

Tea at the peats



THE DAYS of early summer were usually the most suitable for the cutting of the peats. Days when the wind rode high in the blue bowl of the sky, chasing the white powder-puff clouds before it and when the bog-cotton was thinking of hanging out its white silky banners. For these days of wind and sun were essential for the drying and hardening of the peats.

I don't know whether telepathy existed in the village or not, for, though I never actually heard any-one mention that they were going

By Mina Macpherson

to cut the peats on any one day, it was a fact that almost every-one chose the same day to start.

Peat bogs were handed down from generation to generation—having been allocated, I imagine, when the village was first formed—and were worked until they were finished. Our peat bog lay in the hills behind the house and across the main road, and our day there had to be planned as carefully as an African safari, for it was a long way back if anything was forgotten.

My uncle was equipped with a spade and a peat iron (also, probably handed down) with which to cut the actual peats. My mother carried the usual equipment for a picnic although it was

never called a picnic, just "tea at the peats." They both wore wellington boots as they would be standing in the actual bog. We children took only ourselves in our bare feet, a condition we enjoyed (or on cold days endured) for the whole of the summer.

We followed in the wake of our mother and uncle, squealing as our still-tender feet encountered the sharp stones on the main road and then enjoying the feel of the heather when we started to cross the hill. But there was still more squealing when we came to a stretch of moorland grass which was needle-sharp and over which we very often had to be carried across.

When we reached the bog, my uncle first skinned off the heathery turf with the spade. Then my mother stood in the actual bog with water half way up her boots and as he cut out the peats with the iron she caught them and laid them carefully on the bank.

As they worked they gradually built up a rhythm which was exciting to watch. It was exciting, too, to see the shiny rich brownness of the peat with occasionally a piece of decomposed wood through it. How many centuries had gone into the making of it? Was the rotting wood part of lush, primeval forests which had once covered the hills? For no one in the village ever remembered trees growing on that particular stretch of the moor.

When the nearer part of the bank was covered, we heled to lay the peats on the farther heathery

tussocks, for my mother had very definite ideas as to what Satan did with idle hands. Afterwards we splashed about in the peat water until our legs looked as though they were covered with the long shiny boots so popular to-day. Once it had dried, however, it was difficult to remove and we usually had to scrub our legs to get them clean.

Also, of course, we made mud pies. To my mind a child hasn't really lived unless he has made mud pies at the peats. There were so many ways of decorating them for one thing. Apart from the trellis and criss-cross designs probably common to all mud pies, we had "flower" decorations using the yellow tormentil or birds' foot trefoil with the deep blue milkwort as a contrast. Or we had "frosting" made from a powdery white rock close by.

And what if, on coming back a few days later to turn the peats other side up to the sun and wind, we found that our mud pies too had dried hard and the flowers withered? It didn't really matter; the bliss of making them and of squeezing the water out of the rich brown mud and pummeling it into shape still remained.

Where have they gone, those magical days of our childhood—those long, long days of sunshine and of wind, of fun and of laughter? Where have they gone with the ability to create our own amusement, to enjoy everything to the full? Only the memory remains, like the elusive fragrance of a pot pourri or an echo from the past.