

The history of peat (turf)

Translation and adaptation from an article written by [Joyce van Welie](#)

Peat was a fuel made from dried peat. Peat, a material that you find in the soil in many places in the Netherlands, consists of dead plants that have been compressed in a wetland area. This process was repeated for about a thousand years, creating a thick layer of peat.

It was already known in Roman times that you can make peat from peat and use peat as fuel. Yet peat extraction mainly started in the Middle Ages. The population grew rapidly and because there was not enough firewood available, peat was used as fuel. Both in households and in industry. Peat extraction in the Netherlands was seen as the first step towards early and cautious industrialization in the Golden Age.

Extracting peat

Peat was mainly used because it was cheap and available in large quantities. However, that does not mean that peat was easily extracted. Winning peat was hard work. Peat diggers, as the workers who dug the peat were called, often had to work long hours.

How peat cutting was organized could differ per region. In the raised bog (hoog veen), the top unusable peat layer was removed, so that cutting of peat could begin. At low bog, the workers got into a narrow boat and sailed up the bank. Peat was dredged below the groundwater level using a dredging bracket, a kind of landing net with a long handle.

Furthermore, peat extraction took place in three phases. First cut the peat and dig out the peat. The soil was often excavated by hand or with a dredge, piled on piles, after which the mass was cut into lines and rectangles. The piling was done so that the wind could blow through it, making the peat even drier. The excavation took place in the spring, so that it had plenty of time to dry during the warm summer.

Peat colonies

In the areas where a lot of peat was dug, peat colonies, settlements where the peat cutters lived, emerged from the late Middle Ages. These were often elongated ribbon villages, where workers completed a plot from their own home. Various unofficial classes emerged in the colonies. The peat and agricultural workers formed the bottom layer, followed by the peat skippers with their families in the layer just above. Then came the farmers who worked the land when soil became available through peat extraction. The top layer of the social classes were the peat farmers. They owned the land and had a high status in society.

The consequences of peat extraction on the landscape

Centuries of peat extraction left its mark on the landscape. This is how many lakes and ponds were created, that remained after peat cutting. Such lakes often caused environmental problems.

The raised bog areas, which were once common, disappeared due to peat cutting. After the usable peat layers had been excavated, the area was made suitable for arable farming. The last remnants of raised bogs are now often protected areas.

In areas where a lot of peat was extracted, flooding sometimes increased. Peat areas are a buffer for drought and flooding, because the peat can absorb a lot of water and retain it for a long time.

Alternatives to peat

During the industrial revolution, coal became a more important source of energy than peat. Improved mining technology made the coal layers deep in the ground increasingly accessible. Because coal also had a much higher heating value than peat, coal quickly became more popular than peat. Yet peat did not completely disappear as a fuel. In periods of scarcity, as during the First World War and occasionally even during the Second World War, peat was still used as fuel.