

Messenger

HILLS



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Ken sweeps into a new career - and shouts it from the rooftops

A GHOST of Charles Dickens is alive and living in the Hills.

The "spectre" from the past is, however, really flesh-and-blood.

He's a modern-day chimney sweep whose story-book occupation has survived the invention of everything from air conditioners to electric blankets and plug-in foot-warmers.

Ken Hyde, 54, of Blackwood has been cleaning chimneys and fireplaces for about four years.

In the line of his duties, Ken can be found climbing roofs and standing in chimneys to brush away soot with the traditional tools of his trade—a dustpan and broom.

He said his occupation has not altered much since Dickens immortalised chimney sweeps through his classics, although he confesses that vacuum cleaners have made things a trifle easier.

"It's the fire places that have changed," Ken said.

"Up until about 30 years ago they used to be open, but after that a lot of slow combustion stoves were built into the existing brick fire places, which require different cleaning techniques."

Old style chimneys are cleaned from the bottom up, while their descendents are tackled from the top down.

Having brushed with thousands of chimneys in his time, Ken has developed an understanding of their quirks and qualities.

He said dirtiness depends on the type and extent of fuel burned, and that pine and soft wood fires are the worst culprits for leaving behind a sooty fireplace because they build up a resin matter (called creosote) more quickly.

Ken turned his hand to chimney sweeping after he was "given an early retirement" as state manager of a roofing company in early 1983.

He said although there were similarities between the two jobs, he thought his Hills Clean Sweep business was better for his health, because it



Blackwood's Ken Hyde . . . an old trade still sparking.

involved less cups of tea, and plenty of exercise scaling chimneys.

"You need to be a combination of a steeple jack, a sheet metal worker and be used to height to be a chimney sweep," Ken said.

"You also need to be innovative to deal with some of the problems, and be able to climb because 80 percent of the work is on roofs."

The life of a chimney sweep may be gusty and dusty, but according to Ken it doesn't live up to its dirty reputation.

"It's almost a collar and tie job. I wear overalls and a mask to keep the dust out but flues in particular aren't dirty," he said.

Although he has more than 2000 clients with many more chimneys between them, Ken says people are still surprised when he mentions his line of work.

"A lot of people don't realise chimney sweeps still exist," he said.

"But there's a terrific demand for the work and some houses have up to six chimneys," he said.

So will he make a clean sweep of his business?

Dicken!

"I'll sweep chimneys for as long as I can still walk on roofs," Ken said.