

## Work and Labour

**Image:** Charcoal burning in the Wyre Forest. Two charcoal burners in front of their hut, with some of their tools, including a wheelbarrow (background) and shovel (foreground). The man on the right has a clay pipe in his hands. The hut is draped with a sack printed with the message, “Joseph Oakes, Wyre Hill, Bewdley No 1903”. [Image from: Bewdley Museum, early 20th century.]

### 2. Work and Labour

Charcoal burning was a highly skilled task, requiring not only manual skills to build a clamp ready to be fired, but judgement to assess the rate of burn and identify when the charcoal was ready to be gathered. Charcoal pits had to be watched day and night. At one stage, the burning process becomes exothermic, producing more heat than it absorbs. Consequently a small fire in the centre can char the whole and ruin the product. The charcoal burners or wood colliers lived on site so that they could monitor the productive process. They moved around the forest to be near timber-felling sites and so had to make temporary dwellings for themselves. The inventories of four wood colliers survive for the 18th century. In general they lived humbly and had few luxuries. Though they had permanent homes, during the period of “burn” they lived in the forest in tent-like huts, which were also constructed in the 20th century, as the photograph reveals. Their huts were made out of a framework of strong sticks, covered with bracken, turf and grasses and topped with old sacks. A central hole was left in the roof to act as a chimney. Beds of bracken were laid down, and a charcoal fire was lit in the centre of the floor. As the pit had to be watched day and night, burners usually worked in pairs. Sometimes others were employed as day labourers for tasks such as wood chopping.