

HONEY AND BEES WHO LIVE IN SKEPS

Some people say that the Romans brought beekeeping to Great Britain but most people believe there were colonies of wild bees in the forests which covered most of the British Isles. At some point, the bees were taken from the forests and kept as a source of food.

Most household kept bees in skeps until about the middle of the 18th Century when wooden hives were invented. Since then, beekeepers have doubled or trebled the amount of honey gathered each year. Now very few people keep bees in skeps.

From the earliest times, the skeps were made from materials which were easily available and in most cases free of cost. Most skeps are now made of coils of straw, reeds or grass bound with bramble or bamboo lapping cane. In the Domesday Book of 1086, skeps are recorded as being made of wicker and sometimes covered with tree bark or clay.

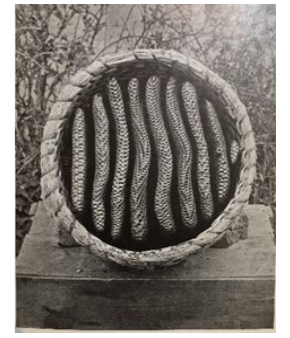
In the olden days, honey was eaten in the form of honeycomb. It was only after the invention of the honey extractor by Franz Edler von Hruschka in 1865 that honey was removed from the comb using centrifugal force that liquid honey could be bottled or put into earthenware containers.

When the wooden hives and the extractor were invented beekeepers realised that keeping bees and extracting honey would be a lot easier.

Beekeepers firstly stopped making skeps as a wooden hive would last many years thus saving the time and effort of making skeps every winter. Secondly the messy and unhygienic way of dealing with the bees in the extraction of their honey was time consuming and the resulted in collecting honey which contained bits of beeswax, bits of bees and other things you would not want to eat.

Everyone found a different way of extracting the honey from skeps.

The beekeepers destroyed the heaviest skeps because they felt if they took all the honey out of the skep they would have to provide lots of food for the many bees living in the skep over the winter.



Until about the Fifteenth or Sixteenth Century, honey was the only form of sweetener available in Great Britain. Before the introduction of sugar cane, the beekeeper would have had to leave a lot of the honey in the skep for the bees to survive. Even when sugar was introduced into Great Britain it was very expensive and only rich and noble families could afford it.

If the beekeeper decided that he did wish to keep his bees for another year, the first step would be to remove all the bees from the skep.

Bees can be controlled by smoke. It is thought that the smoke interferes with their pheromone communication system and it is also thought that they fear their home is going to be consumed by fire. If the beekeeper uses a smoker to puff a small amount of smoke around the entrance to the skep the bees will all fly away,

The beekeeper would have time to take enough of the honeycomb out of the skep before the smoke would clear and the bees would find their way back into the skep.

A system was also devised in the nineteenth century where a skep was turned upside down to reveal the honeycomb and bees. An empty skep was balanced on the rim of the lower skep at an angle. The beekeeper would then beat a steady rhythm on the outside of the bottom skep and all the bees would climb upwards into the empty skep. The beekeeper would then take as much honeycomb as he needed and leave enough in the bottom skep for the bees.

Modern beekeepers try to keep healthy bees and hope to keep all their colonies over winter. Generally in January the bees will have consumed all the honey left in their skep or hive so the beekeeper will insert a sugar solution or paste into the hive or skep. Skeps are now mainly used for the collections of swarms (Note the similar shape of a swarm of bees to the shape of the skep.)

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