

The Mitford Collection of Iron Firebacks

The firebacks displayed in the Servants' Corridor at Petworth House were collected by the late Mr W Slade Mitford, of Pitshill, Tillington, three miles west of Petworth. They are on loan to the National Trust from the Mitford family.

Firebacks first appeared in Germany, then in France and the southern parts of Belgium, following the development of cast-iron production in blast furnaces. By the end of the fifteenth century this technology had spread to the Weald of south-east England. This coincided with a gradual change in vernacular house design, when fireplaces moved away from the centre of the main hall to an end wall. An iron plate against the wall protected it from heat and flames and also helped radiate heat into the room.

Chimney plates, as they were initially called, were easily decorated during manufacture. Initially common objects such as pieces of rope and household articles were used, then stamps were developed, pre-carved into heraldic charges, or letters and numerals. Eventually a complete pattern was carved in wood, to make into a mould.



Early English fireback incorporating separate stamps arranged symmetrically, including two different forms of *fleur-de-lis*. The initials may well be of the people for whom the fireback was made.

In Germany, iron stoves were manufactured alongside firebacks. These were formed from decorated cast plates bolted together. When these stoves became redundant their plates could be used as firebacks, and there are a number of examples in the Mitford Collection. They can be recognised by their flanged edges and sometimes narrow dimensions.

The majority of the firebacks in this collection are of continental origin. Many were produced during the late seventeenth century for the Dutch market in the established iron-producing area of the Siegerland, east of the Rhine. This belonged to a branch of the House of Nassau, the royal family of the newly-independent Netherlands.



German cast iron stove plate made in 1638. The scene is of the marriage of Cana from chapter 2 of the Gospel of St John.



An early-eighteenth century English fireback copying the Dutch style. The figure is likely to be Hercules.

When William of Orange became king of Great Britain in 1688, Dutch design became very fashionable and many firebacks from his native Holland were imported into this country. Typically they were decorated with pictorial scenes of religious, classical or allegorical subjects, and their shape – tall and narrow – reflected the proportions of hearths in Dutch houses.

Before this, English firebacks had been made for wide, wood-burning fireplaces, and were decorated with heraldic or armorial designs, often with initials identifying the owners. By the early 1700s, English firebacks were copying the style and shape of continental imports with their representations of naturalistic subjects, sometimes copied from engravings. Coal, a more efficient fuel, was increasingly being used for domestic heating instead of wood, and fireplaces were being built smaller.

A few examples in this collection reflect a revival of interest in antique domestic artefacts, which began in the nineteenth century and resulted in pastiches of earlier styles.

J S Hodgkinson

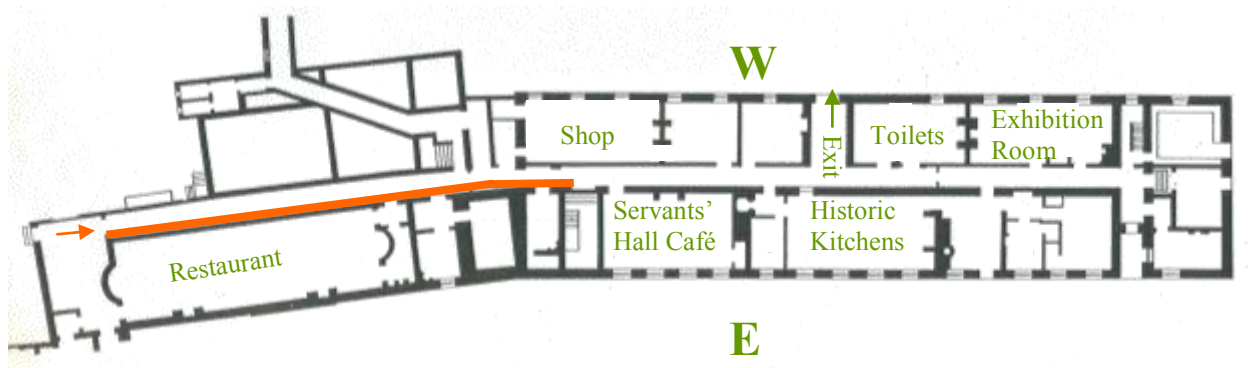


This English fireback bears the inescutcheon of Hanover, which dates the stamp to between 1801 and 1837, though the fireback may be newer. The pineapple fruit is a symbol of welcome and this plus the family group stamp also appear on the side plates of the roasting spit in the Historic Kitchen.

