

A HISTORY OF THE CONWY HONEY FAIR.

by Peter McFadden, Conwy.

The Conwy Honey Fair in North Wales dates back more than 700 years to the reign of King Edward 1st, when local beekeepers were first given the right to sell honey within the walls of the North Wales town, every September 13th, from midnight to midnight, without charge. The right to hold the Fair is in the town's Royal Charter. Honey was very important even then, and in a roll of expenses of Edward 1st at Rhuddlan Castle in 1281 and 1282, the tenth and eleventh years of his reign, and predating the building of Conwy Castle in 1283 to 1289, is an item: repairing a cart of the King's, conveying a pipe of honey from Aberconwy, 1s4d.

Records from 1835 report that "Large quantities of very excellent honey are sold annually in Conwy. The superiority of its flavour is probably owing to its being extracted from the heath blossoms, and other wildflowers, on the neighbouring mountains" (Rev. Robert Williams, History of the town of Aberconwy, 1835). Its average price then was two shillings a quart, or about 8d a pound. Before 1830, four fairs were held annually in Conwy, on 6th April 4th September 10th October and 8th November. By 1835, this was increased to seven annual fairs, on 26th March (Seed Fair), 30th April 20th June 19th August, 16th September, 20th October and 5th November. By 1911, this had increased to 10, including butter, wool and horse fairs.

Now only two fairs remain: the Seed Fair on 26th March, and the Honey Fair on 13th September. Until 1880, a sheep fair was held on the Great Orme in Llandudno following the Honey Fair. Local people could run sheep on the Orme without charge at that time.

In 1901, The *North Wales Weekly News* reported a good supply of heather honey at the Fair, selling at 1 shilling per pound. Cold winds in May and June had reduced the supply of blossom honey. The 1902 fair was confined to just three tiny stalls selling a small quantity of honey. Cattle and pigs were also on sale. In 1904, the Conwy Corporation began awarding prizes for the best honey. The honey was judged in the market hall and then sold in the High Street. 200 quarts of honey were sold at 6 shillings per quart or 3 1/3 pounds. The judge, Mr TW Jones from Derbyshire, said that no place in England (sic) was as well suited to bee farming as the Conwy Valley.

"Spare Moments" newspaper reported whimsically that "once a year the grim old town of Conwy wakes from its normal condition of torpor, and aged, sharp faced and shrunken women with apple cheeks sell honey from a can, with a pipkin to measure it out".

In 1905, John Berry of Llanrwst offered a display of bee management in a marquee inside Conwy Castle. Entries in the display classes had doubled to 35 competitors. The 1907 Fair included a display hive of bees headed by a queen with a Cypriot lady mother and an English father, which had cost 10 shillings. Bees were then selling at 3s6d per pound. Honey was selling at 1s6d per pound. Wax was not as plentiful as usual. The 1908 Fair brought fine weather and 80 competitors from as far as Cornwall and Norfolk.

1909 was a bad season, but in 1910 five prizes were awarded for display hives of bees. The judge, Mr WH Brown of Shrewsbury, described the honey on the tables as far superior to any in the world! John Berry of Llanrwst won the silver medal for the most points, and his son Hugh Berry won the bronze medal for the best exhibit. The Honey Fair was to be dominated between 1850 and 1960 by the Berry family. The Hugh Berry Cup is still awarded for the best exhibit in the honey section at Llanrwst Show. In 1994, it was awarded to the writer.

In 1911, the *Weekly News* suggested that the Queen of England be offered a gift of Welsh honey, recalling that Edward 1st's Queen Eleanor was especially fond of Conwy honey. The *Weekly News* also suggested

that a North Wales Beekeepers' Association should be founded, to benefit the producer and the consumer. Clover honey was plentiful at the Fair.

The 1913 Fair attracted 68 competitors. Isle of Wight disease had just arrived in North Wales, and was causing large losses of bees. The Honey Fair also included fortune tellers with long flowing hair, who would reveal visions of fortunes beyond the wildest dreams, for the sum of two pence. Real 18 carat gold watches were on sale for a shilling!

