

THE VERY BRITISH BEEHIVE



A bee skep, as a symbol, speaks to one's soul. Its charm may inspire thoughts of happiness, health and home. The sight of a simple skep surrounded by an abundance of flora humming in the midday sun conjures notions of a thriving community, a bustling economy and a diligent harmony. The image is ancient, used by heraldry, brotherhoods and sisterhoods and suchlike. A well-warded college divulging mysteries to initiates. A story of labours, treasures and trust. Proudly displayed by innkeepers, beekeepers of course, mead makers and in more modern times by banks and businesses.

By nature it is indeed a sentient symbol for any society or social enterprise. Today we understand that a colony of bees functions as an 'autonomous-collective': they are a self-governing interdependent group in which individuals have the ability to make autonomous decisions according to ever changing external stimulus. There is no one in charge. No ruler, nor manager. Personal occupational decisions can be made in the moment by single bees, and big decisions can be made democratically. The queens serve the populous, honour the democracy, and all enjoy the vote, as you and I may.

Beehives and societies have been viewed quite differently in the past. In 1840 the book illustrator and caricaturist George Cruikshank (1792-1878) designed 'The British Beehive' as an anti-reformist comment in support of not expanding the franchise to the public voter. He didn't etch and print it until 1867 when the second reform act was going through parliament. The cartoon depicts the hierarchy of the British workforce housed inside a giant bee-skep. It echoed the ideas of the Scottish philosopher and astronomer, Adam Smith.



In the 1770's, Smith published and taught his theories that social status and social identity were primarily determined not by social, religious or political rank,

but by occupation and by an individual's relation to the means of production. He is often quoted for his metaphor of 'an invisible hand', which he used to describe unintended social benefits resulting from individual actions, suggesting that the gluttony of the rich naturally trickles down to the poor through the development of the nation.

Cruikshank and Smith and many others wanted to preserve the 'status quo', but we know that didn't happen:

1832. The Great Reform: Act began the changes that one might enjoy today.

1867. Second Reform Act: granted householders and working classes the vote.

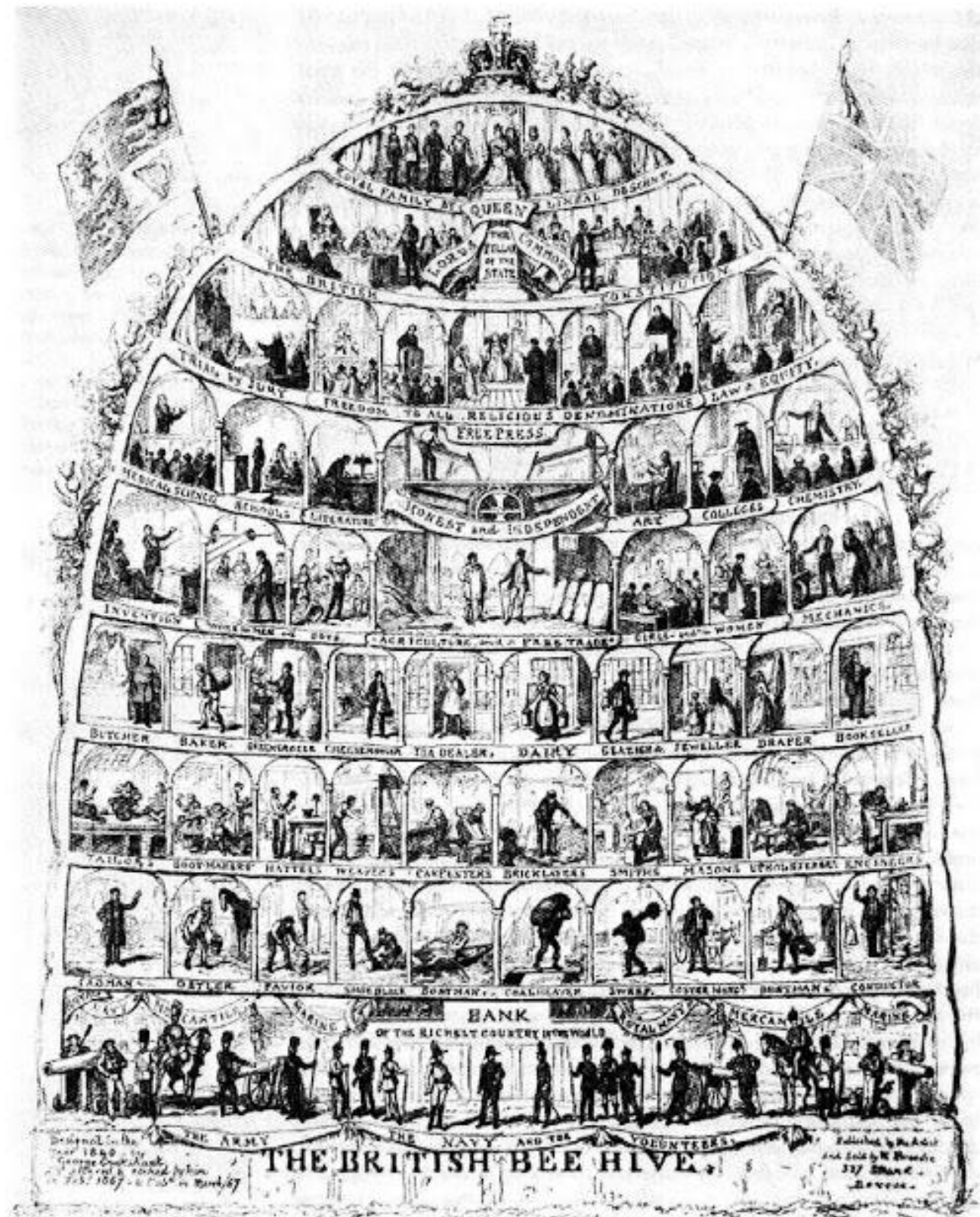
1885. The Third Reform Act: extended the 1867 concessions from boroughs to the countryside.

1918. Representation of the People Act: abolished most property qualifications for men and enfranchised some women.

1928. Equal Franchise Act: abolished most property qualifications for men; enfranchised some women.

1948. Representation of the People Act: removed double vote entitlements regarding business premises.

1969. Representation of the People Act: extended suffrage to include 18 to 20 year olds.



Crowned at the top of Cruikshank's taxonomy of trade and craft is Queen Victoria flanked by the royal family, underpinned by the British Constitution of Lords and Commons. Down another layer is the priesthood, entitled 'freedom to all religious denominations' and flanked by Jury and Law. 'Agriculture' holds a large place at the centre, topped by the 'Free Press'. Then represented throughout are the butcher, baker, boat-maker and so forth.

Right at the bottom of the fifty-four 'cells' representing the various trades and classes of the British workforce and society were placed the military - the foundation of Cruikshank's representation of British society.

To a beekeeper or entomologist this makes perfect sense. They are the guard bees at the city gates, checking every entrant for hive scent and good intention. There they stand, a venom-armed guard, who in a natural state would be warding an entrance enhanced or 'curtained' with the miracle substance Propolis.



The reddish gluey resin made by the bees from botanical products and substances has been used in traditional medicine worldwide. Honeybees cover surfaces, cement and fill small holes with it throughout their colony, sanitizing and disinfecting their home. One will often hear beekeepers say that propolis is the 'immune system' of the hive, and it does indeed act as an antiseptic to prevent microbial infection of larvae, honey stores, and the combs. It has antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, antifungal and has curious anesthetic properties. If a mouse invades a colony during colder months, the bees may kill it, but are not strong enough to remove it, so they coat it in propolis completely preventing decomposition. It is perfect for sticking onto a toothache.

