

**ABSTRACT:** In the 1624 Act of Incorporation which established the Sheffield-based Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire, there was a clause stating that all blades must have an edge of steel. The Company inspected manufactured items and policed the use of cutlers’ identifying marks. Searchers were entitled to enter workshops to seek ‘deceitful wares’—blades without steel or otherwise of poor quality. Because they also monitored the registration of the cutlers’ marks, the Searchers could identify manufacturers. The Company’s maintenance of restrictions led to conflicts with Sheffield cutlers who wanted to respond to economic change and to developments in iron and steel manufacture in the 18th and 19th centuries. Using the records of the Cutlers’ Company, this paper traces the Company’s efforts to deal with cast-iron goods and to restrict the use of trademarks which made claims over the quality of the metal in the blade.

**Introduction**

For centuries, Sheffield has been known for the manufacture of high-quality cutlery. Developing from a medieval craft organisation controlled by the Manorial Court, the Sheffield cutlers expanded into a locally dominant industry employing the majority of Sheffield’s workers, as craftsmen and as suppliers of subsidiary materials and services. After 1624, the Cutlers’ Company was the controlling organisation. It regulated the trade, exercising its control through byelaws which insisted on the production of serviceable goods. The records of the Company contain details of infringements of its rules, blades without a steel edge, or the mis-use of another man’s mark, but more significant were the problems caused by the marking of goods, intended to indicate quality. Although Sheffield made and exported cheap items, the quality of knives and related goods improved during the 18th century and surpassed those produced in London. However, a crisis arose late in the 18th century with the increasing use of cast iron for cutlery and forks, which greatly increased output, very cheaply, but which produced a spurious article. This paper will trace the background to these issues and describe the conduct of the Cutlers’ Company in the face of the cast-metal cutlery and false marking scandals.

**The 1624 Act of Incorporation**

When the Sheffield cutlers successfully petitioned the English Parliament for an Act of Incorporation in 1624, the local cutlery trade appears to have been at least 300 years old (Brown 1894, 76). The economic importance of the trade had been sufficient for the Lords of the Manor, the Earls of Shrewsbury, to control aspects of the trade through their Manorial Court. The mid-16th century ordinances, drawn up by this court, were principally concerned with work practices, apprenticeships and the registration of identifying marks (Sheffield Archives, RC 159). They were later to be incorporated into the rules of the Cutlers’ Company. By 1614 a specific cutlers’ jury was meeting regularly, presumably due to the amount of such trade matters coming before the main court. In 1616, however, the last resident Lord died, and the Sheffield cutlers felt the lack of organisation of manorial business, so lobbied Parliament for the right to control their trade. In 1624, the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire in the County of York was established to continue the system that had evolved in the Manor.