

THE AREA WE KNOW
TODAY AS
SEDLESCOMBE HAS A
LONG HISTORY OF
HABITATION

FROM BEFORE THE BRONZE AGE UP TO THE
21ST CENTURY

ORIGIN OF THE NAME? Beryl Lucey in her 1970s book reached the conclusion that the name “Sedlescombe” was given by the Saxons meaning “A valley of residence” i.e. “a settlement in a valley”. Simon Mansfield in his Battle & District Historical Society lecture on 18/01/2024 agreed on the valley part of the word but suggested “Sedles” could have derived from two Saxon words meaning “seed” and “leech”!

SEDLESCOMBE'S INDUSTRIAL PAST

Looking at Sedlescombe today with its attractive Village Green, surrounded by many Grade II listed houses, some of which date back to the 15th century, it seems a little surprising that Sedlescombe has had an industrial past. But it has... read on in 3 parts

Part 1: Iron and Charcoal

Part 2: Leather, animal farming, The Butcher by The Green,
Boot and Shoemakers, Blacksmiths

Part 3: Gunpowder

Each industry will be considered in turn:

**AT VARIOUS TIMES IN HISTORY,
SEDLESCOMBE WAS:**

NOISY

SMOKY

SMELLY

SCARY

**SEDLESCOMBE'S
INDUSTRIAL PAST PART 1**

IRON

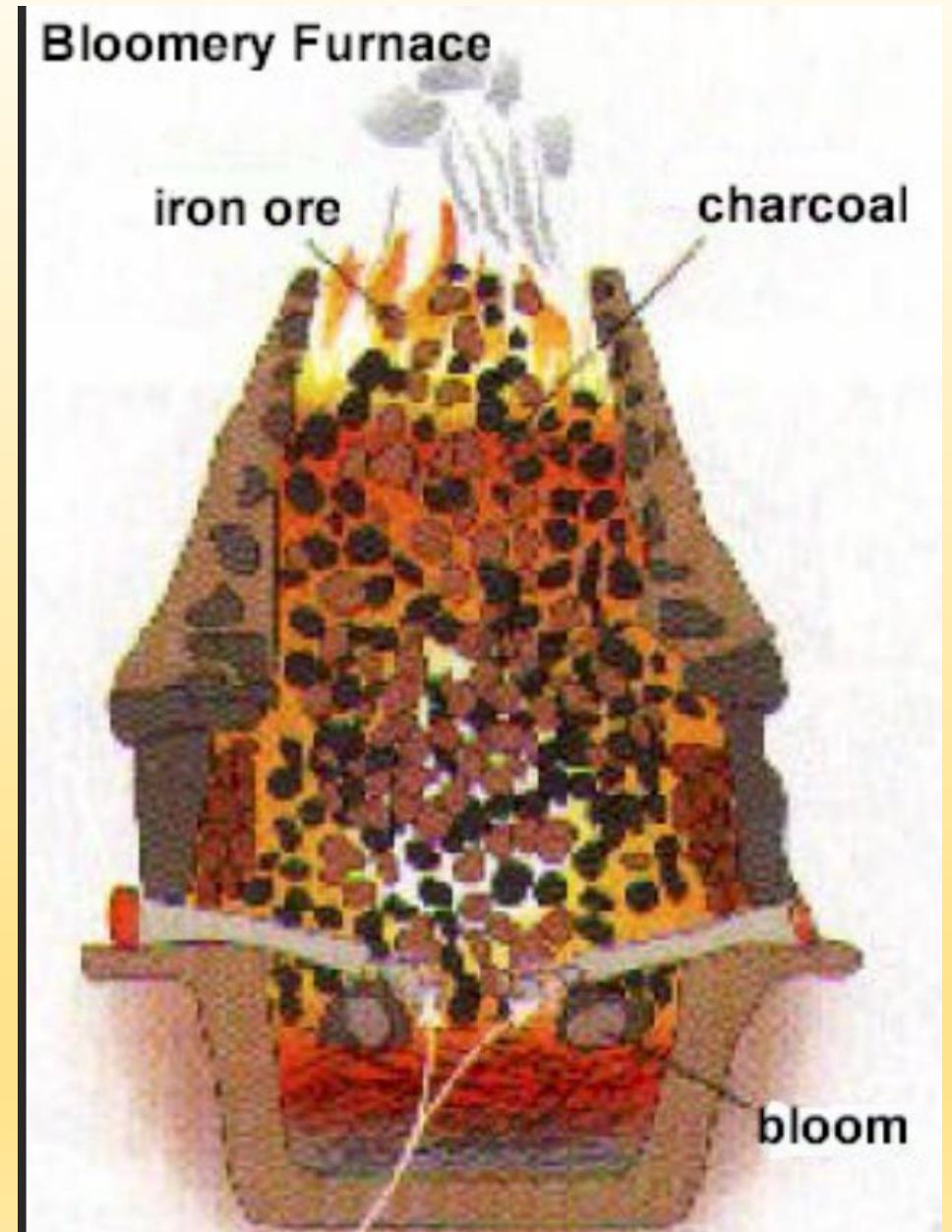
- In Pre-Roman Times, Sedlescombe produced wrought iron in small-scale bloomeries in the countryside making the most of local iron ore & timber.
- The river brought the Romans to this area in the first century AD where they found a well-established bloomery iron industry using ironstone from various clay beds in the area, fuelled by charcoal made from trees in the heavily wooded landscape.
In Sedlescombe, for two centuries, Romans scaled up production of the existing wrought iron industry at Oaklands and Footlands to an industrial scale and continued for 150 years.
- In Sedlescombe, in Tudor times, cast iron was produced at Brede Furnace along Brede Lane on the edge of the village. Brickwall owners owned Brede Furnace. Owner plate for John Sackville dated 1599 on south-facing Brickwall chimney. There were 30 forges and furnaces within 5 miles of Sedlescombe Village Green.

