

Apotropaic Symbols on Cast-Iron Firebacks

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Introduction

Alongside cast-iron firebacks with sophisticated, pictorial designs, introduced from around 1550, examples with much simpler patterns can also be found, although these are rarely dated. Mostly these designs take the form of letters, two forms of crosses and direct impressions of objects: many firebacks have designs formed from the impressing of cables or twisted rope in the casting sand. Some letters, commonly repeated, carried a meaning beyond simply representing the initials of an individual's name. This paper seeks to explain their significance as apotropaic (evil-averting) symbols against accidental fires and other forms of supernatural influence. It will also show comparisons with similar symbols on buildings around Britain: the majority of apotropaic symbols were made by craftsmen who worked on metal, wood, stone, brick and plaster.

On iron firebacks, apotropaic marks fall into clear groups involving the letter forms W and M, saltire and square crosses, and variations of Vs. Three of these clearly represent capital letters.

Taking the main group of single letters found on the simplest of fireback designs, these usually appear singly and in a prominent central position (*Fig. 1*). The letters are M, W and a V form, which can also be inverted. The same use of these letter symbols scribed into mantle beams was first noted in 1988 (*Fig. 2*).¹

Although the pattern of symbols on hearth beams can be more complex, the same three letters, as discussed on these firebacks, stand out as the most significant and recognisable group. Those that were scribed on hearth beams were mostly applied by carpenters.

The most prominent Ms, Vs and Ws on wooden lintels were made with a scribing tool called a *rase knife*. This tool, with its U-shaped blade, was drawn towards the carpenter across the surface. When the timber was green and soft, it made clean-cut lines.

It should be noted that, although comparisons of symbols used in this paper are gathered from a wide area of Britain, in some parts of Britain, such as rural Suffolk, such firebacks would seldom have been found in the 16th and early-17th centuries. Geographical production was, for the most part, in south-eastern counties of England.² Although transportation by coastal shipping meant that firebacks could be delivered to ports and landing stages, and could be purchased by wealthier households, their weight made the extra transportation over land costly and sometimes difficult. Perhaps it is for such reasons that one does not find any mention of iron firebacks in the wills and inventories associated with rural Suffolk houses, although treating such items as fixtures may also account for this.³ However, these symbols, though universal, were used in their own distinctive ways in their particular regions.

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Fig. 1 Fireback with W symbol, probably 16th-century, Guildford Borough Council and Museum, Surrey

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Fig. 2 *top*: Mantle beam in the hall of The Swan Pub, Worlingworth, Suffolk, probably 16th century. Prominent among the scribed lines and circles are the M forms and a large W.



Fig. 3 *below left*: Central section of the hall mantle beam at Anstruther, Fife, Scotland, with apotropaic symbols scribed with a rase knife

Fig. 4 *below right*: Burn marks on the mantle beam at Anstruther, Fife, Scotland. The burn marks are as prominent as the scribed Ms and the AM conjoined (see Figure 3). These have each been burnt away in part by the candle burns. On one mark, however, a lighter, but carefully scribed M has been placed over the top of the burn.



Why were these symbols used above the opening of the hearth?

The M, W and V forms are found not just on mantle beams, but on doors, door frames, around windows, in attics and on ceilings of domestic buildings. Chimneys, doors and windows were the entry points believed to be most at risk from witches or their familiars, and from fire. They can be seen also on church doors and walls. In 1597, before King James VI of Scotland was crowned King of England, he had published his *Daemonologie* in the form of a dialogue. His principal aim was to repudiate the enlightened views of Reginald Scot, who had denied 'that there can be such a thing as Witch-craft'.⁴

A significant extract from *Daemonologie* demonstrates the belief around 1600 of the vulnerability of buildings: '... for some of them sayeth that being transformed into the likeness of a little beast or fowl, they will come and pierce through whatsoever house or church, though all ordinary passages be closed, by whatsoever open[ing] the air may enter in at ...'⁵ The English version, published in 1604, went into a number of editions. This was the year before King James brought in the new punitive witchcraft act.

Although the chimney is not specifically singled out in the quoted passage, it is the most prominent aperture in the domestic building and, unlike doorways and windows, is impossible to defend by closure. The

majority of clustered symbols are nearly always on the largest mantle beam, which is above the opening used for cooking in the hall, assuming there is not a separate kitchen provided (*Fig. 3*). It is likely that the great majority of the selected symbols were made for the household by the builders and not by the occupants, as the latter would be unlikely to possess a rase knife; for this reason, it appears to be initially a trade-led practice.⁶

Apart from the clear use of this symbolic language to protect the chimney, there are several other methods by which the householders added apotropaic material to the hearth area in an effort to ward off witches and their familiars. These included the depositing of worn-out personal possessions in the dead spaces next to the chimney,⁷ the burial of a prepared witch-bottle under the hearth as counter magic,⁸ the use of single or multiple candle or rushlight burn marks on the mantle beam (*Fig. 4*),⁹ and the depositing of wood of all sizes, from the smallest twigs to logs, that had been partially burnt.¹⁰

From all these examples it is clear to see that the hearth was a feared place, and from the latter two, an area that needed special protection against accidental fire. From the evidence of strategically placed burn marks and burnt wood, these seem to have been applied deliberately, as an inoculation. An interpretation might be that, if you touch wood with a flame,



accidental or malicious fire will be prevented. It seems that, by part-burning fragments of wood, extinguishing the fire and dropping the fragments into the hidden voids close to the chimney, people hoped that this deliberate act would be an appeasement against further destructive fires.¹¹

Furthermore, iron itself possesses certain properties which can be apotropaic. The use of iron as a protection against evil has been well attested, particularly at the entrance to homes.¹² Hanging a horseshoe on a wall or concealing an iron knife in the fabric of a building were thought to prevent malevolent spirits from entering a house, and in the iron-working area of the Weald of south-east England, slabs of iron are sometimes found as doorsteps.¹³ It is unlikely that the occurrence on firebacks of symbols, that elsewhere

were used on beams in the parts of buildings considered vulnerable to evil, were intended to identify the initials of family individuals.

