

# **Skep Beekeeping: Research, Resurgence and Resilience.**

*By Chris Park*

New eyes on skep beekeeping has been part of the reason for a resurgence of interest in bees and beekeeping that has blossomed, including a rich diversification in styles of honey bee keeping, a widening of the perspectives of beekeepers and a rebirth of sensitivities towards more bee centred approaches.

We are seeing a renaissance of more natural ways of beekeeping. Natural beekeeping groups, trusts and societies are proliferating as one of the many responses to recent and current problems with beekeeping practices, pests and diseases. Hence, keeping honey bees in skeps is recently receiving interest from those seeking new solutions, old ways or natural inspirations. It has always been of interest to those with an interest in the history and the heritage of honey, and now it is fascinating folk with an interest in the resilience of ancient technologies, the simplicity of natural and locally sourced materials and from those looking for a more bee centered approach (assuming that no-one is interested in reviving the practice of sulphuring the bees, and can I reassure you that I have not yet met anybody who is).

Our passions and inspirations as beekeepers to ensure and entrust a harmonious and sustainable craft can be vast and varied. Some folks passion might be artificially inseminating queens and establishing breeding apiaries whilst another's may be keeping bees in hives designed upon Pythagorean principles and leaving them all the honey... all with valid and fascinating results. We have historically seen beekeepers developing their own unique styles, quirks and ways of working, influenced by inherited systems, mentored techniques, beekeeping courses and innovated practices. Over the last couple of centuries, due to many different factors, an homogenisation and refinement had occurred in beekeeping practices, and the choice of a few standard box hives, until fairly recently, had been the norm. However, human nature ensures that you'll rarely find two beekeepers with exactly the same opinions and preferences, even if using the same equipment. It is often the case that once a new beekeeper has found their feet and confidence, gained enough experience and practice and completed ample research, they will adopt and develop their own preferences and practices. Some sound advice for many aspects of life might be "to find one's own truth... and then live

it", whilst, within good reason and ethic, respecting the truths and inspirations of others. Inspiration indeed may be one of the keys to a marvelous existence.

From the middle of the seventeenth century, wooden, stacking hives and a myriad of contraptions for keeping bees began to be developed and were marketed. About a century later, moveable frame hives were being designed and the BBKA and Central Association of Beekeepers were founded. Beforehand, some had considered early frame hives as "observation" hives and that their primary value was for education and science. The irrepressible spirits of enquiry and science have continued to progress our awareness of apiculture, honey bee behaviour and biology. However, the practice of keeping bees in a basket didn't altogether disappear. Skeps continued to be used widely as swarm collecting vessels par excellence. Skep beekeeping, in both wicker and straw, was persevered in small pockets in Britain and Europe. It was preserved and rekindled by dedicated individuals and skeppists. Mostly continued by those beyond the net of the media, perhaps the eccentric and cantankerous, maybe the romantic and the non-conformist, certainly by Scottish crofters, by German heathlanders<sup>1</sup> who managed skeps for cut comb and wax and by Dutch lowlanders who hired skeps out for pollination purposes and islanders beyond the ninth wave.

One can also seek out conversation with skeppists, makers, enthusiasts, craftspeople, bee masters and those who have professionally trod the paths of research. Some contemporary research into skep beekeeping has been pioneered notably by The International Bee Research Association (IBRA) who archive a wealth of images, artefacts and articles. Through the skilful work of Eva Crane and her precious work *"The Archaeology of Beekeeping"*<sup>2</sup>, and through Frank Alston, practically and concisely in his book *"Skeps, Their History, Making and Use"*<sup>3</sup>. It is also of interest to mention the small publication by Rev. E. Nobbs through BIBBA (Bee Improvement and Bee Breeders Association), *"Make your own skep and revive a lost art"* and another pamphlet titled *"Skep Making"* by Toon Brecklemans. The craft and practice of skep making within these shores and beyond owes much to the following notable experts: Firstly to Karl Showler<sup>4</sup>, a prolific writer of articles<sup>5</sup> and essays and a skep making demonstrator; To the tireless commercial skep maker David Chubb of Cotswold Bee Skeps<sup>6</sup>; To the basket and skep maker Martin Buckle and his informative website<sup>7</sup>; To George Hawthorne and his craft. Needless to say, as with all aspects of life, you can find much to read and look at on the subject across the World Wide Web.



Bees build comb to within a beespace of the floor. Note the new comb.  
*Photo: Chris Park.*

## **Skep beekeeping literature**

Looking further back to a time when skep beekeeping was more common place, there are many charming and educational academic texts. Their scientific knowledge and accuracy is of course dated and limited, however the insight into the mechanics, intricacies and logistics of skep beekeeping is invaluable. Here I list just a few in chronological order with some quotations:

### **C. Butler's magnum opus, "*The Feminine Monarchie*" (1614).**

This wondrous glimpse into the life of an ancient bee master is very enjoyable once you get your mind around the spelling and flowery language. He managed slightly egg shaped skeps. *"The bees do best defend themselves from cold, when they hang around together in the manner of a Sphere or a Globe (which the philosophers account the most perfect figure) and therefore the nearer the hive cometh to the fashion thereof, the warmer and safer be the bees"*. He says of fastening a hackle (straw/reed cover) to a skep: *"first take a litch of strong reedes, and having wetted and wound it a little, put it about the neck of the hackle, and knitting the ends in a half knot, girt the hackle hard with it"*.

