

A CHEST OF THIRTEENTH-CENTURY TYPE FROM  
WORMSHILL CHURCH

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THE literature on Kent medieval chests is scanty, and is mainly to be found in books not especially written for the county.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, nothing has been written for Kent comparable to the article on Surrey's thirteenth-century chests by our late member, Philip Mainwaring Johnston.<sup>2</sup>

Roe<sup>3</sup> has drawn attention to a small number of medieval chests in Kent which might constitute a group. They occur or occurred for instance at Rainham, Faversham, Saltwood, St. John's Hospital in Canterbury,<sup>4</sup> and Wittersham. But a much more characteristic group appeared in the thirteenth century in the neighbourhood of Faversham, at Wormshill, Norton and Graveney.

The Graveney chest was discussed by Mainwaring Johnston<sup>5</sup> and included in a group which he concluded must have come from "some centre—probably in the oak country of the Weald of Sussex and Surrey—where there was something like an organized manufacture of the chests."<sup>6</sup> Mainwaring Johnston apparently did not know of the Wormshill and Norton chests when he wrote his article, and therefore did not have the evidence to postulate a Kent sub-group within his larger group of south-eastern chests.

In their decoration the three Kent chests of this sub-group differ from all others known to me. The front of the Graveney chest is adorned with an arcade of five trefoiled arches in incised double outline. One arch occurs on each of the standards and the remaining three arches cover the intervening front panel. The Norton chest<sup>7</sup> is decorated with similar light incision and this consists of eight trefoil heads in

<sup>1</sup> (a) F. Roe, *Ancient Coffers and Cupboards*, 1902. (b) Cox and Harvey, *English Church Furniture*, 2nd ed., 1908. (c) F. Roe, *Ancient Church Chests and Chairs*, 1929.

<sup>2</sup> *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, XX, pp. 56-60, 68-89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ancient Church Chests*, Chapter Ten of which is devoted to Kent.

<sup>4</sup> F. Roe, *A History of Oak Furniture*, Plate XIV.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 70 and Plate XIVa. The following information is given: date c. 1220, pin-hinge. Sides set sloping. No money-slit or tray. One old lock. Length, 4 ft. 5 in.; breadth, 2 ft. 4½ in.; height, 2 ft. 11¾ in.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> The Norton chest is locked up in the church tower and has thus probably escaped attention. The lid is pin-hinged and appears to be made of coniferous

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double outline, topped by circles and embracing single, larger circles below. The latter enclose incised quatrefoils.

The Wormshill chest is a medieval object of which the county may well be proud. In July, 1951, our member, Mr. Michael Nightingale, F.S.A., coaxed it from the obscure remoteness of St. Giles' Church, Wormshill, and exhibited it at St. Augustine's College, Canterbury.<sup>1</sup> In *Kent Churches 1954*<sup>2</sup> the chest was described as "similar to the contemporary one at Graveney." Torr claimed that faint remains of trefoiled arcading could be distinguished on the front of the chest, but the eye of faith would even need stimulation to see this on the photograph which supplements his description.

Early in 1957 the Vicar, the Reverend C. S. Hardy, M.A., and the Church Council of Frinthead with Wormshill agreed to lend the chest for a short period to Maidstone Museum in return for the Museum's help with cleaning and restoration work.

The cleaning consisted mainly of removing grime,<sup>3</sup> and this action revealed the incised decoration which is well shown in the plate accompanying this present note. When the chest arrived at Maidstone the front plank of the lid was missing, and this was replaced by seasoned oak grown in Wormshill parish. This replacement has incised on its under side the legend "Restored 1957."

DESCRIPTION OF THE CHEST'S CONSTRUCTION

(a) *External*

1. *Front*

The front consists of two upright standards or styles into which are tenoned two horizontal boards and the chamfered plank into which the base is fitted.

wood (? a replacement). The main body of the chest is of oak. The original lock fitting has gone except for a fragment.

Length of main body	.. .. .	4 ft. 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Breadth	.. .. .	1 ft. 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Height	.. .. .	2 ft.
Lid	.. .. . 4 ft. 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. by 1 ft. 8 in.	
Width of standards	.. .. .	8 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Front panel is 5 in. from the ground.

It will be seen that this chest is dwarfed by the Wormshill example.

<sup>1</sup> *Exhibition of Treasures from Kent Churches*, under the auspices of the Association of Friends of Kent Village Churches. *Catalogue*, p. 6, Section IV, No. 1—where the carving is described as in "low relief."

<sup>2</sup> By H. R. Pratt Boorman and V. J. Torr. The Wormshill chest is illustrated on p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> Preliminary cleaning and treatment for woodworm were given at Wormshill by Mr. L. Norton, organist of the church, whose enthusiasm was mainly responsible for the subsequent happenings to the chest and who provided the Wormshill oak for replacement-work.

