

Aberdeen and District Beekeepers' Association



The Captain Manson Trophy

Aberdeen and District Beekeepers' Association



A brief history

1910 to 2010

Foreword

The following account of the first 100 years of the Aberdeen and District Beekeepers' Association has been compiled largely from a more or less complete set of committee minutes and other associated papers and documents covering that period.

John Cooper.

(Chair of ADBKA 2004 to 2007)

The black and white photographs are from the Craibstone Library and probably all local.

A Flying Start

No better indication of the Association's origin can be given than by directly quoting from the very first minute of June 1910.

“A public advertised meeting was held in the Agricultural class room, Marischal College, Aberdeen on Saturday 4th June 1910 at 2pm, with the object of forming a Beekeepers' Association for Aberdeenshire. Mr D M Macdonald, Morinsh, presided over a large and very representative meeting. After an excellent address from the Chairman, it was proposed and seconded and unanimously carried to form an Association for Aberdeenshire and District.”

Names for office bearers were proposed at this inaugural meeting and a committee of 23 people was formed.

No time was wasted and the committee met 6 days later on the 10th June and set up a sub-committee to produce a set of Association rules. This sub-committee met 3 days later on the 13th June and drew up the first set of rules, which were not significantly different than the ones that we still have. The annual subscription was set at 2/6d old money or 12.5p in today's currency. The level of the subscription remained unchanged for several years.

The first annual report relates that the objects of the Association were to advance the practice of beekeeping, to suppress foul brood and other diseases, to seek better means of disposing of honey and bee products, and in general to help beekeepers carry on the craft in a practical and up-to-date manner.

These differ little from our current aims, and particularly interesting, in the light of recent events in this area, is the reference to foul brood and other diseases.



Growth and Development

The committee organised the first honey show, or “honey and bee products exhibition” as it was billed, in August of 1910 in Duthie Park, in conjunction with the Royal Horticultural Association. Prizes of 5/-, 3/-, and 2/- were awarded for 1st, 2nd and 3rd places in the various classes, of which there were 15.

The first honorary President of the Association was Lord Aberdeen, and amongst the honorary Vice Presidents were such notables as the Countess of Southesk, Lady Pearson, owner of Dunecht Estate, a Lady Saltoun and the MP for Aberdeen South Mr G B Esslemont.

In its first year the Association affiliated with the British Beekeepers' Association. (The Scottish Beekeepers' Association was formed in 1912 and our Association has had a somewhat mixed, and at times fractious relationship with the SBA over the years, affiliating in some periods and disengaging at others). By the end of 1910 we had just short of 100 members, and the first annual accounts showed a credit balance of £9 7s 7d.

The Association was truly up and running, and the pioneers of 1910 clearly established sound foundations on which to build.

The following sections trace both the impressive growth that was achieved, and the wide range of activities that were established, in the first few decades.

Membership Numbers

The most outstanding feature of these early decades was the impressive growth in membership. From the original membership of 95 in 1910, a peak was reached in 1953, when membership reached 3000. At this point it was almost certainly the largest local Association, not just in Scotland, but in the whole of Britain.

The growth was not completely continuous, with temporary dips during the First World War and again in the 1930s.

The growth in membership up to the Second World War was predominantly a result of recruiting existing beekeepers into the Association, more than recruiting new entrants to beekeeping, though there would have been some new beekeepers joining as well. The swell in Association numbers reflects the fact that keeping bees was a far more common and widespread activity in the first half of the 20th century than it is has been in more recent times.

The significant spurt in growth during and just after the Second World War was not unconnected with the rules of sugar rationing at this time. Beekeepers who were certified as bona fide by their Associations could qualify for an extra 10lbs of sugar per colony per annum for bee feeding purposes. Beekeepers who had previously remained outside the Association now readily joined, and one might even conjecture whether some non-bona fide beekeepers managed to get into the system. When sugar rationing ended and the extra beekeepers' allowance disappeared in the mid 1950s the membership plummeted by around 1000 in a single year, and the Chair of the Association at the time expressed an opinion in his Annual Report that many members who had not renewed their subscription had been more interested in sugar than in bees.





