**Charcoal burning in Wychwood Forest**

Charcoal is the black carbonised residue of partially burned wood produced under conditions that prevent it from bursting into flame. The main uses for charcoal were in metal smelting and as a constituent in the production of gunpowder. The skilled craft of charcoal burning has a history of over 1000 years and every forest region had one or more practitioners. The domed kilns of charcoal burners were until recently a common sight in many woodland areas locally and charcoal burning is still practised in the woods at Wilcote. To the north and south of Leafield in the Wychwood Forest there are large areas of woodland, which show evidence of coppicing, the source of raw material for charcoal burners.

The kilns from 2-7 metres (7-24 feet) in diameter consisted of layers of thin coppice wood. Hazel, Sycamore, Hornbeam, Ash and Oak were used although Alder was considered the best material. An analysis of the local ancient hedgerows shows how many of these trees occurred in the Leafield area. The layers formed a hearth beneath a heavy covering of turf. Hot coals placed on this kindling ignited the fire and draughts were carefully controlled through gaps in the turf. To prevent flame, water was poured onto the burning kindling producing steam that doused the flames and forced air out. The kiln was then sealed with damp turf.

The kiln would smoulder for many days while moisture was removed from the wood and combustible gasses were extracted through a small whole in the top of the dome. The charcoal burner had to give constant attention to the kiln so lived in a temporary shack by his hearth, tending it night and day until the turfs were removed. The brittle iridescent charcoal was then cooled ready for packing. When used as a fuel charcoal glows red-hot and burns with very little flame. It is useful in a forge or furnace, as it will become white-hot as the heat intensifies.

In the medieval and Tudor periods charcoal's importance equalled that of coal in the Industrial Revolution and manufacturing centres developed in areas such as the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire and the Weald in Kent where iron ore and charcoal were readily available. As it was an important constituent of gunpowder charcoal burners were sometimes "camp followers" of armies. There is archaeological evidence that Roman blacksmiths used charcoal in portable forges for making spear heads. The 18 th century Woodstock steel industry most probably used charcoal from the Wychwood

Forest including the area surrounding Leafield.

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