In 1914, Britain was at war. The army was occupying the town hall, and prizes for honey were no longer offered. Castle Street was filled with rock stalls and beeswax sold at two shillings per pound. The Fair continued during the Great War, and in 1917 Castle Street was lined with vendors of honey, toffee and earthenware goods. Honey sold at 1s9d per pound. In 1918, Miss Berry was the only beekeeper at the Honey Fair. Miss Berry had only one hive surviving out of 180, before Isle of Wight disease. The price of honey had risen to 3s9d per pound. Several cartloads of pigs were on sale in Castle Street, at £2 each. In 1919, the younger element turned the Fair into a confetti fete in the evening!

By 1921, honey had dropped in price to two shillings per pound. John Berry recorded the largest-ever crop of honey from one hive of bees, 383 pounds, described by Herrod Hemsall in *Beekeeping New and Old*, vol 1, page 463. Again, a confetti fete followed the Honey Fair in the evening. In 1922, little honey was on sale, but the toffee vendors did a brisk trade, and itinerant musicians "ground out favourite tunes of last year but one".

By 1923, the old fashioned practice of tasting before buying had ended. The 1924 Fair was held on a Saturday, and Castle Street was full of stalls. Honey sold freely at 2s9d per pound. In 1925, the Weekly News reported that extracted honey was sold in the Fair at two shillings per pound, and stalls filled Castle Street. Comb honey sold at 2s6d per pound. Local traders protested about the Fair (They still do!) but no official challenge to the Fair's charter was made.

The 1927 Fair coincided with a week of celebrations to mark the centenary of the opening of Telford's Suspension Bridge over the River Conwy. 20,000 people attended the opening day, which was opened by Mrs. Lloyd George. The Honey Fair was relegated to Berry Street, but "where the Fair goes, the crowd goes".

The 1930 Fair was spoilt by incessant rain, but in 1931 Castle Street was "full of loud voiced chapmen" (pedlars). 1932 saw the biggest crowds for many years. The streets were thronged with people, but only three apiarists were present. John Berry recalled 50 years of Honey Fairs, and recalled when the High Street had literally flowed with honey, sold from open cans, attracting swarms of bees and hungry children with chunks of bread. Purveyors of coloured rock now dominated the Fair.

The 1933 Fair was marked by a special sailing of the steamer *King George* from Conwy to Tal y Cafn. Tickets cost 1 shilling per head. 1933 was the best honey season for years, and stallholders rushed to claim stall space on the stroke of midnight. In 1935, a man from Llanrwst who was caught begging for money at the Fair was sent to prison for three months, with hard labour. In 1936, evening rain sent hundreds of people running for shelter. Honey still sold at 2s3d per pound.

In 1937, only two beekeepers sold honey at the Fair. Mrs Berry Williams recalled that her mother had always been in charge of John Berry's honey stall, because he was so kind-hearted he would have given all his honey away! Mrs Berry had been the first to bring honey to the Fair in jars. Previously, it had been sold in pint and half pint cans. John Berry hoped to have a stall at Conwy for as long as he lived. Conwy shopkeepers did not like the Fair. (A few still don't).

The Royal Charter gives vendors the right to pitch a stall in front of the shops. Shopkeepers had tried to stop the Fair without success. In the evening, a carnival spirit was captured, but the water squirter was a “disagreeable substitute for confetti and streamers”.

The 1938 Fair, “Conwy’s oldest institution”, was reminiscent of the old days. Vendors of linoleum, carpets, fruit and Welsh rock lined Castle Street. John Berry, now 83 years old, celebrated 55 years at the Fair without a break. He now had 30 hives, compared with a maximum of 164. He had won over 800 prizes at different honey shows.

The Fair continued during the War, but honey was scarce, and none was sold in 1942. Only two stallholders attended the Fair, both selling crockery. 1948 was the heyday of beekeeping in Wales. The Welsh Beekeepers’ Association had 8000 members. The Welsh National Honey Show was held in Conwy Town Hall to coincide with the Fair. One of the organizers was Hywel Jones of Penmaenmawr, known as Hywel Honey, who was to become the mainstay of the Honey Fair for the next 40 years.

