



Eva Crane Trust

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Figure 1 Winter bee house [IBRA Register no. 1283] with 17 recesses; near Narberth, Pembrokeshire, Wales (photo: G. Hudson, 1998).

# Winter bee houses and bee cellars

Eva Crane & Penelope Walker

**In Britain and Ireland in past centuries, bees were kept in wicker or straw skeps. Each skep was placed on a stand in the open, protected from rain by a straw hackle or an old dish. Or several might be housed under a simple stone or wooden shelter or – where stone for building was freely available – in specially built wall recesses (bee boles). The International Bee Research Association's 'Register of bee boles and other structures for protecting hives of bees', started in 1952, now contains records of over 1100 such walls, which have been discussed elsewhere.<sup>1,2,3</sup>**

## Wintering bees in Britain and Ireland

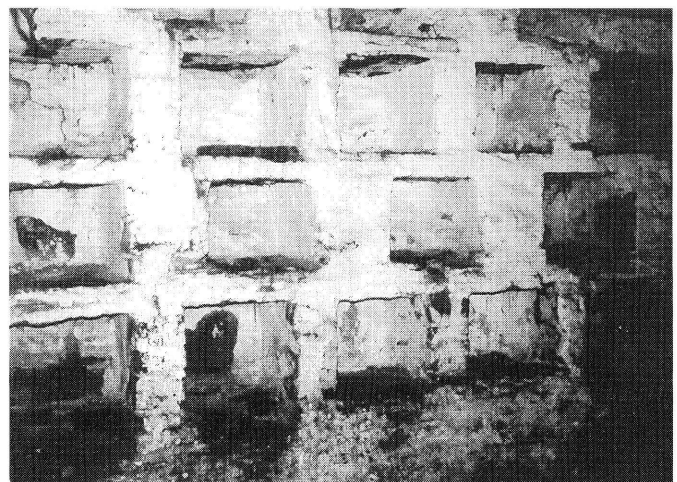
These islands have an oceanic climate, and in mild winters the bees may break their winter cluster several times, using extra energy and therefore more food. Some beekeepers moved their skeps into a dark building for winter so that the bees were kept at an equable temperature and were inactive, thus conserving their energy and food stores. The skeps were also protected from wind and rain.

The IBRA Register includes details

of 30 windowless buildings with recesses on the inside where we believe skeps were kept over winter. We refer to such buildings as winter bee houses. An example in south-west Wales is shown in Figures 1 and 2. (Sadly, in July 2001 we heard that it had been destroyed.)

All winter bee houses identified are in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The table on page 12 lists them, with the number of recesses in each and the approximate date if known. In 9 properties (marked \*) the recesses are not in a separate build-

Figure 2 Square recesses in the bee house at Narberth shown in Figure 1 (photo: G. Hudson).



ing but in the walls of one or more cellars of the house; at the end of the table these are entered again as a group.

The earliest printed reference found to wintering bees indoors was published by Gerrard Malynes in 1622, and quoted by Samuel Hartlib in 1655:<sup>4</sup> 'In December house your bees, if they stand cold: and in the North house all'. This instruction might have referred to a cellar or an outbuilding. William Cotton, an Oxford beekeeper writing in 1842, was more explicit in his advice on wintering bees:<sup>5</sup> 'The best place to put Bees in is a dry, cold, and dark room, or out-house, ... Put your Bees there the last week of November, and let them sleep quietly till the flowers begin to come out at the end of February'. A woodcut shows a windowless lean-to shed. Indoor recesses were not mentioned in these or any other publication we know from the skep beekeeping period.

In *Elysium Britannicum* written in the 1650s, John Evelyn quoted a passage in a 1648 Italian book by Vincenzo Tanaro:<sup>6</sup> 'They frequently set their weakest hives in the Wine-Cellar, where they will maintain themselves with the scent of the Wine till the Spring.'

## Characteristics of winter bee houses and bee cellars

The outbuildings recorded in the Register are widely scattered in Britain and Ireland:

England: 17 buildings in 9 counties

vation and the care of collections.

