

ART. XIV – *Bee boles and related structures in Furness and Cartmel*

By ERIC GREEN

A DEFINITIVE paper on bee boles and related structures, by Penelope Walker and Eva Crane, was published in *Transactions* in 1991, when they reported 152 such structures in Cumbria, of which 57 were in Furness and Cartmel.¹ This present paper describes 40 new sites which I have identified in Furness and Cartmel and which have now been entered in the Register of the International Bee Research Association (IBRA).

Honey bees naturally form colonies in sheltered places such as caves, crevices in rocks, hollow trees etc. When man started to “keep” bees a great variety of hives were used – earthenware vessels, hollow logs, wicker baskets, wooden boxes etc. but in Britain straw skeps were most commonly used. These were made of coiled straw bound together by split briars and, although they kept the bees relatively warm they did not keep them dry – the straw tended to rot in prolonged wet weather. Bees will not tolerate wet conditions. A straw “hackle” was sometimes placed over the skep to protect it from the rain but this met with limited success. In the colder and wetter areas of Britain shelter was provided by building recesses in walls (bee boles) or by roofed structures (bee shelters), which kept the skeps dry. The West Country and Cumbria have the greatest concentration of such structures as those areas have the highest rainfall.

Beekeeping in skeps is inefficient. To harvest the honey and wax two methods were employed. In the first, more predictable method, the whole skep was lowered into sulphur pits but this had the effect of destroying the colony. The alternative method was to attempt to drive the bees into a second skep but the brood tended to remain in the first skep and was lost when the contents were harvested. The queen is generally reluctant to leave the brood and if she remained in the first skep the new colony would die out. It was therefore essential that the colony swarmed to form a new unit before it was necessary to destroy or damage it. The size of the skep was vital – if it were too large the colony might not swarm but if it were too small a poor yield resulted. Ideally a colony swarmed in late May or early June, allowing the establishment of the new colony which would survive the winter. The old colony continued to produce honey and to give a good yield when killed in the autumn. The need to “take” the swarm ensured that the skeps were kept under constant observation and meant that they were frequently situated near the kitchen or the outside privy.

The “skep” method of beekeeping declined after 1851 when Rev. L. L. Langstroth, an American of Yorkshire extraction, developed a moveable frame hive. This system removed the need to kill the bees and discouraged swarming; indeed it is possible to harvest the honey and wax and manipulate the colonies without harming a single bee. In 1852 the moveable frame hive reached Britain and was adopted throughout the country fairly rapidly. There are very few records of skep beekeeping after 1900. The associated shelters and structures remained unused and it is remarkable that so many have survived.



PLATE 1. Low Foxfield Cottage [IBRA site no. 1181]



PLATE 2. Marsh Grange [IBRA site no. 1087]

Bee Boles

Included under this heading are bee alcoves which are identical to boles except that the lintels are arched, not straight, and therefore tend to be more decorative.

Bee boles are recesses built within a wall and are the most common structure identified here – 34 sites have been recorded. The set of four at Low Foxfield Cottage, Cartmel Fell [IBRA site no. 1181] (Plate 1) is very typical of the area. The measurements given in the Appendix for each entry are an average for that particular site – they generally vary less than 10% at each given location – and probably represented the optimum size for skep beekeeping in the area. The 34 sites I have recorded had a total of 114 bee boles – an average of 3.3 per site. The number at each site varying from 1 to 11. The average height and depth of each bole was 19 inches and the width, depending upon the number of skeps they were designed to hold, was 18 inches for one skep but larger if for more. The height from the ground varied but was usually between 12 inches to 24 inches: some were at ground level and others as high as 48 inches.

Of particular interest are two sets at former granges of Furness Abbey. Marsh Grange [IBRA site no. 1087] (Plate 2) was the birth-place of Margaret Fell who married George Fox, the Quaker. The bee boles, eleven in number, are high in a wall which appears to have been the original garden wall. Ormsgill Farm [IBRA site no. 1158] (Plate 3) has a fine set of six boles in a red sandstone wall and are well preserved despite the fact that they now lie in what was the industrial area of Victorian Barrow-in-Furness.

All of the structures mentioned in this paper are made of stone found locally, with the exception of Water Yeat [IBRA site no. 1052] and Sunny Bank [IBRA site no. 1130]. In the Barrow area red sandstone was used, limestone south-west of Ulverston, and elsewhere slate appears. Furness brick was imported to form the division between the bee boles at Water Yeat [IBRA site 1052] and imported red sandstone was used in part for the alcoves at Sunny Bank [IBRA site no. 1130].

In the Appendix it will be noticed that virtually all these structures face between east and south. The heat of the morning sun encouraged the bees to fly and forage earlier in the day. The findings of J. J. Ashburner,² who built an octagonal beehouse near Cockermouth, was that colonies facing between east and south swarmed earlier than those facing in other directions and, as I have indicated above, swarming was desirable when skeps were used.

