

Firebacks began to be made in Britain in the first half of the 16th century. From the purely functional purpose of protecting the back of the fireplace and reflecting heat into the room it was not long before the opportunity was taken to embellish their plain surfaces. Their decoration provides us with a reflection of the social history of their times, whether in the heraldry of royalty and the landed class, the religious and political turmoil of the Stuart period, or the beginnings of the Enlightenment and the rediscovery of classical literature.



A fireback with an apotropaic, or evil-averting, design formed of variations of the letters 'V' and 'M' symbolising the Virgin Mary, moulded from strips bound with twisted rope.

Too often ignored in the darkened recesses of fireplaces or dismissed, unfairly, as copies firebacks received only cursory attention in literature, being largely confined to a small number of articles in journals or books on furniture, architecture or antiques, which appeared in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. This was redressed by the publication in 2010 of *British Cast-Iron Firebacks* by Jeremy

Hodgkinson. But even then only a selection of the huge range of different designs that have been produced in Britain since the 16th century could be illustrated.



A fireback made in 1618 showing the arms of James I; one of several designs of the royal arms, all the work of the same pattern-maker who is associated with the west of England.

Firebacks are frequently still in regular use and often in hostile conditions to which most historic items are no longer subjected. The purpose of this survey, which has already recorded over 800 examples, is to compile a record of as many different British fireback designs and their variants as possible. The compilation of a detailed catalogue has already revealed, and will continue to reveal to greater effect, the associations between different styles, forms and decorative features on firebacks, enabling conclusions to be drawn about their origins and makers and the social contexts of their production.



Furnace accounts show that this fireback was cast at Heathfield Furnace in Sussex in 1758. The distinctive style of lettering has helped identify another fireback that was made there.

While there are several firebacks in museum collections the bulk of examples remain in private hands and the compiler of this survey seeks the co-operation of those fortunate enough to possess firebacks to allow access to them to photograph and measure them. And it is not merely the elaborately decorated firebacks that the survey seeks to record. Often it is the seemingly most innocuous designs, perhaps merely random objects or sets of initials, that yield the most information.



One of a number of firebacks cast by a founder with the initials 'IB', probably in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire. The design with its references to pipe-smoking suggests a connection with the Bristol tobacco trade.

Many firebacks seen today are copies of older ones, some produced commercially in large numbers, but unlike facsimiles of other antiques manufactured by more modern processes, direct casting of a fireback in a mould formed from another one has been practised since the 16th century. It is often difficult to tell which are originals and which are copies, and sometimes the only examples to have survived may be copies. Occasionally the copies include minor variations such as an added date or initials.



Date-stamped 1583 copy of a fire-damaged, early-16th century fireback.

The practicalities of recording a fireback are simple. As can be seen from the photographs in this leaflet the fireback needs to be viewed from directly in front, with no obstructions such as grates or firebricks. However, these need not present a problem for, as long as they can be moved sufficiently for a clear view of the whole back, little disturbance will be necessary. The fireback will be lightly brushed to remove any accumulated soot or dust, and any ash concealing the lower part of the back moved to reveal the bottom edge

of the fireback. Flashlight from an oblique angle will be used to highlight the surface detail. Recording each fireback need take no longer than 20 minutes.



One of a group of firebacks which include Tudor heraldic symbols. The central shield bears the initials 'KH' for King Henry, probably Henry VIII.

The fruits of this survey are already available to the general public via a website www.hodgers.com/firebacks and the eventual aim is to deposit a paper archive in a national library with digital copies to other significant holders of collections.

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Cover illustration: 18th-century fireback showing Hercules slaying the Hydra; one of several moulded from designs by the same pattern-maker and cast at Ashburnham Furnace in Sussex.

THE BRITISH FIREBACK SURVEY

