

### Cast copper-alloy cooking vessels

by

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From about AD 1100, cast copper-alloy vessels – cauldrons and posnets, and later, skillets – were commonly used for downhearth cooking, with the vessel sitting among the embers or suspended over the fire. All but the poorest medieval or post-medieval households would have had at least one metal cooking vessel. The more wealthy members of society would have been able to afford more than one pot in more than one size, but the quality of the pots themselves did not vary greatly. Because they were valuable, cooking pots were often mentioned in wills and household inventories, and their owners generally took good care of them, repairing holes in the body (see for example Figure 2a, below) or replacing broken legs (see Butler and Green 2003, 112 and 118). These vessels gradually passed out of use between 1700 and 1850, superseded by cast-iron pots and by saucepans designed for use on kitchen ranges. The date when kitchen ranges and cast iron took over appears to vary somewhat in different parts of the country, and there was doubtless a period of overlap.

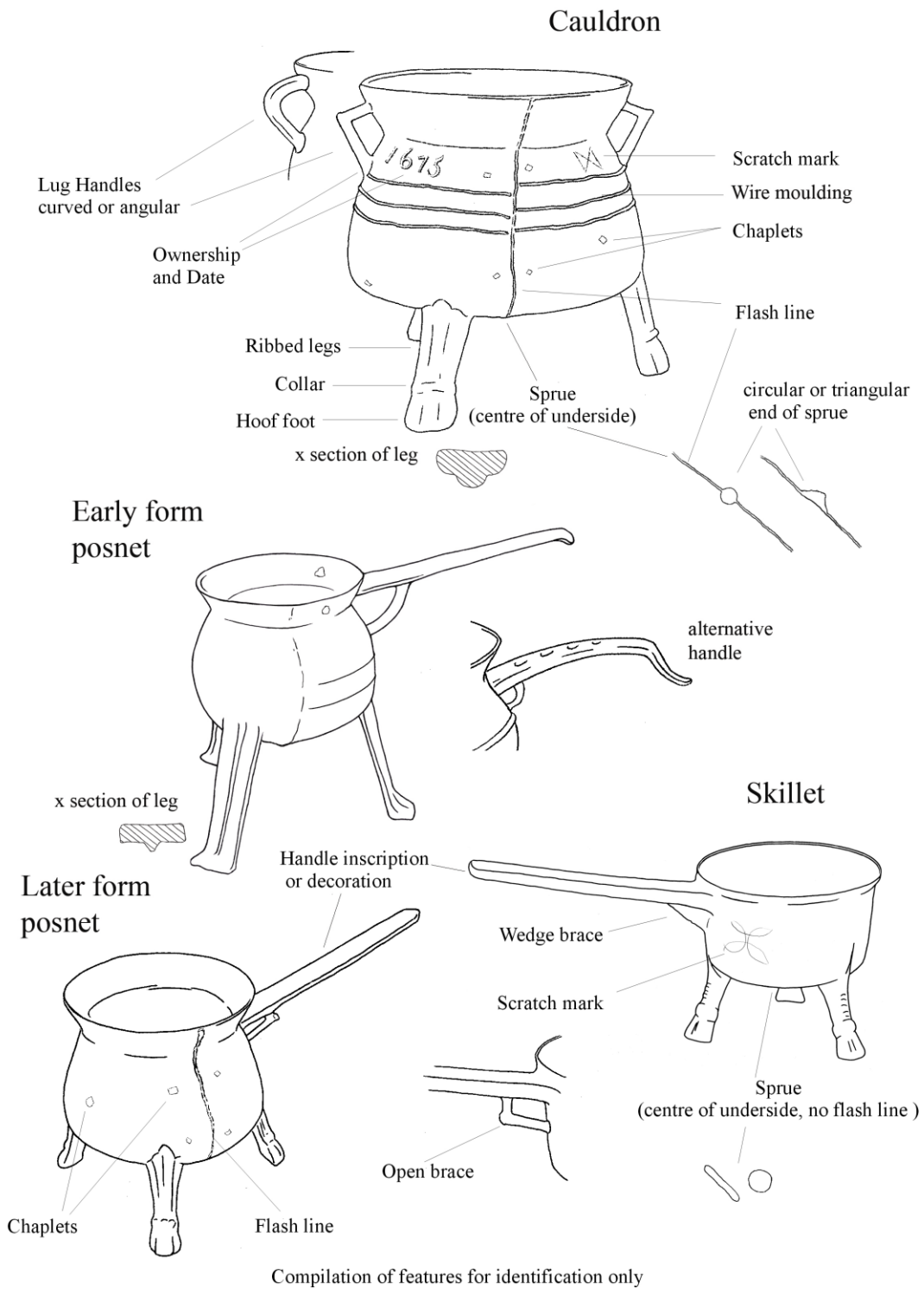
Bronze vessel components, in particular legs, are common metal-detector finds, and a number of the examples featured in this Datasheet are finds recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme ([www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)). The references given are from the PAS database, where full descriptions and photographs can be viewed.