The bee boles at Hole House [IBRA site no. 1098] face north and are in a small courtyard which suggests that they were perhaps used for storing skeps of bees in the winter.

There is one further site of five bee boles not listed in the Appendix because the owners have requested that they are not registered. In addition there are two sites in Furness where walls, which contained bee boles, have been demolished.

Bee Shelters

These structures have a roof of their own, may be free standing or built against a wall; they are taller and usually have at least one shelf. Access to the skeps is limited to the front of the structure. I have recorded seven shelters [IBRA site nos. 1053,



PLATE 3. Ormsgill Farm [IBRA site no. 1158]



PLATE 4. High Rosthwaite [IBRA site no. 1161]

1054, 1130, 1157, 1161, 1163, and 1215] – the shelter at High Rosthwaite [IBRA site no. 1161] (Plate 4) being a particularly fine and well-preserved example. The shelter at Mill House, Water Yeat [IBRA site no. 1054] has lost its roof but the others are in good repair.

Bee Houses

In a bee house the bee-keeper could move about inside the structure and work his bees from there. The skeps were placed against one or more walls, and apertures in the walls gave the bees access. I have been able to record only one site, Cabinet Bank, Pennington [IBRA site no. 1101] but this is now very dilapidated.

Evidence of use

A “bee slate” was a flat, circular slate, slightly larger than the skep which stood upon it (Plate 5). The presence of a bee slate at Water Yeat [IBRA site no. 1052] indicates the use of skeps at this site. Several bee slates have also been found at Little Croft, Kirkby-in-Furness [IBRA site no. 1081]. The occupant of Brocklebank Ground [IBRA site no. 1172] informed me that he remembered skeps of bees being kept in the bee boles during the 1930s, a beekeeper travelling from Kirkby-in-Furness to manage them!

Conclusion

The findings outlined in this paper are similar to those of Walker and Crane. In the Craike valley between High Nibthwaite and Lowick Green (an area of only three square miles) there are now no fewer than 14 recorded sites. Living in the area I have been able to add seven new sites to the seven already recorded. Most of these structures are in private gardens or orchards not visible to the public gaze and therefore local knowledge and connections are of paramount importance when searching for new sites. Several organisations have taken an interest in recording bee boles – Cartmel Fell Historical Society surveyed all the buildings in their parish and some years ago the Women’s Institute did a similar survey. More work will undoubtedly result in more finds.

Acknowledgements

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References

- ¹ Penelope Walker and Eva Crane, “Bee Shelters and Bee Boles in Cumbria”, *CW2*, xci, 237-262.
- ² J. J. Ashburner, “My Bee House”, *Cumbria Bee Times* November 1966.



PLATE 5. Field wall opposite Water Yeat Guest House

APPENDIX

Recordings of Bee Structures in Furness and Cartmel

Most of these sites are on private property: permission must be obtained before visiting any of them.

KEY	1 IBRA Register number	5	Height x Width x Depth given in inches.	10	State of repair of structure.
	2 Address	6	Height from ground to base of structure.	11	Additional Notes.
	3 Map reference taken from 1.25000 O.S. maps	7	Direction faced by structure.		
	4 No. of structures – bee boles except as in Column 11.	8	Situation of structure.		
		9	Date of main building if known		

IBRA	Address	NG Ref	No	Size	Ht.A.G	Aspect	Situation	Date	Cond.	Additional Notes
1052	Field opp. Water Yeat Guest House	291892	3	22x17x18	24	S	Field wall	-	Good	Built of slate with brick divisions. Bee slate found here.
1053	Water Yeat Guest House	289891	1	80x73x25	16	SE	Garden wall	18C	Good	Bee shelter roof intact. Walls plastered. Shelf 28" above ground.
1054	Mill House/Water Yeat	289891	1	60x60x24	20	S	Garden wall	-	V.Poor	Bee shelter. No roof. Shelf 36" above ground
1060	19 Newbarns, Barrow-in-Furness	212784	6	30x22x-	18	E	Garden wall	1770	Good	Filled in. Newbarns is an old village now within Barrow.
1064	Lowick Bridge Farm	293865	3	18x47x18	26	SSE	Garden wall	18C	Good	Bee holes held two or three skeps. Called "Bee bobs" by owner.
1073	Tranearth, Torver	281956	2	22x22x28	0	SSE	Field wall	?18C	Good	At ground level.
1072	Kirkstead, Cartmel	382787	2	-	0	S	Garden wall	-	-	Two bee boles at ground level. Demolished Oct '91.
1074	Plumpton Hall, Ulverston	313787	2	19x20x21	32 & 48	SE	Garden wall	16C	Good	32" and 48" above ground level.
1081	Little Croft, Kirby-in-Furness	237821	3	28x38x19	?	SSE	Barn wall	1800	Fair	Partly concealed by compost heap.
1087	Marsh Grange, Askam-in-Furness	221797	11	22x23x16	30 & 45	SSW	Stockyard wall	15C	Good	Originally the garden wall of a grange of Furness Abbey.
1098	Hole House, Ulpha	181930	2	20x15x15	6 & 29	N	Yard wall	-	Good	One above the other. Probably used for winter storage.
1101	Cabinet Bank, Pennington	258770	1	Apertures 15x17x21	24	SE & SW	In Garden	?1825	Good	A derelict bee house.
1104	Bell Hill Cottage, Marton	245768	3	18x14x24	26	SW	Field wall	-	Good	
1130	Sunny Bank, Broughton-in-Furness	222865	5	24x17x15	12	SE	Garden wall	-	Good	A remarkable set-3 bee boles,
			1	42x38x18	9	SW	Garden wall		Good	3 bee alcoves and 1 bee shelter
			1	66x38x36	0	SW	Garden		Good	in a small area of the garden.
1131	Brantwood, Coniston	313958	1	21x20x24	12	SW	In a large garden	19C	Fair	The home of John Ruskin.
1132	Scar Head Cottage, Torver	284946	2	19x20x19	30	SE	Garden wall	-	V.Poor	A neglected pair of bee boles in a dry stone wall.
1157	Dale Garth, Scales	273723	2	23x37x29	11	SSW	In garden	18C	Fair	Each shelter would hold two skeps. Limestone.

