

# PRESS RELEASE INFORMATION

**Client:**

National Fireplace Association  
PO Box 583, High Wycombe  
Bucks, HP15 6XT  
Tel: 0121 288 0050



NATIONAL FIREPLACE ASSOCIATION

## Cast Iron – the classic material for Fires, stoves and fireplaces

Since cast iron was produced for the first time, some 500 years ago, civilised man has been aware of its properties for transferring heat. Cast iron – literally iron that was too large to be wrought and therefore had to be cast in a mould – was being commonly used for large construction from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards highlighted by Abraham Derby's work at Coalbrookdale, constructing the famous Iron Bridge in cast iron sections to span the River Severn. As a material, cast iron was relatively cheap to produce, and it was soon



**A Coalbrookdale stove  
of c. 1875**

recognised as the ideal material for kitchens and fireplaces in the house of the burgeoning artisan and middle classes of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The first heating appliances to be made in cast iron were ranges for the kitchen and register grates for the living room. The range or 'Kitchener', with a proper chimney, situated in a kitchen or scullery was beginning to replace the open fire of the living room which had been the only source of heat for cooking and warmth for over five or more centuries. The range was made of cast components and led to the development of the saucepan and other cooking pots that we know today. The register grate, which contained the burning coals or wood behind cross bars, often included a small hob for heating a kettle. It was large enough to warm the room but small enough for its limited fuel to be affordable by the impoverished householder.

As the Victorian era progressed, design and fashion changed. In the parlour, the standard register grate began to be replaced by fireplaces with a wooden mantel coupled with a cast iron back panel. The back panel, which was similar in size to today's reproductions, helped to radiate the heat and allowed for a number of elaborate designs, which added to what was, by now, the aesthetic focus of the room.



**A reproduction complete cast iron fireplace from the Gallery Collection**

Typically these cast iron back panels would include a 'slider' on each side, into which a set of decorative ceramic tiles could be inserted. This increased the natural aesthetics of the cast iron and allowed standard designs to be personalised by the builder.



A Jøtul stove of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

Cast iron was also being used in the manufacture of freestanding heating stoves. These were initially designed to meet the requirements of workshops, schools churches and halls but not private houses as their form tended to be rather large and their looks could 'overpower' the average house. Stoves were in fact more popular on the Continent, where their ability to operate overnight on a full loading and their high heat output made the ideal for the colder winter climate of Central Europe. Taylor & Portway still based in Halsted, Essex and Jøtul of Norway are among companies who started manufacturing stoves in this era and Jøtul are still doing so today.

The local blacksmith, as part of his general work, originally produced dog grates. They could be made to fit individual fireplaces and included more or less embellishment, to suit the owner's whim. Where there was a raised back panel, often with a Coat of Arms, this part would be



cast in a 'floor process' using sand, as this casting method was ideally suited for working large, flat pieces of this size. Over the last 100 or so years, as dog grates have become the preserve of inglenook

fireplaces in country cottages, mass production techniques have led to designs being cast in moulds.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a resurgence in cast iron. Furnishing fashion, seemed to hark back to a quieter, slower age, and demand for original or reproduction cast iron fire inserts blossomed. Old fireplaces, which had been ripped out of houses in their thousands during the 60s and 70s were now extremely popular, with reproductions in cast iron and cast aluminium selling for high prices.



Typical of these are the 'continuation pieces' produced by companies like Acquisitions and Agnews. Most manufacturers offer a choice between designs with cast iron back panels (surrounded by mantels in a whole raft of materials) or complete cast iron fireplaces where mantelpiece and back panel are supplied as one. The complete

cast iron fireplace is often smaller in dimensions than the fireplaces that utilise cast iron back panels as these designs were originally intended for bedrooms in the days before central heating.

Also popular is the cast iron fire basket which is today's version of the 'dog grate'. Many designs are based upon styles that



Robert Adam made famous but the fire basket was used in fireplaces up to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Fire baskets are often regarded as the most authentic traditional fire designs and designs powered by wood and gas remain popular. We've shown the Large Adam design from Acquisitions in our picture.



A modern Jøtul F350 stove

Stoves have also increased in popularity over the last 10 years, buoyed up by town dwellers seeking the country idyll in second homes and by models which, first installed in the 70s, are now nearing the end of their useful life. Cast iron stoves, many of them manufactured in continental Europe or the Far East, are extremely popular because of their smooth lines and heat

retention properties. The 1990s have seen the growing popularity of small stoves – ideal for the milder winters found in the UK (as opposed to the severe continental climate of Central Europe). Cast iron can be easily enamelled and the design of heating stoves ensures that damaged or worn out parts can be easily changed. Secondary burn technology has also ensured that modern wood stoves burn efficiently and cleanly to meet today's environmental concerns.

So the market has gone full circle with cast iron, once again, at the heart of many of the Nation's fireplaces.

Ends.