

Helmsdale Charcoal and Coppice

Moving into charcoal production was a natural expansion of an existing business for Mike Ellis who is a professional coppicer – a specialist in the ancient craft of cutting trees and shrubs to ground level to allow for vigorous re-growth. Mike has worked in a self-employed capacity for a number of years and is also an instructor in the craft. He launched Helmsdale Charcoal and Coppice after receiving support from Business Gateway and it is thought to be the only business of its type in the North of Scotland.

Grant aid for equipment and attendance at shows

The service's regional development officer for Sutherland, David Knight, arranged for Mike to receive a start-up grant with which he bought a portable charcoal kiln and ancillary equipment. He later received a small amount of funding towards the costs of marketing his new venture at three shows, the Highland Game Fair at Moy, Sutherland Agricultural Show and the Helmsdale Games. Mike made valuable contacts at these events and has been invited back to Moy to give a charcoal burning demonstration. Although he had been running his coppicing venture for some time, Mike still took up the offer of a place on a Business Gateway start-up course and was surprised by how relevant it was to him, despite his business experience.

From army officer to coppicer

A decorated former army NCO, Mike has always been interested in woodcraft and learned the arts of hedge laying and dry stone dyking during a stint as a voluntary warden in the Cotswolds AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). He left the army in 1999 after 17 years of service and became a self-employed hedge layer and coppicer, moved to Sutherland in 2001. He was awarded a professional qualification after completing two courses in coppicing and coppice products at the Greenwood Centre in Shropshire. Mike now not only manages patches of woodland throughout the Highlands using the coppicing method, but also runs training courses in coppicing on behalf of organisations such as the Forestry Commission, Highland Council and community woodland groups as well as individuals.



Marketing the charcoal

His new kiln, measuring 6ft in diameter, produces a ton of charcoal from one burn which lasts for three days. Depending on the grade of charcoal, he markets it to local retail outlets as barbecue fuel or as 'finings' to garden centres. Larger charcoal logs or 'browns' are being sold as household fuel. He is also investigating using charcoal as a means of filtration for whisky. Mike is hoping to further develop the training side of his business and is in talks with various education providers to establish a nationally recognised qualification, 'Traditional Woodsmen Management and Skills'. He would ideally like to become an accredited trainer for the new qualification which he would offer at a greenwood centre at his home.

Celebrating Sutherland's natural woodland resource

David Knight commented: "Business Gateway was particularly pleased to help Mike and his business. Helmsdale Charcoal and Coppice offers products and services that reflect, protect and celebrate Sutherland's fantastic natural woodland resource. Offering what is probably a unique service in the North, Mike Ellis has given his new business the best chance to succeed by attending a range of Business Gateway courses and networking events which complement his own considerable skills and experience."

Business Gateway provides practical help, advice and support for new and growing businesses in Scotland. To find out how Business Gateway can help your business, visit www.bgateway.com or contact your local office on 01463 713889 or 01343 563634.