

## **W.W. (Willie) Smith.**

The following is an article that was written by David Grimmond entitled "A Conversation with W.W. Smith", that was first published in the February 1963 edition (Vol. XL, No2) of "The Scottish Beekeeper", the magazine of the Scottish Beekeepers Association. This was a report of a beekeeping meeting where the subject was a tape recorded interview with Willie Smith by W.S. (William Selby) Robson. It was repeated in the February 2011 edition (Vol. 88, No2), with an addition by W.S. Robson's son, Willie.

I acknowledge the material source as "The Scottish Beekeeper" archives, who ask that no commercial use is made of their files. Please respect that request.

For ease of reproduction I used the text from the 2011 edition, but presumably it had been re-typed as there were errors. I have edited it to remove some errors, bringing it back very closely to the original. In doing so no meaning has been changed.

During my beekeeping life W.W. Smith, often referred to as "Willie Smith of Innerleithen", has been a name that has been at the highest level in beekeeping, even way beyond his death. I have had some very good beekeepers speak to me about him, always in very high regard, some saying Willie Smith was probably one of the greatest ever Scottish beekeepers. I am therefore delighted to be able to display this material for future generations of beekeepers, as there is a lot to be learnt from it.

*Roger Patterson.*

### **"A Conversation with W.W. Smith"**

#### **W.S. Robson asks a few Vital Questions**

Mr. W.S. Robson, of the East of Scotland College of Agriculture was along in Dundee speaking to the East of Scotland Beekeepers' Association on the subject of "Heather Honey Production in the Borders" on Monday, 21<sup>st</sup> January.

On this occasion he was able to add a novel twist into his talk. He had with him a tape recorder which contained a conversation between Mr. Willie Smith of Innerleithen and himself.

To start off Mr. Robson gave a resumé of what the talk was all about. The talk would reveal Mr. Smith's honey producing methods, and how it was that this Scottish bee farmer depended on his heather crop to make a living. He had done so for nearly 40 years.

So, naturally, from the beginning of the season his aim was to have his stocks right at the peak of their strength to take advantage of the heather in August. Mr. Smith, of course, obtained a fair amount of clover, but it was the money made at the heather that made his beekeeping worth while.

All stocks were wintered on double brood chambers, with the top crate filled with honey. That ensured the bees were never short of stores and would come out strong in the spring.

And a wee note in passing. At one time Mr. Smith took off his food chamber before going to the heather, but very often these crates were not properly sealed and when these crates were put on for wintering they frequently caused dysentery in the hives during winter. Now Mr. Smith keeps the food chambers on at the heather. That is a point beginners might note. I know lots of keepers worry over this same food chamber.

Back to spring now. When nectar begins to come in Mr. Smith puts on a super without the queen excluder. This is to make sure the bees will go right into the super and not clog the brood chamber. As soon as there is brood in the centre combs, the queen is put below and the queen excluder put on.

Three weeks before going to the heather the queen is put in the lower chamber and the queen excluder put on under the second chamber. Two supers are sent to the heather over the brood chambers.

Now let's hear some of the conversation on the tape recorder.

*Robson* – Mr. Smith, what would you consider to be the most important factors in successful beekeeping?

*Smith* – Firstly, one must have a deep interest in the bees themselves. Secondly, a good strain of bee. Thirdly, a good district for honey production. Fourthly, standard equipment of simple pattern.

*Robson* – Can you tell us something about your Smith hive?

*Smith* – I developed this hive from a cottage hive which had 15½ inch top bars and bottom bee spacing. The original hive had plinths, but after importing Langstroth hives from the USA, I saw that there was no need for plinths and I adopted the idea of top bee spacing because one can break the joint and lift off the chamber without dislodging the frames below. The floorboard extends 1½ inch. in front, and the entrance is ¾ inch deep permanently.

*Robson* – You have also designed a number of appliances?

*Smith* – Yes, I designed a cutter for cutting comb honey. It was first used to deal with sections that were not fully sealed. When I found there was a demand for this type of honey I began to produce it in shallow frames and used the wire for cutting the combs into chunks of about ½ lb in weight. The heather scraper was invented during the war when wax foundation was almost unobtainable. When the honey was scraped from the mid-rib, the bees quickly built the comb out during the flow.

*Robson* – Could you tell us something of your methods?

*Smith* – Every beekeeper's year commences in the autumn. I tried the double brood chamber system 35 years ago and found it successful. The hives should be protected from the prevailing

winds. The site should be open to the South so that the hives get the winter sun. The stocks should have upward ventilation.

*Robson* – You rear a number of queens each year?

*Smith* – Most of my queens are reared by the bees under the supersedure impulse.

*Robson* – How important do you consider your strain of bees to be?

*Smith* – The strain of bee and method have been developed side by side. My aim is to build up very powerful colonies and keep them together so that they will be able to take advantage of the main honey flows as they come along.

Along with this tape recording there were shown many very good coloured slides from heather moor scenes in which both Mr. Robson and Mr. Smith figured.

Many other subjects were dealt with, such as queen rearing and swarm prevention.

The results of bees drifting on the heather were shown on several slides and the theory that strong colonies entice bees to join them was expressed. Three-year-old heather, thought Mr. Robson, gave the best results, while heather over five years old was of little use to the bees.

There were a few interesting slides showing the damage to hives caused by the green woodpecker.

