

INFORM

# FIREPLACES



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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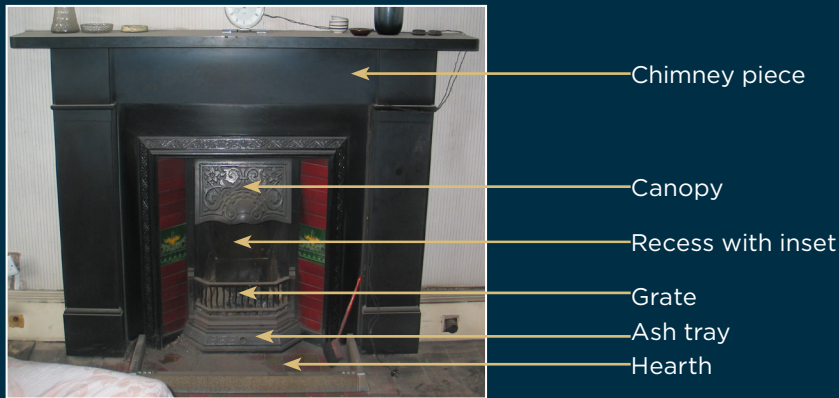


Fig. 1: Elements of a fireplace.

## FIREPLACES

Fireplaces have been an integral part of homes in Scotland for many centuries. Developments in both technology and style 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 fireplaces have lost their original purpose and have thus fallen into disrepair or been removed altogether. This INFORM guide aims to show the value of a properly maintained fireplace and its contribution to the historic fabric and character of a building. It will provide information on the variety of elements which combine to make up a fireplace and give brief notes on the proper care and maintenance of these elements.

### Elements of a fireplace

Although there is a wide range of different styles of fireplaces, from plain to highly decorative, their basic function and structure has not changed. Most fireplaces have the same basic elements (Fig. 1):

- The chimneybreast (which contains the flue)
- The chimney piece or fire surround
- The recess in the wall (which contains the inset and grate)
- The hearth

Other elements which may be incorporated include an ash tray or bucket, a fire back, a canopy, fenders and accessories.

### Chimney piece

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 around an existing opening. They are not essential to the working of a fire and many fireplaces do not have chimney pieces, although it is the chimney piece which makes a fireplace such a distinctive and visually important architectural feature.

### Materials

It is important to correctly identify the materials which are used in the construction of a chimney piece to ensure they are correctly cared for. Chimney pieces can come in many styles but are most commonly



Fig. 2: A painted wooden chimney piece.

made from four basic materials:

### Cast iron

With developments in iron casting technology in the early 19th century came the ability to cast highly decorative chimney pieces. Indeed, many fireplaces were cast whole with grate, fire box and chimney piece, all in one. Existing cast iron fireplaces 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 fireplaces to avoid damage (further guidance is available from HES publications).

### Wood

This was often used for chimney pieces although it was always kept away from the immediate vicinity of the opening. Wood could be varnished, stained or painted to suit the surrounding décor (Fig.2). Where possible, the original finish of a wooden chimney piece should always be maintained.

### Slate

Slate is used in a variety of ways to construct chimney pieces and comes in a range of colours, normally dark



Fig. 3: Decorative marble chimney piece.

grey or black.

### Marble

A more expensive material but provides one of the most visually impressive fireplace surrounds and is easy to keep clean (Fig. 3).

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:** These are often incorporated as decorative elements in historic fireplaces, particularly in the case of cast iron insets. They should be retained wherever possible. It is important to note that the glazed decorative tiles of the fire surround are not suitable for use in the hearth area under the grate as they cannot withstand the high temperatures.

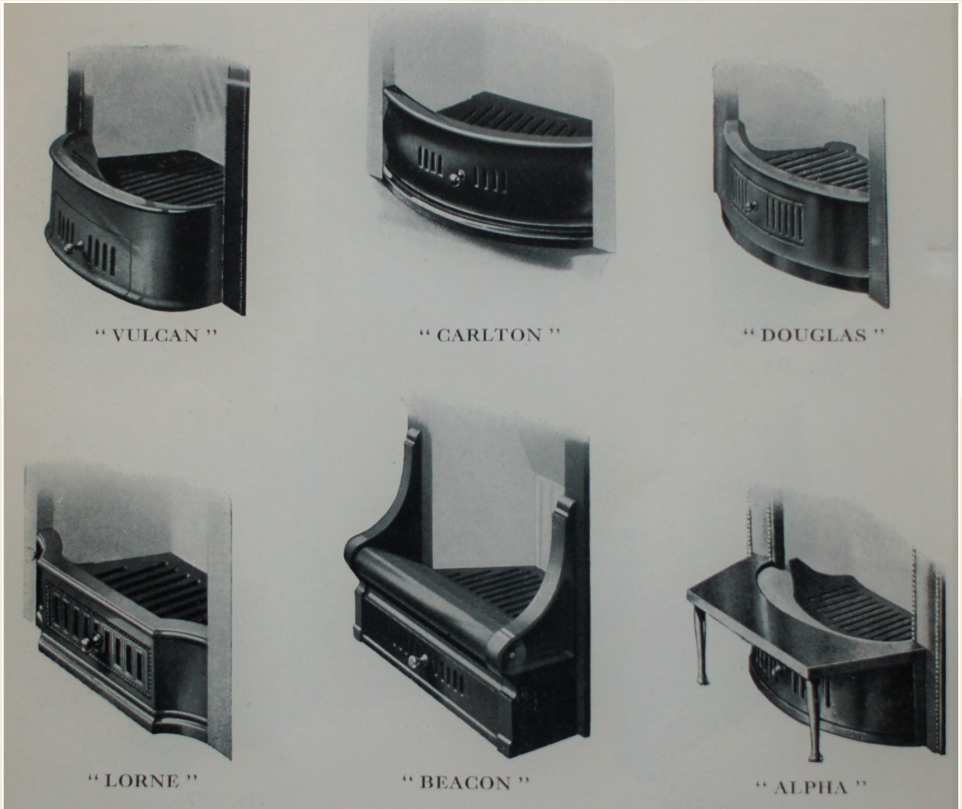


Fig. 4: A range of cast iron grates, some of the many thousands that have been historically available.

