

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR Period fireplace

An original fireplace gives elegance and warmth to a room. But don't despair if your fireplace is badly damaged, painted, or even missing altogether! With a little research and attention, it's possible to restore or re-instate this beautiful feature. Joanna Marsden reports.

No feature embodies the character of a period room like a fireplace. Restoring or re-instating the right fireplace can bring a whole interior together; the wrong choice, on the other hand, can destroy the look and feel of a room.

the history

In period properties, the size of the fireplace was proportionate to the size of the room, and the material and level of ornamentation reflected the room's social importance. In Victorian homes, marble or marble-effect slate tended to be used in the reception rooms, with mass-produced cast iron surrounds in the lesser rooms.

design icons

Fireplaces can often be regarded as design icons in that they epitomise the fashion and tastes of each era. The latter half of the Victorian era in particular witnessed a wide array of influences, from design movements such as gothic revivalism, the aesthetic and arts and crafts movements and, towards the end of the period, art nouveau style. If your fireplace is post 1860s, it's likely to be more heavily ornamented and may have glazed tiles fixed into the 'cheeks' of the cast iron inset.

knowing an original

If in doubt, the quickest way to find out whether your fireplace is original is to look in a neighbouring house of a similar age. Occasionally, you may find a

house with an original fireplace that is much grander than that of its neighbours. One possible explanation for this is that in Victorian times it was not unusual for the architect or builder to live in one of the streets they designed, and naturally, they would raise the internal specification on their own home!

valuing your fireplace

Incredibly, some renovators are still disregarding the features which give a home its character and value. I recently saw two cast iron fireplaces strewn across the top of a rubble-filled skip outside a 1920s house. I pulled in to have a look, delighted at the thought of finding free treasure, but was horrified to discover that some lump-hammering tradesman had got there before me and split them down the middle. Maybe that renovator would not have been so careless if he or she had realised their value.

the prices

Restored Victorian marble fireplaces retail from €1,500 upwards and restored cast iron fireplaces range from €450- €3,000, with exceptionally rare ones fetching up to €7,000. Tiled fireplaces command a premium. That said, if you bargain hunt around salvage yards, you might find a basic, un-restored cast iron surround for as low as €150. And then, of course, there are skips! Always keep your eyes peeled!



1850s-'60s
Marble and cast iron combination fireplace. Typically found in larger terraces in varying sizes and with varying design of corbels. Value: approx €4,000



1850s-'60s Cast iron combination fireplace. This surround is very common in Ireland and can be found in the main living room of mid-range terrace houses and in the bedrooms of grander houses. Value: €450-€900 depending on size

what kind of fireplace constitutes a period feature?

When exactly does a fireplace become a valued period feature? What if you have a severe grey-tiled art deco-style thirties fireplace? Is it okay to throw out fireplaces from the thirties, forties, or even the seventies, because they are not to our taste? This is a difficult one; anything that epitomises an era is a potential antique of tomorrow. You have to go with your gut instinct and try to be true to the house. A

thirties tiled fireplace is appropriate to a thirties house, but not to a Victorian house.

finding an appropriate replacement

If you have a damaged period fireplace, restoration is normally possible. If the original is missing, you need to look for an appropriate replacement, be it an original or reproduction. Before you start hunting, you will need to check the size of the original fire opening.

Restoring a fireplace

marble and marble effect

Marble is permeable and easily stained by smoke and rust. Many stains can be removed or reduced through careful cleaning. Before you begin, be sure your fireplace is marble and not marble-effect. The Victorians and Edwardians were exceptionally good at their special effects and the untrained eye can easily be deceived. Most marble-effect fire surrounds are actually made of black slate and have red or green hues, and are sometimes decorated with gilding. If you are still unsure, gently clean or lightly sand a tiny section under the mantel and if the pattern starts coming off and you see a blue/grey slate colour coming through, you'll know!

Once you are confident you have the genuine article, you can set about cleaning it. David O'Reilly, who specialises in restoring fireplaces, recommends: "First clean the fireplace with a sugar soap, then apply a homemade poultice made from a mix of clear bleach and talcum powder. As this paste dries out, it will draw the stains out. At the end, you finish it off with a marble wax." Cleaning a marble fireplace is a tough job, however, and the faint hearted can choose to use one of the professional restoration services available.

If you are restoring a marble-effect slate fireplace, be extremely careful. Try to imagine you are restoring a painting by an old master. Begin working on a discreet area by gently applying methylated spirit

and a soft cloth and checking if the paint comes off. Once clean, David O'Reilly recommends using a mix of 50/50 boiled linseed oil and turpentine. Worked to a buff finish, this will really bring up the colour in the slate.

cast iron

Cast iron fireplaces were often painted white. You can remove the paint yourself with chemical paint strippers such as Nitromors. Then wash off the remains of the stripper and dry the grate. Use a wire brush or wool to get rid of the rust, or a rust remover.