Jeremy Hodgkinson is the author of *British Cast-Iron Firebacks of the 16th to Mid 18th Centuries* which is on sale in the National Trust shop.

East wall

from the Restaurant entrance to the
Servants' Stairs



East wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Servants' Stairs



A mid- to late 17th century fireback possibly made in Lothringia (modern Lorraine, in France). Its simple, striking design contrasts with the rather predictable form of the firebacks being made in the Siegerland, where many firebacks were produced for the Dutch market.



A fireback of the mid- to late 17th century made in Germany for the Dutch market. A parrot perched on a suspended ring was a popular subject for firebacks in this period; the inscription reading 'papegei', a misspelling of the German word for parrot. The columns are not typical of firebacks from this source, but were widely used on English examples of the period.



A German fireback of the mid- to late 17th century made for the Dutch market. The design shows the wickerwork Garden of Holland enclosing a lion rampant which probably represents the royal house of Nassau. Several patriotic firebacks were produced following the independence of the Dutch republic in 1648.



A side plate from a cast-iron stove made in Germany in the mid- to late 17th century. The scene is from the Gospel of St Matthew where a woman from Canaan beseeches Jesus to help her daughter. A popular subject with artists of the period, the text seems to have been incorrectly quoted as v.15 when it should have been v.22.

East wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Servants' Stairs



A German fireback of the late 17th century made for the Dutch market. It has been suggested that this is a contemporary take on Adam and Eve. However, the lack of a serpent on the tree makes it more likely to be a representation of two notable personages of the period, possibly the Elector Wilhelm Friedrich of Brandenburg and his wife, Henriette Luise of Oranje-Nassau, who figure on several firebacks.



This may be an English fireback of the early 18th century, as it lacks the serpent or dolphin adornments typical of German types of a little earlier. However, its subject, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, from the Old Testament book of Genesis, was more common on continental firebacks.



A German fireback dated 1682. This design, and another similar to it in this collection, was probably produced so that it could be personalised, when cast, by the addition of a coat of arms or other device in the central space. The initials are likely to be those of the pattern maker.



An English fireback of the late 17th century with a scene of cherubs cavorting among bunches of fruit, including pomegranates (a symbol of love). The design is a pastiche of Dutch designs of the period, but the columns are a distinctive feature of English examples.

East wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Servants' Stairs



A mid- to late 17th century fireback made in Germany for the Dutch market. The figure is that of King Gustav II of Sweden – ‘Der Koninck Von Sweden’ – who reigned from 1611 to 1632. Several other prominent figures of the period are represented on similar firebacks.



A fireback dated 1667 cast in the Siegerland area of north-west Germany showing four historical figures: from left to right, Prinz Fredrik Henrik of Oranje, his daughter Luise Henriette, Prince Maurice of Nassau, and the Elector Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg, who married Luise Henriette. The inscription – ‘Presntzi Van Wesel Ende Bvsh’ – may relate to the defeat of the Spanish at s’Hertogenbosch (den Bosch – ‘Ende Bush’) in 1629. German craftsmanship may account for the incorrect spelling of Dutch names.



A mid- to late 17th century German fireback cast for the Dutch market. Devoid of much of the usual decoration, it portrays St Michael the Archangel, vanquishing Satan in the form of a dragon.



A mid- to late 17th century German fireback made for the Dutch market. The scene is of the Nativity of Jesus, with the shepherds visiting the newborn child and its mother.

East wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Servants' Stairs



A mid- to late 17th century fireback probably cast in the Siegerland area of north-west Germany. The central scene shows the encounter at the well between Jesus and the Woman of Samaria, described in chapter 4 of the Gospel of St John. This scene was a popular subject on continental firebacks and stoveplates.



