

The heart of a house shows you so much about that intangible but precious thing, the home. Until recent years when multiple television sets became the norm in households, the living room was the place where everyone gravitated to sit, watch television, chat, read, play and annoy each other. It was often the warmest room, the best lit and the most comfortable. Perhaps it still is?

Anyway, like most houses of the time, my house and Janette's house both enjoyed what modern estate agents would call 'two reception rooms', or alternatively, 'reception and dining rooms'. Call them what you will, there were two big downstairs rooms next to each other, plus a kitchen off to one side. Our parents had both resisted the urge to knock these rooms together to create a 'through lounge', which was very much the fashion of the 1960s. The 'through lounge' flooded the downstairs with light and allowed passers-by to gawp right through to your back garden. But in our case, not knocking through meant we had the choice of a back room and a front room.

Whether it was some throw-back to the Victorian concept of a front parlour, never used but kept for 'best', both Janette's parents and mine independently came to use their front room in the same way. First it was redecorated. Then it was left alone, and was generally freezing cold and slightly damp because the electric fire was seldom switched on. Then it became an easy place to dump stuff like ironing, schoolbags and mismatched furniture. It certainly didn't become a place for sitting in, using and enjoying. This was oddly perverse as in both our houses this was the room that was sunniest for most of the day, and let you slyly observe the goings-on on the street outside.

Both our sets of parents had decided way back that the back room was the living-room. These rooms faced our back gardens, so were I suppose a bit more private, but they also faced north and so were dark all day long. This was the room where the all-important television aerial came in from the roof. The television always sat in the alcove of the chimney nearest the window, in practically every house I ever went in.

But apart from that our living rooms were very different to each other. For a start there was the fire. This was the age before central heating, and in our houses the main source of heat and hot water was the living room fire. This began as an open fireplace with a grate and a tiled surround, but was soon replaced. In our semi-detached house the open fire was closed up by the insertion of a buttery-yellow enamelled coke-burning stove with doors that closed the fire in, and which had a 'back boiler' – in other words, the fire was literally heating up the household hot water supply. At times the water in the back boiler bubbled and boiled like a giant's trapped wind.

The thing about this kind of fire was, it didn't turn on with the flick of a switch. It had to be carefully constructed and ignited. I learned as a young child how to clear out the old ash and cinders, lay crumpled newspaper, wood and coke lumps, and coax it all into a nice warm glow with matches. I often did this unsupervised with nobody else around, and somehow I never burned the

house down or even scorched the rugs.

To keep the fire going all day you needed to feed it shovelfuls of coke from the coal outside bunker, and you also had to periodically 'riddle' it to shake out the burned-up ash and cinders. This was done by using a hook-shaped tool to pull vigorously at a handle attached to the interior fire grate. A shower of hot ash and cinder would then fall into a metal drawer that stood beneath the fire, which you had to empty every day.

You also had to periodically use a long iron poker to root about inside the red-out fire and bring out any 'clinker' – melted and fused burnt waste that was too bulky to be riddled out. Getting the clinker out of the fire was quite scary – like fishing for an angry red-hot crab. You had to leave the clinker to cool on the tiled hearth before you could safely move it anywhere. If you forgot to riddle, remove the waste ash and de-clinker, the fire would struggle and eventually go out from lack of oxygen.

Fashionable fire surrounds were available in legions of finishes. Shiny ceramic tiles, plain, patterned or textured, or expensive Lakeland green slate which could look unfortunately like a wishing well once in place, or teak-and-brass Rancher style inspired by the wide-open Prairies, which nobody thought too incongruous to install in 1960s Salford - these and more found their way into our living rooms.

But the fashion choices didn't end there. A 'hearth set' was essential to keep the area around the fire neat and tidy and to manage the fire itself. A hearth set comprised a hand brush, a small shovel, a pair of metal tongs and a long iron poker with a fancy handle. The long iron poker, designed as it was for leverage and ease of handling, often featured in cases of domestic violence and murder. A shiny polished hearth set was one of many marques of good housekeeping. In reality it was just easier to run the Hoover attachment over the hearth once a day, but hearth sets developed their own momentum and persisted long after their usefulness had diminished.

Janette's living room had been lovingly modernised when they moved into their unfashionable but solid Edwardian villa. This involved new bamboo-effect wallpaper, new doors with a single full-length pane of frosted glass, and a new coal-effect gas fire with matching low-level teak mantelpiece, whose niches and small shelves could hold many ornaments. It was the last word in chic and involved no shovelfuls of coke, no riddling, no hearth set and no mess at all. The gas was ignited automatically across three panels at the bottom of the fire. Above this a translucent hillock of moulded plastic coal was lit from behind by a red light bulb. A slowly-rotating metal fan turned in front of the light bulb, creating a pleasing effect of flickering flames. Well, *we* thought it was marvellous back then, and it was on the bleeding side of cutting-edge interior decoration in 1965.

It also nearly killed Janette and her family. Cosy in their cocoon of a living

room, watching TV in the dark, with mum, dad and gran dragging contentedly on Benson & Hedges, they often all nodded off. Me and Janette didn't smoke and we were lively youngsters, but if we sat down with her folks to watch an episode of 'Jason King' we were often asleep before the first advert break, and would wake up with a throbbing headache. We thought nothing of it. Some years later a gas fitter pointed out that the flue was not drawing and all the toxic gases from the fire were re-circulating in the room.....

Funny to think that if it hadn't been for draughty pre-double-glazing window frames we'd all have been another tragic statistic.