For these reasons, it is not surprising to find symbols on the face of cast-iron firebacks, as an extra measure of protection at the back of the hearth. In certain parts of Britain, when a bird fell from its nest at the top of a chimney and flew around the room, this was taken as an unlucky sign and sometimes a portent of death.¹⁴ It is clear that there might be a link between such a natural accident and the belief that these unwanted birds might be the familiars of a witch.

The cooking area was always the part of the house most vulnerable to accidental fires. Hooked chains and pothooks hanging from internal horizontal bars just above the lintel, or on the hooks attached to the back



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Fig. 5 *top*: Fireback with M symbol between repeated wafering iron stamps, probably 16th-century, Victoria and Albert Museum, museum no. 895-1901

Fig. 6 *bottom left*: Detail from the base of part of a Marian niche in the NW corner of the north aisle of St. Mary's, Framlingham, Suffolk. Two angel supporters hold a shield with the undamaged monogram of the Virgin Mary.

Fig. 7 *bottom right*: Detail from the window in the SE corner of the nave (which formerly lit the Marian altar) of St. Nicholas Church, Bedfield, Suffolk. Around the upper part of each light are small glass panels with crowned Ms.

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Fig. 8 *right*: Detail of bench end with a carved M next to Mary's heart, mid-16th century, St. Columba Church, St Columb Major, Cornwall



wall of the chimney, gathered accretions of carbonized deposits. If flames accidentally ignited these deposits, they might travel up the internal walls setting a thatched roof on fire. In his diary for March 1705, William Coe wrote that his Suffolk house nearly caught alight through a cooking accident: 'My house escaped burning by a boiler of fatt hanging over the fire and was forgot, but my wife happily saw it just before it boyled over'.¹⁵

Although we understand the logical explanation for such fires today, people in the past could attribute their misfortune, and possibly ruin, to *maleficium*. Burning and even death might occur because of poor ventilation around the fire, the wearing of bulky clothes too close to the fire, an accidental fall onto the fire and the ignition of fats. For these reasons, a fireback positioned at the base of the hearth with an appropriate symbol, offered permanent protection to households wealthy enough to own one.

How to Interpret The Fireback Symbols

Each symbol will be explained in turn and where these are grouped together, examined collectively to see if combinations take on a different meaning.

THE 'M' FORM

This is perhaps the most common letter form, widely used as an apotropaic symbol.¹⁶ There is an easily accessible example in the Ironwork Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum, showing a single M (Fig. 5). This letter is formed out of four short sections of rope, and is placed centrally between three wafering iron stamps on what is probably a 16th-century fireback.¹⁷ It was developed from one of the symbols

that was closely linked to the images of the Virgin Mary, before the Reformation.¹⁸ The cult of Marian worship was at its strongest from the late 15th to the middle of the 16th century. When the Puritans began their attacks on the symbols of the old church, all images of Mary were either broken or removed from their niches in ecclesiastical buildings, but symbols associated with her name appear to have remained undamaged. These could be complex M forms with the additional letters of I, A and R integrated with the M to spell Maria. Such an example, appearing on the base of a Marian niche in the north-western corner of Framlingham Church in Suffolk, is presented on a shield held by two angel supporters (Fig. 6). This is only five feet above the ground, so would have been vulnerable during the purges, and in particular during Francis Verdon's visit on behalf of the iconoclast William Dowsing in 1643. From two entries in the Framlingham Church Wardens' Accounts in that year, it is clear that the organ was secretly dismantled before Verdon's visit and re-erected a week later.¹⁹ However the Marian monogram on the niche was left alone, so clearly was not regarded in the same way as 'the superstitious images', mostly in glass, that were smashed and possibly on the organ case.

In the nearby church in Bedfield, there is a south window that originally lit a Marian altar. Although all the figurative glass has gone, the two serpentine rows of crowned Ms are still in place around the top of each window (Fig. 7). The crown on each signifies Mary's role as Queen of Heaven. These are but two of many hundreds of examples in East Anglia alone that apparently did not offend the Puritans.

