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The journey of gas into our homes by Jesse Wallace

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Gas, one of the three states of matter, alongside solid and liquid states, is an air like substance whose particles move quickly and in a chaotic manner to fill a container. Indeed, the word â€œgasâ€• comes from â€œchaosâ€•. It is said to have been used by the Chinese as a fuel from as early as the fourth century.

Natural gas is a cleaner fuel than oil and coal, but as a fuel for homes, did not come into common use until the sixties. It now powers around 85% of British homes. Before natural gas was processed to make the clean gas we now use at home, we were burning a manufactured gas called â€œcoal gasâ€•, which was used for street lighting, public buildings and wealthier homes in the mid 1800s

In the Cornish town of Redruth, Scottish engineer William Murdoch was the first to light his house with coal gas in 1792. This phenomenon became important for businesses, which used gas from small gas works to light their factories. These were installed in the factories themselves, until Fredick Winsor demonstrated the idea of centralising gas works and piping the fuel through the streets.

Only in the late nineteenth century was manufactured coal gas lighting affordable in working class homes. And it was almost unheard of as a cooking fuel at this stage, despite there being many gas ovens on display at The Great Exhibition (1851). After a while, some gas companies started to rent out gas cookers and introduced coin meters. By the 1920s, many households were using gas ovens to cook with, after the invention of the thermostat made this somewhat easier, but at this point, electricity was becoming a strong competitor. Did you know that we used to have gas powered fans and radios?

At last, after natural gas was discovered off the Yorkshire coast in the 1960s, a cleaner version of gas was available and became ubiquitous in British households. Some readers may remember the conversion of all British gas appliances from manufactured to natural gas between 1967-1977. This adaption was essential, as natural gas, mainly methane, burns very differently from the hydrogen and carbon dioxide of the manufactured gas we were using prior to natural gas discovery in the twentieth century. This natural gas was so much cleaner than the gas we were making from coal at the time, with no pollutants arising from its burning, that it became the obvious solution for fuelling homes in compliance with the Clean Air Act of 1956. Isnâ€™t it funny to think that gas as a clean source of fuel is so relatively new to our homes, despite being a substance humans have known about for centuries?

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