

Benson Honey – a history

*"Stands the church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?"*

I hope I may be forgiven for quoting Rupert Brooke's famous lines. Perhaps more fairly, I should describe it as "Benson and around" for this is a South Oxfordshire story. But its origins lie within our Parish.

I am much indebted to Laurie Keys for his comprehensive article on the subject, now in the Benson Archive. More information has since come to light

It is an amazing story – from a garden near Roke Marsh, to the international business which is Rowse Honey today. Surprisingly, *not* a quintessentially English beginning, but here goes.

Laurie quotes. *"In 1919, Ahmed Zaky Abushâdy, describing himself as a physician, Egyptian Apiarist and Journalist, formed a private trading company with its headquarters at Port Hill House at Benson in Oxfordshire."* This is the opening paragraph in the 'History of the Bee Research Association' handbook which describes the organisation's early years. Dr Abushâdy, married to an English lady, started the 'Apis Club' whose purpose was to publish a monthly magazine called 'The Bee World'. He, with another associate, Leonard Harvey, had an experimental apiary at Port Hill House, which is half way along Braze Lane towards Roke Marsh. There were over 200 hives. Soft fruit bushes to provide blossom were planted, and wild flowers sown in the hedgerows. Nearby farmers were persuaded to plant white clover and rape seed. He even persuaded a neighbour to plant lime trees for the same purpose. The front cover of his magazine appears to partly show the garden with bee hives under the fruit trees. Laurie can vouch for that, for he lived there for six years from 1978.

The picture was used until 1949 when the organisation became the 'Bee Research Association' and more recently the 'International Bee Research Association'. Now based in Cardiff, it does important work publishing journals and papers for beekeepers throughout the world. 'Bee World' lasted until 2006 when it was incorporated into the Journal of Apicultural Research.

One other source is available to us on this gentleman's dedication. George Gurney told Janet Burt that he also bred Queen bees for sale internationally. Some expert!

In the 1930's R.O.B. Manley and Tony Rowse were beekeepers together. It is unknown if they had learned their expertise from the Doctor. Between them they started what were to become two of the largest honey packing companies in the world. At that early stage beekeeping was very much the main business and their only source of raw material was English honey, collected from local hives within about a fifty mile radius of Benson.

Years later the beekeeping side had dwindled to nothing, or been sold off, and the main function of the businesses was importing and packing honey from all over the world. Both companies were so substantial that Benson and Ewelme became known as the epicenter of the honey industry in the UK.

I now add an extract from 14 year old Gillian Pether's delightful description of Benson, written in 1956. *"Manley's English Honey is known the world over. Mr Robert Manley who lives in Preston Crowmarsh, part of Benson, is the founder of the firm and the honey is collected and bottled there. On the label is written "Manley's English Honey from the Apiaries of R.B. Manley Benson Oxford, from the flowers of the Chiltern Hills" This firm employs local men too.*

Well, take a stroll down Preston Crowmarsh today, and you will soon locate Honey Farm. But today in name only.

R.O.B. Manley and Tony Rowse continued the beekeeping business together after the war but split up in the 1950's and went their separate ways. 'Separate ways' were not very far apart as Rowse set up in Ewelme and Manley remained in Preston Crowmarsh in Honey Farm. The old Rowse factory is now replaced by houses by The King's Pond.

Both companies had similar developments, almost in parallel, and continued to be predominately as beekeepers until the late 1960's. During this time 'Chiltern Honey Farm', the Manley side of the two enterprises, and where Laurie Keys was later employed, grew to a size of about eight to ten men running about 2000 hives located between the Chiltern Hills and the Berkshire Downs. Some of the local sites were in Clacks Lane, Ipsden, and the fruit orchards on the other side of Didcot. Each apiary contained about a dozen or more hives depending on the amount of potential nectar available for the bees. At the peak, in the early 1960's, they collected 80 tonnes of honey from their bees in one particularly good season. In other years that would drop to perhaps five tonnes, depending on the weather. That's an awful lot of honey from little insects who take 60 flights to fill a thimble –full!

In spring time their bees were taken on a lorry down to the Kent orchards to pollinate the fruit. After the bees were all back in their hives the night before the trip, the 'doors' would be closed and the hives loaded on to the back of the lorry. Arriving in the Kent fruit fields the next day the doors of the hives were opened and the bees started work on the fruit blossom. This was a very productive exercise because they were paid by the fruit farmer to pollinate his orchards and they also collected very good 'blossom' honey which they could sell into the bargain.

The main honey flow of the season came from a variety of English flowers and agricultural crops during May and again in July. The period in between is known as the 'June gap' because normally it's not such a good period for collecting honey. The position of most of apiaries would be 'negotiated' with the local farmers and the hives moved around to take advantage of the best honey producing crops. The 'rent,' paid for the privilege of putting hives on the edge of the farmer's field, was a dozen jars of honey at the end of the season.

It was important for the farmer to keep the beekeepers informed of crop spraying so that the bees could be moved, or shut in the hive, during the process. This was generally a good time in which to collect honey during that period from wild flowers, trees such as horse chestnut and lime, and crops such as borage of which the later produces a mild light coloured honey and stays liquid for a long time before crystallising. It wasn't till a few years later that vast areas of oil seed rape appeared, which produces a prolific amount of honey but is not a particularly nice flavour, and crystallises very quickly.

