



“IF ENOUGH MONEY WAS PUT BEHIND THIS CAMPAIGN, THE PROBLEM OF UNNECESSARY AIR POLLUTION FROM WOOD BURNING STOVES WOULD BE GONE IN THREE BURNING SEASONS.” – HOW THE ‘BURNRIGHT’ INITIATIVE IS CHANGING PUBLIC ATTITUDES

INTERVIEW: JOHN BYNORTH

A TRIP made by British chimney sweeps more than a decade ago to Germany has inspired a new campaign which is having a dramatic impact on the way households burn solid wood fuel.



Edinburgh-born Lawson Wight (left), who is behind the BurnRight initiative, and his colleagues discovered in Bavaria in 2007 that the country was “25 to 30 years ahead” of the UK in the use and regulation of domestic burning.

The discovery came just as sales of wood burning stoves were starting to take off in Britain, a trend which has led to increasing concerns about high levels of Particulate Matter (PM) from poorly maintained stoves or incorrect burning practices damaging air quality.

The Scottish Government is considering ways to deal with the impact of domestic burning in its refresh of the Cleaner Air For Scotland (CAFS) strategy and a ban on the selling of wet wood and restrictions of the types of wood burning stoves that can be sold are widely expected to be announced by DEFRA.

Lawson, the current Chair of the Guild of Master Chimney Sweeps, has been very encouraged by the success of the campaign to encourage chimney sweeps to spread the message to their customers about safe burning practice.

Lawson narrates a three-minute video on the BurnRight website, which launched in March. It provides tips and other advice on how stove owners can cut air pollution, and save themselves money, by correctly operating and maintaining their solid fuel appliances.

There are an estimated 2,000 Chimney sweeps in the UK, with around a further 1,000 who are not registered to a particular trade association or are part-time. Chimney sweeps realise the benefits of preaching the air quality message to their clients.

An increasing number have been acting on the initiative and taking advice leaflets, which link to the campaign’s website and video, into homes around the country as they carry out their regular cleaning in households. Late summer and autumn are traditionally the busiest time as people get their chimneys and appliances in order for the start of the burning season.

Recalling how the trip to Bavaria first set the ball rolling, Lawson said: “There is no cultural history of people burning wood in closed appliances in this country, unlike in other European countries and even north America and Canada, so people in the UK are usually unaware of what causes problems and how to ‘get it right.’”

“About 10 to 15 chimney sweep trade association members went on a trip to a German chimney sweeping school in 2007. I was already starting to question some of the anomalies being found in UK stoves and the kind of deposits we discovered inside the inside the chimneys.

“It is commonplace to find two people in different homes in the UK with the same stove, burning the same type of fuel yet producing two different levels of results in terms of clean burning.

“Germany was 25 to 30 years ahead of where we were at the time. We attended a training course in Bavaria and found that German chimney sweeps must undergo training for three years before they are allowed to work in people’s homes. We went into properties and were surprised at how clean their chimneys were.

“That’s because stoves in Germany are much more efficient and there is a legal obligation for people to have chimneys swept and the boiler serviced. Our legal system is not set up to allow something like that, but we could possibly do with something like it a little further down the line. The efficiency of stoves in the UK is improving now.”

The launch of the BurnRight campaign followed a meeting with DEFRA air quality officials in the spring of 2017. Members of the three chimney sweep associations were invited into the Whitehall department for talks as the issue of air pollution from burning stoves became a pressing one for policy-makers.

Lawson said: “DEFRA were curious to know what we could bring to the table and they had already been talking to the installation side of the industry, as well as appliance manufacturers and fuel suppliers.

It benefits chimney sweeps to hand out advice to tackle air pollution, said Lawson, who added: “The chimney sweeps’ interest lies in providing good service and advice to their customers. We don’t sell appliances, fuel or chimney systems. The advice they give out needs to benefit their customers – or they will be out of a job. If chimney sweeps give good advice, they get referrals and can build up more profitable businesses.”

Lawson: “At the DEFRA meeting we explained that burning dry wood at low temperatures is the main problem. They had thought the issue of wet wood being burned (which creates extra smoke and air pollution) was more of an issue.

“That view caused surprise among the chimney sweep association leaders’ present. The main cause of unnecessary pollution when it comes to the burning of wood is caused by the incorrect burning temperature of a fuel, with people often leaving their stoves on overnight at the wrong temperature (a process known as ‘slumbering.’)

“Generally, 75% to 80% of stoves in this country are designed to have the air supply closed off too much by operator. If the air supply is closed off, the burning temperature drops and it doesn’t matter how wet, or how dry, the wood was in the first place – ‘incomplete combustion’ occurs. This is when volatile hydro-carbons, tars, creosote, and everything else connected with these pollutants, goes straight up the chimney.”

