Sotheby’s London to hold first-ever Sale of Chimneypieces

--200 chimneypieces and fire grates from the antique stock of Chesney’s, the leading fireplace suppliers, to be sold in September –

A recently-discovered chimney piece, designed by G.B. Borra c.1755, once part of one of London’s great “Lost Palaces” Norfolk House, in St James’s square. Est*: £200,000-300,000

ON TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14TH, Sotheby’s will hold its first-ever sale dedicated entirely to antique chimneypieces and fire grates. The sale –among the first of its kind at a leading
auction house – will bring to the market some 200 rare, important and unusual pieces, ranging in date from the 1600s to the 19th century, and emanating from all corners of Europe. Amassed with a discerning eye over a period of some 25 years by Paul Chesney, founder of the leading eponymous fireplace suppliers, the pieces to be sold represent almost the entire antique stock of the company. With the business now focusing on its increasingly international operation of producing and supplying fine reproduction fireplaces, the company’s antique stock is to be released onto the market in a vast sale that will occupy almost all of Sotheby’s New Bond Street gallery space. While the sale as a whole will allow for an overview of chimneypiece design over the course of some 300 years, many of the individual pieces to be offered have interesting stories to tell: some are pieces of great architectural importance; some demonstrate the extraordinary craftsmanship of names such as Robert Adam; some are quirky and unusual; and all are fine examples of their period.

Henry House, Senior Director in Sotheby’s Furniture Department and specialist in charge of the sale, said: “Chimneypieces are traditionally the heart of the home: they’re the place where people gravitate for warmth and for comfort; but very often, too, – as this sale demonstrates – they are of enormous intrinsic beauty. Their ability to add drama and interest to a room has long been recognized by those of us who have spent long hours seeking out the hard-to-find examples of our choice in architectural salvage yards and the like. The appearance on the market, therefore, of such a wide range of important, interesting, and also decorative pieces is set to be the answer to many a fireplace hunter’s dream.”

Chesney’s

Founded by brothers Paul and Nick Chesney 25 years ago, this top-ranking company has come a long way since its chance beginnings. Having read law at Cambridge, and having subsequently qualified and practiced as a lawyer, Paul Chesney realised that the law was not the career he wanted, so he took on work as a painter and decorator while deciding what to do next. It was then, while working on a job in North London in 1985, that he noticed a Victorian chimneypiece lying in a skip. He took it home, thinking it would add character to
the flat he was renting. In the end, it was too large for the space, but Paul’s interest had been sparked; he downed brushes and set about seeking out the best possible examples of old fireplaces he could find and afford. Now, some 25 years later, his company owns the largest and finest collection of antique chimneypieces known to exist.

Paul Chesney said: “Although my love of antique fireplaces remains as strong as ever, in recent years, as the business has expanded, it has become more and more difficult to find exactly the right original fireplace for every client, so we have increasingly focused on the production of top quality copies, made by taking casts from different elements of the finest antique examples. As this has now become the mainstay of our business, I have decided that the time has come to recognize this and part with the antique inventory.”

The Norfolk House Chimney Piece
This extraordinary example of the best in fireplace design and execution was, for over half-century, believed to be lost. The crisp, fluently carved piece was once the centerpiece of the Saloon, or “Green Damask Room”, in one of London’s most celebrated “private palaces”: Norfolk House. This splendid palace, the interiors of which were “infinitely superior to anything in this Kingdom… and to most things… in Europe” (Capt. William Farrington, 1748) was built between 1748 and 1752 on the site of an earlier house (also Norfolk House).

While each of the rooms was decorated in a slightly different manner, it was – thanks to the influence of the incurable Francophile Mary, 9th Duchess of Norfolk – the rococo style that
dominated. But even the wildest dreams of the indomitable Duchess (or “My Lord Duchess”, as Horace Walpole referred to her) could not have been made real without the creative genius of Italian architect Giovanni Battista Borra (1713-1770), who was responsible for almost every decorative detail inside the house, from the grimacing monkeys above the doorcases in the ballroom, to the rococo extravagance of the Music Room (“the most fluent expression of the rococo to be found in England”, now fully recreated in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London), to the fireplace that, long considered to be lost, now forms the centerpiece of September’s sale.

In 1938, Norfolk House suffered the same inter-war fate as many of London’s great aristocratic townhouses: and was sold and demolished in order to make way for an office block. The Times lamented the loss: “The passing of Norfolk House is regretted for its own sake and also as a symptom of the wholesale destruction of these buildings which lend dignity and grace to the capital… It is not an exaggeration to suggest that since the war the damage done by the housebreaker and the flatmonger to the aesthetic value of London is comparable to the results that may be conceived from an air raid of the future.”

