.E. Edwards, Mr. A.S.C Deans, Dr. Colin Butler, Mr. C.C. Tonsley, Mr. Robert Couston, Dr. G.F. Townsend, Mr. Ted Hooper, Mr. Adrian Waring, Dr. Francis Ratneiks, Mr. Norman Carreck, Dr. Mark Winston, Sue Cobey, Mr. Clive de Bruyn, Dr. Keith Delaphane, Dr. Dewey Caron, and Prof. Robert Pickard. Their guest speaker for 2013 will be Mr. Fleming Vejsnaes from Denmark and 2014, Dr. Thomas D Seeley, of Cornell University. I had the privilege of serving as their guest speaker for 2012, an honor I will cherish for years to come.

The course spans an entire week, starting on a Sunday evening with closing ceremonies commencing Friday afternoon. Attendance currently ranges from 300-350 participants, and seems to generate an ever increasing audience. The first course had only 60 people. Attendees often take lodging in the dorm rooms on campus (no Holiday or Hampton Inns around here . . .). The campus

contains a cafeteria capable of accommodating even the largest of crowds. They provide breakfast, lunch and dinner, each of which is served with a bowl of boiled or fried potatoes. The presence and availability of the cafeteria was a valuable resource as there aren't many other local places to eat, other than the pub. Absolutely no fast food chains, which was a pleasant change. Actually driving through a good portion of Ireland, I only saw one fast food joint, a Burger King. What a pleasure it was to stop in a town, find a local pub, have a warm bowl of soup, yummy brown bread, and cup of tea and not have it taste exactly the same as the previous pub's food. The Irish haven't homogenized their cities and towns yet and I for one believe they are all the better for it!

The weeklong program was structured to benefit the needs of beginners to even the most advanced of beekeepers. Each afternoon was devoted to various workshops including: queen rearing, bee anatomy, morphometrics, wax-working, mead making, etc. The course also offers the Federation of Irish Beekeepers' Association examination, which is quite similar to our Master Beekeepers certificate, with entry levels leading up to 'Lectureship', which equates to our Master level. Last but certainly not least the course includes the Irish National Honey Show, often including participates which also take home top awards at the London Honey Show every October.

To reiterate, I believe the attention devoted to creating evenings filled with lively social banter is what really gives this course its unique charm, and separates it from the pack. Following a full day of listening to speaker after speaker, isn't it refreshing to have an unstructured, though guaranteed, hang out session to 'chew the fat' with a group of likeminded folks? Each night there was always a source of entertainment, from table quizzes to discussions, to competitions and music, song and dance. And let me tell you, the Irish love to sing! My favorite night consisted of the entire college meeting at the pub and having spontaneously generated a table vs. table singing contest; one person stood up and belted out a tune, upon their completion someone from the next table over jumped up and followed suit, and then the



Jennifer with Gormanston hives and beekeepers.

next table and so on. Some songs were funny, some sad, some historic and yes, some even a bit bad, but all in all it was just what everyone needed! When it was my turn to sing, I shamefully resorted to “Home on the Range.” Perhaps not the best choice, I admit, but in the heat of the moment I couldn’t remember the first stanza of “Georgia on My Mind” and had to improvise. At the conclusion of the course I departed feeling I had learned so much, met some amazing people, and obtained so many wonderful memories.

There was a legend told to me while at Gormanston I feel I must share. Myth holds it that when a family patriarch is in his final hours, the foxes of County Meath, with the exception of nursing vixens, emerge from their earths and make way to the door of the Gormanston Castle to keep vigil until his passing to show thanks for the deliverance and protection from marauding predators provided by the previous Lords.

Following the conclusion of the conference I traveled to visit a few friends. My first stop landed me in Hillsboro, Northern Ireland to visit with Michael Young, MBE and his lovely wife Rae. Next I ventured across to Gallway and Liscannor for a hike along the ocean and then southeast to Tipperary where I initiated the beekeeping side of the trip.

