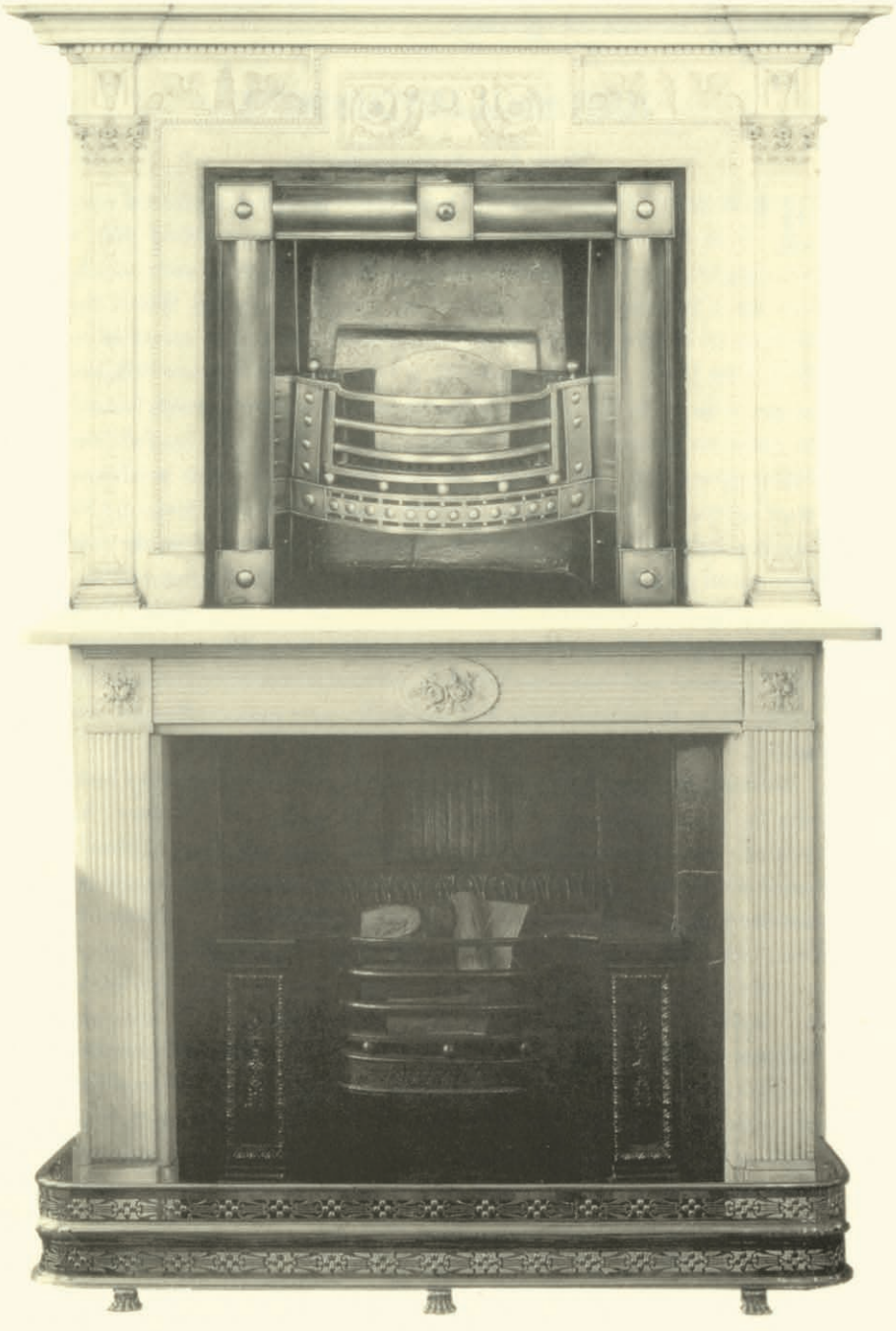
The Georgian Group Guides

No 9

FIREPLACES



A Brief Guide to Georgian Fireplaces

COVER: ABOVE, ADAM FIREPLACE OF C.1767 IN THE LIBRARY AT KENWOOD, HAMPSTEAD *(ENGLISH HERITAGE/GREATER LONDON PHOTOGRAPH LIBRARY)*; BELOW, FIREPLACE OF THE LATE 1830S FROM THE DRAWING ROOM AT DICKENS' HOUSE, 48 DOUGHTY STREET, LONDON *(TRADITIONAL HOMES MAGAZINE/CHRIS CHALLIS)*.

