

The Honey Industry in the Thames Valley

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IN 1874 Mr Isaac Hopkins commenced beekeeping at the Thames with a few gin-case hives.

Out of this small beginning has developed an industry of no small dimensions.

Beekeeping at that time was practically unknown in New Zealand and for many years after the introduction of the hive-bee, followed the primitive methods in vogue in Britain and other parts of Europe at that time.

Common boxes or skeps were used with crossed sticks running through them to support the combs. A prominent feature of this primitive hive system was the sulphuring of the bees at the end of the season to obtain the honey they stored.

The late Mr Hopkins also recorded in later years that his enthusiastic talk about taking up beekeeping in the Thames Valley as a business and raising tons of honey, gave his intimate friends the impression that he was really a fit subject for an asylum.

He lived long enough to see the industry grow even beyond his wildest dreams. To-day it is progressing steadily along sound lines and is worth in round figures approximately £150,000 annually to this Dominion.

According to his records the first movable frame hive seen in New Zealand arrived from California in the year 1876. A duplicate of this hive reached the Thames and was delivered to Mr Hopkins through Captain Wildman in that year.

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This was a German hive made and used by the Baron of Berlepsch and known as the "Berlepsch hive." This type of hive was tried and soon discarded.

In the following year, 1878, Mr Hopkins made by hand a quantity of Langstroth hives and later arranged with Messrs Bagnall Bros., of Turua, saw-millers, to cut them by machinery. So in 1879, the first apiary in New Zealand was thus established on modern lines at Parawai, Thames.

The late Sir George Grey visited this apiary more than once as did many noted visitors to the Thames, conducted there by the late Mr Walter Brodie, the County chairman at that time.

This apiary, the very beginning of commercial beekeeping in New Zealand and the first commercial queen rearing apiary in Australasia was later in August, 1882, transferred to the late Mr J. C. Firth's estate at Matamata.

It would take many volumes to tell of the activities and hard spade work done by the late Mr Isaac Hopkins in the early days, it will be sufficient to say that he was truly the father of beekeeping in New Zealand and the first Government apiarist.

The first Apiaries Act was passed and made law in 1908. At that time two additional apiary instructors were appointed to administer the Act.

Mr Robert Gibb, now successful Jersey breeder and beekeeper of Southland, Otago, was appointed assistant for the North Island.

Mr Gibb relates that in his day the Thames Valley was mostly in bush and standing scrub and that owing to the extremely bad condition of the roads, he was obliged to move about the district on horse-back.

Tea-tree (native) was very much in evidence all over the Valley, consequently the honey produced was dark in colour and of a very heavy nature.

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He tells of a Mr Karl who, with his bees, produced 14 tons of this thick wholesome honey at Putaruru in 1908.

Other prominent beekeepers at that time were Mr Stinton Hutchinson, Mr J. Clark, Puriri, and Mr J. S. Cotterell, of Manawaru.

Needless to say the conditions have changed during the past 20 years, and the honey industry also has progressed with the times. Bush and scrub has been cleared away and rich pastures are now in evidence on all sides.

Honeys now produced in the Thames Valley range in colour from white to a dark brown.

The white honeys are gathered from white clover, thistle, lucerne and various other sources.

The light amber honey produced is a mixture of clover, catsear, dandelion, konini and so on.

The medium amber and dark honeys from tea-tree, pennyroyal, flax and practically all flowering scrubs yield a dark coloured nectar.

These honeys may be mild or strong in flavour as one can imagine, yet in each case it is absolutely pure.

The best honeys produced in the Thames Valley are equal in quality to any produced in any part of the world.

Honey is the nectar and saccharine exudation of plants, obtained from the flowers by the worker bees, which, after modification in the honey-stomach of the bee, is stored in the cells of the comb for use in feeding the young brood, and is a means of existence during the winter months.

Bees do not hibernate, therefore they must make provision for the winter months when plants do not secrete nectar. To do this they gather enormous quantities of nectar, treat and store it under

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excellent conditions during the summer months. This honey, after it has been stored, is an excellent food for man.

To make this point quite clear, I should mention that, although bees do not hibernate during the cold months of the year, they certainly do live in a semi-dormant condition. This condition calls for a food that is easily assimilated and from which there is little or no waste products.

Nectar as it is gathered by the bees is found to be to a great extent water with varying quantities of certain sugars and aromatic principles. This nectar is subjected to a process of predigestion in the honey-stomach of the bee. It is then regurgitated into the wax cells prepared within the hive and there it is further subjected to heat and a process of fanning, the object being to drive off any surplus moisture that remains.

With these operations completed and the honey sealed over by the bees we have a concentrated and perfect food known as honey.

Analysis of honey made from time to time shows that it is made up as follows, the analysis varying slightly with certain honeys:—

Dextrose and levulose, approximately 78 per cent., water, 15 to 18 per cent., and the balance is made up in varying quantities of ash, dextrine, sucrose and acids.

It has been considered a pure and wholesome food from the earliest times.

At the Lady Margaret Hospital, Kent, England, New Zealand honey is used by the ton as a food, as a restorative, and as a great nerve tonic.

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Although district figures are not available, it can be authoritatively stated that the Thames Valley produces more honey than any other district of the same area in the Dominion.

The official figures given for 1914 were:—number of beekeepers in New Zealand, 11,200, number of hives of bees, 74,340, value of output of honey, £50,000. At this time the industry was only in its infancy.

The export figures alone, during 1929 season, amounted to 2,411,540lbs. of honey, valued at £59,728 10/-.

Double the above figures to allow for consumption on the local market and you will get a conservative estimate of the value of the industry to New Zealand.

The development of honey production made possible by the administration of the Apiaries Act, has been largely assisted by the operations of the Producers' Co-operative Association.

The Association has been able to make prompt and liberal advances to the producer from year to year so that he has always been assured of a ready cash return for his crop.

The Association has further built up a demand for New Zealand honey on the European markets as packed under its Imperial Bee Brand, removing much of the export from market fluctuations.

Export marketing has been helped by the Honey Export Board whose control enables a definite and high quality of honey to be offered to the overseas public.

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We have in New Zealand the most effective Apiaries Act in the world, administered by the Department of Agriculture.

Beekeepers from North Cape to the Bluff are helped in every way possible to overcome their difficulties. Instruction in all matters pertaining to the honey industry is freely given to all who show a keen desire to adopt modern practice. The registration and general inspection of all apiaries, the compulsory control of Foulbrood (*Bacillus alvei* and *Bacillus pluton*), bee moths, (*Galleria mellonella* and *Achroea grisella*) and acarine disease, have made beekeeping possible in this country. It is recognised by all who are actively engaged in the business of honey production that the effective administration of the Apiaries Act has made commercial beekeeping what it is in New Zealand to-day.

It is also freely recognised that an old Thames resident, the late Mr Isaac Hopkins, laid the foundation of this very interesting and valuable industry in this Dominion.