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## BEE BOLES AND BEEHOUSES

By V. F. DESBOROUGH

### INTRODUCTION—By R. M. DURUZ

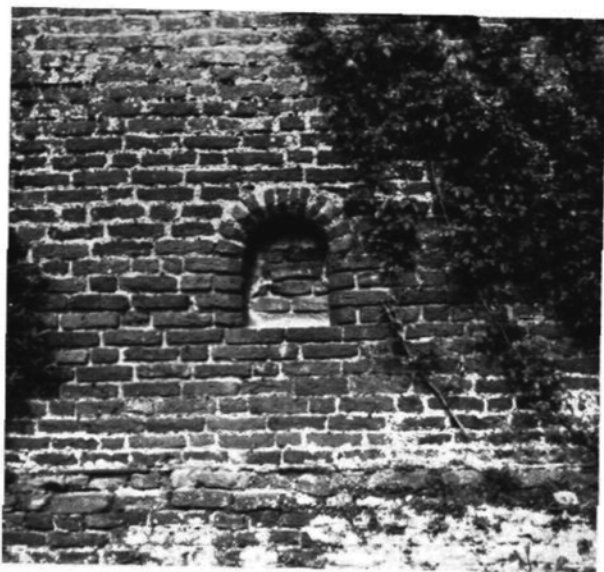
WHEN the National Beekeeping Museum was founded in 1952 it seemed likely that few relics of the craft would be found—other than pictures or carvings—dating from before the nineteenth century. Hives, skeps and most of the tools beekeepers use are made of very perishable material.

We knew, however, that in a few places there existed wall shelters for skeps, and old stone or brick beehouses, which were built of more durable material than the straw or wooden hives they accommodated. Publicity was given to our search in the Press, and it soon became evident there were far more of these shelters about the countryside than anyone had previously realized.

Beehouses are widely used on the Continent even to-day, mainly in German-speaking countries. They have often been described and advocated in English beekeeping literature, but have never become very popular here. Some of those recorded and photographed by the National Beekeeping Museum—such as Lady Anne's beehouse at Appleby Castle, Westmorland—are of considerable age and interest.

Wall-recess shelters, some of which are illustrated, are in many ways more remarkable. We are using the term "bee hole" for this kind of shelter. The word *bole* or *boal* is defined in Jamieson's *Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1927) as "a square aperture in the wall of a house for holding small articles"; it is said to be derived from the Welsh word "bolch" or "bwilch" meaning a gap or notch, an aperture. The more recent *Scottish National Dictionary* (Vol. 2, 1941) gives the meaning simply as "a recess in the wall." The term "bee bole" has been in common use in Scotland, and we have taken it into use for the whole kingdom—there seems to be no corresponding English word—defining it as "a wall recess made to shelter a straw hive."

After the introduction of movable-frame hives into Britain in 1862, skeps went steadily out of fashion. People with sufficient means to build bee boles were soon using wooden hives instead, though no doubt those already in existence remained in use here and there, especially in remote country districts. As a rule the bee boles have not been used "within living memory"; occasionally some old person remembers



(a) Roydon Hall, East Peckham.



(b) Scadbury Manor, Southfleet.



(a) Quebec House, Westerham.



(b) The Yews, Boxley.



(a) Nearly Corner, Heaverham.



(b) Boroughs Oak Farm, East Peckham.



The Ferns, Eynsford.

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having seen or heard of hives in them. It seems possible that the bee boles which still exist to-day are representative of a very old tradition indeed. We have not been able to find any written description of them, nor of beekeeping methods suitable to their use, in the apicultural textbooks of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

Bee boles appear to be unknown in other north European countries, although skeps were almost universally used, in succession to log hives, or even at the same time. We have recently heard of their existence in S. Italy, Italian Switzerland and Yugoslavia (in which countries they have been used within living memory) and of a large apiary in Greece, where 98 bee boles are in active use still. Armbruster (our best known apicultural historian) quotes a passage from Columella, the Roman agricultural writer, describing recesses for bees cut in the walls of villas. It would seem likely that Britain took the idea from some Mediterranean civilization, perhaps introduced by Roman settlers, or possibly by seafaring peoples via Spain and Ireland. Or the method may have been brought here by monastic beekeepers at a later date. We know that the early Church did much to encourage beekeeping (for it used a vast number of wax candles), and many of the oldest existing bee holes are found on former Church property.

