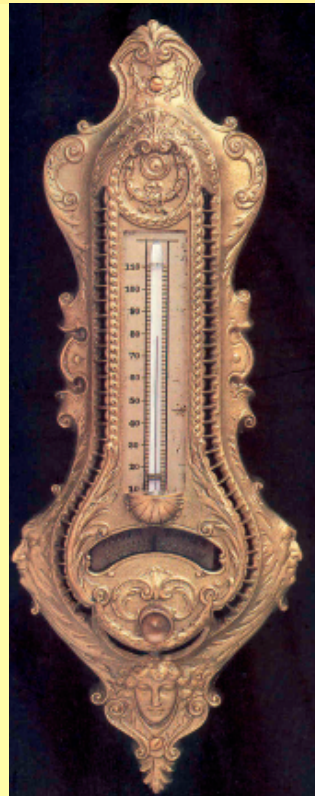


Hall of Fame

Landmark equipment that shaped the history of h&v

1883 – Electric thermostat

[Warren S Johnson]



Even the cave man who rubbed two sticks together knew he needed to exercise some control over his fire. He got fed up with lugging logs from the forest just for his missus to fling the goatskin door open to let the cold in! Fire was therefore rationed to conserve energy which is pretty much what a thermostat is now expected to do. Several millennia on this situation is hardly any different – but, thanks to Warren S Johnson and his electric thermostat, we now have a little more choice in how we can remain comfortable in an economic way.

Sadly, as so often is the case, it was the Brits who invented the thermostat but failed to sell the brilliance and commercial potential of the idea. In the inter-war years, a President of the IHVE (now CIBSE) *deprecated in his own practice the elaboration of automatic mechanisms, because in his view, they were not needed, and, in the second place, they were liable to get out of order*.

Born in Vermont, Johnson worked as a printer, but in 1876 he was appointed professor at the State Normal School in Whitewater where he experimented with control of the school's warm-air heating system. In a wheeze very much like an 'Upstairs, Downstairs' servant call system Johnson installed electric thermostats in each room, connecting them to annunciators so that thermostat contacts operated an indicator in the furnace room to show 'Warm' or 'Cold' leaving the janitor to adjust the dampers as required. He went on to develop his well-known system of pneumatic controls. In 1885 he founded the Johnson Electric Service Company, which was to become a major international controls manufacturer. This in turn was a significant driving force in the eventual worldwide acceptance of automatic controls in the building services engineering industry.

For a widget that has its origins in the cave but its future becoming even more important in carbon reduction – Professor Johnson gets my vote.



More pictures and details of historical products can be found on the CIBSE Heritage Group website at: www.hevac-heritage.org