ROMAN IRON BLOOMERIES AT OAKLANDS, PETLEY WOOD AND FOOTLANDS

A bloomery was a type of simple mobile furnace for smelting iron that was widely used in Sedlescombe and surrounding areas before, during and after the Roman occupation. Sedlescombe had at least 3 of the 113 bloomeries that have been identified as “Roman”, mainly in East Sussex. The Weald was one of the most important iron-producing regions in early Roman Britain.

The bloomery was about a metre in height and made of earth, clay or stone. Iron ore and charcoal were fed into the fire at the top until it was full. Air was pumped in through holes in the sides with bellows made from animal skins to keep the fire burning.

The wrought iron product and slag fell to the bottom of the bloomery and were raked out. The iron was hammered out from the slag and made into tools, ornaments and weapons. Well into the 21st century in Sedlescombe it has still been easy to turn up lumps of Roman slag in flower borders in gardens near to Roman ironworking sites.





A 21st century view of the Oaklands Roman Ironworking Site

Early finds around the Sedlescombe area have not always been well documented.

This splendid 1st century cooking pot found at the Footlands Roman ironworking site in the north of the parish was photographed on display in Battle Museum



COOKING POT

of native ware. Late 1st.
Century from Footlands,
Sedlescombe.

This early Roman brooch on shown in Battle Museum was found by Eileen Chown of Sedlescombe in the early 1950s. A Women's Institute Scrapbook dated 1953 (now in the E Sussex Record Office) says it was found at Oaklands.

