

Skep Beekeeping - Looking to the past to look to the future

By Chris Park

The Past: Old ways and wisdoms

Looking to the past we can see that we inhabit the "Isle of Honey" and the land of circles. Great ring-shaped enclosures and rotund homesteads, round houses and circular boats, curved earthworks, domed burial chambers, giant circular temples of standing stone and humble circular beehives. Consider the legendary round table... the word "church" is rooted in the word circle, reminding us of older sanctuaries like the sacred groves of antiquity. Our horizon is also rounded and a druidic eye can view the domed, starry night sky above us as a giant skep.

The romantic image of a straw skep on a stand has inspired many societies and institutions with its symbolism and allegory. Being a symbol it speaks without words directly to the soul or sub-conscious. It has a trans-rational charm, but there is also lot more of benefit than meets the eye and delights the heart. Through experimenting with and practicing skep beekeeping one can know that there was some simple wisdom in the old ways.

The beginning of hiving bees

So where did it start? Archaeologists are undecided upon a date and even the era that we stopped honey hunting and started "keeping" bees in this neck of the woods. I provide here a very rough evolution of our relationship with honey bees.

Our ancestors have been stealing honeycomb and brood from bees since they were able to climb trees. These practices became more cunning and developed. Many eons later European forest beekeepers were managing wild colonies high up inside trees, cutting doors to enable access to the comb and leaving their personal mark upon the trunk. In many areas this evolved into collating the colonies within special clearings, fenced or walled off from bears and deer, containing either hollow log hives or bark hives stood on end. They were sometimes roofed with straw, wood or slate. These wooded clearings were often found on a south-facing slope and were sometimes called a "gardd" or "garth". In northern Spain we find the stone walled "Albariza". The use of the log hive waned, perhaps because of their weight or a need for a

more easily moveable hive. The use of basket hives or skeps then proliferated. Some archaeologists assume the use of pottery hives, however this may have been a more Mediterranean phenomena. The basket hives were predominantly woven out of hazel and willow, and were daubed or "cloomed" with dung, clay and other materials. They were of varying shapes and sizes. Some conical, some domed. Curiously, the Welsh word for beehive is "cwch", which also means boat. The coracle fishing ancient Britons housed themselves in wicker buildings plastered with daub and topped with a thatched roof. Daub is one of the first composite materials, often a mix of manure, clay, subsoil, straw, hair, blood, oils etc. Essentially some sticky stuff and some plant or animal derived fibres. The earliest bee baskets were designed on a similar technology, and covered with a straw or reed hat. This new manageable habitat for honey bees was created utilising the same materials and technology that we used for our own habitat.



The skep on the left is covered with a hackle. *Photo: Chris Park*

It is thought that straw skeps came into fashion during the Anglo-Saxon period, giving us the classical image of a skep on a stand that we know today. This straw craft, called lip work, has survived the test of time, and I'm sure many of you have a straw skep handy for swarm collection. Long straw varieties of wheat, rye, moor grasses and rushes were commonly used

materials. This was fed in to a cow horn to determine and uniform the thickness of the coils. A grooved bone needle (often of bird bone, or the cannon bone of a deer) helped to sew up the skep with a piece of lapping made of a traditional split material like willow or bramble (two members of the plant kingdom that bees know well).



The tools of a skep maker. These are Chris Park's tools, with the driving irons on the right.
Photo: Roger Patterson

The name "skep" derives from the Anglo Saxon "skeppa" meaning basket. Consider the last syllable of the word basket. There aren't many skep beekeepers around this day and age, and some have simply kept a skep going for a season or two out of curiosity. There are more serious enthusiasts around. Like them, I keep a skep apiary, experimenting with various methods of construction, size, shape, materials, shelters and systems of use.



Roger Patterson's well known border collie Nell thinking Chris Park's bone tools are for her!

