

Charcoal burning: Retorts

Image: Charcoal burning in the Wyre Forest. Three men are cutting up timber to fill retorts. A horse is in the background. [Image from: Bewdley Museum, 1930s or 1940s]

11. Charcoal burning: Retorts (1)

Charcoal burning was a long-established traditional industry, but it was influenced by technological developments. In 1810, Mollerat Freres developed a design for a kiln, based on a wrought iron cylindrical retort of 3 cubic metres capacity. It was built into a brick chamber which allowed hot gases from the fireplace below to circulate around the cylinder, before passing out through the chimney. It was loaded and emptied through a manhole in the lid. For most charcoal burners a permanent structure was not suitable and portable retorts soon developed from the fixed retorts. These were widely adopted and examples are shown in this 20th century photograph. It is not known when they were first used in the Wyre Forest.