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A survey of English beekeeping in 1086

Dr Eva Crane looks at
beekeeping records in the
Domesday Book

The survey of England recorded in *Domesday Book* was made in 1086 by the order of King William I who had conquered the country in 1066. In the 1920s, Graham Burt of Gloucester copied out a number of extracts that related to beekeeping, using county translations then available, and the extracts were later deposited in the Library of the International Bee Research Association. A complete English translation of *Domesday Book* was published from 1970 onwards¹ and this contains the widest survey of beekeeping made in England until the present century.

Penelope Walker and I have collected together all the beekeeping information, and published it in an article in *The Local Historian*².

Detail from East Anglia

Hives were recorded in detail only for East Anglia which was surveyed first; all the other counties had to be surveyed much more briefly, for lack of time. The entries found for the three East Anglian counties are shown in the table.

In all three counties, at places where hives were recorded, there were, on average, between four and five hives.

In East Anglia, a hive was referred to as *vasa apum*, probably a coiled-straw skep, or as *rusca apum*, possibly a skep woven from stems of Butcher's Broom, *Ruscus apum*. Elsewhere, the hives were mentioned only in Huntingdonshire – and in Herefordshire where the word used was *vasculum*, a small hive which was probably a wicker skep. Several centuries earlier, around 705, Aldhelm, the abbot of Malmesbury in Wiltshire and later bishop of Sherborne in Dorset, had mentioned hives in his writings. He said that they were little huts constructed of osiers, or made from bark stitched together to make a hollow. The first description suggests that wicker skeps were in use and that straw skeps had not yet reached Wiltshire. No other reference has been found to bark hives in England, although cork bark was widely used for making hives in parts of south-west Europe. Perhaps thinner bark was stitched together in England to make a cover for a wicker skep.

Beekeepers were mentioned only in Devon, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Wiltshire – and County Durham. Some of these might have looked after wild colonies in the woods instead of, or as well as, hives.

Honey renders

Honey renders (statutory honey payments) were mentioned in 88 places, which were in 20 of the 35 counties surveyed. In some

	<i>Essex</i>	<i>Norfolk</i>	<i>Suffolk</i>
Total number of places surveyed	442	734	646
Number of places with hives	131	85	76
Total number of hives	601	418	350
Highest number per place	30	27	17

places a honey render paid before William became King had been commuted to a payment in money, possibly because honey was scarce but more probably because the King was in great need of money.

In an Appendix, our article cites all the references to honey, hives and beekeeping in *Domesday Book*. In addition, it quotes references related to beekeeping and bee products in England before the Norman conquest and up to the end of the Norman period – some of which provide interesting insights into uses of mead and beeswax. No references were found in *Domesday Book* to mead or to beeswax. It seems likely that beeswax payments were made directly to the Church which needed much beeswax

for candles, and not to the lord of the manor.

A future article will deal with local records from later centuries. ♣

References

- 1 Morris, J (Ed), (1970-86). *Domesday Book* (Chichester: Phillimore).
 - 2 Crane, E; Walker, P, (1999). Early English Beekeeping: the evidence from local records up to the end of the Norman period. *The Local Historian*, **29**, (3), 130-151. [Try your local library for a copy]
- [Dr Crane was formerly Director of IBRA. Her latest publication is 'The world history of beekeeping and honey hunting.' This was reviewed in October 1999, page 312.]