A History of Heating

with Price Guide *by Toby Pinn of Clevedon Salerooms*

Toby Pinn of Clevedon Salerooms takes a look at some of the different ways we have adopted for keeping warm and wonders whether he should feel guilty about wanting to contribute to global warming.

As technology advances so our ability to control the temperature of our surroundings, indoors at least, becomes ever more advanced, yet in spite of this we still find time to complain. When I told my wife I was going to write an article about heating the domestic environment her slightly acerbic response was 'What do you know about heating?' As I was raised in a large and draughty house where the euphemistic reply to the question whether the heating could be turned up was 'Put a warmer jumper on', I can see her point.

The problem these days is often one of finding the right temperature. Your place of work is probably hot enough to cook food in while you may arrive home of an evening, as my wife often does, to a dark and chilly house. Admittedly heating bills can be expensive but in fairness we have probably never had it so good. Traces of Man's use of fire go back more than one million years. Today in the western world an open fire in the home is for many a luxury item and often fulfils a dual role of not only providing heat but also for creating a cosy romantic setting. It is widely acknowledged that in terms of efficiency the open fire is a not up to much, although on a frosty night the birds perching on your chimney pot would certainly dispute that fact. In many parts of the world the open fire is used in much the same way as it was tens of thousands of years ago, even if lighting the thing has become a little easier! Not only does it provide warmth but also a way of cooking and a source of light. One problem with the fire is that it works on the radiant principle, which means that by the time we were building rudimentary dwellings it could take some time to warm anything but the very smallest of spaces.

So if it was that difficult to keep a place warm why not find a warm place to start with? Easier said than done. Anyone who has visited Cheddar caves on a warm summers day will recollect how cold and dank they feel. Visit them on a frosty day in winter and it is like walking into a sauna. The guides will tell you the temperature is a constant 11 degrees centigrade all year round, making a cave the pinnacle of the Dark Ages property market. Even as late as the first half of the twentieth century at least one family still occupied a cave in Cheddar Gorge.

Of course while we British were busy rubbing our hands together to keep warm and sticks together to start a fire, the Romans had already mastered central heating. The hypocaust heating system represents one of the Romans' outstanding achievements. For any Roman of status posted to the north of the Empire a hypocaust system was a necessary part of any relocation package. By raising the floor on columns of tiles an airspace of about two feet was created which, together with ducting in the walls, was force-fed with warm air from cleverly controlled fires.

Whilst the discovery of fire was a turning point for mankind it has always commanded respect and has on occasions demonstrated the need for its careful containment. When a baker in Pudding Lane in London failed to douse the fire in his oven on the evening of 2nd September 1666 the embers set light to the firewood stacked nearby. It took more than five days to contain the fire, meanwhile some 13,200 houses and 87 churches had been consumed in the conflagration. Today the building regulations that seemingly frustrate your every move as you attempt a loft conversion owe a great deal to this one disastrous event.

So what alternatives were there? By the end of the eighteenth century gas was starting to be looked at but the awful smell it gave off, mainly due to impurities in the manufacturing process, meant it was never going to catch on at that time. This problem was to delay the development of gas heating for some time. The gas flame was played over a radiant such as a pumice ball, firebrick or even glass. The first successful domestic gas fire was developed by Leoni in 1882 and consisted of a firebrick embedded with asbestos tufts. If the carbon monoxide did not finish you off there was always the toxic asbestos instead!

It was not until the 1960s brought the invention of the gas convector fire that gas became a far more efficient and cleaner way of heating than coal and timber. Electricity was cleaner still and who can forget the glow from a two-bar electric fire with its chrome reflector? The early electric fire was again based on the radiant principle but improved rapidly with the advent of the convection heater.

While these are all advances on the open fire the big breakthrough was of course the central heating system based on water heated in one place being pumped around the house through a network of pipes. This was in effect the next stage on from the hypocaust system and though warm air heating systems can still be found in the high-rise blocks of the post war era they have been largely superseded by more modern methods. With today's solar panels and heat exchange systems as well as the latest under floor heating the choice of methods of heating, their efficiency coupled with the techniques of insulating new properties has never been greater.

At the moment I live in a house without an open fire but having been raised in a house with two open fires and a range I know only too well that while they are wonderful additions to any room they are in many respects like a small child. They need constant attention, feeding and if you think of the ash pan as a nappy, quite a lot of cleaning. However, like a child an open fire is worth all the effort. As I have a small child I am content to put off the arrival of one that consumes coal instead of liquidised food, for the time being at least. The problem is that the open fire may well be living on borrowed time. If we are to sort out these environmental problems there is probably no place in the future for a smoking, polluting, greenhouse-effect contributing open fireplace. I just wondered since I dutifully put my newspapers and bottles out for the recycling lorry every fortnight whether I am allowed to build up some 'green' credits against one day having a roaring open fire? I expect not!

Toby Pinn of Clevedon Salerooms is a Chartered Arts & Antiques Surveyor and Member of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors.

