



Wooden chimney piece painted to resemble slate

### Fire Backs

Given the heat that can be generated by open fires, the fire place requires a fire back at the rear of the opening. Some fires have backs of cast iron fitted into the opening to protect masonry and radiate heat. More commonly the fire back is built into the wall, built of refractory fire bricks. It is important to maintain the fire back as it provides protection for surrounding masonry. When replacing refractory bricks it is vitally important to replace them with other refractory bricks as common bricks will quickly crack and fracture.

### Caring For Fireplaces

There are a number of simple steps which can be taken to care for an historic fireplace.

- **Cleaning:** It is important to regularly clean a fireplace to both ensure performance and maintain a good visual appearance. Surfaces such as tile and brick can be washed down with water and a little detergent. Care should be taken when cleaning any element of a fire place not to use anything which will abrade the surface or cause long term damage.

- **Painting:** Many chimney pieces, particularly where soft wood was employed, were painted. Where this is the case careful repainting will sometimes be necessary. It is important to ensure that paint being used is suitable for the job with enamel paint being the best. The paint finish should match the original as closely as possible and any decorative finishes such as marbling or graining should be retained.

- **Metal Finishing:** Many fireplaces will incorporate metal elements. Iron which is rusty or dirty can be rubbed down and burnished with wire wool and cleaned using white spirit. Traditionally the iron would then have been polished using black lead but this is no longer available. Modern black grate polishes using graphite are easily obtainable.

- **Tiles:** It is important to protect tiles from cracking and damage wherever possible. This means being careful not to chip or crack them when, for example, moving accessories or adding fuel to the fire. Where a tile is only slightly damaged it is often better to keep it in situ rather than risk disrupting the decorative scheme. Replacement tiles may be sourced where damage is particularly bad. As close a colour match as possible should be found. It should be noted that modern tile sizes are often different to those used originally and may require to be cut down.

- **Chimneys:** It is important to remember if the fire place is in use to have the chimney regularly swept. When this is taking place elements of the fireplace and surrounding furnishings within the room should be protected from soot by dust sheets and then cleaned afterwards.

- **Smoke Emission:** Some fire places may experience problems with smoke emission. This is likely to be a problem with the chimney or flue rather than the fireplace itself. Where this occurs only rarely it is likely to be a case of strong winds hampering the escape of smoke. A simple cowl on the chimney can be installed by an experienced contractor to remedy this problem. Where smoke emission is a more frequent problem there may be a fault with the chimney lining or condition of the flue and this should be investigated by a competent contractor. It may be necessary in some instances to re-line the flue.

### Re-instating fire places

Where a fireplace has been long disused or boarded over it may be possible to re-instate it. Often a new grate will have to be installed or if the original is still in situ it will require to be cleaned up. A new chimney piece will be required where the original has been lost, both this and grates are obtainable new or from architectural salvage yards. If the fire is to be used then the chimney and flue will require a thorough sweep and inspection to ensure it is in working order. It will also be necessary to ensure that the hearth is in suitable condition to guarantee safety. It is always best to consult an experienced contractor before commencing the reinstatement.



A re-furbished fireplace before and after work

### Contacts and Further Reading

Victorian Society Guide 3: *Fireplaces*

Miller J., *Period Fireplaces*, (London, Beazley, 1995)

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# Fireplaces





## Introduction

Fireplaces have been an integral part of homes in Scotland for many centuries. Developments in both taste and technology have seen a wide range of different fireplace designs and features emerge. Increasingly in the 18th and 19th centuries they became highly decorative and the focal point within a room. In recent years with the spread of central heating many have lost their original purpose and have thus fallen into disrepair or been removed altogether. This INFORM aims to show the value of a properly maintained fireplace and its contribution to the historic fabric and character of a building. It also provides a guide to the variety of elements which combine to make up a fireplace and give brief notes on the proper care and maintenance of these elements.



Chimney piece

Canopy

Recess

Fire place Accessories

Grate  
Ash Tray

Hearth

## Elements of a Fireplace

Over the years changes in both taste and technology have resulted in the development of a wide range of different styles of fireplace. Despite these changes the basic function and structure of these elements has not changed. All fire places have the same basic elements:

- The recess in the wall
- The hearth
- The grate
- Ash tray or bucket
- Chimney Piece (also known as a Fire surround)

Other elements which may be incorporated include:

