

# THE BELLFOUNDER'S INDENT AT BURY ST EDMUNDS

by SALLY BADHAM and JOHN BLATCHLY

IN THE CENTRE of the paved floor beneath the Norman Great Gate of the Abbey which since the Dissolution has been associated with the church of St James, now the Cathedral of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich Diocese, is the much worn matrix of a memorial to a 15th-century bellfounder. The drawing of the composition, long robbed of all its brass components (Fig. 43) is realised from the extant rivet pattern, the faint outlines which remain indented, and from the sketch D.E. Davy made in 1824 in his Collections for Bury.<sup>1</sup> It comprises a pair of kneeling civilian figures praying to a canopied Trinity on a bracket, flanked by two praying angels, two bells and two three-legged pots. The bells are an obvious indication of the profession of the commemorated, but so too are the three-legged pots: Ranald Clouston has commented that

They would have been cast by bell founders when required, who would also make other domestic equipment. The fine one at Lacock Abbey cast by Peter Wagherens of Mechelin in 1500 has a capacity of 50 gallons. The mouth diameter is 30½ inches, and the internal height 29½. Bellfounders needed water containers for use when preparing loam for their moulds.

Until about 1870 the slab was in St James's church, where Thomas Martin was the first to remark on it in his Church Notes made in the mid-18th century:

There lyes a large stone part in the Church and part in the Chancell which had one of these figures [he drew a bell and a three-legged pot] inlaid in brasse upon the 4 corners.<sup>2</sup>

This is where Davy found it at the head of another indent (Fig. 44), which is similar in design but without any symbols to indicate the profession of the deceased. Instead of the Trinity on the bellfounder's brass, a single male figure stands under the canopy at the top of this second composition.

The centrally prominent positions these slabs occupied originally can be seen in a drawing of the St James interior 'sketched and copied in crowquill' by Ellenor Jane Lathbury sometime after 1827 (Fig. 45).<sup>3</sup> Her sketch shows the bellfounder's indent in the foreground. The second slab, according to Davy, would have been to the east of it: Miss Lathbury was, of course, looking west.

The marked similarity in design strongly suggests that the two slabs are of similar date and come from the same workshop. An important brass engraving centre operated in Suffolk from c. 1460 to the mid-16th century.<sup>4</sup> Large numbers of brasses have been destroyed owing to iconoclasm, civil unrest and cupidity and doubtless many Suffolk examples have been lost to us (Bertram 1976, *passim*). The earliest local products that survive are of disparate design and cannot be organised into any clear stylistic groups. The remainder form four coherent series, containing a total of eighty-seven known examples. Most are in Suffolk and the greatest concentration is around Bury St Edmunds, where the workshop was centred, though there are also substantial numbers in south and west Norfolk, east Cambridgeshire and north Essex, with scattered examples further afield (Fig. 46). Interestingly, this distribution is similar to that of bells from the Bury St Edmunds foundry. Most of the brasses are fairly modest compositions, though a handful of larger and