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Total length	.. .. .	4 ft. 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Left standard	.. .. .	35 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 10 in.
(In thickness it tapers from 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. at the top to 2 in. at the bottom)		
Right standard	.. .. .	35 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 11 in.
(In thickness it tapers from 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. at the top to 1 $\frac{3}{8}$ at the bottom)		
Boards (between standards)	3 ft. 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. in breadth ; 1 ft. 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. in height	

2. *Lid*

This, which is slightly convex or arched, formerly consisted of three boards. The front one has suffered in the past by the loss of the portion which has now been replaced by modern, sawn oak from Wormshill. The underside has been strengthened in the past by two small pieces of oak.

Length	.. .. .	5 ft. 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Breadth (including 1957 restoration)		2 ft. 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Thickness	.. .. .	$\frac{3}{4}$ in.

3. *Left Side*

This side consists of two planks which are slotted into the front and back standards.

Width at top (including standards)	..	2 ft. 4 in.
Width at bottom (including standards)		2 ft. 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

4. *Right Side*

This, as the left side, consists of two planks.

Width at top (including standards)	..	2 ft. 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Width at bottom (including standards)		2 ft. 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.

5. *Back*

This portion is made of two standards into which are tenoned three planks. Mainwaring Johnston<sup>1</sup> suggests that "the back standards having more work to do are the thicker" (i.e. thicker than the front standards).

Left standard	.. ..	8 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. in breadth, tapering from 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. at the top to 2 in. at the bottom
Right standard	.. ..	8 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. in breadth, tapering from 2 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. at the top to 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. at the bottom
Boards between standards		41 in. in width

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 57.



The Wormshill Chest.

*(b) Internal*

The bottom is formed of five large planks and one small plank which are slotted into the sides.

Internal measurements of chest (without lid) :

Front length .. .. .	53½ in.
Back length .. .. .	53 in.

1. *Front*

Behind the top edge is fastened (formerly by five square-headed iron nails of which three remain) a wooden bar of triangular shape. This formed part of the early locking arrangements.

2. *Lid*

On each side of the lid's underside is fastened a rail which fits into grooves made in the front and back standards. The rail rests in the groove of the back standard and is fixed there by an iron pivot-pin. The pin is covered externally by a small, iron, kite-shaped shield. The left one is 2 in. high by 1½ in. broad, the right one 2½ in. by 1½ in. The side rails are each embellished with two depressed arches formed by stop-chamfers.

On the top of the right-hand side of the interior is fitted a small receptacle or hutch of which the internal measurements of the four sides are 24, 24¾, 5½ and 4½ inches, with a height which varies from 4½ to 4¾ inches. The lid of the hutch has now gone, but the two holes, into which the lid pins went, remain.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CHEST'S FITTINGS

On the front the original, central lock—the only one—was replaced by a post-medieval, iron example. What appears to be the slightly off-central, original keyhole (to the left of the modern replacement) leads into the triangular wooden bar which has already been described. On the right-hand side of the back plank of the lid are the remains of a slit which may possibly be equated with Mainwaring Johnston's "money slit," although I am not happy about this attribution as such slits are usually centrally placed or are put directly over the hutch.

The boards are fastened together by oak dowel pins. Those which hold the central planks to the standards, both at the back and the front of the chest, are square in section. Those which are used on the lid are round and were helped in their task by iron clamps of which only the holes remain. A few large-headed, wrought-iron nails are also found, especially on the front and lid.

On the inner, narrow and free surface of the two front standards, well below the floor-level of the chest, five dowel holes appear. The

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two holes on the right side still contain the broken-off dowel pins. It is tempting to connect these features with an applied detail, such as a pilaster or spandrel, in the angle.

### DECORATION

The ornamentation, which only covers the front of the chest, is incised and seems to have been done with some form of dividers or scriber. It consists of an arcade of six, pointed, trefoil arches (one on each standard, as at Graveney), done with a double outline which terminate above in a circle and below in an oblong corbel or impost. Above and tangential to the top of the trefoils is a trellis of double-outlined, extended chevrons. These latter are but faintly incised. The designer-craftsman obviously wanted to achieve in wood something akin to the stone arcades (cf. Stone next Dartford) or sedilia (cf. Womenswold) which he might have seen in his wanderings round Kent, but his incision work was too enthusiastic and overran its intended limits. Within the arch of each trefoil is a circle containing a 6-foil. Below these, but still just above the chest's floor level, are portions of seven double-outlined circles, five of which are crowned with an inverted V. In the free portion of each standard is a large 6-foil, within a double-outlined circle and above two incomplete, double-outlined circles.

The narrow, chamfered board which fronts the base of the chest bears along the whole length of its chamfer a single row of connected chevrons.

The chest is of adzed oak, and traces of paint, red and blue, on its surface point to a partial decoration in the past.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion I wish to thank Miss Elizabeth Glenn for the photograph which accompanies this note.

<sup>1</sup> Roe, *Ancient Church Chests*, p. 104, says "not seven miles away from Graveney an almost identical coffer (to the Graveney example) exists, still retaining much of its primary colouring," but he does not specify the place.