In this datasheet, we will outline the main vessel forms and describe some of their more recognisable components, before moving on to discuss what is known and may be learned of their manufacture and ornament. We will then close with some concluding remarks.

#### Vessels

There is considerable variation in the size of copper-alloy cooking vessels, from children's toys and miniatures apparently made for special occasions or as showpieces, to very large cauldrons with capacities of up to 60 gallons and rim diameters of over 800 mm. The bodies of all these vessels are remarkably thin (in the case of cauldrons, generally no more than 2-3 mm). In the following, we outline the main categories by which such vessels are traditionally classified (Figure 1).

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**Figure 1** Line drawings of copper-alloy cooking-vessel types and associated terminology (after Butler and Green 2003. Line drawing by Neil Bollen)

## **Types of cooking vessel (Figure 1)**

*Cauldrons*: These have globular bodies with an out-turned rim and lug handles, to which a bail handle might be attached, and three legs (though a few examples were cast without legs). Cauldrons generally range in size from 150 to 400 mm in rim-diameter (Butler and Green 2003, 8).

*Posnets*: Posnets resemble small cauldrons in having three legs, but rather than lugs, they have long handles akin to those of modern saucepans. To add strength, handles often have a support in the form of an open L-shaped or C-shaped brace under the end that adjoins the body of the vessel.

*Skillets*: These are similar to modern saucepans (being straight-sided with a projecting handle) but, like cauldrons and posnets, they have three legs. Like posnets, their long handle is usually supported by an open brace or a solid triangular wedge. Most recorded skillets are of 17th-, 18th- or early 19th-century date (Butler and Green 2003, 10). Functional skillets have a rim diameter of between 130 and 170 mm (Butler and Green 2003, 10).

*Other forms*: Several other less common vessel types are known, including hanging skillets, tubs and grissets (see Butler and Green 2003, 202 for illustrations).

*Lids*: A number of illustrations depict cauldrons with lids, and there are documentary references to skillet lids (Butler and Green, 2003, 8, 10). However, no such lids have been identified as finds with certainty.

## **Other copper-alloy vessels**

*Mortars*: Although they were used for grinding rather than cooking, mortars were also cast in copper alloy, and body or rim fragments might be mistaken for pieces of cauldrons, skillets or posnets. Mortar fragments should be distinguishable from fragments of cooking vessels because of their greater thickness relative to their radius of curvature.

*Ewers*: Legs from medieval and early post-medieval ewers (water jugs) are sometimes mistaken for those of cooking vessels. However, the former are less substantial than the latter, and have a distinctive slender form with forward-projecting, pad-like feet (see Lewis 1987).

## **Typical finds**

It is very unusual (but not unheard of) to discover complete vessels in the ground. Much more common are broken pieces, as follows.

### *Body fragments (Figure 2)*

Fragments of body and (particularly) rim are not uncommon, but when they are completely plain their significance can easily be overlooked. Measurement of curvature will indicate the size of the vessel and may help to distinguish between cauldrons, posnets and skillets. When individual fragments are discovered, they are most likely to be rim fragments from cauldrons or posnets. The out-turned rims of these vessels constituted a weak point that might be further weakened through repeated contact with utensils. Body fragments may feature simple mouldings on the external surface or (rarely) part of a founder's scratchmark, a date, or an owner's initial. Occasionally, a mark made by a chaplet - a rectangular scrap metal spacer used in the casting process - may be visible on a body fragment (see figure 2b). The internal surface is always smoother.