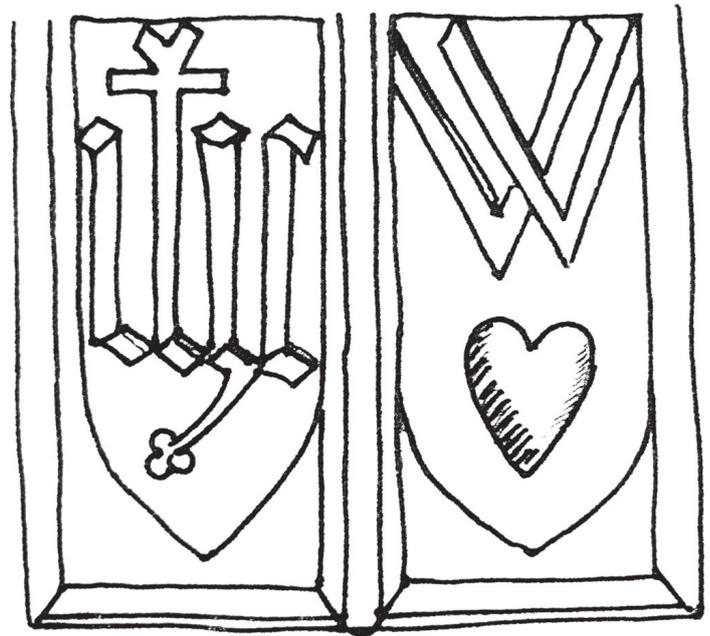
The M, as a letter on its own and representing



Fig. 11 *above*: Fireback with M and inverted V symbols, 16th or 17th century, Mayfield, Sussex (in private ownership)

Fig. 12 *below*: Fireback with W between two cross symbols, probably 16th-century, Hadlow Down, Sussex (in private ownership)





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Fig. 13 *top left*: Detail from a candle-marked ceiling, with an M next to a W, around 1670, Bedingfield Hall, Bedingfield, Suffolk. Whichever way this is viewed the symbols read the same. See also Figure 2.

Fig. 14 *top right*: Drawing of a bench-end in St. Mawgan and St Nicholas Church, St. Mawgan-in-Pydar, Cornwall. The Marian symbol of two conjoined Vs is placed over her heart.

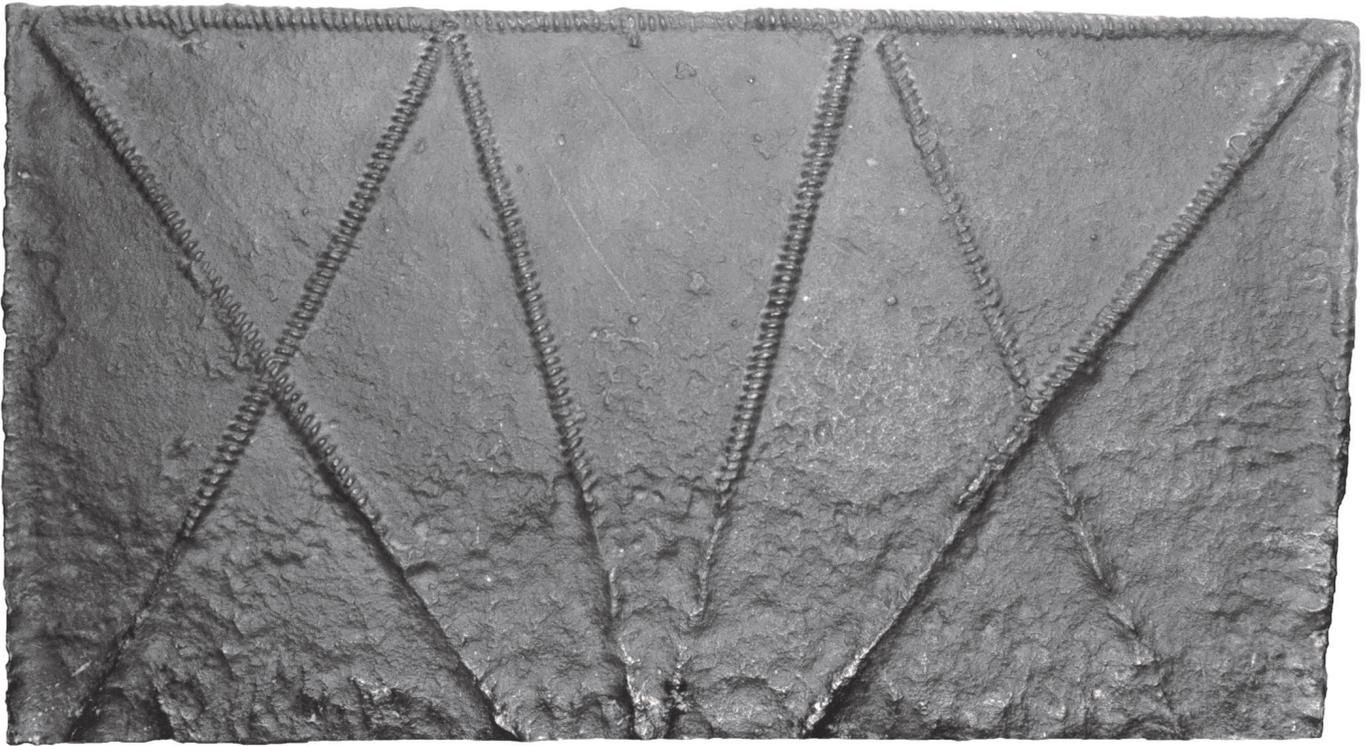
Fig. 15 *left*: Bench-end with a crowned W, representing two conjoined Vs, probably 16th century, Columba Church, St Columb Major, Cornwall

Fig. 16 *above*: Misericord with two crowned Ws either side of the perk, probably 15th century, Cartmel Priory, Cumbria

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Fig. 17 *top*: Fireback with V between two X symbols, 16th-century, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, Sussex

Fig. 18 *below*: Inserted ceiling joist, probably 17th century, in the Parlour chamber of Ulveston Hall, Debenham, Suffolk, with Ws and a V scribed with a rase knife on one side. The base of each letter has been removed in the final finishing stages when the chamfer was formed.