Organisation into Districts and Branches

The impressive growth in membership was connected to the way the Association organised itself, from an early date, to maximise the chance that existing beekeepers would join and new recruits would be brought in. It did this by dividing up its area of operation into Districts and appointing District Secretaries. Each district was sub-divided into smaller Branches each with a Branch Secretary. These District and Branch Secretaries actively recruited existing and new beekeepers and were responsible for the collection of annual subscriptions. By 1921 for example there were 13 Districts and District Secretaries, and no less than 92 Branches and Branch Secretaries, all serving 1800 members all told. With such a comprehensive network it must have been quite difficult for anyone with bees or anyone thinking of starting beekeeping to avoid being drawn into the Association.

Expert Tours

This organisational model was reinforced by the introduction from an early date of annual Expert Tours, in the summer months, by Association members whose beekeeping qualifications gave them 'expert' status. In 1921, for example, the Association had 12 members who were either First Class experts of the British Beekeepers' Association, or Expert Beemasters of the Scottish Beekeepers Association, or both.

An expert would be allocated a District, and, working through the local Secretaries, would spend as much time as he or she could spare in the summer, visiting individual apiaries giving help and advice as required. Two Expert Tours took place as early as 1914, and by the 1920s around 10 or more tours were organised each year. These tours continued right into the 1950s, and at their height covered most of the Association's area most years. In 1947, for example, 21 Expert Tours took place.

The Association's Annual Reports of the time included the reports of these travelling experts, and make fascinating reading. A few examples will give some flavour of these reports.

In 1918 one expert recorded that he covered 1200 miles in 8 weeks by walking, cycling, motorcycling, car and train.

In 1921 10 Expert Tours were undertaken, and one of the experts covering lower Deeside visited 82 apiaries containing 490 frame hives and 63 skeps. He recorded the reluctance of some beekeepers to change from skeps to framed hives.

Twenty years later in 1941, the expert covering the Strathbogie District recorded 600 stocks of bees in the district and came across 3 cases of Addled Brood, 2 of American Foul Brood, a few mild cases of Acarine and many stocks affected by Chalk Brood.

The Expert Tour Reports regularly recorded outbreaks of disease. The Experts were reimbursed for their work at the rate of £10 or £12 per month, and as these tours increased they drew quite heavily on Association funds, but they clearly fulfilled a very useful purpose.

Annual Reports/Yearbooks

From its inception right up to 1955 the Association published an Annual Report and Year Book. We have almost a full set of these volumes and they contain an enormous amount of detailed and fascinating information. The cost of production, allied to a fall in revenue from fewer subscriptions, was behind the decision in 1955 to discontinue the production of these reports.



The Northern College of Agriculture and Craibstone

The Association struck up an excellent working relationship with the College through its beekeeping staff, most of whom were members of the Association. The expertise offered from the college's Beekeeping Department was a tremendous asset, and lectures by college staff became annual events, as did meetings and demonstrations at the College apiary at Craibstone. As an example of the contributions made by college staff, in 1941 staff accompanied the Association's Touring Experts and examined 1233 colonies, 7% of which were found to be infected with American foul brood. More will be said about the influence of some college staff in a later section. Suffice it here to say that the Association and the College's Beekeeping Department grew together in a mutually supportive way over a large part of the 20th century.

Outings, Demonstrations and Meetings

As well as the Expert Tours, the Association also organised demonstrations in most years from 1912 onwards, and in addition arranged for talks and lectures by visiting speakers from time to time.

For several years, before numbers got so large as to make it impractical, an annual outing was arranged for members.

In 1912, for example, 50 members travelled by train in a reserved carriage to Granton on Spey to visit the apiary of a Mr Cruickshank, who provided a demonstration and refreshments. A similar outing to an apiary in Ballater was organised the following year.

Some of the most popular outings in these early years were to Glassel House and the apiary of a Mr Wood who was Association Chair for most of the 1920s. His demonstrations and his hospitality was apparently a big attraction. In 1921 he hosted several outings from different districts and catered all told for around 1000 people. In the Annual Report that year a cautionary note was included to indicate that Association outings were intended for members only, and not members' friends as well.

