

I can confidently say that both hives have survived the winter. Last year was a particularly bad year for hive survival. Over the last six years a fifth of all colonies in the UK have not survived the winters. A report in Scientific American suspects it will be a difficult winter for American beekeepers due to persistent cold weather. A paragraph in their report tells us a little more about bees overwintering:

Honey bees survive winter in a remarkable fashion. Rather than slowing into a sort of dormancy, the typical insect way, letting the body's natural anti-freeze proteins do the work, honey bees instead maintain the centre of the nest at room temperature. They create heat by metabolizing honey, and the honey furnace is powerful indeed. Hive temperature doesn't waver even at – 40° outside. Honey is fuel, and in cold winters bees need more fuel than in warm winters. They are like us.

With Hedgehog Day approaching I opened the original hive with the intention of harvesting some honey. This year is the first Spring where the bees have had the opportunity of a complete cycle and I was hopeful that there would be a comb or two left over from their winter needs. The bees store honey above the brood in the centre of the hive and then build up stores on the outer combs. There was very little honey left on the outer combs so I was unable to take any. The bees were popular on the day itself and the weather was cooler than the preceding days. The many bees that had been flying around the previous week in warm sunshine were not in evidence and this enabled me to take many people into the apiary and have a look at the bees at work through the glass observation window. Everyone was enthralled!