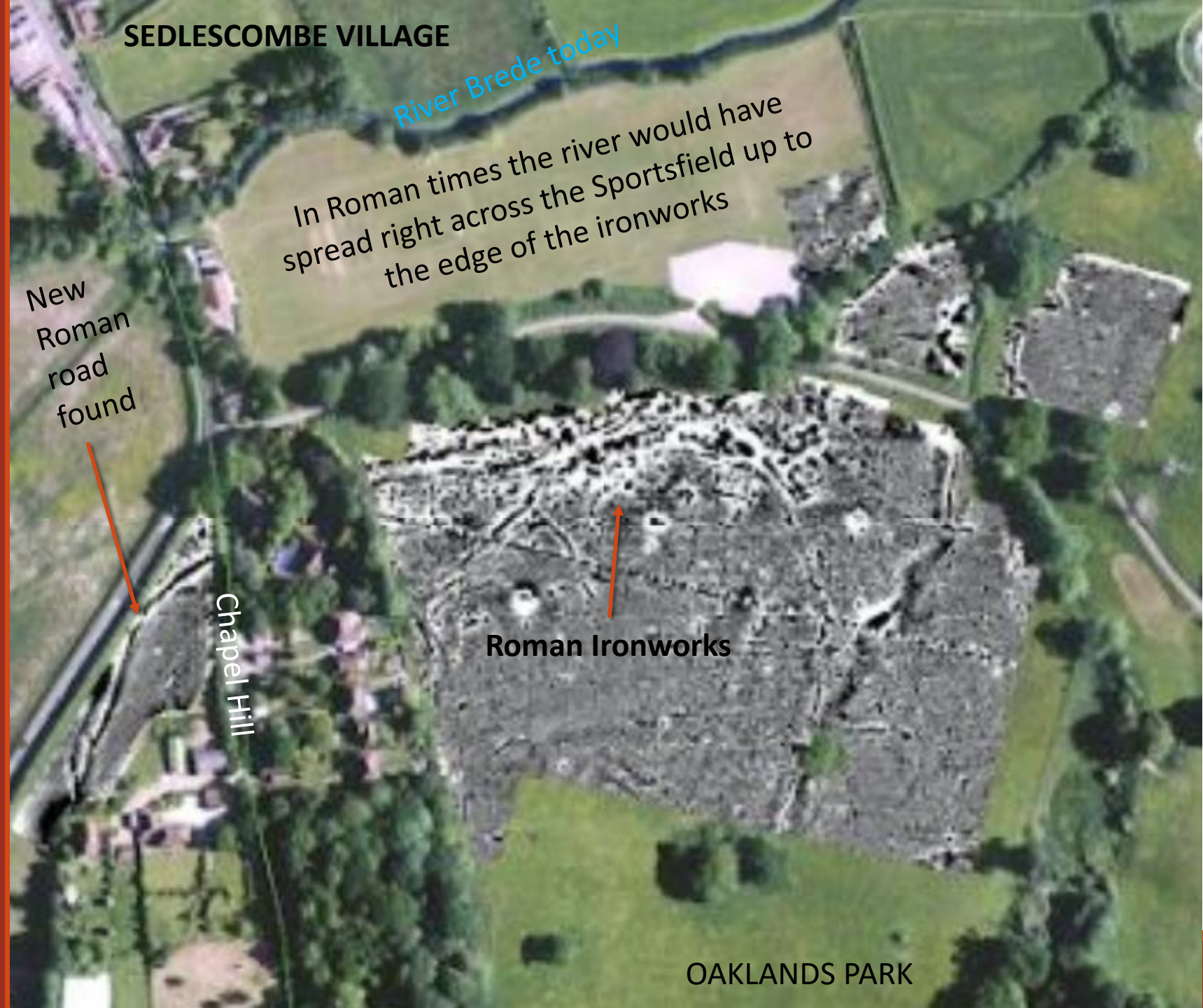
BROOCH (FIBULA)

Group E. Type IV – normally 1st. Century A.D. this may be as early as A.D. 50 to 65.

Eileen Chown bequest.



In 2012, the Independent Historical Research Group identified various Roman tracks in Oaklands Park. One led by a winding route, through land belonging to Luffs Farm west of Chapel Hill, to the Beauport Roman bath-house site on outskirts of Hastings.



IRON IN SEDLESCOMBE

It is often said that the local iron-working industry went into decline when the Romans left in 410 AD.

However, an entry in a 1952 Battle & District Historical Society Journal makes the suggestion that because two finds, separated by 300 years, had recently been made on the Footlands Roman road, it is possible that the Footlands iron bloomery continued working into the Medieval Ages. The finds were a 12th century piece of pot and close by a 15th century "Abbey Token". Whatever happened to the bloomeries, when the cast iron industry arrived in the mid-16th century, once again Sedlescombe was in the thick of it.