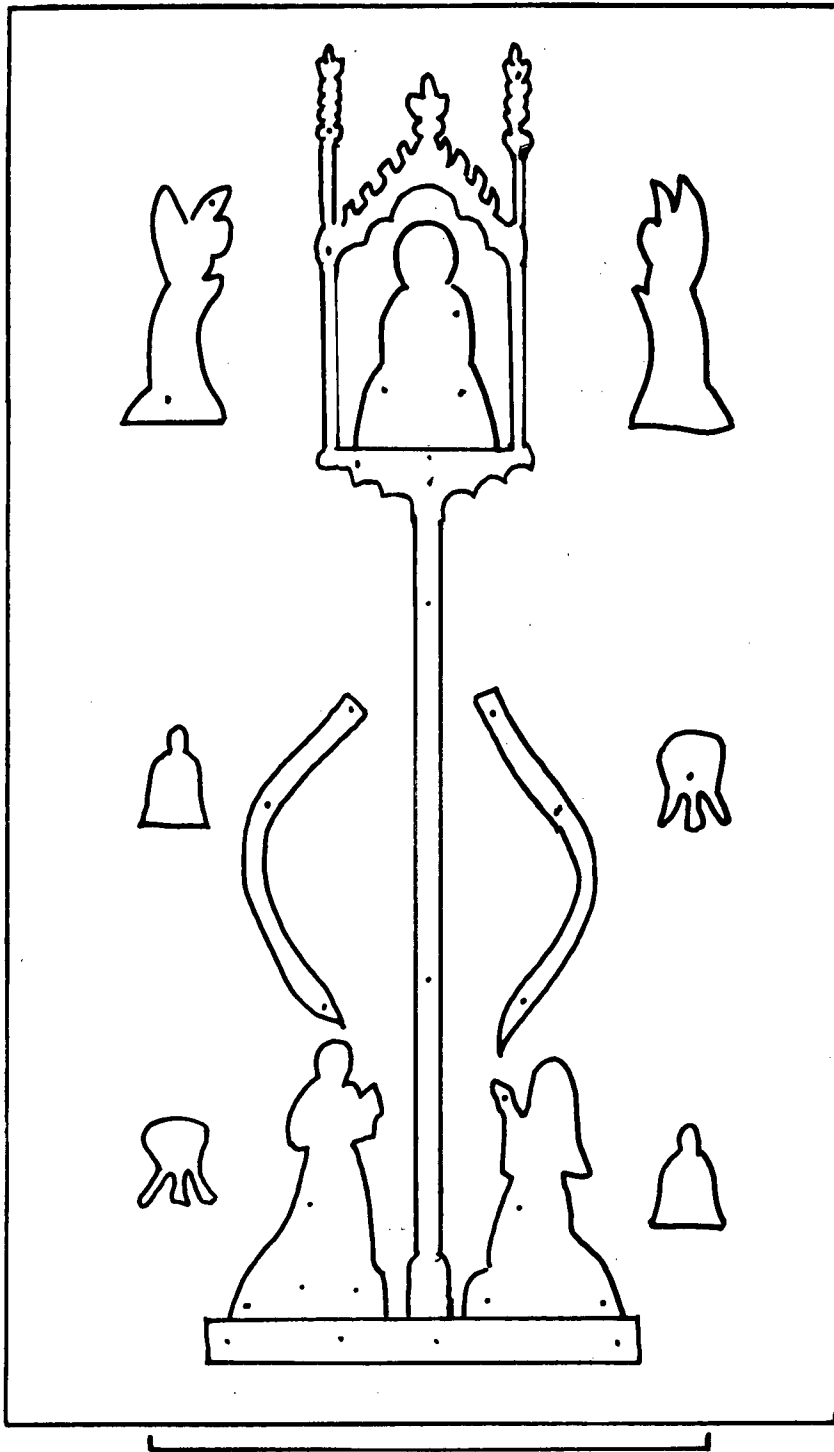


FIG. 43 – St James's Church, Bury St Edmunds. Under the campanile. Indent of Suffolk Series I brass to a bellfounder, dating from the 1470s or the 1480s (drawing by John Blatchly).

