COUNTRY LIVIN

FORGOTTEN CRAFTS

In our continuing series, we discover traditional skills that are at risk of disappearing. This month, we meet Ben Short, who makes his living in the woods of west Dorset

United Kingdom · Elizabeth II · Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust · Bridport
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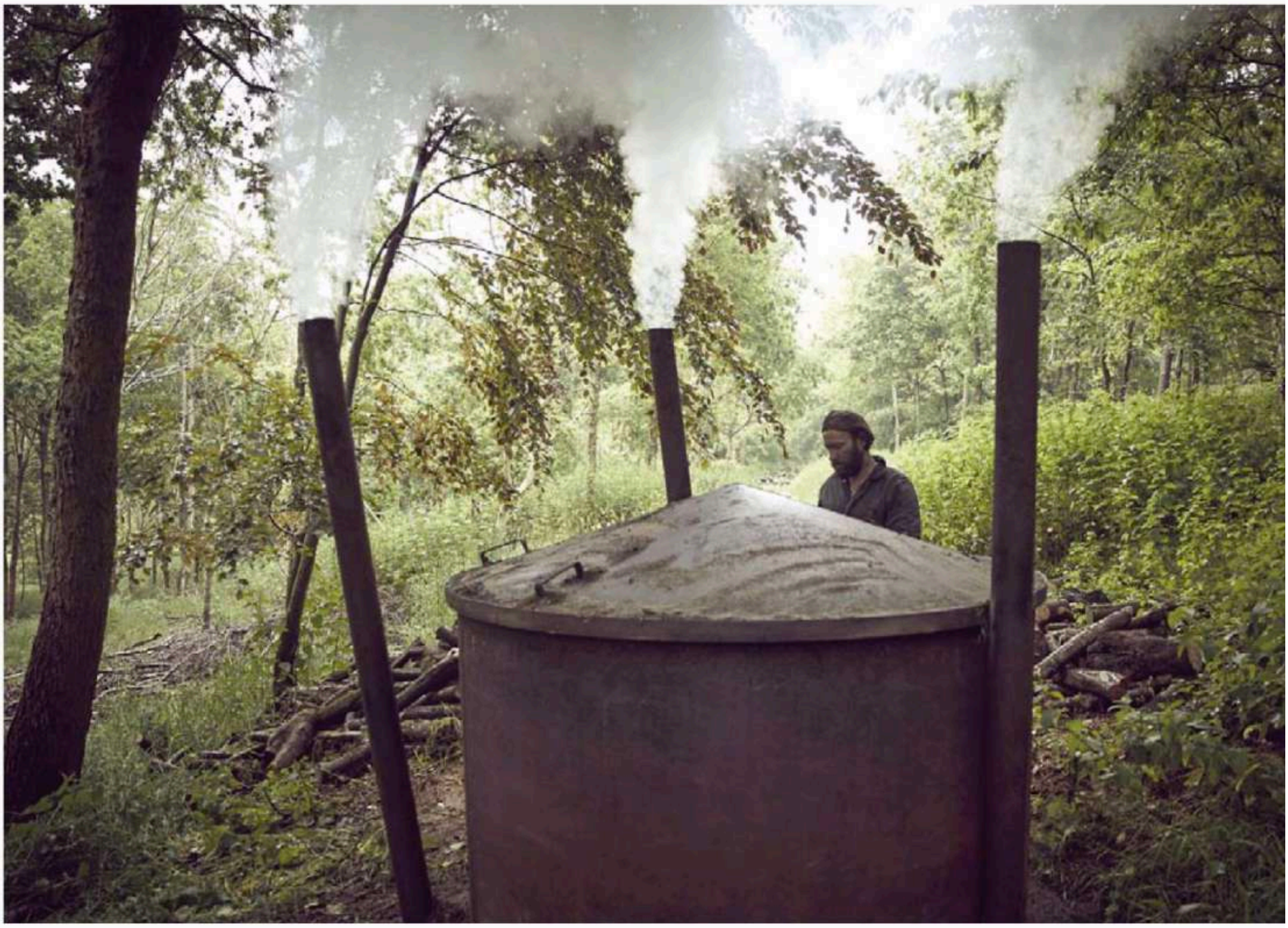
We discover traditional skills that are at risk of disappearing. This month: the charcoal burner

Held to be one of the most ancient crafts, charcoal burning has a history in Britain dating back thousands of years. Prior to the industrial age, and the invention of coke, charcoal was the smelting fuel used for making metals and glass. As a result, the large log-pile kilns built for slowly carbonising timber – along with the soot-covered charcoal burners or 'colliers' who tended to them – would have been a familiar sight in woodlands across the country. The faint echoes of their presence survive today in place names, such as Colliers Wood or Coldridge.

During the 20th century, the craft continued to shrink into obscurity, and now, most of the charcoal used on our barbecues is imported from overseas. The romantic figure of the charcoal burner – a nomadic forest dweller living on the edge of society, said to have kept adders as talis-



ABOVE A modern steel kiln has made the traditional charcoal-burning process slightly easier than it was yearsago, but Ben still has to rely on the weather, condition of the wood and soil type to produce a good yield mans or pets – had all but vanished from the rural scene.

A chance encounter with some surviving practitioners of this dying art in the late 1970s was to have an indelible impact on Ben Short, now a charcoal burner himself, living and working in west Dorset. He recalls taking a day trip from his school in Hampshire: "We were taken to the woods where there were several charcoal burners at work, and it was magical. Even as a child, I had this intuition that it was a more beautiful way of life."

