



## Creating your dream fireplace

First, the good news; there are now the most amazing ranges of fires, stoves and fireplaces, catering for all tastes and budgets. Now the bad news; you've got to choose one! However, help is at hand. Working through the following sections will allow you to develop a shortlist of preferred options and, with the assistance of an experienced fireplace retailer, create your dream fireplace.

Let's get technical!

Unless you are opting for an electric fire, gel fire, or catalytic gas fire – more on all of these later – there are certain technical factors which may limit your options, particularly if your preference is for solid fuel.

All solid fuel fires, and the vast majority of gas fires, require a flue – a conduit which vents off smoke and waste gases. In most houses built before 1960 the flue is formed by what are known as 'Class 1' chimneys. A 'Class 1' chimney has a 7" (180mm) or greater diameter flue. Open fires burning solid fuels such as wood, coke or coal require a 'Class 1' chimney. Some solid fuel stoves can be used with flues smaller than 180mm in diameter.

Whilst many houses built after 1960 still have 'Class 1' chimneys the trend has been towards 'Class 2' chimneys or pre-cast flues. A 'Class 2' chimney has a steel flue lining built in to it which is typically 5" (130mm) in diameter and is topped at roof level by a steel flue terminal. Pre-cast concrete flues have a rectangular cross section and a short rectangular terminal located at the roof apex – alongside the ridge tiles.

Most gas fires will operate happily with any of the three chimney types listed above but it's worth checking with your preferred retailer to make sure. It is worth remembering that all open solid fuel and gas fires require a hearth, as do solid fuel stoves. Your retailer can provide exact details as to the required dimensions for the hearth, but they must be at least 2" (50mm) deep and manufactured from a non-combustible material such as stone.

The vast majority of houses built today have either no chimney at all, or a 'decorative' chimney which has no practical function. Many properties of this type still enjoy the benefits of a gas fire using either a 'balanced flue' or 'power flue'. Balanced flues consist of concentric pipes – a smaller pipe within a larger pipe – one of which draws in air and the other which acts as the vent for the waste products of combustion. Balanced flues pass through the outside wall immediately behind the fire and their opening is protected by a metal 'cage' to ensure that nobody touches the pipes which become hot when the fire is operating. Balanced flue fires are 'room sealed' which means they have a glass front through which the flame is visible.

If you have no chimney and your fireplace is not on an outside wall, but you still want a 'living flame' effect, then there are now several flueless gas fires which use catalytic converters – a similar process to that used in car engines – to change the combustion products into carbon dioxide and water vapour which are vented in to your room. Fires using catalysts are glass fronted.

Gel fires burn various fuels including sugar cane to generate an open flame. A relatively new introduction to the fireplace market, gel fires don't require a flue but produce relatively insignificant amounts of heat so are mainly for visual impact.

Building a budget ...

Before visiting fireplace showrooms it is always worth determining how much you can afford to pay for your dream fireplace. Your budgeting should include the fire, fire surround, hearth, possible accessories such as a fire grate and guard, and the cost of installation which could include an element for any necessary redecoration.

In centrally heated properties, a fireplace's primary function is often to act as a decorative focal point. In such cases, the thermal efficiency of the fire is not a major concern. However, if your new fire is to be a major source of heat for your room then an understanding of the comparative running costs is extremely useful.

The thermal efficiency of a fire is based on the ratio between the energy consumed to generate the heat, and the actual heat output. For example, if an electric fire requires 2 kilowatts per hour (kWh) of electricity to operate and provides 1 kilowatt of heat output then it is said to be 50% efficient. Gel fires and flueless gas fires are effectively 100% efficient – although the heat output of a gel fire is minimal. If you're looking for maximum heat output some solid fuel stoves have maximum outputs exceeding 20kW – the equivalent of twenty small electric fires!

Gas fires range between 30% and 65% efficiency. Open, living flame gas fires are typically less thermally efficient than glass-fronted room-sealed units. Gas fires can use convection to increase efficiency. All reputable manufacturers of fires and stoves provide details of the heat output of their products and their thermal efficiency.

To obtain a rough estimate of comparative hourly running costs, consult your electricity or gas bill to obtain the unit cost for a kWh and multiply this by the input kW of an appliance.

It is stating the obvious that a large room requires more energy to heat than a small one, but there are many other factors such as the number of external walls, window size, number of doors, level of insulation and ventilation which contribute to the heat requirement of a room.

...and buying at the right time

The peak months for fireplace sales tend to be between September and April. Consequently, prices are frequently more competitive and installation times shorter in the summer months. Why not consider having your new fireplace installed when you are away on holiday? Hassle free, lower prices, and heating in place ready for the winter months!

Who had the remote control last?

Once you've identified any potential technical constraints, estimated the heat output required, and built your budget, the search for the dream fire becomes a matter of personal taste. Some of the possible features you may be looking for have been highlighted below and it is worth prioritising them to help refine your choice.

Many gas and electric fires incorporate a remote control facility which is ideal if you have limited mobility. Manufacturers offer different warranties and guarantees which may sway your choice. There are now some amazingly realistic ceramic woods, coals and stones for use on gas fires, and electric fire manufacturers vie with each other to create the most realistic flame effects. Electric fires can also come with multi-coloured lighting effects if you're tired of the traditional flame and at the recent Hearth and Home exhibition there was even an electric fire and fireplace which concealed a large plasma-screen television!

What came first – the chicken or the egg; the fire or the fireplace?

Whether you choose your fire or your fireplace first, they need to work in harmony with the décor of your room to create a balanced ambiance.

Fireplaces now come in a huge variety of different materials with designs to satisfy both traditionalists and those looking for something more contemporary. Your choice of material could have a significant impact on your fireplace budget.

Limestone, marble, wood and cast iron remain very popular as do brick (inglenook) fireplaces. Cheaper fireplace materials include plaster, and MDF coated with stone-effect paint. Reasonably priced stone-effect fireplaces can also be created by combining polyester resin and stone dust, and a recent innovation is the use of thin marble laminate applied to wood. For the more adventurous, some fireplace designers incorporate glass, fabric and steel in their creations.

The traditional fireplace is now facing considerable competition from 'hole in the wall' fireplaces. As the name implies, 'hole in the wall' fireplaces consist of a recess in the wall and can create extremely attractive 'scandinavian' or 'manhattan loft' style focal points in your room.

I know what I want, what I really, really want..

The majority of fires and fireplaces can be viewed over the internet and this can provide an opportunity to gain an appreciation of the different designs which are available and their respective costs. An ideal site to start at is [www.fireplace.co.uk](http://www.fireplace.co.uk) which is an independent website run by the leading trade fireplace magazine.

However, there is nothing to replace the visual and tactile experience of seeing your dream fireplace in a room setting within a retail showroom. A good retailer is the best source for technical and design guidance, and will also organise the installation of your fireplace.

Happy hunting!

The installation and care of your dream fireplace is covered in a further article on page XX.