1948 was the worst honey year for 30 years, but Hugh Berry still sold several hundred jars of honey in 45 minutes. 1949 saw a busy Fair, with many more itinerant vendors than in recent years. The honey season had been very good, and honey was sold at 3s6d a pound. There were long queues at the Welsh rock stalls.

1950 was a quiet Fair. Many of the itinerant traders were away celebrating the Jewish New Year. Hugh Berry was celebrating 60 years of Honey Fairs. Vendors of India rock soon sold out. In 1954, Hugh Berry had no honey for sale, the first year without the Berry family selling honey in Conwy for 100 years, apart from wartime. 1955 was the best season for 25 years, and the Fair had many more honey stalls. A heatwave had reduced the crop of heather honey, which sold at 4s6d per pound. Clover honey sold at 4 shillings per pound. 1957 was a wet summer, with 22 wet days in August and little honey.

The 1960s brought changes to the Honey Fair. In 1963, Hugh Berry died. Half of Hywel Honey’s bees died in the cold winter of 1963. An editorial in the North Wales Weekly News after the 1963 Fair complained that the Fair was a disruption to normal life, a free-for-all, and a virtual surrender of Conwy to itinerant traders. Honey was selling at 5 shillings per pound.

1965 saw the last Fair in Castle Street, with more than 60 stalls. Stallholders complained bitterly about the poor organization of the Fair. A few still do! In 1966, the Fair was moved to Rosehill Street car park, and stallholders were charged for a pitch for the first time. Many refused to pay, but in 1968, a good honey year, the Town Council collected £99 in rent. Five beekeepers sold honey at 6 shillings per pound.

The Fair thrived in the 1970s, and in the hot summer of 1976 Alan Morley from the Llyn sold a vanful of honey. I started beekeeping in 1978, and I bought my first hive of bees from Alan Morley. Also in 1978, Aberconwy Beekeepers’ Association was founded, and one of the founder members was Wil Berry, son of Hugh Berry. The old Colwyn Bay BKA and the Conway Valley BKA were long defunct.

The 1980s saw a run of poor honey years and the Fair gradually declined, until in 1983 Hywel Honey was the only stallholder. I remember seeing his honey stall next to a tree on the corner of Vicarage Gardens Car Park. The Fair was close to being abandoned! In 1984, Conwy Town Council revived the Fair and attracted 18 stalls, and in 1985 the Fair was returned to the High Street, thanks to the efforts of the Town Council. The High Street was closed to traffic for the day, and stall space was again free of charge. In 1988, Hywel Honey celebrated 50 years at the Fair. In 1989, a good year for honey, I had a stall at the Fair, and I’ve continued ever since. The Fair was still in decline.

In 1990, the best honey year in living memory, members of Aberconwy & Colwyn Beekeepers’ Association (now known as Conwy Beekeepers) decided to take over the organizing and promotion of the Honey Fair. We were determined to see the Honey Fair develop into a major event again. We publicized the Fair widely and we had a successful day.

The 1992 Fair was very successful. Following the opening of the road tunnel under the River Conwy in October 1991, the town was free of heavy traffic, and visitors could walk around Conwy safely. There were more than 40 stalls, and seven beekeepers sold a total of over 1100 pounds of honey by lunchtime. Free honey tastings were again on offer! The Fair attracted widespread press and television coverage, and several new beekeepers were recruited. In 1993, many customers returned to buy a year's supply of honey.

The 1994 Honey Fair was a great success, despite a poor honey season in North Wales. Nine beekeepers sold honey to large crowds of visitors in the warm September sunshine, and there were many other stalls. The long hot summer of 1995 produced a good honey crop, and 15 beekeepers sold honey at the Fair. All the beekeepers had agreed to sell their honey at the same fair price, to avoid any problems with undercutting. Some beekeepers charge more than the recommended minimum price, especially if they are producing prize-winning honey. Widespread newspaper coverage, including a half page feature in the *Daily Telegraph*, brought welcome publicity to Conwy. In December 1995, Hywel Honey died aged 94. In February 1999, the writer acquired three hives of bees, which had belonged to Hywel Honey.

