

## Bee boles

Joe Saunders

Bees serve an important purpose both today and historically. They are essential pollinators for growing plants and food. Their honey was the main source of sweetener for European food until sugar-cane was grown in large quantities in the sixteenth century. Beeswax was and still is regularly used for candles.

The importance of bees led beekeeping to be encouraged at least by the sixteenth century. Samuel Hartlib in *The Reformed Commonwealth of Bees* (1655) advocated the widespread keeping of bees. Many superstitions came to be associated with bees such as the need for the head of the household to go out at tell the bees when a family member had died.

In the medieval and early modern period bees in Britain were kept in bee boles, recesses built into walls in which a straw hive could be protected from the elements. This hive was a coiled-straw basket called a skep, used before the introduction of modern wooden hives. The name *bole* comes from a Scots word for a recess. Bee boles are almost completely unique to the British Isles, though they are also found part of what is now France and Belgium.



Bee boles at Well Hall in Eltham, London. © Joe Saunders

Many surviving bee boles are found in ecclesiastical buildings which had a particular need for candles for use in religious services. Others are found near high-status buildings and significant estates. Early examples that can be seen today are often associated with Tudor manor houses. Lower-status buildings also had bee boles and although many have not survived they can be found in some rural areas in association with small farms or cottages.

Bee boles are usually found in sets of 2-4 and sometimes were big enough to hold two skeps apiece. They are often around 25 inches high, 20 inches wide and 17 inches deep. They are usually rectangular though they occasionally have rounded or even pointed arches. Early modern writing on the ideal skeps for honey extraction recommended a range of sizes fitting within these dimensions.

While they are sometimes set in the walls of a house itself, bee boles are more commonly found in garden or orchard walls nearby. The prevailing British weather meant that they were usually built into south-facing walls in order to offer best protection from the wind and rain and to benefit from the most sunlight.





Bee boles at Dol-y-gaer, Wales (1960). © Natasha Ceridwen de Chroustchoff ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

A survey in the 1950s showed that the majority of surviving British bee boles were to be found north of a line from the Wash to Cardigan Bay with a high proportion in Fife and Angus, on the Isle and Man, the southern Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. This spread either reflects the wider use of bee boles in these parts of Britain or their better survival in these areas.

Because of their durable nature in comparison to skeps or hives bee boles are some of the earliest evidence we have around British beekeeping. However, they are difficult to date as very few of them carry a year, nor are the walls they are in often mentioned in documents.



The [Bee Boles Register](#) homepage.

Efforts to record bee boles and other historic beekeeping structures were started by Dr Eva Crane in the 1950s. The [Bee Boles Register](#) now contains records for 1608 sites and images for most of them. To improve accessibility to the records and to encourage conservation and further recording, the Register was put into a database and made available online in 2005. The Register includes a useful further reading list as well as a function to add 'new' structures.

#### References and Resources:

Information for this post was taken from the wonderful R. M. Duruz and E. E Crane, '[English Bee Boles](#)', *Bee World* 34 (1953) and The [Bee Boles Register](#) website.

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