

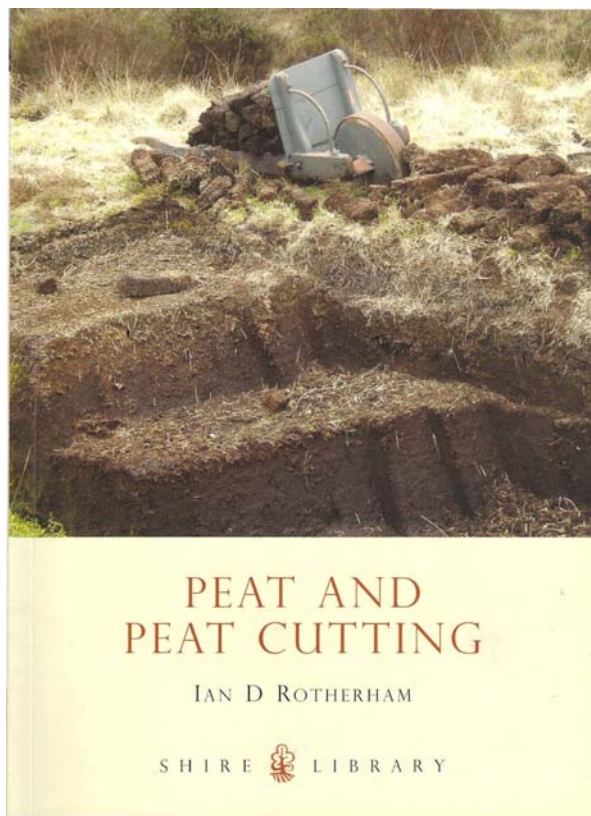
## Peat and Peat Cutting

Ian D. Rotherham (2009)  
Shire Publications, Oxford, UK

64 pages  
Paperback

Price: £5.95 from [www.shirebooks.co.uk](http://www.shirebooks.co.uk)

Shire Library No. 483  
ISBN -13: 978 0 7478 0705 6



This very readable small book provides an informal, informative and enjoyable introduction to peat and the history of peat cutting in the British Isles. The author traces the origins of this social and economic activity from the Iron Age to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

It is divided into five short chapters beginning with a historical overview (preceded by a preface and followed by brief conclusions), outlining archaeological evidence for peat cutting in the East Anglian Fens and Somerset levels more than 2000 years ago. Peat cutting for domestic fuel has virtually disappeared but it was important in the culture, folk memory and identity of many communities throughout these islands. Large scale, mechanised peat extraction for fuel only began in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century but the industry declined as peatlands disappeared and alternative fuels appeared that were cheaper and more convenient.

There is a brief introduction to peat and how it is formed and where in the British Isles it is found, describing the conditions under which peat accumulation is initiated and mentioning the different types of peatland. For centuries peatlands were regarded as 'waste' land owing to their remote locations, often subjected to severe climates, but they provided fuel, food and building materials and latterly employment for local communities.

The second chapter focuses on 'uses of peat and peatlands' by describing the wide range of uses and products that have been derived from peatlands. The

main importance of Britain's peatlands was for fuel, building materials and grazing. Over time the peatland resource was exhausted but evidence for its former extent remains in the large legacy of place names, for example, Peat Lane, Moss Lane, and Turf Lane.

Fuel has always been the most widespread use of peat. It was the main fuel of poor people and settlements were established within reach of peat bogs. Peoples' lives revolved round the annual cycle of peat cutting, drying and stacking. When peat stocks were exhausted poverty increased and sometimes famine resulted as happened in the Western Isles of Scotland. Towns and cities also depended on peat for fuel and bedding for livestock and horses. Norwich, for example, received peat and turf from the Norfolk Broads, Carlisle from the Solway Mosses, Cambridge from the Fens of East Anglia while York was fuelled from Askham Bog and nearby turbaries.

Chapter 3 describes how peat was worked by listing the various operations from vegetation clearance, drainage, peat cutting, processing and delivering peat to users. The book contains excellent illustrated descriptions of the large variety of peat tools from all over the British Isles and some of the primitive aids to stacking, drying and transporting peat turfs off the workings. Peat cutting for widespread local use declined rapidly when coal could be delivered by rail to most of the country quickly and cheaply, although it continued in remote

parts of Ireland and Scotland.

Following the various Acts of Enclosure in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries (Chapter 4) some land was set aside as 'allotments' for the rural poor. This was usually the poorest land and included peatland that would be cut by 'commoners' for their own domestic use. Allotments were the source of various fuels such as furze, wood, bracken and peat since the cost of coal was prohibitive to poor people.

Chapter 5 lists 'other uses of peat, ranging from peat baths (therapeutic), paper (poor quality), building material (peat blocks), agriculture (horse stable litter), soil improver (increase water holding capacity), ash (fertiliser) and horticulture (controlled soil environment). The use of peat as a growing medium for pot plants and bedding plant cultivation began in the 1930s and increased subsequently, boosted by commercial industrial exploitation by machine. This led to a vast increase in the amount of peat extracted and speeded up the exhaustion of the resource. The book contains pictures of a selection of mechanical devices used for peat drainage, cutting, milling and collection.

The wide range of other industrial applications of peat are mentioned briefly, including petrochemicals, tars, bitumen, dyes, tannins, alcohols, ammonia, naphtha, benzenes, paraffin, oil, charcoal, creosote, acetic acid, gas and more! Arguably, the most famous (and important) use of peat is in the distillation of whisky.

In conclusion, the author points out that peatlands are threatened by domestic cutting and industrial extraction and emphasises that these practices are unsustainable. He expresses concern over the ability of peat covered landscapes to continue to function as water catchments, water regulation systems and carbon stores as peatlands degrade and disappear. Future prospects under climate change scenarios are uncertain.

The book is illustrated liberally with colour and black and white photographs and many diagrams. It contains a useful and lengthy list of references. This book is well worth buying.

*Jack Rieley*  
*2<sup>nd</sup> October 2009*