

Faith Comment published in the Petersfield Post

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Respect

Charles Butler was a 17th century beekeeper who was vicar of the Hampshire parish of Wootton St Lawrence. He wrote three books, including one on beekeeping, but he remained relatively unknown in his life. Beekeepers call him the father of English beekeeping.

Today, when there is anxiety about declining honey bee populations, and its knock on effects on the pollination of crops, Charles Butler has a thing or two to say to us. He kept bees in skeps, and treated them with reverence and respect. He thought they were marvellous creatures, created by a wise God.

Some commentators today suggest that beekeeping in parts of America has now become 'factory farming' of the worst sort, where bees are being driven to work so hard and for so long, that we are now seeing a collapse of colonies – with potentially devastating effects for our own food supplies. Butler observed his bees carefully and was intrigued by their behaviour (like Gilbert White of Selbourne). Butler sold his honey to provide a dowry when his daughter Elizabeth got married.

But honey wasn't the only outcome of his beekeeping. He also had a sense of wonder at the bee world – and knew that human well-being depends on treating these creatures with respect. It is a lesson for our time.

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