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Choosing the right wood or multifuel stove

Increases in gas and oil prices over the last two years have led to growing interest in wood-burning and multifuel stoves – wood is renewable, carbon neutral and not subject to the supply problems that the pundits believe we could suffer. However, if you're new to wood burning and to stoves, you may need some advice on the type of product that is correct for you and your lifestyle.

A wood-burning stove burns wood, as the name implies. It typically has no riddling grate as wood likes burning on a bed of ash. When a riddling grate (a grate with an external control that shakes ash through into the ash can) is used the stove is termed a multifuel stove – it can burn wood or coal or a mixture of both.



Heat output – or chic looks?

There are two reasons to purchase a stove – for warmth (heat output) or for looks (styling). If you are buying a stove as a method of heating your room or your house, it is important that the stove is sized to match your heat requirement – there is no point in having to open the windows of your room because the stove produces more heat than you need! Stove showrooms are happy to calculate the heat output you require as long as you can provide details such as room sizes, type of house construction and any other types of heating in the property. Heat output can depend on the fuel you burn – the Solid Fuel Association (www.solidfuel.co.uk) produce their 'Guide to solid fuels' and the National Fireplace Association (www.nfa.org.uk) have a leaflet 'Fuels for your fire' both of which provide you with information on fuel suitability for your appliance.

If styling is the major factor in your choice, purchase models with lower outputs. Don't be tempted to buy a larger model that looks great

in the fireplace but produces much more heat than your family can cope with.

Cast iron or sheet steel

Virtually all wood-burning and multifuel stoves are made either from cast iron or sheet steel. Cast iron is the traditional material – it's hard wearing, conducts heat well and produces the subtle rounded lines and decorative panels so beloved of traditional stove enthusiasts. On the down side, it can be brittle, especially when hot and hates extreme thermal shocks. It is also more expensive than steel.



Steel stoves are welded together which makes an air-tight (and smoke-tight) design. Cheaper to manufacture they are strong and durable if a little less 'pretty' than their cast iron equivalents. Most buyers have their favourites and both types hold significant shares of the market.

Approved models



Whilst there is no legal requirement for stove manufacturers and importers to have their models tested this may become a Europe-wide requirement in the future. With this in mind HETAS, the testing and approvals body for solid fuel, have set up a system that enables UK manufacturers and importers to have their designs measured against criteria

which provides specifiers, builders and the public with information that they can use to make the complex calculations required when constructing heat efficient properties to meet of the Building Regulations requirements.

Many of the best known manufacturers have their stoves tested with brand names such as Aga, Clearview, Dunsley, Efel, HWAM, Nestor Martin, Vermont and Villager. Other major manufacturers intend to have their designs tested over the coming year. If you choose a HETAS approved design you can be sure that the manufacturer's claims on heat output and efficiency have been independently verified. A list of HETAS approved appliances is available online at www.hetas.co.uk or, in printed form, in the 'Official Guide to approved solid fuel products and services' (known as 'The HETAS guide' published by HETAS and priced at £10.00).

Smoke control areas

Smoke control areas were set up in the UK in 1956 to combat the smog which enveloped most major cities each winter. What our parents and grand parents called smog, we now recognise to be pollution which, at that time, was caused by burning ordinary house coal in fireplaces throughout the UK. These smoke control areas still exist in major cities and towns and it remains illegal to burn ordinary coal (rather than smokeless fuel) in these areas. Wood can only be burned in a small number of stoves that have been tested for use in Smoke Control areas and are exempt from the regulations.



To see if your local authority area is a smoke control area follow this link - <http://www.uksmokecontrolareas.co.uk/locations.php> and for a list of models that are exempted under the regulations to burn wood, follow this link - <http://www.uksmokecontrolareas.co.uk/appliances.php>. Details of exempt appliances are also shown in the HETAS guide (as mentioned above).

Working chimneys or flues

Before you decide to buy a stove it is necessary to establish whether the product you intend to purchase can be safely installed. Wood-burning and multifuel stoves up to 30KW output require what was once termed a 'Class I' flue which must have at least a 6" (150mm) diameter flue (or one with a similar cross-sectional area) – a small number of appliance types with heat outputs up to 50kW require flues up 7" (175mm) diameter.

If you have an existing chimney or flue get your local supplier to check that it is big enough and that it works properly. If the chimney has been blocked or boarded up, you will need to check it out. First, knock

your knuckle on the area where the blocked fireplace is. Does it sound hollow over most of the area? Then you probably have a hardboard cover mounted on a wooden frame. Carefully prise off the cover and remove the wooden battens. You will need to conduct what is called a smoke evacuation test but we explain this below.



If your knocking has revealed a solid surface all over the blocked in chimney breast, your fireplace has, almost certainly, been bricked up. Before removing all the bricks you should check that, once they're removed, the chimney will work. If the bricking up was done properly, there should be an air vent near the floor. Remove this, hold a taper, or a match that has been lit then

extinguished, near the opening. Is the flame (or smoke) drawn through it in to the chimney? If the flame or smoke is drawn through, you do not have a problem but, if it isn't, check that the chimney is open at the top (pot). If this is OK, you may need to spend money on repairing or relining your chimney.

If your fireplace doesn't have a ventilator, you will have to carefully cut out a couple of bricks 300mm (12") above the floor with a cold chisel and conduct the test suggested above.

Assuming you now have a working chimney you need to check on the following fireplace components (depending on what fuel and what type of fire you want):

- Is there a decorative fire hearth visible or hidden under a floor covering? For solid fuel, any 'stone' hearth should be in three sections to allow for expansion.
- You will also require a sub hearth (sometimes known as a 'constructional hearth'), below the decorative hearth, made of concrete and with its top at or near floor level. The sub hearth should be at least 125mm (5") thick and overlap the fireplace opening by 150mm (6") each side and 500mm (20") in front. A concrete floor is normally deemed to be a suitable sub hearth.

Complete new flues can be built in a variety of materials. One excellent option is the flue block system supplied by companies like Isokern and Anki. These systems include a choice of fire box including

designs that can house a stove plus the complete flue. Other systems for constructing flues are often based on rigid, twin-walled stainless steel flue pipes.

If the steps outlined in this article seem a little daunting, why not contact your local HETAS Registered Competant person (visit www.hetas.co.uk for details) or visit your local stove showroom where the helpful staff will 'hold your hand' through the various decisions you need to make. Many of the better stove showrooms are members of the National Fireplace Association (NFA) and their details can be found by visiting the NFA's web site at www.nfa.org.uk

Ends.

Solid Fuel Association – 0845 601 4406 – www.solidfuel.co.uk

National Fireplace Association – 0121 288 0050 - www.nfa.org.uk

HETAS – 0845 634 5626 - www.hetas.co.uk

Aga - 01952 642000 - www.aga-rayburn.co.uk

Clearview - 0 1588 650401 – www.clearviewstoves.com

Dunsleyheat - 01484 682635 – www.dunsleyheat.co.uk

Efel, HWAM & Nestor Martin(Euroheat) - 01885 490474 –

www.euroheat.co.uk

Wermont (BFM Europe) - 01782 339000 - www.cfm-europe.com

Villager - 08701 602202 – www.villager.co.uk

Anki - 01983 527997 - www.anki.co.uk

Isokern - 0 1202 861650 – www.isokern.co.uk

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