The ancient Egyptians utilised this 'bee-glue' in their mummification processes. It was praised by the

ancient Greeks, (Hippocrates, Dioscorides & Aristotle), for its healing properties. The Romans also knew of its healing powers and used it as a medicine. Pliny the Elder wrote of it:

“[propolis] has the property of extracting stings and all foreign bodies from the flesh, dispersing tumours, ripening indurations, allaying pains of the sinews, and cicatrizing ulcers of the most obstinate nature.”

In the Persian manuscripts propolis is described as a drug against eczemas, myalgia, and rheumatism. The ancient Jews knew it as *Tzori*. The biblical ‘Balm of Gilead’, which the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon is known as *Tzori Gilead* in Hebrew.

The prolific author Marcus Terrentius Varro (116BC – 27BC) wrote “The Propolis is the name given to a substance with which they build a *protectum* (“gable”) over the entrance opening in front of the hive, especially in summer.” It’s name contains two Greek words *pro* – before and *polis* – city. To guard the city and keep the hive protected.

Therefore, one can understand that the military might at the foundation of Cruikshank’s pyramid-like depiction of British society were well placed: ‘the Army, the Navy and the Volunteers’.



The Royal Air force, not yet in existence when he designed the cartoon, were formed in 1918. In due course aircraft were designed and built that were named after insects with a sting or a bite: De Haviland Queen Bee; De Haviland Hornet; De Haviland Mosquito; De Haviland Venom; Airspeed Queen Wasp.

When aviation really 'took off' it was not just the shores and seaports of this 'Honey Island' that needed

policing and propolising, but great international gateways to the sky... airports.

Heathrow Airport was interestingly designed upon a hexagonal theme. According to an old acquaintance that policed there, the geometrical design is more than just a clever way of maximizing on runway space. It is a defensive symbol utilizing the powers of an ancient alchemic design combining a fire triangle (upward pointing) and water triangle (downward pointing) in a "Seal of Solomon" device. To raise and perpetuate its protective energies the passengers and traffic moved within and around the design in a clockwise direction.

Surrey sacrificed a lot of its high quality agricultural land. Beneath it, much archaeology was unearthed during the building of the airport. I was informed that an underground stream runs along one of the sides of the water triangle, and that a fire station was placed on one of the points of the fire triangle if I remember correctly.

Make of that what you will. I can vouch for the gentleman's professionalism and expertise in occult knowledge. The design certainly ensured that the war planes of that era could take off whatever the wind direction. When Elizabeth II came to throne the 'Queens Building' was built close to the centre, which was later replaced by Terminal 2, known as the Queen's terminal.