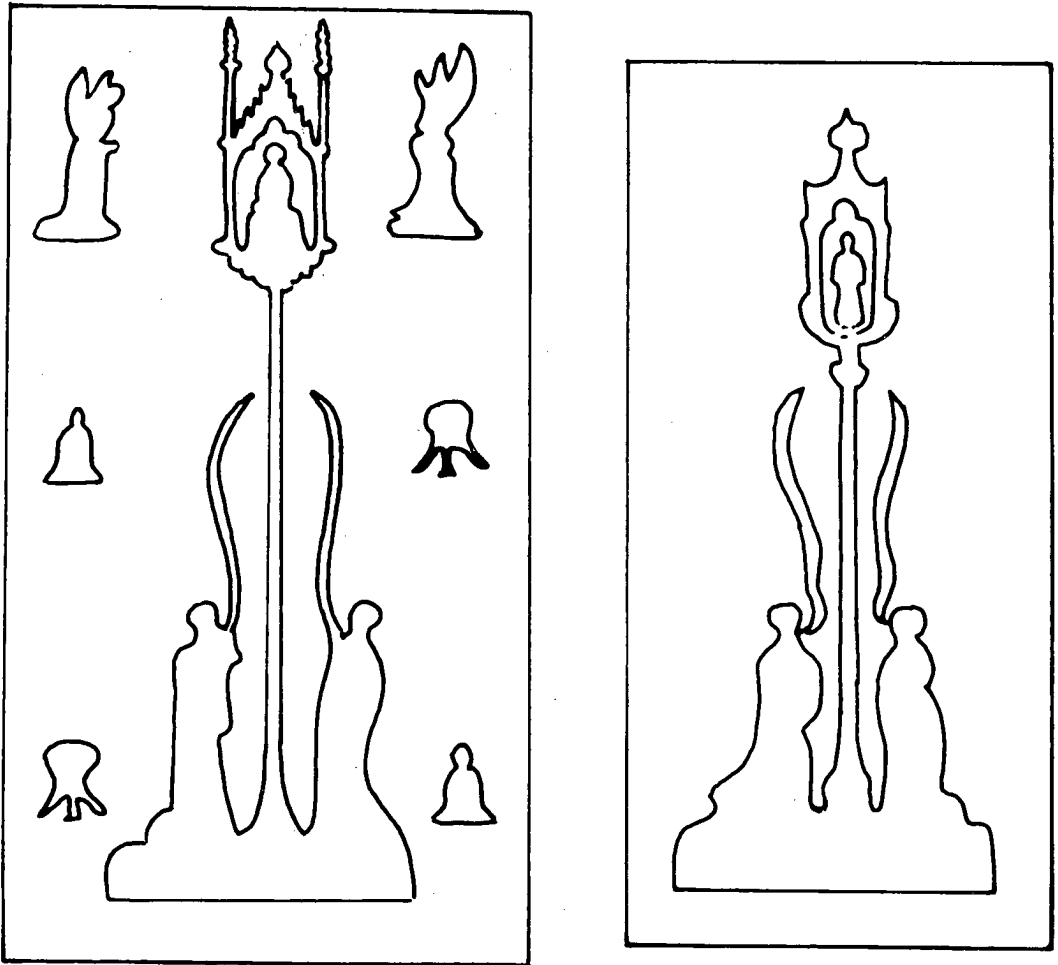


FIG. 44 – St James's Church, Bury St Edmunds. After drawings by D. E. Davy, 1824, of the bellfounder's indent and another similar indent, both in the nave (B.L., Add. MS. 19107, f. 249).

more elaborate examples survive. The workshop's clientele consisted mainly of tradesmen and the minor gentry. Some families were regular customers; the Cokets and Rokewoods, for example, have a number of Suffolk school brasses at Ampton, Norton and Euston and locally made brasses to members of the Drury family can be found at Hawstead, Denstone and Great Thurlow (Badham 1980, 66–67).

The first identifiable group of Suffolk brasses, Series 1, began in the 1470s. The products are drawn in a rather crude but lively style, possibly inspired in some respects by Netherlandish art, either directly or through London Series F brasses (Emmerson 1978, 62). The surviving bellfounder's indent in St James's church can confidently be assigned to this series. It is of lightish grey limestone, typical of Bury products, rather than the Purbeck marble invariably used by the London marblers. Although none of the surviving Series 1 products is as sophisticated a composition as either of the St James's slabs, the outlines of the kneeling figures with their prayer scrolls on the latter compare closely with the brasses to John Smyth and his wife at St Mary, Bury St Edmunds<sup>5</sup> and to John and Alice Coket at

