

Telling the Bees

During the recent ceremonies marking the death of Queen Elizabeth II there were many rituals associated with the event that may have seemed arcane to those of us on this side of the Atlantic, the oddest perhaps that of telling the bees that the monarch had died. This was in keeping with long-established custom – when the beekeeper died, the next of kin went to the hive and informed the bees of the death lest the bees fly away to take up residence elsewhere. The beekeeper at Buckingham Palace said that he knocked on each of the five hives and said “The mistress is dead, but don’t you go. Your master will be a good master to you.”

Bees occupy an important place in agricultural folklore, perhaps because the production of food and its storage for the winter was the major occupation for most rural families. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beekeeping was often combined with fruit-growing, especially in Brighton where so many early nurseries such as Ellwanger & Barry grew their products. Farmers and nurserymen were well-aware that they needed bees for pollination.

Before the advent of wooden boxes nineteenth century farmers often used bee skeps, woven straw bell-shaped enclosures, to house their bees. A skep had a small opening that allowed the passage of insects but not predators such as field mice. Some farmers were so protective that they even took the bee skeps into the cellars of their homes in the cold months lest the bees freeze.

Today a person visiting the Stone-Tolan house on East Avenue in Brighton can see a bee skep in the barn. Orringh Stone, the first owner of the house and farm, planted an orchard in the 1790s so he would have an adequate supply of hard cider for his tavern. In the 1960s, the Allyn’s Creek Garden Club recreated that orchard using varieties of apples that would have been grown in Orringh Stone’s time.

A few years ago, the horticulturist for the Landmark Society, owner of the Stone-Tolan house and barn, planted a pollinator garden in response to the national phenomenon, Colony Collapse Disorder. This is an abnormal condition manifested by the disappearance of a hive’s worker bees. Believed to be caused by pesticides, mites, and inadequate nutrition, the loss of pollenating bees to a farm can be devastating. The pollinator garden at the Stone-Tolan historic site serves the bees that work in the orchard and in the kitchen garden on the site, also recreated using heirloom varieties of vegetables and herbs.

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