Virginum'. This was used both in prayers and in sung responses before the Reformation.²¹

Although these symbols are not as common as the M form on lintels, they do occur on chimney mantles, sometimes side by side or even overlapping, as in The Swan public house in Worlingworth, Suffolk (see Figure 2). The fact that these paired letters can be inverted and remain the same, may have given them extra potency. This is very clearly seen on a few candle-marked ceilings, made for wealthy clients by wizards in the later 17th century.²² The example from Bedingfield Hall in Suffolk is a clear example (Fig. 13).

To compare the evidence before the Reformation that links Mary's name with this symbol, we can look at the example on a bench-end at St Mawgan-in-Pydar Church in Cornwall (Fig. 14). Here it is suspended over the Heart of Mary and to the right of the cypher for Christ's name. A similar W is depicted under Mary's crown on another Cornish bench-end in St Columb Major parish church (Fig. 15). For a more elaborate example of the crowned Ws, the examples under a misericord from Cartmel Priory, Cumbria, confirm this idea (Fig. 16).

THE 'V' FORM

The last letter symbol to consider in the context of early fireback designs is V. Where this occurs between two X forms at Hastings Museum, the V is uncomplicated (Fig. 17). The V is seen amongst the Ms and Ws on lintels, studs and beams, and in the context of the Marian explanation for the origin of the three letters, may have originally derived from 'Virginum'. A clear example is scribed on the side of an early 17th-century joist in an inserted ceiling at Ulveston Hall, Debenham (Fig. 18). The carpenter prepared this joist off-site and scribed the symbols before he planed off the bevel, losing the bases of the V and of the Ws. One cannot always be sure if a carpenter was working on the timber the other way up, in which case these could be read as a series of Ms and an inverted V. In this case, they were not.

The Hall beam from Doggetts Farm, Stradbroke, Suffolk, has inverted Vs among the selected symbols scribed into the wooden surface (Fig. 19). In other examples of firebacks, such as at Mayfield (see Figure 11), the pair of Vs at the top are inverted and in the lower half, there are two Vs which have an extra bar



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Fig. 19 *left*: Hall beam at Doggetts Farm, Stradbroke, Suffolk, with inverted Vs scribed into the wooden surface

Fig. 20 *below*: Fireback with inverted V with cross and four figures around enclosed box, probably 16th-century, Robertsbridge, Sussex (in private ownership)

Fig. 21 *bottom*: Fireback with two inverted Vs with a cross on each and a circle motif in centre, probably 16th-century, Sussex Archaeological Society

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Fig. 22 *above*: Fireback with central cross, probably 16th-century, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, Sussex

Fig. 23 *below*: Fireback with two cross symbols, probably 16th-century, Sussex Archaeological Society (on loan to Hall Place, Bexley, Kent)



bisecting one side. There is an alternative way to read the lower combination as another centrally placed inverted V that is not properly joined in the centre, with a linked saltire cross on either side. This loose inverted V is found used in a similar way at Robertsbridge, Sussex (*Fig. 20*) and Lewes (*Fig. 21*), where the open central part meets a cross.

Two Forms of Cross Patterns

Either form of the cross symbols, shown in their simplest way, as in Hastings Museum (*Fig. 22*), where there is a single cross form placed top centre, or at Hall Place, Bexley, Kent (*Fig. 23*), where there are two saltire crosses, one on either side, have a warning that seems reasonably clear. Traditionally, metal workers also used these forms, and the saltire cross is often found on door and window latches between two parallel lines (*Figs. 24 and 25*). An explanation given by a traditional Suffolk blacksmith, for putting the saltire

crosses with a vertical line on either side, on metal work and where these are associated with apertures in buildings, was that the cross symbolically barred the way between two sides of the entry.²³ The author Allan Jobson, writing about the old people in Middleton, Suffolk, in the first half of the 20th century, said that they were ‘...forever taking avoiding actions against possible and portending evil’; ‘... why the menfolk nailed up a horse-shoe over the cow-house, and drew mysterious lines, crosses and triangles in the dust before the door’.²⁴

Variations of the saltire cross seem to have been more favoured of the two types of crosses for apotropaic purposes. An example of a rowan-wood witch cross from Goathland, North Riding, now in the York Castle Museum, illustrates a strongly held belief that this form would protect the home from unwanted entry by malicious spirits (*Fig. 26*). Also from the North York Moors are two witch posts, sometimes known as



heck posts, now in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (*Fig. 27*). Both these show the common elements found on the surviving examples from Yorkshire and one from Lancashire, which are the prominent saltire crosses carved near the top. These posts formed part of the seat built into one side of the hearth and were intended to deny entry or exit to a witch via the chimney.

Also in the York Castle Museum is a chalk mould for the production of amulets to avert the Evil Eye; this has a matrix with four symbols set in each quarter around a prominent central square-set cross (*Fig. 28*). There are four saltire crosses in each corner. On one of several faces of a professionally-made lead charm is a scribed saltire cross (*Fig. 29*). This object from Hertfordshire was either to hang over an animal stall or to be worn around the neck of an animal as an amulet.