nearby Ampton (Fig. 47). The St James's figures were the same size as those at Ampton and the outline of the male bellfounder figure seems particularly like John Coket's effigy; when a cut-out rubbing of the Ampton civilian was placed in the St James's indent the fit appeared comfortable, though the slab is too worn to allow a firm conclusion be drawn that the figures were engraved from the same pattern. The bellfounder's wife seems to have had a longer train to her gown than Alice Coket. The rivet patterns on the Ampton brass and the St James's slab are similar, but not identical. This is compatible with the workshop's probable working practices. It was not one of the few brass engraving centres that used 'templates' to produce carbon copies of its standard designs; rather the Suffolk school probably relied on training to ensure that the workmen engraved brasses according to the workshop style (Badham, forthcoming). Thus, although all the Suffolk 1 brasses are broadly similar, each is an individually designed product and no two are identical.

The Smyth and Coket brasses are dated 1480 and 1483 respectively; but it would be unwise automatically to assume a similar date for the St James's slabs, for two reasons. First, only seven other Series 1 brasses survive, of which four are undated; many more must have been destroyed. With such a paucity of evidence it is difficult to determine the chronological development of the Series 1 products. Secondly, the design of these brasses was certainly not novel and was to an extent backward looking. Bracket brasses and canopied saints and Trinities were at the height of their popularity with patrons and designers in the first half of the 15th century. Moreover, comparisons of detail may be made between the Series 1 brasses and manuscripts and screens painted in Bury in the second and third quarters of the 15th century; the Smyth and Coket brasses are particularly close to Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge MS. 3-1979, which dates from *c.* 1440 (Badham, forthcoming) and the 1450 pulpit at Burnham Norton, Norfolk. The St James's slabs could thus easily date from anywhere in the series from its beginning in the 1470s.

The Series 1 brasses may have been made in the workshop of Reignold Chirche, who took over the Bury bellfoundry around 1470 and operated it until his death in February 1498/9. He was associated with other metal-workers, including latoners and braziers, acting as executor for a number of them and his activities were clearly not restricted to the casting of bells. In his will he directed that his son Thomas should clean the lectern that he gave to St Mary's church quarterly and asked to be buried in 'The Ile of St Peter' in St Mary's church 'under the marble ston thar be me leid'.<sup>6</sup> Thomas also directed that he was to be buried in St Mary's 'under the ston ther be me leyd'.<sup>7</sup> It may well be significant that both prepared their monuments in their own lifetime and it is tempting to speculate that both monuments were brasses prepared in the Chirches' own workshop. Certainly 'a marble stone' was a formula commonly used to refer to brasses, but unfortunately neither monument survives or is recorded in antiquarian notes.

The evidence for a connection between the Chirches and the Suffolk brasses is strengthened by a consideration of the Series 2 brasses. The nineteen surviving examples date between 1501 and 1521. Thomas Chirche died in 1527, so the Series 2 brasses fall comfortably within the period that he had control of the Bury foundry. The designs are distinctly different from those of Series 1. It is interesting that a number of the Series 2 inscriptions incorporate decorated Lombardic letters; the Lombardic alphabet ceased regularly to be used on brasses around the mid-14th century, but was, of course, common on bells in the 16th century. Those on the 1519 Dymoke brass at Horncastle, Lincolnshire are contained within a rectangle of foliage scrolls, a form which precisely parallels Lombardic lettering on bells (Badham 1980, Pl. IV b, facing p. 51).

