

Swansea & District Beekeepers Newsletter Gwenynwyr Abertawe a'r Cylch



Gerti's Part-finished Straw Skep.

Which shows the straw being fed through a 'girth' before being bound into the skep with a split cane binding.

See article on page 2

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Editor: D. Salkild

Topical Tips.

Swarming. Spring is here, and with it the swarming season is upon us! May and June are prime months for swarming though it is not unknown in April and has happened much, much later in the year. It is a natural phenomenon and is the bees' way of increasing their species.

However, there are some ways of minimising the swarming urge (if the urge hasn't already started) though they don't always work. Replacing old brood comb with 4 or 5 sheets of new foundation at the spring inspection gives the workers plenty of work to do and sometimes helps. Similarly, a Baily frame change in early May gives the workers a large task to build the new cells and usually keeps them too busy to swarm.

An important factor is to ensure that the queen's pheromones are free to circulate within the hive by not having hoards of brace comb. This is also said to reduce the swarming tendency. Remember that a young queen's pheromones are stronger than those of an old queen, so having a young queen is preferable, though once again, it is not a guarantee that they will stay put.

The only way to positively stop a swarm is to remove one of the three elements of the colony, either the queen, the flying bees or the brood. If any one of these is removed from the hive, they will not swarm. This is the basis of all artificial swarm techniques and is usually carried out once you have found evidence of swarming, i.e. queen cells in the hive.

If you do find queen cells, there are many techniques available to deal with the situation. They all revolve round splitting the colony into two or more parts, allowing a new queen to develop and take over the old hive whilst the old queen is moved to a new hive. All good beekeeping books mention these artificial swarming techniques.

Just be aware that not all queen cells are swarm cells. They may be supersedure cells so don't be too hasty in removing them before being certain. Swarm cells are usually numerous, found on many frames throughout the brood area and are most likely to be on the sides and bottom of frames. Supersedure cells tend to be fewer and are usually located nearer the centre of the frames.

One prevention technique to remove the brood is a shook swarm. This also has the advantage of giving the workers plenty of work building comb on the new foundation and, by having an uncluttered hive, allows free circulation of pheromones. It is said that a shook swarm can result in both a healthier colony and a better crop of honey, though to be honest, I have never done one.

If you don't feel up to this sort of manipulation, use the conventional method of checking through the brood at weekly intervals to search for queen cells and, if you find them, do an artificial swarm. If you intend to follow this path, make sure to have your spare equipment readily available before it is needed.

Looking through some colonies last week, one was choc-a-bloc with bees and brood, with numerous drone cells spread throughout the hive, though no sign of queen cells being built. They had even filled the eke with brood and honey. That colony is almost certain to swarm in the near future and is an ideal candidate for a shook swarm. Some of the brood from it could then be distributed to other hives so as to strengthen them.

The Gower Show ~ Honey Show Schedule

Enclosed with this newsletter is a copy of the 2018 Honey Section Schedule. You will see that it differs from previous schedules by having more pages and a different layout but, at the heart of it, the Honey Show Schedule is the same as it has been previously

Gill Lyons has asked me to mention that stewards will be needed to help in the Honey Tent and in the Bee Tent on Show Day, Sunday 5th August and also on the two previous days in setting it all up. **Volunteers who steward for half a day on show day will get a free entry pass to the show ground.**

If you would like this opportunity of helping on a fun day out, contact Gill by email at gillml@btinternet.com or by phone on 01792 233169 to make arrangements. She will be drawing up a timetable for stewarding so let her know your preferences, i.e. helping in the Bee Tent or stewarding in the marquee.

Skep Beekeeping

Whilst writing the last newsletter, I was asked if I could write a little about skeps, however, it was at short notice and the space had already been taken up with other articles. So, here are some notes about skeps.

The interest had been sparked by the skep making session run by Gerti on 17th February, where eight of our members had tuition from Tina Cunningham in this ancient art. I am told it was a very successful day, with people learning the skills and each producing the basis of a skep, though they needed to be finished off at home as skeps take quite a time to complete. Incidentally, Gerti is proposing another one-day course on Saturday 20th October if enough people are interested.

On the day, straw was used for the main body and split cane was used for the bindings. Sleps have been made from other materials in the past, particularly wicker, which is almost always covered with a mud, clay and horsehair daub, but it all depended which materials were at hand at the time. Agricultural workers had the choice and used whichever was available.

The earliest known representation of a wicker skep dates to 1325 - 1335, illustrated in the Luttrell Psalter in the British Museum, though they were used centuries before that date. The earliest representation of a coiled straw skep is dated 1475 in a German book *Buch der Natur*, printed in Augsburg. From their shape, domed on top, it is clear that they are made from coiled straw, not wicker. Recent archaeological excavations at Coppergate, York, have turned up the remains of a straw skep, dated to the twelfth century.

