

# A Seventeenth-Century Sussex Woodcarver: The Evidence of Cast Ironwork

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Following the introduction of the blast furnace from continental Europe in about 1490, the Weald of Sussex, and the adjoining parts of Kent and Surrey, became the principal iron-producing region in England in the early modern period.<sup>1</sup> By the 1570s over 9000 tons of iron a year were being made in the Weald.<sup>2</sup> The spread of this industry nationally began in the 1560s, with ironworks being built in South Wales, the Forest of Dean, and the north and west Midlands, but the output of the Weald was not equalled in the rest of the kingdom until the 1610s. Both in the Weald and elsewhere output was primarily focused on the production of raw cast iron for refining into wrought iron bars. However, the facility whereby iron could be cast directly into moulds allowed for some specialist products. Of these cannon were the most significant, but domestic items, which included andirons (fire-dogs) and cooking pots, were a useful sideline in the output of furnaces. Perhaps the best known of these products are firebacks or ‘plates for chimneys’, as they were originally known. The ability to cast an iron plate, which could be placed against an interior wall to protect it from the heat and flames of a fire, had been developed in Germany, so it was already a proven technique when iron casting became available in south-east England, and it may not be a coincidence that domestic fires in the region, that had hitherto been in the centres of open halls, began to be moved to end or side walls following the introduction of iron casting. The Weald became a particularly productive area for firebacks.

Made by pouring the molten metal into a level depression formed in sand, firebacks could be simply decorated by making impressions in the sand with objects, such as lengths of rope, wooden food moulds or domestic implements, before pouring the iron. The impressions appeared in relief on the finished plate. In the same way that, for example, elaborate capital letters might be made for use in printing, specific images on firebacks could be formed from specially carved designs called stamps; such stamps included heraldic charges, letters and numerals. More elaborate still were designs formed from entire wooden patterns, carved to the exact shape and proportions of the fireback that was intended to be produced. These date from the mid-sixteenth century in England. Few examples of such patterns survive, and only one is known in this country from before the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Firebacks cast from patterns are recognisable by the unity of the design, the lack of variation in the degree to which the elements in the design are reproduced on the surface of the fireback, and the frequency with which copies are encountered. Firebacks cast from simpler moulds formed using individual stamps or everyday objects often display variation in the amount of pressure exerted when positioning the stamps in the casting sand; the uniform pressure exerted

<sup>1</sup> Hodgkinson (2008), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> King (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Hodgkinson (2010), pp. 137–40.

on an entire pattern obviates this. Just as in fine art, distinctive stylistic elements, which suggest the work of particular pattern-makers, can be recognised on groups of firebacks, and in a small number of instances pattern-makers 'signed' their work, but rarely is it possible to identify such craftsmen.

A small group of firebacks produced in the mid-seventeenth century bear the initials, IM, and examination of those backs reveals other stylistic indicators that suggest that the same pattern-maker was responsible for a larger group of backs as well as patterns for iron graveslabs. Initials on firebacks can mean several things. Most frequently they are likely to refer to the person or persons for whom the fireback was made. This can be an individual, but is often a couple, with the letters frequently arranged in a triad. In this form they rarely occur in more than one instance, unless the fireback has been copied. Very rarely, initials may refer to the founder. A distinctive group dating from 1582, designed using individual stamps, and incorporating lengthy texts identifying the people for whom the backs were cast, all also bear the initials, IA, which were probably those of the founder.<sup>4</sup> The basis for the assumption that the initials IM are in this case those of the carver is that, in the instances where they occur, the lettering appears to be integral to the carving of the pattern because it is in the same style, it varies in size to suit the space on the design, and because it is more clearly part of the design of the fireback. Individual letters added to a mould before casting would be part of a stock of characters held at a furnace for general use and unlikely to be available in the range or freedom of styles and sizes that a pattern-maker might incorporate into his designs.