The professionals who work in our museums, archives and libraries should be accountable to our democratically elected representatives and not protected by 'Best Value' or 'performance' targets set artificially low to enable compliance and protection. National and local politicians who want power without responsibility are largely to blame for the promotion of 'free market' public services which will lead, before too long, to the privatisation of our museums, archives and libraries. It is depressing to see this anti-democratic stance becoming common in what are important local services. Resource (The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries) can be contacted at 16 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AA, tel: 020 7233 4200.

## Out & About

**Hever Castle in Kent** may well be worth a visit during the autumn half-term break (20–28 October) when many of us are likely to be grandparenting or wondering what to do with our offspring. Among the activities being provided for children during the week are brass rubbing, a storyteller, a Mummers play and a knight in armour. For details about opening times, costs and access, telephone 01732 865224, web: [www.hevercastle.co.uk](http://www.hevercastle.co.uk).

**Some 5,000 historic photographs of the Isle of Dogs** between 1870 and 1970 will be on display at the Dockland Settlement during the weekend 13–14 October. All the photographs have been referenced for easy access. There will also be a bookstall, other exhibitions and a tea-bar. Admission will cost £1 (concessions 50p). The venue can be reached by D7 bus route from Mile End Underground Station or Mudchute Station on the Docklands Light Railway. For more information contact Eve at the Island History Trust, Dockland Settlement, 197 East Ferry Road, London E14 3BA, tel: 020 7987 6041, web: [www.islandhistory.org.uk](http://www.islandhistory.org.uk).

**Over 2,000 objects will be on display** in the new 'World City 1789–1914: the birth of modern London' Gallery which opens at the Museum of London in December 2001. For more details contact the Museum at London Wall, London EC2Y 5HN, tel: 020 7600 3699, e-mail [info@museumoflondon.org.uk](mailto:info@museumoflondon.org.uk), web: [www.museumoflondon.org.uk](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk)

**Castle Hill in Huddersfield** is now open to visitors every weekend until mid-September, 12–4pm. The Victoria Tower, which was built at the end of the 19th century and probably stands on the site of the medieval keep, provides fantastic views of the surrounding countryside. To help visitors find and explore the site, a free leaflet is now available from Kirklees Metropolitan Council, tel: 01484 223800.

**There will be a 1940s Open Day at Nottinghamshire Archives** on Sunday 9 September, 2–6pm. The aim is 'to take visitors back to the days of evacuation, rationing, "make do and mend" and the post-war struggles of Nottinghamshire people'. Nottinghamshire Archives are very close to Nottingham railway station and the city centre, on Castle Meadow Road, Nottingham NG2 1AG, tel: 0115 958 1634, e-mail [archives@nottsgov.uk](mailto:archives@nottsgov.uk), web: [www.nottsgov.uk](http://www.nottsgov.uk).

**Images of the River Trent**, 'from pastoral retreat to economic powerhouse', are the subject of an exhibition entitled 'Trentside' at the Djanology Art Gallery, at the south entrance to Nottingham University, from 27 October until 16 December. The exhibition includes some 70 works from many different periods. There will be an introduction to the exhibition on 10 Nov (10am–2pm, cost £15, £10 con). Admission free. Open Mon–Sat 11am–5pm, Sun & Aug Bank Holiday 2–5pm. The new D H Lawrence Centre is situated opposite and you are within a few minutes walk of the remains of Lenton Priory. For more details contact DAG, Arts Centre, Nottingham University NG7 2RD, tel: 0115 951 3192.

## Societies

**Hendon & District Archaeological Society** have teamed up with London University's Birkbeck College to develop and organise 'a practical training course in the writing up of an archaeological excavation and preparing it for publication'. The course, *The Origins of Hendon: The Ted Sammes Project*, will begin in September and use material from a number of excavations which took place under the direction of the late Ted Sammes in the late 1970s. For more details contact Tim Wilkins, HADAS Publicity, tel: 020 8445 2401. This is an excellent example of how local societies can work with colleges and universities to facilitate their own training and research programmes.

**The Tamworth Heritage Trust** is a grassroots organisation which wants to create a real museum for the town, which will tell the history of Tamworth and its people. Many local people believe that Tamworth Castle has become 'too themed' to be interested in the real local history of the town. Membership costs £10 for individuals (£15 couples, £5 concessions). For more details contact Tamworth Heritage Trust, c/o 12 Peel House, Lichfield Street, Tamworth, Staffs B79 7BQ, tel: 01827 314994, web: [www.tamworthheritagetrust.co.uk](http://www.tamworthheritagetrust.co.uk).

