

Fireplaces & Accessories By Roland Head

A genuine period fireplace is one of the most authentic ways to complete and enhance an older home, and a good quality, refurbished antique fireplace costs little more than an equivalent modern one, so there is no reason to mar the beauty of your period home with a cheap, mass-produced, modern fireplace.



This cream-painted Arts & Crafts fireplace dates c1897 and came from a London house complete with its original tiles. Image courtesy www.oldfireplaces.co.uk.



Edwardian fireplace, c1905, in the Art Nouveau style. At approx 3ft wide and 4ft high, this is quite a large fireplace, but smaller models are available. Image courtesy of www.oldfireplaces.co.uk.

What's your period?

Antique fireplaces fall into a number of distinct periods, each with a recognisable style. Oldest are Georgian fireplaces, broadly dating from the period between 1714 and 1837. Victorian fireplaces take the story to the turn of the twentieth century, whilst Edwardian examples are the last major subset, covering 1901 up until the First World War. The Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements span the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, and fireplaces in these styles are available to suit houses dating from around 1860 to 1910, while rarer Art Deco fireplaces usually date from the 1920s and 30s.



Tiles change a fireplace dramatically. The original Arts & Crafts tiles here are in good condition, but will cost 3-4 times as much as a set of similar reproduction tiles. Image: www.oldfireplaces.co.uk.



This Victorian Arts & Crafts dog grate measures 23in wide and 30in high, giving some indication of the large scale of the fireplace it was intended for. Image courtesy www.nostalgia-uk.com.

How well do they work?

Refurbished Victorian and Edwardian fireplaces retail for between £300 and £1,500, with a wide choice available for under £1,000. The most practical design is the cast iron combination fireplace, where the mantelpiece, surround, and grate are all incorporated into a single unit. Alternatively, fireplace inserts are available, allowing a fireplace to be integrated with an existing mantel or surround. This allows a wooden, marble or stone surround to be used with a cast iron fireplace, which creates a completely different style. A refurbished antique fireplace should be usable, durable, with no wear and tear, as any corrosion or damage should have been addressed. Cast iron has a very long life expectancy and these fireplaces were well designed when new.



The owl detailing on this Victorian Arts & Crafts fireplace is exemplary. Image courtesy of www.oldfireplaces.co.uk.



Original Art Deco fireplaces are rarer than Victorian/Edwardian designs, but add a touch of period glamour to a 1920s/30s house. Image www.oldfireplaces.co.uk.

To tile, or not to tile?

As someone whose original interest in antiques was through ceramics, I am a big fan of tiled fireplaces, which I think add character and visual appeal to a fireplace. If you share my enthusiasm for tiles, then it is worth noting that a great many genuine antique fireplaces are sold with reproduction tiles, or sometimes with none.

Sets of reproduction or original tiles can be purchased separately, and as the size of the tile openings was fairly standard, you should have a fairly wide choice of tiles, although the number required will vary between fireplaces. A wide range of potteries made tiles for fireplaces, including quality names such as Minton Hollins, Minton, Wedgwood, Booth and Rhodes. However, such tiles, in complete sets, can double the cost of your fireplace.



The smallest class is the bedroom fireplace. These tend to be 20in-25in wide and 35in-40in high, and work well in small living/dining rooms. This example is a painted Edwardian fireplace. Image: www.oldfireplaces.co.uk.



At around 30in wide and 40in high, this Victorian fireplace is a typical smaller design, which will suit many living rooms. Image: www.oldfireplaces.co.uk.

Buying options

There are two main options when buying an antique fireplace. You can buy a fully refurbished fireplace from a specialist fireplace dealer, or buy an 'as found' fireplace from a general dealer or auction and refurbish it yourself. A discussion of how to refurbish a fireplace is beyond the scope of this article, but it's worth noting that when choosing a fireplace for a room, you should choose a fireplace that is in proportion to the dimensions of the room, not to your existing fireplace opening, which can easily be altered. Restoring a fireplace and then fitting it to your home could be a very rewarding project that's within the reach of DIY and gives you the opportunity to buy cheap, add value and enjoy the fruits of your own labour.

An alternative to fireplaces

Cast iron fireplaces look good in urban houses, but not everyone likes them, and they can be out of character in rustic buildings and much older homes, which would have been built with open fireplaces. In this case, a freestanding fire basket or dog grate may be the answer. These come in a variety of shapes and sizes and add real character to an open fireplace, as well as helping to contain the fire and reflect its heat into the room. Often expensive, due to their size, ornate design and age, they can incorporate decorative back panels and canopies with figurative or naturalistic designs that provide real character as well as period appeal.