A late 17th century fireback cast in Germany for the Dutch market. The central panel shows a simple bucolic scene of a goatherd playing a pipe.



A fireback of 1662 made in Germany for the Dutch market. The design comprises many symbols of Dutch nationhood. The figure of the Dutch Maiden, with her cap of Liberty held aloft on a lance, is seated within the wicker framework of the Garden of Holland, the lion of the United Provinces before her. Above this scene, within the traditional design of firebacks of this period, are the mottoes, 'Hollandia' and 'Pro Patria' – 'For the Fatherland'. In 1648 the Netherlands had gained their independence from Spain; this fireback symbolises their spirit of freedom.



The front plate from a cast-iron stove made in 1638, probably in the Siegerland area of north-west Germany. The scene is of the Marriage at Cana from chapter 2 of the Gospel of St John. The initial letter 'H' is probably that of the maker of the wooden pattern from which this plate was cast.

East wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Servants' Stairs



An English fireback of the mid-17th century with the royal arms probably of Charles II. Likely to have been cast in Sussex, its modest dimensions reflect the smaller size of fireplace being built in houses of the period.



The front plate from a cast iron stove probably made in Wallonia (the southern part of modern Belgium) in the mid- to late 16th century. Its design portrays Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, with the serpent entwined around the Tree of Knowledge.



An English fireback dated 1613, probably cast in Sussex. Its design incorporates several separate stamps arranged symmetrically. These include two different forms of *fleur-de-lys*. The initials are probably those of the person or couple for whom the fireback was made. A similar fireback of a later date, but cast using the same base panel and some of the same stamps, is in Horsham Museum.



A fireback possibly of English design dating from the mid- to late 18th century, with an elaborate rococo border. The battle scene may have been inspired by one or more paintings or engravings of a battle in history. Likely sources are 'The Defeat of the Pisans at the Tower of St Vincenzo' by Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) and 'Alexander the Great's crossing of the Granicus' by Charles Le Brun (1619–90). An engraving by Daniel Kollerthaler (1574–1648) has a similar frame enclosing an unidentified cavalry conflict.

East wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Servants' Stairs



An English fireback of late 16th or early 17th century date. Unusually, it comprises a stamp formed of a strapwork design with the head and forelegs of a goat beneath a bunch of grapes. Such a feature may have originally been carved in relief on furniture.



A 19th century English fireback. The family group stamp at the top is the same as on another fireback in this collection. Below it is a small stamp of the English royal coat of arms, apparently with the inescutcheon of Hanover, which dates the stamp (though not necessarily the fireback) to between 1801 and 1837. On each side is a small stamp of St George and the Dragon above a large stamp of a pineapple plant in a pot. This fruit is a symbol of welcome; a similar design is seen on some fireplace grates of the period. The same family group and pineapple stamp can be seen on the side plates of the roasting spit in the kitchen, suggesting a common source.

West wall

from the Restaurant entrance to the Shop



West wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Shop



A late 17th century fireback originally made in Germany for the Dutch market but, in this example, recast with an English inscription. 'The 3 Goddesses' were Aphrodite (shown on the left with Cupid), Hera (identified by her accompanying peacocks) and Athena (shown with spear, shield and helmet). These goddesses were the subject of the Judgement of Paris, which led to the Trojan War. A dated casting of this fireback has a pattern-maker's monogram of NDV and the year 1697.



Probably an English fireback of the early 18th-century. The scene shows Pan with a goat. Its small size is an indication of the reduced dimensions of fireplaces being built at that time, when coal was replacing wood as a domestic fuel.