In making a skep, the straw needs to be formed into a tight rope about 20 to 30mm diameter and this is accomplished by using a 'girth' (Tina called it a gauge) which is a circular tube, made in the past from a section of cow horn, but nowadays more likely to be a plastic or metal tube. Strands of straw are fed into the girth and bound into the skep with bindings made of any available material such as strips from bramble, cane, rattan, or even binder twine. Tina used split cane at the class. Some of these binding materials need soaking in water to render them flexible enough for handling.

The most difficult part of skep making is the start, where just a few strands of straw are bound into a tight circle. Then, as the circle grows larger, strands are gradually added till the rope reaches its full diameter, controlled by the diameter of the girth. With cow horn, it was possible to cut it to any convenient diameter, plastic tube, however, is set.

The other tool used is an awl, which is a hollow tube sharpened to a point at one end, through which the binding is fed whilst tying the coils together. Historically, chicken bones have been used for this purpose but today's class used a small metal tube with a wooden handle. Incidentally, the tools, straw and bindings were all supplied by Tina.

Although only made of straw, skeps are remarkably strong. This was demonstrated to me when, years ago, I went on a skep making course in Hartpury Agricultural College, Hertfordshire, in the days when it was a beekeeping centre of excellence. The tutor stood on a skep he had made and it easily took his weight. In use, skeps can last many years. The college had a room full of ancient examples of the craft on display, all shapes and sizes.

Nowadays, most straw is cut into small pieces whilst being harvested by modern agricultural equipment. There are however, sources of long straw still available, for thatching etc.

Historically, most skeps were relatively small, somewhat smaller than the volume of a national brood chamber and bees were encouraged to swarm. In some cases, smaller skeps were put on top acting as supers. This gave the advantage of not having brood to deal with when taking the honey off. For exhibition purposes, and for honey to sell, bell glasses were often put on top as supers. The rows of comb showed through the glass. When this was done, there would have been a straw cover over the bell glass to keep the light out.

Concerning the size of skeps, Charles Butler wrote in 1623:

"Hives are to be made of any size between a bushell and half a bushell: that any swarme, of what quantity or time soever, may be fitly hived. Lesse than half a bushell will not contain a competent stall, and more then a bushell is found too bigge for any company to continue, and thrive together."

Sleps usually didn't have removable frames, the comb was built against the straw shell, so harvesting the honey necessitated driving the bees off first. This was done in a number of ways, sometimes killing the colony by holding it over a sulphur fire, sometimes by inverting the skep and drumming the sides to drive the bees up into a new skep placed above it. However it was done, the comb had then to be cut out to reach the honey.

In the previous paragraph, I said that skeps usually didn't have movable frames but there is always an exception to the rule. One such was an 1865 German skep, the Gravenhorst hive or 'Bogenstülper', a large barrel vaulted, flat ended straw hive which was turned upside down to access the frames.

Today, skep beekeeping is illegal in some countries simply because examination for disease is not possible, but I have heard that some beekeepers have skeps as 'Garden Ornaments', and if a swarm happens to make its home there, well, what can the beekeeper do!

In practice, straw skeps need to be kept dry so they were either covered with a straw hackle (like a thatched cover) or put into a shelter, called a Bee Bole. These were cavities built into walls round gardens or orchards, but some were exotic, like the one at Hartpury Church in Gloucestershire, made of stone. However, this is another subject and will be covered in a future newsletter.

Skep beekeeping flourished for centuries in U.K. until the movable frame hive finally came into prominence in the early twentieth century. I copy some information from the BBKA booklet (priced sixpence) dated 1882, in which only 2 of its 79 pages were devoted to skeps, an indicator of advanced thinking of the times. It reads:

The movable comb-hive, hereafter described, offers so many advantages over those with fixed or immovable combs, that the Association is labouring for its introduction amongst all classes of beekeepers, and, in consequence, but a short description of straw skeps will here be given. These should be flat-topped rather than dome-shaped, and should have a large hole in the centre of the crown, as this gives facilities both for feeding and supering, as explained in subsequent chapters. Their sizes can hardly be stated, since, in fertile, honey-producing districts, large skeps secure the best results, while, where the pasturage is poor, those of less size will be found more profitable: but cottagers generally use them too small. The skep is both cheap and portable, and if kept dry it affords sufficient protection; but this is nearly all that can be said in its favour Later, it goes on to mention their use in collecting swarms.

