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What is Peat?

Peat covers most of the Highlands and Islands, with the large blanket areas over the north, east and west. It is covered over by rough heather and moss as seen in the picture below.

It was formed by the combined action of excess surface moisture, low temperature and high acidity, which deterred the breaking down of plant matter.

The formation of peat started during the Atlantic period *(Mesolithic–warm and wet)* around 4,000-3,500 BC. The blanket peat came later, around 500 BC *(Sub Atlantic–colder and wetter)*.

Peat as Fuel

Peat has been used in the Highlands and Islands as a source of fuel for hundreds of years.

There are varying qualities of peat. Generally, the deeper one digs the blacker the peat and the hotter it burns. The black peat dries more easily and hardens into a dense hard peat. Brown peat is a much younger peat, found nearer the surface and is of poorer burning and drying quality.

By 1900, wood and coal appeared as alternative fuels to peat. However, trees were sparse along the North Sutherland coast and those that existed were planted on ground owned by the landlords and wood had to be bought.

Coal was taken in to this area by boat. Local people buying it could make a small profit organising its unloading and then its haulage to customers. It is unlikely that many crofters could afford to buy it so it would mainly be bought by hotels and lodges - these were largely owned by the landlords and used by gentry who came to the area for salmon fishing.

Crofters were entitled to a section of peatland (known as a peat bank) to go with their croft. As a result, peat was the obvious fuel, given that the only cost attached was physical labour.

How is Peat Cut?

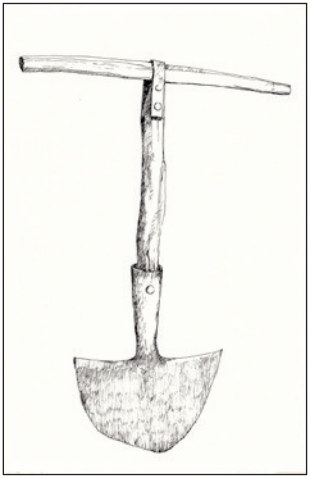
Peat cutting starts at the beginning of May so that the peat can dry out slowly throughout the Summer ready to be taken home in the Autumn. Up until the late 1970's, the removing of the turf and the cutting of the peat was all done by hand using the tools shown here.

Peat Tusker (left and right), Rutting Spade (centre rear), Flauchter Spade (centre front)

Removing the Turf

The turf would be marked out and cut using a ***rutter spade.*** A line would be rutted parallel with the bank and about 30 cm in from the edge. This was done for the entire length of the bank and would be repeated twice more.

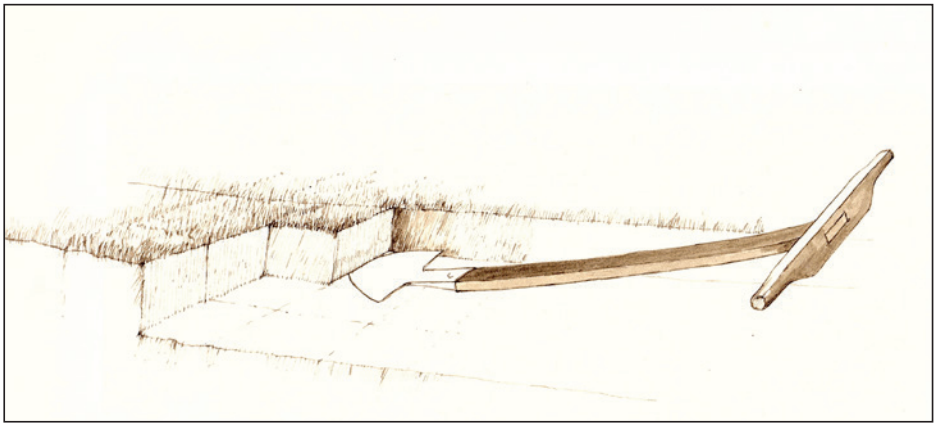
These rutted lines were then cross-cut at right angles to the bank every 2-3 metres.



Marking the turf with rutter

Once marked the *flauchter spade* was used to remove the turf. This was a specially designed spade and usually was made to measure, dependent on a person's height, as it was 'punched' through the ground using force from the thighs.

Removing turf using flauchter spade

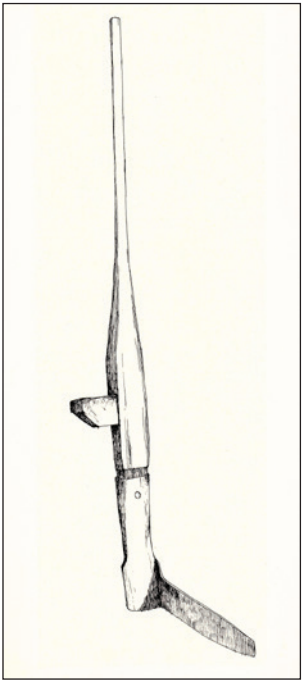


The depth at which this was cut varied from 10-30cm according to the type of turf being cut. The 'bassags' (pieces of turf removed) were put in the hole left by the previous year's cut.