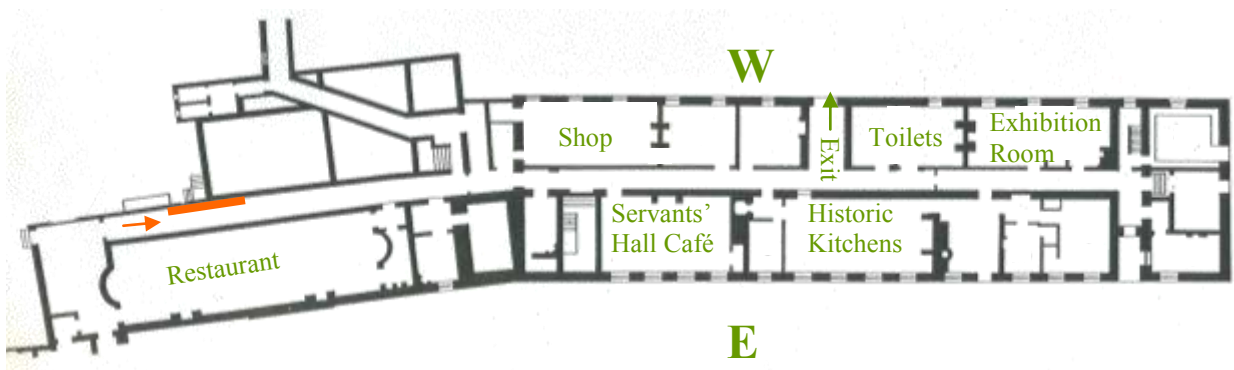


An English fireback of the early to mid-17th century. The arms are those of the Worshipful Company of Clothworkers, one of the livery companies of the City of London. On a large fireback in Haslemere Museum the pattern for this fireback has been used to incorporate these arms into a larger design.



An English fireback of the mid-17th century, probably cast in Sussex. The figure is likely to represent Charles I *in memoriam* as other examples of this style of fireback seem to date from the period of the Commonwealth or later. The inscription reads 'CR' on other examples.

West wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Shop



A fireback dated 1662 probably made in the Eifel region of north-west Germany. The arms are those of King Philip IV of Spain who ruled the Spanish Netherlands (modern Belgium and Luxembourg) at that time. Beneath the shield and the chain of the Order of the Golden Fleece is the word 'Loven', for the town of Leuven in Brabant.



A fireback dated to 1679 made in north-west Germany probably for the Dutch market. It shows the infant Vulcan working at his anvil with two other cherubs. Below is a 'triumph' of weaponry, including cannons, spears, shields and flags.



A fireback, almost certainly dated to 1662, made in north-west Germany for the Dutch market. The central panel shows a parrot, a popular design on firebacks of this period. The outer border, with its inscription, 'Hollandia', was cast from the same pattern as another fireback in this collection.



A fireback of the mid- to late 17th century made in Germany for the Dutch market. The biblical scene illustrates the visitation of the pestilence on Israel described in the second book of Samuel chapter 24, and the sacrifice of an ox by King David; the skull borne by the angel represents the death of those struck down by the plague. A slightly different version has the face of David looking up at the angel.

West wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Shop



A fireback of the mid- to late 17th century made in Germany for the Dutch market. The scene is of the marriage at Cana from chapter 2 of the Gospel of St John, a biblical story often portrayed on firebacks and stoveplates.



A fireback dated 1630 probably from the Eifel region of north-west Germany. The coat of arms has not been identified. The scene below is of Jesus' encounter at the well with the woman from Samaria, described in St John's Gospel chapter 4; a popular subject on German firebacks and stoveplates. The initials 'GP' probably identify the maker of the pattern from which this plate was cast. Its style shows a derivation from the design of stoveplates.



A mid- to late 17th century fireback made in the Siegerland area of north-west Germany. 'Fruhling' means 'Spring' in German, the figure being a personification of the season. While the vase of flowers is in keeping with the main theme, the reason for the inclusion of a small statue of Poseidon/Neptune to the left is less obvious.



An English fireback dated 1658. A smaller version of this design, dated to the same year and cast using the same numerals, can be seen at Lytes Cary Manor, in Somerset, another National Trust property.

West wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Shop



A late 18th or early 19th century French fireback in the Empire style. The figure with the children is an allegory of Charity, a popular subject on firebacks.



A mid- to late 17th century fireback cast in north-west Germany probably for the Dutch market. The scene is unlikely to be allegorical as many firebacks of the period were, but instead may simply be of a lovers' tryst.