The 1996 honey crop was only average, but 10 beekeepers sold honey at the Fair, faster than ever, to the largest crowds seen for many years. Friday proved to be the best day of the week for the Fair, with crowds of tourists and local buyers. Honey was selling faster than ever. I sold 250 jars of honey in 2½ hours. The Fair was well covered by BBC radio and television, and by local and regional newspapers. The 1997 Honey Fair was held on a Saturday, attracting 23 honey sellers, but visitor numbers were down on 1996.

The 1998 Fair brought 14 honey sellers, who sold more than a tonne of honey. There were many other stalls, and the charity stalls reported a good day. The local Guide Dogs group raised more than £600, and Arthritis Research raised £300.

The 1999 Honey Fair was blessed with the best weather for many years, following a good honey season. The High Street was filled with stalls, now on both sides of the High Street, including two visiting beekeepers selling borage honey. We've always welcomed a few beekeepers from outside North Wales. The Guide Dogs group raised £750.

The 2000 Honey Fair also enjoyed good weather. Fifty stallholders filled the High Street, and 10 beekeepers sold honey, but visitor numbers were reduced by a fuel blockade. The sycamore had yielded a good harvest of honey in May, but the heather had failed completely. I only sold 150 jars of honey, half my 1999 total. The local Conwy Estuary Lions group manned the High Street barrier.

The 2001 Honey Fair was spoilt by rain, but in 2002 and 2003 we had the best weather in years, and over a tonne of honey was sold at each Fair, following very good heather honey crops.

The 2004 Honey Fair was another successful event, despite the poor honey season. The next Honey Fair is on Tuesday 13th September 2005. The 2005 Seed Fair will be moved to Saturday 2nd April to avoid congestion on 26th March, which is Easter Saturday.

In 2004, Conwy Beekeepers' Association floated the idea of a food festival in the walled town, following the success of the 2003 Honey Fair. The idea met with approval and generous funding from the Welsh Development Agency and The Cooperative Group Wales, and many local businesses. We handed the idea over to Jane Hughes, who lives within the town walls, and had been running the Wall Place Restaurant. The first Gwledd Conwy Feast was held on 22nd to 24th October 2004 in various venues in Conwy, indoors and outdoors, celebrating the wide variety of local food and drink. About 50 local food and drink stallholders attended, and the event attracted about 8000 visitors. Conwy Feast has continued to grow and to thrive, still organized by Jane Hughes and her team. It has become the largest food event in North

Wales, and the second largest in Wales. Some of the original stallholders still attend every year, including Edwards of Conwy, Conwy Brewery and Llaeth y Llan. Conwy town has become well-known for its very successful community events.

The 2005 Fair was very busy with 20 honey sellers. S4C's Dudley Newberry was there and Country Living magazine's Charley and Tara Fisher came from London to do a feature on the event. I sold 340 jars of honey.

The 2006 Honey Fair again brought crowds of visitors to Conwy and at least 12 new stalls. The *Country Living* magazine article had just been published, and it attracted visitors from far and wide. It turned the Honey Fair from a regional event into a national event, and was probably the best publicity we've ever had. I sold over 200 jars of honey in two hours and I was sold out by midday. Lovely weather all day.

In 2007, there were about 70 stalls, with several new ones. I started selling at 9.55am and was sold out by 10.55am, with a long queue from the start. I spent the rest of the day just chatting to visitors.

The 2008 Fair was held on a Saturday and it was very crowded. It was a lovely Fair. I was up at 4am and on duty in the High Street at 5.20am. Some stalls had already started to set up. I sold 350 jars of honey @ £4 per jar in 1½ hours! Plus soap, beeswax and strawberry plants from the garden. We packed up at 4.30pm and I was home soon after 5pm. Deborah Phillips and her children, dressed as bees, collected £66 for Bees for Development. This was the start of a regular collection towards BfD.

The first stallholder at the 2009 Honey Fair arrived at 4.45am. I arrived at 5.15am, and the High Street soon filled up with stalls. I only had 135 jars of honey, and it was all sold in 35 minutes. We had just 12 honey sellers. We collected £300 towards BfD, far more than we expected. The quality of the stalls was gradually improving, although it was hard to get rid of some of the market stalls, including one stall selling videos, who insisted they had a right to attend.