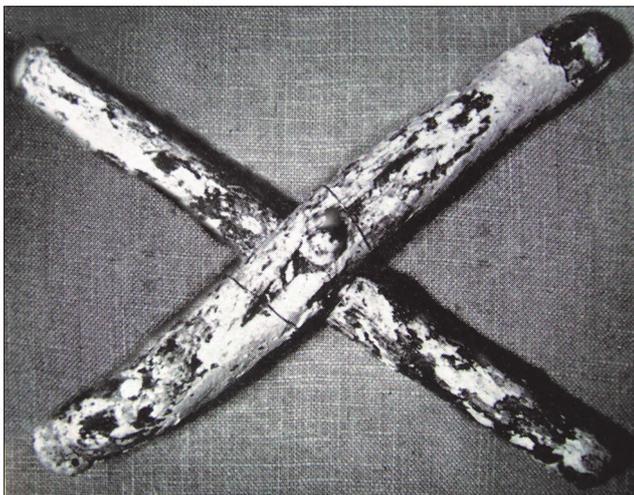
These examples were all made by specialist craftsmen or cunning folk (conjurers), with the exception possibly of the rowan cross. However, on chimney lintels, door panels and some furniture, crude saltire crosses were frequently applied, probably by the occupier.

Triple Forms

Where symbols are grouped in threes, the effect appears to enforce the meaning: symbols used three times are often found in apotropaic magic, as also when they are multiplied by three to make nine. Shakespeare made use of this numerical magical device in the words spoken by the three weird sisters, as Macbeth and Banquo first encountered their presence on the blasted heath, 'Thrice to thine and thrice to mine and thrice again to make up nine. Peace! The charm's wound up'.²⁵

The use of both forms of crosses, the square set cross and the saltire cross, in association with the large M, at Anne of Cleves House, Lewes, completes the three-fold protection (see Figure 10). Similarly the motif of two crosses, one on either side of the central W (see Figure 12) carries the same message. When the three crosses at Freshfield instead are of mixed form, it seems that the two square-formed crosses have the same meaning as the single saltire cross (*Fig. 30*).

Although the triple repeated image of firedogs on the fireback in Hastings Museum (*Fig. 31*), bearing the



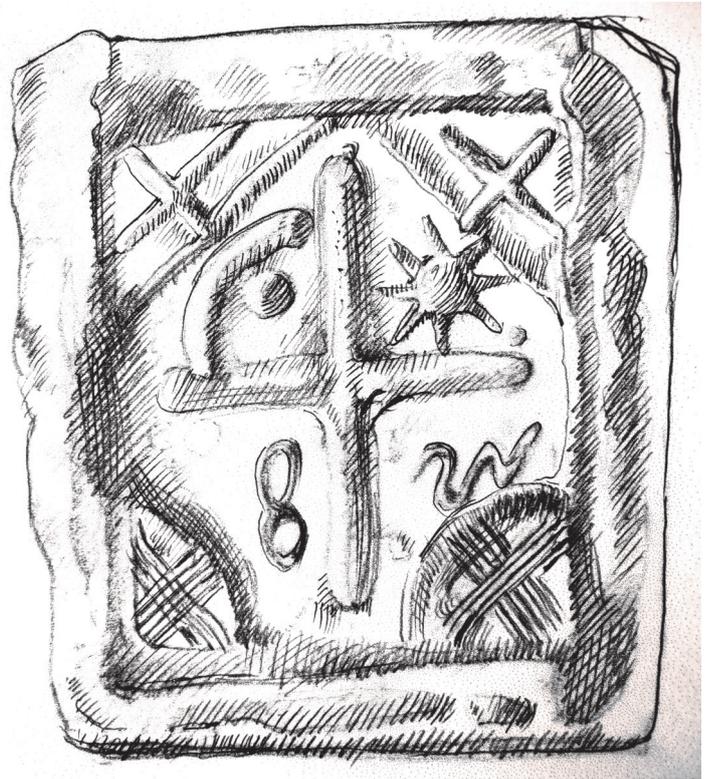
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Fig. 24 *top*: A door latch on the parlour door at Bedfield Hall, Bedfield, Suffolk, around 1600, with an elaborated saltire cross

Fig. 25 *middle left*: Window latch on a west-facing upper window at Bedfield Hall, Bedfield, Suffolk, around 1840, with a saltire cross between two lines

Fig. 26 *below left*: A rowan-wood witch cross from Goathland, near Whitby, York Castle Museum

Fig. 27 *below right*: Top sections of two witchposts from the North York moors, latterly known as heck posts. These were built below smoke hoods and linked to the side seat inside the hearth. Their purpose was to prevent entry or exit of a witch via the chimney. The saltire cross is present in all the surviving examples. Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.



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Fig. 28 *above*: Chalk mould for the production of amulets to avert the Evil Eye. Around a matrix with four symbols set in each quarter of a prominent central square set cross are four saltire crosses. York Castle Museum

Fig. 29 *right*: A detail of a scribed saltire cross on one of several faces of a lead charm, private collection, Hertfordshire

Fig. 30 *below*: Fireback with three crosses possibly moulded from twisted wrought iron, probably 16th-century, Freshfield, Sussex (in private ownership)





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Fig. 31 *top*: Fireback with three repeated firedogs believed to be associated with Richard Woodman, ironmaster and Marian martyr; probably mid 16th-century, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, Sussex

Fig. 32 *above*: Fireback with three repeated bollock daggers between cross and inverted V symbols, probably late 16th-century, Sussex Archaeological Society