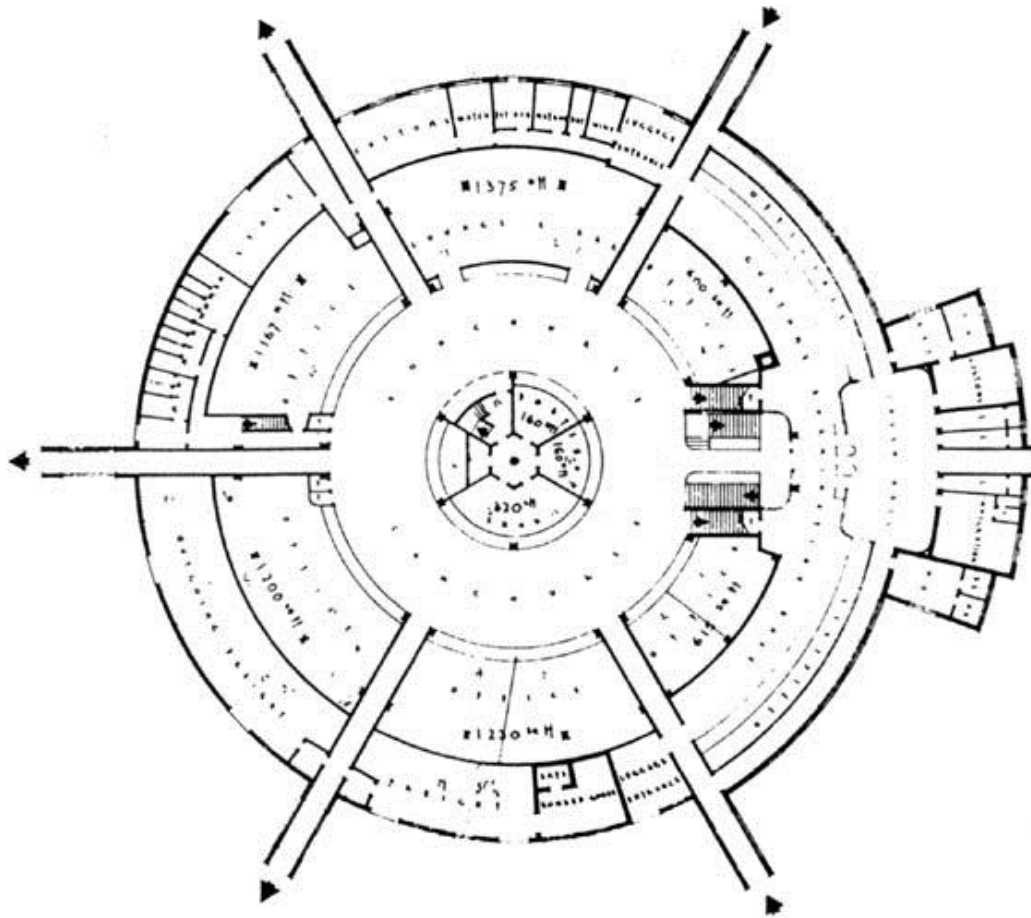
Heathrow Airport, 1983

Gatwick Airport, another well-warded gateway to Great Britain, also enjoyed honeybee symbolism in the circular concrete building known as 'The Beehive'. This was the original terminal building, whose patent application was submitted on the 8th of the 8th 1934, and was officially opened on the 6th of the 6th 1936.

Circular, skep like and with six bastions or piers, the design was unique and inspirational. It ensured greater safety for planes and passengers. A girder with six supports runs around the first floor roof.



Gatwick Airport, 1936



Plan of the Beehive Building, Gatwick Airport.

The gateways of this sceptered Isle are certainly in cunning hands. Frankfurt airport also has similar themes.

Back in Anglo Saxon times, the man who guarded the Castle gates was known as the Beoward. This title is in the same camp as many bee and bear related words such as the name Beorn or Bjorn, meaning 'brave' and 'bear'. The character Beowulf, literally bee-wolf, which alludes to both a bear and a hornet. The name Berengar contains words for bear and spear. The name Osborn is the god-bear. Math,

Mathgamain & Arthur, all have the Celtic name for bear ringing loudly within them.

The red star Arcturus literally means, Bear-Guard: circling the pole star, it sets into the hollow hills in the winter, to return again in the spring.

This again conjures the legendary King Arthur and his knights, sleeping within hollow hills until the Isle of Britain are in great need. Whilst the northern constellations turn anti-clockwise around the pole star in the northern sky, never setting 'eyes and ears', 'ever vigilant', 'everything, everywhere'. By star and by stone, the British beehive is well warded.

In the early days of beekeeping, instead of wasp-traps, one might see bear-traps hanging from trees or dug into the forest floor. This indicates another possible meaning of the name Bear-guard: keeping bears out of the bee garden or 'gardd' - literally the bear-ward. The surname Burward is also derived from 'castle guard' or 'castle warden'. He is the 'lofty lance bearer' who keeps the bears at bay. 'Bur' being an Old English name for bear. Which in Russian and similar Slavic languages is 'medved', a fusion of the words *med* – honey and *ved* – wisdom, which can be literally translated as 'honey-wise', or 'the one who knows where the honey is'!



