

The Future

Despite the increasing ease with which peats can be cut, the overall practice is in dramatic decline. As crofters age and are replaced by people to whom peatcutting is entirely foreign, North Sea gas or oil has become a more attractive option than the annual six week struggle in a midge infested moorland to have fuel for free.

Peatcutting is part of the cultural heritage of Caithness and Sutherland. Although currently in decline, it is important that good traditional peatcutting practices are remembered and passed on to future generations and new folk who come to the area.

Best practice:

- The turf is replaced neatly, vegetation side up, at the bottom of the bank to recreate a level growing surface
- Banks are kept clear to allow water to drain away
- Banks have at least one end open to allow domestic stock and wild animals to escape
- Banks are left neat and tidy with all rubbish and any old peats taken away
- Only enough peats for the coming year are cut

The Peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland

The cool moist climate and low rolling hills of Caithness and Sutherland provide the ideal conditions for peat to form. Although the process is very slow, perhaps no more than 1mm every year, an uninterrupted period of 4000 years has resulted in entire original landscapes being hidden beneath a blanket of up to 4 metres of peat. For umpteen generations of traditional management, this unique, haunting landscape has remained largely intact, making it probably the largest area of its kind left in the world.



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TRADITIONAL PEATCUTTING IN THE NORTH



past and present

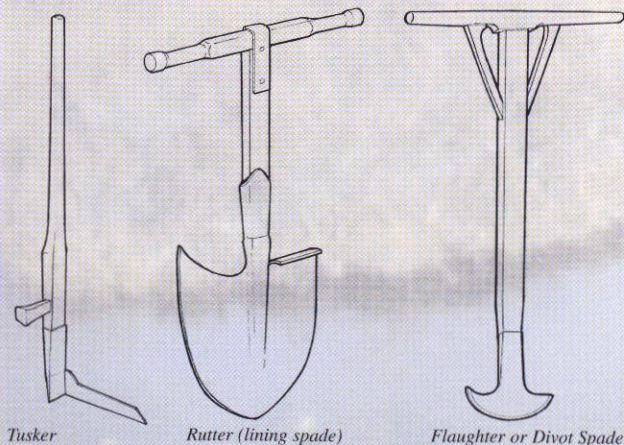


Through the Years

When Pliny the Elder visited the Low Countries around 50 AD he noted with some surprise, "the mud of their soil they knead with their hands, dry it in the sun and wind, after that they burn it to cook their food and warm their stiff bodies". Peat extraction methods have moved on somewhat from that time but the basic principle remains the same. There is no record of when peat cutting began in Caithness or Sutherland, though the sagas allege that Einar, son of Earl Rognvald, introduced the practice to Orkney around 890 and was subsequently known as "Torf-Einar" from the turf he cut.

~ The Tusker, the Rutter and the Flaughter ~

Though the exact method may vary from place to place, three tools are found in common throughout the area – the tusk or tusker, the rutter and the flaughter spade. The latter, a long-handled and cumbersome instrument, is used to undercut the thick, fibrous surface turf that has to be removed from the peat bank before cutting can commence. The rutter is used to make lengthwise cuts along the bank to determine the width of the surface to be cut and, usually, to make cuts at right angles to these so that the "bassags" – large, heavy blocks of turf created – can be manhandled off the top of the bank and into the ditch from which peat has been cut in previous years. On some estates, peatcutters have been required to replace this turf as neatly as possible so that a smooth sward is



Tusker

Rutter (lining spade)

Flaughter or Divot Spade

Drawings by Ian Myles

recreated at the lower level; on others the opposite demand has been made and the floor of the bank must be left as rough as possible, thus supposedly providing shelter for grouse.

Once the turf had been removed, the tusk was put into action. This was a narrow spade with a 4 inch cutting edge with a step on the side of the wooden handle so that the cutter could use the strength of his leg or the weight of his body to drive the tusk down. The peat was then broken off by a twist of the handle and the thrower facing the cutter, but standing at the bottom of the bank, would throw the peat out on to the top of the bank to dry.



Dunbeath Preservation Trust

~ Drying and Stacking ~

Once the peats had been left for a period to dry, they would be made into little wigwam-like structures of four known as "storrows". After another 3 weeks or so the peats would be ready to be stacked on the hill or, more usually nowadays, taken straight home. Often, in poor spells of drying weather the "storrows" would need to be remade into larger structures known as "astorrows" and, if this still did not work, these might need to be further reworked into larger heaps known as "rooags". In the times of the horse and cart the peats were stacked on the hill until they were dry and light enough to cart a good load home without crippling your horse. But tractors feel no pain and now it is not uncommon for huge loads of peats to be carted home for stacking beside the croft house.



Scottish Highland Photo Library

Most peatcutting was done in May or occasionally into June. Peats cut in April would be at risk of frost damage. Except in exceptional years, 6 weeks would be the usual time between cutting your peats to taking them home. Once home, the peats would be carefully stacked with, in some areas, considerable competition over who could have the neatest stack. Today, while there are still some expert practitioners of the stacker's art, many people now put their peats inside rather than bother with stacking at all.

~ Peat Quality ~

The quality of peat varies widely with the best peat for burning being black in colour with little fibre. This sort is found where the peat is shallow although it also has the drawback of breaking up very readily when handled, especially when dry. The poorest peat has large quantities of tree remains and dries out very light, as well as burning quickly with little heat. The best overall peat contains a reasonable amount of fibre to hold it together but is also black and dense enough to provide good burning.

~ The Machine Age ~

The advent of light, tracked diggers with specially adapted buckets has revolutionised peat cutting in the North. While two men would take 3 days to cut enough peats for a year's burning, a digger can do the same in a couple of hours. He cannot, of course, do it anything like as neatly, nor can he tailor the width of the peat to the type of turf. It is also much harder to lift the peats cut by a digger than those carefully spread by skilled men. However, the overall effect is labour saving and few but the most diehard traditionalists have failed to be won over.