

Information Sheet 3G: Peat workings

Peat forms when the decomposition of plant material is inhibited. The damp, cool conditions of Dartmoor, especially in the north where the average height above sea level exceeds 365m and rainfall is high, have combined over thousands of years to provide ideal conditions for the formation of peat-forming blanket bog. These peat deposits are a rich source of environmental information as they contain well preserved pollen which reveals vegetational changes on Dartmoor over many thousands of years, as influenced by human activity.

Historically, peat took the place of wood as a fuel on Dartmoor - and more latterly coal - and has often even been referred to as 'coal'. Peat *turves* and *vags* have been cut on Dartmoor for many centuries for both domestic use and as a fuel, in the form of charcoal, for tin smelting furnaces. *Turf* on Dartmoor is the true peat, that '*cuts like butter and dries out as hard as coal*', whereas *vags* were cut from the more crumbly surface layers which could also include heather and gorse.

In a charter of 1201, King John confirmed the privilege of '*digging tin and turves for smelting at all times*' to the Dartmoor tin miners or *tinners*. Peat was converted into charcoal by specialist workers known as *carbonarii* who sold it as a fuel for tin smelting and to blacksmiths for their forges. It was calculated that when peat was burned to produce charcoal it had the same calorific value as good English coal but being reduced to only 1/3rd of its original weight, it was infinitely lighter to transport over long distances.

Since medieval times those with commoner and venville rights on Dartmoor have been able to cut peat for their own requirements. Peat cutting was normally undertaken between April and September from long strips or 'journeys', usually 36.6m (40 yds) long, two turves wide and cut to a depth of 45-50cm (18-20 inches), often increasing to several feet over the years. The top turves were replaced carefully to preserve surface vegetation. After lengthy drying, the peat was transported by pack animals to the moorland settlements. Evidence for peat cutting can be seen to the south-east and north-east of High Willhays.

The last industrial operation to work peat closed in about 1955 or 1956 after intermittent activity for around a hundred years. This was at the head of the Rattlebrook, south of the Meldon area, where fibrous peat was dug out from the top 1.2m of a total of around 4.2 m depth of peat. One ton of this wet fibrous peat produced around 8 hundredweight of horticultural dried peat. A combination of increasing ecological opposition to the use of peat and rising overall costs, led to the eventual closure of the venture.

Authors: J. Marchand & R.E. Page 2006