Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

PEAT CUTTER'S COTTAGE G60

This model is based on a cottage from County Donegal, Ireland, as it looked in 1951. Some cottages like this were the homes of peat-cutters and their families and some were used only during the peat-cutting season when the weather was dry. Cottages were located very near the peatlands where the men worked. But what is peat?



Peat is a naturally occurring substance made from layers and layers of decomposed vegetation. It forms in wetland areas where the land is constantly saturated by water. Deposits of peat can be found in a wide variety of places around the world including the Netherlands, Britain, Finland, New Zealand, North America and Ireland. The picture on the right shows layers of peat after being cut.

The first written records of peat being used as a source of fuel in Ireland date back to the seventh century, but evidence suggests that it was being used long before then. Peat became the primary source of fuel for heating the home during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Ireland - a time when forested areas were shrinking and wood was becoming scarce. In 1926 the production of hand-cut peat in Ireland reached a peak when over six million tonnes were cut.

Peat can be used for other purposes besides fuel. It can be used as a building material, as bedding for animals and for making paper. The postcard on the right is made from peat! The picture on the postcard shows a traditional peat cutter's cottage, like the model in the box.



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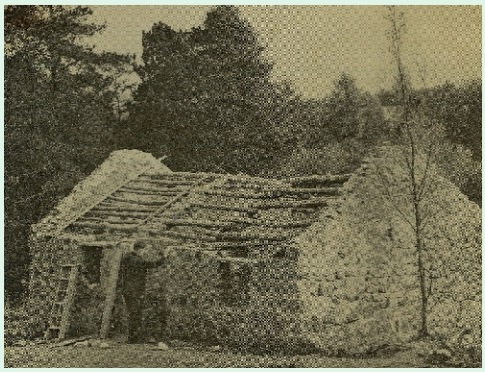
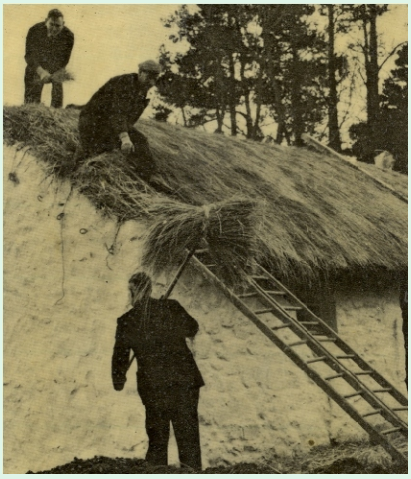
The cottage that this model is based on was built from local stone and painted with whitewash. The roof was made from a combination of rushes, heather and turf. The roof materials were kept in place with wire, which was tied to wooden pegs at the top of the walls. And of course, it used peat as fuel for the heating.

The pictures here show a traditional cottage being built. Cottages like this still exist in Ireland, although many have since been turned into holiday homes for tourists.





To cut peat by hand three important tools are needed. First the marking iron was used to cut the top layer into squares. Then the turf spade was used to separate and lift the squares out of the ground. The peat cutter was used to cut the squares into smaller pieces so that they could dry out and be stacked up.

But today the traditional process of hand-cutting the peat has almost disappeared. It is still possible to see people in rural areas using spades to cut peat for their own use, but over the last 50 years peat has been cut using tractor-drawn machinery. An Irish company called Bord na Móna oversees the production and distribution. The peat still provides fuel for the home, but is also used on an industrial scale in some factories and power stations. Despite the fact that machines make the work faster and easier, the demand for peat is in decline as alternative sources of fuel are readily available.

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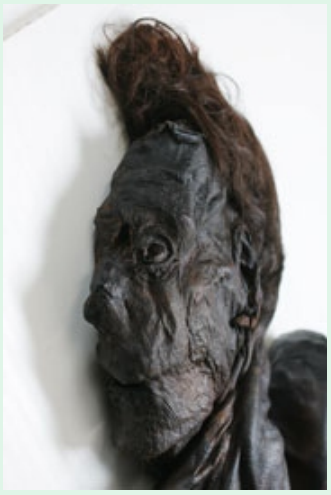
Peat is well known for its preservative qualities. Many fascinating things have been found in peatlands, such as tools, weapons, clothing - even bodies. The most famous Irish bodies both date from the Iron Age. Clonycavan Man was found in March 2003 in a peat harvesting machine and Old Croghan Man was found in June of the same year by workmen clearing a drainage pipe. The remains of both men are displayed at the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.



The head of Clonycavan man

Peatlands cover about 3 percent of the surface of the Earth, although they contain twice the amount of carbon than that of all the forests in the world combined. Healthy peatlands take in and store the carbon created by cars and factories, which is fine until they are damaged and dried out by farming, drainage and warmer weather. When this happens harmful greenhouse gases are released into the atmosphere and contribute to climate change. The National Trust is launching a campaign in Britain to raise awareness of the importance of preserving peatlands so that they continue to absorb the carbon we produce and help to tackle climate change, rather than make the situation much worse.

Environmental organisations are encouraging people to use peat-free potting compost in their gardens to reduce the demand for peat. They encourage people to make their own compost with old leaves, grass cuttings and food scraps.



Machine worked peatlands