Lawson said many stoves could be turned into an ‘absolute tar factory’ simply by putting them on at a high temperature, loading them with around three kilos fuel, and closing the air supply down.

He said: “Because the stove is quite well sealed up during the course of a burn, which can take up to eight hours, an additional 1.5 to two kilos of tars can be created which goes out up the chimney.

“About 80% of fuel from any type of wood is in the form of these volatile hydro-carbons. When the temperature is not high enough, the volatiles don’t burn properly, and stuff is coming out we don’t want to see. It’s also waste of money as unburned fuel is going up the chimney. Some of the material also solidifies inside the chimney and can cause blockages.

He said the chimney sweep associations knew 10 years ago that low temperature burning of wood was “bad for chimneys, for people’s wallets and the environment. These three things have been swapped around now –the environmental issue has come to the fore.

“When smoke is coming out of a chimney, something at the bottom is not burning quite right. When you first light the fuel, everything is cold – so lots of unburnt fuels are escaping and lots of smoke is coming out of the top. But once everything is properly hot, there should be no smoke from the chimney.”

The BurnRight campaign website plans to provide updated tips on “exactly this sort of thing,” said Lawson.

He explained that most owners of wood stoves and other similar appliance were ‘really engaged’ with how to burn safely and had a thirst for knowledge about how to use their expensive equipment correctly.

Often they have spent thousands of pounds on the equipment, which takes pride of place in their living room or conservatory, and have a desire to not see the appliances damaged or send pollutants into their neighbourhood air.

He said the rise in the home heating source had been driven by fashion; the boom in home improvement and environmental concerns, including extreme fears that one day Britain’s power supplies may be cut by an external country with access to them.

Even former prime minister David Cameron helped promote interest in the appliances after he was pictured in newspapers sitting on the steps of his new garden hut, which contains a wood burning stove.



Lawson added: “There’s an emotional attachment to being near fire and often people have invested time, energy and emotion into buying a stove for their homes.

“It takes pride of place in their living room, even when they are not using it. You don’t find people sitting in their chairs staring admiringly at their gas boiler!”

Lawson said the solid fuel stove in his Cambridgeshire home is used to heat the entire four-bedroom property. “The only time I used the central heating in my home was over Christmas when we were away,” he added. However, he accepted that many people only use the wood burning stoves to heat one small room.

He said some of the problems in the industry were caused by firms installing stoves, adding: “There is still a lack of education and awareness in the industry regarding aspects of installation and fuel use, but things are starting to change quickly. This is partly because we are opening up and providing information outside of our trade associations, which we previously didn’t do properly.”

Lawson said that it would be a ‘bad idea’ and unpopular for the UK and devolved administrations to follow Germany’s example and introduce laws to make it compulsory for people to regularly have their stoves cleaned. He said: “We don’t need compulsory actions to improve the situation as it would cost a lot of money. We are better off giving good sound advice from the point when people buy stoves.”

Lawson said the chimney sweeps associations and BurnRight campaign were in discussions with the Stove Industry Alliance, which represents the manufacturers and distributors of appliances, over how they could work together more effectively to deliver messages to consumers.

He said: “The result of these discussions will get the right messages onto the BurnRight website. If that means BurnRight information is provided to consumers with each stove that is sold, then that’s a good thing.”

Lawson said careful thought went into the presentation of the BurnRight campaign and website to ensure it won support from across the chimney sweep profession and solid fuel industry.

He added: “Due to the fragmented political situations within the chimney sweeping and solid fuel industry, the campaign needed to be completely impartial and independent of any organisation or companies.”

Lawson said the ‘Getting It Right’ video on the website will be updated shortly to make it more hard-hitting. Environmental health officers will be interested to learn there are plans to provide information about Smoke Control Areas and further tips on the proper use of smoke-less fuels.

He said: “The video itself needs to grab the viewer’s attention a bit more. The advice is essentially right, but we’ll be adding another 45 seconds or so onto the video to show people what happens when you don’t burn wood at the correct temperature and the results of other incorrect burning procedures.

“We have images of what a chimney looks like when it’s blocked by hard, solid deposits and other things which we plan to use.”

Lawson estimated 20% of his customers were doing “everything right” when it comes to burning fuels properly. He believed 5% had poor burning habits, but that if they followed the guidelines properly could make a big difference to the levels of PM material being released into the air.

“The remaining 75% fall somewhere in between and could all contribute towards improving air quality. (Individually) they are not ‘heavy polluters,’ but they are the biggest and most important group to educate (about good burning practices). They are the ones who are collectively contributing the most pollution,” he added. “They are just completely unaware (of what to do) and often feel that if they close off the air to a stove, that will make the fuel last longer and has to be a good thing. They ARE making the fuel last longer, but are also wasting money and contributing to air pollution.”

