

BY CANDLELIGHT AND COAL

THE HISTORY OF KEEPING WARM
IN BRITAIN



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Introduction

There was a time, not so long ago, when staying warm in winter meant more than turning a dial on the wall. It was a daily effort – fires had to be tended, draughts patched, and layers of wool and flannel piled on like medieval armour. Before central heating arrived, warmth wasn't something you took for granted. It drew families together around the hearth, shaped how homes were built, and even influenced what people wore to bed.

This booklet takes a look at the many ways people in England kept cosy before radiators and electric blankets arrived on the scene – from flickering fireplaces to piping-hot bricks. Some methods were clever, some... less so, and a few could easily have gone down in history as “not recommended.” Either way, they paint a picture of life in a time when staying warm required a bit of ingenuity and plenty of patience.

So, pull up a chair and let's step back in time. And who knows — you might even pick up a tip or two for keeping cosy yourself. Let's face it, with the cost-of-living crisis, a few extra ideas can't hurt!



The Long Cold Winter

These days, winter is something that most of us rather enjoy. We light our scented candles, pull on our softest, cosiest jumpers, and treat ourselves to a pumpkin spice latte or two (purely for survival of course). The cold is something we manage – even romanticise – with fluffy socks, central heating, and a good blanket. But this hasn't always been the case.



For most of England's history, winter wasn't something to look forward to – it was something to survive. Before insulation, double glazing, and radiators, the cold got everywhere. Those charming old cottages you see on the front of Christmas cards? Lovely from the outside – less so when the wind's whistling through the thatch and you can see your breath in the sitting room. Stone walls and timber-frames certainly looked the part, but inside they were often draughty, damp, and downright freezing.

Back in the chillier centuries of Britain, central heating came with four legs and a tendency to moo. In many rural homes, families quite literally shared their living space with livestock — cows, sheep, and chickens were often tucked up nearby to keep everyone warm through the winter. It wasn't exactly glamorous — imagine trying to sleep with a cow snoring and farting heavily beside the hearth — but it was practical. After all, when the wind roared outside, a warm cow was better than a cold bed.

Winters could drag on and on. During what's known as the *Little Ice Age* – which took place roughly between the 14th and 19th centuries – England had far colder winters than we get now. The Thames often froze solid, people would hold 'frost fairs' on the ice, and snow could stick around for weeks. Out in the countryside, families huddled together in one main room, drawing heat from the fire, the livestock, and when all else failed, each other. Bedrooms were usually unheated, so heading upstairs at night was less a routine and more an act of bravery.

The fire ruled daily life. Cooking, mending, storytelling, complaining about the cold – everything happened around it. When the days were short and the nights dragged on, people turned to small comforts: sewing, reading aloud, or simply watching the fire. Staying warm wasn't about luxury; it was about getting through the season in one piece.

Even the wealthy didn't have it easy. Big houses had plenty of fireplaces, but also huge, icy rooms and endless draughty corridors. Servants rose before dawn to light the fires, but it could take half the morning before the chill lifted. In poorer homes, one small fire did its best to heat the whole family – and every spark was precious.

For centuries, the English winter was a test of patience, resourcefulness, and thick socks. It demanded respect, encouraged creativity, and left behind a patchwork of clever little traditions for keeping warm – many of which we still cling to, even in the age of central heating.



Thames Frost Fair

The Hearth – Heart of the Home

Early on, most heat came from open fires. Charming, yes – if you liked smoke in your eyes and half your heat disappearing up the chimney. By the late medieval period though, people were experimenting with enclosed hearths and chimney hoods, which was a vast improvement. Suddenly it was possible to sit by the fire *and* breathe at the same time – revolutionary stuff. Over the centuries the great open fires of medieval halls slowly gave way to smaller fireplaces with chimneys – a huge innovation that meant smoke finally *left* the building instead of hanging stubbornly above everyone’s heads.



Even in the humblest cottages, the fire was where the day began and ended. The first person to wake had the chilly honour of coaxing the embers back to life, while the last to bed banked* the fire to keep it glowing through the night.

* Banking a fire meant to prepare it for overnight so it could be easily rekindled the next day. Typically, this was done by smothering the coal with ashes and cinders to reduce airflow; while keeping the embers hot so a new fire could be started in the morning.

Coal fires became popular for domestic use in Britain from the mid-16th century, particularly as wood supplies dwindled. They were cheaper, hotter, and infinitely messier. By the mid-19th century, coal was everywhere — and so was the soot. The Industrial Revolution made coal cheap and plentiful, but it came at a cost. Chimneys belched black smoke, laundry turned grey overnight, and city air took on a permanent haze. London’s famous “pea-soup” fogs weren’t just mist — they were coal dust and pollution thick enough to blot out the sun.