Firebacks were often dated, but for a variety of reasons. Those that were designed using individual stamps could be custom made at relatively low cost, and were probably dated to record a significant event, such as a marriage or the purchase of a property. In the case of pre-carved patterns, unless there is some obvious clue in the design tying it to a particular year, such as the commemoration of an event, dates seem to have been included to record when the design was carved; for instance, an impressive group of Jacobean armorial firebacks all bear the date 1618.<sup>5</sup> It is not known, in most instances, what prompted the carving of a fireback pattern, but the ease with which such backs could be produced made the sale of 'off the shelf' designs commercially attractive to ironmongers from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest dated fireback bearing the initials IM is a frequently copied design of 1641 showing a stylised lion passant surrounded by symbols of England, Scotland and France (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> Of particular note on this accomplished piece of craftsmanship is the depth of the carving, but significant in terms of identifying other examples from the same hand are the lush shapes of the leaves, the scroll feature on the right, carved as if stapled to the frame, and, most of all, the distinctive style of the numerals with the pronounced hook-shaped serifs of the number 1, the bold sweep of the 6, and the individualistic number 4, where the vertical line passes over the horizontal line. Similar

<sup>4</sup> Hodgkinson (2010), p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145–6.

<sup>6</sup> The Derbyshire ironmaster, George Sitwell, cast a large number of firebacks from patterns supplied by James and Andrew Trubshaw, ironmongers, in the 1660s [Riden (1985), pp. xx–xxi].

<sup>7</sup> A version of this fireback dated 1649 is also frequently encountered.



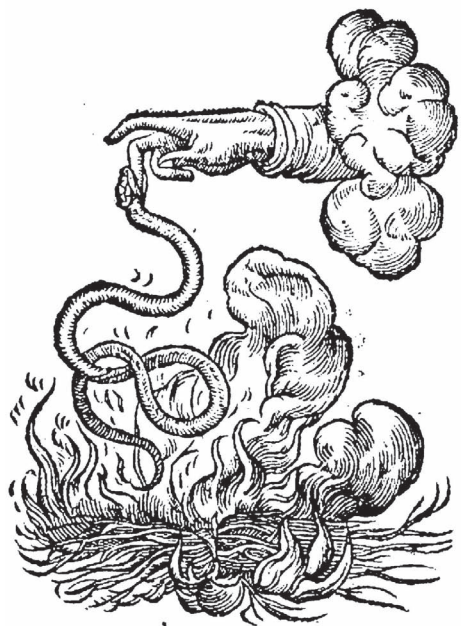
1 Recasting of a fireback of 1641 with a lion passant guardant and symbols of England, Scotland and France, and pattern-maker's initials IM (80 × 71 cm). *Private collection.* Photo: P. J. Gates



2 Fireback of 1649 illustrating an episode from the Acts of the Apostles, and pattern-maker's initials IM (56 × 47.5 cm). *Victoria and Albert Museum M.119-1984.* Photo: the author

numerals are seen on a back of 1649 (Figure 2). On this example, by contrast, it is the horizontal line on the 4 that crosses the vertical. There are also two scrolls abutting the edges, again shown as being stapled to the frame. The design here is derived from an illustration in a French book of emblems and devices first published in England in 1591 (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> Two firebacks of 1650 also bearing the initials IM display a similar





3 The hand of St Paul bitten by a viper, from Acts of the Apostles 28 v.3; illustration from *The Heroicall Devises of M. Claudius Paradin* (1591).

4 Recasting of a fireback of 1650 showing a phoenix, and pattern-maker's initials IM (66 × 55.9 cm). *Private collection*

5 Fireback of 1650 depicting a rose and crown, and pattern-maker's initials IM (44.5 × 44 cm). *Victoria and Albert Museum M.113-1953. Photo: the author.*



boldness of execution (Figure 4 and 5).

Cruder and less assured is an undated fireback identified as the work of the same craftsman (Figure 6). Here, the design of two halberdiers, each beneath an arch, echoes styles found in sixteenth-century German backs that usually displayed religious or mythological figures.<sup>9</sup> The shape of the fireback owes more to furniture forms, particularly chairs, with its symmetrical scrolled top. A similar design is seen in a 1636 fireback portraying the iron founder, Richard Lenard, of Brede in East Sussex (Figure 7). Although it does not bear the initials IM, nor are its numerals in the same distinctive

<sup>8</sup> P. S. (1591), p. 187.

<sup>9</sup> Driesch (1990), pp. 241–62.



