So what's the "Buzz" in the club this week..

Have you ever wondered who was the first person to look at a beehive and think "Those bees are hiding something delicious in there, I know it". So I thought we could do a short potted history of beekeeping this week.

Early humans did not keep or manage bees but would rob colonies of their honey. In the wild, honeybee colonies, are found high in trees or hidden in well protected cavities. Collecting honey was a job for only the bravest or hardiest to attempt and is still practised today in some parts of the world, especially with tropical bee colonies who build their comb in the open air. The honey hunters of Nepal are famed for their bravery as the giant honeybees (Apis dorsata) from whom they take the honey is in comb, fixed precariously on high cliffs.

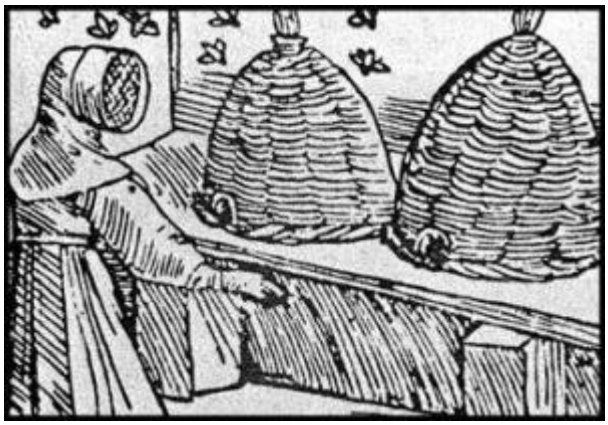
Thousands of years ago in Africa the concept of hollowing out a log to make a cavity suitable for bees to nest evolved and is still sometimes used today. The advantage was that the log could be hoisted into a tree which made it difficult for predators to reach and allowed the beekeeper to safely lower it at harvest time.

There is documented evidence that the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt were keeping bees in hives as early as 4000 years ago, floating colonies down the river Nile on barges to follow the nectar and bloom flow. The agricultural, nutritional, medicinal and ritualistic value of the Bee and its honey was so important in Egypt that King Menes, founder of the First Egyptian Dynasty, was called "the Beekeeper"; a title ascribed to all future Pharaohs.

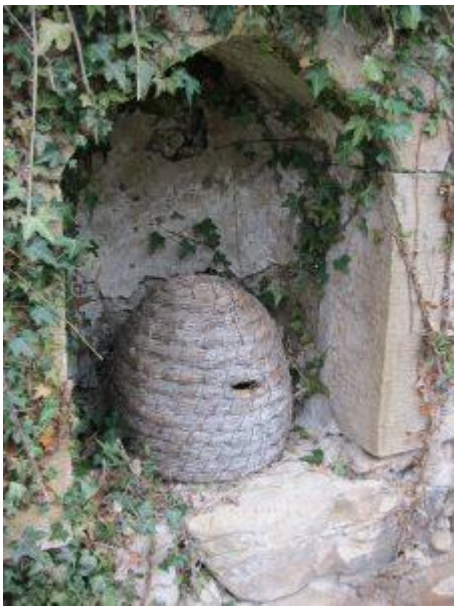
In Ancient Greece and Roman times beekeeping was a very important activity. They established methods picked up from their occupied lands and were able to spread good practice, a lot which is still used into the 20th century. Their hives were made from plant material, daubed with mud or dung to make the surfaces smooth. Throughout Europe and the Middle East basic devices such as clay barrels, jars, hollowed out logs and also purpose built boxes were used as hives.

In the 15th Century European explorers began their great voyages. The explorers took honeybees with them and introduced them to the Americas and Australasia, where they previously did not exist.

Monks became skilled beekeepers having realised that beeswax was an ideal material to make candles for monasteries and churches. Beeswax burns with a bright, clear flame with virtually no smoke compared to the smelly, smoky flames produced by candles made from Tallow. The monks enjoyed the added advantage of being able to sell the honey for income and producing “mead” an alcoholic drink also made from honey, much enjoyed by the monks.



In the 16th century Europe skeps were used to hive our bees. They were made from straw bound with bark or twigs woven into a conical shape. Skeps are not waterproof and a straw hackle, simply a bunch of straw tied at one end, was used to cover the skep to protect it from rain. Later, skeps were placed into recesses or cavities in walls called bee boles to protect them even further. The problem with the skep was that the bees had to be killed or encouraged to move “driving the bees” so the honey could be harvested.



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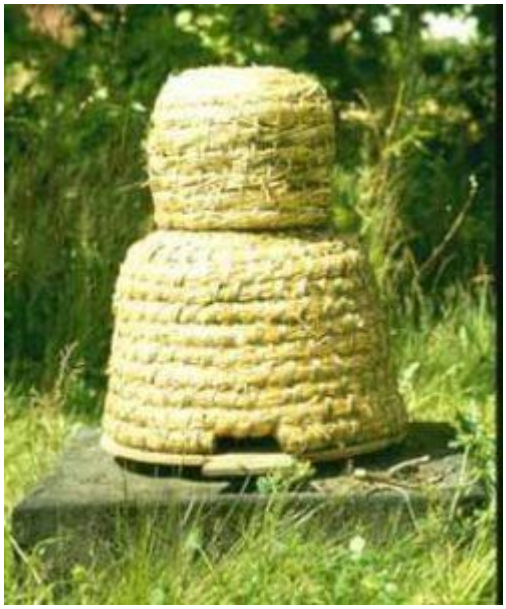

The 18th century saw the design of the hive change to try and solve the problem of having to kill the bees to collect the honey. The first was a much smaller skep that fitted on top of the main skep with a small hole in the bottom. It was noticed that the queen rarely went up into the smaller skep and so few eggs were laid there, the bees used it store honey. The upper chamber could then be removed with and bees driven back to the lower skep, and the honey removed. Other hive designs were tried, involving a series of chambers aimed at separating the bees from their honey but these came quite complicated and very elaborate.

The first major breakthrough in modern beekeeping was in 1834, when Major Munn developed his Munn hive. This hive had removable frames and he realised that if the frames were a specific distance apart, between 6 and 8mm, so they didn't get stuck together with the wax comb built by bees.

In 1851 the Reverend Lorenzo Langstroth patented a design of a hive with moveable frames and spacing. The Langstroth hive is reputed to have been based on wooden champagne boxes. The pioneering developments relating to "bee space" and moveable frames have been used in many other designs since then.

Still to this day hives are designed using the principle of moveable frames and "bee space" that allow beekeepers to work with the bees rather than against them.

Modern Hives

It was not until 1935 that the British Beekeepers Association introduced a British standard for the beehive which has been modified over time. Other hives have been developed for greater simplicity or to increase the volume of the brood box, but most UK hives still use the same super boxes based on the original British standard.

Top bar hive

In 1965 J.D. Treadwell and P. Patterson designed the Top Bar Hive as a cheap, simple but effective box for keeping bees and was furthered developed in 1976 and become known as the Kenya Top Bar Hive which is becoming more popular worldwide.