Beehives were once used in warfare as projectiles, being thrown from medieval castles under siege or attached to trip wires in trench warfare. Stories surrounding the mythical Irish Saint Gobnat tell us of how one of her hives transformed into a golden helmet while her bees morphed into soldiers to successfully chase away marauding cattle thieves.

During the Vietnam War era, the anti-personal ammunition round called 'Beehive' was developed. It was packed with lethal flechettes that buzzed whilst flying through the air. The word bomb is derived from the French *Bombe*, Italian *Bomba*, Latin *Bombus* ("a booming sound"), and from the ancient Greek *bómbos*, ("booming, humming, buzzing") imitative of the sound itself. Consider here the bumblebee, whose genus is *bomba*. I have heard that beehives and bees were used as weapons by German troops against the British in East Africa in WWI.

During the same war Iodine was used on a large scale

to treat the injured, and was 'poured into everything' by nurses. Honey was also used by medical officers and nurses to dress wounds, and again in WWII until penicillin was available. When not interred in the terror of war, life in the trenches could get awfully boring. To keep themselves occupied the troops got up to all sorts of activities. Imagine a swarm of bees arriving. What luck! They'd be hived in an old ammunition box or some sort of crate by a beekeeper keen to keep up his hobby.

I was lucky to collect this story a few years back: Sometime after both world wars had ended, a veteran, Tim Bowler, was attending a club meeting in High Wycombe and related some tales of his experiences in the trenches. He told of how he had kept bees behind the lines to alleviate boredom and of course to sweeten up their lives a bit. Well, inevitably, the time came for him to be moved up the lines... He did of course make it back to tell the tale, but when he did he was most annoyed to find that someone had stolen all of the honey from his hive. Perhaps the thief thought that he wouldn't make it back again. Imagine though that new beekeeper's luck to find a hive of bees unattended as he moved up to a new position in a war zone. Plenty of honey for breakfast and a brew, being quite an upgrade from one's ration pack. Fantastically, after the old soldier told the story to the High Wycombe club, a member in the audience exclaimed, that it was he who'd been there and stolen the honey! I hope that he repaid his new friend at HWBKA with a few swarms over the years. Well,

that's the story that is still told today.

He successfully adapted back into post war civilian life, which was not always an easy task. After the war, confronted with the duty of helping men adjust back into society, the United States and British governments created beekeeping programs, amongst many other agricultural pursuits and this did aid veteran rehabilitation. Interestingly, as international relations had eased slightly, *Bee World*, an 'international monthly journal devoted to the progressive interests of modern bee culture', was started in England in 1919. The First World War was also a time that French beekeeper Jean Hurpin, in 1916, had the idea to create a beekeeping organisation (today known as the Syndicat National Apicole). Wartimes can also be times of great social change and technological development. A wonderful film called 'The Year of the Bee' was made between the wars at Elstree in 1920, it can be viewed on YouTube today. Perhaps out of necessity, beekeeping in Britain grew in popularity during 'The Great War', and again after WWII.

'Shell shock', first coined in 1898, was a generic term for those suffering from the severe trauma of battle. It was widely used during WWI as a result of continuous bombardment that created feelings of helplessness, sleeplessness, panic and worse. This is a short-term combat stress reaction, however, if longer term and more acute it would be termed today as post-traumatic stress disorder.

The three types of people created by war: heroes, villains, and those left suffering.

Back in 1914-1918 the worst-case veterans with severe trauma, the thousand-mile stare, lack of peace, nor purpose, nor the words to express their traumas, were sent to Somerset to make baskets. Perhaps this was when occupational therapy was coined. I had always thought that this must have been the origin of the term 'basket case', but apparently not. In its original context, a basket case was a soldier who had been so badly injured that he had to be carried from the battlefield in a barrow or basket, usually with the implication that he had lost all four of his limbs.