I stayed with Mary and Gerry Ryan, who both hold the equivalent of our Master Beekeeping Certification and are wildly involved in all aspects of beekeeping. They live outside of Dundrum, in the county of Tipperary. And yes, it is a long way to Tipperary with roads no wider than a mid-sized car, squeezed between sheep pastures, rock walls, hedges, and cliffs. I must admit, however, once I was finally able to pry my white knuckled fingers from the steering wheel, I was completely entranced by the scenic landscape. When I arrived at the Ryan’s farm, I came to find Michael Gleeson and Jim Ryan there as well. It was a like a mini Gormanston reunion. The duration of my visit featured a whirlwind of touring castles, abbeys, pubs and apiaries.

One fond memory of mine is visiting Micheál Mac Giolla Coda’s bee breeding operation. Micheál is the chairman of the Galtee Bee Breeding Group (GBBG), a group dedicated to the study, improvement, conservation and propagation of the native dark European honey bee, *Apis mellifera mellifera*. Impressively, they have been at it now for over 20 years. In the beginning, there were only four members: Micheál Mac Giolla Coda, Redmond Williams, David Lee and Johnny Carrigan. Over time, membership has grown along with the implementation of a few program objectives: a simple system of colony evaluation, record keeping, culling and selection. Any colony showing undesirable traits such as over-aggressiveness and excessive swarming are re-queened at once while colonies with the desired characteristics (gentleness, decreased supersedure, longevity, productivity and purity of strain) are selected.

Each year improvements are made to the local stock via selection methods coupled with morphometric analysis. Additionally they utilize instrumental insemination from selected queens and drones to produce numerous combinations for queen-distribution to members who are then encouraged to keep records. Queens selected to stay in the program are allowed to propagate drones in order to saturate not only the breeding apiary but the whole of



Philip McCabe PRO FIBKA, Gerry Ryan Summer Course Convenor, Seamus Reddy President FIBKA, Jennifer Berry, Eddie O’Sullivan, Past President FIBKA, Mary Ryan Summer Course Convenor, Terry Clare President BIBBA, Alan Jones Executive BIBBA.

Galtee/Vee Valley. Just for reference, the Galtee/Vee Valley is located in southern Tipperary County. The Galtee/Vee valley is positioned between the mountain ranges of the Galtees and the Knockmealdowns and runs about 15 miles long and five miles wide. In the center of the valley, the GBBG has established a breeding apiary, which serves as the headquarters for most of their activities.

Education and training is another endeavor of the GBBG. Workshops devoted to honey bee improvement and queen rearing, winter discussion groups, along with a quarterly newsletter called “The Four Seasons” are all ways they facilitate information to beekeepers.

On a side note, and a cause of concern to the GBBG, up until several years ago, the Emerald Isle was off limits to the importation of exotic (non-endemic) honey bee stock. But recently the Northern Ireland Ministry of Agriculture has reversed their original ruling and now allows the importation of queens from different parts of the world. The members of the GBBG, along with other Irish beekeepers, fear that if this trend continues it may have deleterious effect on the purity of their native bee which they have tried so hard to preserve.

If you are searching for a vacation opportunity that includes a bee meeting, look no further, you must attend the Gormanston Summer Course! I can’t imagine you will



Singing contest.



Micheál Mac Giolla Coda and his daughter Aoife examining mites under the scope for bite marks, a sign of grooming behavior.

leave disappointed. And if you're a president, board member, or on a planning committee that organizes meetings of your own, take notes while you're there. These folks really know how to put on a top-notch meeting.

I want to extend thanks to all my friends in Ireland that contributed to this amazing adventure. Michael Gleeson, thank you for inviting me to be a guest lecturer at Gormanston 2012, and for the information you provided for this article. Kevin Lincoln, thank you for permitting use of your beautiful photos. Mary and Gerry Ryan as well as Michael and Rae Young, thanks for your generous



From left to right, Michael Gleeson, Jennifer Berry, Mary Ryan, Jim Ryan and Gerry Ryan.

hospitality. Jim Ryan, Eddie O'Sullivan, Eamon Magee, Seamus Reddy, Richard Jones, Micheál C. Mac Giolla Coda, Aoife NicGiolla Coda, Ben Harden, Terry Clare, and Dennis Ryan thank you for your gracious help, beekeeping wisdom, guidance and friendship. And to Brother Kennedy, a spry 80-year-old veteran beekeeper and author, whose first words whispered to me were, "When it comes to bees, there is always more to learn . . ."

And learn more I will! **BC**

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