IBRA	Address	NG Ref	No	Size	Ht.A.G	Aspect	Situation	Date	Cond.	Additional Notes
1158	Ormsgill Farm, Barrow-in-Furness	191712	6	19x18x16	15	S	Garden wall	17C	Good	A fine set of bee boles. Former grange of Furness Abbey.
1159	Thyme Cottage, North Scale	172697	4	24x35x15	24	SSE	Drive and garden wall	1836	Good	
1160	Huntide Farm, Great Urswick	262745	5	19x32x20	12	SSE	Wall of outbuilding	17C	Good	Three tiers: two, two and one.
1161	High Rosthwaite, Woodland	242901	1	84x120x45	0	SE	Built against garden wall	?	Good	A fine bee shelter in a very attractive garden.
1162	Burnmoor, Woodland	251919	2	13x16x12	28	SE	Field wall	?	Poor	Near derelict farm.
1163	Raisthwaite, Woodland	250892	1	56x150x51	0	SSE	In neglected garden	19C	Fair	Bee shelter similar to 1161 which is nearby.
1169	2 Holme Cottage, Urswick	271739	4	22x18x11	12	SE	In building wall	1713	Fair	Made of limestone.
1170	Mireside, Broughton-in-Furness	225886	1	46x36x23	39	SE	Courtyard wall	1814	Good	Bee alcove.
1171	The Cottage, Gawthwaite	272848	2	25x18x19	24	SSW	Former garden wall	?	Fair	
1172	Brocklebank Ground, Torver	277939	2	16x12x14	35	ESE	Wall behind house	1590	Good	Used for skep beekeeping within living memory.
1173	Hundow Hall, Lowick Bridge	294864	2	16x20x22	27	S	Barn wall facing garden	1850	Good	
1180	Collin Field, Cartmel Fell	415893	4	17x18x18	50	SE	Garden wall	?	Poor	In drystone wall which is falling down.
1181	Low Foxfield Cottage, Cartmel Fell	404871	4	19x16x19	24	SE	Garden wall	?	Good	A typical set of Cumbrian bee boles.
1182	Stang End, Little Langdale	319028	6	15x15x17	44	SE	In wall near barn	?	Good	National Trust property. Recently restored.
1193	Crowtrees, Satterthwaite	957925	3	16x17x20	7	S	Garden wall	?	Good	
1194	Houkier Hall, Blawith	284883	1	16x16x19	36	S	Garden wall	17C	V.Poor	Wall is collapsing.
1195	3 The Row, Lowick Green	298853	1	24x38x13	25	E	Garden wall	?	Fair	Back of bee bole has collapsed.
1197	Bolton Ground	241829	8	16x17x14	0	SE	Garden wall	?	Fair	Garden abandoned many years ago. Bee boles partially buried.
1211	The Poplars, North Scale	182697	3	21x17x18	33	S	Garden wall	1750	Good	Built of brick in a cobble wall.
1212	Yew Tree Cottage, Kirkby-in-Furness	228817	1	16x42x20	12	S	Garden wall	1800	Good	The house has been rebuilt recently.
1213	Greenfield House, Allithwaite	386763	4	26x21x17	20	S	Garden wall	?1845	Good	In limestone wall. Slate bases.
1215	Hampsfell Hall, Field Broughton	395805	1	64x100x46	0	ESE	In rear of main building	1600	Fair	A large shelter.
1218	Dove Bank, Grizebeck	235847	5	26x38x15	25	S	Passage wall	18C	Good	Only 7ft separates bee boles and house.