Changes of Name

The Association started off as The Aberdeenshire and District Beekeepers' Association. In 1919 it changed its name to The Aberdeenshire and Kincardineshire Beekeepers' Association. In 1930 it finally settled on its current name, The Aberdeen and District Beekeepers' Association. These changes probably reflected changes and changing perceptions of the geographical area that the Association sought to serve.

Notable Individuals from the first 50 years

Certain figures stand out in the archives and are worthy of special mention for the contributions they made to the Association's work.

Mr H.E. Wood was Chairman from 1914 through to 1928, and hosted the early Association visits to his apiary at Glassel house. He also funded some of the research into Isle of Wight disease carried out at The Northern College of Agriculture. (See below). Mr Wood also made generous donations to the Association funds from time to time. Mr Wood's donation of books was also instrumental in setting up the Association's first library. Mr Wood was obviously an expert beekeeper and the 1921 Annual Report records that 1ton 1cwt 17lbs of mainly clover honey was produced from his 11 colonies. Mr Wood died in 1934.

Mr J. Rennie worked in the Department of Advisory Entomology at the Northern College of Agriculture and was an active member of the Association. From 1913 he was carrying out research, partly funded by Mr Wood, into the identification of the tracheal mite responsible for Isle of Wight disease, which later became known as Acarine. On identification he named the mite *Tarsonemus Woodi* in recognition of Mr Wood's funding. Mr Rennie gained international recognition and status for his scientific work. He died in 1928.

Mr E. Rezin did sterling work for the Association as Secretary and Treasurer from 1917 through to 1932.

Mr A.S.C. Deans became head of the College Beekeeping Department in 1938 and was Chairman of the Association in 1939 and again in 1945 and 1946. His work for the Association covered a period of nearly 40 years up to his retirement from the College in 1974. Over that period he was an inspiration to more than one generation of beekeepers in North East Scotland and beyond.

His connection with the Association as Honorary President continued until his death in 1997. We still have members who remember him with great respect and affection.

Many more dedicated members contributed to the Associations success in its first 50 years, and while it is impractical to try and list them all, the members who gave their summers carrying out the Expert Tours between 1910 and 1955 are deserving of special mention.

They were: Mr A.D. Low, Mr J.J. Mackintosh, Mr A.B. Duguid, Mr R. Duguid, Mr M. K. Watt, Mr J. Mackie, Mr J. Hall, Mr D. Fearn, Rev. W. Murdoch, Mr R. Cruickshank, Mr W. T. Scott, Mr A.W. Ross, Rev. A.G. Catto, Dr. W. Thorburn Scott, Mr A. Forbes, Mr J.A. Johnston, Mr J.A. Thomson, Mr D.M. Macdonald, Miss N. Meston, Mrs G Smith, Miss N.M. Robinson, Mr J.S. Barron, Mr G.W. Hunter, Mr. J. Nicolson, Mr A. Dow, Mr J.D. Rennie, Mr J.F. Davidson, Mr W. Kennedy, Mr T. McIver, Mr H.L. Christie, Mr W. Marr, Mr W.G. Lobban, Mr J. Mann, Mr M.K. Watt, Mr A. Donaldson, Mr J. Paterson.

A Turning Point - 1955 to 1960

The spectacular drop in membership of 1000 in a single year, mentioned earlier, was just the start of a continuing steep decline in numbers over the next few seasons. By 1960, when the Association celebrated its half-century with a Golden Jubilee Dinner in Aberdeen's Station Hotel, the membership had slumped to around 350, or just over one tenth of what it had been 5 years earlier.

The 'sugar rationing factor' alone cannot explain this dramatic fall, and one can only surmise that, for whatever reasons, many beekeepers

were either not renewing membership or were going out of beekeeping altogether. New recruits were not able to counterbalance the trend. The committee at this time expressed considerable concern and regret at the decline and set up a special committee called The Propaganda Sub-Committee to try and find ways of reversing the trend.