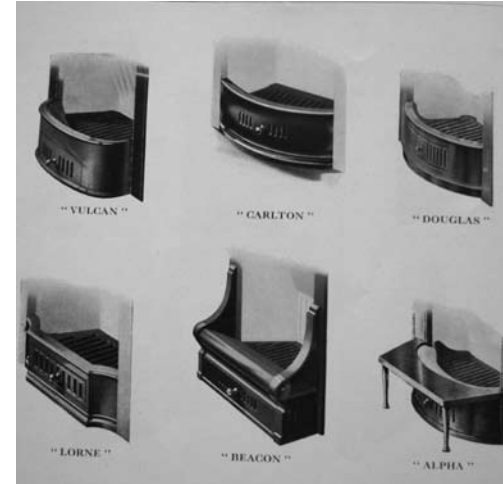
- Fenders
- Canopy
- Fire place accessories
- Fire Backs

## Hearth

The hearth is the area in front of the grate and chimney opening which prevents burning material which might fall from the grate causing a house fire. It is made from a tough, non-combustible material such as stone, slate, brick or ceramic tile.

## Grate

The grate is used to contain the fuel and burning material of the fire and comes in a variety of styles. The grate initially comprised an iron basket known as a dog grate. This was later superseded by a cast iron register grate. The register grate incorporated an adjustable vent which was designed to regulate air flow for the more efficient working of the fire. Grates are most commonly made of cast iron and must be chosen carefully to fit the opening of a fireplace. In some instances the grate is part of the inset. The inset is the area between the grate and the decorative elements of the chimney piece.



*A range of cast iron grates, some of the many thousands available over the years*

## Ash tray or bucket

In the 19th century ash trays appear beneath the grate to catch ash and make its disposal easier. These are often incorporated as part of the grate with some hearths also having built in ash buckets which can then be removed and emptied when full.

## Fenders

Fenders are designed to ensure that burning material does not spill from the hearth into a room and prevent other combustible items getting near the fire. They are most commonly made from steel or brass although other materials such as iron are sometimes used. Despite often being highly decorative they can be hard to keep clean and are sometimes replaced by a built in kerb constructed of the same material as the hearth.

## Canopies

Some fire places have a canopy or hood projecting from the fire surround over the hearth. These help ensure that smoke travels up the chimney and also help radiate heat into the room. Canopies are made in a wide range of materials such as copper, aluminium, brass or steel and were frequently highly decorative elements.

## Fireplace accessories

There are a wide variety of accessories and tools which can accompany a fireplace. These should be maintained and preserved as far as possible. Such accessories can include:

- Poker, tongs and rakes:
- A brush and shovel
- Fireguards : These are designed to prevent people, especially children, falling into a fire but do not always stop sparks.
- Sparkguards: These differ from fireguards in that they are designed to prevent sparks flying from the fire place and causing fire. They should have a mesh with gaps no less than 0.071 mm2 and should always be used where an open fire is to be left unattended.
- Bellows
- Coal scuttle



*A selection of fire place accessories*



*A fire guard in place*



*A highly decorative fender*

## Chimney pieces

Chimney pieces are the decorative elements which surround the fireplace opening. When someone thinks of buying a “fireplace” they are often actually buying a new chimney piece to go round an existing opening. They are not essential to the working of a fire and some fireplaces do not have chimney pieces although it is the chimney piece which makes a fireplace such a distinctive and visually important architectural feature.

It is important to correctly identify the material which is used in the construction of a chimney piece in order to ensure they are being correctly cared for. They can come in many styles but are made from four basic materials:

**Wood:** Was often used for chimney pieces although was always kept away from the immediate vicinity of the opening. They could be varnished, stained or painted to suit the surrounding décor, where possible the original finish of a wooden chimney piece should always be maintained.

**Cast Iron:** With developments in iron casting technology in the early 19th century came the ability to cast highly decorative cast iron chimney pieces. Indeed, many fire places came to be cast whole with grate, fire box and chimney piece cast in one piece. Existing cast iron fire places can be renovated and cleaned if they have fallen into disrepair. They can be cleaned by shot blasting, stripped of paint then polished or re-painted. Great care should be taken when renovating such fire places to avoid damage.

**Slate:** Slate is used in a variety of ways to construct chimney pieces and comes in a wide range of colours, normally dark grey or black.

**Marble:** More expensive but provides one of the most visually impressive fireplace surrounds and is easy to keep clean.

Other materials used in constructing chimney pieces include:

- Terrazzo: conglomerate of marble chips bonded with cement and made into prefabricated slabs
- Brick: Sometimes built in patterned courses
- Briquettes: small bricks again available in a variety of shapes
- Brick tiles or slips: come in various sizes and are applied to a surface to give the impression of brick work
- Glazed tiles are often incorporated as decorative elements in historic fire places particularly in the case of cast iron insets and these should retained wherever possible. It is important to note that the glazed decorative tiles of the fire surround are not suitable for use in hearths under grates as they cannot withstand the high temperatures involved.



*Decorative marble chimney piece*