## LETTERS

### Help needed

I am researching private chapels, i.e. those which are attached to country houses and castles, and while I am familiar with most of the best known chapels, I am sure that there are others which would not be so familiar to the public at large. If, therefore, you read this letter and know of any such private chapels in your area, I would very much appreciate hearing from you.

**Janet Hall**

27 Hawkfield Court, Woodlands Grove, Isleworth TW7 6NU.

Scotland: 6 buildings in 5 counties  
 Wales: 3 buildings in 2 counties  
 Ireland: 4 buildings in 3 counties.

Many of them are farm outbuildings containing recesses in one or more walls, usually in 2 to 4 tiers. The largest number was in a building recorded in Co. Mayo [IBRA Register no. 584] which once belonged to a substantial house. When visited in 1978 it was roofless and isolated, but still contained at least 43 recesses, in 2 and 3 tiers in two opposite walls. A winter bee house in Fife, Scotland [1248], has 41 recesses built close together in 5 tiers in two adjacent walls, and one at Witherslack Hall Farm in Cumbria (1304) has 34 in two tiers. Most other buildings have about 10–20 recesses, but around a quarter are barns or outbuildings used mainly for other purposes and they contain only a few recesses.

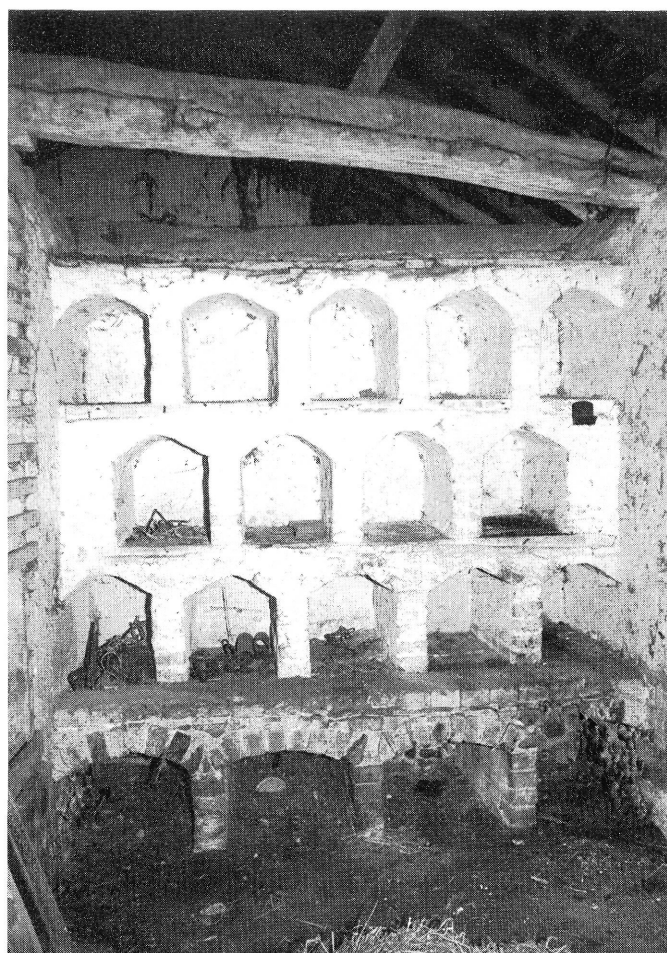
Most winter bee houses are built of stone, and are in areas where stone was the common building material. The thermal insulation of stone that is porous (such as sandstone) is higher than of stone that is not (such as granite). We could not obtain information as to the type of stone used for all the bee houses, but we know that 5 are of sandstone, 2 of limestone, 2 of rubble, and 1 each of slates or field boulders; in Devon there are 2 of cob.

All 9 dwelling houses with bee cellars are in England, and the farthest north is in Staffordshire; perhaps in other regions a cellar would be too cold or damp for bees in winter. Four are in Kent where brick was normally used for building, but there is no concentration in any other area. The cellars had from 2 to 9 recesses for skeps, except in a large country house near Newcastle-under-Lyme [1061c] where recesses that would hold 35 skeps were found in four cellars.

