

A SERIES OF KENTISH FIREBACKS AND THE POSSIBLE IDENTIFICATION OF
THEIR FOUNDER

In volume 29 (1911) of *Archaeologia Cantiana* H.S. Cowper described a group of iron firebacks that all bear the same heraldic shield in relief though repeated in differing numbers.¹ He identified the arms as those of William Aylofffe (c.1535-84), a judge from Hornchurch in Essex, and his wife Jane née Sulyard. Cowper established a distant connection between the Aylofffes and the Kentish village of Boughton Aluph (near Ashford) but suggested a possible religious motive behind their production. More likely is that the Essex Aylofffes commissioned a fireback from one of the Kent furnaces, providing the armorial stamp for the purpose. Remaining at the furnace, this was subsequently available for re-use.

Cowper's interest had been inspired by his ownership of one of these firebacks at his then home of Loddenden Manor, Staplehurst. He noted several other examples at locations in west Kent, most of which bore a date separating one or other of two pairs of initials, CT or RS, inside a rectangle with a cavetto-moulded frame. The single appearance of initials on a fireback is usually thought to represent the person who commissioned it. Sometimes initials occur in triad for a husband and wife. However, the repeated occurrence of the same initials on different firebacks,

sometimes over a period of time, suggests that they are those of either the founder or the pattern-maker. A group of firebacks cast in 1582 all bear the initials IA though clearly made for different people.² As the decorative details on those firebacks were individually stamped into the mould the initials are likely to have been those of the founder. By contrast, the single wooden patterns carved to form the moulds of another group, dating to the 1640s and 50s, were evidently the work of a craftsman identified as IM but who has not otherwise been identified.³ The small rectangular panels bearing the dates and initials on the Aylofffe firebacks are positioned centrally above the arrangement of shields. Of the 12 dated examples identified by Cowper or known to the author, the initials CT appear on nine, dated to between 1601 and 1630, and evidence has emerged that suggests this founder's likely identity.

With one exception the dated examples of Aylofffe firebacks that Cowper recorded were in Kent locations; the exception was at 'Pounceford' Farm. This is Poundsford Farm, at Burwash Common in East Sussex, and the fireback had been first noted there in 1869,⁴ although it was not identified as one of the series until nearly 30 years later.⁵ The fireback is still there (**Fig. 1**).⁶ Most of the dated Aylofffe firebacks bear between 13 and 17 shields and all but one are in excess of 1.2m (4 feet) in width and, therefore, cast for large fireplaces. Examples on public view are in Scotney Castle and in Great Dixter, at Northiam, neither of which were noted by Cowper. The Poundsford back is much smaller at 92cm (3 feet), with only seven shields and is, accordingly, more portable. It is dated 1629 and has the initials CT.

In his will of 1694 Charles Tyler of Heathfield, Sussex, bequeathed Poundsford to his widow Mary to be a source for the payment of his debts.⁷ Charles was the son of Elias Tyler who, in turn, was the eldest surviving son of Charles Tyler, an iron



Fig. 1 Iron fireback of 1629 bearing the arms of Aylofffe impaling Sulyard, at Poundsford Farm, Burwash, East Sussex (photo, author).

founder. It is likely that Elias was also in the iron trade as a ‘Charles Tayler and his sonne’ are listed among the founders and fillers at the furnace of the Brenchley gunfounder, John Browne, at Horsmonden in 1628-9.⁸ The elder Charles Tyler had married Mary Allarde at Goudhurst in 1599. Living initially in Goudhurst where, recorded as Charles Stiller, he appeared in a recognizance in 1603,⁹ he seems to have moved to Cranbrook in the same year where his wife bore five children: Elias in 1606 and the last there in 1612. He was in Biddenden in 1615 where his daughter Elizabeth was baptised, but from 1618 the baptisms of two further sons and a daughter indicate that he was in Hawkhurst. Charles died there in 1629, his son Elias being his residuary legatee.¹⁰ Describing himself in his will as a founder, the possessions at his house and land called Tubbs Lake indicate the prosperity he achieved, with money and domestic items capable of providing bequests to his widow, his four sons and five daughters. Elias Tyler remained in Hawkhurst initially, acting as bondsman in the marriage of John Levett and Joan Burkham in 1634.¹¹ By 1648 he was in Burwash where he was one of those who took the inventory of the possessions of Simon Coney.¹² The following year he is recorded as occupying the manor of Woodknowle, a property of 150 acres on the northern edge of the parish.¹³ Predeceased by his son Charles, he died at Burwash in 1697.

The large size, cumbersome nature and predominantly Kentish distribution of the dated firebacks – and there are many more small examples that are undated – suggested to Cowper that they had been the products of one of the furnaces operating in the county at that time, a conclusion with which this author does not disagree. These were Barden (Speldhurst), Bedgebury (Cranbrook), Biddenden, Cowden, Frith (Hawkhurst), Hawkhurst, Horsmonden and Scarlets (Cowden).¹⁴ Of these Barden and the two furnaces at Cowden are distant from the main distribution area of the dated firebacks, which leaves furnaces in parishes where Charles Tyler was known to have been living or working. The potential for these firebacks to have been cast at a succession of furnaces, depending upon where Charles Tyler was working at the time, implies that he would have had possession of the Aylofffe shield and date/initial stamps rather than they being part of the stock of one particular ironworks, as would have probably been the case with most such moveable decorative stamps.

It is the author’s contention that the Poundsford fireback was brought to the property by Charles Tyler’s descendants and that the initials CT on most of the dated Aylofffe firebacks are his.¹⁵

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¹ H.S. Cowper, ‘A Series of Kentish Heraldic Firebacks and the Identification of the Arms,’ *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 29 (1911), 40-6.

² J. Hodgkinson, *British Cast-Iron Firebacks of the 16th to Mid-18th Centuries* (Crawley, HodgersBooks, 2010), 112.

³ J. Hodgkinson, ‘A Seventeenth-Century Sussex Woodcarver: the Evidence of Cast Ironwork’, *Regional Furniture*, 28 (2014), 39-48.

⁴ C.F. Thrower, ‘Burwash’, *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 22 (1869), 113.

⁵ J. Starkie Gardner, ‘Iron Casting in the Weald,’ *Archaeologia*, 56, 1 (1898), 14; he erroneously identified the arms as those of the de la Warr family.

RESEARCH NOTES – EARLY MODERN

⁶ The author is grateful to Mr and Mrs C.J. Mees for allowing him to photograph the fireback at Poundsford.

⁷ East Sussex Record Office, Moulsecomb (hereafter ESRO), PBT 1/1/42/196.

⁸ R.F. Monger (ed.), *Acts of the Privy Council of England: new series. Vol. 44 June 1628-April 1629* (London, HMSO, 1958), 71-2.

⁹ J.S. Cockburn (ed.), *Calendar of assize records: Sussex indictments, Elizabeth I* (London, HMSO, 1975), no. 2084.

¹⁰ Kent History and Library Centre, Maidstone, PRC/1767/297.

¹¹ J.M. Cowper (ed.), *Canterbury Marriage Licences, Second Series 1619-1660* (Canterbury, Cross and Jackman, 1894), 616.

¹² ESRO, AMS 5744/147.

¹³ West Sussex Record Office, Chichester, Wiston/1325.

¹⁴ H. Cleere and D. Crossley, *The iron industry of the Weald* (Cardiff, Merton Priory Press, 1995), 309-67, 392-93.

¹⁵ The author acknowledges a debt to the late Brian Awty whose research into the families of Wealden ironworkers, due to be published in his book *Adventure in Iron*, revealed the connection between the Tyler family and Poundsford Farm.