A recasting of an English fireback originally made in 1724. The figure is derived from a personification of Europe on a playing card designed for Louis XIV. In its original form the chariot would have been shown being driven across a bridge, with a religious inscription in Welsh along the bottom. These firebacks were made with thinner metal than had been the usual practice, resulting in many of them corroding badly at the bottom. In this example a damaged plate has been used as a pattern, with the bottom part of the design left blank.



An 18th century English fireback bearing the royal arms of George I, II or III. The inscription above the arms is the abbreviated full title of the king, which included 'Duke of Brunswick and Lüneburg, Arch Treasurer and Prince Elector of the Holy Roman Empire'. This fireback predates the Union with Ireland in 1801.

West wall – from the Restaurant entrance to the Shop



A mid- to late 17th century fireback cast in north-west Germany probably for the Dutch market. The central scene is of Poseidon/ Neptune being drawn through the waves by *hippocampi* (mythical sea horses).



An English fireback of the early 18th century, copying the Dutch style. The figure is likely to be that of Hercules, and the monogram 'SHR' identifies the maker of the pattern from which this fireback was originally cast. Several firebacks bear the same monogram.

East wall

from the Servants' Hall Café to opposite
the Exhibition Room



East wall – from the Servants' Hall Café to opposite the Exhibition Room



A German fireback probably made for the Dutch market. It shows the figures of Joshua and Caleb returning to the Children of Israel with the huge bunch of grapes they had picked in the land of Canaan, a scene described in the Old Testament book of Numbers, chapter 13, verses 23-4. The initials 'GK' probably identify the maker of the pattern from which this fireback was cast. Others by the same pattern-maker date from 1700.



A late 17th century German fireback probably made for the Dutch market. It shows the figure of Poseidon or Neptune standing on a sea shell, holding a trident in his right hand and the reins of two *hippocampi*, or mythical sea horses, in his left hand. The nautical theme is reinforced by the shells around the border and by the dolphins on top, although the latter were common on many firebacks made for the Dutch.



A mid- to late 17th century German fireback probably made for the Dutch market. The central female figure is an allegory of Charity, who was shown in the art of the period with children about her. There are many different versions of this design. The initials 'HS' probably identify the maker of the wooden pattern from which this fireback was cast.

East wall – from the Servants' Hall Café to opposite the Exhibition Room



A late 17th century German fireback probably made for the Dutch market. The figure is an allegorical representation of Wisdom.



A mid- to late 17th century English fireback portraying the Royal Oak with crowns among its branches. The design is derived from the celebrated occasion when Charles II evaded his pursuers by hiding in an oak tree at Boscobel House, near Wolverhampton, following the final Royalist defeat at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. Royal Oak Day or Oak Apple Day, the 29th May, commemorating the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, was celebrated as public holiday until 1859. This popular fireback has been copied frequently.



19th-century English fireback with a series of small stamps conveying a nostalgic theme. Such stamps were derived from different sources. The churchwarden pipe was probably just that, pressed twice into the casting sand. The jug and goblet may have been made specially, so too the small cow stamp. The family group, which can be seen on another of the firebacks in this collection, may have been from a brass ornament commonly placed on a mantelpiece. The same family group can be seen on the side plates of the roasting spit in the kitchen, suggesting a common source.

East wall – from the Servants' Hall Café to opposite the Exhibition Room



The front plate from a cast-iron stove dated 1649 made in the Eifel region of north-west Germany. The scene shows the encounter at the well between Jesus and the Woman of Samaria, described in chapter 4 of the Gospel of St John. This scene was a popular subject on continental firebacks and stoveplates. The inscription at the bottom reads: 'Vom Frolin Von Samaria IOH 4.'



A decorated panel from a small cast-iron stove, probably of English design from the mid-18th century. The central oval shows a woman and child with water jugs.