INTRODUCTION

THIS SHORT GUIDE is intended as a general outline of the development of the Georgian fireplace — not only the chimneypiece itself but also the grate and related fireplace furniture.

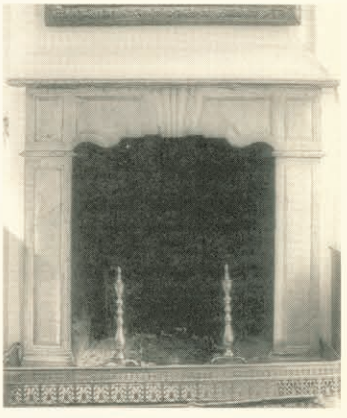
Before you begin any repairs or restoration, always consult a commercially disinterested expert. Your local District or Borough Council Conservation Officer, or a national organisation such as English Heritage or the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, should be able to help in choosing reliable and experienced craftsmen and operatives.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

THE CHIMNEYPIECE

THE BASIC disposition of the chimneypiece remained roughly the same from the early 18th century until after the Second World War: a projecting lintel-entablature supported by columns, pilasters or consoles which, from the 1720s onwards, generally carried a large overmantel. Before the Georgian era chimneypieces remained very plain and were rarely decorated — often being simple, flat slab surrounds; it was only with the new Palladian designs of the 1720s that profuse decoration and three-dimensionality became the norm for chimneypieces in important rooms. Many of these Palladian chimneypieces of the 20s, 30s and 40s were heavily ornate, with ponderous swags and scrolls and large shells and masks in the style of Inigo Jones and his Palladian disciple William Kent. They were frequently taken from the new architectural pattern-books which were now available to any architect, sculptor, mason or even house-owner. By the late 1740s lighter, more indisciplined Rococo designs had begun to appear; yet even these were comparatively tame when compared with their French models, and most houseowners continued to employ the stock Palladian styles with which they were most comfortable and familiar.

THE CHIMNEYPIECE FROM THE GREAT HALL OF ROGER MORRIS' MARBLE HILL HOUSE, TWICKENHAM, MIDDLESEX OF 1724-9 *(ENGLISH HERITAGE/GREATER LONDON PHOTOGRAPH LIBRARY)*.



SIMPLE EARLY 18TH CENTURY MARBLE SURROUND IN SPITALFIELDS *(DAN CRUICKSHANK)*.

William Chambers' *Treatise on Civil Architecture* of 1759 laid down the basic rules for the proportion of chimneypieces. 'The size of the chimney', he declared, 'must depend on the dimensions of the room wherein it is placed' (sound advice often ignored today). Similarly, whilst chimneypieces could be constructed from a wide variety of materials — 'stone, marble, or... a mixture of these, with wood, scagliola, or-moulu or some other unfragile substances' — in decorating them 'regard must be had to the nature of the place where they are to be employed.' Chambers' advice was both practical and aesthetic. Recommending that fireplaces should not be placed on an outside wall, since the unsupported stacks above would be more liable to collapse, he also advanced the somewhat prudish precept that 'All nudities and indecent representations must be avoided, both in chimneypieces and in every other ornament of apartments to which children, ladies, and other modest, grave persons, have constant recourse'.