The word skep is derived from the Anglo-saxon 'skeppa', meaning basket. Consider the second syllable of the word basket. In Irish a skep or a basket is a 'sciob'. These words share their etymology with the word 'cup', and I'd wager also with the word 'skip' and 'scoop'. Skep making is a traditional straw-craft stretching back through prehistory. Technically the craft is termed lip-work due to the use of a binding or lapping that wraps the straw or grass rope, held in place by a piece of horn, being stitched together using a bone needle or fid. A piece of lip-work basketry has been found in an Irish bog dated to that the Mesolithic era. Very simply the vessel is created using one continuous spiral of straw. You may at one time in your life have thrown linen into a basket made with this technique, or shot an arrow at an archery target

fashioned in a similar way.

A bee skep may come in many different shapes and sizes, but most often, as with Cruikshank's cartoon, it is domed in shape, giving it the great strength it needs to support the weight of the colony and their stores. Even though the straw-craft is ancient, the bee baskets that predate the straw skeps were made of woven rods, sometimes split, and then rendered with a kind of daub. There is a clear distinction between the Anglo-Saxon straw bee-skep, and the earlier wicker bee-skep of the Ancient Britons (Celts). Known as an 'alveary' or 'alveari' as termed by Virgil in Latin. Virgil interestingly was from Celtic northern Italy. In Britain, even as late as 1858 these wicker skeps have been found still in use in deepest, darkest Herefordshire, where Anglo-Saxon culture failed to penetrate. Curiously, one Welsh name for a beehive is a cwch-gwenyn, which translates as a bee-boat.

Cesar noted, after his first 'visit' to Britain in 55BC, that the ancient Britons were highly proficient in all kinds of basketwork. A reconstructed prehistoric roundhouse is practically a large basket with a thatched conical roof on top. I suggest that the dwellers of these islands simply downsized their own habitat for bees. A skep needs shelter from the elements or it will rot and wither.

The most charming and traditional of skep shelters is a miniature thatched conical roof called a 'coppet', 'cap', or 'hackle' (after the ruffle around a cockerel's

neck). The ancient British houses, enclosures, boats (coracles) and beehives all utilized woven wooden rods, and had a circular theme akin to the henges and circles of stone.



So let us continue to consider the symbol of the skep: full of thriving diligent bees, hard-working and

healthy, guarding a great treasury of golden nourishment, protecting their young and their Queen, an auspicious symbol for any institution, and this very British beehive has worn it well.

Banks across Europe have utilized skep symbolism. At the very centre of Oxford is the Carfax Crossroads, where four roads run to the four cardinal directions. On the north-east corner is a Lloyd's Bank, and upon that, carved in stone, a bee skep, the old symbol for the bank.



King Lludd (Lloyd?) is an old mythical King of Britain. It is from him that London takes its name, being his favourite port – Caer Ludd. Legend has it that he began his reign in peace, but the land was soon beset by the ‘three plagues of the Isles of Britain’.

The Druidic oral traditions utilized mnemonic devices

to aid one's memory. One such device was grouping events, people, places etcetera into triads. Some examples below:

'There were three names given to the Isle of Britain from the first: before it was inhabited it was called the Sea-girt Green Space (*Clas Myrddin*); after it was inhabited, it was called the Honey Island (*Y Vel Ynys*); and after the people were formed into a commonwealth, by Prydain the son of Aedd the Great, it was denominated the Isle of Britain.'

'The three heroic sovereigns of the Isle of Britain: Cynfelyn Wledig, Caradog the son of Bran, and Arthur; because they conquered their enemies, and could not be overcome but by treachery and by plotting.'

'The three primary and extraordinary works of the Isle of Britain: the ship of Nwydd Nav Neivion, which brought in it a male and female of all living things when the lake of floods burst forth; the large horned oxen of Hu the Mighty, that drew the crocodile from the lake to the land, so that the lake did not burst any more; and the stone of Gwyddon Ganhebon, upon which all the arts and sciences in the world are engraved.'

