

A Forgery in Iron

By H. R. Schubert

THE COLLECTION of ornamental cast-iron firebacks owned by the Sussex Archaeological Society and exhibited in Anne of Cleves's House at Lewes includes a fireback (shown below) which was for a long time the subject of special attention and considerable interest.

This fireback is remarkable for several reasons. The figure of a salamander, a lizard-like animal which was believed in antiquity to live in fire, is a very rare artistic motif used for the ornamentation of firebacks. Above this figure appears a date (1550), which is also unusual, since the majority of firebacks in England, as well as in other countries, bear no date. The importance of the date is increased by the fact that at the time of its first reproduction in literature it made the specimen on which

it appeared the oldest fireback cast in England.* Another English fireback dated 1548 was not known at that time.†

The first to express doubts about the early date of 1550 was Professor W. R. Lethaby, who "thought that the second figure [i.e. the first "5"] was forged in both senses of the word."‡ An examination made recently by the present author proved that Lethaby's assumption was perfectly correct. There are even slight traces of a different numeral underneath, which had been carefully filed off and may have been a "6." That the original date was indeed 1650 and not 1550 is confirmed by a replica in the Museum at Rochester, Kent, which bears the date 1650.

The motive which prompted the forger is quite clear: by altering the date he produced the oldest specimen of its type known in England. The person of the forger, however, cannot be identified. Naturally, the disclosure that the Piltdown skull, discovered by Charles Dawson, and a number of items from his collection of antiquities were fakes has recently raised the suspicion that Dawson had a hand in forging the numeral on the fireback. Dawson, however, who died in 1916, should be ruled out; according to a catalogue, the fireback has been in the possession of the Sussex Archaeological Society since at least 1866, § almost half a century before Dawson drew attention to it.

*First described by J. Starkie Gardner in *Archaeologia*, 1899, vol. 56, Fig. 23, p. 158; subsequently by Charles Dawson in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 1903, vol. 46, p. 27; further in "Victoria County History of Sussex," vol. II, plate facing p. 242 (London, 1907).

†Reproduced by H. R. Schubert, *J. Iron Steel Inst.*, 1954, vol. 176, p. 36. The development of the art of casting firebacks in England is described by the author in "History of the British Iron and Steel Industry, c.450 B.C.—A.D. 1775," which is to be published shortly by Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1957.

‡W. R. Lethaby, *The Builder*, 1926, Oct. 1st, p. 538.

§ Evidence kindly supplied by the Curator of the Collections, Mr. N. E. S. Norris, F.S.A.