Under the influence of Chambers' great rival Robert Adam, chimneypieces became less heavy in design, ponderous, high-relief Palladian decoration being replaced by low-relief, small-scale motifs of Neoclassical origin — particularly urns, delicate swags and figures from classical mythology. By 1790 the transformation was complete, the Regency chimneypiece being both simpler and more reticent than its Palladian predecessors. Indeed as a key feature in the room it was often excessively plain, with little or no superimposed decoration. Frequently it was only the two small paterae inserted at the top corners of the

surround, or recessed reeding at the sides, which relieved the overall severity of design; even the central tablet — the focus for applied decoration earlier in the century — was generally left unadorned.

Architectural elements, and not surface decoration, were now accorded the prime role in the composition. Outside the homes of the richest families (who could possibly afford the latest French confection) Regency chimneypieces rarely varied from this standard, rectilinear form; supporting pilasters were now rarely tapered, and attendant caryatids or terms were devices which only guarded the fires of the wealthy. With the Gothic fashion of the 1820s, however, decorative licence was back in fashion. The Gothic designs featured in Rudolf Ackerman's influential *Repository of the Arts* during the 1820s were covered with low-relief but vigorous embellishments, usually based on those ubiquitous motifs the quatrefoil and the crocket.

THE FIREPLACE AS THE FOCUS OF A ROOM: WATERCOLOUR OF THE DRAWING ROOM OF SIR JOHN SOANE'S HOUSE IN LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, LONDON, OF 1825 *(THE TRUSTEES OF SIR JOHN SOAN'S MUSEUM).*

The design of Late Georgian fireplaces was profoundly affected by technological improvements. 17th and 18th century examples had for the most part been too large to function efficiently. The invention of the Rumford stove in 1796 (see below) engendered a revolution in attitudes to the arrangement of the fireplace, as householders recognised the need for more precisely-controlled grates and for smaller fireplace openings. Thus the Regency fireplace grew not only increasingly simple, but also increasingly small. Paradoxically, though, the fireplace was more than ever the focus of the room. From the 1780s onwards furniture began to be moved more informally around the principal rooms and, given the vagaries of the British climate, it naturally gravitated towards the fire. Ackerman held that the resultant, heightened prominence of the fireplace in the principal rooms of the house was a peculiarly British solution; the corresponding effect, he asserted, was a healthier household and a healthier nation, with the fireplace 'the rallying point or conversational centre' of each home.

Chimneypieces could be constructed from a broad range of materials. White, grey or black marble, often with an inlaid relief of exotic coloured marbles, was most sought after — and most expensive. A cheaper and lighter alternative to genuine marble was coloured scagliola, made up of coloured plaster and other aggregates moulded in the form of carved and polished marble. Cast iron fireplaces were very prevalent by 1840, often blacked and with patterned tiles set within the splayed frames.

MID-18TH CENTURY BRISTOL AND (BOTTOM) LIVERPOOL DELFTWARE TILES *(FROM HANS VAN LEMMEN, DELFTWARE TILES, SHIRE 1990).*

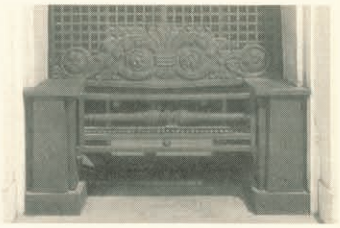
By 1700 tiles for fireplace surrounds were largely imported from the United Provinces (domestic tile production having largely ceased following the Dissolution of the Monasteries during the 1530s). The characteristic Dutch tin-glazed 'Delft' tile (often termed 'maiolica' after the island of Majorca, a trading centre for tin-glazed pottery) was white, with painted surface decoration in blue or, occasionally, brown. By 1750 a number of English factories were producing large numbers of 'Delftware' imitations, and had indeed become increasingly independent of Dutch designs and conventions, with a number of new colours — green, yellow, red and typically Bristolian 'bianco sopra bianco' white-on-white patterning — being added to the established blues and purples. In 1756 John Sadler and Guy Green began producing copperplate-printed tiles — printed onto Delftware blanks and fired at a low temperature — at their factory in Liverpool. Unfortunately, today many of these printed patterns have wholly worn off. However, it was only at the end of the Georgian period that the British tilemaking industry began to achieve great commercial success. During the 1830s Herbert Minton of Stoke-on-Trent built up industrial production of medieval-style stamped tiles, with patterns filled with liquid slip and then fired;

by 1840 the Minton Pottery was producing vast numbers of these indented tiles for fireplace surrounds as well as for floors and walls.