There is no evidence either way for any Chirche family connection with the remaining

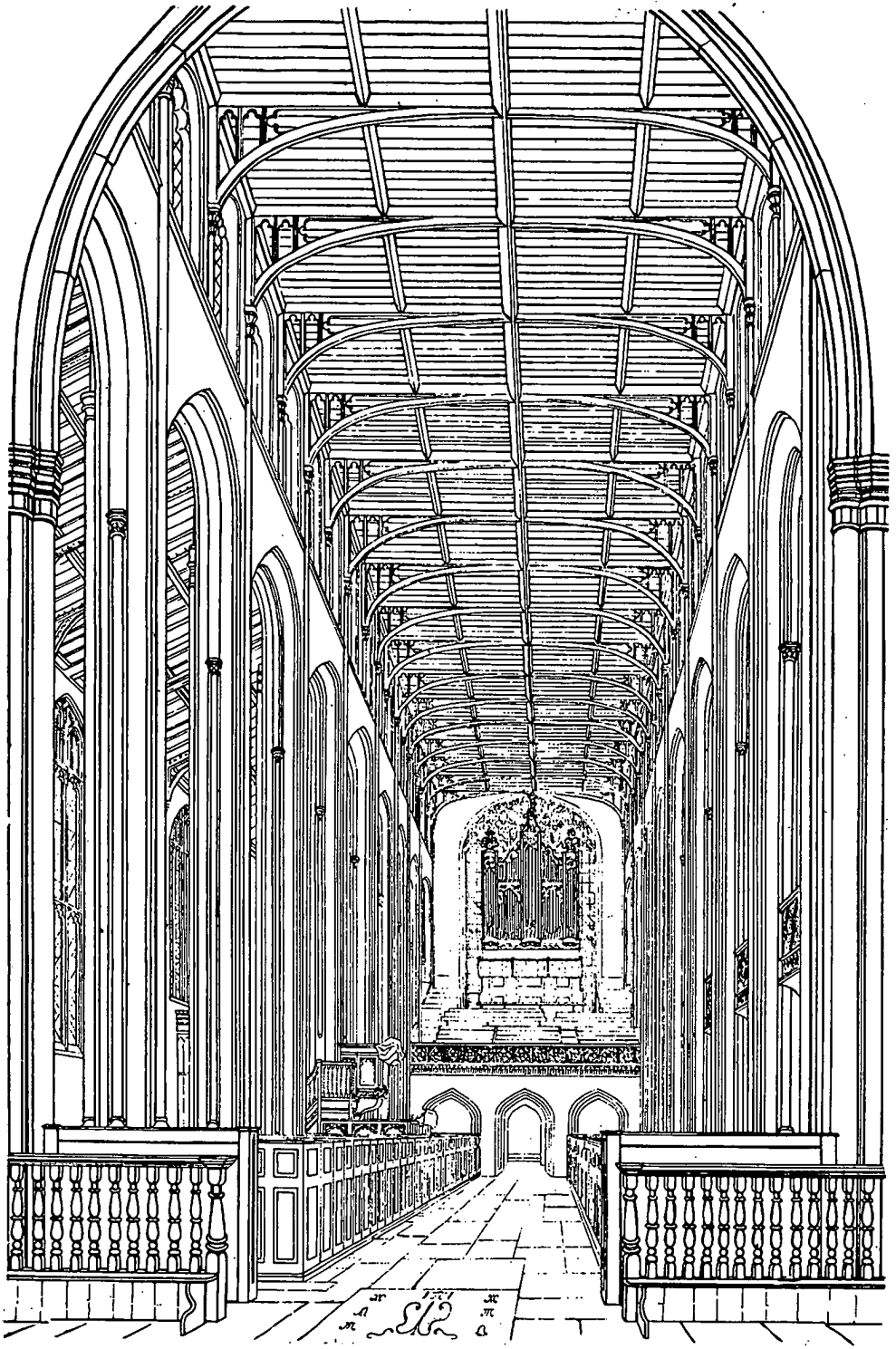


FIG. 45 – St James's Church, Bury St Edmunds. Drawing by Ellenor Jane Lathbury of the interior of the church, showing the bellfounder's indent in the foreground (S.R.O.B., 1557/1/1).