Prior to the demolition, the contents of the house, the chimneypiece among them, were removed; they were sold at auction later that year, where after all trace of them was, for the most part, lost. Such was the fate of the chimneypiece until, some 12 years ago, Paul Chesney came across the central frieze. He knew nothing, at the time, of its history, but the carving was so crisp and assured, and the head of Mercury so distinctive, he felt he had to buy it, as an objet d’art if nothing else. He kept it, often admiring its craftsmanship and wondering about the kind of home it must once have graced, until in autumn 2000, thumbing through a copy of Country Life he came across full-page black & white image of a beautiful room, in the centre of which was his frieze. The room depicted was the Saloon at Norfolk House; the other elements of the chimneypiece (the jambs with corbels and trailing foliage) were clearly visible, and so the hunt for those began. It ended in 2005, when the jambs appeared at sale in
the West Country, and soon after, the various elements of this extraordinary chimneypiece were once again reunited.

**Fire Surrounds / Chimneypieces: A Selection**

Left: A cast iron arts and crafts chimneypiece and overmantel mirror in the manner of the Glasgow School with original faux wood grain finish. Made by Wilson and Mathieson Foundry, c.1900. Est: £4,000-6,000

Right: An unusual Arts and Crafts Portland stone chimneypiece, c.1890, with heavily stylised Palms to the jambs surmounted by a finely carved group of three Peacocks. Est: 10,000-15,000

Below: These two chimneypieces display the style of colourful inlay work widely attributed to the Dublin workshops of Pietro Bossi, an Italian craftsman who worked in Dublin from 1785 to 1798. Not much is known about Bossi, although much inlay work of the late 18th century is commonly known as “Bossi-work”. He used coloured marble inlay and also a coloured paste inlay, known as scagliola, on a white marble ground. Bossi’s process was a closely guarded secret and was apparently carried out behind closed doors. He left Dublin in 1798 under a cloud of suspicion implicating him with the revolutionary movement. Est: £40,000-60,000 (left) and £60,000-100,000 (right).
Right: An important George III statuary marble and blue john chimneypiece, c. 1780, displaying many of the hallmarks of the renowned Architect Robert Adam. The central tablet with the classical carved detail and the carved columns are typical of Adam’s work. The use of blue john as an inlay is also typical and could possibly have been conceived to harmonise with the display of blue john objects in the room that it was intended for. The symbolism of the central tablet is astronomy and suggests that the chimney piece may well have been designed for a library room. Est: £70,000-100,000

Left: A George III giltwood chimneypiece, c.1760, in the manner of Matthias Lock, one of the first Englishmen to work in the French rococo style. Etching his own designs, he produced a number of publications, and for more than 10 years before the publication of Chippendale’s *Director* his engraved designs for rococo furniture and other items such as chimneypieces, were the only ones of their kind in England. Est: 12,000-18,000.

A finely carved Siena marble chimneypiece Italian, circa 1825, repeating anthemion design and console jambs terminating in lion’s paw feet. Est: 15,000-20,000
Grates, Fire Baskets, Fire Dogs

Left: Detail from The Zodiac Chimneypiece, c.1900, attributed to Sir Robert Lorimer (1864-1929). This striking chimneypiece, made for Craiglockhart House in Edinburgh, features the 12 signs of the zodiac in finely carved detail. Lorimer was a prolific architect, noted for his restoration work on historic houses and castles, and for his promotion of the Arts & Crafts style. Est: £8,000-12,000

Right: One of a pair of Regency Paktong fire irons in the Baroque manner, early 19th-century. Paktong was a rare Chinese alloy imported into Britain in the 18th c in very small quantities (export from China was forbidden, so it reached Europe only by circuitous routes). Prized by European craftsmen for its silvery non-tarnishing appearance, it was much favoured by Robert Adam, who recognized its qualities as ideal for use in fireplace equipment. Paktong items are exceptionally rare. Est for the pair: £3,000-5,000

A Regency bronze and steel fender (c.1815) from Fasque House, the family seat of William Gladstone in Fettercain, Aberdeenshire. Est: £2,500-3,500

Right: A Regency steel and brass Sarcophagus firegrate with Egyptian figured pilasters, after a design by George Bullock, c.1820. Est: £4,000-6,000

Left: An engraved George III Irish brass and wrought iron register grate, in the manner of George Binns of Dublin. Est: £3,000-5,000

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*Estimates do not include buyer’s premium

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