

POST CHRISTMAS SEASON / NACHWEIHNACHTZEIT

New Year's Eve: Silvesterabend (der 31. Dezember)

New Years Eve custom: Silvesterabendsitte

chimney sweep: der Schornsteinfeger, die Schornsteinfeger

sure they are clean and functioning efficiently.

However it is not possible to just pick up the phone book and choose a chimney sweep oneself, as the German law that decrees all chimneys and heating systems must be checked annually also insists that the one used is allocated to you because you happen to live in his district, and free choice is not an option.

Not only that if you don't want him to enter your home he is entitled to do so with the help of the police and a locksmith, and without your permission if necessary.

A hangover from Germany's pre war days when the mandatory yearly inspection was introduced, the regime of the time thought it quite useful to have people who could freely enter homes and perhaps see if anything untoward was happening there.

There are 7,888 separate 'chimney sweep' regions in Germany and each is covered by a qualified chimney sweep, together with trainees who also wear the traditional black suit outfit but with a skull cap not the 'masters' top hat.

The uniform might be from another age however the profession has become more technical, not limited to cleaning chimneys but inspecting all stages of chimney construction in new buildings, and for environmental and safety reasons checking for carbon monoxide leaks in gas heating systems, making Germany a country that has fewer problems with that gas than any other.

Earning a licence takes four years but it doesn't stop there, because the newly qualified Schornsteinfeger can exchange

his skull cap for a top hat and join a waiting list to eventually have his own district, or Kehrbezirk as it is called, however as a 12 to 15 year stay on the list is not unusual, he, and there are some 'she's' but very few, will continue working as an assistant.

In the past only German nationals could become chimney sweeps, and unlike in many other countries children were never used to climb the chimneys, but in theory there is now a law in place that says anyone can learn the trade, nevertheless generally that is not the way it works. As a job for life and a closed society, places are handed down from generation to generation with some families going back to the 18th century which, together with a 'chimney sweep monopoly', means new openings are limited and protected. A German chimney sweep is 'lucky' in many ways.

Chimneys were brought to Germany by the Romans who appreciate being warm on cold nights and had developed a technique to clear the smoke produced by their fires so it was possible to enjoy the warmth without the smog.

For the Germans however things developed more slowly, castles and monasteries were their first tall stone buildings and in the beginning fires were placed in the centre of the rooms, only later being moved to a corner of two outside walls to be built

around a chimney, and it was this that in the 16th century brought about the emergence of chimney sweeping as an essential service.

Open fireplaces created a lot of smoke, potentially fire hazardous waste, dirt and dead birds, soot and creosote coated the chimney, and after a visit from a chimney sweep bringing fresh smoke free air back into the home and clearing away the debris, people were said to have 'good luck' for the next year because their houses would not burn down.

In fact since pagan times fire and firesides have been linked with good fortune and well being, and perhaps it is also because of their connection with this that in so many countries, including Germany, a chimney sweep is considered a symbol of good luck, wealth and happiness, and somehow the day is brighter if it begins with seeing a Schornsteinfeger on his way, wire brush hanging from a loop on his shoulder, ladder at hand.

Chim chiminey Chim chiminey Chim chim cher-oo

Good luck will rub off when I shakes 'ands wiv you,

Or blow me a kiss and that's lucky too.