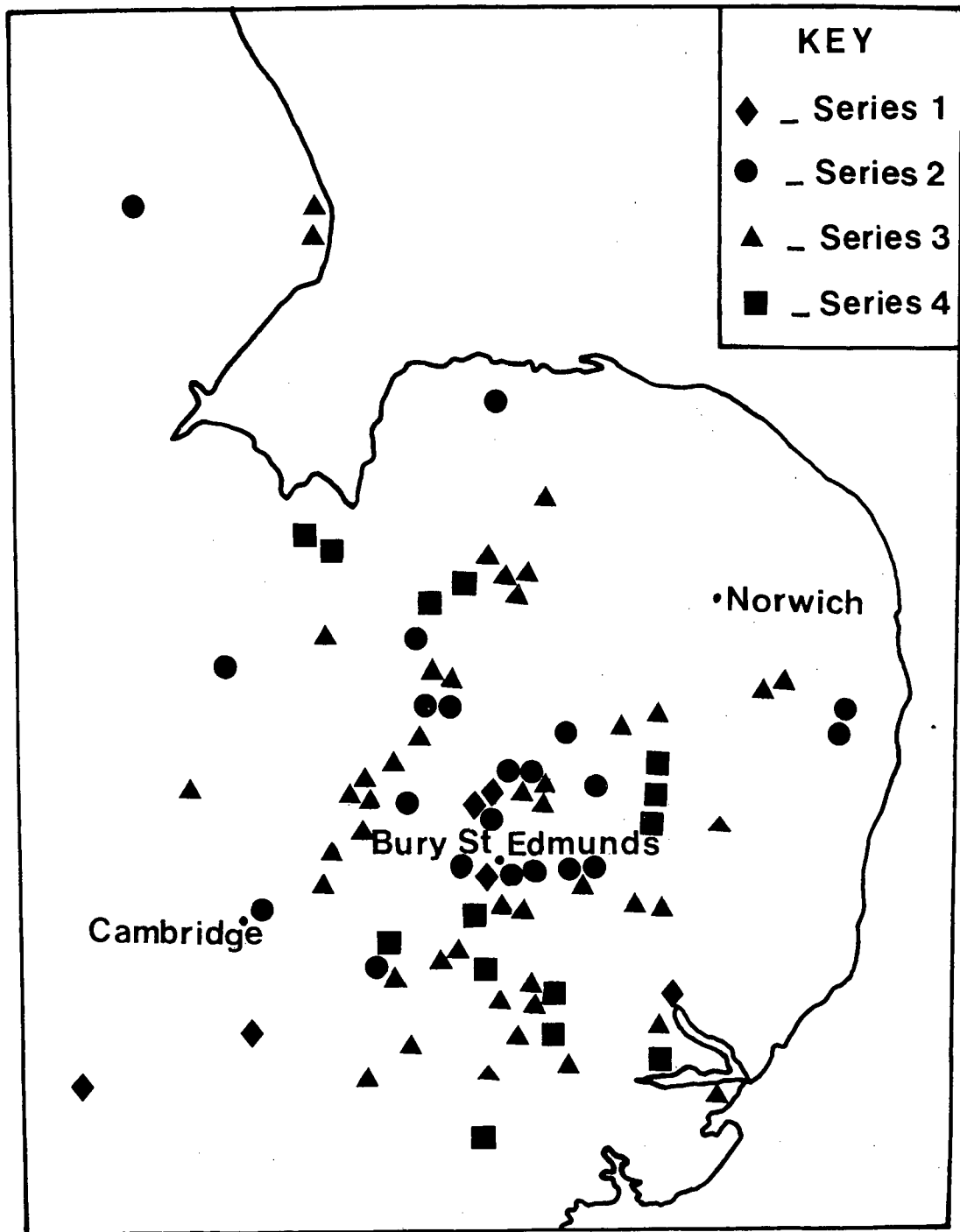


FIG. 46 – Distribution of Suffolk Series brasses.



