

Child Chimney Sweeps: A True and Shocking Tale

Nowadays, if you get your chimney cleaned by a professional chimney sweep, special tools are used to do the job.

There was a time in history, however, in which the work of cleaning a chimney was carried out by a child, who would climb the chimney flue (or shaft) while holding a brush over his head. The soot would fall over the child to the bottom of the fireplace. He would then slide back down the chimney, collect the soot, and hand it over to the master sweep, who, in effect, owned him. Yet this wasn't even the worst of it: small boys, usually 6 years of age, were bought from their **poverty-stricken** parents by a master sweep, or even directly from an **orphanage** or workhouse. The children then became the property of the master sweeps and were nearly always cruelly treated, essentially living the life of slaves in some of the worst conditions imaginable.



This practice of sending small boys up and down chimneys in order to ensure that they were free of soot was normal in England for approximately 200 years! The use of child chimney sweeps became widespread after the Great Fire of London, which occurred in September of 1666. When the city was rebuilt, building regulations were changed. Fireplaces had to have narrow chimneys, in an effort to stop a repeat of the London fire. As a result, it became the life of generations of small boys to be woken before dawn and **mercilessly** made to work. The children would climb up the chimneys using their elbows, back, and knees. The master sweep would scrub their knees to harden them; but before **calluses** formed, the children were usually seriously bloodied.



Small children would often get stuck inside a twisted chimney, which caused serious health complications and sometimes death.

There were many dangers associated with human chimney sweeps. Children got stuck in the 18-inch-wide (about 45cm) chimneys; if children had to go up chimneys which had turns, they often became lodged between tight corners and walls of soot. A second child would usually be sent into a chimney to rescue the first, and they could sometimes both die for various reasons. On occasion, the walls of a home would have to be torn down to remove the child or children lodged in the flue. Some master sweeps even lit fires underneath the children if they did not come down quickly enough.

These children received no wages, but they were beaten if they didn't work well enough to suit the master sweep. They received little food and usually slept in basements on top of the blackened bags used to collect soot.

As a result of their work, the children often had lung problems, and their eyes would swell, becoming sore and inflamed. Many children became **disfigured** or had stunted growth because they were placed in such unnatural positions before their bones were fully formed.

Chimney Sweep Cancer was unique to chimney sweeps and is the first recorded form of industrial cancer. A child who worked as a chimney sweep rarely grew to live past middle-age.



Even young girls were sometimes used as chimney sweeps.

Efforts were made through the years to put an end to the cruel practice of using child chimney sweeps, but they failed until 1875. The death of 12-year-old chimney sweep George Brewster became the **catalyst** that finally pushed through the law that ended the cruel practice.

George Brewster became stuck in one of the twisted chimneys in Fulbourn Hospital, sent up by his master, William Wyer. A wall had to be torn down to free George from his narrow prison, but sadly, he died a short time later. Wyer was charged and found guilty of manslaughter. George Brewster was the last child chimney sweep in England to die in a chimney.

Glossary

poverty-stricken: very poor

orphanage: home for children without parents

mercilessly: cruelly

calluses: areas of hard skin

disfigured: harmed so badly that the body is damaged

catalyst: something that causes something else to happen

manslaughter: unlawful killing