## Grate

The grate is used to contain the fuel and burning material and comes in a variety of styles (Fig. 4). 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 at the top 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.

## 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.

## Hearth

The hearth is the area under and in front of the chimney opening and grate that 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.



*Fig. 5: A highly decorative fender.*

## Fire backs

Given the heat that can be generated by open fires, fireplaces require a fire back at the rear of the opening. Some fireplaces 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 and made of refractory fire bricks. It is important to maintain the fire back as it protects the surrounding masonry. When replacing refractory fire bricks, it is vital to replace them with other refractory bricks as common bricks will quickly crack and fracture.

## Canopies

Some fireplaces have a canopy or hood projecting from the fire surround over the hearth. These ensure that smoke travels up the chimney and 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.

## 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 (Fig. 5), they can be hard to keep clean and are sometimes replaced by a built-in kerb constructed from the same material as the hearth.

## Fireplace accessories

There is a wide variety of accessories and tools which can accompany a fireplace (Fig. 6). These should be maintained and preserved as far as possible. Such accessories can include:

- Poker, tongs and rakes
- A brush and shovel
- Fire guards: These are designed to prevent people, especially children, falling into a fire but do not always stop sparks (Fig. 7).
- Spark guards: These differ from fireguards in that they are



*Fig. 7: A fire guard in place.*

YOUNG & MARTEN, MERCHANTS AND MANUFACTURERS

FIRE IRONS, BERLIN BLACK

No. 3490.

No. 3491.

No. 3492.



Fire Irons, with Brass Knobs.  
PRICE, 9/ per set.



Fire Irons, with Copper and Brass Handles.  
PRICE, 12/9 per set.



Fire Irons, with Copper and Brass Handles.  
PRICE, 15/ per set.



Fire Irons, with Brass Handles.  
PRICE, 16/6 per set.

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No. 3513.



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PRICE, 7/6 each.

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No. 3493.

No. 2197.

No. 2198.

No. 3494.

BRASS POKERETTES



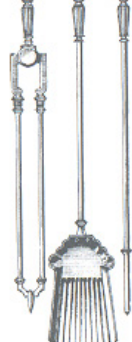
24 inches long.  
PRICE, 8/3 per set.



24 inches long.  
PRICE, 13/6 per set.



26 inches long.  
PRICE, 15/9 per set.



24 inches long.  
PRICE, 15/9 per set.

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No. 3502.

No. 3503.

No. 3504.



PRICE, 1/6 each.



PRICE, 2/3 each.



PRICE, 2/6 each.



PRICE, 3/ each.

Fig. 6: A selection of fireplace accessories.

designed to prevent sparks flying from the fireplace and causing a fire. They should have a mesh with gaps no less than 0.071 mm<sup>2</sup> and should always be used where an open fire is left unattended.

- Bellows
- Coal scuttle

## Caring for fireplaces

There are a number of simple steps which can be taken to care for a 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. When cleaning, however, care should be taken not to use anything which will abrade the surface or cause long term damage to any element of a fireplace.

### Painting

Many chimney pieces, particularly those made from soft wood, were painted. Where this is the case, careful repainting will sometimes be necessary. It is important to ensure that the paint used is suitable for the job, with enamel paint being the best option. 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 has become 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,

however, this is no longer available. Currently, 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, but these should be as close a colour match as possible. Modern tile sizes are often different to those used originally and may need to be cut down.

### Chimneys

If the fireplace is in use, it is important to have the chimney regularly swept. When sweeping is taking place, elements of the fireplace and surrounding furnishings within the room should be protected from soot using dust sheets and then cleaned afterwards.

### Smoke emission

Some fireplaces may experience problems with smoke emission. This is likely caused by a problem with the chimney or flue rather than the fireplace itself. Only rarely it is caused by strong winds hampering the escape of smoke. A simple cowl on the chimney can be installed by an experienced contractor to remedy the problem. Where smoke emission is a more frequent problem, there may be a fault with the chimney lining or condition of the flue. This should be investigated by a competent



*Fig. 8 and 9: A refurbished fireplace before and after work, using a reclaimed chimney piece.*

contractor. It may be necessary in some instances to re-line the flue.

### **Reinstating fireplaces**

Where a fireplace has been disused for a long time or boarded over, it may be possible to reinstate it. Often a new grate will have to be installed or, if the original is still in situ, it will require cleaning. A new chimney piece will be required where the original has been lost (Fig. 8). Both chimney pieces and grates are available new or from architectural salvage yards (Fig. 9). If the fireplace is to be used, then the chimney and flue will require a thorough sweep and inspection to ensure they are 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.

### **Conclusion**

Fireplaces are an important element in historic interiors. With a variety of styles and materials used, the right methods for maintenance and refurbishment have to be considered on a case-by-case basis. Fireplaces are also intrinsically connected with the accompanying chimney and flue. More information about the maintenance of these two elements can be found in the Historic Environment Scotland Inform guide: Domestic Chimneys & Flues.



## Further reading

*INFORM Guide: Domestic Chimneys & Flues*, Historic Scotland (2013).

*Care for Victorian Houses 3: Fireplaces*, Victorian Society (2nd edition 1997).

*Period Fireplaces*, J. Miller, Reed Books (1995).

## Further information

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W: <https://solidfuel.co.uk/solid-fuel-association-contact/>



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