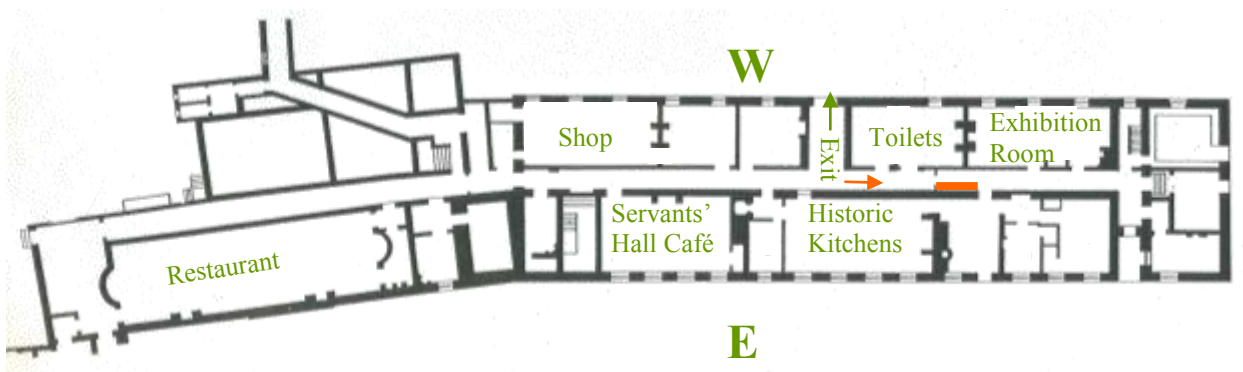


An English fireback dating from 1724. A pastiche of the Dutch fireback designs being imported into England at the time, its central panel shows a flowering plant in a vase. English fireback designs of the period tend not to have the dolphins on top that were typical of those made in Germany.



An English fireback of the early 18th century, copying the Dutch style. The central figure is probably an allegory of Democracy, one of several iconic figures that were the subject of firebacks in this period. To widen the fireback, two narrow panels have been added before casting.

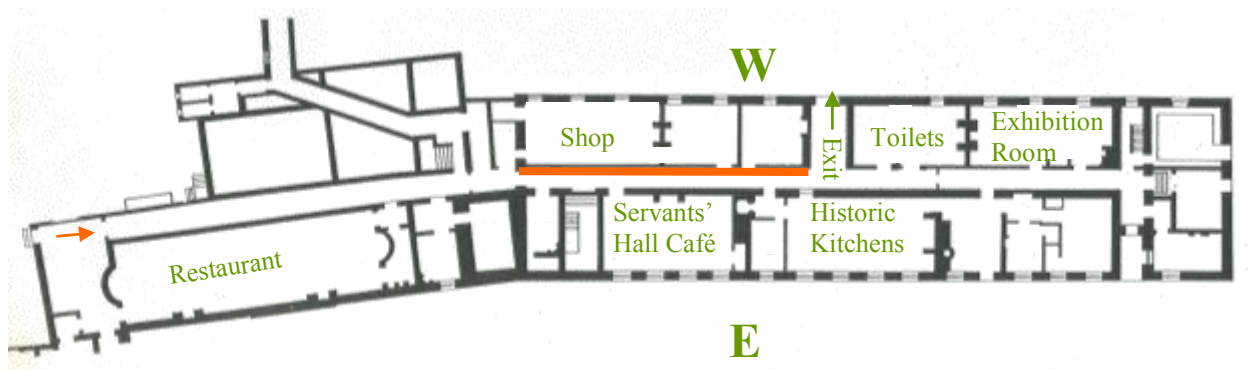
East wall – from the Servants' Hall Café to opposite the Exhibition Room



A late 16th or early 17th century plate from the side of a cast-iron stove, probably made in the Eifel region of north-west Germany. The main scene is of the Marriage at Cana described in chapter 2 of the Gospel of St John, a biblical story often portrayed on firebacks and stoveplates. The significance of the portraits below is not known.

West wall

from the Shop to the Exit to House and
Grounds



West wall – from the Shop to the Exit to House and Grounds



A German fireback dated 1695. This design, which is similar to another in this collection, was probably produced so that it could be personalised, when cast, by the addition of text or other decoration in the central space.



A late 17th century fireback probably cast in the Siegerland area of north-west Germany. It shows the figures of Joshua and Caleb returning to the Children of Israel with the huge bunch of grapes they had picked in the land of Canaan, a scene described in the Old Testament book of Numbers, chapter 13, verses 23-4. A popular subject on firebacks of the period.