Several special meetings were organised in different localities to try and stimulate interest in the Association. These meetings seemed to have little effect. A system was also introduced whereby District and Branch Secretaries could retain 2/- of every subscription they collected. It was hoped this would be an incentive for them to be extra diligent in retaining existing and recruiting new members. While this did not bring about any significant increase in membership immediately it probably helped to stabilise the situation, and led to some growth later. Since 1960 membership numbers have never been above the 500 mark.

This five-year period certainly represents a turning point in the Association's history, and brings out the contrast between the earlier 'golden age' of expansion, and the period of stabilisation which was to follow.

The Second 50 Years

1960 to 2000 - Consolidation Rather Than Innovation

With a much smaller membership, the last decades of the 20th century saw a continuation of several of the initiatives and activities that had been started earlier, and a cessation of others. The Publication of an Annual Report or Year Book, and the Expert Tours were not continued after 1955.

The system of District Secretaries continued right into the present century, though on a much smaller scale than earlier times. By 1980 membership numbers had increased to around the 500 mark, but subsequently fell again to around 300 by the end of the century. Demonstrations, both at Craibstone and at members' apiaries continued, as did a winter programme of lectures.

The strong link with Craibstone continued right through to the closure of the College's Beekeeping Department in 1990/91. Mr A.S.C. Deans was the lead player in this up to 1974, when he was succeeded by Mr B. Mobus, who headed the Beekeeping department until its closure. The Honey Show continued, and several of the trophies were donated during these decades.

Some new initiatives were launched during this period. A Newsletter, originally entitled The ADBKA Bulletin, was started in 1963, at first on a quarterly basis. It still remains, in its monthly format, as the Association's main organ of information for members. Bulk purchases of Ragus candy and honey jars, for the benefit of members, were started in the 1960s.

In 1991 a series of free theoretical classes for beginners ran for the first time, and these were augmented by practical classes from 1993. Both were run for several years by the then secretary Mr S.C. Rae.

In 1998 the Association formed a small library following donations of books by two widows of beekeepers, Mrs Forbes and Mrs Beedie. (A much larger Association library had been in existence since the 1920s containing, 150 volumes as early as 1929, but the entire stock had been transferred to the then County Library in Crown Street in 1962). It is clear from the Committee minutes throughout these years that the Association was being run smoothly, efficiently and effectively by a committed team of officials, and even allowing for the big fall in membership in the late 1950s, ADBKA, by the end of the century was still the largest local Association in Scotland.

The Last 10 Years

Stability with some innovation probably sums up the character of the most recent past.

Membership has remained more or less at the 300 mark.

The Association obtained charitable status during this period and the chief advantage of this has been a welcome addition annually to our funds through the government's gift aid scheme.

We have renewed our link with Craibstone through the establishment of an Association apiary on the same site as the old College apiary, which we rent from the Scottish Agricultural College.

The theoretical and practical classes, under Mr W. Taylor's first class leadership have gone from strength to strength, and the large numbers attending in recent years, (around 60 in 2009 and a record 92 in our centenary year, 2010), has been very encouraging.

A 'Winter Roadshow' of meetings has taken place for several years now, and this winter programme has been augmented by guest lectures and meetings.

The Honey Show and the AGM continue to be held at Craibstone and remain two of the key events in our calendar. We have established a presence in recent years, via an Association stand, at the Turriff Show and the Royal Horticultural Show in Aberdeen. This initiative has proved a popular venture. Mr. A Gordon has been the lead player at these shows.

Our secretary, Mrs J. Kennedy, continues to provide our 300 or so members with an excellent monthly Newsletter.

Bulk purchasing for the benefit of members has been extended in recent years to include treatments against varroa and Ambrosia syrup.

Notable Individuals From The Last 50 Years

Mr B. Mobus, who took over from Mr A.S.C. Deans as head of the Beekeeping Department at the Northern College of Agriculture in 1975, soon joined the Association and sat on the committee for several years. The Association benefited from the work he and his staff did at Craibstone until the Beekeeping Department was closed down in 1990. Several current members have vivid memories of Mr Mobus, whose high reputation and contributions to beekeeping extended far beyond the northeast of Scotland.