One of the three plagues of Britain was a scream that issued across the land every May Eve causing women to miscarry. To rid Britain of this plague, Ludd had to measure its width and breadth and find the very centre. It was in a place called Rhydychen, now

known as Oxford. Here he was to dig a pit, and place in it a vat of mead, and on top of that a sheet of cloth. His brother informed him that the scream was that of a red dragon fighting a white dragon, and that they would spiral down into the vat of mead and drink them selves to sleep. This he did to good effect, wrapped them in the sheet, shut them into a stone casket and they were taken west to Dinas Affaraon, the Fortress of the Pharo's, in Snowdonia. Years later to be identified by the young Merlin Emrys.

In this piece of British mythology we see honey being used in a placative way, lulling the dragons/serpents to sleep. When one considers comparative mythology, similar motifs can be seen: according to Virgil, the canine/serpentine Cerberus was caused to sleep when the Sybyl threw it a loaf laced with honey and herbs; in Apulius' *Metamorphoses*, Cerberus is put to sleep with mead soaked barley cakes.

In the Bronze Age, before ancient Greece had an alphabet, the sea-worthy Pheonicians did. They knew Britain as 'Barat-anac', the 'land of tin', and they travelled to Cornwall in their ships to trade. Good quality tin ensured good quality bronze. They kept this trade a secret from the world, but eventually their state declined and the Grecians learnt the way and took up the Tin trade. Having known of Britain as *Cassiterides*, or the *Tynn Islands*.

As the age old saying goes "if you want to make something in metal, you must first make it in wax."

The 'lost wax' process of bronze casting coloured a whole new culture, art form and arms trade. The Pheonicians had strong links with the Minoans of Crete, and it is possible that the beekeeping culture there may have influenced the possible beekeeping culture in Britain, via the nautical trade routes.

There is nothing in the British archaeological record that has been interpreted as a beehive before the Roman era. Yet such wicker baskets rarely survive that long. It's possible that the ancient Britons were simply honey hunting instead of beekeeping, but it is my opinion that they were beekeeping since the Bronze Age, if not before, as the Minoans and Grecians were.

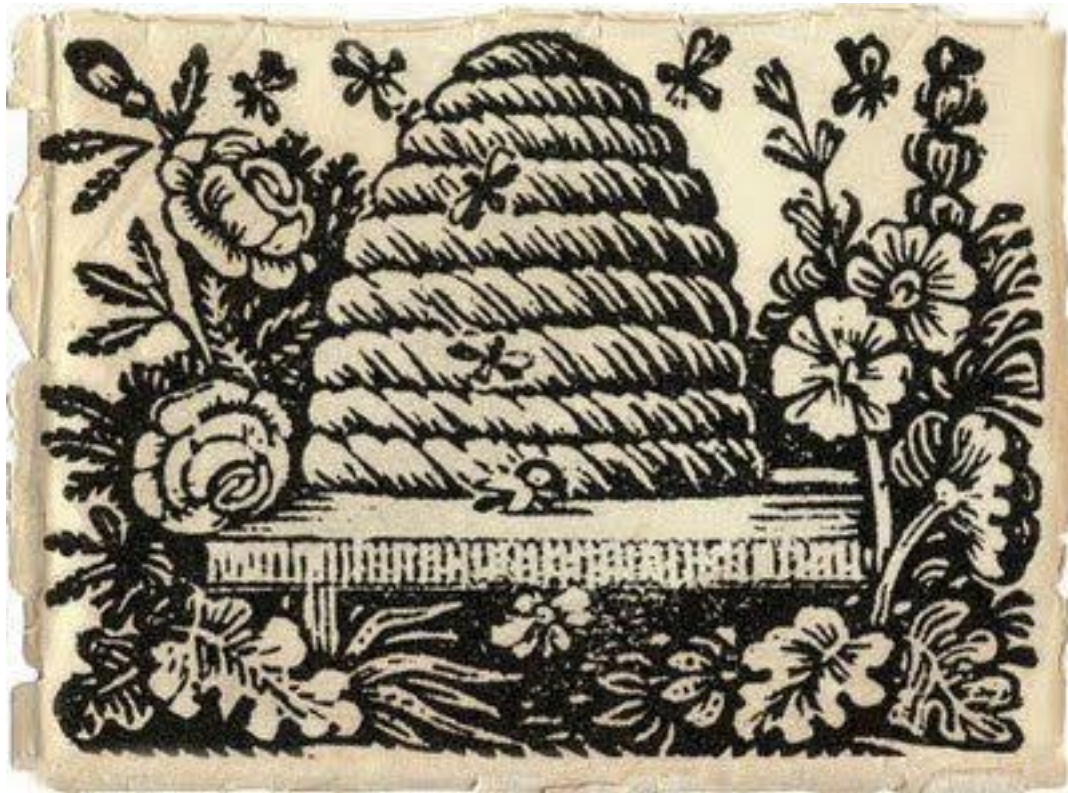
The use of honey in drinks is suggested as far back as the Neolithic era through grooved ware finds in Balfarg, Scotland. The fragments contained traces of meadowsweet, pollen, cereals and henbane. The use of henbane here may have been medicinal, and not necessarily psychoactive. It was used to brew beer and has long been utilized in folk medicine. It is the origin of the word 'Pilsner'. Henbane, known as 'Bilsenkraut', the 'cabbage with magical powers', associated with the norse goddess Bil and the Germanic goddess Bilwis, can be fatal and needs careful attention.