The decorative opportunities of the fireplace tile were not fully exploited until the 1850s; however, another ceramic product was much in evidence on many Late Georgian chimneypieces. By 1800 the Coade factory of Lambeth was marketing a range of 'Coade stone' chimneypieces, made from Eleanor Coade's highly durable ceramic, which ranged in price from an astonishingly cheap 25 shillings each to a by no means ruinous 14 guineas. By far the commonest materials for cheaper fireplaces, however, were plaster, composition and pine. Simple 'Greek' pine fireplaces were being offered by Chippendale, Haig and Co. for £1 19s. by the 1780s, whilst their plaster equivalents could be had for between as little as £1 and £6 each. In 1833 J C Loudon reported that plaster chimneypieces were selling in London for 7 shillings, with reeded ones at 28 shillings. Pine examples were invariably painted — usually a broken white (specified by Chippendale himself); they were never left bare, nor subsequently stripped.

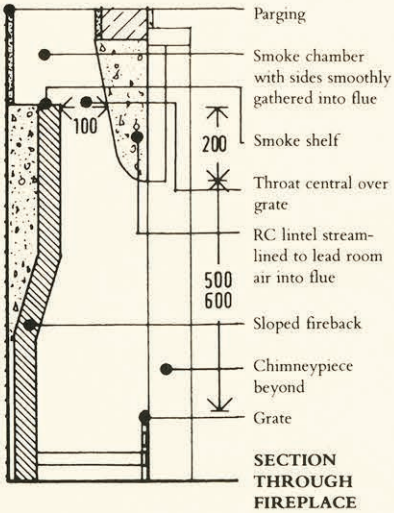
THE GRATE

EARLY IN THE 17th century andirons or firedogs were first introduced to support burning logs. By 1700 these were also being used to support simple basket grates, and by 1750 the 'stove grate' — a freestanding, rectangular basket with three fire bars placed between two andirons and a grid for falling ash at the bottom — was very common, being found in Chinese, Greek and Rococo styles. Gradually, however, these forms were eclipsed by the hob grate — a variant which first appeared in the 1720s and comprised a basket flanked by flat-topped hobs, designed to keep kettles and pots warm. By 1780 this type had become hugely popular; indeed, original or reproduction examples of these can still be widely found. The hob grate was not, like earlier versions, freestanding, but set into the fireplace and available in a simple 'duck's nest' design or in more complex forms such as the branded 'Bath', 'Pantheon' and 'Forest' grates —each distinguished by the form of the central plate linking the two hobs. A further improvement was the provision of movable iron plates to regulate the size of the chimney opening and thus the efficacy of the updraught — what became known as a 'register grate'.



REGENCY GRATES OF 1810 BY BURTON & CO FROM MARBLE HILL HOUSE, MIDDLESEX *(ENGLISH HERITAGE)*.

Even register grates, though, were still smoky and inefficient, with much of the heat disappearing up the chimney flue. By 1810, however, the situation had changed markedly: new, heat-efficient grates were all the rage, and as chimneypieces became simpler in design, the technology of the grate was becoming ever more complex. The progenitor of the fireplace revolution was the colourful figure Benjamin Thompson, an American adventurer and amateur engineer who was awarded the improbable title of Count Rumford by an enraptured Elector of Bavaria in 1784. During a visit to England Rumford was appalled by the primitive condition of the fireplaces he saw, where most of the heat went up the chimney and most of the smoke into the room. The practical result of his concern was the essay 'Chimney Fireplaces' of 1796. This comprised a number of recommendations: a constricted flue throat, to confine the fire to the grate and also to create enough low pressure to promote an upward draft; a smoke shelf to be placed behind the throat, to stop rain and soot falling back down the chimney; a smaller opening for the fireplace as a whole; and angled grate backs and sides, made not of iron (as had been used for hob and register grates) but of a non-conducting material such as firebrick, which would reflect the heat forward into the room.