Photo: Roger Patterson

Harvesting Honey

When I mention skep beekeeping to knowledgeable beekeepers two comments usually arise: "we can't do that anymore because you have to kill the bees to harvest the honey" and something about "bee boles", the alcoves set into cottage or garden walls to house skeps. A skep needs some protection from the elements or it will soon rot and decay. Bee boles are just one solution. Others are open sided sheds with shelves for the colonies, single stands with hackles (straw or reed hats), skep houses and even old basins or creamers.

Let us dispel the myth that bees need to be sulphured or drowned to be able to harvest honey. Some beemasters did, but not all. Being the favourite technique of Charles Butler, it gained much press when he published "*The Feminine Monarchie*" in 1623. There were and are of

course other successful and less barbaric methods. The simplest way of harvesting honey from a skep is cutting a piece of honeycomb out from the sides, sometimes called "castrating" the comb. A cottage beekeeper could simply go and cut some more when the honey pot in the larder was empty. Sometimes an "Eke" (an extra section of about 5 coils of straw) is added underneath the skep for the bees to draw honey stores down in to. Another technique used is to drive the bees from a skep that is full to the brim, no later than midsummer. This involves up turning the colony and pinning an empty skep to the top with two iron staples and an iron pin (driving irons) or hazel spars and a hazel skewer, then rhythmically drumming the bottom skep. The bees' natural instinct is to walk orderly upwards to a dark place. After about 20–30 minutes all the bees have occupied the top skep, which is placed onto the original stand and they have the rest of the season to build themselves up ready for the winter. From the original skep, honeycomb, wax and brood are harvested. This may also be done in the Autumn, and the bees are united with another colony, the honeycomb removed, any brood comb may be pinned into a new skep and stock introduced. Another system involves multiple layers of skeps, akin to a brood box and supers. The bottom flat topped skep goes through the winter, and has a hole in the top that is opened when a "super" skep is placed on top. At the end of the season the top skep is removed and only honeycomb and wax is harvested. There is no queen excluder, but a three-inch diameter hole in the top of the brood skep for the bees to travel through and extend the comb. Some drone brood may have been laid in the top skep above the hole, but by the end of the season it will have been replaced with honey stores.

Some pros and cons

How is skep beekeeping relevant and of value to contemporary beekeeping? Skep beekeeping grew out of fashion when moveable frame hives became popular. Were some babies thrown out with the bathwater? Some obvious disadvantages of skep beekeeping to the contemporary beekeeper are the difficulty in inspecting brood comb, an inability to use foundation or reuse drawn out supers and swarm management.

Here is a list of some of the advantages of skep beekeeping.

- They are round to suit the shape of the bees cluster. This eliminates cold corners and enables the vertical, oval shape of the brood to develop naturally, not being forced to

expand sideways. Charles Butler preferred slightly egg shaped skeps to suit the natural shape of the comb.

- They are natural, breathable and well insulated.
- The bees draw pure virgin comb. Reducing traces of chemicals or miticides from recycled wax foundation that may be affecting the fertility of queens and drones.
- The bees orientate the comb the way they like it to manage the ventilation and logistics of the colony. In my experience they draw it the cold way, although I have known one colony to draw two small 'windbreak' combs the warm way by the entrance (a rather large entrance on this particular skep).
- The bees decide on their own cell size.

Minimal inspection means:

- The colony's scent is disturbed less
- The colony's temperature is maintained (consider Varroa)
- There is minimal risk of spreading disease (consider foul broods)
- Propolis is damaged less (one colony last winter built a curtain of propolis across the entrance with two small holes in. They made there own mouse guard and hygienic entrance.
- Bees are squashed less (consider Nosema).
- Bees are smoked less.
- Comb is broken less.
- Bees are stressed less.
- Honey bees are allowed to swarm. This is a natural way of re-queening, and an effective Varroa control.

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Chris Park starting a skep. Note the cows horn feeder. *Photo: Roger Patterson.*

This article is similar to the one that was published in BBKA News Issue 207 November 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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