

Edinburgh & Midlothian Beekeepers' Association

A Short History – Una A. Robertson

(Article written for the Scottish Beekeeper magazine January 1992)

On 20th December 1928, the motion put to the Special General Meeting was adopted unanimously then swiftly put into effect, the Edinburgh and Midlothian Beekeepers' Association (EMBA) had arrived on the scene. It came about when long-established Midlothian joined forces with the rather newer Edinburgh and, since their first joint meeting on 10th January 1929, the union has prospered.

Midlothian is nearing its Centenary having been founded in 1894, but it is by no means the earliest local association. Their first season was considered successful as it created a 'great interest in bee matters' as well as producing an 'excellent display of honey at our first show at Dalkeith'. Within three years 46 Members had joined, finances showed a healthy balance £10.4s (£10.20p), the annual exhibition at Juniper Green had mustered an impressive 98 exhibits weighing in at 690 lbs, and the County Council was willing to renew its grant to fund lectures by the President - Rev. J. W. Blake of Temple. The 1898 Honey Show was held at Bonnyrigg, during the August Flower Show, with 24 classes and over 70 prizes which were later listed together with the prize winners. In 1899 its venue was the Waverly Market, in conjunction with the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society's Autumn Show. Although some shows and weather conditions are detailed, there is no indication as to what, if anything, happened during the winter time.

These early days were recalled by Mr Hogg, 'an old member of the original Midlothian BKA', who spoke at the 1937 Members Night, and further memories were forth coming when the Rev. John Beveridge opened the 1940 winter programme with a talk entitled 'A Veteran Beemaster Looks Back'. With 60 years experience of beekeeping in Midlothian he was able to describe many outstanding personalities and significant events. Elsewhere he expressed the opinion that without the enthusiasm of Midlothian, in conjunction with the East of Scotland and Perthshire Associations, the present (1912) foundation of the of the Scottish Beekeepers' Association (SBA) would also have failed. By 1928 however, in spite of all Midlothian's enterprise, its fortunes were at a low ebb. It was without funds, without a secretary and, owing to the latter's death, without even a list of its Members. It turned to a neighbouring association for help.

Edinburgh dates from just after the First World War. 'A meeting of beekeepers and persons interested in bees was held in Edinburgh on Saturday, December 14th 1918, at which it was decided to form an Edinburgh & District Beekeepers' Association. After the election of a President, Secretary and Treasurer, the annual subscription was fixed at 2/6d (12.5p) and, the report concluded, 'it was decided not to interpret too narrowly the word *District*'. The first President was Mr W. H. Menmuir, and the Honorary Secretary was Mr A. C. Williams whose book *The Story of the Hive* was published 10 years later. Also attending that first meeting was Mr James Nesbit who became President in 1921, and remained in office until his death in May 1936. His obituary speaks of him in glowing terms and the EMBA felt bereft indeed. However an experienced understudy was at hand in Vice-President Mrs J. E. P. Robertson who, in 1927, had been President of the SBA. In 1928 she had not only presided over Ladies' Day at the 7th National Show of Bees held in London but had given the Show's opening lecture. Her talk 'The Value of Honey' had apparently shown 'much appreciation and experience; moreover, those....present were delighted with her charming brogue'. She had twice been the EMBA Vice-President but remained Acting-President only until the next AGM.

Over the years many well-known personalities addressed the Association and present-day Members would feel at home with the programme. During 1929, for example, January's meeting was a demonstration on preparing honey for show and for sale, February's was a lecture on the production of comb versus extracted honey, and March saw the AGM. Autumn titles were 'Some Conditions of Success in Honey Production' which was illustrated by lantern

slides, 'Bee Appliances & Management' and 'Queen Lore & Queen Rearing'. The minutes detail other titles such as 'Whither Beekeeping?', 'Experiments We Might Try', 'Management of an Out Apiary', 'Control of Swarming', 'A Ton of Honey from 30 Stocks', 'Beekeeping Reflections', and 'Some Controversial Matters', to name but a few. In November 1940 something new came with 'Wartime Beekeeping', doubtless discussing problems such as the keeping of bees in localities liable to be bombed and the sugar ration for winter feeding.

