



Eva Crane Trust

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TITLE: Britannia's skep

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For those interested in history

Britannia's skep

In years gone by bees have been regarded as symbols of divine sweetness, of virginity, of an organized community and, especially in the last century, of industry and thrift. Perhaps because bees are so small, a hive has often been used as the symbol rather than the bees themselves.

An enquiry addressed to the Bank of England, as to when the skep last disappeared from their banknotes, elicited some interesting information from the Bank's Museum and Historical Research Section.

When the Bank of England was founded in July 1694, the seal depicted "Britannia sitting and looking on a Bank of money" (sic). This theme was adapted for the vignette that appeared on the upper left part of Bank of England notes (Fig. 1). There were many variations in detail, particularly during the eighteenth century, as individual engravers interpreted the design. In the first few years (1699-1703) the pile of money became



Fig. 1 Britannia emblems on Bank of England banknotes.
Top row: 1699, 1702, 1703; bottom row: 1707, 1712, 1732.

increasingly tidy, and rather skep-shaped. Between 1712 and 1732 it moved to the other side of Britannia, where it has remained ever since. The transformation of a pile of money (coin) into a skep was completed by 1838, when the skep was given a flight entrance, and a handle at the top (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Britannia emblem on a banknote of 1838, with the pile of coin completely transformed into a skep, showing the flight entrance.

New notes issued in 1855 incorporated the classic vignette of Britannia shown in Fig. 3. This design, by Daniel Maclise, R.A., shows the skep still at Britannia's right hand, but now with an indication of the coiled straw from which it is made, and a flight entrance (but no handle), and—as always—no bees. Black and white notes of this design were issued until 1957, when a blue £5 note designed by Stephen Gooden, R.A., was issued; it still showed the head of Britannia, but neither a skep nor a pile of money.

The Maclise medallion that included the straw skep was adapted for the coloured £1 and 10/- (=£0.50) notes introduced in 1928, but the flight entrance disappeared in this engraving. In 1960 a new £1 note was introduced, designed by Robert Austin, R.A., with a portrait of Her Majesty the Queen. There was a Britannia emblem, with a pile of coin at her feet rather than a skep, on each side of the note.

The flight entrance (Fig. 3) was shown from 1855 to 1956 on notes for £5 and over. Both the skep and the pile of coin were omitted from the £5 note in 1957. The skep continued in the £1 note until 1960, and in the 10/- note until 1961—when the design reverted to the pile of coin. The £5 note of 1963 and all subsequent Bank of England notes have shown Britannia similarly, with money, not a skep.



Fig. 3. The classic vignette of Britannia designed in 1855 by Daniel Maclise, R.A., and used on Bank of England banknotes until 1957.

Our appreciation is expressed to the Museum and Historical Research Section HO-G of the Bank of England for their investigations on our behalf, and for arranging permission for our reproduction of the Bank of England copyright photographs (MBC 779, 1877, 1074) in Fig. 1, 2 and 3, respectively.