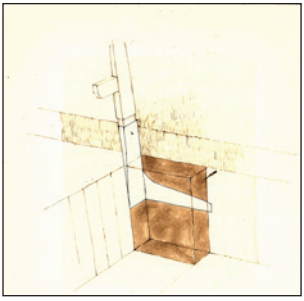
Placing turf over previous year's cut

Cutting the Peat

Once the turf is removed it is ready for cutting and this is done with the ***tusk*** (or ***tusker***). One person stands on top of the bank with the tusk and cuts the peats while another person below lifts the cut peats and throws them clear of the bank.



Cutting with the tusk



They are then spread out flat to dry out. Peats at this stage are about 8 cm wide, 30cm long and 46cm deep. They are very wet and heavy and require a lot of physical strength to handle.

Laying the peats on the bank to dry

Setting up

Within a couple of days of being cut the peats begin to form a hard 'skin' from the sun and a lot of the water dries out of them. After about three weeks (depending on the weather) the peats would be "set up" in fours – two leaning against each other, then two leaning against them – much like setting up playing cards. This was known as the 'first lifting' and was mostly done by women and children. In some areas, a second lifting was done where peats were stacked into small stacks known as 'storags'. Peats would be left until they were totally dried out.

Taking the Peats Home

Until around 1920 this was done either by horse and cart or carried in a specially designed basket called a peat creel. The creel was carried on a person's back.

Carrying peats home in creel baskets (Image: Gairloch Museum)

One of the main reasons for getting the peat as dry as possible was to make the loads as light as possible.

The journey home would often be in two parts. The first part was taking the peat from the banks to the roadside. The hill track could become wet and boggy and the cart would often sink in the moss. Getting the peats off the hill was entirely weather dependent.

One of the biggest breakthroughs came in 1926 in the form of lorries. The first lorries used could take a year's supply of peats home in two days rather than the two weeks it took with horse and cart or creel basket.

By the 1940's tractors had been brought in to replace horses on most crofts but they were big, heavy and unsuitable for boggy hill ground.

In 1947 the first Ferguson tractor came into the area. This was a light tractor and was the first to be used to transport peats from the hill banks to the road.

Ferguson Tractor

With the peats at the roadside and the carrying capacity of lorries greatly increased - four lorry loads could transport home a household's yearly peat supply. Crofting was not a sustainable form of living and most people had some other employment as well as the croft so the time saved on working at peat was crucial.

Methods remained almost the same up until the 1970's. As tractors became more powerful, the trailers became bigger. To combat the increases in weight double wheels were fitted to trailers and then also to the tractors. Tipping trailers with hydraulic power also quickened the process.

Loading the trailer

On the road home

The Peat Stack

Once home the peats had to be properly stacked next to the house with easy access for carrying in to put on the fire. Great pride was taken in building a 'good' peat stack and for many this became a bit of a fine art.

The Peat Stack

for the duration of the Winter. The best 'black' peat (the driest and hottest burning) would be protected by the more 'spongy' larger pieces of turf.

A well-designed stack would allow the householder to remove peats from the inner section of the stack without disturbing the outer walls.

Peat stacks would vary in size according to family but each would try to have enough peat home to keep them warm through the cold Winters. Larger households may have more than one stack.

The Fire

Peats would be collected from the stack daily in buckets to keep the home fire burning. A hammer would be used to break the peat into smaller pieces to put into buckets.

Smaller dry pieces, known as 'clods' would be used to start the fire, and burned much like coal. Once a good fire was going in the home a large wet peat might be thrown on top to dampen down the flames and keep the fire going longer. This was also a method used at night to keep the fire smouldering slowly and the house warm until morning.

Before the introduction of electricity, the fire was the only source of heating and hot water in houses so setting and relighting the fire would often be the first thing to be done of a morning.

Peat Cutting Today

Modern digging machines appeared in the 1980's. They have a specially designed bucket to cut the peats and set them out on the bank in blocks of ten.

Peat cutting machine in action

Machine-cutting comes at a financial cost but it is the most common method used today. Peats are still taken home by tractor and trailer, or quad bikes are used where the hill ground is particularly soft and boggy.

Climate change has blurred the seasons. The lack of long dry summer months can result in peats being left on the hill all winter if the ground is too wet. Bogged tractors are still a common sight but anyone else on the hill at the time always goes to lend a hand. The 'community spirit' of the peat hill lives on even today.

And the dreaded midge can always be guaranteed to make an appearance, peat bog is its favourite 'hang out'!

Peat and the Environment

The people of Sutherland and Caithness live and work surrounded by a vast expanse of pools, bogs, mountains and moorland known as the Flow Country. It's the best blanket bog of its type in the world and holds a special place in the heritage of this area.

Peat stores carbon and the Flow Country holds three times the carbon found in *all* the UK's woodlands put together. Keeping it safely stored here is vital in helping to control climate change.

Blanket bog forms in cool, wet places when plants grow faster than they're able to decay. Here in the Flow Country the most successful plant is sphagnum moss. It's been growing here since the end of the last Ice Age some 11,000 years ago, laying down a thick layer of carbon-rich peat, deep enough in places to bury this building!

But it's the plants, birds and insects of the Flow Country that are truly amazing. Take a closer look at the peatland around this area and you'll find it full of startling colours and fascinating wildlife.

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The Flow Country/ Peatlands Partnership
www.theflowcountry.org.uk

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