The 2010 Fair enjoyed lovely weather and I was in shorts all day. The video stall, which was the last of the tatty market stalls, didn't turn up thankfully. I had help setting up the stalls from John Hughes, husband of Jane Hughes of the Conwy Feast, and from John Humphreys. This was just before my first hip replacement operation, and I was glad of the help. Kay Pierce and her mum helped me. Kay was lifting the boxes of honey, I was taking the money, and Kay's mum was giving out the jars! We kept the queue down. It was a very good-natured Fair, and we had about 20 honey sellers, including several new ones. I stopped for fish and chips in Gyffin, and was in bed by 6.30pm!

In 2011, we had nearly 30 honey sellers and about 30 other stalls. I'd had my two new hips by now, and I was feeling much better. Josie Goodwin, a beekeeper from Eglwys Bach, helped me on the stall. The town was busy by 9.15am. I made the mistake of limiting buyers to only two jars each, and at lunchtime I realized I wasn't going to sell out this year! I had to bring home 85 jars, for the first time ever. Home and to bed early after a 12-hour stint in the High Street.

The 2012 Honey Fair saw about 18 honey sellers and 80 stalls altogether. We'd had an awful non-summer, and honey was in short supply. Some friends from student days in London had travelled to Conwy for a reunion. Great to see them again and they helped on the stall. It was a nice, sunny day. We collected £425 for Bees for Development. I sold 180 jars of honey, plus some apples, beeswax and candles.

In 2013, I arrived in the High Street at 5.15am and found two plant stalls already setting up. The Honey Fair also a great day out for plant sellers, and many say it is their best event. One plant seller, Steve from Nantwich, sets up his stall, then cooks himself a full Welsh breakfast. There was very little of the usual hassle while we were setting up. We had about 30 honey stalls and some had travelled a long way. I had help from Mike Bethell and new beekeeper Katherine Owen, a farmer's wife. It had started raining by 4pm when we packed up, but the High Street was still quite busy. We collected £700 towards BfD.

2014 was a lovely summer and we all had a very good honey harvest. The Honey Fair was held on a Saturday. A record thirty stalls were selling honey. My old pal Dave Rees from student days at City

University London worked hard on my stall all day. My honey was not selling as quickly as usual, because we had so many stalls, but I still sold 240 out of 300 jars of honey. We raised £900 towards BfD. In December 2014, I went to Ethiopia for a backpacking holiday, and I visited a very successful beekeeping project in Bahir Dar, funded by BfD.

At the 2015 Honey Fair, my 26th year as organizer, I had help unloading my car in Conwy, just 10 days after a hernia operation. My friend Jane helped on my stall all morning, and we raised £700 towards Bees for Development. We had steady sales throughout the day. The day started with a little rain, then became dry and cloudy, but no wind and not cold. In 2015, I took over one of Hywel Honey's apiaries, near Henryd in the Conwy Valley. I'm now the 4th beekeeper using the site, which has housed beehives for maybe 60 or 70 years.

The 2016 Honey Fair was probably the warmest Honey Fair day in living memory. We'd had a disappointing honey crop. Three beekeepers brought glass-fronted display hives, and visitors loved seeing the bees. Jane helped on my stall again. Shopkeepers had enjoyed a very successful summer season, and many of the shops had their own stalls outside their shops. There was a sense of optimism in the town. We had a wonderful Autumn in 2016, and the bees went into winter in very good condition. We are looking forward to a good year with the bees in 2017, my 40th year of beekeeping.

Local beekeepers are very aware that the Honey Fair is a unique privilege for them. We work closely with the Town and County Councils, and with residents and traders, to ensure that everybody benefits from the Conwy Fairs. We try to minimize disruption. We intend to ensure that the Conwy Honey Fair continues to grow and to thrive. The Honey Fair will hopefully remain very much a Honey Fair. We will continue to discourage any stalls detracting from the traditional nature of the event.

We are very grateful for the support provided by Conwy Town Council and Conwy County Borough Council, Conwy residents and Conwy Chamber of Trade.

To be continued....

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