

Fatal accidents occur occasionally on the farm, when unventilated silos are being filled with Lucerne at the critical period. Anyone standing in the caged ladder and opening the inspection hatch may be suddenly overwhelmed, becoming unconscious or suffocated. The heavy, slightly pungent and coloured gas, which pours out and down the escape ladder,

makes rescue highly dangerous, except by the Fire service.

References.—British Poisonous Plants, Bul. No. 161, M.A.F.F., H.M.S.O. The Diagnosis of Mineral Deficiencies in Plants, T. Wallace, H.M.S.O. Black's Veterinary Dictionary, Adam and Charles Black, London.

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## An Appeal

On 10th November our house and a number of others in this village were entered by a skilled burglar collecting costume jewellery and other small items, including two of particular interest to beekeepers.

The first was one of the special badges recently issued to the B.B.K.A. Executive Committee Members, in the form of a round B.B.K.A. badge enclosed in a silver wreath suspended from a bar inscribed

"executive". The other item taken was one of the current minting B.B.K.A. medals in silver, with a non tarnish finish. Neither item was inscribed.

Should any reader of BEE CRAFT see or hear of either item being offered for sale, perhaps they would be kind enough to contact us, as this may offer a clue to the detection of the thief.

Karl & Betty Showler, Chalfont St. Giles.

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## Honey Hunting

by Ian McLean

Honey hunting is a very ancient occupation, as evidenced by the cave paintings from Arana in Eastern Spain and Zimbabwe which are about 9,000 years old. Honey will have been sought for its sweetness and rapid release of energy, but diluted with water it would soon have fermented to yield a crude mead, and application as a poultice of this magical commodity on wounds will have further extended its importance to primitive man. The ability of beeswax to burn with a pure clean light in tapers, confirmed the sacred nature of the bee to the Chaldean civilisation.

Honey hunting must always have been a specialist trade, because of respect for bee stings, but smoking bees to subdue them is depicted in the cave paintings. Bronze age civilisation saw the development of casting Bronze replicas of wax models by the 'lost wax process', a technique Sculptors and Dental technicians use to this day.

Bees often occupied hollow trees, an equable home in temperate climates, cool in summer and warm or sheltered in winter, and easily defended at the knot hole entrance. In Russia a haeman is called a 'bortnik' from 'bort' a hollow tree trunk.

Honey hunting has not entirely died out in forest areas of Russia and Hungary. Contemporary accounts describe searching for pine marten tracks and nest debris, in the snow at the base of trees on the edge of forest clearings. In other parts of the world, the Honey Guide Bird and Honey Ratel are natural guides. In spring or autumn when there are few competing flowers, lures will attract bees nesting nearby. Honeycomb is put out and sometimes burnt in clearings, other attractants are Sunflower heads smeared in honey or moss heavily soaked in urine! The simplest technique is then to observe and follow the line(s) of foraging bees to their nest. Developments of this use traps. Collumella A.D. 60 describes one made of reed with the ends closed and a hole in the stem which could be covered by one's thumb. Variations include cowhorns with ventilation holes drilled in and wooden slides to close the bees in. The insides were often smeared with honey and when about a dozen bees were feeding inside they were released one by one, and followed home.

Ingenuity eased observation in various ways. Fixing the trap on a stick (tree climbing crook) and lying down, enabled





*Honey hunting in the wilds of Wirral. Bill Corbett, with modern equipment. Photo: Brian Boyd.*

the bees to be seen against the sky. Dusting them with ashes or sticking down to them, rendered them more visible. Some authors recommended releasing bees from two sites and triangulating the bee flight lines. An early edition of the ABC of Bee Culture—Root, Gives a time computation 'deduct two minutes from the time taken by a bee to reappear at the forage site and divide the remainder by ten—this gives distance to the colony in miles.'

Having found your colony, the trunk is sounded by tapping and the nest probed with a thin stick to discover the extent of the stores. The tree may be marked by an ownership mark. There were laws governing the ownership and compensation for damage to a tree; penalties for stealing honey from a marked tree and tributes or dues to be paid to the landowner who would either be a Prince or the Monastery.