6 Undated fireback showing two halberdiers, and pattern-maker's initials IM (67.7 × 62 cm). Guildford Museum. Photo: the author



7 Fireback of 1636 with the image and paraphernalia of Richard Lenard, ironmaster at Brede Furnace, Sussex (52.3 × 55.2 cm) Sussex Archaeological Society. Photo: the author



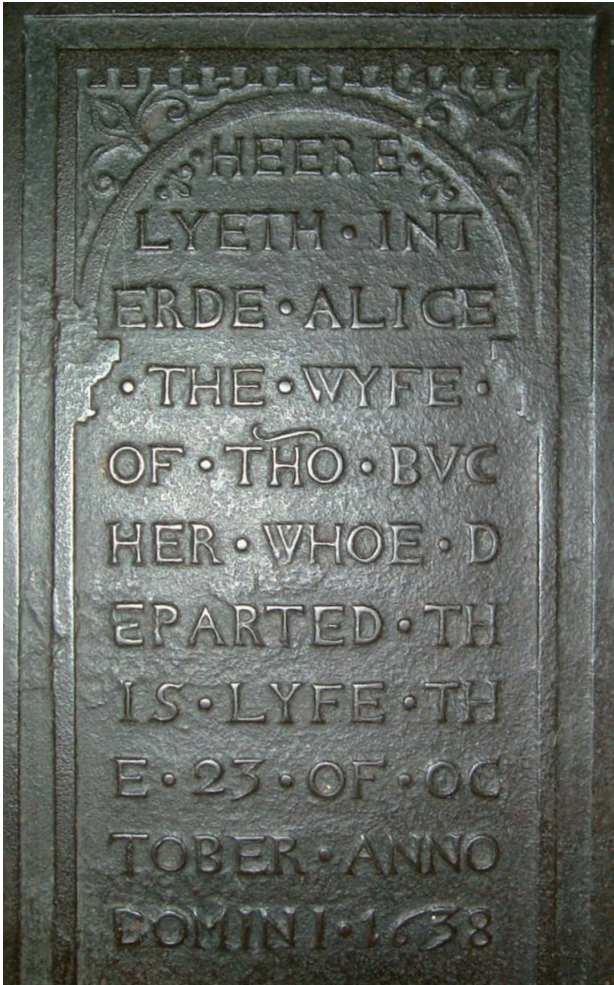
style as those described earlier, the naïve depiction of the human form and the scrolling link its execution with the halberdiers fireback and its pattern-maker. In a later back, seemingly from the same hand and with the date 1652, having the distinctive hooked serif, the naïve depiction of facial features must have been deliberate, and the similarity of the central mask, reputed to portray the 'Brede Ogre', a figure of Sussex folklore, with the face of the lion in Fig. 1 is worthy of note (Figure 8). Similar scrollwork and naïve features can be seen on an unusual piece of ironwork, a metalworking forge-back, which may be the work of the same craftsman (Figure 9). Here, the 1655 date has been inserted, for the casting has been made from a mould perhaps formed from

- 8 Fireback dated 1652 alleged to be of the 'Brede Ogre' flanked by two pikemen (73 × 58.4 cm). *Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*  
*Photo: the author*



- 9 Metalworking forge-back dated 1655 cast from a mould perhaps formed from the upper part of an early seventeenth-century joined chair (56 × 51 cm). *Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.*  
*Photo: the author*



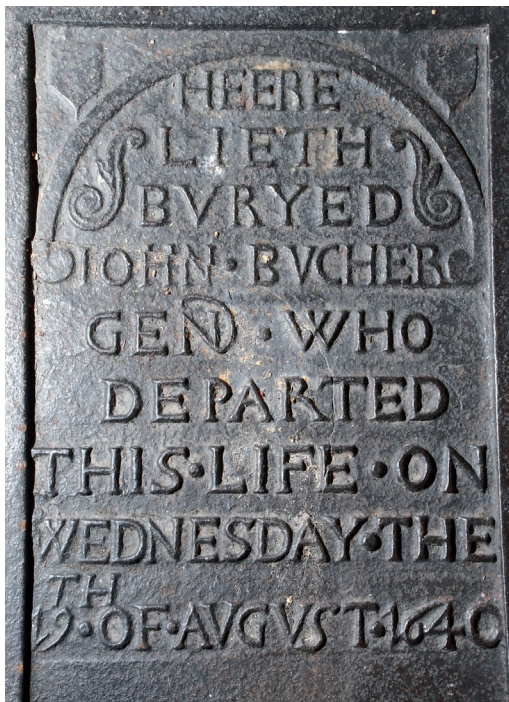


10 Graveslab of Alice Bucher, 1638, detail (63 cm wide). *St Peter and St Paul's church, Wadhurst, East Sussex. Photo: the author*

the impression of the back of a joined chair with arches and guilloche decoration of probably rather earlier date. The style of the numerals is not dissimilar although there are no hooked serifs, but the faces could be a signature feature of this craftsman's earlier style.

