

# The Chimney Sweep Story

In the famous musical *Mary Poppins* starring Julie Andrews, an Edwardian Dick Van Dyke danced and sang 'Chim chim cher-ee', to great applause, forever immortalizing chimney sweeps as happy-go-lucky grafters. But the life of a Victorian chimney sweep was much darker and more brutal, relying on child labour and often causing horrific injury and the possibility of an agonizing death.

It was the early Romans who first constructed the chimney and flue, to funnel-off smoke from log fires out of the roof. However, the practice was not widely adopted. During the next few centuries, a central wood fire burning on hearth stones in the middle of the room was more common. By the 16th century a fireplace and chimney became more widespread, and in the 17th century citizens were even assessed by a hearth tax. The size of a house determined the amount of tax paid, and was calculated by the number of chimneys present.

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, coal became the main fuel for domestic heating. When overcrowded cities began to produce foggy smoke from chimney fires, Queen Victoria ordered all flues or chimneys to be swept on a regular basis. With royal approval the chimney sweep trade flourished.

Victorian working-class children were often required to supplement the family's income. It was more important to bring home a wage, than to get an education. Child labour was vital to Britain's economic success. In 1821 approximately 49 per cent of the workforce was under 20. Many children, some as young as four, worked long hours for menial wages. Child labour was cheap, and many were employed on farms in 'agricultural gangs', or in factories. Young children crawled beneath huge machinery to clean it, and many were crushed or killed in the process. Children also worked underground in coal mines, opening and closing ventilation doors, while older children pulled carts of coal to the surface.

In 1844 parliament passed a law which required children working in factories to attend ragged schools for six half-days a week, thus providing poor children and orphans with a free basic education. Then in 1870 the Forster's Education Act required that all parts of Britain provide schools for those aged between five and 12. However, not all schools were free, and many could not afford the 'school's pence', each week. It was only in 1891 that the possibility of free schooling for all was finally introduced.

The job of a chimney sweep was essential to avoid fires erupting in the home. When the interior of a chimney became choked or partially blocked with a build-up of soot, chimney fires could occur. Coal creates sticky soot which often does not come loose easily, and chimney edges need scraping where soot builds up. Since the Georgian period chimney sweeps climbed up inside the chimney and brushed the flues clean with a hand-held brush. They also collected soot and sent it to farms as fertilizer. Chimney sweeps wore top hats and tails – generally cast offs from funeral directors – or a flat cloth cap, jacket and trousers with a belt.

Master sweeps employed young boys (and girls) as young as five or six, to train as apprentice chimney sweeps. Master sweeps were paid a fee to feed, clothe and teach a child the trade. Some parents sold their children to the trade, but they were often orphans taken from the parish workhouse. Child labour was cheap and readily available, and when chimney sweeps (or climbing boys) became too large or ill to climb chimneys, master sweeps returned to the workhouse for more apprentices to exploit. They earned considerable amounts of money from chimney sweeps, which were poorly fed, slept on a bag of soot in a damp cellar and often beaten. A child chimney sweep would get up in the middle of the night, climb and clean their first chimney at about four o'clock in

the morning, then clean another six to eight chimneys a day. After each visit a servant would offer the chimney sweep and his apprentice a pint of ale.

Sweeping chimneys was a harsh and dangerous occupation. Chimneys were as narrow as nine feet square and sixty feet high. Small boys forced to climb barefoot inside large chimneys, often choking with soot, their sore hands and feet bleeding as they climbed higher. If boys cried out in fear of the cramped darkness, the master sweep would light a fire beneath them, making them climb quicker up the chimney. Many children suffered horrific injuries, suffocated, became trapped in narrow flues or fell to their deaths from a rotten stack.

In 1775 the first cancer resulting from exposure to a particular chemical was discovered by Sir Percivall Pott, a British surgeon. He found that coal tar in chimneys led to cancerous 'sooty warts', cancer of the testicles. The 1788 Act for the Better Regulation of Chimney Sweepers, stated that master sweeps could not make their apprentices work on Sundays, and that they had to wash off their soot before going to church. The act limited master sweeps to six apprentices, all of whom had to be of at least eight years of age. However, it was not enforced by the police, so had little effect.

The harsh conditions suffered by young chimney sweeps began to gain public sympathy. Prominent members of society protested that young lives were being wasted for cheap labour. Reformers argued that longer, more expensive brushes could do the job just effectively as a child.

Joseph Glass, a Bristol engineer, is generally recognised as the inventor of the type of chimney-cleaning equipment still in use today. His system relied on canes and brushes formed from whale bones being pushed up into the chimney from the fireplace below.

In 1800 a friendly society for the protection and education of chimney sweep boys was established. Finally in 1840, a law was passed making it illegal for anyone under 21 to sweep chimneys. The Chimney Sweep Regulation Act of 1867 tightened controls further, with Lord Shaftsbury a main proponent of the bill. By 1875 all chimney sweeps had to be licensed by law, and licenses were not issued to master sweeps that employed child chimney sweeps.

## **Chimney Sweeps and Weddings**

Traditions, customs, conventions and superstitions are usually all part of a wedding, and although most of these rituals started in times when marriage was a very different thing to what it is today, their core symbolism relates to the unification of a couple – to a 'couple' becoming one.

Furthermore, because they can still apply to 'marriage' as we know it today; they still exist, and are still followed:

- The Eternal Bond
- Throwing Rice
- Carried Over the Threshold and Into the Honeymoon
- Something Old, Something New
- A Sixpence In Your Shoe
- A Kiss from a Chimney Sweep

A kiss from a chimney sweep is a superstition that is increasingly recognised at weddings and originally started in England. This charming practice involves an authentic chimney sweep kissing the bride on her wedding day. The kiss is supposed to be lucky,

ensuring the marriage is a happy and prosperous one. Even if a chimney sweep, or a chimney sweep's brush is seen sticking out of the top of a chimney, it is considered lucky.

The tradition of a chimney sweep bringing the bride and groom luck on their wedding day is one that goes back many years, and there are many traditions associated with sweeps. In Victorian times if coachmen and race-goers saw a chimney sweep, they would raise their hats or call out a greeting for luck.

Coal, being connected to the fire and hearth, is also a symbol of the home. During World War I, soldiers carried small lumps of coal into battle, a lucky token for survival.

### **By Royal Appointment**

The tradition of chimney sweeps kissing new brides for good luck, had its origins 200 years ago... As people lined the streets of London to see King George III pass in his royal carriage, one of his horses began to gallop out of control. A chimney sweep dashed forward and single-handedly stopped the horse and carriage, saving the king. By Royal Decree, King George III proclaimed that all chimney sweeps were bearers of good luck and should be treated with respect. The folklore of a chimney sweep being lucky continues to this day.

Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh had a lucky chimney sweep on their wedding day in 1947, as reported in a newspaper at the time: *'Not by mere chance a sooty chimney sweep sauntered in front of Kensington Palace, on the wedding morning of Prince Phillip and Princess Elizabeth, thereby, affording the excited bridegroom an opportunity to dash out from the royal apartment, to wring his grubby hand for chimney sweep's luck.'*

Another reason they are deemed lucky could be that the high mortality seen in this occupation, led to a shortage of chimney sweeps. You were therefore lucky to meet one.