**Figure 2 Vessel rim and body fragments**

(a) A cauldron rim fragment with a mend, from Queen Camel, Somerset. Maximum thickness of thickened part of rim 4.7 mm. SOM-AEFCE8, Copyright Portable Antiquities Scheme.

(b) A fragment of cauldron body, with a chaplet (a rectangular spacer used in the casting process), from Grayrigg, Cumbria. The presence of a chaplet demonstrates that such a fragment is likely to have formed part of a cauldron or posnet, as opposed to a skillet, mortar or bell. Maximum thickness of body 2 mm. Private collection. Copyright Naomi Payne.

### *Handles* (Figure 3)

The L-shaped and C-shaped lugs from cauldrons are usually round in cross-section and are often undecorated, but cable decoration has been recorded. Pieces of the long, straight, or slightly curving handles of posnets and skillets generally have a convex underside and a flat upper surface. Some are plain, but most are decorated either with geometric designs or, in later post-medieval examples, have inscriptions in the form of mottoes or the maker's name.

### *Legs and feet* (Figure 4)

These are the most commonly recorded find, probably because they were particularly vulnerable to damage. They are often very worn and pitted, partly because the metal alloy had a high lead content that leached out during years of exposure to the heat of the fire, but also because they were worn down by repeated scraping across the hearth. There is an interesting variety in the original form and decoration of legs and feet that can be used to give a very broad estimate of the age of the piece. The following are common forms:

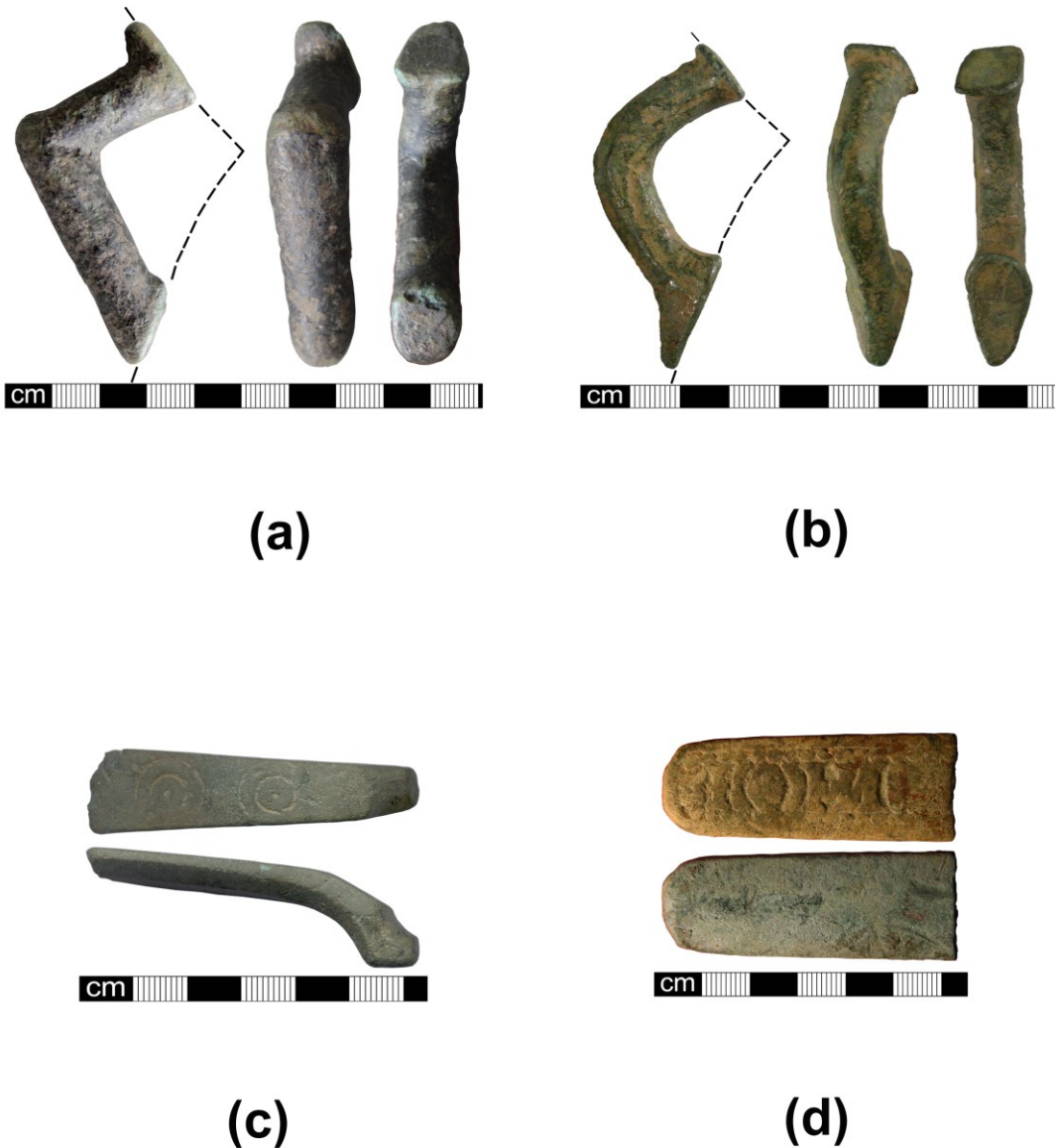
-Rectangular or trapezoidal cross-section, tapering slightly downward, and terminating downward in a simple, out-turned, pad-like foot (Figure 4a). The outer surface may be decorated with a narrow central rib, or three narrow ribs (one in the centre and one close to or at each edge). This ribbing may extend downward onto the foot, and upward onto the body of the vessel. This form seems to have been in widespread use in the medieval period, but early 17th-century examples are also known.

