

Rupert Lane

Charcoal production.

Charcoal making was a big business round here up until about the 1920s, huge areas of woodland would have been felled at any one time, coops of up to three or four acres, just over a hectare in size, on a 7 to 40 year rotation, depending exactly on what they were after. Where they're actually making the charcoal you'll find these areas of cut and fill, so you find little platforms about four or five metres diameter maximum, sort of 15, 18 feet, something like that, and you'll know you're in a coppiced woodland, you've got these platforms and you've got multi-stemmed trees growing out, two or three stems from one stool, and on those platforms they would cut the timber in the winter and then come back in the summer, having split the wood so it dries out a bit quicker, and then build a dome of up to about six foot tall with two or three air inlets built into that with what they call a motipeg down the middle of it, which would be a supporting post that was pulled out after the dome was created and that would form the chimney. The whole hearth then is sealed with soil, bracken, moss, whatever was to hand and that's how you get charcoal, by burning without oxygen or with a very limited supply of oxygen, so the lads managing the fires had to be there all the time to re-seal any holes or gaps that would occur as the whole pile shrank, otherwise they'd end up with a pile of ash and presumably bread and water rather than a pint of beer and a crust for dinner that night.