All this is, of course, mere speculation. The best evidence we are likely to obtain of the origin of bee boles must be that of their present-day distributions, and it is on this aspect that the National Beekeeping Museum is concentrating. We have been astounded by the number which have come to light, and new sites are reported every month. A preliminary illustrated account has been published as Pamphlet No. 1 of the National Beekeeping Museum (price 1s. 6d. from the Hon. Publications Secretary, Bee Research Association, 2 Northover, Bromley, Kent) which shows that far the greater number of bee boles are found in the west (wetter part) of the country—especially in Yorkshire, the Lake District, Lancashire and Devon. Kent has, however, proved to contain a number of very interesting *early* bee boles, and also two beehouses. Our knowledge of these is due mainly to Mrs. V. F. Desborough's work in finding and recording them; indeed, it seems that a keen searcher will find bee boles in almost any county; but since they are hidden away in gardens and orchards, and the present owners rarely have any idea of their origin or significance, it is by no means an easy task to spot them.

It is usually very difficult to establish the date of bee boles, unless they form part of a house wall, or of garden walls closely connected with the house and, built of the same materials (Roydon Hall; Quebec House, Westerham; Wrotham Water). Tudor houses in various parts of the country show the earliest boles we can date with some certainty, and Kent sites are important ones in this category.

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In the country of dry-stone walls the bee boles are larger and less carefully made, and seem to be generally associated with seventeenth-century houses, though some may be considerably older. Larger houses sometimes have a long row of quite elaborately shaped recesses, while many small cottages have been found with two or three simple bee boles in the garden wall.

Bee boles in brick walls are in general shallower than those in stone walls. The depth was no doubt often limited by the thickness of the wall itself, but it seems curious that so few of the bee boles were given protruding walls, which could easily have added a few inches to the depth. If the skeps were on separate floors they *could* have projected beyond the wall itself, but they would not then have been protected from rain.

### KENTISH RECORDS—By V. F. DESBOROUGH

Nine sites of bee boles and beehouses have so far been reported, inspected and photographed in Kent. They are all situated in the West of the county within a circle of 10 miles radius from each other. There would seem to be a local "fashion" for bee boles or bee shelters of a certain type, so that if one set is found, one can be fairly certain that others exist in the same neighbourhood. This has been noticed in other counties too.

Of these nine sites in Kent, two are beehouses and seven are bee boles. The walls are made (with the one exception of the Leeds beehouse) of brick; the recesses usually have a rounded roof arch, and do not differ much in their dimensions, except in the depth, some being shallower than others. Their aspect, as is usual with any bee shelters, is south to south-east.

Most of our Kentish bee boles are built either in the house walls or in garden walls connected with the house, so that we are able to date them with certainty. This greatly increases their interest, especially as in most other counties it is impossible to date most of the bee boles with any accuracy.

The oldest sites in Kent are at Roydon Hall, East Peckham, and Scadbury Manor, Southfleet, followed pretty closely by those of Quebec House, Westerham; The Yews, Boxley, and Wrotham Water.

Roydon Hall was built in 1530, and the eight bee boles are in a very long garden wall in view of the house. The recesses are shallow, and high above the ground, and well spaced out. We may suppose that they are of the same date as the original Hall. The shape may be seen from the close-up photograph (Pl. I (a)).

The old manor house of Scadbury, Southfleet, late sixteenth century, mentioned by Philipott in his *Villare Cantianum*, or *Kent Surveyed and Illustrated*, published in 1659, no longer exists (the present house



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has been built on the same site). But in the walled garden, the walls are probably the original ones, perhaps even of an earlier date than the former manor house, and it is here, in the corner of the east wall that we find 10 bee boles (see Pl. I (b)). On the Kent County Planning Officer's List of buildings of architectural or historical interest, is an entry for Scadbury, Southfleet: "The wall of kitchen garden recessed for bee-hives." These recesses have not been used for sheltering skeps within living memory, but strangely enough, the present owners of Scadbury say that during the two springs that they have lived there, they have noted solitary bees making their homes in the shallow layer of sand and dust lying in the recesses.

