Skep Beekeeping, developing best practice.

By Chris Park

In Articles 1 & 2 we have "looked to the past to look to the future", explored the resurgence, resources and traditions, and now the development of best practice is demanded of us. Quality beekeeping entails social responsibilities, etiquette and community mindedness... the practice of skep beekeeping accentuates these values.

Skep beekeeping may not be something you would ever contemplate exploring, but some of you may, or it may have already have happened to you by accident. As earlier articles have outlined, the advantages of skep beekeeping are many, yet how one approaches the fewer, but major disadvantages is crucial. The most significant problem to tackle is the difficulty in inspecting the fixed comb and perhaps a more minor complication is the honey/wax harvest. Before I write about these, lets first begin with the basics... siting an apiary.

Siting an apiary

When choosing a site for skeps, with all the usual considerations, and whether you'll house them under straw hackles, inside bee boles, enclosed in a bee house or on shelves in a shelter, it's proximity to the public is of greater importance. Especially so if you adopt a swarming system of management. Swarm control systems do exist for skeps, however it is wise to site them as if you were using a swarming system as your management styles may change over the years, and you may not always anticipate swarming. Due to the restricted access to viewing brood comb, and because queen cells may not always be apparent, one may wish to develop a greater awareness and sensitivity to the behaviour of the colony to asses when a colony will swarm. This skill will take some time to hone. Swarming bees are commonly good tempered, and however educational and fascinating they may be to some, the sound, sight and energy of the bees may still provoke fear and alarm in others. Swarms may become aggressive if they've been hanging around for a while due to bad weather and if their honey stomach reserves become depleted.

We could summarise that - life is better on a full stomach and skeps are more sensitively situated away from people and animals. Lure hives or skeps may be reassuring and an out apiary to house swarms of unknown origin is a good practice. Looking back through time,

skeppists and cottage beekeepers, or one of their family or colleagues, were generally around to hear or see a swarm, settle them or raise the alarm. A contemporary, conventional life is very rarely so sedentary. Today's broad horizoned lifestyle means that one is often far from home even if you keep your bees there.

A skep in Chris Park's skep apiary.
Photo: Chris Park

So here's the paradoxical situation... you've conscientiously sited your skep apiary a good distance from the public and perhaps your home, but you've settled into a system of management that allows your bees to swarm (ensuring natural re-queening, vibrant bees and an effective form of varroa control). You lose many swarms and then what? The majority of us simply won't have the time or will to bother with swarming skeps. There may be some natural beekeepers who might consider these colonies as semi-wild, and be happy that they might be providing the world with healthy, happy bees that have been chemical free and developed hygienic behaviour. There won't be many unshackled, extraordinary individuals who experience a spiritual epiphany, and feel that the soul of skep beekeeping is luring one's stressed out, thinly spread, disconnected highly mechanised human organism and all that is wrong with the world back "home" to a simpler, closer, deeper, more sustainable and healthier relationship with all that resides and relates within one's horizon, in-sourcing village sufficiency,

real community and integrated aspirations... if there are, changes may begin to appear in their lives. Fundamentally, if you mind about losing the odd swarm, you'll need to give proper consideration to siting your skeps close to home but away from those who may be alarmed by swarms. This will be fairly simple if you live in a rural area, not so easy if suburban, difficult if urban.

The capacity of skeps varies historically from as little as 18 litres up to 50 litres. The skeppists who preferred to keep bees in small skeps certainly enjoyed an early swarming system. Even those who preferred big skeps still sang the praises of allowing bees to swarm. To summarise his chapter on swarming and non-swarming systems in *"The Handy Book of Bees",* Pettigrew finishes with, *"we greatly prefer the swarming mode of management. Hives that do not swarm are often affected and made useless by that terrible and incurable disease of 'foul brood' ".* He also gives several accounts of hives that had been left to swarm naturally reaching a greater weight than those that hadn't by harvest time.

Healthy bees

How does one aspire to keep healthy bees in skeps or other fixed comb habitats that are not easily inspected? Once a suitable site for your skep is decided upon, be it a bole in your garden wall or a shelter at a club apiary, the next responsible decision to make is how to stock it.

