

In New Zealand superb wood burners are available. Terry and I have always wanted one. Our desire to own one was kindled on the skiing trip we made on our first visit to this country. We used to return from the icy ski fields and warm our frozen bodies in front of the roaring wood burner in the lodge. I am prepared to admit that perhaps we may have a romantic and idealized memory of how wonderful they can be...

When we bought our house it came with a very round, very large, and a very full bellied wood burner, with the word "Woodbine" cast across the top of its rotund girth. Now Woodbine was a little past its prime. But Woodbine, in its round corpulence, was a rather fascinating creature.



Wood was fed into Woodbine's belly through a small porthole, whose hatch looked exactly how I would have imagined the Victorians would have made a submarine hatch. Built into this hatch there was a fan shaped air vent. By opening and closing it one could roughly regulate the amount of air that fed the burning mass inside, and thus have some measure of control.

The previous owner of the house had devised a very cunning scheme whereby a car muffler used as a sleeve around the flue to heat our water. With time this had leaked, and the run off had corroded the chimney joint quite badly. I had made some fixes with fire brick plaster, but it was a stopgap measure.

Above the car muffler there was another wonderful invention of the previous owner of our house<sup>1</sup>. Not content with the rough air control in the porthole, he had cut a slit in the chimney, inserted into the slit the lid of a tin can, and attached to the lid an aluminium handle. The whole lot was sealed off with a pipe clip. By turning the handle the amount of air leaving the Woodbine could be regulated, and thus one had a fine control over the rate of burn. Under our stewardship we regularly had the chimney cleaned, and this stressed the lid of the tin can badly. Also, the aluminium handle was not standing up to the rigours of use. It was slowly melting. Our fine control was going!

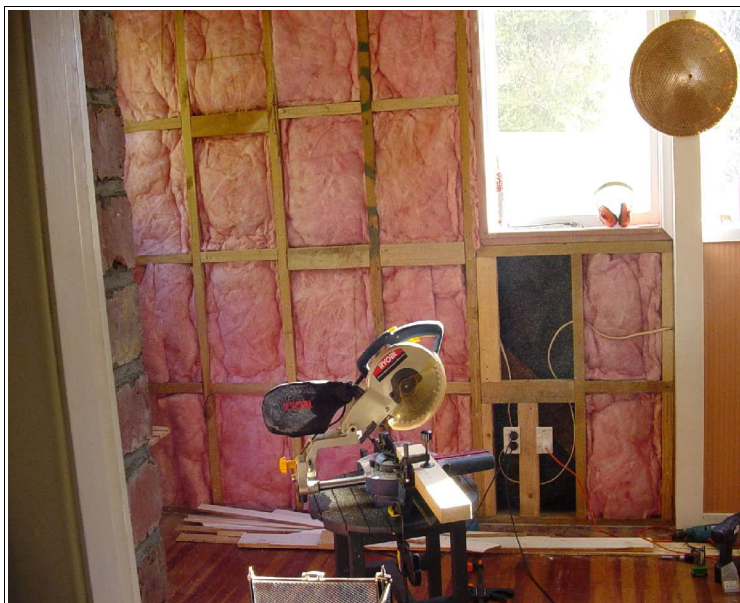
So, although Woodbine provided heat, it was not one of the wonderful wood burners that Terry and I wanted. And it needed a lot of restorative work.

Now the room that Woodbine was in was the coldest in our house. If the fire was not warming it in winter it used to get down to near zero. It seemed to our untrained South African eyes that instead of plasterboard, the walls were covered with a thin layer of Masonite. We felt this, plus a lack of insulation was the cause of the heat loss. So we decided that the Masonite was to come off, a layer of insulation was to go into the wall, and plaster board put back to finish it off.

Our eyes must be very untrained, because when we tried to pry off the Masonite it turned out to be plasterboard. Admittedly a very thin plasterboard, but a plasterboard nonetheless. Off it all came! By now the room was an empty shell, and looking at it we decided what better time to replace Woodbine. Yes, everything must go!

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<sup>1</sup> I have had a lot of fun finding and fixing these little "inventions". Watch out for home handymen... I was trained by my father, a structural engineer. So of course, all the work I am doing is at a more professional level...



So Terry toured the shops looking at and choosing a candidate set of wood burners. Wood burner sales in New Zealand must be a very good market to be in, because we found that we were begging people to sell us one. It was quite remarkable. We would go into the shops, and the assistants would do their best to ignore us. We started to wonder if we had a visibly contagious disease. We grew accustomed to rugby tackling shop assistants as they fled for the exits on our entry. I have never had a worse shopping experience.

But despite this we managed to select the wood burner we wanted. And to get a quote for it to be installed. The quote for installation was more than twice the cost of the burner! And then we stumbled on a web site for a shop in Wellington and phoned. And my how the story changed... We phoned on the Friday, on the Sunday a person visited us at home, and that evening we had a quote, and this time the installation price was much less than the cost of the wood burner! We leapt at it and within two weeks the new burner was installed. I am sure there is a lesson here. Although with the lesson one must consider the fact that unbeknown to us the shop had burnt down some months previously. We only learnt this once the new wood burner had been installed. Such is the power of the Internet.



The installation was finished inside four hours, and signed off by the building inspector<sup>2</sup> (who also complimented Terry on the work that I had done on the roof – but that is definitely another story).

Thus we have settled into a warm and snug winter. With a wonderful wood burner that is all we thought it would be.

There are however one or two teething problems. The first is that I am not used to the sound of the hot water cylinder boiling. Yes, the fire is so good at heating water, if we don't use it fast enough it gets up to boiling point. The second is that we have put the insulation into the wall cavities, and now the plasterboard has to be put onto the walls. I know what I am doing over the next few weekends!

<sup>2</sup> I did mention that the installers shop had burnt down, didn't I? Nothing quite like the security of an independent eye!