

ENERGY PEAT

Much of Scotland's accessible native woodland had been removed by the 17th century. Coal was widely available in the central Lowlands, but scarce and highly localised elsewhere. For the rest of Scotland – the Highlands and Islands, the Southern Uplands and the North East, an alternative fuel had to be found. Fortunately, a solution was at hand in the form of peat.

Peat comprises the remains of plants which once had grown in waterlogged conditions but which, on account of their lack of oxygen, had not then been broken down into normal soils. Thus, deposits built up, over hundreds and thousands of years. This unlikely, wet source was to provide much of Scotland's fuel.

The time for cutting and drying peats was in late spring. Though laborious work, it was also a communal occasion, not without enjoyment. Each community and household had its specified *peat bank* from which to cut. Spades were used, of a variety of forms, usually with a tang at right angles to the blade so as to cut away both sides attached to the bank. The peats might be dug out vertically or



horizontally, depending on local practice. These were thrown onto the un-cut bank above, and put on edge to dry. This picture shows work in progress at a **peat bank at Rora, Aberdeenshire**. The man at the bottom left is cutting peats horizontally and throwing them onto the bank where specially designed, low peat barrows are waiting to take them to dry. Cutting was men's work, transporting women's.

© Aberdeenshire Heritage via SCRAN



The three or four upended peats which formed each of the first sets of still-waterlogged heaps were, once dried, piled into larger and larger stacks until fully dried and ready to take home. This **peat bank, at South Glendale, South Uist, Inverness-shire**, has small heaps of partially-dried peats on the bank above the workings. Another view, at Loch Eynort, on the same island, shows a large stack ready for removal.

The next stage involved taking the peats home. The simplest method was by basket, carried on the back by both men and women. The baskets were often locally-made, from local raw materials such as heather. In Shetland and elsewhere, peats were carried in baskets or nets on pony back, one each side for balance. More could be carried on a *slype* – something like a cart but without the wheels – which could be dragged across country by a pony. Where road conditions permitted, a pony, horse, ox or (latterly) tractor could pull a cart-load of peats back to the home. This picture, taken on **Fair Isle, Shetland**, shows an **ox-cart, fully laden with peats**.



Finally, in extreme cases, as here in **Fetlar, Shetland**, the only feasible means of transport was by boat. The boat nearest the camera also carries straw baskets, used with the strap across the chest to carry peats from the peat bank.

Once delivered, the peats were stacked close to the house. One rule of thumb suggested that the volume of the stack should be equivalent to that of the room to be heated. This as yet unstarted stack at **New Pitsligo, Aberdeenshire**, gives some idea of their scale.



Small-scale removal of peat continued over centuries, without any risk of exhausting the resource. But this has now changed. Peat is a marketable commodity, principally for garden use, and the technologies exist to extract it on

3

an industrial scale. This picture taken at **Gardrum Moss, Stirlingshire**, shows a **narrow-gauge railway and train**, used to transport peat. In recent times some still extant peat deposits, such as Flanders Moss, Stirlingshire, have been given protected status.



To find out more:

Fenton, A. *Scottish Country Life*. Edinburgh, 1975

Fenton, A. *The Northern Isles*. Edinburgh, 1978

Questions
Peat – THEN and NOW

1. Which two of the following statements is true of peat?

- (a) Peat was an important fuel in Scotland until the 19th century, but its deposits were soon exhausted and an alternative fuel had to be found.
- (b) Peat was an important fuel in Scotland until the 19th century and over much of the Highlands and Islands to this day.
- (c) Peat is formed by the accumulation of dead vegetation in airless, waterlogged soils over many years.
- (d) Peat is formed by the accumulation of dead and decaying vegetation, and the process only occurs in dry soils.

2. When was the best time to cut and dry peats?

- (a) Late Spring/ Summer
- (b) Late Summer/ Autumn
- (c) Late Autumn/Winter
- (d) Late Winter/Spring
- (e) Any time of year

3. Peat played an important part in the making of Scotch whisky. In which part of the process do you think peat was used?

Answers

1. (b) Peat was an important fuel in Scotland until the 19th century and over much of the Highlands and Islands to this day.
(c) Peat is formed by the accumulation of dead vegetation in airless, waterlogged soils over many years.

2. The best time to cut and dry peats was (a) Late Spring/Summer

3. Malted (soaked and germinated) barley was dried in a drying kiln, fuelled by the peat. The barley would then be milled and distilled. The peat gives the finished product its distinctive flavour.