

YORKSHIRE CURIOSITIES

Bee Boles and Bee Holes



FROM the Middle Ages honey was an important crop, being used for the sweetening in the days before sugar, and for making mead. Colonies of bees were kept at most of the great houses as well as many farms.

In the wetter parts of England, notably Yorkshire, Lancashire, the Lakes and Devon, the conical straw hives (or "skeps") used until 1862 required shelter from the elements and from moisture on the ground. A popular method of achieving this was the construction of a stone bee wall with alcoves (15 to 30 inches square) on the sheltered side in which the skeps were placed. The alcoves were set several feet above ground level. In Yorkshire these alcoves are known as bee holes, although the Scottish expression bee bole (meaning a recess) is often applied. To confuse the issue further, Yorkshire bee holes are sometimes called bee houses, a term which outside Yorkshire refers to a wooden hut used to house hives!

Bee boles come in many shapes and sizes from a single alcove to a row, with flat or rounded lintels and some with shelves to take more than one hive. The finest example in Yorkshire can be found in the grounds of Nutwith Cote Farm just south of Masham (Ordnance Survey Landranger Sheet 99: SE 230/788). Here half a dozen elegantly built bee holes are set side by side along the base of an outbuilding. We spotted a similarly sturdy row of

bee boles at a farm on the A169 2.5 miles north of Malton. On a hillock just beyond Nutwith Cote Farm is a noteworthy but dilapidated Classical dovecote.

Of a similar form but of more modest construction is a row of bee boles in a garden wall at West Scafton in Coverdale, and a further row of eight are built into a hillside in a field at Hurst, west of Richmond. More modest again is a single, shelved bee hole in a garden at Sedbusk near Hawes into which three hives could be placed one above the other.

Curiously enough the earliest known example of a straw skep was found at the Coppergate excavations in York and dates from the twelfth century.

So far our examples have been restricted to North Yorkshire and sadly it seems it will remain this way. A gale in the mid 1980s blew down South Yorkshire's only bee wall in a farmyard at Hemingfield south-east of Barnsley. With a height of twenty feet and room for thirty-six skeps it had stood for some 300 years. Frustratingly it was in the process of being restored when the gale struck and today only a few foundation stones overrun with weeds mark the site of this lost Yorkshire curiosity.

This article has been adapted from the newly published "North and East Yorkshire Curiosities" by Duncan and Trevor Smith (The Dovecote Press, Stanbridge, Wimborne, Dorset BH 21 4JD £5.95).

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