### **T. Wildman's "*A Treatise On The Management Of Bees*" (1768) is beautifully illustrated.**

Strictly not a skeppist, but a pioneer of a cylindrical straw hive with top bars, akin to the 'Greek Hive'. A fascinating document. His preferred material being straw at a time of early wooden alternatives... *"straw hives, as far as regards the bees, are preferable to any other habitations, because the straw is not so liable to be heated by the rays of the sun at noon, to which they are generally exposed, and is better security against the cold, than any kind of wood or other material."* The treatise is woven throughout with poetry, and wise words from the likes of Virgil and Ovid, and anecdotes and observations of his contemporaries engaged in innovation. Wildman was an avid spokesman for not sulphuring the bees to harvest honey and wax.

**H. Taylor's "*The Bee-Keepers Manual*" (1838) discusses both straw and wooden hives.** He goes into some nice detail on hive stands and floor boards. *"In size the floor-board ought to be a little larger than the exterior of the hive, from whence it should be chamfered down every way, to three eighths of an inch at the edge."* He preferred a small capacity skep for warmth.

**A. Pettigrew's "*The Handy Book of Bees*" (1870) returns the reader to a strict focus on**

skeps. I find it to be a very handy and amusing book. Known as "the Bee-man's son" due to his father earning the title "the Bee-man" he preferred skeps of large capacity for maximum yield of honey and larger swarms. *"The shape of hives may be rather conical at the top, or flat-crowned. It is a matter of taste and convenience this. Some bee-masters like one sort and some the other."* He also comments on artificial swarming with skeps.

Standing upon the shoulders of these writers, researchers, crafts people and skep makers, through experimenting with materials, through working skeps in all seasons, one can hone a contemporary practice of skep beekeeping and expand a skep apiary utilising various systems, shelters and preferences as I have done. Of course, the primary source of learning is in the practice, one's relationship with the bees and the seasons, the materials, the dynamics between the honey bee colonies and the environment they are situated within. My skep apiary is experimental and contains skep hives of various sizes and materials, utilising several different shelters and systems of management. Some times I am harvesting wax and honey, other times keeping colonies for early swarms the following year, sometimes "driving the bees" into empty skeps, at other times settling swarms. I have also added open mesh floors to some of the skep stands. There is much more to do and learn. I am currently experimenting with mixing different daubs or clooms for wicker hives, different styles of hackle and varying the position of the entrance of the skep.

It is interesting that bees in skeps, being left to manage their own comb and be in control of their own ventilation predominantly draw their comb the "cold way" (in parallel lines pointing toward the entrance). I usually face the entrances southwards, and had wondered if the North-South alignment was perhaps magnetic, however I recently had an entrance facing WSW and they aligned the comb the "cold way" still. I am constantly enchanted and surprised at their behaviour. Last winter a colony in a wicker hive (sometimes referred to as an alveary) with a letter box entrance sealed their door with a curtain of propolis, leaving just two bee sized round holes.

I find that teaching skep making and skep beekeeping and exhibiting is also of great value. I run skep making and skep beekeeping courses all throughout the year and visit a number of clubs and associations. I am continually meeting like-minded folk and always learning something new, hearing anecdotes from someone's family history or a fascinating piece of

folklore.



One of Chris Park's displays at 2015  
BBKA Spring Convention.  
*Photo: Roger Patterson.*

However one's beekeeping practice develops, skep beekeeping entails extra responsibilities. It is not just a matter of throwing a swarm in a basket and away you go. In some parts of the U.S.A. keeping bees on fixed comb rather than moveable frames is illegal. Developing best practice is important, whether you wish to establish a working apiary for harvesting honey and wax and swarms, or if you are simply keeping bees for pollination purposes, or for simple pleasures and enjoyment. Bees have seen aeons come and go, and those that aren't "kept" can do perfectly well by themselves if their environment is abundant and healthy. They are wild animals and the honest transaction of the keeper who harvests honey is thus; one gives them a good home, protects them from pests and diseases and in return takes a harvest. Simplicity may be one of the keys to success. Within skep beekeeping, the advantages are numerous for the bees and the keeper, as outlined in Article 1, but the disadvantages demand careful responsibility. These will be outlined in Article 2.

The other articles are available on Dave Cushman's website.

Chris Park. <http://acorneducation.com/homepage.html>

## References

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upbONroWPic>
2. Crane, E. (1983) *The Archaeology of Beekeeping*. London:Duckworth
3. Alston, Frank (1987) *Skeps Their History Making and Use*. Hebden Bridge:Northern Bee Books
4. Showler, K. (2011) *Essays in Beekeeping History*.
5. <http://www.beedata.com/data2/skeps.html>
6. <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/cotswoldbeeskeps/pageb.htm>
7. <http://www.martinatnewton.com/#!/beekeeping-pages,-skeps>

This article is similar to the one that was published in BBKA News Issue 208 December 2012. It is the second of three articles by Chris Park that are on this website, although BBKA News published the articles in four issues.

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