In wealthier homes, a well-tended fire was a point of pride. Servants rose early to clean the grates, lay fresh kindling, and polish the fire irons until they shone. Parlours, drawing rooms, and bedrooms might each have their own fire. For the upper-classes, warmth was part of the décor – another sign that you had “made it.”



Meanwhile, for most people, the household fire was less a luxury and more a lifeline. The poor might have just one small hearth to heat an entire family, often

In the 1800s, a ton of coal could cost around 20 to 25 shillings – far beyond the reach of many working families. A poor household might only burn as little as a scuttle a day in winter, rationing it carefully between cooking and keeping the frost off.

in a single-room cottage where the kitchen, living space, and bedroom were all the same place. Fuel was precious, fires were small, and every scrap of warmth was stretched as far as possible. In workhouses, conditions were worse — draughty halls and meagre fires made sure no one mistook charity for comfort.

By the mid-19th century, some churches and charities tried to ease the “workhouse chill.” They set up **coal clubs**, where families could pay a few pennies each week towards a bulk delivery before winter hit. It wasn’t much, but a few extra shovels of coal could mean the difference between freezing and merely shivering.



In the end, warmth became a kind of social thermometer. The rich basked in it, the poor rationed it, and everyone else simply learned to make do.

Layer Upon Layer – Clothing for Survival

When your house felt like an icebox and the fire couldn't quite reach the corners, the only solution was to *wear the warmth*. The art of layering was taken to impressive – and occasionally ridiculous extremes.

In the Middle Ages, people piled on wool, linen, and fur until they resembled walking duvets. A wealthy Tudor might wear a shirt, doublet, jerkin, gown, and cloak – each one slightly thicker than the last. Meanwhile, the less well-off made do with whatever scraps they could find: patched up wool, old blankets, or, in a pinch, sacking. Fashion, particularly when it was cold, was less about looking good and more about not freezing solid.

Even undergarments did their part. Long linen shifts or shirts acted as the first line of defence, with layers of petticoats, stays, and overskirts to trap body heat. Men wore hose and breeches, often with knitted woollen stockings pulled up high. In the 18th and 19th centuries, quilted waistcoats and flannel underwear became all the rage – early thermal wear, if you like, though not quite as sleek as today's.

Then we come to accessories: mittens, shawls, mufflers, and caps, all made of anything vaguely insulating. Nightcaps weren't just a fashion statement – they kept your ears from dropping off while you slept. Some people even wore gloves in bed.

The result was a nation that looked permanently ready for an arctic expedition, even when they were indoors. But for centuries, layering up was the simplest and most reliable way to fight off the chill – proof that sometimes, even with all our modern technology, you can't beat a good bit of wool.



Bedtime Battles – Warming the Night

If there was one place people dreaded on a winter's night, it was the bed. Before central heating, climbing between icy sheets was a demonstration of remarkable courage – the kind that deserved a medal... or at least a hot drink. Bedrooms were often unheated, and in older houses you could practically see your breath as you got undressed.

To take the edge off, people got inventive. If you were well-off, you might get one of your servants to run a bed warmer – a brass pan filled with hot coals or embers – between the sheets before you climbed in... although this did come with the small risk of setting the bed on fire – a rather dramatic way to warm up!

For the less wealthy, there were simpler tricks: heated stones wrapped in cloth, or earthenware “pigs” filled with hot water and tucked by the feet. These early versions of hot-water bottles were surprisingly effective, though a little less huggable than the ones we have today.



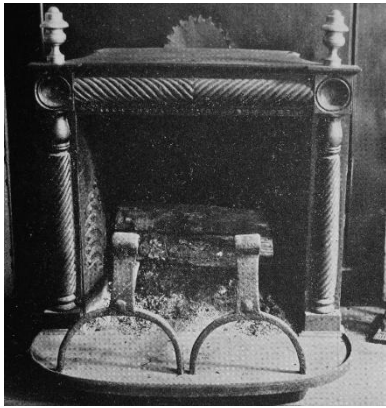
The beds themselves were as varied as the people sleeping in them. The wealthy might have feather mattresses piled high with woollen blankets with curtains drawn around the frame to trap in the warmth. In contrast poorer families often slept on simple rope beds... which would sag if the ropes were not pulled tight (hence the old saying “goodnight, sleep tight”), or on straw-stuffed mattresses laid on wooden boards. Couples, children, and sometimes even servants shared beds, not always for lack of space but for warmth; body heat was the most reliable heating system of all.

Sleepwear too was a serious affair. Long nightshirts, woollen caps, and thick stockings were the height of practical bedtime fashion. The idea of “slipping into something more comfortable” would have been laughable when frost was forming *inside* the windows.



In short, bedtime wasn't about luxury – it was about strategy. But once you had settled in and wrapped yourself in layers of blankets, the cold might have felt – for a little while at least – a world away... getting up in the morning would have been fun though!