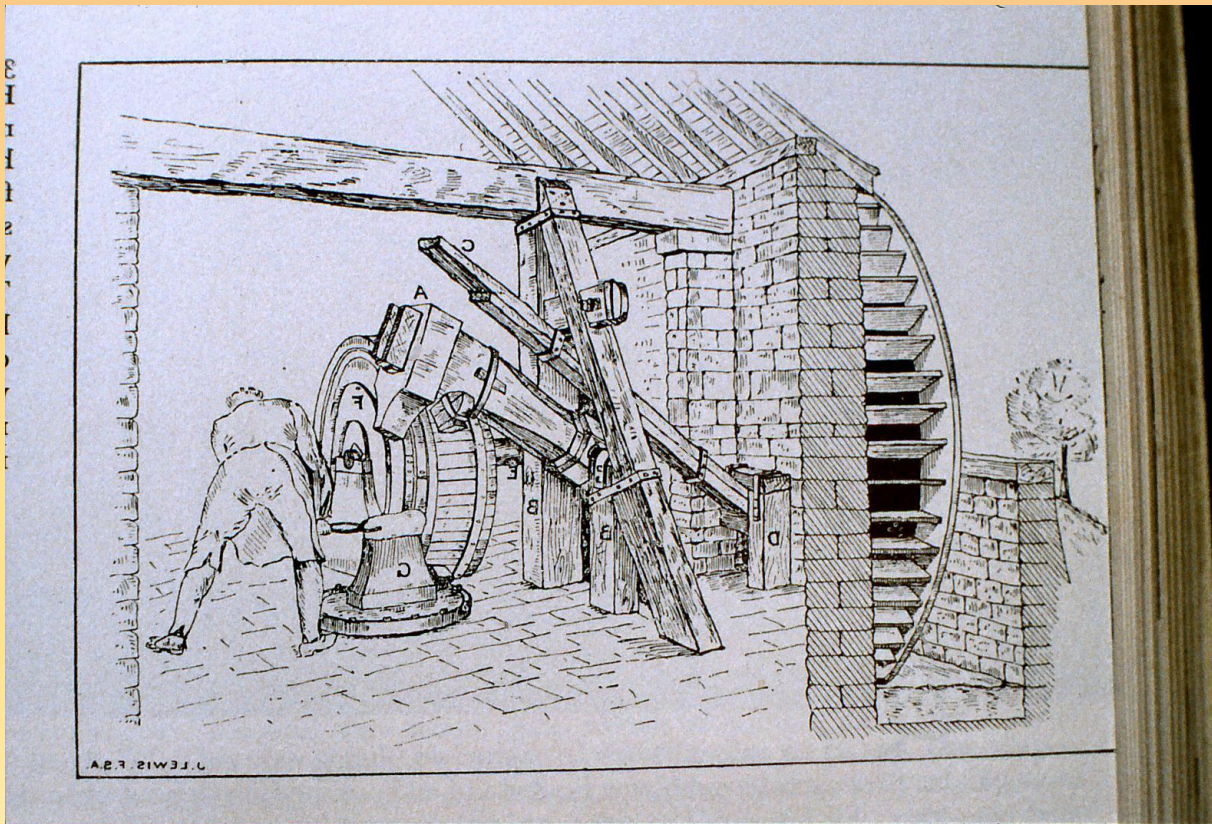
CAST IRON was produced in a big way at the Brede Furnace, a couple of miles along Brede Lane from Sedlescombe (Furnace Field close to the Reservoir entrance is a candidate for the site). Starting around 1576, the industry continued to produce iron until 1766. The resultant cast iron required to be worked in the nearby forge before it could be put to use.

It was iron cannons and cannon balls that they were making there. During the Spanish Armada, the British Fleet was equipped with guns made by Sussex gunfounders and it is said that we also illicitly helped arm our opponents too (when a Spanish ship was captured, it was found to have cannon marked with a Tudor Rose made in Ashburnham Furnace).

TUDOR IRON IN SEDLESCOMBE

A ton of cast iron was made at Brede Furnace every 24 hours.

There were 30 furnaces and forges within 5 miles of Sedlescombe. There was noise and smoke day and night. Trees were cut down by the thousand to feed the furnaces. Water power was an essential part of the process.



Even in death, ironmasters like William Bishop wanted to show their wealth. This Iron tombstone in the floor of Sedlescombe Church is dated 1664

TUDOR CAST IRON MANUFACTURE IN SEDLESCOMBE 1636



This is an important dated iron fireback made in Brede Furnace in 1626. In the 17th century, firebacks became exceedingly popular to safeguard the brickwork of the new chimneys. Many other firebacks have been identified that are thought to have been produced at Brede. They can be seen on an interesting website.

Depicted is ironmaster Richard Lenard whose family brought ironworking skills to this country from France and then afterwards took them on to USA.

Not only are the tools of Richard's trade around him but, in addition, his clothing and the fancy fireplace with its own fireback with the R.L. initials and high-class drinking vessels on the mantelpiece are meant to show the prosperity of ironmasters such as the Lenard family.



Surprisingly, a Lenard fireback can be seen even in 2020, nearly 400 years since its production, on the front wall of The Bridge Garage in Sedlescombe Street.

END OF TUDOR CAST IRON MANUFACTURE IN SEDLESCOMBE

By the middle of the 18th century, nearly 200 years after it started at Brede Furnace, the iron industry in the Weald was in decline because of the rise in iron industry in the north of the country where coke made from coal was being used instead of charcoal.