FIG. 47 – Ampton. M.S. I John Coket, *ob.*1483 and wife. Suffolk Series 1.

two series of Suffolk brasses; but there must have been some continuity from Series 2 among the workmen involved. Series 3, which with its forty-six known examples is by far the most important of the Suffolk school pattern series, began in c. 1515 and continued until the mid 1530s. The earliest examples are in a fairly independent tradition, but in about 1521, which marks the end of Series 2, there is a marked influx of influence from Series 2 designs, which can best be explained by the arrival of workmen with a knowledge of the Series 2 products. Finally, the design of the thirteen Series 4 brasses, dating from between c. 1532 and the second half of the 1540s, are very clearly a development of those of Series 3.

We can thus say that the St James's indents were produced in Bury St Edmunds, probably by Reignold Chirche, between c. 1470 and the late 1490s. Who then might have been commemorated by the bellfounder's brass? First, we must rule out Reignold Chirche himself: as noted above, he was buried in St Mary's church. However, Chirche was not the earliest Bury bellfounder; Kanald Clouston and George Pipe suggest that the foundry was established around 1450 (Clouston and Pipe 1980, 20). When in 1434 the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds needed a bell to be cast they turned to William Powdrell, a London founder, and this has been taken to mean that there was no-one in Bury St Edmunds capable of casting a bell at that time.<sup>8</sup> The identity of Chirche's predecessor, who may have taught Chirche his trade and who was almost certainly the person commemorated by the bellfounder's indent, is obscure. The bells made in this foundry are distinguished by a fine trade shield (Fig. 48a). The pair of crossed arrows, the symbol of St Edmund's martyrdom, and the crown show that the foundry operated from Bury. The main product of the foundry is indicated by the central bell and the cannon and cannon ball indicate that the foundry also produced ordnance. The letters 'h' and 's', which appear on either side of the bell, are less easy to explain. Clouston and Pipe follow Raven in suggesting that they represent the initials of the founder, but no appropriately named craftsman can be traced in Bury at this time (Raven 1890, 64).

One problem with this explanation is that the trade shield, complete with the letters 'hs', continued to be used for Bury bells until Roger Reve ceased operations in 1533 (Decdes and Walters 1909, 49-55). Dated examples include the 3rd bell at Isleham, Cambridgeshire (1484), attributed to Reignold Chirche and the tenor bell at Redenhall, Norfolk which was recast by Thomas Chirche around 1514 (L'Estrange 1874, 63). The successive

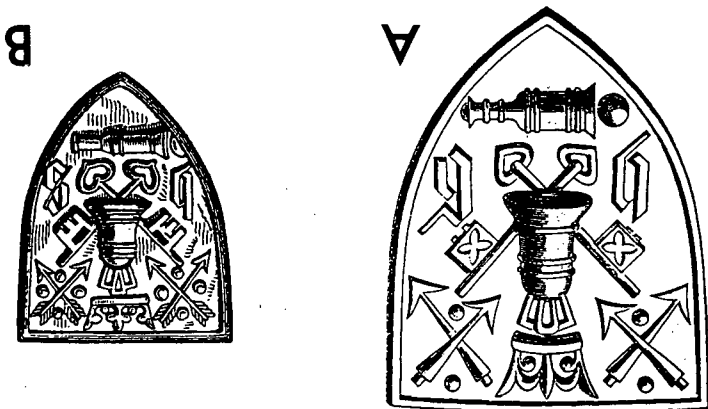


Fig. 48 - Trade shields of the Bury St Edmunds bell foundry (reproduced from Raven, 1890).



founders used different lettering styles for the inscriptions on their bells, so why, if 'hs' indicated the name of their predecessor, did they not design a new trade shield? Roger Reve went to the trouble of having a new half size shield made (Fig. 48b); he retained the 'hs' while altering the shape of the s. This strongly suggests that the letters had another meaning, now lost to us. A possible interpretation is that it was an abbreviated or re-arranged variation of the sacred monogram 'Ihs'; certainly variations have been found elsewhere in 15th-century Suffolk.<sup>9</sup> If such an alternative explanation of the trade shield letters is valid, then the search for the first Bury bellfounder must encompass metalworkers with other initials than H.S.