Heating Innovations – From Hearth to Radiator



As the centuries passed, the English got steadily better — or at least more ambitious — at keeping warm. Fire was still very much the heart of the home, but gradually people began to think beyond the humble hearth.

Even as early as the 18th century, inventors were wondering if it might be possible to stay cosy without covering every surface in soot. Enter the great age of stoves, when cast iron changed everything: fireplaces became more efficient, and people discovered that metal held heat far better than stone. In 1742, Benjamin Franklin introduced the imaginatively named *Franklin Stove*, which promised to use less fuel while giving out more heat. It must have seemed like magic — though thanks to a design flaw, it proved a bit of a flop in Britain. Still, it paved the way for improvements to come.

By the Victorian era, heating had become something of an obsession. Coal grates, cast-iron ranges, and experimental “hot-air” systems appeared in grand homes — the kind with enough servants to keep the fires burning day and night. A few forward-thinking estates even installed early versions of central heating, using networks of water pipes or ducts to distribute warmth. Public buildings such as churches, schools, and hospitals often led the way, introducing large-scale systems long before the average household could dream of such comfort.

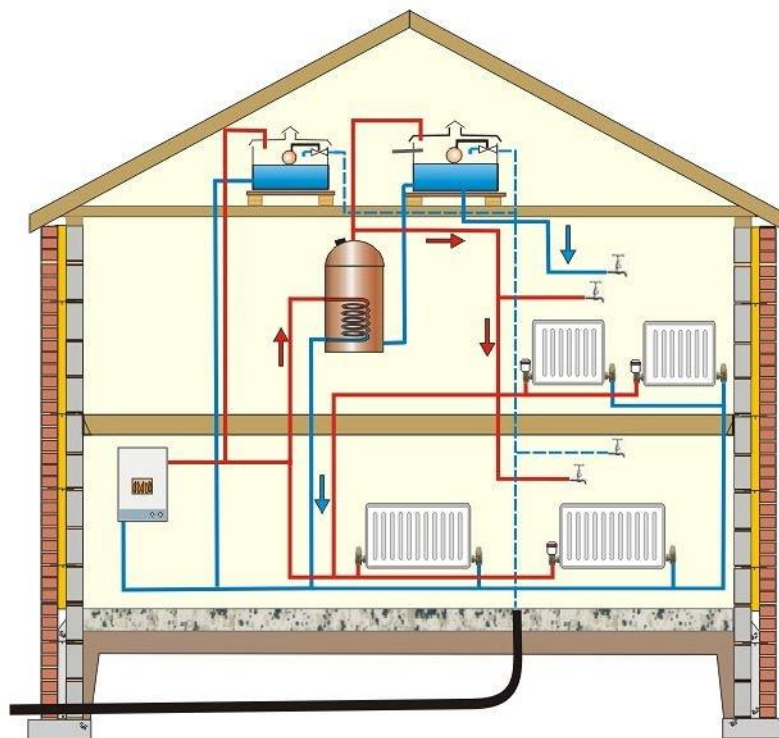
Of course, not every innovation was a roaring success. Hot-air systems piped warmth from basement furnaces into rooms through grilles — a clever idea until soot and smells joined the party. Gas fires arrived in the late 19th century and quickly divided opinion: some hailed them as modern marvels, while others eyed them nervously from across the room, convinced they might explode at any moment.



True central heating — the kind that quietly gurgled through radiators — didn't become common in British homes until well into the 20th century. Before 1960, only around five percent of households had it, as it was still considered a luxury reserved for the well-off. Most people still relied on open coal fires to heat individual rooms.



By the 1960s and 70s, however, new heating systems were transforming homes across Britain. The technology had finally become affordable enough for ordinary households to enjoy warmth at the turn of a dial rather than the poke of a fire. By 1977, nearly half of all homes had central heating, and by the 1980s it was hard to imagine life without it. House design began to change too — out went the sooty fireplaces, in came neat boilers and obedient radiators that didn't need constant tending. These days, central heating is so standard that about 95% of UK homes have it — the rest are either proudly independent, stubbornly chilly, or simply very fond of blankets.



Modern Comfort – Looking Back

Today, most of us can just banish the cold with the flick of a thermostat or the tap of an app. We pad around in T-shirts in January and complain if the radiators gurgle. It's easy to forget that not so long ago, warmth had to be earned – chopped, hauled, lit, and coaxed into life.

Yet there is still something timeless about gathering by the fire, even when we no longer need to. Perhaps it's the glow, the crackle, or just the ancient satisfaction of being warm while the world outside freezes. And with talk these days of energy saving and sustainability, it seems we're circling back – layering up, lighting stoves, and rediscovering that a good blanket and a hot drink can do the trick.



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