



Corbis

Restoring Fireplaces

Transforming an old fireplace into the heart of your new home requires attention to mechanics as well as detail, says Clive Fewins.

One of the trickiest problems facing keen restorers moving into old houses (particularly Victorian and Edwardian ones) is bringing a long disused old fireplace back to life. Many building society surveyors will advise leaving well alone, but people restoring period houses tend to be an enterprising bunch and many would prefer to revitalise and reuse a fireplace for its original purpose — if local regulations permit.

The first thing to do is to take a look at the height of the chimney. Many chimneys were lowered in the 1950s and 1960s (this was the time when many open fires in homes were being abandoned) and new owners of houses with shortened chimneys often fail to realise this. "The consequence is that many people spend a great deal of time and money opening up fireplaces to install a fire that does not work," says chimney consultant John Stammers.



Jeremy Phillips



Jeremy Phillips

LEFT: Wood burning stove If your flue just won't draw, the best option for a recovered fireplace is an enclosed woodburning stove.

fire smokes upstairs or downstairs, or both, and does not draw properly," John says.

Sometimes the problem cannot be rectified, and the only thing is to install an enclosed stove, which will work with a much narrower chimney. If you choose to do this, be sure to install an insulated flue to combat condensation.

If you are set on an open fire, it's most important to calculate the internal size of the chimney. "As a rule of thumb the ratio of the flue area to the area of the fire opening (width times height) needs to be 8:1 in a house," John says. "When a fireplace is reopened after having been closed for many years, the opening is very often too large for the flue and needs to be reduced in size if a new fireplace is to work properly. When restorers open up a fireplace and find a large opening they should not make the mistake of assuming that it was built to take a fire surround of the same size."

If the ornate cast iron surround in your sitting room is in poor repair, don't despair. It is often possible to restore it. However, this is rarely a DIY job. "If a fresh casting is needed you probably need to consult a specialist," said restoration specialist Jonathan Griffiths from The Victorian Fireplace in Canterbury. "Burnishing is also the bit that always seems to cause problems. In order to get it right you need a series of abrasive pads. It is not completely beyond the abilities of a competent self-builder, but it is very expensive to acquire the equipment you need, so it's probably best to go to a specialist, particularly if there are any cracked or damaged areas that need repairing, or any parts missing. However, seeking suitable replacement tiles for the cheeks has got easier with the expansion of the Internet. Most fireplace specialists will advise on sources for these." **Mol**

Mark Welsh



ADDRESS BOOK

JLN Stammers: 01242 602617 **The Victorian Fireplace:** 01227 767723 **Solid Fuel Association** (free pamphlets available) 0845 601 4406 **National Association of Chimney Sweeps:** 01785 811732

There is good advice on fire openings in relation to flue sizes in literature available from The National Fireplace Association, based in Birmingham. Leaflets numbers one and two in their technical information series are very informative. They can be viewed on the website, www.nfa.org.uk, or purchased from the association, tel: 0121 200 1310. Also see our expert advice on page 132 for more info.

'Draw', or 'up-draught' in the flue is the key to a successful fire, John explains. Draw results from a combination of the height of the flue and the difference in temperature between the flue gasses and the outside air. The column of hot gasses in a flue is lighter in weight than the outside air, so the pressure inside a warm flue is less than the air pressure outside. It is this, quite small difference in pressure, that creates up-draught. So the warmer and taller the flue, the better the draught and the less the risk of condensation, which is bad for the flue because it causes a build-up of tar.

"I have known many people opening up their fireplaces without seeking advice first and then being bitterly disappointed because the