While the earliest of the IM firebacks with the hooked serif '1' dates from 1641, there are earlier instances of this distinctive numeral. The parish church of St Peter and St Paul in Wadhurst, East Sussex, is home to the largest number of cast-iron graveslabs in the British Isles. Among them are four plates with inscriptions that include the hooked serif '1'. Three are clearly in the same style and of the same workmanship as several of the firebacks already illustrated (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4). On the earliest, dated 1638, commemorating Alice Bucher (Figure 10), the top of the inscription is framed within an arch supported on brackets, with an indented border above and fleurs de lys within the spandrels; the whole within a double fillet border. The second slab, dated





11 Graveslab of John Bucher, 1640, detail (63 cm wide). *St Peter and St Paul's church, Wadhurst, East Sussex. Photo: the author*



12 Graveslab of David Barham, 1643, detail (61 cm wide). *St Peter and St Paul's church, Wadhurst, East Sussex. Photo: the author*

1640 and commemorating John Bucher (Figure 11), has the same distinctive style of lettering but within a simpler arch and border, and with blank shields in the spandrels. The third slab, for Joan Bucher, is similar to that for Alice Bucher, being almost identical in its presentation, lacking only the brackets for the arch. Its date, said to be 1638 as well, is obscured by church furniture. A fourth slab with a similar style of border and decoration, commemorating David Barham (Figure 12), is dated 1643 but, while hooked serifs are in evidence even for the capital letter 'I', the style of lettering is crude and far inferior to the other three slabs, and perhaps represents the efforts of an apprentice in the same workshop.

The quantity of lettering employed on the three Bucher graveslabs would not be expected on a fireback, yet at least two examples of this craftsman's fireback designs incorporate inscriptions of sufficient length to enable comparisons to be made. A fireback probably of the early 1650s (Figure 13), on which the letters IM can be partially identified in the bottom left corner, shows a boldly executed cabled anchor with the inscription, *Probasti Me* (Thou hast searched me), in capitals.<sup>10</sup> Comparison with the lettering in Figures 10 and 11 shows certain similarities: the distinctive slight curve of

<sup>10</sup> From Psalms 139, v.1; *Domine, probasti me et cognovisti me* — Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me.





13 Fireback of c. 1650 with a quotation from Psalm 139, a cabled anchor, and pattern-maker's initials IM (58 × 48 cm). *Sussex Archaeological Society. Photo: the author*



14 Fireback of 1650 portraying St George and the Dragon and inscription, *Cursius Nil Desperandum*, with pattern-maker's initials IM (89 × 72.5 cm). *Private collection. Photo: the author*

the diagonal on the letter 'R', and the wide splay of the letter 'A'. Other characteristic features are the design of leaf, and the scrolls in the top corners. Another fireback, of 1650 (Figure 14), also marked IM, displays the carver's skill to a greater extent than all the other examples illustrated.<sup>11</sup> While not as uniform in size as the lettering on the graveslabs, the style of text, nevertheless, bears the same, if not more, similarities to

<sup>11</sup> While *Nil Desperandum* — Despair Not — is easily understood, *Cursius* is somewhat of a mystery if associated with what appears to be St George defeating the Dragon. It may be a mis-spelled reference to the Roman hero, Marcus Curtius.

the graveslab texts. Also, a hooked serif is just discernable on the lower end of the '1' in the date.

The accomplished wood carver who made the patterns for the firebacks and graveslabs described in this article worked in the eastern part of Sussex in the 1630s to 1650s. The bold individual style of his craftsmanship and, in particular, the distinctive appearance of the numerals on both the firebacks and graveslabs should make the work of this man easily identifiable if he turned his hand to a wider range of woodworking, such as furniture and other types of interior joinery, particularly if associated with the same region of England. His identity, apart from his initials, is unknown to the author, and any information on other examples of his work would be received with great interest.

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