

THE BOOK
OF THE
OLD EDINBURGH
CLUB

The Journal for
Edinburgh History



Una A. Robertson, 'An Edinburgh Lawyer and His Bees',
Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, New Series 1 (1991), pp. 79–81.

This article is extracted from **The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club**, **The Journal for
Edinburgh History** ISSN 2634-2618

Content © The Old Edinburgh Club and contributors. All rights reserved.

For information about The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club (BOEC), including contents of
previous issues and indexes, see <https://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/boec>.

This article is made available for your personal research and private study only.

For any further uses of BOEC material, please contact the Editor, The Book of the Old
Edinburgh Club, at editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk. The Club has a Take-Down Policy
covering potential rights infringements. Please see [http://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/oec-
take-down-policy](http://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/oec-take-down-policy).



*Digitised by the Centre for Research
Collections, Edinburgh University
Library from the copy in the Library
Collection*



AN EDINBURGH LAWYER AND HIS BEES

UNA A ROBERTSON

WITHOUT THE AID of the seven little notebooks in which he kept such careful accounts, it is doubtful whether he would still be remembered today. *The Account Book of Sir John Foulis of Ravelston, 1671-1707*, was transcribed, edited, and printed for the Scottish History Society in 1894 and it is from this printed source that Sir John is now so widely known. From the many thousands of individual entries a record of life in a bygone age can be created. Family and friends; houses, servants and estate matters; business dealings and social life; all spring to life from its pages. In addition, the wide-ranging entries reveal incidental glimpses of other topics, including a few relating to beekeeping.

These particular entries may not be very numerous but they are of vital importance in providing information as to how bees were managed in seventeenth-century Edinburgh. Although it is frequently asserted that beekeeping was widespread in the days before sugar became an everyday commodity, it is surprisingly difficult to find evidence to support such a statement and the Ravelston accounts, therefore, assume an added importance. When the details are set against practices outlined in the bee books of the period it is a vivid picture that emerges.

The Ravelston estate, the beneficiary of much of Sir John's expenditure, was just one of the many small properties that ringed Edinburgh and, at that time, was about two miles outwith the city. Both his father and grandfather had owned Ravelston and Sir John spent most of his life there until, for various reasons, he decided to let the estate in 1703 and move to Woodhall, near Colinton. He also maintained a town house in Foster's (or Forrester's) Wynd, one of the narrow streets slightly west of St Giles' Cathedral leading from the Lawnmarket to the Cowgate, for his work was connected with the law. He held the post of Clerk of

the Register of Sasines, in charge of the department that registered all land transactions in Scotland.

Sir John's efforts at beekeeping took place at Ravelston, rather than in the overcrowded streets of Edinburgh. The first mention of bees occurs on 1 March 1681; presumably this heralded the start of the venture. A few weeks earlier Sir John had paid £3.10.0 (Scots) 'for markhames works'. This prolific author – Gervase Markham – had frequently written on different aspects of country life, and sometimes included advice on bees, but unfortunately there is no indication as to which of the many editions was purchased. More than once in the years to come Sir John had reason to buy the ingredients for a remedy referred to in the accounts as 'markames balls to y^c horss'.¹

On 1 March 1681, then, five beehives were bought from 'Joⁿ Grant' and two months later Sir John gave money to his brother Adam, who ran the estate for him, to complete the payment for another eleven beeskeps at 8 shillings the piece. Over the years further purchases were made. Both in June 1690 and May 1691 two beeskeps were bought for 12s the pair; while May 1694 saw 'daniell Tailleour in y^c shoemakers land in west port' selling him three beeskeps, described as 'large ones', for £1.1.0. By the time 'bessie haddoway in caldhame' obliged with two new beeskeps in May 1698 the price had risen to 16s the pair, although the year after another large one was still 7s. The hefty sum of £4.16.0 was paid out in May 1704 for twelve skeps, six of which were sent to his son's estate at Dunipace. One wonders why. The previous year had seen the move to Woodhall; maybe the bees had been left behind and Sir John was setting up a new apiary, but that does not account for the ones sent to Dunipace. The final purchase was made in April 1706 when 'James adamsone at whythous' sold him five

skeps for £1.18.0. These transactions all occurred in the earlier part of the season, only one being later than the first week in June. This reflects good beekeeping practice to this day. Not only is it the time of year when bees are plentiful but it also makes sense to let the seller take the risk of seeing them safely through the winter.

Nowhere in the accounts does the terminology suggest that Sir John was making use of the new method of managing bees, as promoted by his compatriot, John Gedde of Falkland. Gedde had patented the first wooden beehive, forerunner of today's hives, in 1675 and had been commanded by King Charles II to set up apiaries using them not only in London and Windsor but also in Falkland, as an example for others to follow.² It would seem that Sir John was not sufficiently convinced of the advantages to take up either the new hives or the new style of management they required.



Fig. 1. Knocking the swarm out of a tree and into a skep. A neat row of skeps in the background. (From *Scenes of Industry*, London 1821; by courtesy of the Moir Library, Scottish Beekeepers' Association.)

Tucked in among the myriad entries of monies spent is an occasional memo. On 14 May 1694 Sir John recorded: 'The wester bee skep did cast [i.e. swarm] this day, this is y^e first'. Rather earlier for a swarm than one would expect nowadays, though not impossible given an early season. The smaller size of the old-style skep would also contribute, as overcrowding is one of the factors that induces swarming.

