

A SERIES OF DISTINCTIVE FIREBACKS

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An intriguing group of firebacks was produced in the early-18th century, probably in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire. Of a uniform design, Figure 1 shows a typical example. Other decorative stamps are included on individual examples, such as rosettes, different arrangements of foliage, and in one instance, two seated apes. What unites these firebacks, apart from their stylistic similarity, are the initials 'I' and 'B' on the bottom edge of each the castings. While different initials seen along the top panel on the castings may safely be assumed to denote the individuals or couples for whom the firebacks were made, 'I' and 'B' will be those of the founder. Of this person we know next to nothing.

The majority of these firebacks were made between 1703 and 1710, and they vary in size from the largest the writer has recorded, with a width of 1.1m (3ft 7in) to the smallest, illustrated by Shuffrey in *The English Fireplace* (1912) at about 0.5m (1ft 8in)(Fig. 2). There is an earlier back, dated 1699 (Fig. 3), which also bears the lion stamp seen on Figure 1, and which is stylistically so similar as to be the work of the same founder, but the initials IB are absent. Its whereabouts are unknown to the writer.

The figures of the pipe smokers suggest a connection with the tobacco trade, one of the main centres of which was Bristol. Illustrations of both native and European pipe smokers can be found dating to the 18th century and earlier and while it may not be possible to identify the figures on the firebacks with specific printed



Figure 1: Fireback of 1706 cast by 'IB' with figures smoking pipes; 111x72.5cm; photo Dominic Smith.

images, there are several prints dating from the period that could have inspired the ones on the firebacks (Figs. 4 and 5). Also, furnaces in the Forest of Dean are known to have sold batches of firebacks to ironmongers in Bristol.

As previously mentioned, the date range of these firebacks extends to 1710 but two other firebacks made by IB have been noted that were cast more than a decade later, in 1721. Both are in Palace House at Beaulieu in Hampshire and, significantly, both clearly state that they were cast at Sowley Furnace, close to Beaulieu and, as with the rest of the estate, in the ownership of the Dukes of Montagu. As well as the founder's initials, the distinctive swirled foliate stamp seen in Figure 1, and on three others the writer has recorded, appears on both backs. Sowley Furnace had been established by the beginning of the 17th century probably to supply ironwork to



Figure 2: Fireback of 1710 cast by 'IB'; from L. A. Shuffrey, *The English Fireplace* (1912), p.139.



Figure 3: Fireback of 1699 with lion stamps in top corners; photo anon.



Figure 4: 17th century print of an 'Indian' smoking a pipe; Conrad Meyer;
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Figure 5: Tobacco paper advertising Edmonds's, tobacconist, Gray's Inn Lane; 18th century;
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the dockyards at Portsmouth. In 1717 the furnace and its forge were leased to John White who was operating two forges in the Forest of Dean close to the River Wye, at Monmouth and at New Weir. White evidently brought some ironworkers with him to Sowley, for in the registers of Beaulieu after 1717 the surnames of ironworkers whose family members were 'hatched, matched or dispatched', included Thomas, Pugh, Lewis, Llewelin and Jones; all distinctly Welsh-sounding. Although no founder with the initials IB is among them, it seems entirely plausible that this otherwise anonymous individual could have numbered among the skilled workers that John White seems to have brought from the Gloucestershire-Monmouthshire area and could also have been of Welsh ancestry. Were it to be possible to identify the specific furnace that was the source of IB's earlier castings, his (or her) identity might be revealed.

The two Sowley castings differ from the earlier ones (Figs. 6 and 7). They are not in the line-divided style that was simply adapted for different customers. Instead they were specifically cast for the Palace House and on one is the apposite inscription, TUNC BONUS EST IGNIS CUM PENDET STIRIA TIGNIS - 'Then fire is good when icicles hang from the eaves'. This aphorism has been traced to *A Dictionarie in English and Latine for Children* by William Clark, published in 1602.

The range of examples I have recorded can be seen at <https://hodgers.com/firebacks/results/series/25>. Images of two, at Dyrham Park and at Greys Court, can be viewed on the National Trust Collections website - <http://nationaltrustcollections.org.uk>. The writer would be most interested to learn of more examples of this series of firebacks (as well as, of course, any other backs).



Figure 6: Fireback of 1721 cast by 'IB'; 92x68.5cm; Palace House, Beaulieu; photo author.



Figure 7: Fireback of 1721 with Latin inscription cast by 'IB'; 100x68.5cm; Palace House, Beaulieu; photo author.