Throwing a swarm of bees into a basket and letting them get on with it could be considered as irresponsible, yet one might point out that wild colonies of honey bees manage themselves and no one is responsible for them. A colony in an old stone farmhouse wall can yearly send out large healthy swarms of little black native bees from their undisturbed strongholds. Someone else may point out that a wild colony may have collapsed a few times, been reoccupied several times over many years, and may be living with a disease. Another may highlight the fact that they may have been keeping at bay, or living with, many of the pests and diseases that conventional beekeepers work so hard to eradicate. Whatever is pointed out, the provenance of swarms is most important. Needless to say, the most assured quality of healthy swarms is from your own stock, assuming your own stock is healthy. You may of course know of the "bee whisperers" amongst us, those who can lovingly turn around a dwindling or bad tempered colony through their care and the spirit with which it is administered... enhanced by a well tended environment and the quality of forage. However, this may not be your calling, and those

within your "honey bee horizon" may not appreciate you siting colonies of unknown origin nearby.

In a nutshell, a swarm of certain and healthy provenance or a shook swarm from a good colony is a perfect way to stock a skep.

It would be polite to inform your local club and neighbouring bee keepers of your skep or skep apiary. They can be a fascinating addition to an apiary safari. I am assuming that most of the folk that read this publication are experienced in and aware of the intricacies of keeping bees in moveable frame hives. If you are not, then it would certainly be wise to understand the way bees are predominantly kept at this present time and understand the varying crafts of your contemporaries. To visually and experientially learn from keeping one or two easily inspected colonies can only help to improve your understanding and appreciation of honey bees and their behaviour and improve your beekeeping. It will also be reassuring for a bee inspector if you keep one or two colonies on moveable frame hives in the same apiary, as a kind of control. There is no guarantee that they may contract a disease before a skep may, but the possibility of exposure to disease is greater. It may be the case that bee keepers are the cause of the spread of many pathogens through bad practice... but it is also possible that one little bee may one day alight herself upon a piece of toast within foraging distance that is spread with non EEC honey that may contain pathogens of a foul brood. Hence, it is a good idea not to site a skep or any other kind of fixed comb hive within foraging distance of a wholesale honey supplier.
(That was where the article in the January 2013 BBKA News finished. What follows is the fourth article. R.P.)

There are varying degrees of skep inspection:

A simple and enlightening first step would be to observe the skep entrance. Whether you have a channel cut into the floor board for the bees to alight upon and crawl inwards underneath the skep, or a letterbox entrance somewhere further up, a great deal can be learnt watching and listening to the bees come and go. For example, if pollen is being brought home then its a sign that they have brood, if lots of pollen is coming in then one can discern that there is a lot of brood, or a well mated queen beginning to lay. If there are yellow or brown spots of faeces then there is dysentery, and a possible nosema problem. If one hears piping or tooting then

swarms are preparing to fly. If a colony goes still and silent in good weather during a nectar flow, a prime swarm may be about to issue forth. The behaviour of bees and any debris at the entrance may also tell you of queenlessness, robbing, Chronic Bee Paralysis Virus (CBPV), mouse activity or starvation and more.

A gem of a work and the only one solely dedicated to this subject is *"At the hive entrance: Observation handbook"* by H. Storch. (European apiculture editions 1985). It can be read, printed or downloaded at:-
http://www.scribd.com/doc/88176574/At-the-Hive-Entrance

A second step you may like to employ is hefting the skep, keeping it on the stand and board so as not to break the propolis seal. This art will take some time to master, and for the wisdom of one's flesh and sinew to calibrate and assess the weight of the colony. The kinesthetic and sensitive tactile qualities that will be fostered within you may bestow all sorts of blessings upon your life in this increasingly abstract and mechanised world.

I like to put open mesh floors into skep stands. A third step may be removing and inspecting a tray beneath a mesh floor. Upon this tray there'll be a wealth of information about what is happening inside. You will see where the bees are uncapping stores and brood, where they are building new comb, various pollen loads, varroa, evidence of hygienic behaviour - (chewed varroa mites, white antenna or nymph parts. Note the sterling work of Ron Hoskins and the Swindon Honey bee Conservation Group www.swindonhoneybeeconservation.org.uk), evidence of dysentery and other conditions or diseases. Plus, you will be implementing a natural way of helping the colony resist varroa. A tray beneath a mesh floor can also lure the wax moth to lay eggs there instead of the colony above. If you don't like the idea of a mesh floor, the skep stand or floor boards can be changed for a clean one, and the debris on the old one can be examined.