Fig. 33 *left*: A small lead cup, from Suffolk, probably 18th century, scribed with sigils on the convex side as part of a wizard's equipment. The concave side has 4 crosses with a central cross form made by the word SILENTIUM bisected by a sword. Found in Mildenhall, Suffolk now in the Moyses Hall Museum, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk

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Fig. 34 *top*: Fireback with four repeated rondel daggers in a saltire between crosses, probably 16th-century, Plaxtol, Kent (in private ownership)

Fig. 35 *below*: Fireback with octagram between two saltire crosses, probably 16th-century, Sussex Archaeological Society



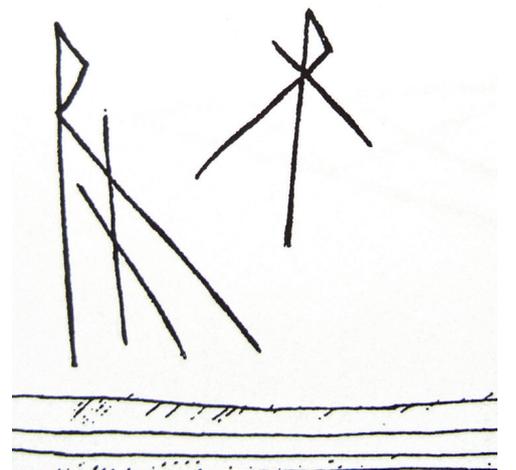
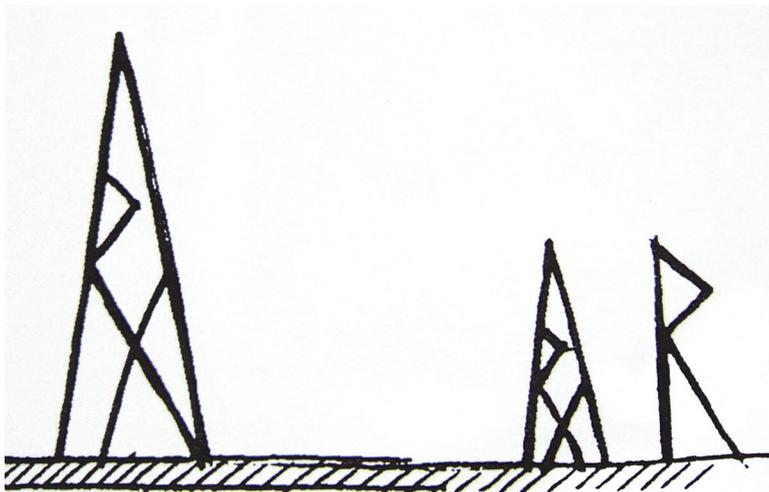
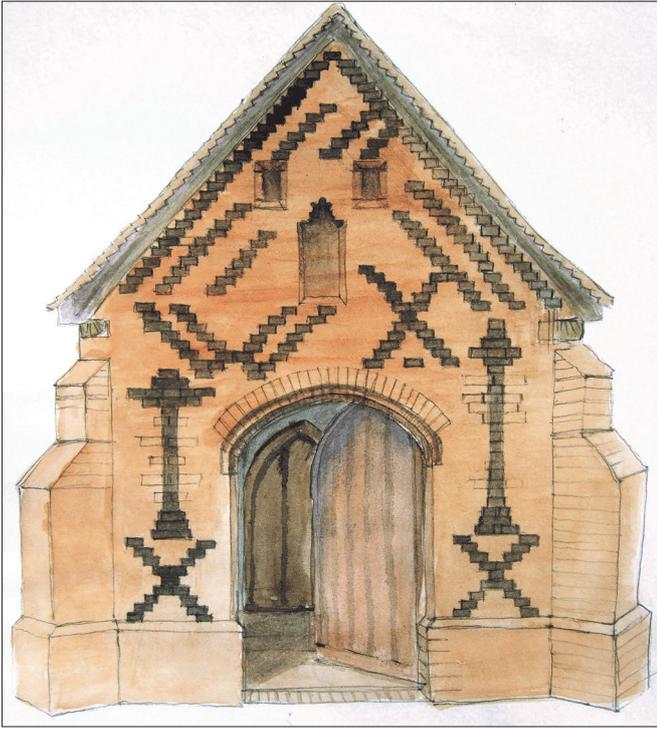
initials RW on each, possibly made by the mid 16th-century ironmaster Richard Woodman, may seem straightforward enough, the number he depicted may have the same significance.²⁶ The lower part of each dog also resembles the horseshoe; the frequent apotropaic use of these is well known. John Aubrey gives an account of them in his *Miscellanies* published in 1696.²⁷ Other firebacks depicting repeated firedogs are known although not always in threes, and not always with prominent horseshoe-shaped legs.²⁸

There may be a similar reason for the design of the example in Anne of Cleves' House, Lewes, where the founder has arranged the three bollock daggers between two square crosses with two inverted Vs, one on either end (*Fig. 32*). The triple use of these weapons may also contain another level of meaning, as a dagger/sword is used in the centre of a small magical cup from Mildenhall, Suffolk, forming a cross with the

word SILENTIUM (*Fig. 33*). This cup, along with other related symbolism on both sides, was probably part of the equipment belonging to a wizard in Suffolk.²⁹ On a fireback from Plaxtol there are four rondel daggers that make a saltire cross with a square cross on either side (*Fig. 34*).