With no local coal mines, at this time, Brede Furnace moved to producing gunpowder.

CHARCOAL

Sedlescombe made charcoal throughout the parish wherever there was woodland for twenty centuries. At Petley Wood, charcoal burning still continued at the end of the 20th century and was still being distributed from there into the 21st century.

Roman ironworks near Battle needed an annual yield of 23,000 acres of woodland to make the charcoal required in the process, if harvested regularly on short rotation. (Weald & Downland Museum information board at Singleton)

CHARCOAL IN SEDLESCOMBE

CHARCOAL was an important ingredient in the iron-making process and small charcoal-burning hearths can still be identified in woods in and around Sedlescombe. Woods were systematically coppiced to provide the wood for the charcoal burners.

DR PATRICK ROPER, IN HIS BOOK “Brede High Woods”, which is old woodland on the edge of Sedlescombe parish, speaks about the number of charcoal hearths that he has identified there.

In 1424, the Battle Abbey account books stated that charcoal burners in “Pettelee Wood” had been paid 6/8d.

Charcoal burning was Sedlescombe’s most enduring industrial process continuing right up almost to the end of the 20th century.

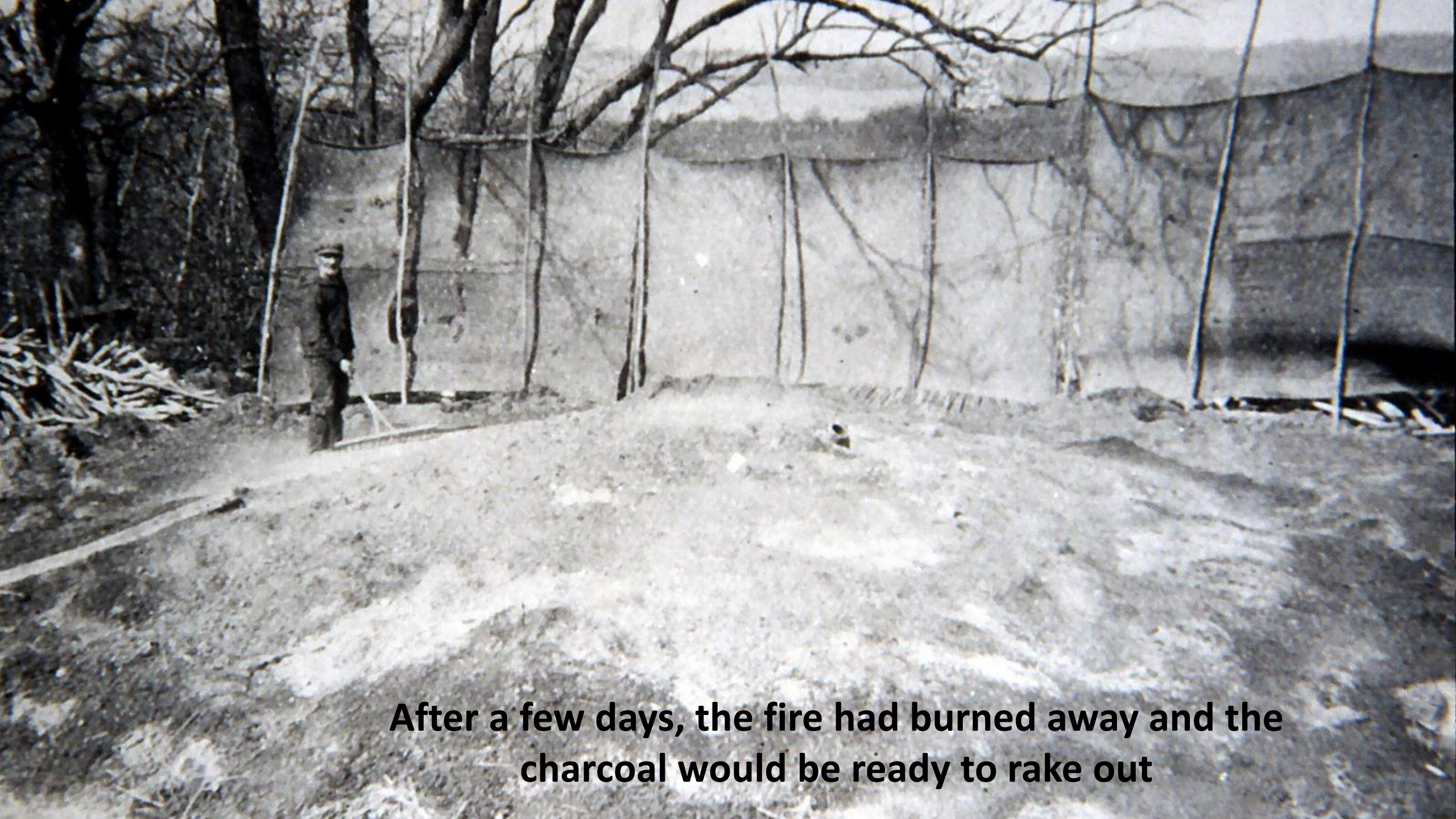
THE CHARCOAL BURNER



Jim Smith of Manor Cottages, Sedlescombe's Charcoal burner in the start of the 20th century setting up the stack of wood for slowly charring over several days in Petley Wood



