

Charcoal Making

Contributed by Bodger

Bodger offers us his experiences of a two day charcoal making course. I had a very enjoyable day today on the first of two days on a charcoal making course, which was held as part of the Meirionydd Oaklands Management Project. The course was lead by John Owen - charcoal maker.

It was held a place called Coed Lletywalter near Harlech.

We are well blessed in this area with castles. I actually passed two on the way to the venue. Here's a snap of Harlech Castle that I took this morning on the way in.

It was a cold start to the morning and here was my first view of the ring kiln that myself and fellow course members would be filling.

After levelling it up, six ventilators were placed underneath the kiln, so that there was a gap beneath the ring.

The raw material.

Coed Cymru, in their attempt to conserve the natural Welsh oak woodland are outing foriegn interlopers. They have felled masses of beech trees and its hoped that charcoal burning , might be one way of utilising this resource.

Time to start swinging the axe, to turn these logs into usable sized pieces to go into the kiln.

This is the bottom of the kiln with some of the chopped logs arranged in such a way as to allow a flow of air into the centre from each of the six vents.

Some kindling was then placed at the confluence of these flues, topped off with some 'brown ends'. These are pieces of timber from previous burnings that hadn't quite gone all the way and become charcoal.

The logs are then placed into the kiln in such a way as to utilise as much space as possible.

Willing hands made light work of both chopping the logs and loading the kiln. It also built up quite an appetite.

The big moment. John Owen lights the blue touch paper.

Slowly but surely, some smoke and steam begin to rise.

The smoke starts to rise.

John obviously hasn't heard of the smoking ban

Slowly the colour of the smoke changes to a yellowy brown, which means that the fire is starting to get hold, at this time the lid goes on the kiln.

At first the lid is propped open by a log to aid ventilation.

The smoke starts to come out of the ventilation shafts.

At this stage, the lid is dropped and the gap under the ring between the vent is sealed using sand or soil.

Every other vent is blocked and then the chimneys are put on those remaining.

The top of the lid around the edges is also sealed with sand and that's it, job done for the time being. The wood in the kiln will now be left to burn for the next 20 to 24 hours. John will return to the kiln in the morning and if the smoke has become fairly clear with a blue tinge, he'll completely close the kiln down by cutting off all the air to it. In other words, he'll seal the remaining vents and the fire will go out..

On Thursday, I'm going to return to help empty the kiln. By this time it will have had two days to cool down. To open it up before then will lead to the fire flaring up as the oxygen floods in and the charcoal will be turned to worthless ash.

John says that to get good results , the wood needs to be of a similar size and of the same species.

Today (Thursday) was the day I returned to the woods to see the fruits of the first days labour.

On the way, I passed a second castle, this time it was the one at Criccieth that I stopped and photographed.

We made our way up this track to the woods and to the kiln. Remember, this is the only access to it and that our instructor John has to carry everything in and out either on his back or in a wheelbarrow.

Our first view of the now extinct kiln

John had returned to the site to cut off all the air to the kiln on the Tuesday. His final task in order to achieve this had been to take off the chimneys and put socks full of wet sand over the vents.

And now to the moment of truth! Off with the lid.

This was what we'd been waiting to see.

The finished article.

Now down to work. The charcoal had to be taken out of the kiln, graded and then bagged. Time to get suited up and face masks on.

This sieve was used to grade the charcoal and the lumps went down the bottomless bucket into the bags.

It was again, a matter of many hands making light work of a very dusty job.

The dust was incredible and got everywhere, when I got home, I still looked as though I was wearing eye liner. It quite suited me actually. I think I may have discovered my feminine side.

The charcoal went into nice recyclable bags. Here's the Welsh version.

The English

All in all we made about 100kg of charcoal though this did not include the small bits that had fallen through the sieve.

We had quite a lot of these bits and they can be used either on the fire at home, or can make a very useful addition to certain types of soils. At the end of a short day, John very kindly sent us all home with a bag of the charcoal that we'd helped to make.

I found this course to be a very enjoyable and useful and I went away realising that charcoal making is very labour intensive, not particularly financially rewarding but a very satisfying pastime. Just great to get out into the woods. I can truly recommend it to everyone and rest assured, that I'll be having a go at making my own sometime in the future.

Thanks to everyone for being so helpful and friendly.