

# The Medieval Beehives at Rosslyn Chapel

During conservation work at the Chapel, our stonemasons found that two high level stone pinnacles had become unstable. Each pinnacle had to be taken apart for repair. Imagine our surprise when the stonemasons found a hollow space inside one of the pinnacles, containing a perfectly preserved fossilised honeycomb!

The medieval stonemasons had created an opening in an intricately carved flower, and lined the inside of the pinnacle to create a unique stone beehive. The construction shows that the hives were never intended to be a source of honey, but as a protective haven for bees during times of inclement weather. It is our belief that the hives were built out of kindness and respect for these sacred creatures, known in medieval times as "small messengers of God".

Humans have been collecting honey from wild bee colonies since time began, and evidence of bee keeping can be traced back to ancient times. Bees were very important as honey was used in everything from medicine to cooking. Intriguingly, honey was also seen as a symbol of hidden gold! The Egyptians kept bees in cylindrical hives and pictures in temples show evidence of everyday bee keeping practice. Bronze Age hives made of straw and unbaked clay have been found near Jerusalem, and the Greeks also developed bee keeping as an art. The Romans also kept bees and their hives are thought to have been made from cork oak bark, fennel stems or wicker-work, the inside surfaces sealed with cow dung.

Here at Rosslyn we have discovered that the North pinnacle was occupied by bees, which gained entry through a small hole in a beautifully carved flower. There is a hollowed out area in both North and South pinnacles, about the size of a gas cylinder. While honeycombs were found inside the dismantled north pinnacle, the south one does not seem ever to have been occupied by the bees, as an entry hole was never formed.



Stonemasons working



Pinnacle removed for repointing

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Malcolm Mitchell of Page Park Architects was overseeing the conservation work when the fossilised honeycomb was found. "It's highly unusual to find beehives in a chapel as early as the 15th century. I feel that this is quite unique in Europe". In Scotland, hives were usually made of baskets which could be moved around. "It is particularly a surprise because the hives themselves are of the ideal size for bees to inhabit, but they have been constructed purely as a haven for bees – they weren't built to harvest honey", Mitchell believes.

Allan Gilmour, stonemason, said that he had seen evidence of bees creating hives within soft sandstone, in Irvine Town House. There, bees had burrowed into the sandstone and created honeycombs, which had weakened the stone. It may be that at Rosslyn the monks had the same problem and created the hive as a sanctuary to stop them spoiling other parts of the building.

It is thought that the interior of the hives was lined with a special coating to prevent the wild bees damaging the stonework. There is anecdotal evidence that visitors to the chapel used to be disturbed by bees.

Local legend suggested that honey would drip onto St Matthew's altar in the Lady Chapel, which sits just below the north hive. However, this has been found to be untrue. The hollows are completely sealed and honey could not have reached the interior of the church.

Some Chapel staff had been aware that bees had been going into the cavity when the modern canopy was first erected over 12 years ago, but it was thought that all the noise and dust from the conservation work drove the bees away. The hives were reinstated within the rebuilt pinnacles and it is hoped that bees might return. And indeed they did, as the attached photographs show.



Fossil hive found



Honeycombs



Bees returning

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