“I have seen the light go on in so many people’s eyes when I explain what’s wrong and how to get it right. They never go back to their bad old habits after being shown. Most people could do with some information about the way they use their stove, which could be something simple like whether they need a rope seal on the door to prevent leaks. A stove that is leaking cold air in can cause the burning temperature to drop, affecting its efficiency.”

He said the BurnRight campaign had its foundations in an initial idea to provide advice and it became apparent a ‘one-stop’ website not tied to any particular industry or association was required.

Lawson, who grew up in North Berwick, said: “We created the website to pull things together in one place and back up the information chimney sweeps were giving to customers – the BurnRight information acts like a third-party reinforcement of the sweeps advice.”

He is very grateful to chimney sweep colleague David Sudworth for pulling together the BurnRight campaign material and helping with the launch. He added: “David has a professional background in journalism and running campaigns. We couldn’t have done without him. We are doing this on a shoestring and don’t have any funding yet from DEFRA’s air quality unit, but they are very keen on the information and awareness and it is something we are looking at obtaining.

“We had a standing start with no fanfare at the launch in March, except for around 100 people at our trade show. The chimney sweep associations have been very proactive in rolling it out to their members. DEFRA then came on board to link into the campaign and the information has been rolled out across the UK.”

Lawson said the campaign was now supported by printed material – a flyer and an eight-page glossy brochure giving advice and signposting people to the BurnRight website. These are for sale at cost-price.

He said: “We don’t want to put any barriers up to prevent the information getting into the hands of chimney sweeps because they are obviously key to the campaign’s success. We had an initial print run of 5,000 of the advice guides, followed by another 20,000 brochures a month ago and around 50,000 flyers. They’ve nearly gone so we need another print run soon. It’s the tip of the iceberg.”

He said chimney-sweeps are increasingly aware of the direct benefits of the campaign for their livelihoods, with customers who receive good advice keen to come back to them. There are also benefits from improved air quality in the communities in which the chimney-sweeps operate, and frequently live in themselves.

The campaign has been bolstered by support, announced last week, from major industry supplier Valiant Fireside.

The BurnRight website has an additional [‘Trade Information’](#) section which can be reached by inserting the password (the password is: **burnright**) It gives links to downloads of the flyer, and other campaign tools. This section contains a further video providing background information about the campaign and why the industry’s involvement is so important to its success, helping chimney-sweeps spread the message.

He said: “We know from our own areas and customers that if you can raise their awareness beyond a certain point, then the whole thing gets much better.

“The season for cleaning chimneys is well under way, even though we have had a very hot summer – chimney sweeps have been out working even though it has been 32°C sometimes - before the start of the autumn burning season.

“Nearly every single day we are receiving new orders for brochures and fliers.”

He said it was noticeable that people are hungry for information about wood stoves after a spate of stories in the media about high levels of air pollution from wood burning stoves. He added: “They are sensitised to the press coverage which has taken place over the last year. They have all seen or heard stories saying there will be a ban on wood burning stoves in certain cities or restrictions on the sale of wood. So they are very receptive to any information about wood burning stoves.

“One of our members who had printed off one of our fliers to give to customers said he had never had a response like it during 20 years in the industry. He is sometimes turning up at people’s homes and they are on the doorstep with the fliers in their hands.

“It’s fair to say the campaign has come at the right time...”

Lawson also made a plea for more funding for the campaign – which has been launched on a budget of around £9,000 – saying that it could have a dramatic impact in cutting air pollution from home burning.

He added: “If enough money was put behind this campaign to raise levels of awareness, the problem of unnecessary air pollution from wood burning stoves would be largely gone in three burning seasons.”

CASE STUDY: EDINBURGH RESIDENT, RHODA, ON HER EXPERIENCES OF POOR BURNING PRACTICES.

It is so important that wood burning stoves are used correctly. Wood needs to be properly dried before purchase and then stored in a dry place. If not, the stove burns at a too low a temperature and produces more pollution, especially particulate matter which is so harmful for our health. The stove also needs to be professionally cleaned every year, otherwise harmful substances are produced, including creosote, which is also very flammable.

Our previous neighbours bought dried wood for their stove but then stored it outdoors leaving it exposed to rain. This led to profuse smoke and fumes entering the surrounding properties. The stove also wasn’t cleaned and the fumes became increasingly pungent and toxic.

We were informed by a roofing tradesman that creosote produced by this wood burning stove was a fire hazard to the entire building.

Although staff from environmental services at City of Edinburgh Council were helpful, the stove was a type permitted by DEFRA and they were unable to independently observe the smoke and fumes as these mostly occurred at evenings and weekends.



USEFUL LINKS:

Further details of the campaign can be found by visiting www.burnright.co.uk

The Scottish Government's Cleaner Air For Scotland (CAFS) strategy can be found here <http://www.scottishairquality.co.uk/lez/>