Even then, straw skeps were being advertised, some of them quite exotic, for example the "Neighbour's Improved Cottage Hive" made by George Neighbour and Sons, which had wooden framed glass windows in the brood area and a thermometer built in, with facilities for three glass bell jars above the brood area for honey collection.

Although movable frame hives were rapidly being accepted as the best way to keep bees, skeps were still being sold well into the twentieth century. Incidentally, both Thorne and Maisemore have skeps in their catalogues today, though more as marketing tools or as swarm catchers.

I would like to thank Gertie for the photograph of her "skep in progress", for her information on the course and for her notes on skep making. Hopefully we will see an exhibition of these skeps later in the year at the Gower Show. They could also be exhibited in class 26, 'A Piece of 'Homemade Beekeeping Equipment'.

If you are interested in joining the next skep-making course, please email Gerti on gerti.axtmann@gmail.com. Costs will again be £50.00 per person. D. S.

Ed: In this article, reference has been made to "The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting" 1999, by Eva Crane; "The Quest for the Perfect Hive" 2010, by Gene Kritsky; "Bees, their Habits, Management and Treatment" c 1870s by Rev. J. C. Wood; "Modern Beekeeping" 1882, BBKA, "The Feminine Monarchie" 1623, by Charles Butler: and "Bee Boles and Bee Houses" c 1990s, by A. M. Foster.

With Charles Butlers book, I took the liberty to using the modern 's' and 'v' in place of the archaic 'f' and 'u' but have kept to the original spelling.

What the Papers Say

Good news for gardeners! An article in the **Daily Mail** on Thursday 15th Mar. mentioned a study at the University of Massachusetts, which highlighted the fact that a fortnightly 'lazy lawn mowing approach' allowed the growth of wild flowers such as dandelions and clover which the bees visit for forage. Dr. Susannah Lerman, the lead author, said "Mowing less frequently can improve pollinator habits". The university asked 16 gardeners to mow at different intervals and counted the bees that visited the lawns. Between May and September, they counted 1,425 bees in gardens which were mown weekly, but in gardens mown fortnightly there were 1,903. Gardens allowed to grow for three weeks saw just 1,259. In the article, they intimate that in two weeks the grass doesn't grow tall enough to hinder the insects access to the flowers.

An article in the **Daily Telegraph** On 26th Jan. this year suggested that urban beekeeping poses a threat to wild bees, based on research being done at the Zoology Department of Cambridge University. The gist of the article was that honeybees remove pollen and nectar from the environment to the detriment of other pollinators and species of wild bees and, effectively out-compete them.

They state that the crises in global pollinator decline has been associated with one species above all, the western honeybee. They go on to say that saving the honeybee does not help wildlife because western honeybees are a commercially managed species that can have negative effects on their immediate environment.

Referring to the demise of wild species, the article cites an example of the 'great yellow bumblebee', which was once widespread across the country but is now only found in some coastal areas of Scotland.

Ed. There is a lot of truth in this study, however, I feel that it overlooked other major reasons for the decline of pollinators, such as the vast reduction of habitat through commercial farming and the use of pesticides on agricultural land and in gardens. Of course, this has a knock-on effect with other insects and birds too.

On Sunday 11th Feb. the **Daily Telegraph** ran an article on the Flow Hive, going into its inception in Australia, development and sales. Some facts from the article are interesting:

- 1) It took about 10 years to perfect the Flow Hive principle.
- 2) With crowd funding they raised £150,000 within 24 hours which rose to £8,800,000 in two months and had orders for 25,000 hives from 130 countries. It was one of the world's most successful crowd fundings.
- 3) At that early stage they were "terrified" by the prospect of having to produce hives when they had virtually no production facilities.
- 4) They overcame this and to date, they have sold 49,000 Flow Hives worldwide.

Ed: Boy, what a story!! This remarkable development is probably the first major change in hive construction in over 150 years. If you know of anyone with practical experience of a Flow Hive, let me know, as I would like to hear how well they do in U.K. conditions.

"More About Bees" by Tom Davies.

Finally our weather is improving, and I have been doing a bit of tidying up. I have tomato seedlings in the greenhouse that I picked out into 3 inch pots, five or six days ago, and they are looking good, a little later than usual, but should come on quickly given some decent weather.

Lots of my dahlias have survived and are beginning to sprout, so I have quite a bit to do with them, like splitting the largest clumps for replacing any losses. My Michaelmas daisies are looking very good, so with some seedlings of French marigold I have coming on nicely, my bee garden should not be short of plants.

