

THE BEST IN INTERNATIONAL DESIGN AND DECORATION

HOUSE & GARDEN®

August 2015
£4.20

HOW TO Mix and match fabrics / Decorate with coloured glass
Create delicious food with fresh herbs

127

BRILLIANT
DESIGN IDEAS
WHATEVER
YOUR
BUDGET




HIGH SUMMER STYLE

RELAXED LUXURY
IN IBIZA

A CONVERTED DOVECOTE
IN THE COTSWOLDS

A GRAND
WILTSHIRE GARDEN



THIS PAGE Michal pieces together a fifteenth-century-style Istrian stone 'marriage' chimneypiece for Jamb. OPPOSITE Oliver restores an eighteenth-century marble chimneypiece for Chesney's

Rising from the ashes

It hasn't been long since many of the elaborate chimneypieces of England's grander houses were ripped out and consigned to the scrapheap. But now they are back in fashion, thanks to their unrivalled craftsmanship and intriguing provenance, as DAVID NICHOLLS discovers

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY



The great socio-political soothsayer George Orwell wrote an essay for the *Evening Standard* in 1945 entitled 'The case for the open fire'. In it, he conjured up an image of idyllic domesticity, in which a family and their dog are gathered in the sitting room in front of a fire. In the face of coal rationing and the rise of the electric fire, scenes like this may disappear, Orwell warned. 'The survival of the family as an institution may be more dependent on [the fireplace] than we realise.'

We can decide for ourselves whether Orwell's fear became fact, but what is certain is the shameful story of what happened in the years that followed. Central heating began to replace open fires in many a middle-class house, and the Clean Air Act of 1956 put paid to the burning of solid fuel in cities. A little later, televisions ousted the fireplace as the focal point of the nation's sitting rooms. Concurrently, as societal changes resulted in prohibitively high running costs, about a sixth of English country houses were demolished. Across the country, chimneypieces were systematically stripped from grand and modest houses alike and discarded.

So why is it that now, 70 years after Orwell wrote his essay, some of these very chimneypieces – particularly the grander, more elaborate examples – have become highly sought after once again? 'I think there is something very inspiring in knowing that someone has sat in front of one of these pieces with a fire burning for 200 years,' says Paul Chesney, managing director of the fireplace specialist Chesney's. The company has been dealing in antique fireplaces since 1984, although for many years its smart reproductions, modern designs and, more recently, wood-burning stoves have dominated its sales.

According to Paul, the carved stone and marble pieces from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries have been enjoying a new lease of life. 'During that period, they were making chimneypieces from white statuary marble with barely a blemish,' he says. 'Today, that's almost impossible to find. The quarries are quarried. We can patinate a reproduction, but there's something intangible about a piece that has taken 200 years to look that way, which can't be replicated.' Earlier this year, he opened a showroom dedicated to antique chimneypieces that cost between £2,000 and £500,000, and by the end of 2015, he expects sales to have increased by 60 per cent year-on-year.

It is scarcity, at least in part, that has driven up prices. Unlike antique furniture, which can exchange hands several times within a generation, an antique chimneypiece tends to stay put far longer. 'And the minute they end up in a listed property, they're out of circulation,' says Will Fisher who, with his wife Charlotte Freemantle, runs the Pimlico Road antiques shop Jamb. They, too, have noticed a pick-up in demand for antique fireplaces.

'Up until the Eighties, American dealers would come over and drive down from Scotland to the south coast to buy fireplaces, filling up two lorries along the way. Those days are gone,' Will says. Now, dealers such as Jamb and Chesney's make trips to the US, buying back some of the same chimneypieces that crossed the Atlantic during this period. Will recently undertook a 2,000-mile road trip on the east coast doing just that, and Jamb currently has a stock of about 200. 'My

FROM TOP Will Fisher and Charlotte Freemantle in their Pimlico Road antiques shop Jamb, with an eighteenth-century Palladian carved stone chimneypiece. Scagliola work on an eighteenth-century Irish chimneypiece. Michal prepares sections of marble

financial director asked me to stop buying them, but when there are great things around, you have to buy them. They're not there forever.'

Chesney's and Jamb both have workshops in London, in which they restore chimneypieces that are in varying degrees of disrepair. And both have small teams of craftspeople who are tasked with the very delicate job of bringing the pieces back to their former glory. At least partially. The key is to not over-restore. 'We tend to do enough to stand it up and then restore it as far as the client wants,' Paul says.

Among the craftspeople at Chesney's is Oliver, who has worked there for 28 years after joining through the Youth Training Scheme and is now the company's top marble carver. He's working on a Georgian Revival marble chimneypiece from 1880. Alongside him is Matt, whose current project is an intricate 1770s carved-wood piece from the West Country.

Michal, who has worked for Jamb for 14 years, explains the seventeenth-century scagliola marble-effect technique he is using to restore an eighteenth-century Carrara marble Irish mantelpiece, while Arek, his colleague, shrugs when he says he's waiting for his fingernail to grow back after an altercation with a diamond file and a shard of marble.

Where possible, the dealers have traced and recorded the provenance of the chimneypieces they sell. There are some alluring examples: at Jamb, a mid-eighteenth-century piece featuring Siena marble doves came from the now-demolished Methley Hall near Leeds, while Chesney's has a similarly ornate piece that came from the Green Damask room of Norfolk House in St James's Square.

It is heartening to think that these pieces are once again finding homes, although not necessarily in the humble sitting rooms described by Orwell. Nonetheless, Paul has noticed that antique chimneypieces with interesting histories are increasingly integral to many new design schemes. Their

return signifies a change in tastes, and a renewed desire for architectural elements that delight the eye. Perhaps it is also an acknowledgement of what Orwell claimed that the fireplace represented: a place to gather and 'a background to our memories.' And nostalgia is a powerful emotion □

Chesney's: 020-7627 1410; chesneys.co.uk | Jamb: 020-7730 2122; jamb.co.uk

OTHER SPECIALISTS

NICHOLAS GIFFORD-MEAD

Following 20 years at his base on the Pimlico Road, antiques dealer Nicholas Gifford-Mead (nicholasgiffordmead.co.uk) is now in Chelsea. He deals in marble, wood and stone from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, and his pieces are available to view by appointment.

WHARTON ANTIQUES

Simon Wharton of Wharton Antiques (whartonantiques.com) clocks up countless miles trawling Europe for antique and reclaimed stone chimneypieces and grates. He has a base in the South of France, but sells from Somerset where, if necessary, they are restored.

GIBILARO DESIGN

Jesse Gibilaro and his team at Gibilaro Design (gibilarodesign.co.uk) have an excellent reputation for sourcing and restoring fire grates. Along with these, they also stock a vast range of antique fire tools, screens and fenders.

FROM TOP Chesney's managing director Paul Chesney in the newly opened antiques showroom, with an eighteenth-century marble chimneypiece featuring carvings of the myth of Romulus and Remus. Oliver carves sections of marble. Matt cleans an eighteenth-century carved-wood chimneypiece from the West Country

