

Patterson's Pages

by Roger Patterson, Wisborough Green BKA

I have recently been lent a copy of Volume XIX of *The Bee-Keepers' Record* of 1901 and 1902. This is a fairly hefty book, amounting to some four hundred pages, that is a compilation of the twenty four monthly journal issues of those two years. It was edited by Thomas W Cowan and W Broughton Carr; two well-known names from the past and was advertised as 'a monthly journal devoted to practical bee-keeping'.

Although this book is well over a century old some of the practical information and advice is incredibly sound, but we must remember that times were different and many things have happened since then. Many beekeepers at the time worked on the land and this shows in the many references to agriculture and horticulture. I suspect many beekeepers would have worked 6–6½ days per week for very poor wages. Although many words are devoted to movable-comb hives of various types, there is also much written about skeps. There are regular features and contributions, but there are no advertisements; I think these might have been in the journals, but were probably omitted from the book.

One feature series is 'Homes of the Honey Bee; The Apiaries of our Readers' with an article about each 'home' along with a photograph. Interestingly, although some are clearly owned by the working class, they are virtually all moveable comb hives, so it looks as if there was considerable effort made by the editors to get away from skep beekeeping. There is a photograph of Mr Arthur Webber's apiary at Soham, Cambridge, where he has over twenty identical hives, all in a row against a hedge. Another shows the apiary of Mr J Daniels of Chichester, Sussex, with a similar number in the same manner. Perhaps drifting is not the problem it is often now thought to be!

There is a photograph of Mr WA Withycombe of Bridgwater, Somerset, in his apiary in front of a thatched house over four hundred years old that '...serves as a storehouse and extracting room for me and a nesting place for thousands of wild bees'. He seemed to be a successful beekeeper who in 1895 was '...appointed expert to the Kent BKA and since then has acted as expert in the various Associations of Lancashire, Cheshire, Kent, and Sussex,

Bristol, Somerset, South Gloucester, and Essex...'. His engagements kept him away from home for most of the summer, with his father hiving his swarms. He had 25 hives, mostly of the 'Sandringham' pattern, all bar one he made himself. I wonder if he bought the one to copy. I have searched on the internet for details of the 'Sandringham' hive, but cannot find more than an old drawing. It looks remarkably like the 'cottage' hive that was still used by many in West Sussex when I started beekeeping in 1963.

Mr S Bailey of Itchingfield, Near Horsham, Sussex, describes his beekeeping well. I was particularly interested, because he had his bees in the next parish to where I live. He had made all his hives and his honey house himself, so was quite skilled, as many would have been at that time. Although he appears to have been self-taught, he seems to have progressed well in his beekeeping. He had foul brood regularly and describes what is fairly close to a shook swarm to deal with it. In his opinion, burning was the best and cheapest way to stamp out foul brood (as it still is today). He mentions taking 8 cwt (896lb) of honey in 1900 and in 1887 one colony yielding 129lb. In those days many beekeepers augmented their income with honey sales. His wife took the swarms because he was away from home all day. During one manipulation he received nearly one hundred stings because his home-made smoker went out!

'Our Letter Box' was a regular feature and although some of the correspondence was obviously genuine, I have great suspicion about much of it! Some had names and addresses, yet others were credited to 'Exhibitor', 'Record reader', 'Inquirer' or 'A Learner'. The cynic in me suggests this may have been a way of getting a message out, especially as some of the 'questions' were similar, a favourite topic being the transfer of bees from skeps to moveable comb hives, with many references to the 'discovery' of foul brood in combs when this is done.

Quite a lot of space is taken up by questions, some of which are remarkably similar to those asked at beekeepers' meetings today. One questioner asked if the setting up of bait hives was right, to which part of the reply was '...the practice is very reprehensible...'. We must

remember that swarms had a far greater value then and they were sold almost as a crop, with references to the price of a stock of bees being 1½–2 times the cost of a swarm, so a fairly high value. I have been the auctioneer at West Sussex BKA auction for over twenty years and have recently sold colonies for approaching £300, putting the modern day value of a swarm at £150–£200.

Unsurprisingly, information on disease is, way out of date now; acarine and nosema were not discovered until later. 'Foul brood' was clearly a huge problem, but AFB and EFB were not yet considered separate diseases; although much description seems to suggest AFB. Chalk brood did not get a mention and I wonder if it was confused with 'foul brood', hence the apparent problem, when there may have been a lesser one. There are many references to foul brood, including this amusing snippet '...in Cornwall I have frequently come in contact with skeppists, who have told – with great pride – that during all the years they have kept bees, they have never had foul brood in the apiary. In fact, they say it is impossible for bees in skeps or places other than frame-hives to be affected'. Would the current BBKA Examinations Board accept that one as an answer, I wonder?

On that subject there were beekeeping examinations with 'third class certificates' being mentioned, but no details. There were 'experts', one of whom was rather scathing of the views of someone who only had a third class certificate. I do not know the history of the examinations and it might be interesting to know. I assume there was always some sort of syllabus, but what was included? Were the examinations written, oral or practical? One thing is certain and that is they must have been much more difficult to sit and administer than they are now.

Education was a major topic and there seems to have been much activity with several references to bee tents at agricultural shows. Whether this was a concerted effort centrally, or by the regions I do not know, but it was obviously given much importance. Lancashire County Council made a grant of £15 for 'outdoor lectures and demonstrations' of which there were nine.