Some people attempt a 'quick fix' by simply painting black enamel paint over the white paint. The problem with this is it can make an original cast iron fireplace look like a reproduction.

Professional restorers will strip paint more quickly using two techniques, shot blasted stripping or dipping in an acid bath. David O'Reilly recommends the latter, as "shot blasting can take the natural skin off the cast iron, making it more prone to rusting." After removing the paint, a fireplace should be primed to prevent rust and re-polished to a burnish using a cast iron paste like Zip paste. To commission a professional to carry out full restoration on a cast iron fireplace will cost upwards of €280.

If the cast iron is cracked in any place, you will need to remove the fireplace and have it welded by a specialist used to working with cast iron.



1870s-80s
Fireplace known in the trade as 'The Ferns'. A gothic influence can be seen over the arch. This design can also be found on Victorian cast iron benches. Value: €450-€900 depending on size



1880s onwards
Cast iron fireplace known as 'The Bird and the Butterfly' with stylised motives reminiscent of William Morris wallpaper. Popular in mid-range late Victorian homes. Value: €450-€900




1880s
Very rare bedroom fireplace designed by famous designer Thomas Jeckyll in the heyday of the arts and crafts movement. In the centre, there is a stylised flower in the form of love-birds. Value: €1,795

replacing tiles

To replace a cheek tile, you have to remove the fire surround and the grate, so only attempt this if it's absolutely necessary. Instead, try to repair the tile by filling the crack with glue and covering it with an appropriately coloured enamel paint. Chips can be repaired with standard filler, or a mix of talcum powder and epoxy resin. Use household bleach to reduce staining where the tile is crazed. If you are not happy with a DIY repair, a professional ceramic repairer can work wonders, but at a cost. If you want to replace a single tile, it can be hard to track the right one down. Your best bet is Ebay, which has a thriving antique tile marketplace, or Tile Heaven (www.tile-heaven.co.uk). Reproductions of certain styles are also available from restorers, but usually in full sets only.

missing or damaged hearth

Traditionally, fireplaces had decorative hearths made from slate, ceramic tiles, brick or other stone. If your hearth is missing, you could consider reinstating a slate slab hearth or a tiled hearth. Most original hearth tiles were 4x2 inches but a similar look can be achieved using modern 6x3 inch tiles. As a rule of thumb, if you can't be authentic, at least be sympathetic to the era. 

**top
TIP**

INSTALLING A GAS FIRE IN A PERIOD FIREPLACE

It is possible to have period style with modern comforts by installing a gas fire in an original

fire surround. An experienced professional should be able to do this without damaging any of the original fireplace and grate. According to Dublin-based Heating Distributors: "First a template has to be taken and then a made-to-measure gas fire can be produced for €500 upwards."

FIREPLACE DIRECTORY

PERIOD FIREPLACES AND RESTORATION SERVICES

Dublin

- > Antique Fireplace Company, 89 Francis Street, Dublin 8. Tel: 01 454 4101. Web: www.antiquefireplacere restoration.ie.
- > Antique Fireplaces, Golden Ball Cottage, Kiltiernan, Co Dublin. Tel: 01 294 1556.
- > Artefaction, 12-13 Lime Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 01 677 6495.
- > Belle Cheminee, 106 Capel Street, Dublin 1. Tel: 01 872 4122. Web: www.bellecheminee.com.
- > Irish Fine Art Plasterwork Ltd., 144 North Strand Road, Dublin 3. Tel: 01 836 6065. Web: www.plasterwork.ie.
- > Michael Duffy Antiques., 9-10 Parnell Street, Dublin 1. Tel: 01 872 6298.
- > Paramount Ltd., 26 Montpelier Hill, Dublin 7. Tel 01 677 7474.

Meath

- > The Victorian Fireplace Company Ltd., The Village Centre, Ratoath, Co Meath. Tel: 01 825 7707.

Galway

- > Honan's Antiques, Crowe Street, Gort, Co. Galway. Tel: 091 631 407. Web: www.honansantiques.com Renovation for cast iron fireplaces.

Tipperary

- > Angel Architectural Salvage, Bank Place, Main Street, Tipperary. Tel: 062 80906. Web: www.angelarchitectural.com.

Waterford

- > The Salvage Shop, Airport Road, Waterford City. Tel: 051 873 260. Web: www.bang2000.com

Belfast

- > Barewood Ltd, 176 Laws Court, Belfast. Tel: 028 (NI) 048 (ROI) 9024 5618.

England

- > The Antique Fireplace Company, Jasmine Cottage, Prees Green, Nr Whitechurch, Shropshire, SY13 2BL. Tel: 0044 1948 840666. Web: www.antiquefireplace-company.co.uk Shipping available.

GAS FITTERS

- > Heating Distributors Ltd., 32 North Park, North Road, Finglas, Dublin 11. Tel: 01 864 8950. Custom made gas inserts.

PARTS

- > Blackwater Crafts, The Bridge, Main Street, Donaraile, Co Cork. Tel: 022 24333.



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