- Jim Smith would set up a simple makeshift camp in the woods so that he could keep a watch on the burning of the charcoal every 2 hours, day and night.
- Jim is thought to be the subject of a painting by the locally-well-known artist, Edward Patry (1856-1940) who bought Brickwall in 1929 after it had stood empty for three years.



After a few days, the fire had burned away and the charcoal would be ready to rake out

Petley Wood charcoal burning 1985

As the 20th century went by, wood offcuts would be imported from sawmills to Blackman, Pavie and Ladden at Petley Wood and burned in large metal hooped containers.



CHARCOAL BURNING IN SEDLESCOMBE

In 1985, the company produced and distributed about 10 tons of charcoal each week from 70 tons of timber offcuts most of which came from sawmills at Rochester and Ashford. The company employed 20 people, four of them involved in the burning operation.

But it was becoming cheaper to import the charcoal than produce it on site. About 60% of the charcoal the company distributed was imported from abroad e.g. South Africa, Argentina, Spain, Portugal (they had a company in Portugal making charcoal from cork tree prunings).

(Information provided by the Company to Sedlescombe Parish Council)

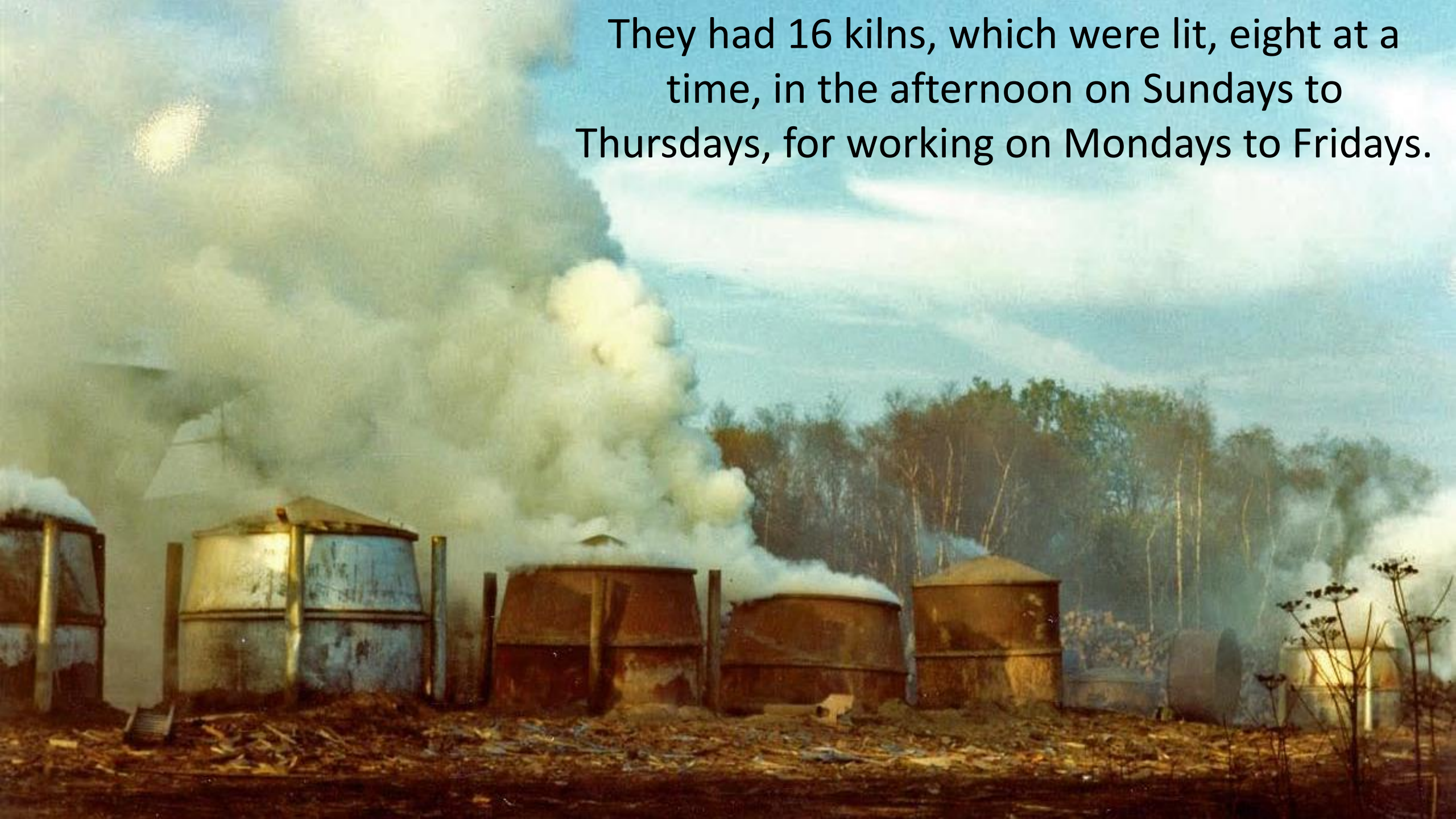
20TH CENTURY CHARCOAL BURNING IN PETLEY WOOD