There are many reports from BKAs, AGMs mainly, with some surprising revelations, in particular the amount of funding from local authorities. Devon BKA enrolled 59 new members and lost 14, and refers to the work of the 'bee-van', which was presumably a mobile vehicle of some sort, possibly horse-drawn. In six weeks it visited 36 venues at a cost of £88, of which the County Council contributed £75. Berkshire BKA also had a 'bee van' and made reference to the one in Devon. Surrey BKA received £150 from Surrey County Council 'in aid of certain educational work'.

The Cheshire expert was Mr J Gray who examined 1,500 frame hives and 138 skeps, with a reduction in diseased colonies of 44, although there is no mention of the total number of diseased colonies or what the diseases were. The Derbyshire experts visited 398 beekeepers, with 1,251 frame hives and 239 skeps examined, which is interesting, as that puts the number of colonies per beekeeper close to the current figure of 4.5. There seem to have been several good years, with Mr Thomas Bunting securing 600lb of honey from eleven stocks, as well as increasing his number of colonies to eighteen. He also won second prize for the best managed apiary in the county offered by the Essex BKA. When did this award cease, I wonder?

There were several accounts of huge honey harvests, many in excess of 200lb per colony. This was in the days before oil seed rape, that in many districts more than doubled yields when it was introduced. Although there were comments about imported bees, Italians and Cypriots mainly, many of the colonies would have been the native bees, worked on single brood boxes with ten frames. Interestingly, the National did not become widely used until the 1930s. At that time the Royal Agricultural Show toured the UK; in 1901 it was held in Cardiff and in 1902 in Carlisle. Among the classes in the bee and honey section were: a Collection of hives and appliances, Complete inexpensive frame hive for Cottagers, Twelve 1lb sections, Honey vinegar (half gallon), Mead (half gallon) and Three shallow frames of honey for extracting. In those days prize money was usually much higher in relative terms than it is today. In many shows there was an observation hive. The fact that twelve sections were quite common, even in smaller shows gives an indication of the high skills of some of these older beekeepers.

The BBKA AGM and committee meetings were held in the board room of

the RSPCA. One meeting was convened to deal with education and foul brood. It seems that one of the problems was that theory was pushed at the expense of practical demonstrations by competent beekeepers and the report mentions 'In other words, a cultured and able lecturer may be a very poor bee man indeed, and an interesting platform address may convey to the minds of the hearers no more than an infinitesimal portion of the advantages secured from a practical demonstration of actual bee work by a thoroughly competent man'. In some cases I think we may have exactly the same problem today!



Mr S Bailey of Itchingfield, Sussex from The Bee-Keepers' Record of 1901 and 1902 and supplied by Roger Patterson.

There was a BBKA insurance scheme being formulated, but no details given in the 1901 section of *The Bee-Keepers' Record*, although there were later suggestions of what should be covered, including hives being blown over and struck by lightning. In June 1902 details were given of the policy and for 6d (2½p) the cover included '... all liability to third parties for damage to persons or property occasioned by bees from the above apiary outside the apiary ...'. The maximum claim was £30. There was no cover for personal injury or live-stock. In July there was a question about whether a beekeeper, hiring one or more horses to take bees to the heather, was covered if the animals were injured.

We know how many errors there are in the modern written word and how it is used to manipulate opinions. The same may have been the case here, but this book still gives an overall view of beekeeping at the time, including a small item from MS Fox of Ivybridge, Devon reporting a swarm on 21 May 1901, noting it was the first swarm in the district and suggesting it was early. I wonder what current Devon beekeepers would make of that. Also, there are some glimpses into international activities. For example, there was a notice of: 'An International exhibition of bees, hives, appliances, honey and bee literature, arranged by the Central Association of Austrian Beekeepers, will be held at Vienna during the festival of Easter 1903.'

I have not been able to read the entire book, there is a lot there, but I did come across this little gem: 'I have seven colonies of bees at present and four empty hives. Three of my stocks died last spring. I fancy a big spider must have killed the queen in one hive, as the bees were all right in April, but on examining at the end of the month I found only dead bees and a very large spider in the hive'.

Despite the difficulty in transportation there were several instances of bees being taken to the heather. This would probably have been with a horse-drawn wagon and with much larger and heavier hives than we have now. Virtually nobody had a motor car, telephone or electricity. There were two world wars to come and of course the Isle of Wight epidemic. There was much correspondence to the editors, but of course that was often written in flowery language. They lived in hard times and life was different for them. The home, family and work took up much of their time, with few outings and no foreign holidays. By contrast we have much improved communication, health and safety, varroa, stress and all the other things we dress up as 'progress'.

'Bee Notes from Surrey' by W H (expert), Guildford, stated the following: 'Several beekeepers about us have had no surplus at all, but, as a rule, these beekeepers know very little about bee management'. I suspect this was more than a little harsh on many beekeepers, who probably worked long hours out of doors doing very physical work in all weathers. Their pay was so poor they probably could not afford to buy books, so what they knew was either passed down from others or gained by experience and observation. Perhaps W H (expert), Guildford, only knew the theory and they were the real beekeepers! ❀

Roger Patterson celebrates fifty years in beekeeping this year. Members of the Wisborough Green BKA recently presented him with a cake to celebrate this milestone that few of us will reach! Roger has been President of WGBKA for many years and a Trustee of BBKA.

The cake was made by member, Sue Elliott and presented to him at the End of Season Supper celebrated annually by the division.



Graham Elliott, West Sussex BKA