Beekeepers can sympathise with the tell-tale entry in July 1699 when Sir John had to pay out 3s 6d 'to davie to give w^m youngs wife in Corstophin to take care of the hyve of bees flew to Corst'. In the days before there were moveable frames it was impossible to check on what was happening inside a skep and swarming was endemic; it was customary, therefore, in the height of the season to employ children or old people to watch for the first signs of a swarm emerging.³ This was obviously one that had got away, and had flown over the hill! A couple of years later David was sent to Dalry 'about the hyve of bees'. Was this another swarm? It was the end of June, which would be well within the swarming season, and the distance would not be impossible, but the sum involved (14s 6d) would make this unlikely. Another time he received 2s 'to drink w^l the men at currie about the hyve of bees', whereas 'tonie' was given 10s when he brought a beeskep from Colinton; too far for swarms, surely, so maybe these were more purchases.

There is also the occasional reference to the actual management of the bees. Another memo, dated 16 March 1700, makes mention of plum trees and their whereabouts in the garden – 'one of s^d plum in the east border of y^e beehouss q^rter'. From this one can safely deduce that Sir John's bees were given the shelter of a bee house as protection from the elements, a feature often recommended by contemporary authors.

The bees at Ravelston, however, did not quite supply all his needs. On 22 January 1690 the Falkirk carrier was paid 7s for transporting an unspecified amount of honey. Was it possibly from Dunipace, since the estate was over in Stirling? In October 1704 there was a purchase of '32 unce of bee wax', but in the long run his efforts were rewarded: '22nd October 1701, for a pot to hold the honie, 1s'.

In order to obtain the honey it was seventeenth-century practice to kill off the bees in a proportion of the hives each year by smoking them to death over burning brimstone. Sir John's accounts

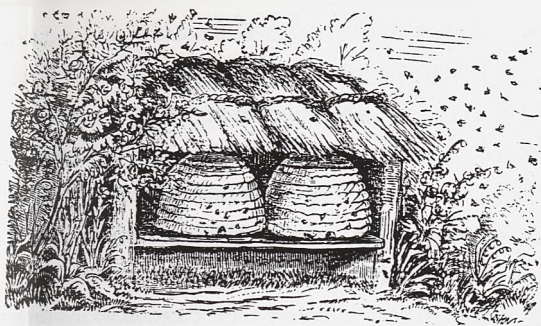


Fig. 2. Two straw skeps in a thatched shelter. (From S.O. Beeton, *Beeton's Book of Poultry & Domestic Animals*, London 1862; by courtesy of the Moir Library, Scottish Beekeepers' Association.)

reveal that in July 1691 he paid 'for 2 unce brimston to smeik y^c 4 beeskeps 3sh', while in August 1693 he bought '1/4 pund brimstoune for y^m and y^c bees' (y^m referring to the previous entry about a horse). A further purchase was made at the end of August 1706. Even at this period there were those who considered this practice abhorrent and promoted alternative methods to obviate the necessity.⁴ John Gedde's wooden hive was welcomed on humanitarian grounds as it made it very much easier to separate the bees from their honey. It took a long time, though, before all beekeepers were convinced that this was so, and the use of brimstone continued for many years.

These few details from Sir John Foulis' accounts are almost all there are to tell us about his efforts at beekeeping. They are sufficient. Even though it is not apparent which sort of hive was used at Ravelston or how much honey was harvested, beekeepers today will recognize the salient points. The acquisition of hives in spring time, accompanied by the purchase, either before or afterwards, of an instruction manual; the further buying of hives from time to time, either to augment the number of stocks or to introduce a new or better type of bee; the references to swarms, some of which caused problems – not much has changed it seems! Killing the bees over pits of burning brimstone may appear barbaric to twentieth-century eyes but it has to be seen as part of contemporary practice, and beekeepers nowadays can be thankful to be spared the trauma of the annual slaughter.⁵ Over the intervening centuries many advances have been made in beekeeping practices so that beekeepers can now have honey, conditions permitting, as well as all their bees.

The Ravelston accounts may, indeed, offer only the briefest glimpse of beekeeping in a bygone era; but at the end of the day one cannot but be charmed by the thought that Sir John's venture was sufficiently successful to require the expenditure of a shilling on 'a pot to hold the honie'.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Hive: a container in which bees are kept, but also a community of bees in such a container. *Skep*: old-style hive made of woven straw, wattle, etc. *Swarm*: a body of bees leaving home to set up a new colony.

- 1 A. W. Cornelius Hallam (ed.), *The Account Book of Sir John Foulis of Ravelston, 1671-1707*, Scottish History Society, Vol. XVI (Edinburgh 1894), e.g. pp. 189, 215.
- 2 Robert Mylne, junior, 'Memoir of John Gedde', *Miscellany of the Abbotsford Club*, I (Edinburgh 1837).
- 3 John Reid, *The Gard'ners Kalendar (The Scot's Gard'ner)* (Edinburgh 1683):

'May: Near the end watch the Bees ready to swarm.

June: Bees now Swarm, look diligently to them.'

- 4 Charles Butler, *The Feminine Monarchie* (Oxford 1609); John Gedde, *A New Discovery of an Excellent Method of Bee Houses and Colonies* (London 1675); John Worlidge, *Systema Agriculturae*, 3rd edn (London 1681).
- 5 Rev. W. C. Cotton, *A Short & Simple Letter to Cottagers* (Oxford 1838), p. 2: 'I myself was told by a Bee Master, that he always saw the ghosts of the Bees the night after he burned them; and have heard of an old woman, who never went to Church the Sunday following. She felt she had done a most cruel deed, and she was right in so thinking, tho wrong in staying away from Church for this reason.'