This set of photos was taken by Ron Street of Battle Camera Club between 1985 and 1988 providing a wonderful insight into the work that went on there.

By the end of the 1980s, the Marley Lane site was the only one in the country producing charcoal, apart from small craft-persons with one or two kilns.

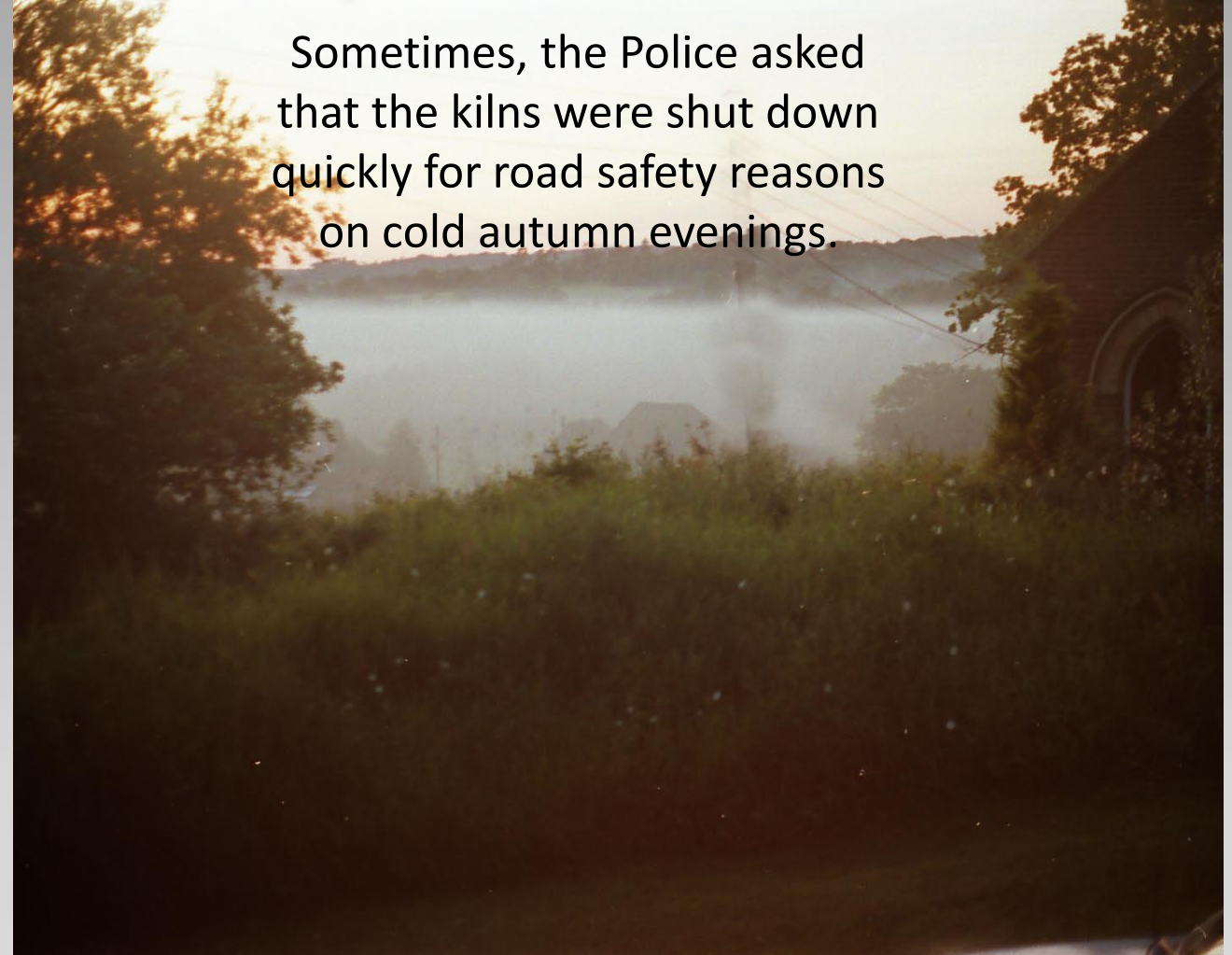


They had 16 kilns, which were lit, eight at a time, in the afternoon on Sundays to Thursdays, for working on Mondays to Fridays.



20TH CENTURY CHARCOAL BURNING IN PETLEY WOOD

This caused a lot of smoke to drift across Sedlescombe village.



Sometimes, the Police asked that the kilns were shut down quickly for road safety reasons on cold autumn evenings.

CHARCOAL BURNING IN THE 20TH CENTURY

In 1989, Blackman, Pavie & Ladden:

- Distributed to the restaurant trade (all year).
- Distributed to garages for the barbecue trade (4 months of the year).
The whole company supplied about 40% of the UK trade.
- Distributed their own extremely pure charcoal (90% carbon against 82% carbon in imported charcoal) to industry for the production of pure metals for space shuttle nose cones etc.
- Distributed incense manufactured from charcoal dust for churches in this country and mosques in the middle east.

CHARCOAL BURNING IN THE 20TH CENTURY

In 2001, the local newspaper reported an “**EXPLOSION FIREBALL AT FACTORY**” in Marley Lane. The fireball was created after friction from moving a piece of machinery caused powdered Sodium Chlorate and charcoal on the factory floor to explode.

The fire was put out by employees and no-one was hurt.

