

## Forest Perspectives

### Charcoal production at Bahana, Glencree Valley, Co Wicklow, 1939-1945

Visitors to forested districts like the Wicklow Way area must inevitably become interested in the details of the occupations of those who find a living there. Nowadays there are foresters and forest staff concerned with the actual work of planting, general care and thinning and finally harvesting of mature timber and its transportation to sawmills and board factories.

During World War II there was another dimension to these activities, that of charcoal making. This was a skilful and ancient craft, practised around here at that time and the people who carried it on were an interesting and unusual group. At that time restrictions in the use of very scarce petrol caused the virtual ending of private motoring. Road transport was partly maintained by using Producer Gas to power vehicle engines, which, apart from the fitting of the necessary Producer Gear (which admittedly was rather clumsy), required a minimum of alteration. The raw material used to make this gas was charcoal obtained from wood, for which there was great demand at the time, hence the many charcoal burners found in the more highly forested areas of which, then as now, this part of Co Wicklow was among the most important in the country. The art of charcoal making must have been known in Ireland long ago but by the year 1939 it had been all but lost, so those able to do it were nearly all from the Continent, where it is practised in the traditional way right up to the present day.

Anyone who has read or heard the fairy stories of Grimms or Hans Anderson in their childhood will remember the mention of Charcoal Burners which conjured up strange and rather uncouth people in mysterious dark Northern Forests. These were our ideas on their first arrival in these parts in the early war years.

Those who came around here were all interesting people, most of them originally coming from various parts of Italy or of Italian extraction – but were living in Dublin, mostly shopkeepers and owners of small cafes and restaurants whose business had suffered owing to wartime restrictions and shortages, forcing them to fall back on their old crafts. In this immediate area were Homero Marshetti who came from near Lucca in northern Italy and his uncle Renaldo. Then there was Gino Collini an Austrian-Italian from the Austrian Tyrol, formerly an army ski instructor. He had a young assistant Harry Schneider, a native of Alsace. Amadeo was half Italian and French from Marseilles formerly, according to himself a French Foreign Legionnaire. He made charcoal in the Deer Park, close by Powerscourt.

Homero bought a big stand of scrub timber from us, mostly sally, and spent a couple of years here, living in a wooden three roomed shack in the field which we still call “Marshetti’s Field”, where he was frequently joined at weekends by his wife and children. Renaldo and Collini mostly operated in the Ballyorney area.

The cutting down and preparing of the wood for burning entailed quite a lot of labour in those pre-chainsaws days as each burner employed three or four helpers so quite a lot

of local people gained employment as a result. The timber for conversion to charcoal varied in size from up to eighteen inches diameter [45 cm] to as little as two inches [5 cm], cut into lengths of about six feet [1.8 m] down to three feet [0.9 m] or so. The sites where this took place were level areas, of dry hard soil about fifteen feet [4.6 m] in diameter, with a drainage channel around the circumference. A wooden stake about nine inches [23 cm] diameter and eight feet [2.4 m] in length was then placed upright in the centre of the area and around it the timber for burning was placed, standing upright row after row, the largest pieces first, gradually decreasing in length and size, the small ones fitted into spaces between the larger pieces. Four ducts were left at ground level, spaced evenly around the pile and leading to the central post. These were for the necessary air supply for burning. In this way a large mound of timber, approximately five tons [5 tonnes], was built up, something about the same shape and size of a haystack, for those that can remember such things! Finally the whole thing was covered over by a layer of sods and soil and it was then ready for burning. Then, using a ladder the central post was removed leaving an open chimney or flue connected with the ventilation ducts.

The fire was started by inserting burning material, usually oil soaked rags, into the central area created by the removal of the post. Combustion was controlled by opening or closing the ducts as required using sods for the purpose. Slow burning went on for four or five days and the colour of smoke from the flue and the temperature of the side of the mound, done by hand testing, judged the progress. At the beginning smoke was copious and white, changing to a barely perceptible whiff of blue colour towards the end. The location of a charcoal burning could always be detected from the vinegar-like odour of acetic acid from the reaction. I remember that Homero had a kind of watchman's hut where he used stay up at nighttime during the final twenty-four hours or so. It was his experience, which dictated when the flues were all closed and the fire extinguished.

After a couple of days the heap had cooled sufficiently to allow the sods and soil to be removed and the charcoal revealed, shiny and black but perfect in shape and none of it consumed. It was then broken into lumps and bagged for sale. Marshetti had a partner and agent in Dublin, a Mr Rocca who looked after that side of the business. The whole process was a continuous one of preparing a new pile while burning was in progress at the other, a process requiring managerial abilities as well as technical expertise; it was most interesting and educational to see it in full swing.

I cannot comment on the economics of the business but I think that about 5 tons of wood went to each burning, producing approximately 1 ton of charcoal, which sold at that time for about £30.00 .

Nowadays I believe that charcoal burning is just another industrial process using special kilns with sophisticated instrumentation whose operatives will probably dismiss the old methods as "folk handicrafts" or some such patronising description. But the Wicklow Way and similar places in the country would be even more interesting than they are at present if people with the same kind of knowledge, skill and calibre as Homero Marchetti and his colleagues of half a century ago were still carrying on this and other rural occupations.

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(Passed to Aeneas Higgins by the late Brian P. Hogan, 27 June 1990)