The recording of this feature "A Conversation with W.W. Smith" was produced by Mr. J.R. Ashton NDB, County Beekeeping Officer, Northumberland. The recording with slides may be hired from Mr. Ashton, Kirkley Hall Farm Institute, Ponteland, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The hire fee is 10s. for the first day, plus 5s. for each day following the first.

I can thoroughly recommend this "Conversation Piece" to all secretaries arranging lectures. One of the attractive features about the recording is that points for discussion can be played back and repeated as often as the meeting wishes.

The above article appeared in the February 1963 issue, Vol. XL, No2 of "The Scottish Beekeeper". It was reprinted in the July 2011 issue, Vol. 88. No2. The following is an addition to the latter version by W.S. Robson's son Willie of Chain Bridge Honey Farm, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland.

Willie Robson writes:

This tape was made by my father because he didn't think that Willie Smith was given enough credit for what he had achieved. Willie Smith was a despatch rider in the first war in France. Thereafter he became a chauffeur for Mr. Ballantyne, a mill owner in Innerleithen.

Mr. Ballantyne encouraged Willie to keep bees during the daytime when he wasn't needed as a driver. I would imagine he would have cottage hives and as he wished to be a progressive beekeeper he designed a new hive which was the British Standard dimensions to the American pattern. The hive was very cheap to make being four pieces of wood only. He went for top bee space, as this prevented the box above coming into contact with the lugs of the frames below, allowing the box to be tipped up and inspections made for queen cells. Thus the frames in the bottom box were not dislodged by the upward force and no bees were crushed. This would be a problem with metal ends which were used at that time but would diminish with the introduction of Hoffman frames.

The only draw-back of the Smith hive is the poor handholds and a deep box weighs 70 lb when filled. His hives were made of close grained white pine and painted with white lead paint as in the American tradition. We still have one at home.

In the spring, Willie put on a brood chamber of frames from which the heather honey had been scraped. Peebles is a late area and this provided a huge boost for the bees. Readers may know of the American tradition to provide pollen patties in the spring. Willie's method amounted to the same thing. Thereafter the queen had three boxes to work in and I suspect the bottom box would be largely brood free, providing ventilation and some considerable control of swarming. If they did build cells he would find the queen and make an artificial swarm. It wouldn't be easy to find the queen in three boxes although their wings would be clipped and the queen marked. At a certain date the queen would be put down into the bottom two boxes. This is known as contraction.

Sometimes the queens built cells in July out of frustration due to unsettled weather. This provided him with huge problems as he needed to keep the bees together. It meant going through every hive and shaking the bees off the combs and removing the cells until the bees lost interest in swarming. By this time the hives were very powerful and Willie only had a net veil and bare hands. This is unimaginably difficult work. On one occasion ROB Manley and AW Gale of Marlborough visited Willie during the summer and my father got them off the train. When they arrived at the apiary they were attacked by bees and Willie could not be found. Needless to say he had retreated into the bushes. In days gone by when protective gear was rudimentary in the extreme it was very common for beekeepers to retreat into the undergrowth to get rid of followers.

On that day the bees were not out of hand, just extremely peppery. This caused a good deal of amusement. I remember being at a demonstration at Kelso where the bees belonged to Alec Cossar, another exceptional beekeeper. On that day Willie Smith was speaking and a bee flew into his mouth and stung him on the tongue. He barely interrupted his speech. People were more than impressed.

His mode of attire was a heavy tweed suit and waistcoat, collar and tie and a light net veil on the brim of his hat. He was a very big strong man and worked 120 hives single handed. I cannot think

that he moved many about, especially as he worked double brood chambers and very often two brood chambers on top as supers.

In Peeblesshire at that time the bell heather came nearly to the valley bottom with the ling on the tops. Permanent sites therefore made a great deal of sense. Since then Peeblesshire has suffered from afforestation on a massive scale. It would be difficult to run that honey farm in that area nowadays.

When the supers of heather honey were brought home he scraped the honey from the frames into muslin bags and pressed it. His target was 5 cwt. a day Thereafter the jars of heather honey were put into warm water baths and sold as clear heather honey with air bubbles.

The grocer in Innerleithen dressed the complete shop window with his honey. This was often photographed.

His honey house was on the banks of the River Leithen and as I remember was hexagonal in shape. My father persuaded him to give a talk at a conference in Northumberland and he had to sit through a lecture given by somebody who did not know what he was talking about. This made him extremely annoyed and as he had a heart condition my father got him pushed away round the corner before he could confront the chap. Willie was extremely intolerant of people who didn't know their job.

My father was brought up in a beekeeping family. His grandfather had 60 skeps, but he was trained as an agricultural botanist. He joined the Edinburgh College to teach beekeeping in 1949 and as they had only kept cottage hives he needed to learn about progressive management. Thus he and Willie Smith became great friends.

Willie's bees would be selected from the local strain and yet ROB Manley wrote to my father saying he had never encountered such powerful colonies. This spoke volumes for Willie Smith's ability and the plentiful flora in that locality at that time. I remember them talking about queens going into their fifth year before they were replaced.

George Hood (East Lothian beekeeper) got some of his bees when Willie retired and the rest were taken over by George Lunn who was an apiarist at the college.

George Hood retained an apiary in Peeblesshire and the bees are still there. I heard recently that some of Willies hives had been burned by gamekeepers because they had become neglected which is sad.

I also heard very recently that Brother Adam's hives have been burned although no hives last for ever.

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