Beli, father of the aforementioned Ludd, must be mentioned here. Britain has also been referred to as *Ynys Fel Veli*, The Honey Isle of Beli. Known as Beli

Mawr , the great, his name and alludes to the deity Belinus or Belenos, another all father figure of Celtic mythology. Kings often took on the names of deities declaring divine rite, and also ancestors became revered as deities.

In other Welsh poetry the sea is referred to as Beli's liquor and the waves as Beli's cattle. It is not clear if these refer to the King or to the God. Beli however has also been noted as a deity of death and the night, casting shadow across the world. He may be depicted riding a chariot and throwing lightning bolts. One of His symbols is a wheel, six and eight spoked, and His face is often solarised within a sun disc. He is perhaps a British Apollo. The Romans and Greeks noted Apollo as a patron of music, poetry, art, oracles, archery, plague, medicine, sun, light and knowledge. There is a connection between these ruling figures and the plant henbane. It's relationship to prophesying, the gods and herbal medicine suggest interesting links to the stimulating meads of divine poetry and metheglins of the past.

Well let us return to an image of a bustling British skep, sitting in sunlight, its current monarch still sentient at the centre.



Honey symbolism has been and still is to this day spread liberally across the platter of Britain by the 'invisible hand'. Perhaps you have a nectar card in your wallet, or a honeycombed co-operative members card? Consider the Land Registry logo; The Royal Exchange (est. 1566); The Refuge Assurance Company (est. 1858); banks and building societies and business; beekeeping associations and trusts; the Worshipful Company of Wax Chandlers; fellowships and fraternal lodges; societies and organisations; mythologies, meads and metheglins; beehive pubs, inns and taverns.

Traditional British honey drinks are quietly and quintessentially medicine: well made mead, metheglin, melomel, cyser & braggart and more...

however, the provenance of honey is most important. 'Honey laundering' is becoming more elaborate and hard to detect.

Let us praise the ubiquitous, honey-wise beverages of the Britons. Be they Neolithic grooved ware sharers, Bronze-age beaker people, mead-amused Celtic bards, Roman scholars, Anglo-Saxon prophetic poets or mazer raising monastic beekeepers, they were makers and partakers of the meads of poetry, the sacred vessels of wisdom and inspiration, and the medicinal metheglins of 'Y Vel Ynys', the Island of Honey.

Raise a glass, a horn, a drinking bowl or the loving cup and give thanks indeed to the honeybees that inhabit hives and hollows from Land's End to John O Groats; to those that may keep them in their care, and to all the ways in which we keep this very British beehive alive.

Chris Park
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