THE CHAIRMAN AND CLERK OF SEDLESCOMBE PARISH COUNCIL ATTENDED THE 2004 QUEEN'S AWARD FOR ENTERPRISE CEREMONY AT THE FACTORY IN MARLEY LANE



STEVE BARNES OF SWIFT-LITE WAS PRESENTED WITH THE QUEEN'S AWARD FOR ENTERPRISE BY THE DUKE OF YORK FOR HIS COMPANY'S ACHIEVEMENTS IN OVERSEAS TRADE.

An annual turnover of more than £2 million had been achieved by exporting charcoal tablets for incense burners and hookah pipes.

Charcoal buyers from Italy, Morocco, Germany, Tunisia, Kuwait, Israel and South Africa were among the 90 guests at the ceremony.

THE END OF CHARCOAL IN MARLEY LANE

And then, later in 2004, months after receiving The Queen's Award for Enterprise from The Duke of York, the company suffered a catastrophic fire.



At the time of the fire, Swift-Lite Charcoal was employing 32 people. The business was destroyed and that was the end of a hugely-important industry over many years to Sedlescombe.

MARLEY LANE POSTSCRIPT

Charcoal Burning is no longer operating in Marley Lane, Sedlescombe. Out of the ashes has risen a new exciting and very clean business run by **CKL Developments Ltd.**

CKL is one of the world's foremost restoration and historic racing companies, specialising in sports and racing cars of the 1950s and 1960s.



**END OF PART 1 OF
SEDLESCOMBE'S INDUSTRIAL
PAST**

SEE CONTINUATION IN PARTS 2 & 3

PART OF THE 2020 SEDLESCOMBE LOCAL HISTORY VIRTUAL EXHIBITION
COLLECTION ADDED TO BATTLE & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY WEBSITE 2024

Copyright © 2024 Pauline Raymond.

Permission granted to reproduce for personal and educational use only.

Commercial copying, hiring or lending is prohibited.