Coppice wood management in the eighteenth century: an example from County Wicklow.

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Abstract

The extent and commercial significance of semi-natural coppice woods in Ireland in the past are far from clear and relatively little detailed analysis of coppice management using primary sources has been undertaken. Employing a collection of documents relating to the Watson-Wentworth estate in Co. Wicklow, coppice wood management in the first half of the eighteenth century is analysed. Evidence is presented which shows that during that period coppice woods covering more than 800 hectares were managed in a fairly sophisticated way, resulting not only in the preservation of important semi-natural woods but also in the production of a wide range of commercial products. The woods made an important contribution to the income of the estate, generated local employment, developed trading links over a surprisingly wide area and provided a renewable supply of raw materials for a number of important manufacturing industries.

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For many centuries charcoal or wood was the normal fuel for most metallurgical processes. Indeed one of the features that characterises the Industrial Revolution is the transition in fuel from sustainable to non-sustainable development, that is, from a fuel that regenerates of its own accord to one that is eventually exhausted. The objective of this paper is to examine that transition from organic to mineral fuel in the production of metals. Evidence from Shropshire shows that after a short period of decline, charcoal ironmaking in the county [Show full abstract] increased in real terms. This is explained by examination of the expanding market for high-quality iron, and in particular wire manufacture and related industries.