



Louise Chapman is safe behind her protective gear, no matter how curious the bees are

QUEEN BEE

How a Norfolk woman became a honey bee saviour

We love honey bees, don't we? The drowsy buzzing on a summer's day as these little creatures go about their business is one of the wonderful sounds of life.

Usually, these amazing animals live quietly in their hives and spaces and we tend not to get too close to them. But every now and again, they swarm and set up home where they shouldn't - in chimneys and cavity walls, for instance.

That's when you might need to call in Louise Chapman and her team, who will come to your property, gently extract your guests and rehome them in a new hive elsewhere.

It all started one day a couple of years ago. "I got four calls in one day where bees were swarming in separate properties in Saxlingham Nethergate," she says. She went out to investigate the first instance, where the bees were in a chimney, and called a friend for advice. The suggestion was to try and smoke them out.

"I tried that, but the bees had got between the flue and the brickwork," she says. Finding herself in a situation where she couldn't help, she did some research - and discovered that the proper way to do the job was to take out the brickwork, find the queen, carefully remove the bees and put the brickwork back. So that's what she did.

"It was quite exciting really!" she says. And so, Buzz-Off came into being, with Louise being joined by builder Adam and beekeeper Mark. It was an



Photo: Louise Chapman/Buzz Off

extension of her existing work; Louise is well-known in the county as the Lady Molecatcher and runs a busy pest-control business.

The 'bee-rescue' season is relatively short, from April to September, but even so last year the team removed seven nests – giving new homes to several hundred thousand bees.

Her first customer had originally called her in to deal with a mole problem. He mentioned that he also had a problem with wasps.

"It was April, and I thought 'you can't have wasps in April because wasps don't really come until June,'" she says. "So, I looked up and saw it was honey bees – 80,000 aggressive Italian bees."

They were safely extracted and moved and then came another call from a Hethersett home-owner and she was, metaphorically speaking, flying.

Most of the nests which need to be moved are high up, which brings its own challenges, as you need a little courage to be able

to work calmly at height with squadrons of bees buzzing about. "I don't even like heights," says Louise. "When I first got up on the scaffolding my little knees were knocking together!"

But she enjoys the thrill and says that she has hardly ever been stung. "I was only stung once last year, because I wear a proper suit. I took it off for lunch and when I put it back on made the mistake of not tying my hair back and one got in..."

Calmness is also important, especially for the bees. "We talk

ABOVE:
Most nests need to be moved from high up which can be a challenge



Photo: Louise Chapman/Buzz Off



Photo: Louise Chapman

Louise Chapman, the Lady Mole Catcher, with her dog, Buddy

to them and say 'morning ladies, we're now going to move you to a new home and it's going to be lovely.'"

It gives her a great sense of pride to save a colony. "Everybody gets a tremendous feeling of satisfaction – the builder, the beekeeper, the customer and me, because I can see they are all happy, it's fantastic, it is just so rewarding – and exciting!"

Louise adores the outdoor life – though she wasn't born into it. She used to teach English and drama in a Norfolk school.

"I used to look longingly out of the window, thinking 'I need to be out there,'" she says. She married, moved to a big house which she renovated. With a two-acre garden to maintain she got to spend a lot of time outside and loved it.

She did a garden design course at Easton College and while there saw a mole catching course, which she also completed. Then her life took a different direction and, finding herself divorced and wanting to do something outside with her two dogs, took up garden work.

But it is a tough job, physically, and finding that at 45 years old it was unsustainable, she decided to start work as a molecatcher. She went to the Royal Norfolk Show, talked to people, made some contacts, and was in business. Cutting a glamorous figure in a world traditionally dominated by men in well-worn waxed jackets, she attracted national media attention.

Things are quieter these days, though she still loves her work, even the risky bits of getting

up close to a swarm of bees or putting her hand in a rat hole and wondering if she might get bitten. "If you're not living life on the edge, you're taking up too much room!"

You can see how Louise and her team tackle bees' nests by visiting buzz-off.co.uk and also watch a video on why saving bees is so important.

You can also win a hamper full of bee-themed products at [facebook.com/BuzzOffHoneyBee](https://www.facebook.com/BuzzOffHoneyBee) [instagram.com/buzzoffhoneybee/](https://www.instagram.com/buzzoffhoneybee/) or twitter.com/BuzzOffHoneyBee

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Grow more nectar-rich flowers, shrubs and trees to provide for pollinators.
- Leave patches of land to grow wild; wildflowers create great nesting and feeding sites.
- Pesticides can harm pollinators and other bugs. Only use pesticides as a last resort.
- Cut grass less often and take cuttings away to let plants flower.
- Build a bee hotel and avoid disturbing or destroying nesting or hibernating insects in grass margins, bare soil, hedgerows, trees, dead wood or walls. ♦



Photo: Louise Chapman/Buzz Off

FAR LEFT: When a hive is moved, the queen is identified and colour-marked, with each colour corresponding to a year

LEFT: Colonies grow fast – this honeycomb is the product of just two weeks' work by the bees