



**Eva Crane Trust**

## **ECTD\_144**

**TITLE:** Places to visit:  
The British Museum's beeswax treasures.

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## Places to visit

### The British Museum's beeswax treasures

All the world's great museums and libraries probably contain objects to do with bees and beekeeping, but comparatively few have been systematically searched for them. One notable exception is the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England, whose Department of Western Manuscripts has identified illustrations of bees and other insects in its illuminated manuscripts, and colour slides of these are now available (*Bee World* 1977, page 39).

Staff at the British Museum in London have been kind enough to report on some of their material that is of interest to us, and here we focus attention on to beeswax. The British Museum is open Monday to Saturday 10—17 h, and on Sunday 14.30—18.00.

The Department of Egyptian Antiquities has a number of 'magical' beeswax figures such as the Sons of Horus—four gods, with the head of a man, a baboon, a jackal and a hawk respectively, who protected the embalmed internal organs of a mummy. Then there are embalmers' wax incision plates, which were often used to cover the incision in the lower left abdomen of the corpse, through which the internal organs were extracted during the embalming process. The above objects are on display in the Mummy Room. Beeswax has also been found applied to the orifices of mummies, but the mummies have not been systematically examined for beeswax.

Beeswax was used as an adhesive in several ancient civilizations. In the Department's Fourth Room it can be found attaching alabaster lids to vases, and alabaster vases to their pedestals; fixing the flint teeth of a sickle; together with limestone powder, cementing a handle on to a razor. In every wig examined, beeswax has been used for curling and plaiting. In the Coptic Corridor, the same Department has on display a considerable number of encaustic paintings of the Roman period, all of which will certainly contain beeswax. A pair of wooden writing tables of the Roman period (BM 29527) are still coated with wax.

The Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities has a beeswax candle (1851.8-13.364) found in a tomb at Vaison (Vaucluse, France), dating from the Roman period. The majority of their Greek, Etruscan and Roman bronze figures were made by the lost-wax process (*cire-perdue*), from original beeswax casting models, but these themselves are only rarely preserved.

The Department of Mediaeval and Later Antiquities has two cakes of beeswax, whose dimensions range from 3 to 11 cm, discovered with a Late Bronze Age founder's hoard.

In the Department of Manuscripts, now part of the British Library, is Additional MS 30337, an Exultet Roll dating from about AD 1075. This is one of a number of illustrated manuscripts made during the eleventh century in Central Italy, especially at Monte Cassino. MS 30337 is not on public display; however, the one other Exultet Roll in Britain—a fragment, but including three bee illustrations—can be seen on the wall of the basement of John Rylands Library in Manchester. The Exultet Rolls were used in the Roman church for the service on Holy Saturday, when the paschal candle was blessed. *Exultet* was the first word of the hymn sung in its praise, which probably dates from the fifth century. The hymn also praised the bees that provided the wax

'for the candle, 'who produce posterity, rejoice in offspring, yet retain their virginity'. The manuscripts include clear illustrations of hives and beekeeping; the only earlier such illustrations known are those in the tombs of Ancient Egypt, made several thousand years before.