Many of the indoor recesses can be dated to century (see table overleaf). A single recess known as 'the winter home' inside a Devon barn [789b] is from c.1450; the same barn also has two hive recesses in an outside wall. The cellar recesses at Manor House in Canterbury [357c] were built in 1490. Of the 27 other winter bee houses or cellars whose approximate date is known, 6 are from the 1600s, 16 from the 1700s and 5 from the 1800s.

We have rather little direct evi-

Figure 3  
**Arched recesses in a winter bee house [859], near Attleborough in Norfolk (photo: J. Rushen).**



dence of the use of these recesses for skeps, but at a farm in Perthshire [947] a building dating from c.1750 contains a row of 9 small recesses, and skeps found in another outbuilding fitted into them. At Stonegrave in North Yorkshire [651], an outbuilding with six recesses contained old wooden hives and comb in 1980. Indirect evidence is provided by the fact that 10 of the winter bee houses or cellars are at a property which also has an outside wall with recesses for skeps (usually a smaller number) or a bee shelter, possibly used only in summer; see the table overleaf. The bee house at Ballachurry in the Isle of Man [141] has two storeys containing altogether 31 recesses, and also an outdoor wall with 11 hive recesses [26].

It may be difficult to know the original use or uses of recesses in a certain outbuilding. Dr Blake Tyson, who has a wide knowledge of vernacular architecture, found that in Cumbria especially, Lakeland farm outbuildings had 'keep holes' which were still used for storing useful things. Usually square, their size varied from 8–9 inches up to 12–20 inches and 12 inches deep — large enough to hold a skep. He suggested that a

building should be regarded as constructed for housing skeps only if there were at least three or four recesses of the same (adequate) size, arranged in an organized way.

Winter recesses have similar dimensions to those of hive recesses in outside walls (bee boles), and this characteristic has been an aid to their identification. Most recesses for skeps in both winter bee houses and outdoor walls are rectangular (Figure 2), but quite a number are arched (e.g. Figure 3).

## Information needed

We do not know how many beekeepers in Britain and Ireland placed their skeps on skep stands or benches in a dark building for winter. Nor do we know why a few beekeepers, in widely scattered places, built wall recesses for wintering their skeps. If readers know of useful historical details of any of the buildings listed in the table, we should like to hear from them. We should also value information on any building not listed in the table that might have been a winter bee house or bee cellar. Please send details to us at Woodside House, Woodside Hill, Gerrards Cross, Bucks SL9 9TB.

# Winter bee houses and bee cellars

In column 1 which gives the IBRA Registration number, \* indicates a cellar, not an outbuilding.  
In column 3, B = brick, C = cob, S = stone, Ss = sandstone, Ls = limestone.

Reg. No.	Location	Material	Date	No. recesses	
				Indoor	Outdoor
<b>ENGLAND</b>					
<b>Bedfordshire</b>					
*472	Old School House, Studham	B	c.1600	3	–
<b>Cornwall</b>					
307	Radland Mill, St Dominick, nr Saltash	rubble	pre-1800	12	–
718a	Penpol House, St Erth, Hayle (in barn)	SC		9	2
<b>Cumbria</b>					
666	Hill House, Maulds Meaburn (collapsed c.1983)	Ss	1700s	12	–
1255	The Abbey Mill, Furness	red Ss	pre-c.1500	7	–
1291	Park House, Kentmere	slate	1700s	9	–
1304	Witherslack Farm, nr Grange-over-Sands	Ls	house 1635	34	–
1311b	Newbiggin House, Newbiggin, Stainton, nr Penrith (in barn)	Ss		3	2
<b>Devon</b>					
650	The Old Rectory, Clannaborough, Bow, Crediton	C		6	–
789b	Trehill Farm, Sampford Courtenay, nr Okehampton	C	c.1450	were 10?	2
1107	St George's House, Georgeham	SB	early 1700s	19	–
<b>Isle of Man</b>					
141	Ballachurry, Rushen	S		31	11
<b>Kent</b>					
*375c	Manor House, St Stephens, Canterbury	B	1490	9	20
*1014	Forge House, Charing, Ashford	B	pre 1740	5	–
1300	Joyce Hall, Betsham, nr Gravesend	B	pre 1841	2	–
*1301	Westwood House, High Cross Road, Betsham, nr Gravesend	B	pre 1775	8	–
*1302	Betsham House, Betsham, nr Gravesend	B		4	–
<b>Norfolk</b>					
859	Wilby Hall, Quidenham	B+clay	1700s	14	–
<b>Oxfordshire</b>					
821c	Champs Folly, Frilford, nr Abingdon (possible winter storage) ?			2	3+
<b>Somerset</b>					
882	Lower Cockhill Farm, Castle Cary	S	c.1800?	6	–
<b>Staffordshire</b>					
*1061c	Betley Court, Betley, nr Newcastle-under-Lyme	B	1716 or later	36	bee shelter
<b>Sussex, West</b>					
*507b	New Hall, Small Dole, Henfield	S	Elizabethan	8	8
<b>Wiltshire</b>					
*914	The Wilderness, Box	S	pre 1626?	4	–
*972	Belcombe Croft, Bradford-on-Avon	S	c.1760	6	–
<b>Yorkshire, North</b>					
82	New Wath Apiaries, Goathland (collapsed)	drystone	late 1700s	shelves	–
651	Stonegrave House, Stonegrave, York	S	late 1600s	6	–