Penultimately, if what you observe so far is cause for alarm, you may wish to upturn the skep and look for queen cells or evidence of swarming, for a healthy brood check one can part the combs and if a good amount of healthy sealed brood is present fears may be eased. As Frank Alston wrote, *"a good slab of solidly sealed brood is a fair indication that all is well".* You'll be able to count the number of plates of brood comb, assess honey stores and perhaps spot a

queen.

The nature and frequency of exposed inspection of skeps is a double edged sword. On one hand, the less you inspect the better. The bees are less disturbed and the pheromones at the heart of their world remain happy ones, propolis is not broken, their temperature is not lowered, comb is not broken, bees are not squashed or smoked, bees are not stressed or put at risk of disease entering their dark temple of sound and smell, taste and touch. On the other hand, you'll be less aware if a disease has entered their world.

Upturned skep showing "spleets". *Photo: Chris Park*

Ultimately, In the worst case scenario, if a skep does need to bee checked for foul brood, the combs can be cut out and inspected one by one as the cross sticks or "spleets" are slowly removed. A skep comb cutting knife that is usually used for harvesting is the right tool for the job. It consists of a blade that protrudes at a right angle from the end of a long handle. The combs can be carefully put back again if no sign of disease is present. The bees wouldn't thank you for it, and the bee inspector probably wouldn't either, but the job can be done.

Natural honeycomb can be transferred from one place to another with due care and attention. A few years back, a friend and I removed a colony from a roof that had been there for a number of weeks. We simply took the combs out one by one from the closest end, inspected them and fastened them into an empty skep with cross sticks (cross sticks, also known as spleets, are pinned through the skep at right angles to the combs to brace them against falling out or falling against each other whilst upturning the skep). The straw skep had a flat top with a three inch feeding/expansion hole in the top. The colony was fed and built up well.

Apiary hygiene

Good apiary hygiene is of heightened importance in a skep apiary. To limit the spread of disease is paramount. As you most likely know, this can be done by preventing robbing and drifting, keeping the apiary clean and tidy, keeping any equipment clean and disinfected. Mice are a possible source of spreading disease. If a skep is well guarded from mice (a simple mouse guard can be pinned to the entrance) one may still build a nest on top of it in the winter months. It is good practice to check under hackles or skep shelters from time to time through the darker half of the year.

Harvesting

Harvesting honey comes in various forms... assuming no-one is bent on reviving the practice of sulphuring or drowning the bees. The simplest way is to cut out some of the honeycomb from the outermost edges, sometimes referred to as "castrating" the comb. Ekes and Nadirs may be utilised in this method to increase the capacity of a colony one wishes to build up bigger if it hasn't sent out a prime swarm, and then harvest or castrate later in the season. Another successful method is to have a "brood" skep with a three inch circular hole in the top and consecutive "super" skeps above it. Driving or drumming the bees as mentioned in earlier articles is another method. In all these methods, it is easier to spill honey from honey comb than it is using wired frames, greater care must be taken. A large amount of wax is harvested, and ideally a colony ought not dwell on the same brood comb for more than two years without swarming. The bees can be driven into a new skep before midsummer, and they'll hopefully have the rest of the season to build up strong. Bees can be driven in the Autumn and a new colony can be made up of any unemerged brood comb and some nurse bees. Honey comb can be consumed or packaged as cut comb, or run through straining bags into containers. The famous "honey-poke". The wax can then be washed and you are halfway to making mead.

I am still a learner myself, all the time learning, experimenting with the varying styles and sizes, systems and shelters. There are of course other intricacies and concerns depending on what systems of management a skeppist may explore and deploy. It is not just sweetness and light, there is equal venom and shadow, and all is of great value. Developing best practice is an ongoing process and at least if one aspires towards impeccability then you can feel twice as good about enjoying the blessings and benevolence of skep beekeeping. There are many advantages for the bees, much more than those I have highlighted, and the disadvantages are generally for the beekeeper, and perhaps they are blessings in disguise.

For some readers, these three articles have hopefully given you enough tools, references and inspiration to begin a careful procession along the path. For the majority, an insight into what some of the natural beekeepers up the road from you may be up to and why. For all of you, a window onto a small fragment of the rich history and heritage of honey.

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This article is combined from two similar ones that were published in BBKA News Issues 209 January and 210 February 2012. It is the first of three articles by Chris Park that are on this website, although BBKA News published the articles in four issues.
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