



The Founding of the Scottish Beekeepers' Association

Condensed from Mrs Una A. Robertson's article "Bees, Books and Beekeepers" in 'The Scottish Beekeeper', June 1993

The minutes say: 'THE SCOTTISH BEEKEEPERS' ASSOCIATION was founded on the 25th May 1912, to unite the beekeepers of Scotland, for their mutual benefit, in a national confederation and to promote, by the concerted action of its members, the extension and general advancement of beekeeping throughout the land.' Twelve principal objectives were listed, which included readily available lectures and expert advice for everyone, an annual show at 'The Highland' where medals would be awarded, the extirpation of disease, the setting up of a library and the holding of exams – much of which continues to this day.

The impetus for a national association came from G. W. Avery, newly appointed Senior Lecturer in Beekeeping at the Edinburgh and East of Scotland College of Agriculture. A preliminary meeting was held there to discuss plans for such an organisation, which were well received, and at a public meeting one month later was set up and its constitution drafted.

Two earlier attempts to establish something similar had both failed to survive. First in the field was 'The Caledonian Entomological and Apiarian Society' (C.E.A.S.) of 1874. The immediate cause for this initiative, although other longer term elements lay in the background, came from C. N. Abbott, the appliance dealer. He launched the 'British Beekeepers' Journal', the first British magazine of its type, on the 1st May 1873 and called for a great exhibition to promote beekeeping. In September the following year, 300 exhibits in 40 different classes were massed in London's Crystal Palace. Scottish honey, produced in Stewarton hives, proved a revelation and won the major prizes. The C.E.A.S. was founded the next month. In 1875 and 1876 exhibitions were then mounted in Glasgow and at the then peripatetic Highland Show thereafter.

The C.E.A.S. was formed as a national association but although it had many branches in the west it attracted no representatives from the east. Instead, a rival show was held in Dundee in 1876 which led to the setting up of the East of Scotland BKA and a great revival of the craft in the area. Its emphasis on humane beekeeping through modern methods was reflected in the early show schedules whereby classes for skeps and skep honey were soon replaced by others.

By 1889 the C.E.A.S. was unable to participate in the Highland Show, held that year at Melrose. Mr (later to be Sir) Thomas Gibson Carmichael of nearby Chiefswood staged his own exhibition and then, under his auspices, the first **Scottish Beekeepers' Association** was established on 8th April 1891. It had seven branch associations (but only one in the west) and 320 individual members, while many of its aims would be familiar today. A supply of lantern slides and beekeeping books were collected

together. Sir Thomas resigned as secretary in 1895, on becoming MP for Midlothian, and by 1898 the Association had dwindled although it was at this point that the **SBA** had launched 'The Scottish Beekeeper', a fortnightly magazine dealing with a wide range of topical issues. It ran for just over 2 years, then disappearing without warning. The Association also vanished.

Meanwhile G.W. Avery was in Cumbernauld, successfully transforming the beekeeping scene, in spite of foul brood and Isle of Wight disease and it was a sad day for beekeepers there when he was appointed to Edinburgh.

Although the initial response to the idea of a national organisation for Scotland was favourable, only a handful of individuals joined and the Midlothian BKA (founded 1894) was the sole Local Association. An amended constitution replaced affiliation with federation. Membership soared. In 1916 Robert Steele (of Steele & Brodie) spoke of its "*phenomenal success*" - 1400 members and 12 Associations and numbers increased rapidly thereafter.

One can not have beekeepers without books, it seems. Both the previous national organisations had gathered together a suitable supply of material and in 1912, after the present **SBA** had formed, John Moir began collecting the books for the library that now bears his name. SBA committees looked after Shows, Marketing, Education, Propaganda and the Library. Some years later a Ladies' Committee was added; examinations were introduced in 1917, and the Insurance scheme coming in 1924.

The latter was also the year of 'The Scottish Beekeeper', the second of that name. The decision to publish was taken at the very end of May and the first issue out by July! From that date on, evidence is plentiful regarding beekeeping activities, management methods and equipment, along with every other topic relating to the bee.

What of beekeeping itself since those early days? By 1912 the moveable frame was becoming commonplace. Equipment was recognisably the same as today's but there have, of course, been developments. Clover and heather provided the main sources of forage but others were raspberry, strawberry, wild mustard, fruits such as apple, currant and gooseberry, field beans (reckoned as poor), sycamore and lime. Interestingly, in the first magazine (July 1924) G. W. Avery wrote: "*We have noticed that there is an increasing number of folks who keep bees in places such as city or suburban gardens, where there must be seldom chance of a paying honey harvest...*", but he conceded that such beekeepers might be "*lessening the point of view of the city and the country dweller*". Present day agricultural practices might cause him to revise his opinion, while city parks and gardens have much to offer the beekeeper.

Since 1912 the **SBA** has been carrying out its fundamental objectives. Honey Shows

are held at local and national level. Excellence in beekeeping is rewarded; and Local Association meetings are a time for discussion and learning, whether at the winter lectures or apiary outing. Two further reasons to count our blessings lie in the Moir Library which is in good order, with well filled shelves and new material coming in all the time; and in 'The Scottish Beekeeper' which continues to be 'instructive, educative and interesting'.

The **SBA** was founded at a time when apiaries were being devastated by Isle of Wight disease and beekeepers were demoralised. Council's first report included the words: *"Union is Strength: and Scotland needs a strong national beekeepers' association to unite her beekeepers to secure the greatest possible advance... by training and working together... to our mutual advantage, and to present a united front to the ravages of bee diseases. Never was a strong central association so necessary as now, to coordinate the efforts that are so essential"*.

The words are as true today as they were when they were first written.