The Asian hornet has been found on a cauliflower, (Daily Mail, Saturday 14th April) which was grown in Boston, Lincolnshire, so all efforts are being made to locate any nests in that area. Let's hope for success in finding and destroying any, our bees have enough pests to get on with just now.

The lawn here could do with a trim so later I will check the mower to get it ready for starting up. I have fresh oil for it and have given the plug a good cleaning. The wind here has come up a bit and is drying the grass nicely.

One job I meant to do over the winter was giving my garden bench a coat of paint, but did not get it done, so still have things to do. The bench was also a favourite of a cat we called Whinger. One day I went up the garden and she was sleeping on the bench with her legs up in the air catching the sun. I said to her "You should be patrolling the patch to keep intruders away" and gave her a prod in the belly.

Nothing more true than the old saying "Let sleeping animals lie", took a week for my fingers to heal up!
More next time, Tom.

Forthcoming Events

More details of all the events mentioned can be found on our [website](#)

May

Tuesday 8th 7.00 p.m. Talk by Stephen Davies: Why do we use a queen excluder and what happens if we don't use it.

Weekend of 12th & 13th A short course on Handling Skills will be run by the NDB at Pontarddulais Comprehensive School. This is an intensive two-day course tutored by Tony Harris and Alistair Welch. According to the NDB website, these courses are aimed at beekeepers with some experience of the craft; they are not aimed at novices. I understand that there will be both theoretical and practical beekeeping involved. See the [NDB website](#) for more details or to book etc.

Weekend of 18th, 19th & 20th RWAS Spring Festival at Builth Wells, this is a Bee Tent Outing. Note: Set up will be done on Friday 18th.

June

Saturday 9th Bee Tent outing to 'Go Wild', held at Brynbach Park, Tredegar.

Tuesday 12th Talk by Bernard Diaper, What a Judge is Looking For on the Show Bench (in preparation for the Gower Show).

Saturday 23rd Bee Tent outing Pontarddulais Carnival.

July

Tuesday 10th Talk by Kate Davidson (PhD Student at Swansea University) – title TBA.

Weekend of 13th, 14th & 15th, WBKA 75th Anniversary Summer School. To be held at Aberystwyth University. Information on the programme, costs and booking form is available on the [WBKA website](#).

Monday 23rd to Thursday 26th Welsh National Honey Show, to be held during the Royal Welsh Show at Builth Wells.

Tuesday 31st Pre-Gower Show meeting at New Lodge. Gill Lyons will be there to receive show entries and give out show passes.

August

Friday 3rd Start preparation of marquee in the Gower Show.

Saturday 4th Continue set up, stage exhibits, Judging starts at 2.00 p.m.

Sunday 5th Gower Show day.

Wednesday 8th Bee Tent outing Vale of Glamorgan Show, Fonmon Castle.

September

Tuesday 11th Talk, Preparing for Winter, by Stephen Davies.

October

Tuesday 9th Panel Show ~ all questions welcome.

Saturday 20th Second Skep Making day course.

November

Tuesday 13th The Society Honey Show.

December

Saturday 1st Christmas Dinner at the Rake & Riddle.

January 2019

Tuesday 8th Talk, preparing for Spring, by Ade Bowen.

Contact Numbers

Chairman: David O'Carroll dsocarroll@yahoo.co.uk

Secretary: Post vacant sdbks.secretary@gmail.com

Treasurer: John Gale 07855 451 781

“When Bees Were Bees” by Tom Davies

A step back in time now to the year 1906, from a small book called “Bee Appliances and How to Use Them”, written by a Mr. E. H. Taylor, who ran a beekeeping supplies firm, as well as being a very able beekeeper in his own right, with many years experience of the craft behind him.

At that time a great many keepers were still using skeps, and Mr. Taylor was of the opinion that the craft would benefit by a change to wooden hives with removable frames, so the small book was an introduction to modern ways of keeping bees safely as well as helping to make an income from them.

Mr. Taylor described various hives that were in use at that time, which included a type of W.B.C. hive, which had had been used for quite a few years, but one hive in particular caught my attention and I think it is worth a mention, because of its difference. I had never heard about it so it could not have been a popular hive.

It was called “The Combination Hive” and the brood box was designed to take 15 frames. The thinking behind a larger number of frames was that a larger brood body box could be reduced by substituting some dummies, while a smaller box is fixed in size.

The frames were installed parallel to the entrance instead of at right angles. Mr. Taylor stated that “as long as the bees were happy in the hive, it did not matter which way the frames were”. On reflection I would not have been very happy as it would have added quite a bit of time at inspection times, I think.

More next time, Tom.

In the Next Issue: An article on Bee Boles.

The deadline for articles / items for the next issue is **June 15th**