On a summer's day in the woods near the Iron Age hill fort of Eggardon Hill, east of Bridport, it certainly looks like an idyllic way to make a living. The sun is filtering through the treetop canopy of oak and ash as Ben checks on his kiln, from which Great plumes of white smoke billow skywards as he begins the 12- to 15-hour charcoal-making process. His towable bow-top wagon is stationed nearby and he will camp overnight here to keep an eye on the burn, with his friendly rescue dog, Clanger, for company. "In the summer, when it's light until 10 o'clock, I sleep with the door open," he smiles.

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From March to the end of September, Ben is based outdoors, either in his wagon in the woods or his shepherd's hut – a 1910 model he restored himself – at his workyard up on Eggardon Hill, where the downland views stretch as far as the Jurassic Coast. His working days, engaged in charcoal making, forestry thinning, hedge laying and making firewood, depending on the season, are punctuated by occasional sightings of brown hares, badgers, kingfishers and even, once, a white fallow deer.

Nowadays, Ben estimates there are fewer than a hundred full-time charcoal burners in the UK. "As with all craft, there's been some resurgence," he says. "More people are getting the message that we should be buying British charcoal, but it is still a very small industry." Ben explains how his product has a higher carbon content than tropical hardwoods, from which most imported charcoal is made, and therefore heats up much faster: "It retains heat well, and also it hasn't been hauled halfway across the world."

Another reason for the renewed interest, Ben suggests, is the simpler, outdoor lifestyle that charcoal making offers, far from the bureaucratic pressures of the modern workplace. Returning to a rural environment (he grew up on a smallholding in Hampshire) and learning this traditional skill provided a fresh start for him after he became disillusioned with his first career in advertising. Ben was the creative director of a London agency when he decided to quit in 2008. "The fun had gone out of it," he says. "I had problems with anxiety, and I felt pretty numb and unfulfilled."

After considering painting (Ben went to art school before his career in advertising), he began volunteering at the National Trust's Wimpole Estate in Cambridgeshire, where he learnt "useful and practical" forestry skills, which he enjoyed. He later moved to Dorset, where his twin brother lives, and spent a year labouring on a building site before landing an apprenticeship

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE Throughout summer, when he works long days, Ben mainly lives in a woodland wagon with his dog Clanger
BENJAMIN SH
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On an agroforestry project (where trees are grown around or among crops or pastureland). "That's when I started charcoal burning," Ben says, adding that the valley setting was "indescribably beautiful".

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woodland wagon with his dog
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ing similar work in a wood in south Somerset, while also labouring to pay the bills, Ben applied for – and was granted – a QEST (Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust) scholarship in 2013. The funds enabled him to focus on charcoal burning, forestry and coppicing work full time. His charcoal now sells for £7.50 per 3kg bag in farm shops, butchers, garages and campsites. The brown paper packaging is embossed with Ben's logo – an adder, designed by his artist-craftsman brother Cameron of Bonfield Block Printers – harking back to the folklore surrounding the charcoal burners of the past.

As Ben uses the off-cuts from his hedge laying and forestry thinning to make charcoal, his customers are supporting positive management of local woodlands, thus increasing their biodiversity, and rural employment. "It's a win-win," he explains. "But sometimes, it's like trying to sell free-range or organic chicken to people – they'll look at the cost and if it's a couple of pounds more, they'll pick up the rubbish!"

Ben's natural charcoal is made from a variety of wood, from oak and ash to maple and beech, and is sold in large paper bags

The six-foot steel kiln now smoking in the forest is packed full of hardwoods such as hazel, ash, oak, cherry, field maple and hawthorn. After Ben has lit the bottom of the kiln, he allows it to burn freely for an hour to make sure the fire has spread evenly across the base, while wearing a mask to limit the dust he inhales. Then he banks up the sides of the kiln with earth, puts the lid on and places chimney stacks on three of the six air ports. "Charcoal burning is a misnomer," he explains. "You're basically baking wood in a large oven. You're controlling the oxygen that goes into the kiln to keep the burn alive, but not so fierce that it all becomes ash."

The kiln will reach 700°C at its hottest and, as the burn progresses, the smoke turns

PREMIUM GRADE
BARBECUE
CHARCOAL
BEN SHORT
CHARCOAL BURNER
EGGARDON HILL, DORSET

from steam engine clouds to a spectral blue vapour. After six hours, Ben rotates the chimneys, to prevent hot spots burning away his product. Then, after another six to nine hours, he takes the chimneys out and fills up the air ports with sand and earth so that the fire dies and the kiln cools. The charcoal is finally graded with a wire mesh, so only the larger pieces are weighed and bagged. "My average yield for a six-foot kiln is just under 50 bags," Ben says. "And I can do three burns a week in summer."

There is clearly poetry in the path he's chosen, creating an ethical product he describes as "iridescent, like a rook's feathers" and spending his time immersed in nature. Ben hopes now to be able to share his knowledge and craftsmanship with a wider audience, by offering courses on charcoal burning, including accommodation in vintage wagons in the woods. There are plans, too, to develop his yard, and for a book about his journey from advertising to the present day, which he is close to finishing. "I'd like to think the book might show people that there is another path," Ben says. "The way things are, we're becoming more distanced from haptic skills and from nature. If you do take that leap – if you're authentic and willing to work hard – you'll be amazed at the serendipity that will come your way."

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