

The History of Charcoal

Charcoal has been crucial in the industrial life of Britain since the Roman times. For thousands of years it was the only fuel used to smelt iron: it was only in the 1700's that coke was developed as an alternative.

This talk began by looking at traditional methods of charcoal production, which usually involved building large earth covered heaps of wood which were then lit. By controlling the supply of air and thus ensuring incomplete combustion, moisture and impurities were driven off to leave behind what we know as charcoal. This is nearly pure carbon which burns at higher temperatures than wood and coal and with far fewer impurities.

The demand for charcoal grew as the demand for iron grew and it would have been common to find it being produced in the forests and woods around Britain. It was particularly common in those areas where iron ore was easily extracted, which included the Weald, the Wyre Forest, the Forest of Dean and the New Forest.

A key aspect of supplying enough timber of the right size was the development of coppicing - the cutting down of trees at ground level and allowing them to regenerate over a period of ten to fifteen years. Estimates of how much forest was needed to supply the charcoal for smelting vary considerably but by the mid-1700s this was between 200,000 and 600,000 acres. This was a considerable area and brought competition with demand for wood for shipbuilding and clearing of forests for agriculture.

Although iron smelting was by far the biggest user of charcoal, other uses included glass making and pottery, both going back to Roman times or before. A new use for charcoal emerged in the 1300s with the introduction of gunpowder into Britain. Along with sulphur and potassium nitrate, saltpetre (carbon) is an essential element in this early explosive.

The life of the collier (as charcoal burners were called) was hard and involved spending lengthy periods camping in the woods alongside the charcoal heaps which needed constant tending. Although modern methods of charcoal production were developed there is plenty of evidence of this practice continuing into the twentieth century.

There is not a lot of evidence of charcoal burning locally, but as the Romans were smelting iron along the eastern edge of Leicestershire it would certainly have been produced. There is a much later reference to woodland at Crow Hill, Woodhouse Eaves being sold in the 1700s by the Earl of Stamford. It was charred and taken for use in a blast furnace at Melbourne. This is thought to have been located somewhere under what is now Staunton Harold Reservoir.

There are more modern uses for charcoal, including the various by-products such as wood tar, acetic acid and wood spirit. Bradgate Park currently produce a small amount of charcoal from their waste timber which they sell as barbecue fuel.

Richard Mollart



A charcoal heap prior to covering and burning - Wyre Forest late 19th Century