



National Honey Show
Class: 62 Entry no.: 3

THE MAGIC OF BEEKEEPING.

During a period of over 25 years I have stood at the side of an observation hive at a great many shows describing the activities of honeybees to a wondering and increasingly understanding public. To them bees have a magic about them because they do so many things which can best be explained as magical. Beekeepers are clearly modern day alchemists whose manipulation of insects conjures golden honey from base flowers. The Arthurian Merlin is alive and well and living in suburbia with a hive of bees in his garden.

To beekeepers the magic of beekeeping is in being privileged to participate in, observe and understand the activities of what is and will always remain a wild untameable stinging insect.

My bees live in a hive with an entrance about 17 inches long in the front. They know where that hole is in space to the extent that if I move it, say two feet to one side, they can't immediately find it. Navigation that precise has to be some kind of magic. But in August I can move them 15 miles to the heather moors they are aware of the disturbance and re-orientate directly to the new location.

My bees have as their head and apparent leader a queen although she is really as much a servant of the colony as any worker. If, for whatever reason, she suddenly vanishes the bees know that she has gone because a magical substance has vanished from the hive in which they live. I know that people call it a "pheromone" but in reality it is a magical potion. Its presence holds a colony of 50,000 bees together. Its absence initiates a course of action by which the bees appoint a leader to the matriarchal throne. The bees can choose a day old larvae which would, if left alone, eventually emerge as a female worker, build a larger cell around it and feed it on concentrated diet of a substance which they exude from a gland in their mouth. The result is that the larvae will emerge as a queen. There is a vast difference between the two creatures. One committed to be infertile and lead a short life with a progressive work pattern that will eventually kill her. The other, much larger, destined to be fertile, head the colony and lay thousands of eggs before separating from it leading a breakaway group, a large swarm, to begin another colony. This change is brought about by an alteration, albeit radical, in diet during the larval stage of its development. Now *that* has got to be magic.

The box my bees live in contains vertical sheets of wax to which they add wax flakes produced by their own bodies. The vertical sheets of wax, which form the mid rib of the finished storage area, are man made and quite thick. At least they are thick in comparison to

the mid rib that the bees, left to their own devices, would make without sacrificing any of the strength. On each sheet in the darkness of the hive they form, with outstanding ingenuity, hexagonal cells back to back in an overlapping pattern in which the base of one cell shares the base of three others on the reverse side of the mid-rib. This forms a storage area of immense strength and capacity in ratio to the material used. It is also done in such a manner that the sum of the depth of two opposing cells on either side of the mid-rib is greater than the width of the comb. The complex geometry of the design has fascinated mathematicians down the ages. No doubt the packing industry has a name for it but I call it magic.

Enter the magical world of the honeybee with care and a desire for knowledge. Observe the usual rituals of gently applying a little smoke to the entrance pausing a while before removing the roof and any parts above that innermost sanctum the brood chamber. The bees are able to defend their home and family with vicious stings but they also recognize and accept an entry into their domain that does not threaten them so move slowly. One of the snippets of advice which has come down through the ages is to talk slowly to the bees while handling the frames. This has the effect of reducing jerky movements which might bump and annoy the bees inducing stinging but could it not be that the advice originates as repeating some long forgotten spell, an incantation to calm the savage bee.

On the subject of communication with bees is there beekeeping family who would dare omit the ceremony of telling the bees that their keeper has died. I suspect not. It isn't so many years since I saw a piece of material from a wedding dress tied in a bow and pinned to the front of a hive following a family wedding. There it would hang until it fell of its own accord. Customs built on a foundation of superstition, an attitude which itself is based on a trust in magic.

Instinct, custom, legend, a craft, use any terms you wish in describing the workings of the hive and it's management but you can't deny the fact that keeping bees is just magic.

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