

Seanchas Ìle

HERITAGE ARCHIVE

Interview: Cutting peat

LM: Lena McKeurtan

EE: Emily Edwards

EE: It's on now.

LM: When the frost is over you cut the peat. If you cut peat and it freezes, it just breaks apart. It would just break up. We cut peat on, up at Bunnahabhain, the hill there at Bun na h-Abhainn. And, when we cut peat, on Ardnahoe, that land. And now, you had cutters. Some who were cutting peat and they'd use a spade. That's a spade, a peat-spade. And some marking out...

EE: What is marking out?

LM: Marking out means, you are, you have a fork and you take it with you and the cutter, he cuts the turf. It isn't like the Lewis folk. The Lewis folk use their feet but the Islay folk use their hands.

EE. Oh, aye.

LM: Arms, arms, hands...

EE: Aye.

LM: ... they use. And you put the spade down onto it, and cast the turf on top of the bank and then the markers are there putting rushes on the turf. And it's a point and fork with two small feet on it. But it could have had three in the old days there would have been just two small feet on it and you would thrust that into the turf and put it up neatly on top of the peat-bank. The first peat that you cut out of the bank was normally spongy peat, this means that it's mossy. But the next peat under becomes much darker. That's the black peat, it's much easier to cut but they are lifted higher onto the bank. When you are cutting the spongy peat at first you go a bit out from the peat-bank, and you leave it out on the top of the peat-bank and with that you leave room for the spongy peat, the black peat and you put the black peat down like that. And the odd time if there is a good depth, maybe three turfs out from the middle of the bank and three turfs deep in every bank. And, well, there was always, I don't know how many inches maybe a dozen inches or something but maybe fourteen, there's something like that. There was room for you to stand and a wee bit more, a wee bit more than that, room for you to stand on the bank. But we cut peat, down back a bit further. We cut an extra piece off the top there. The first thing you would do, you were getting a large spade and you cut down the bank as long as the bank went. The odd time they are long and you don't do it if they are long. You cut down twice, twice, like the width of two spades, between the thing, that's how you get it. That makes it into chunks

like, say, two, ten, a dozen inches. They would cut through and there you get it as a lump. Did you ever hear this word mentioned?

EE: No.

LM: Well, it is, they are like a lump, a wee bit of round iron or something like that, it is round. That is joined, like a stave in a wall, wood in a wall, it is a bit round, you know, they don't throw down, it's a wee bit bent. And on top, there's a crossbar, and that is on the length [???]at the bottom. You stand like that and you are, your legs, using that on the sod to take it off and we are like that over [??] and that is falling in the bottom below until the top of the peat-bank is clear and there's nothing left. And then, some are below and they're... when all the peat has been taken out, the spongy peat and the black peat, the bottom is left and there isn't peat there, you put the sods there were over the top. You have it neat and after that you put the ground back as it was and years afterwards you can't see that there was peat down there. Do you understand?

EE: Yes.

LM: So, there you have it. Well, you leave it there on the... Well, it is depends on the weather. If the weather is good and it can get a good drying there, well, maybe two or three days. If it is getting pretty dry and the turf is drying out, if the top is dry, the bottom is always wet, you stand them up like wigwams.

EE: Oh, aye.

LM: Like wigwams. And if it is really wet, the odd time it can't stand and you make boxes out of them, a pair like that, a pair like that. You make boxes. But that's the lazy way, as we say (*laughing*). It dries better. That takes a week or something. Just if the weather is good off the peat-bank again and trying to get a good drying. If it is drying we didn't change it and we'd put them together on the ground but if it is wet we put it up above. And then you make it into, ricks they are, small ricks and then it dries and then you need large ricks. You leave it on the peat-bank until they are all large ricks. That gets, well, we used to have a horse and cart but now it's tractors. But, well, now there they have a machine and the machine cuts the peat, they don't use a peat-spade but we don't..

EE: Do they have that in Islay?

LM: The cutters here don't dirty hands, their hands. The Lewis people, they lift the peat there. The cutter cuts the peat with his foot, and the peat falls down at his foot. You know there is a stepper we call that. If you have to lift the peat like that, someone that can't lift the peat, that can't cast the turf from the top of the peat-bank. Oh, you need a stepper, someone to lift the peat for you, do you understand? And, you dirty your hands then but you don't need to dirty your hands cutting peat. You can use your hands... It's not... The peat-spade is clean. And, there is a horn at the end. It's, it's like that. There is iron like that, and there is a piece like this and that is joined to a piece of round wood and on the top of the round wood there's a cow's horn. Usually it is a bull's horn or something round like that. You take a hold of that with your hand and push it down but the Lewis folk have put a foot on it, on the spade,

and we didn't have a foot on it. They don't lift the peat, the stepper does it, [lifts] the peat. But the peat they have is small and square. The kind we have is like sausages. There was a man from Lewis down here and he says that peat you have there is sausages (*laughing*). They were long and thin. The odd time they are wider but sometimes they aren't. They are nice, they were the right size, to cut.

EE: And who used to go? Did you go with your family or your...?

LM: Oh yes, yes. Usually someone would help you and you would help them and usually it wouldn't take long. Everybody used to help each other and we'd cut the peat. Someone cutting and an extra person. You would help everyone. We would eat our food on the hill. And the food always tasted the best if I think about it, the best taste (*laughing*). You'd sit in the heather and there was no hygiene, nobody thought about hygiene.

EE: no!

They'd put the bread on the heather whilst they ate. The odd time they would. You didn't have table napkins. The odd time you did. Now, Oh, it isn't healthy if you work like that. Anything you had on the table. We were, heather... and grass. There was always a well close to the peat, there was always a water well you could drink from and we'd fill the kettle, the kettles. What's Gaelic for kettles?

EE: Kettles.

LM: One kettle, two kettles, three kettles (laughs). Kettles, no?

EE: Oh, aye.

LM: And you'd have to take care that the smoke didn't get in it. We wouldn't like the taste of smoke on tea. We wouldn't like that. But there were some, they didn't mind but I wouldn't like it when the smoke would get into it but it didn't often get in. I think they had the small pans, the small pans. We had an old kettle, boiling the water and putting the tea in the kettle and passing it about...

[12.15]