A member of the Regional Furniture Society and The Antique Metalware Society, Toby specialises in Furniture and 20th Century Design.

Visit: www.clevedon-salerooms.com.
Telephone: 01934 830111.

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A small selection of heating antiques from our website Price Guides.

19thC pine and gesso fire surround, the shaped mantle with applied edge above a figural and foliate applied frieze supported on acanthus carved fluted columns, each standing on a plinth base, 190cm wide. Cheffins, Cambridge. Apr 05. HP: £1,600. ABP: £1,882.

Late Victorian Arts & Crafts oak fireplace, moulded cornice over panel bordered Minton tile inset frieze and uprights, cast iron shallow Gothic arch and tracery grate front, 119 x 122cm. Bristol Auction Rooms, Bristol. May 03. HP: £1,050. ABP: £1,235.

A pair of 19thC Italian walnut and gilt gesso fire bellows, in a 17thC style, 2.5in. Gorringes, Bexhill. Sep 02. HP: £520. ABP: £611.

Adam style fire basket, with roundel applied shaped apron, 78cm wide. Cheffins, Cambridge. Apr 04. HP: £400. ABP: £470.

Brass and mesh nursery spark guard complete with a pair of fire tongs, 30in. Denhams, Warnham. Oct 03. HP: £190. ABP: £223.

Morris & Co mahogany cheval firescreen inset with a silk embroidered panel depicting an apple tree within a roundel of flowers and foliage, 118cm. high x 65cm. wide, the underframe stamped: MORRIS & CO - 449 OXFORD ST W and the number 1826. Bearne's, Exeter. Jun 05. HP: £1,350. ABP: £1,587.

Adam style steel fire basket, shaped top, three bar grate, urn finials, 91cm wide. Locke & England, Leamington Spa. Sep 04. HP: £520. ABP: £611.

18thC fire surround with a pair of female heads and butterfly mouldings, 2m wide x 1.3m high. Sworders, Stansted Mntftcht. Nov 04. HP: £380. ABP: £446.

Art Deco fire surround with burr walnut front, quadrant ends with macassa ebony columns. Kent Auction Galleries, Folkestone. Jul 05. HP: £170. ABP: £199.

A Regency cast iron fire grate with architectural back, on brass dragon scroll legs with paw feet, 2ft 3in height 2ft 7in. Gorringes, Lewes. Apr 00. HP: £900. ABP: £1,058.

Victorian papier mache fire screens, painted with a floral bouquet within a mother of pearl inlaid border, pole with turned finial, concave triform base with bun feet. Andrew Hartley, Ilkley. Feb 05. HP: £500. ABP: £588.

Victorian rosewood firescreen, arched gros point panel depicting a young girl in a garden with a dog and puppies, 50.5in high. Andrew Hartley, Ilkley. Aug 05. HP: £380. ABP: £446.

Art Deco 'Bunting' designer radiant heater in the form of a yacht. English 1930s. Gorringes, Lewes. Mar 05. HP: £160. ABP: £188.

Regency style cast iron and steel fire basket, formed as a twin handled urn, plinth base, incorporating a cinder tray, 54cm wide. Cheffins, Cambridge. Apr 04. HP: £720. ABP: £846.

A fine set of early Victorian burnished steel fire-irons, gilt bronze handles, tongs 74cms, stamped lozenge shaped regn mark. (4). Mellors & Kirk, Nottingham. Apr 03. HP: £1,150. ABP: £1,352.

A pair of 19thC bronze fire dogs, 18.5in high. Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet. Jul 01. HP: £450. ABP: £529.

Art Nouveau brass and glass fire screen, decorative plate and side swing mirrors, the frame with stylized cresting on four splay feet, 33in high. Dee, Atkinson & Harrison, Driffield. Feb 05. HP: £300. ABP: £352.

A pair of cast iron fire dogs cast as classical male torso on dolphin supports, 45 high x 85cm wide and a fire grate Dreweatt Neate, Donnington. Nov 02. HP: £130. ABP: £152.

Victorian mahogany fire surround, turned and reeded columns with floral patera, frieze over arched mirror, mantel shelf, 70in wide, 95.25in high. Andrew Hartley, Ilkley. Aug 05. HP: £550. ABP: £646.

A pair of walnut fire screens. Gorringes, East Sussex. Dec 03. HP: £1,150. ABP: £1,352.

An early Victorian rosewood cheval firescreen, Berlin woolwork panel, 113cm high. Locke & England, Leamington Spa. Jan 03. HP: £440. ABP: £517.

19thC carved firescreen, with woolwork picture of a gentleman and lady, 109cm. Sworders, Stansted Mountfitchet. Nov 04. HP: £280. ABP: £329.

Victorian miniature cast iron ducks nest fire grate, surmounted by Royal Coat of Arms, 12in. Denhams, Warnham, Sussex. Mar 05. HP: £90. ABP: £105.