



SWEPT AWAY

Where there's smoke, there's fire. And where there's fire, there's usually a chimney that needs sweeping. Jill Starley-Grainger finds out why this traditional profession is once again a hot business



Fancy a career in one of Britain's oldest professions? The pay is good, and it's not as dirty as you think. 'When you get all the right equipment and learn to do the job properly,' says Essex-based chimney sweep Dave Moore,

'you can come home nearly as clean as when you left.'

Chimneys have been around since ancient times, and they've always needed to be cleaned to keep them working properly. Gas fires have dominated the market for the past few decades, but now wood fires – cheaper and greener than gas – are making a comeback, which means more people are now in need of chimney sweeps again.

As both a fireman and a sweep, Dave knows the importance of good chimney maintenance. 'About seven years ago, we started to see an increase in the number of chimney fires after a break of about 15 years,' he explains. 'It seems people were opening their fires up for the millennium celebrations, then continuing to use them, but not realising they needed to be swept.'

'There are now two or three generations of people who don't know how to light or run an open fire,' says Dave. That ignorance has been costing lives, with more than 130 deaths since 1996 as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by badly maintained chimneys.

'When a fire gets in the chimney, the fire brigade have to pour water down it to put it out, and it cracks the chimney stack,' explains Dave. This can lead to major structural damage for houses. If you use your fireplace, it's recommended you have it swept at least once a year. >



THE CLEAN UP
Dave Moore did an NVQ in Chimney Engineering to qualify to be a sweep – it took just nine months



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Like many chimney sweeps, Dave has a background in the fire service. Having worked as a fireman for 30 years, he already knew quite a lot of the technical information necessary to gain the qualifications to becoming a sweep. Retiring from the fire service next year at the age of 50, he wanted to make sure he'd continue to have a good income. 'I was looking into other careers, such as being a plumber or electrician and the like, but chimney sweeping just seemed to fit.'

GETTING QUALIFIED

To make the transition from fire brigade officer to chimney engineer, as they're officially known, Dave completed his training with a sweep, then he applied for the Heating Equipment Testing and Approval Scheme (HETAS) qualification, which is a vital certificate.

'I knew there were further qualifications you needed, so I looked into those. That's when I found out about the NVQ,' says Dave. The Level 2 NVQ in Chimney Engineering, delivered by the Construction Awards Alliance (CAA), the awarding body of CITB-Construction Skills, and endorsed by City & Guilds, includes General Workplace Safety, Efficient Working Practices, Moving and Handling Resources, and some optional units, such as Clean Flues and Appliances.

'The NVQ is an on-the-job, evidence-based qualification, and I completed my evidence in about nine months,' explains Dave, who was supported by the National Association of Chimney Sweeps (NACS) to do the qualification. 'It was professionally done and NACS did a brilliant job,' he adds.

In addition to sweeping, for which he charges £30-100, Dave also does CCTV chimney surveys, chimney consultancy for consumers, equipment testing and more. And the future is looking bright for chimney sweeps. Since setting up his business, DDM Chimney Sweep Ltd, a year ago, Dave has been rushed off his feet.

'I'm making more than adequate money from being a sweep, and when I go full-time after retiring from the fire service, I'll be earning more than I did as a fire brigade officer,' says Dave, chuckling. 'I wish I'd become a chimney sweep sooner.' ■

THE FALL AND RISE OF THE CHIMNEY SWEEP

As early as the Georgian period, it was appreciated that chimneys needed to be swept in order to avoid problems. A Master Sweep would use small boys to climb up the inside of flues and brush them clean. Metal scrapers were used to remove hard tar deposited by wood or log smoke.

Youngsters between the ages of five and 10 were apprenticed. The children used were parish boys, orphaned children and some were sold to the trade by their families. During this time there were no regulations or safety clothing to protect them. The conditions in which these children were kept were dreadful: some were forced to sleep in cellars on bags of soot, and washing facilities rarely existed.

In 1803, the Society for Superseding the Necessity of Climbing Boys was formed with the intention of finding equipment to clean chimneys without using children. Joseph Glass, an engineer from Bristol, is largely credited with developing the methods still in use today. The design consisted of a system of canes and brushes that could be pushed up into the chimney from the fireplace below, cleaning the flue as it went. At the time, however, these methods were rarely used, as it was still cheaper to use children rather than buy the equipment.

In 1840, Parliament forbade anyone under 21 from climbing a chimney, but this act had little effect since penalties were small. It was not until 1864, after many years of campaigning, that an act of Parliament outlawed the use of children for climbing chimneys. Lord Shaftesbury's Act for the Regulation of Chimney Sweeps established a penalty of £10 for offenders, a sizeable amount of money at the time. The Act had widespread support, bringing an end to climbing boys and ushering in a new era of professional chimney sweeps.

CLIMBING BOYS
This engraving depicts two London chimney sweeps around 1750. Children were used to climb the narrow chimneys before modern-day tools



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