The usual depth of bee boles is from 14 to 21 in.—30 in. is the maximum. The Scadbury bee boles, however, are only 9 in. deep, a shallow depth frequently found in recesses in Tudor brick walls. The total available thickness of these walls was much less than that of most stone walls, but even so, these shallow recesses indicate the use of very small skeps during Tudor times. Other shallow recesses occur at Roydon Hall and Quebec House, Westerham. The Scadbury recesses have pointed arches, and not the usual rounded roof arches found in most of our Kentish bee boles.

The third site is at Quebec House, Westerham, where there are three bee boles. To quote from "English Bee Boles" (Pamphlet No. 1, National Beekeeping Museum) on the Westerham bee boles:

"Quebec House at Westerham, Kent—a National Trust property—has three recesses in the south wall of the stable which formed one side of a Tudor fruit garden. The wall is built in English bond of red brick and probably dates from the late sixteenth century. The recesses, which have an unusual gabled shape, are again shallow (see Pl. II (a)). They show traces of smoke and may have been used to house braziers intended for keeping frost away from the fruit on the wall. Enquiries made at the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, and the Botanical Gardens at Oxford have produced no evidence that this was a Tudor practice, and it seems possible that the recesses were built for bees and used subsequently for braziers."

The fourth and fifth sites are at Wrotham Water and at "The Yews," Boxley. At Wrotham Water (National Trust Property) there are two bee boles built into a dismantled chimney-stack on the south wall of the house, which is mainly Elizabethan, and probably the recesses are of the same date. The two bee boles at "The Yews," Boxley, are in an old wall in the garden of an early seventeenth century house (see Pl. II (b)).

At Heaverham there are six recesses (two now bricked up) built into the side of a 300-year old house, "Nearly Corner" (see Pl. III (a)). The house originally formed two cottages surrounded by fields, but now

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the main road runs alongside it, and it is possible to reach up and touch the bee boles as one passes.

The seventh site is at Boroughs Oak Farm, East Peckham, on the Roydon Hall estate. Here, there are seven bee boles built into a brick wall which was part of an eighteenth century brewery. Five of the recesses are alongside each other, then after a few paces come two more (see Pl. III (b)). They have the rounded roof arch, and it is interesting to note how little the shape differs from that of the nearby Roydon Hall bee boles built over 250 years earlier.

At Eynsford, in the small garden of a late sixteenth century cottage, "The Ferns," there stands a beehouse containing seven recesses (see Pl. IV). It is a picturesque little structure, dating from c. 1770. It is built of brick, and is in an excellent state of preservation. There are two large recesses, 5 ft. in height, in the lower part of the beehouse. Each of these is divided into three by shelves made of tiles, set in mortar. Their depth is about 1 ft. 11 in. The third recess is at the top, concave and flint-lined, also measuring 3 ft. 6 in. in length. It has not been possible to find out when the recesses were last used to shelter skeps.

The beehouse at Arnold Hill, Leeds, is in a most dilapidated condition. It was built as late as 1870, and is of quite another style. This little house is built of weather boarding; on the west side there are 12 apertures in three rows of four. On the east side, there are two rows of four. Each platform measures 5 in. by 3 in. with a 3 in. slit flight entrance into the beehouse. The platforms are protected by little porches. The first row of apertures is approximately 13 in. from the ground, the next, 23 in. from the peak of the previous roof, and the last, 22 in. from the previous roof top. The hives stood on shelves behind the entrances.

Since writing the above, Mr. S. E. Rigold (of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments) who has been conducting excavations at Eynsford Castle, informed me that there were certain rough "niches" cut out of the flint rubble of the curtain wall (c. 1100 or soon after) of the Castle, which he said he had always thought were for bees.

Dr. Eva Crane, Director of the Bee Research Association, and I have inspected these niches and Dr. Crane gives the opinion that they are not bee boles, and have not been used by bees. So their origin is still problematic.

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*Should any members hear of any further sites in Kent or any other county, would they kindly report them to Mrs. V. F. Desborough, 11 Lonsdale Gardens, Tunbridge Wells.*

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*I should like to express my gratitude to all the owners of the bee bole sites, to Mrs. Duruz, Dr. Eva Crane, Miss J. Harden, the Rev. D. G. Hill, Mr. L. Haynes, Mr. A. Dale and Mr. S. E. Rigold for their help and kindness. And my sincere thanks to Miss Andrus, Mr. and Mrs. Bowers, Miss Jane Anderson and Mr. V. R. Desborough for their excellent photographs.*