Less familiar though, would be the annual 'Members Night' when short talks were given by several Members, instead of the current 'President's Night'. Equally unfamiliar would be the formal debate between two opposing teams. A social evening of whist, music and dancing with an interval for tea, held in the Dundas Tea Rooms, started promisingly enough but faded through lack of support. At one such evening in 1934 Miss Rollo, the Secretary and Treasurer, was awarded a gold wristlet watch for her organising skills, in due course she became Vice-President and then President.

Summer outings have always featured. The 1930's saw visits to apiaries as far afield as Gifford, Cupar, Fala Dam, and Dunkeld. Thirty five Members journeyed to Auchencruive, while in June 1937, an excursion to Cambus went via the newly opened Kincardine Bridge. A visit to Mr W. W. Smith (of Smith Hive fame) at Traquair proved memorable, when the weather was unseasonably cold but the bees were distinctly firey! Travel was by 'private motor charabanc', not until 1961 was it decided that, due to losses on bus hire, cars would should be used.

Outwith their customary activities the EMBA became involved with events such as the 1948 Silver Jubilee Conference of 'The Scottish Beekeeper' when President J.M. Waterston welcomes 120 beekeepers and their friends to dinner for the SBA's Executive Committee. Bearing in mind that food rationing was still in force, catering arrangements for the Conference was somewhat restricted. Over the years Members produced displays of honey for a Chrysanthemum Show here or a Hobbies Exhibition there, even a winning entry for the Association Cup at the Ayr Show.

Reading the minutes, it seems some things never change and that includes the annual weather reports! Seasons came and went, as variable then as they are today, and as with the weather, so with the honey crop. The bumper year of 1955 was compared by some to the 'glorious bee season' of 1893, while 1946 was considered the worst for 50 years evoking comparisons with 1896. The Committee's concerns, seemingly, are perennial. Requests for a communal site outwith the city, the threat from imported honey, poor turn-outs to the summer outings, travel expenses for visiting speakers, block insurance schemes, and that most permanent problem of all, Members who do not pay their subscriptions! This last has been a headache for each and every secretary, not only distorting the EMBA 's finances but absorbing much Committee time in deciding how much leeway to allow before Membership is cancelled. Unconscious irony surfaces in 1937 when it was recorded: 'Ten new Members joined, and some of the Members paid their subscriptions'.

Numbers tended to fluctuate but increased gradually. In 1929 there were 54 paid Members plus 3 honorary and 2 'lifers'. By 1957 the total had risen to 171 although this included 25 from West Linton who, until 1961, were affiliated to the EMBA rather than the SBA. On separation, the Committee sent its best wishes for their future. Today the EMBA has four life members, six honorary life members and 124 paid members.

It has taken time for the EMBA to assume its present form. First came amalgamation, then in 1934 the suggestion was adopted that the Committee members should retire in rotation, in 1937 came proposals for an AGM in January rather than March, and for 'a small competitive Honey Show of our own'. Not until 1962 was it agreed that the show should include baking classes 'as an experiment' – except that such a class was included at Bonnyrigg in 1898!

The EMBA has been lucky in those who have guided its fortunes. Midlothian benefitted from the generosity of Sir Thomas Carmichael Gibson of Melrose who established the SBA of the 1890's and was Secretary until elected MP for Midlothian. It was later assumed that his collections of books and lantern slides loaned to the infant SBA had been returned to him, his

many appliances and specimens however were presented to the local association for the safe keeping along with a 'giant anatomical bee' costing £200, used for demonstrations and shows. Its last recorded sighting was c. 1920 when John Moir, founder of the Library that bears his name, was using it 'skilfully but gently'. The EMBA has always had good relations with the College Advisors, but most particularly with those from the Edinburgh and East of Scotland College of Agriculture. References abound to their lectures and to the warm welcome accorded visitors to the College Apiary at Nether Liberton, later at Bush and Stobo. The Association also has cause to thank the many individual beekeepers who contributed much time and effort to its affairs and have steered it through some difficult days.

And what of the future? Will we, as beekeepers, be able to continue enjoying our bees or will we become increasingly entangled in problems such as Varroa or the thou-shalt-nots of the Common Market or British Government policies? Only time can tell. But one thing is certain: so long as beekeepers can gather together to discuss their beloved BEES, then will local association such as the EMBA continue to flourish.

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