ANATOMY OF A RUMFORD FIREPLACE *(EDINBURGH NEW TOWN CONSERVATION COMMITTEE/BUTTERWORTH PRESS)*.

The effect of Rumford's treatise was instantaneous. New, cast-iron 'Rumford' grates were soon being manufactured, whilst many existing fireplaces were modified to fit many of the Count's specifications. Not all his suggestions were immediately taken up, however the use of firebricks in place of the much-loved iron fireback did not catch on until mid-century.

Fireplace Furniture

LATE GEORGIAN firegrates were not intended to be purely utilitarian machines but stylish pieces of room furniture, too. Many of them were provided with applied ornament in brass or steel, while Robert Adam pioneered the use of 'paktong' — an expensive, silvery alloy of copper, zinc and nickel which was not difficult to cast, highly lustrous, easily engraved and did not tarnish. Paktong, brass or steel were, by the 1760s, additionally being used for fenders — a novel fireplace element provided with pierced decoration to match the style of the surround and grate.

By 1830 most of the types and designs of the fireplace furniture we are now familiar with had come into being: coal boxes, shovels, tongs, pokers, fire-irons, hearth-brooms, decorated bellows, hearth-stands. Fire guards, hooked to the top bar of the grate, were widely used, and often decorated with inlaid metal or alloy. Two items common by the 1830s have, though, since disappeared. Fire-screens of green-painted silk, rushes or canvas — either self-supporting or, more usually, tied to chair-backs — were prevalent, as were bell-pulls — not in themselves connected with the operation of the fire, but invariably placed by the chimney so as to be at the central focus of the room. Bell-pulls, Southey observed, were generally '. . . of coloured worsted, about the thickness of a man's waist' from which suspended 'knobs of polished spar' (the 'spar' being, Dan Cruickshank believes, probably of crystal glass).

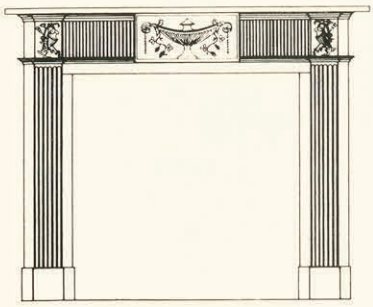
During the summer, of course, the fireplace could — even in Britain — be dispensed with. The question was then what to put in the gaping hole left by the absence of a cheering blaze. Formerly freestanding grates were simply bodily removed, and replaced with a vase of flowers or some such decorative device. With the new, fixed grates, however, a flower-vase, or perhaps a decorated folded fan, was lifted inside the grate bars. An alternative solution was to fix a board over the opening; this was often painted with a trompe l'oeil representation of the grate behind — even, on occasion, with illusory flowers — or of the decorative scheme of the room in which it was set, and could be decorated to blend with the fireside dummy boards so popular throughout the Georgian period.

LATE REGENCY FIREPLACE AT DICKENS' HOUSE, WITH WOVEN FIRESCREEN AND BRASS GUARD *(TRADITIONAL HOMES MAGAZINE/CHRIS CHALLIS)*.

Maintenance

The Chimneypiece

REPAIRS TO MANY chimneypieces may require specialist attention. However, some simple tasks can be tackled yourself. Discoloured marble surrounds can be cleaned with a mixture of equal parts of soft soap, quicklime and caustic potash, left several days and then removed. (Lime can now be obtained from a wide variety of sources; do, though, be extremely careful when handling it.) Marble can also be polished with a mixture consisting of two parts soda and water to one part pumice stone and one part chalk. Ingrained dirt on marble or plaster, though, is often best tackled by a professional sculpture conservator. Always ensure you know what the basic material of the chimneypiece is before you begin; many composition chimneypieces, for example, have been accidentally dissolved during paint-stripping by over-enthusiastic restorers.