A mid- to late 17th century fireback cast in north-west Germany, probably for the Dutch market. The central scene is copied from 'The Toilet of Venus' (1640), the third of three paintings of the subject by Simon Vouet (1590–1649). The scene is reversed, having probably been taken from an engraving of the painting. The inscription at the bottom of the fireback, 'L6G', indicates the style of the border; other firebacks with the same code have an identical border.

West wall – from the Shop to the Exit to House and Grounds



A mid- to late 17th century fireback made in north-west Germany, probably for the Dutch market. The central female figure is an allegory of Charity, who was shown in the art of the period with children about her. There are many different versions of this design. The inscription at the bottom of the fireback, 'L6G', indicates the style of the border; other firebacks with the same code have an identical border.

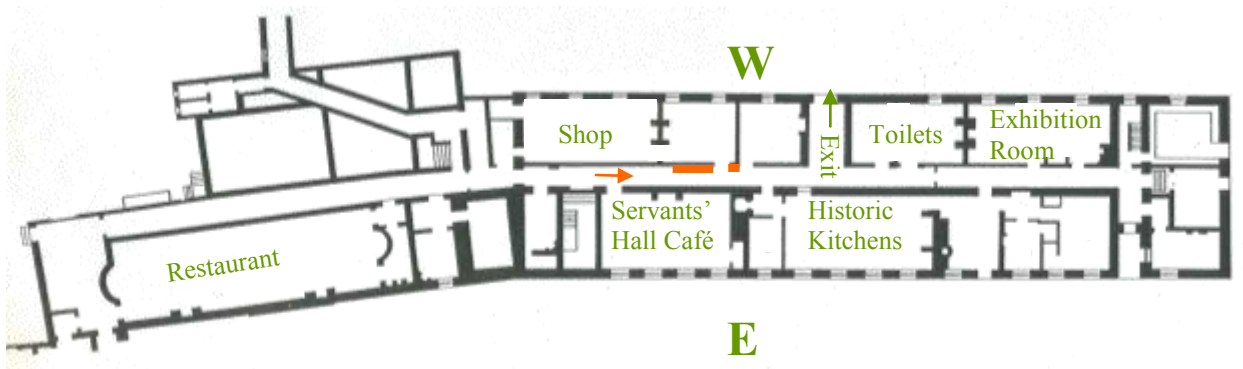


A mid- to late 17th century fireback probably made in the Siegerland area of north-west Germany. The crown and double-headed eagle are likely to be those of Leopold I, Holy Roman Emperor, who reigned from 1658 to 1705.



A mid- to late 17th century fireback made in north-west Germany, probably for the Dutch market. The central scene is of the Apocryphal story of Susanna and the Elders, in which two old men attempt to impugn the virtue of Susanna by taking advantage of her as she bathed. This was a popular subject on firebacks possibly because of the racy elements in the tale. Several firebacks with the same 'HIS' monogram are known, all having identical borders, and would have been the work of the same pattern-maker.

West wall – from the Shop to the Exit to House and Grounds



A mid- to late 17th century fireback made in north-west Germany, probably for the Dutch market. The central scene is derived from a painting (c.1642), by Mathias Czwiczek, of Wilhelm Friedrich, Elector of Brandenburg, and his wife, Luise Henriette of Oranje-Nassau. The word 'Evropa', can be seen faintly below the figures; the fireback is one of a group, the scene on each symbolising a different continent.



A mid- to late 17th century fireback made in north-west Germany, probably for the Dutch market. The central scene shows the encounter at the well between Jesus and the Woman of Samaria, described in chapter 4 of the Gospel of St John. This scene was a popular subject on continental firebacks and stoveplates.



A late 16th or early 17th century English fireback decorated with the arms of the Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors, one of the livery companies of the City of London. On the right side of the shield and over the helmet there are excrescences on the casting caused by careless pouring of the iron into the mould. The motto at the bottom reads: 'Concordia Parvae Res Crescunt' – 'In harmony small things grow'.