The paired crosses on either side of the star-shaped symbol on a fireback in Lewes were also able to give triple protection (*Fig. 35*). The central octagram, made from a continuous line, is an unusual pattern which is sometimes seen as a protective ideogram in Scandinavian countries,³⁰ and the same symbol was noted on a fireback in Belgium.³¹ This too, can be read as four X forms around a central square, or as four Ms.

Many of the symbols that have been discussed were also used by brick masons, as outstanding apotropaic patterns in fine brick. On one Pre-Reformation example from the early 16th-century brick porch of Hemingstone



Church, in Suffolk there are three saltire crosses, two ecclesiastical crosses and a large W (Fig. 36). When these were first made, the mason would have washed over the brickwork with red ochre distemper, called ruddle,³² the distemper would either have not taken on the glazed headers or would have been supplemented with black pigment to make the patterns much clearer than can be read today. By colouring over the mortar joints and any faults in the rest of the brick work, these patterns would have been particularly outstanding.³³ They were placed on this facade to guard the main north entry into the church.

An Assortment of Symbols

In Hastings Museum is an elongated plain fireback with a rope pattern around the outer edges (Fig. 37). Five symbols appear on it. To the left of the M is an integrated AM. This is commonly found on chimney lintels often in conjunction with Ms and Ws (See Figures 3 and 9). Like the last two letters, this also had associations with the Virgin's name. Although the AM symbol can be found in the past, either used as an

elaborate letter A, or to stand as Alpha in conjunction with Omega (See Figure 12), its common use on chimney inscriptions with two extra lines to make a combined AMR, shows its Marian derivation (Figs. 38 and 39).

If the straight line of the AMR is counted as an 'l', albeit that it is sloping, this combination can represent a version as MARIA. This scribed form can be found on mantle beams from the late 16th century, but was also still being used in the late-17th century.³⁴ The AM shown in Figure 37 has a bar placed above it, as does the inverted V next to it. On each of the outer sides is a Tau cross; these are an older form of protective mark that were used for protective purposes above the door in several 13th-century variations on enamel crosses (Fig. 40).

The central motif of a fireback from Cranbrook Museum, Kent, may also be a version of the AM cipher (Fig 41). This is placed centrally, directly under the husband's and wife's initials and between the commemorative date, which is conspicuously later than that presumed for the other firebacks illustrated.

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Fig. 36 top. Diagram of the designs in the brickwork on the north porch, St. Gregory's Church, Hemingstone, Suffolk, early-16th century. Here there are three saltire crosses, two ecclesiastical crosses and a large W.

Fig. 37 centre. Fireback with five symbols: M, AM, inverted V and two Ts, probably 16th-century, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery

Fig. 38 bottom left. Section from a late 16th-century scribed Hall beam, Elm Farm, Mendlesham, Suffolk

Fig. 39 bottom right. Similar scribed mark from the late 17th-century mantle beam in a parlour chamber, at Mill Farm, Worlingworth, Suffolk

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Fig. 40 right. Diagram drawn from an enamel plaque for a 13th-century ecclesiastical cross that existed in several very similar forms. This shows Aaron marking a Tau cross over a door, using the blood of the sacrificial animal for passover. Illustrated in Neil Stratford, *Catalogue of Medieval Enamels in the British Museum, II. Northern Romanesque Enamel*, British Museum Press, 1993





Another oddity is the icon that appears between repeated furniture-derived stamps (*Fig. 42*). At a quick glance this follows the form of a merchant's mark. These usually have a mast-like vertical line, sometimes with the top resembling a back-to-front 4. Beside this may be placed the merchant's initials. The central mast is usually positioned on a base symbol, and this is often one of the common apotropaic marks already discussed; the AM mark is one of them. Here we find the inverted V, and around the centrally-placed box hang a series of crosses. For comparison, an early 17th-century merchant's mark scribed on the chancel arch of Wissett Church, Suffolk, has similar crosses linked to the inverted V at the base (*Fig. 43*); the rest of this merchant's mark follows a standard pattern. It is debatable whether this entire decoration is of significance apotropaically. It was moulded from a composite of several short lengths of twisted rope which appear in differing arrangements, both more and less elaborate, on a number of firebacks that were probably products of the same furnace.³⁵ Nevertheless, the multiple crosses are probably intended to give protection to the hearth.

The last fireback to be considered is one that had been acquired by Nathaniel Lloyd before the First World War (*Figs. 44 & 45*). This is now in the study that was used by his son Christopher Lloyd at Great Dixter, Sussex until his death in 2006. This magnificent fireback is covered with royal symbols, and, judging from its design, may have been made for a royal

household or for the home of a loyal supporter. Along the lower half are four Ws. These are not as large as some of the single examples cited before. Therefore it is possible that these have a double meaning: not only are they apotropaic, but they could be used in this way with the royal symbols to flatter Queen Elizabeth as the Virgin of Virgins. This idea of pairing the Queen with the Virgin Mary may at first seem exaggerated for the overseer of a reformed church, who wished to disassociate all links with the Catholic religion. Several 20th-century scholars have tentatively explored this connection by comparing contemporary poetry and Marian iconography, particularly after the mid 1570s. More recently the concept has been advanced in a paper titled, 'Elizabeth I as a second Virgin Mary'.³⁶ Although no direct reference to the VV symbol has been found by these authors to make a direct link to Queen Elizabeth, this symbol was widely displayed in patterned brickwork on high status buildings. The queen and her retinue would have passed the obvious example on the side of Melford Hall in Suffolk that faces the entrance drive, when she visited in 1578.