Three possible candidates for the bellfounder's brass emerge from a scrutiny of Bury wills between *c.* 1470 and *c.* 1498:

John Brasyer *ob.* 1468;<sup>10</sup>

John Cheney *ob.* 1471;<sup>11</sup>

John Quey *ob.* 1475.<sup>12</sup>

All three were of St James's parish. John Brasyer's occupation is not specified in his will and can only possibly be inferred from his name, though the other two are described as brasiers. Of greater possible significance is the fact that Cheney and Quey<sup>13</sup> had an executor in common, the brasier and bellfounder Reignold Chirche, the possible manufacturer of the Suffolk Series 1 brasses. It seems from the date of the Series 1 brasses that the bellfounder's indent is likely to have been for either Cheney or Quey; if Chirche, as executor, felt it appropriate to provide similar memorials for both, they may well have lain under adjoining slabs.

Unfortunately their respective wills give nothing which enables us to take the matter further, beyond the facts that Cheney lived in Wellystrete (with half an acre of land in Spyntellmefeld) and that his other executor, Aldhelm Cowebregge was a mason of Gyldehalle Strete (the provider of the stones perhaps), and that Chirche was a good deal better off than the other two, with several tenements, his own in Southgate Street. The attributions for the St James's slabs must therefore remain speculative.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Peter Northeast for so generously transcribing the relevant Bury wills; Mrs Margaret Statham for bringing the Lathbury drawing to our attention; and Randal Clouston, Peter Northeast and Margaret Statham for help and comments. Fig. 45 is reproduced by kind permission of the County Archivist of Suffolk.

#### NOTES

1 B.L., Add. MS 19107, f. 249.

2 S.R.O.B., 1183, p. 65.

3 S.R.O.B., 1557/1/1.

4 For a fuller account of brass engraving in Bury St Edmunds and a list of the products of the Suffolk school see Badham 1980, 41-67.

5 Illustrated in Druiitt 1906/1970, facing p. 208.

6 S.R.O.B., Will Register Pye, f. 74v. In Badham 1980, 45, it was erroneously suggested that a brass with bells powdering the slab once in St Mary's church might have been Chirche's memorial. This was based on a reference in Raven 1890, 73; clearly Raven had confused St James's with St Mary's and was referring to the indent under discussion in this article.

7 S.R.O.B., Will Register Hood, f. 154.

8 Abbot Curtey's Register, B.L., Add. MS 14848, f. 168.

- 9 Blatchly 1988, 39–43. According to Ranald Clouston the form Ihs is rare on English bells. The c. 1320 tenor bell at Hales, Norfolk, made at Kings Lynn, and another like it at Wood Rising, have Ihc. Ihc is also found on a number of bells cast in York in pre-Reformation times, starting with John Potter (*fl.* 1359–80), and carrying on until c. 1500. Perhaps in the case of the Bury St Edmunds foundry the crowned bell could stand centrally for the I in Ihs.
- 10 S.R.O.B., Will Register Hawlee, f. 115v.
- 11 S.R.O.B., Will Register Hawlee, f. 137v.
- 12 S.R.O.B., Will Register Hawlee, f. 211v.
- 13 The name may have originated from the manor called Queyes at Risby, near Bury St Edmunds, held by de Queye in the early 14th century. A Robert Queye is recorded as having lived at St James, Bury St Edmunds in 1361 (his will is at Sudbury Archdeaconry Register Osbern, f. 9), though his occupation is unknown. John Quey the brasier presumably came from a family established at St James for at least 150 years.

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*Abbreviations for MSS*

- B.L. British Library.
- S.R.O.B. Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch.