

Bee Harmony



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What is a Skep?

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Skeps, are baskets placed open-end down, and have been used for about 2000 years. Initially they were made from wicker plastered with mud and dung but from the Middle Ages they were made of straw. In northern and western Europe, skeps were made of coils of grass or straw. In its simplest form, there is a single entrance at the bottom of the skep. There is no internal structure provided for the bees. The colony must produce its own honeycomb, which is attached to the inside of the skep.

Skeps have two disadvantages; beekeepers cannot inspect the comb for diseases and pests, and honey removal is not easy – often resulting in the destruction of the entire colony. To harvest the honey beekeepers either drove the bees out of the skep or, by the use of a bottom extension called an eke,

or a top extension called a cap, sought to create comb with just honey in it. Quite

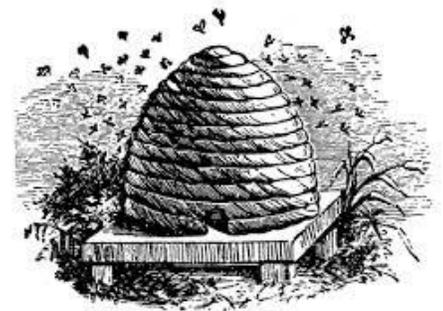
often the bees were just killed, sometimes using lighted sulfur, to allow the honeycomb to be removed. Skeps could also be squeezed in a vise to extract the honey. As of 1998, most US states prohibited the use of skeps because they cannot be inspected for disease and parasites.

Later skep designs included a smaller woven basket (cap) on top over a small hole in the main skep. This cap acted as a crude super, allowing the harvesting of some honey with less destruction of brood and bees. In England such an extension piece consisting of a ring of about 4 or 5 coils of straw placed below a straw beehive to give extra room for brood rearing was called an eke, imp or nadir. An eke was used to give just a bit of extra room, or to "eke" some more space, a nadir is a larger extension used when a full story was needed beneath.

A person who made such woven beehives was called a "skepper", a surname that still exists in western countries. In England the thickness of the coil of straw was controlled using a ring of leather or piece of cows horn called a "girth" and the coils of straw could be sewn together using strips of briar. Likenesses of skeps can be found in paintings, carvings and

old manuscripts. The skep is often used on signs as an indication of industry ("the busy bee").

In the late 18th century, more complex skeps appeared which had wooden tops with holes in them over which glass jars were placed. The comb was built in the glass jars which made it commercially attractive.



Skep

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