Blocking off fireplaces can cause serious damp problems within the home, since air can no longer circulate freely and thus moisture is retained. (Remember, too, that most modern houses — with showers, baths, kettles and so on — are far more saturated with moisture than they would have been during the Georgian and Victorian periods.)

The Grate And Hearth

IF YOUR IRON grate or fireback is rusty, use a wire brush to remove rust and dirt, and clean using white spirit (not water). Steel grates can be cleaned with Solvol Autosol, applied with cotton wool or soft pads.

To blacken iron grates, black lead (Zebrite) is still widely available; alternatively, if you wish to paint the metal, finishes such as Manders Black Ebony paint can be used, applied in a very thin coat. Wax applied to matt black paint can produce an effect resembling black lead; never, though, use a black gloss paint for grates or fireplace furniture.

If you have to replace or repair the hearthstone, make sure that the timbers below and the sheet metal which is often inserted underneath the hearthstone are sound, as the principal floor beam often passes directly under the hearth.

SALVAGE AND THEFT

OFTEN YOU WILL find that an old house has had its original chimneypieces removed — perhaps only very recently. The choice then is whether to buy a modern reproduction or a salvaged original. Some local authorities are actually now recommending reproductions, given that the recent demand for authentic 'period' features has led to a huge growth in architectural theft.

Many architectural salvage outlets are wholly responsible and impeccably organised; some even compile dossiers on every item they stock. However, the huge increase in the demand for original architectural fittings over the last ten years has led to a proliferation of salvage firms with more dubious pedigrees who do not bother (or want) to check the provenance of the items they receive. As a result architectural theft is big business — and chimneypieces, highly saleable and quickly removed by skilled operators, are at the top of the thieves' shopping list.

AFTER A FIREPLACE HAS BEEN STOLEN . . . *(ENGLISH HERITAGE).*

There are a number of steps you can take to protect yourself from these increasingly sophisticated thieves:-

— photograph the fireplaces, and indeed all other interesting architectural features and fittings, and if possible take measurements;

— if the house if being refurbished (the time when the majority of thefts occur), box in your fireplaces, fit alarms if you have not done so already, and let the police know what is happening;

— if there is any building work underway (and particularly if you are away) then ensure that the contractor puts up a highly visible sign informing passers-by of the times the site is being worked on, and thus of the times in which any witnessed removal of architectural items is theft.

If you do use a salvaged chimneypiece, establish from the salesman exactly where it has come from. Without precise records of provenance, a salvaged item could well be stolen — and in purchasing it you are helping to promote the theft of such fittings.

Equally importantly, make sure that the chimneypiece is wholly appropriate for your own home. Oversized and over-elaborate chimneypieces can look ridiculous in a small space. Remember, too, that the position of the fireplace was governed largely by the function, not the appearance, of a room. Thus the less important the room, the smaller and plainer the fireplace. Unfortunately this basic common sense is often forgotten today.

If you do buy a reproduction, ensure that the style as well as the size is applicable to your own home. Many modern 'period' products are sad, clumsy pastiches of genuine historical precedents. Many, too, are in bare pine — in stark contrast to Georgian (and Victorian) practice. Georgian wood or plaster chimneypieces were always painted; stripping historic paint layers away to reval the basic structure reveals inferior woodwork that was never intended to be seen.

Sources Of Information

The Brooking Collection, housed at the University of Greenwich: an invaluable collection including grates and surrounds from every period open by appointment, tel. 0181 331 9897