-Triangular in cross-section, tapering downward, with a slightly convex inner surface and outer facets (Figure 4b). An example from the *Mary Rose* (Gardiner and Allen 2005, 432) must be of late 15th- or early 16th-century date. There is evidence that this form terminated downward in a flared hoof-like foot, separated from the leg by a raised collar.

-Broadly triangular cross-section, the inner surface flat or concave, the outer surface formed of three or five conjoined convex ribs (Figure 4c). The central rib may be decorated (often with cable pattern). The leg terminates downward in a flared, hoof-like foot, separated from the leg by a raised collar. The ribbing of the leg usually extends down onto the foot, while the collar may also be decorated (usually with cabling). This form was already in use in the 16th century and was almost universal in the 17th century.

-Shallow D-shaped cross section, tapering downward, with a flat or concave inner surface, and a gently convex outer face. Typically, the form has no foot (Figure 4d). This simple design came into universal use in

association with sand-casting and is therefore characteristic of all 18th- and 19th-century skillets.



**Figure 3 Lugs and handles.**

- (a) An L-shaped cauldron lug from Ings, Cumbria. Private collection. Copyright Naomi Payne.
- (b) A C-shaped cauldron lug from Walberton, West Sussex. SUSS-848B27, Copyright Portable Antiquities Scheme.
- (c) An incomplete posnet handle, from Wilbarston, Northants. Dot and circle motifs are the most common type of decoration found on posnet handles. NARC-A77323, Copyright Portable Antiquities Scheme.
- (d) Part of a skillet handle from Higham, Kent, featuring part of the maker's name: IOHN. The form of the letters suggests John Hatch was the maker. Maximum thickness 6.5 mm. KENT-AFB625, Copyright Portable Antiquities Scheme.



**(a)**

**(b)**



**(c)**

**(d)**

**Figure 4 Legs and feet.**

- (a) From Donyatt, Somerset. SOM-CBD395, Copyright Portable Antiquities Scheme.
- (b) From Market Rasen, Lincolnshire. NLM-721B37, Copyright Portable Antiquities Scheme.
- (c) From Misterton, Somerset. SOM-4CB634, Copyright Portable Antiquities Scheme.
- (d) From Aller, Somerset. SOM- D239A5, Copyright Portable Antiquities Scheme.