Reg. No.	Location	Material	Date	No. recesses	
				Indoor	Outdoor
<b>SCOTLAND</b>					
<b>Aberdeenshire</b>					
115a	Manor House, Midmar, Inverurie	S	late 1700s	40	4
<b>Angus</b>					
1015	Drumshade Farm, nr Glamis	S		7	—
<b>Argyll &amp; Bute</b>					
703	Inverlussa House, Grinan	S	c.1800	24	—
<b>Fife</b>					
1232	Glenorkie, Kingskettle, nr Cupar	Ss	late 1700s	4	—
1248	Burnturk Farm, Kingskettle, nr Cupar	Ss	nearby building 1851	41	—
<b>Perth &amp; Kinross</b>					
947	Polcalk Farm, Alyth	field boulders	c.1750	9	—
<b>WALES</b>					
<b>Pembrokeshire</b>					
817a	Butterhill Farm, St Ishamaels	S		21	—
1283	Greenway, Narberth	rubble		17	—
<b>Vale of Glamorgan</b>					
899	Pentre Farm, Llantrithyd, Cowbridge	Ls	c.1800	14	—
<b>IRELAND</b>					
<b>Co. Mayo</b>					
584	Ruins at Castlecarra, nr Ballinrobe	S		43+	—
<b>Co. Meath</b>					
701a	Ninch House, Ninch West, via Laytown (outside orchard) destroyed 1979, now rebuilt	SB	late 1700s	18?	—
701b	Ninch House, Ninch West, via Laytown (in farmyard)	B	late 1700s	4	—
<b>Co. Tipperary</b>					
167b	Ballingarry House, Ballingarry	?		8	18
<b>CELLARS (all in England)</b>					
472	Bedfordshire	B	c.1600	3	
375c	Kent (also 20 outdoor recesses)	B	1490	9	
1014	Kent	B	pre 1740	5	
1301	Kent	B	pre 1775	8	
1302	Kent	B		4	
1061c	Staffordshire (also outdoor bee shelter)	B	1716 or later	35	
507b	Sussex, West (also 8 outdoor recesses)	S	Elizabethan	8	
914	Wiltshire	S	pre 1626?	4	
972	Wiltshire	S	c.1760	6	

**Acknowledgement** We are most grateful to Dr Blake Tyson for the information and ideas he gave us about the structure and use of outbuildings in past centuries.

## References

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- 2 Crane, E.; Walker, P. (2000) Wall recesses for bee hives. *Antiquity* 74(286): 805–811.
- 3 Walker, P.; Crane, E. (2000) The history of beekeeping in English gardens. *Garden History* 28(2): 231–261.
- 4 Hartlib, S. (1655) *The reformed*

*common-wealth of bees* (London: Giles Calvert), p.60.

- 5 Cotton, W. C. (1842) *My bee book* (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington), pp.85, 87.
- 6 Smith, D. S. (1965) John Evelyn's manuscript on bees from *Elysium Britannicum*. *Bee World* 46: 48–64, 116–131.