The favoured time for harvesting the crop was the 8th September, the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary, when the bees were either smoked or drummed out. The tree might be felled to get the honey and so one can see the link to established apiaries in log hives. Alternatively, a wedge shaped panel was cut out of the trunk, so that the nest could be raided, the panel replaced and the process repeated the following year.

A skilful beekeeper could track and claim 10-15 new colonies per year, but practice varied in different areas. In Russia there were defined 'Beewalks' for the 'bortnik' to follow and rules to restrict the lopping of trees, which was practised to encourage rotten cavities to develop. The Domesday Book records that the Bishop of Worcester had a licence to hunt for honey in the forests of Malvern. Forests in Hungary contained large stands of



oinla, Horse Chestnut and Lime, in the village clearings, Buckwheat would be common crop.

Bears could be a pest, so branches were removed to make climbing more difficult. The beekeeper then used crampons and straps looped round the tree as stirrups on a sling to assist ascent. A 'bear club' was devised, consisting of a lump of wood suspended on a rope in front of the entrance, the bear pushed it aside to reach into the cavity, but was knocked off as it swung back.

Apart from honey and wax the quantity of mead made was enormous. In 946 the followers of Olga turned on their allies, the Drevlyane, having first organised a victory binge, and killed 5,000 of them whilst they were in their cups. My favourite story,

however tells of a Polish beekeeper who slipped into a hollow tree and found himself chest deep in honey. He stuck fast there, undiscovered for two days, until a bear attracted by the scent also climbed the tree and let himself down backwards into the cavity. The man grabbed the bear's shaggy coat and hollered. The startled bear took off and hauled himself and the quick witted beekeeper out of the tree.

There is a swarm which has established itself in a hollow tree down the road, anybody free on the 8th September next?

Main Sources—Survey of a thousand years of beekeeping in Russia, Dorothy Galton. Bee Hunting in the Carpathian area Bela Gunda. Acta Ethnographica (Budapest) XVII 1968 1-2. Honey and your Health,

Beck & Smedley.

## Postbag

Dear Sir,

I view with concern the suggestion repeated by James Walton in the September issue of Bee Craft, that ether be used to subdue vicious bees. Ether is a dangerously inflammable, volatile liquid, with a very low flashpoint, a mixture with air being explosive. Such a condition could be

obtained even with the use of an atomiser and would be set off readily by sparks, flames, static discharges, or even hot surfaces. The use of matches, cigarettes or the smoker in the vicinity is likely to be disastrous.

Graham F. Rendall, Salisbury.

Dear Sir,

Fourteen by Twelve.

I am glad that Mr. R. G. H. White has come to recognise the many virtues of this size of frame—better known perhaps, as the "British Deep". He should not feel isolated in his choice, as I can assure him that there has been a great up-surge in the popularity of "British Deep" in recent years. As I am sure the Appliance Manufacturers would confirm,

My belief is that this is due to a fundamental change in beekeeping methods dictated since the last war, by the importation of more prolific strains from southern Europe to replace stocks lost before the war through acarine disease. This process was accelerated following the severe winter of 1962/63 when it was the vogue to import from the U.S.A. Here again, queens brought in, were far more prolific than our usual strains, and beekeepers were faced with a dilemma in providing adequate housing for the stronger colonies.

Many took the line of least resistance and provided required brood space by adding another brood chamber or shallow—messy systems at the best of times.

Others chose Langstroth, British Commercial, M.D., or of course, "British Deep". Why there should have been initial hesitation in adopting the last named is hard to understand, because apart from the brood frames and brood chambers, all the equipment is compatible with British Standard hives, both National and W.B.C., and the saving in cost is therefore, considerable. Among many other advantages are all those which go with single brood chamber management, and the provision of a frame deep enough to allow the development of a brood nest of a shape natural to the honey bee.

I have used "British Deep" for over twenty years and have little fault to find. A few words of caution, however, may not be out of place in the light of experience; there is no point in giving these frames to less prolific strains which would be happy on a single B.S. brood box, but if you are a slave to standardisation, then use the deep