Mr S.C. Rae became secretary of the Association in 1963 and remained in that position until his death in 2002. Over these 4 decades his services to the Association were manifold, and hundreds of local beekeepers learned from his beekeeping skills and experience. As secretary and as the local agent for Thornes he knew most beekeepers in the northeast and was a focal point for beekeeping in this part of Scotland.

Mr A. Ross joined the committee with Mr Rae in 1963 and served as treasurer, with one break in 1983/4, for over 30 years. Mr Ross died in 2005.

Mr R. Wood became Chairman of the Association in 1966 and provided steady

and farsighted leadership for not far short of 40 years. The Robert Wood Fund, that forms part of the Association's reserves, was donated by Mr Wood on his retirement from the Chair, and bears witness to both his generosity and his commitment to the work of the Association. Mr Wood is now the Association's Honorary President.

Messrs Wood, Rae and Ross, working together as the main office bearers, gave jointly over 100 years service to the Association.

Mr A. Gordon joined the committee in 1990, and from that date, ably assisted by his wife, Mrs L. Gordon, the Association's Treasurer, has provided storage facilities at Danestone. Mr and Mrs Gordon and Danestone have been the veritable hub of the Association for the past 20 years providing, not just a set of practical services, but also the advice and experience of one of the Association's most skillful beekeepers.

Mr Gordon's prowess is evidenced by the number of times his name appears on Association trophies.

Mr W. Taylor has enlivened and invigorated the work of the Association in the last few years more than any other individual. He has taken charge of the theoretical and practical classes for beginners, he has been the curator of and leading worker in the Association's apiary, and has been the driving force behind the successful Winter Roadshows. Mr Taylor's enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, bees and beekeeping has been transmitted to all who have heard him speak and seen his demonstrations.

In the decades since 1960 the Association has never been short of willing committed members, and while it is impossible to name everyone who has given their time and expertise, the following, in addition to those mentioned above, deserve a place on any role of honour. Mr W. Foubister, Mr W.A. McKenzie, who died in 2004, Mr. A.J. Lilburn, who died in 2005, Mr. J. Tocher, Mr. G. Tough, Mr G. Thom, Miss L. Christie, the two Miss Stopanis, Mr and Mrs E. Lamb, Mr J. and Mrs A. Steele, Mr J. Greenhorn, Mr and Mrs J. McGregor, Mr J. Greenhorn, Mrs B. Cruden, Mrs J. Kennedy, Mrs H. MacKenzie, Mr L. Webster, Mr A. Innes, Mr F. Simpson, Mr A. Smeaton.

Another name that clearly belongs on the list above is Mr J. Stables, who was a District Secretary at Huntly and a committee member for many years. His son Mr G. Stables now sits on the committee and the unbroken Stables' family connection with the Association goes back almost 90 years, when Jim's father became a member in 1922.

A note of apology is offered to the many deserving members whose names do not appear above.

Endpiece – The Future

The arrival of varroa in the area in the early years of this century has been the most important new factor the Association and its members have had to address, and this will continue to remain true as far as one can see ahead.

Other problems and threats to bees and beekeeping, like the recent European and American Foulbrood outbreaks in Scotland, and the possibility of problems like Colony Collapse Disorder and the Small Hive Beetle becoming established here, are daunting prospects. The global outlook for the survival of the honeybee is seriously problematic. That is as true in northeast Scotland as anywhere else on the planet.

Beekeeping now is more about protecting our bees against disease and other threats than has ever before been the case. Since honeybees are the world's best pollinators this makes beekeepers the custodians of a particularly important species. It is the duty of Aberdeen and District Beekeepers' Association, and all its individual members to play their part in facing up to and finding ways through the unprecedented problems that lie ahead.

Despite these problems, the Association, having provided first class services to its members over the past 100 years, is well placed to continue to do so into the future with some considerable degree of confidence.

