

## Village Echoes Charcoal Burning

August 11th is the feast day of St Alexander of Comana. He is the patron saint of charcoal burners. They were dubbed "The Devil's People". This was mainly due to their blackened appearance, from working with charcoal, but also because they travelled from one woodland site to another performing their 'alchemy' on wood. Their way of life caused suspicion and fear within rural communities, who viewed the charcoal burner's craft as 'magic'.

How many of us, when lighting our barbeques, give any thought to where the charcoal comes from and how it is made? Indeed, we probably come across charcoal only when we use it for the barbeque, or, if we are artistically-minded, for drawing. It does, however, have other uses, such as filling the cartridges that are used to filter tap water. The craft of charcoal burning was practised as early as 4,000 BC in Central Africa and has a long history in the High Weald, being used in the production of iron from the time of the Roman occupation. Also, charcoal was burnt in pits for use in the oast houses for hop drying. For these reasons, charcoal burning would, at one time, been a common sight in and around Goudhurst.



The Society has recently been shown photographs, taken by the late Gordon Batchelor, of a charcoal burner and his work but we have been unable to identify him. Nevertheless, we believe that the pictures here were taken locally, possibly in the vicinity of Pattenden. Does anyone know?

The basic method used to produce charcoal changed very little until the recent introduction of metal kilns. Charcoal gives about twice the heat of an equivalent weight of wood, making it very important to the iron smelting industry. The craft of the charcoal burner lies in building a kiln which restricts the air supply while it is burning, and then watching the kiln continuously until the burn is complete. Low value, coppiced or 'waste' wood is normally used for charcoal production. Ideally the wood needs to have been seasoned for a couple of months as the drier the wood the faster the burning process. Burning therefore usually took place once the wood cutting season was over - between March and October.

When the kiln is built and ready to be fired, glowing embers of charcoal are dropped into the flue until the wood is well alight. The top of the flue is then sealed with turf and earth. Once the kiln is burning the long watch begins. A large kiln could take three days and two nights to burn and had to be watched constantly. Burning is controlled by making small holes to let in a little air and repairing any part of the kiln which slips. When the charcoal is judged to be ready, the burning is extinguished by water and the kiln is opened up.



The charcoal is then spread out and sorted and sifted three times to make sure it is cool and clean.

Because it was essential to watch the burning kilns night and day, the charcoal burner always lived on site either alone or with his family.

In Lady Oak Wood, there is much evidence of charcoal burning, including the remains of the workings of the last charcoal burner, known to have been there in the earlier part of the last century.

Local History Society

Email: [help@goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org](mailto:help@goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org)

Website: [www.goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org](http://www.goudhurstlocalhistorysociety.org)