At the end of the season the hives might be moved to the New Forest, or perhaps the West Country, to collect heather honey during August/September. Heather honey is a strong flavoured dark honey and commands a premium price but is not everyone's favourite.

So the summer months were hectic with every hive having to be checked every ten days or so for the condition of the bees, whether there was still a healthy queen in place and that she was laying thousands of eggs every day. It was physically hard work lifting heavy hives on and off of the lorry then driving on to the next apiary. In a good spell of weather each hive could produce over a hundred pounds of honey (in weight) in a matter of days which all had to be manhandled on to vehicles. Winter jobs were, firstly, the extraction of honey from the frames where it was pumped into large drums then, when that was complete, the honey had to be filtered and bottled. It was generally a sticky business and attracted swarms of bees and wasps much to the annoyance of the neighbours.

Most of the employees came from Benson and around. The Winterbournes, the Hazel brothers, Earnest Sandford, and Paul Deakin, all worked as beekeepers. Harry Wickens was probably the most expert beekeeper. He lived in Crowmarsh Gifford and Laurie once went out with him to see his bees. They drove down to the fruit orchards near Rowstock. Approaching the apiary Harry said ‘These bees will be quite calm today, so he didn’t bother to put on his gloves and protective kit.

It was my first experience of bees at close quarters. The next apiary wasn’t so friendly – apparently the bees were hungry- so gloves and visors were donned. Both of us were attacked quite viciously. Harry was an excellent beekeeper who knew instinctively the mood of his bees. He gets a mention in ‘Honey Farming’ written by ROB Manley and published by Northern Bee Books, still regarded today as the essential book for commercial beekeepers. Harry spent the last years of his working life rearing queen bees at Nuffield – an essential part of productive beekeeping.

Laurie Keys continues: “Several spin-offs came from beekeeping in Benson. Vivian’s Honey, still in the West Country, has its origins in Manleys. Swallows Honey in Witney, and Laurie Keys own business, Honeysuckle Foods in Wallingford. If you go down to Dorset and buy a jar of local honey, the chances are it will be Robert Field’s honey. Robert’s father, Oliver Field, took over the Chiltern Honey Farm bees in the early 1970’s, continuing to run them in this area for a few years and then moving to Dorset and the New Forest.

Back in the fifties and sixties commercial farming of English honey was a fairly reliable occupation. But the urban development of the countryside, the digging up hedgerows, the use of pesticides, and a series of poor summers all led to the decline in English honey production. R.O.B. Manley was nearing retirement, which he eventually took and lived in Chapel Lane, but not before being joined in the company by his nephew, John Manley, who was instrumental in the next phase of development. Both Chiltern Honey Farm and Rowse began to import honey from abroad, where there were large crops of good honey, such as Acacia and Clover. These honeys were available as a single floral source in commercial quantities and were competitively priced. This was something we could not do in the quantities required in the UK. This period, early 1970’s, coincided with the development and growth of the supermarket and the requirement for their own brand. When Laurie joined the company in 1970, Chiltern Honey Farm was supplying Sainsburys and Boots , with their own brand honey and similarly Rowse had secured the Tesco and Waitrose accounts. The supermarkets grew dramatically over the next few years and the honey companies with them.”

Chiltern Honey Farm moved from Honey Farm to a new purpose built factory in Berinsfield. After a takeover of Ratcliffe Bros of Bingley, the company changed its name to Manley Ratcliffe Ltd. Rowse managed to hang on longer in Ewelme but eventually made a similar move to Wallingford. These firms became two of the major players in the world in terms of importing and packing honey. Today, in 2009, Rowse buys 50 types of honey from 22 countries, packing about 12000 tonnes, sells maple syrup and a collection of other sweet “goodies”. This results in the large range of delicious honeys and dessert sauces that you find on our supermarket shelves today.

Honey is also an important ingredient in many other foods by giving them a healthy image. As a result, supplying honey in bulk to other food manufacturers has become a large part of the business.

Now Stuart Bailey takes over. “I am indebted to Laurie for it was he, as Managing Director of Manley Ratcliffe in 1983, who recruited me 26 years ago as Production Director Designate and where I progressed to being Commercial Director. When Manley Ratcliffe closed down in 1992, Richard Rowse and Colin Wright invited myself and several colleagues to join Rowse Honey.

We successfully developed the business; Brian Butcher became Operations Director and I was Managing Director for 11 years and now Chairman after the sale of the company to Wellness Foods in

2006. Today Rowse Honey employs 160 staff, has a turnover of over £50m p.a. and Rowse is the UK's favourite brand of honey, with a 40% share (three times the size of Gales, our nearest competitor) and so is a success story for local business."



Somehow the expertise required to make a consistently good quality product seems to be confined to the people in and around Benson! Lorraine Passey on the right, with Davina Peedle.

Tailpiece

"Stands the church clock at ten to three?

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So, I would return to this famous extract from Rupert Brooke's poem. The simple fact is that it may well not be English honey for tea. The English beekeeper is beset with the varroa parasite and all kinds of afflictions these days. However, there is a lovely ending. My good friend Max Vine now makes great local honey. Guess where? Preston Crowmarsh! ***"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"***

Peter Clarke