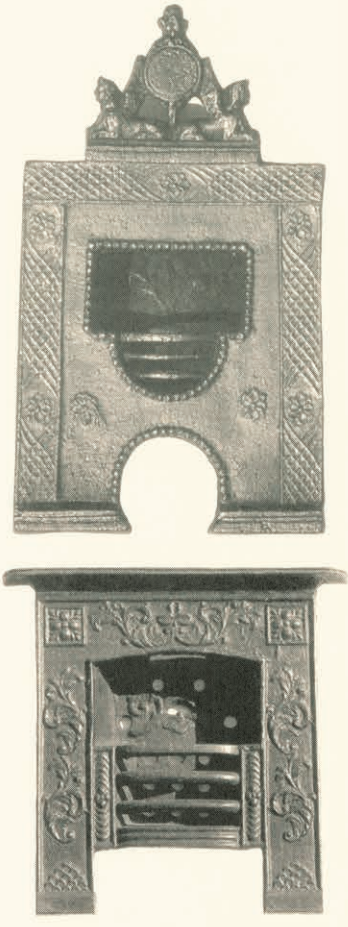
The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 37 Spital Square, London E1 6DY, tel. 0171 377 1644: sound advice on building history and structural repairs,including an invaluable range of advice sheets.

Temple Newsam House, Temple Newsam Park, Leeds LS15 0AE, tel. 01532 647321: expert advice on all aspects of the Georgian fireplace.

Trace Magazine, Mill Court, Furrlongs, Newport I.O.W., PO30 2AA, tel. 01983 826000: can help trace stolen chimneypieces and other architectural and antique items.

Department of Furniture and Interiors, The Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL, tel. 0171 938 8500: expert advice as well as a wealth of useful examples.

Examples of original chimneypieces, grates and fireplace furniture can be found in numerous houses open to the public.



Miniature Cast-iron Grates of the 1830s. Either Intended as Manufacturers' Samples or as Casting Exercises *(The Brooking Collection/Lark Gilmer).*

FURTHER READING

Robert Adam, ***Classical Architecture*** (Viking, 1990)

Ed. Pauline Agius, ***Ackerman's Furniture and Interiors*** (Cameron Press, 1984)

Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton, ***Life in the Georgian City*** (Viking Penguin, 1990)

Davey, Heath, etc., ***The Care and Conservation of Georgian Buildings*** (Edinburgh New Town Conservation Committee/Butterworths, 1978)

David Eveleigh, ***Firegrates and Kitchen Ranges*** (Shire, 1983)

Jacqueline Fearn, ***Cast Iron*** (Shire, 1990)

Christopher Gilbert and Anthony Wells-Cole, ***The Fashionable Fire Place*** (Leeds City Art Galleries, 1985)

Clare Graham, ***Dummy Boards*** (Shire, 1987)

Nicholas Hills, ***The English Fireplace*** (Quiller Press, 1983)

Alison Kelly, ***The Book of English Fireplaces*** (1968)

Alison Kelly, ***Crade Stone*** (Self-Publishing Association, 1990)

Roxana McDonald, ***The Fireplace Book*** (Architectural Press, 1984)

Steven Parissien, ***Regency Style*** (Phaidon Press, 1991)

Hans van Lemmen, ***Delftware Tiles*** (Shire, 1986)

Suggested pattern-books

Robert and James Adam, ***Works in Architecture*** (1774)

William Chambers, ***Treatise on Civil Architecture*** (1759)

James Gibbs, ***Rules of Drawing*** (1732)

William Glossop, ***The Stove-Grate Maker's Assistant*** (1771)

William and John Halfpenny: various works, from ***Practical Architecture*** of 1724 to ***The Country Gentleman's Pocket Companion and Builder's Assistant*** of 1753-6

William Kent, ***Designs of Inigo Jones, with some Additional Designs*** (1737)

Batty Langley: various works, from ***A Sure Guide to Builders*** (1729) to ***The Builder's Director*** (1747)

J C Loudon, ***An Encyclopaedia of Villa, Farm and Cottage Architecture*** (1833)

Robert Morris, ***The Architectural Remembrancer*** (1751)

James Paine, ***Plans, Sections and Elevations of Noblemen and Gentlemen's Houses*** (1767)

John Vardy, ***The Works of Mr Inigo Jones and Mr William Kent*** (1744)

W & J Welldon, ***The Smith's Right Hand*** (1765 ed.)

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