

Buzzing along

An historic honey factory is the latest, and most unusual, addition to the Tasmanian Heritage Register. GILL VOWLES reports.

IAN STEPHENS reckons there is one key reason his family honey business has lasted for three generations and grown to be the state's largest producer – the way they breed their queen bees.

And those breeding methods – which result in jumbo jets of the bee world – are based on a record keeping system devised by Stephens' father, Robert, in the 1920s.

"You won't find our system in any beekeeping books, although Austrian beekeepers are now using a similar system because of us," Stephens said.

"Dad developed the system after speaking to cattle and sheep breeders and we have records going back to 1925 which tell us what to do.

"Without those records we wouldn't have a clue when making decisions about mating and which hives to use."

Using those historic records, and a unique egg transfer method, Stephens breeds about 1000 queens a year – each valued at \$1000-\$2000 – and closely guards his bloodlines.

"Our bees have a bigger wing span, which means they can fly further and carry more – just like a jumbo jet," he said.

"I would love to register our pedigree stock like they do in the beef industry, but I still haven't found a way to achieve that."

Even though the Stephens' system is not officially recognised, the family still record honey production and other vital statistics for each of their queens every fortnight from September to the end of February.

Those records, which document every bee and every hive used by R. Stephens Golden Bee Honey since 1925, are one of the reasons Stephens' bid to have the business, and the nearby family home, listed on the Tasmanian Heritage Register was successful.

Tasmanian Heritage Council chairperson Michael Lynch said the listing was one of the more unusual on the heritage register, but it had captured the public's imagination.

"It is a terrific story to think one Tasmanian family exports this internationally renowned honey to the world from a site occupied since 1920," Lynch said.

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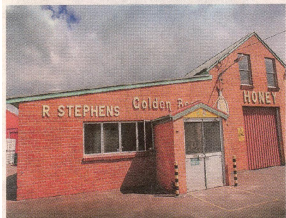


THE BEE'S KNEES: Golden Bee Honey owner Ian Stephens. Picture: CHRIS KIDD



SWEET AS SUGAR: Above, bees deposit their honey in a hive; right, a bee smoker; below, the Golden Bee Honey factory at Mole Creek.

Pictures: CHRIS KIDD



KEEPING TRACK: The Golden Bee Honey factory has records dating back to 1925. Picture: CHRIS KIDD

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"And from the heritage council's perspective it has been wonderful to show the Tasmanian public our heritage is more than houses and convictism."

Lynch said the initial provisional listing of the R. Stephens Golden Bee Honey factory, apiary, nuclei and residence had been embraced by the community with 14 separate submissions of support.

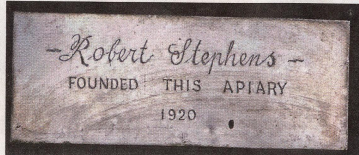
"This is a tremendous mark of respect for the Stephens family the importance of the honey industry to Tasmania and the history of this particular place," Lynch said.

R. Stephens Golden Bee Honey was permanently entered on the register in September.

Stephens said he decided to seek heritage listing for the family business after seeing it immortalised in one of the

silk wall hangings handcrafted as part of Deloraine's YARNS community art project.

"When I saw the panel it got me thinking about the significance of what we have here and that gave me the idea



of seeking heritage listing," Stephens said.

"Our factory is a living museum and there is so much history here, I wanted that history to be preserved."

That history predates World War I, when Stephens' father

Robert, then the Mole Creek street lighter, started keeping a few bee hives as a hobby.

In 1916 Robert enlisted as a private in the Tasmanian 19th Reinforcements for the 12th Infantry Battalion and while

fighting in France researched bee keeping.

After the war he used his army pension to buy two acres of land at Mole Creek and established the factory that is still in use today.

"I think he just had the

beekeeping bug and then saw an opening for a commercial operation," Stephens said.

When Robert started the business in 1920 it was Tasmania's first commercial honey factory and, back then, it had just 50 hives which were moved by horse and cart to Caveside each season.

Today the Stephens have 2500 hives, which are moved each season to the West Coast by a very unusual method of transport - the Apt Wilderness Railway.

The family used to access the area - its best yielding leatherwood spot - by rough bush tracks.

However, the rebuilding of the West Coast Wilderness Railway blocked the family's only route into the area.

With the help of the State Government the Stephens gained access to the railway and a specially designed train



BUSY AS A BEE: Apilary assistant Jackie Woods. Picture: CHRIS KIDD

carriage was widened to fit the trucks.

"Each year we put the whole truck, hives and all, on the train to take them into Teepookana," Stephens said.

"There is simply no other way of getting them there."

The Stephens access more than 70 per cent of their leatherwood honey from the West Coast's world heritage rainforest areas and work an area from the Lyell Highway to Mt Arrowsmith and Gormanston.

Although the leatherwood honey is captured on the West Coast, all Stephens' honey, sold as either Golden Bee Honey or Golden Nectar Real Leatherwood Honey, is processed at the Mole Creek site.

The site, which still bears traces of the original factory, now employs 15 full-time staff and produces 35 per cent of Tasmania's honey output

and 3 per cent of Australia's total annual output.

Stephens said the business label was now known worldwide and that, along with heritage

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listing, was a fitting tribute to his father's foresight.

"He was an innovator and even though I took over the factory in 1966, Dad continued researching Tasmanian

pollens until his death in 1977," Stephens said. "His research included detecting pollen varieties from honey samples, bee breeding, sugar qualities and the types and effects of enzymes and acids from flowers."

"Dad was also one of the first to improve his queen bee breeding program by importing Golden Italian queens."

Stephens, now 81, has no intention of retiring but has handed over some of the business responsibilities to his sons - third-generation apiarists Ken, Neal and Ewan.

"The doctor told me just yesterday I was good for another 40 years, so we'll just have to see how long I continue," Stephens said.

"But I do want the business to stay in the family and I think at least the fourth generation is assured. They are only young still, but they are definitely interested."