## Manufacture

Further information on form can sometimes be gleaned from the evidence for the manufacture of vessels. Until the introduction of sand-casting in the late 17th century, cauldrons and posnets were cast using a two-piece outer mould of loam (Butler and Green 2003, 8), and consequently bear a casting mark or flashline showing where the two halves of the mould were joined during casting. This runs from the rim down the outside of the body, across the bottom of the vessel and up to the rim on the other side. Skillets bear no flashline, as they could be cast using a one-piece outer mould.

The legs and handles of all these vessels were formed in a single casting together with the body. The surfaces of loam-cast vessels have a distinctive texture, as though the surface of the mould, while still moist prior to casting, had been wiped over with a sponge or brush. The surfaces of sand-cast vessels are granular, reflecting the medium in which they were cast.

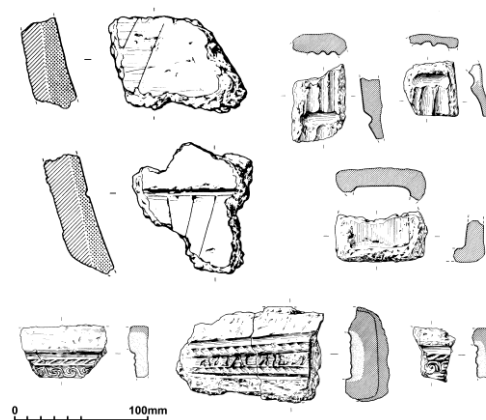
## Foundry sites

A number of foundries have been excavated, for example at Cowick Street, Exeter (Devon), South Petherton and Taunton (Somerset), and most recently at Crediton (Devon). There is documentary or archaeological evidence for foundry sites in many of the major cities of the medieval period, and by the 17th century potfounders were also established in various smaller communities, particularly in the south of England. Casting copper-alloy cooking vessels was probably the principal commercial activity of many craftsmen better known for their work as bellfounders. This is occasionally reflected in the iconography apparent on examples such as this posnet handle found at Henley-in-Arden, Warwickshire (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** An incomplete posnet handle from Henley-in-Arden, Warwickshire, which is decorated with bells. Length 139 mm. WAW-05DFF1, drawing by Nick Griffiths.

At medieval and early post-medieval foundry sites, mould material is invariably present, sometimes in vast quantities (Figure 6). The ability to recognise this material is important for the ongoing study of the founder's craft in Britain. Mould material usually has the appearance of thick (commonly 20-40 mm), very friable pottery. Its outer surface is mainly brick red in colour, its inner surface grey. Occasionally, traces of decoration, lettering or scratchmarks are discernable on the inner surface.



**Figure 6** Mould material excavated from the site of the Birdall foundry, Cowick Street, Exeter (after Blaylock 2000). Top left: cope (outer mould) fragments, top right: leg mould fragments and bottom: skillet handle mould fragments. Illustrations by Jane Read. Copyright: Exeter Archaeology/Devon Archaeological Society.

## Decoration

Most copper-alloy cooking vessels are relatively plain, with one or more simple mouldings around the body. More elaborate decoration of the body is rare, and ornament is otherwise generally confined to the outer surface of the legs, or the upper surface of skillet and posnet handles. Legs are commonly ribbed, and less commonly the ribbing may be decorated with cable or herringbone designs. Posnet and skillet handles may also be decorated with geometric designs, or - from the early 17th century onward - may bear an inscription. This may incorporate either the maker's name or a motto, such as those cast on the handles of skillets from the *Fathers* (Figure 7) and *Sturton* foundries in Somerset. These foundries are known to have been active in the post-medieval period, and were based in Montacute and South Petherton respectively (see Green and Butler 2005 for more information on these foundries).



**Figure 7** A two-pint skillet of late 17th-century date, cast at the Fathers foundry, Montacute, Somerset. The inscription on the handle reads 'PITTY THE PORE 1684'. The last two letters - IF with an arrow through them - are the initials of John Fathers. Total length of complete skillet 156 mm, diameter 89 mm. Copyright Somerset County Council.