Conclusion

It seems highly likely that the use of such simple but significant symbols on some firebacks would connect with the apotropaic protection of the hearth area. That such designs were largely confined to the simplest firebacks that could be moulded and cast, suggests two different but not mutually incompatible conclusions.

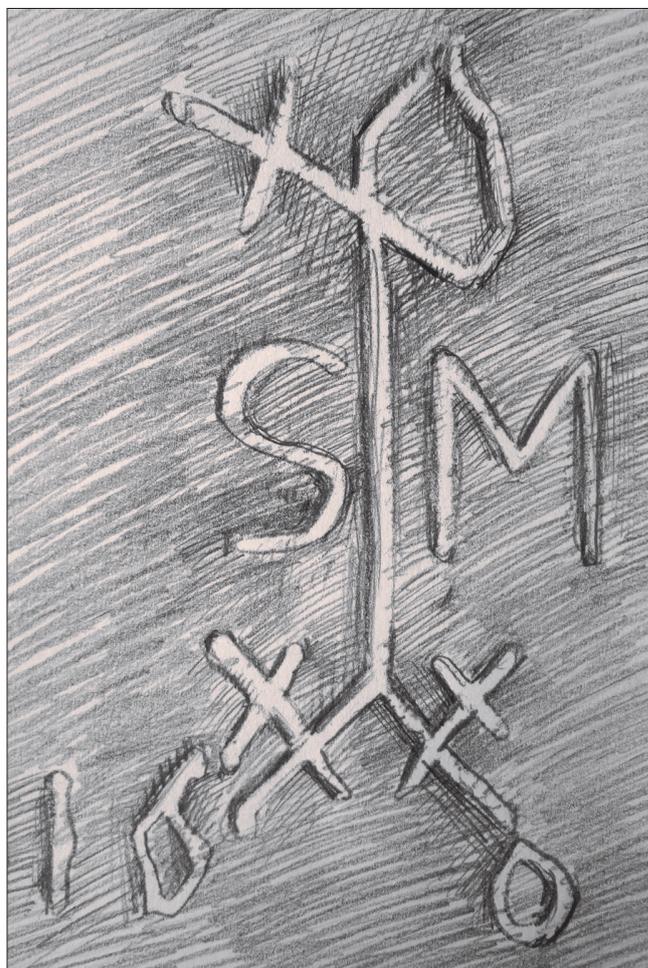
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Fig. 41 *above*: Fireback with initials and possible A and V symbols and the date 1728, Cranbrook Museum, Kent

Fig. 42 *below*: Fireback with complex four-cross design between furniture-derived stamps probably 16th-century, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, Sussex

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Fig. 43 A merchant's mark from the first decade of the 17th century scribed into the chancel arch of St Andrew's, Wissett, Suffolk, by an individual whose initials were SM. The top section follows a standard pattern, but the base can often be the familiar forms common to apotropaic symbols.



Firstly, that those who acquired such firebacks were, in general, financially less able to commission more elaborate and more skilfully executed designs.

Secondly, that such designs were more common in the early days of firebacks, in the 16th and early-17th centuries; particularly wide firebacks such as Figure 37 are very probably of early date.

However, there is a caveat in that, although the smelting of cast-iron was not introduced into England until the 1490s, the practice of making firebacks had already been established in Germany by that time,³⁷ so their manufacture would not have had to be developed afresh. Firebacks with simple apotropaic designs continued to be cast contemporaneously with other designs moulded from pre-carved patterns. The combination of the established belief in the protective power of iron and the ability to incorporate symbols

long held to avert the evil intentions of the devil and his minions was only made possible when cast plates that could be decorated became available at the beginning of the 16th century.

The rarity of dated examples of such firebacks makes chronological attribution difficult but the Cranbrook example of 1728 (see Figure 40) indicates that the desire for such protective measures lingered. This is not so surprising, as is demonstrated by similar symbols which were scribed onto doors and buildings until well into the second half of the 19th century. The circumstances under which a brick was scribed with an AM and two crosses and then blessed by the monk and self-styled Father Ignatious, later known as The Monk of Llanthony, during 1863 for a new pair of cottages, in Coddendam, Suffolk, was fully reported by one of the builders and subsequent authors (*Fig. 45*).³⁸



Fig. 44 *left*: Fireback with royal heraldic emblems and four W symbols, probably late 16th-century, Great Dixter, Northiam, Sussex. This photograph has been adjusted to remove later features which are presently attached.

Fig. 45 *below left*: Study fireplace at Great Dixter, Northiam, Sussex, around 1917, reproduced by permission of English Heritage



Fig. 46 *above*: Inscription on a brick with the AM symbol and a cross either side at Monk Cottages, The Street, Coddendam, Suffolk. In 1863 the inscription was ordered by the workmen building two cottages. They requested from a passing churchman, a charismatic high-Anglian preacher called Joseph Leicester Lyne, self styled as Father Ignatious, that he should bless this commemorative brick and the house. He dressed as a monk, which explains the name of the cottages, but both Father Ignatious and his blessing of this brick were highly controversial. Later he became known as the Monk of Llanthony where he re-established a monastery.

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Timothy Easton trained in fine art and practises as an artist. He has always had a broad interest in works of art and collected metalwork from an early age; he was given his first fireback as a 21st birthday present. Curiosity about symbols, repeated on artifacts from the late-medieval period onwards, led him to investigate apotropaic practices, which he has lectured and written about for over 40 years.

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