## Makers' and owners' marks

From the mid-15th century until the late-17th century (when sand-casting superseded the use of loam moulds), founders commonly marked their work by scratching their mark into the mould before casting. Figure 8 shows a selection of founders' scratchmarks ranging from simple geometric forms and marks resembling merchants' marks (mainly of 15th- and 16th-century date), to monograms representing the founder's initials (dating from the 17th century). From early in the 17th century founders also cast their names on the handles of skillets. Other cast inscriptions on the bodies of vessels include dates and sets of initials, presumed to be those of the owner. The presence of triads (groups of three initials) together with a date are thought to indicate that the vessel was a marriage gift.

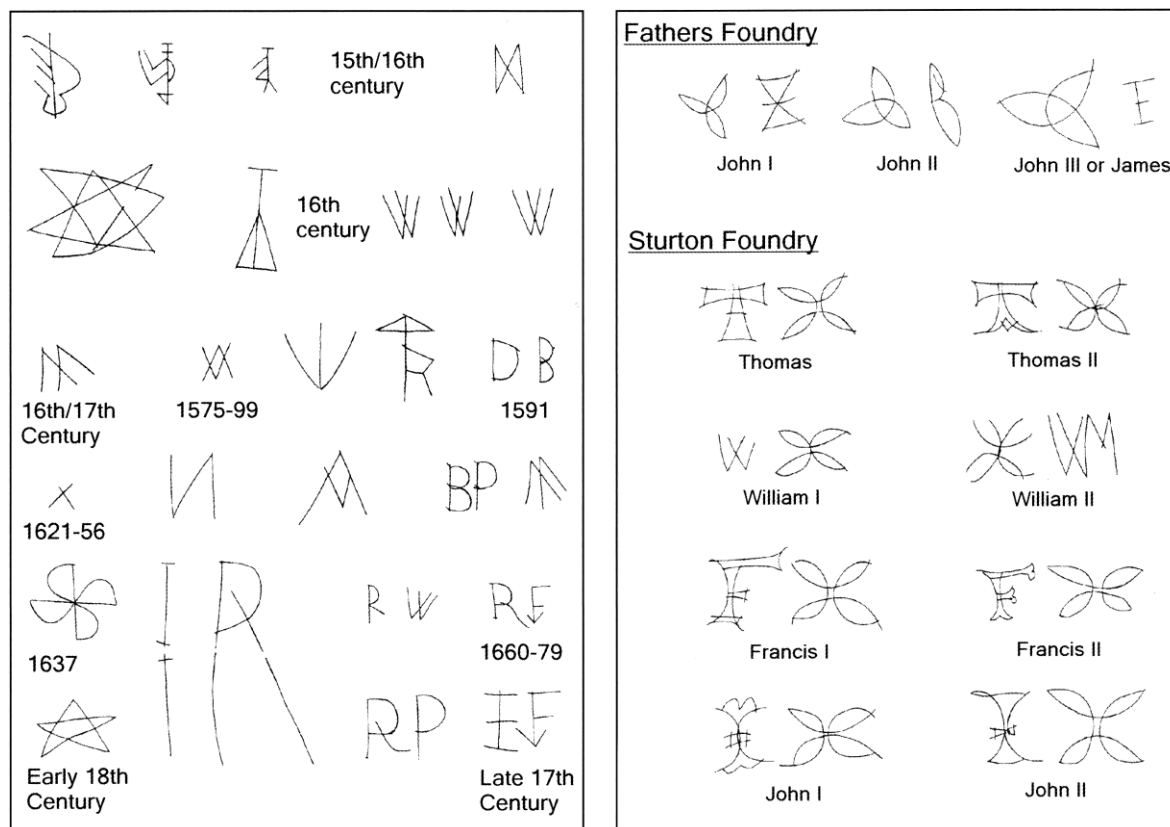
## Closing remarks

The importance of cast copper-alloy cooking vessel fragments is often overlooked. However, these vessels were an integral part of everyday life in the medieval and post-medieval periods. Fragments are not uncommon site and metal-detector finds and there is certainly potential for their recording and study. Future research will include experimental work to elucidate the processes involved in their manufacture, and closer analysis of the distribution of finds and foundries.

## Acknowledgements

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**Figure 8 Left: Representative scratchmarks and their approximate dating. Right: Scratchmarks of the *Fathers* and *Sturton* foundries showing the marks of individual family members.** Traced from vessels by Roderick Butler (after Green and Butler 2005. Relative scale only).

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