

A PAINTED ELMWOOD CHEST FROM NORTH SOMERSET

John Weallans

The chest pictured (Figure 1), which is 42 inches wide, 32 inches high and 18 inches deep, is located in a house in the village of West Huntspill, near Highbridge, Somerset, not far from where it was made approximately two hundred years ago. Apart from the drawer bottom it is made entirely from elm. A great deal of furniture from the West Somerset area of Sedgemoor is made from native English elm and dressers, chests and tables constructed in this timber have been recorded by David Knell.¹ There are, however, two very special elements about this chest that make it worthy of recording. Firstly, it is a provenanced country-made piece following 'high-style' fashion, and secondly, it has been expertly painted to simulate figured mahogany with boxwood stringing. The hinged top covers a well behind three rows of dummy drawer fronts with one long drawer below. The interior of the chest and the lid, which is supported by iron strap hinges, is lined with a blue 'sugar-bag' type paper. On top of the fitted till or candle box is a dated piece of paper which gives the history of the chest and names its maker. Through the information recorded it has been possible to search through local archives and find out more about this skilled carpenter and painter. Many carpenters working during this period also advertised their capabilities as house builders and painters, and if it was Joseph Turner, carpenter, who both made and painted the chest, then this is an excellent example of such versatility.

A pasted-on paper label inside the chest reads:

4th September 83

I give unto James Jeffery this box it was made for his father when a youth by Joseph Turner of East Huntspill a common carpenter. This man lived to the age of one hundred and one years, highly respected.

Christine(?) Jeffery

Joseph Turner, carpenter, was born in North Petherton in 1772 or 1773 and was buried at East Huntspill churchyard on 2 May, 1874, at the age of 101. It would appear that he, his wife Sarah, and three other members of his family came to the village (which is just south of Highbridge, Somerset) a few years prior to 1801; the census for that year² indicating that he was the head of a family of five. The 1801 national census only recorded the head of the household by name. There is no record of any banns for their marriage, or any records for their children's baptisms or christenings in the local Parish registers. This would indicate that their marriage and the birth of their children took place outside of the village of East Huntspill and at some time prior to 1801. One of Joseph's and Sarah's sons, Robert Turner, was buried at the adjacent village of West Huntspill in 1803 and it is also possible that another of their sons, William Turner, was drowned in December 1810. Following the Reform Bill of 1832 which granted the power to vote through citizenship to many of the smaller rural landowners, Joseph

Turner was one of the 170-odd parishioners of East Huntspill who was enfranchised. He is listed in the Voters List for 1832,³ his qualification being the ownership of his property, which in the early nineteenth century was known as 'Norwell'. At the time of the Tithe Map in 1840,⁴ he was living (presumably at Norwell) at the northernmost part of the parish, and owned a one-and-a-half acre garden that was situated on the road that formed the parish boundary between East Huntspill and Highbridge. This parish boundary must have originally been formed by a ditch or a stream as, even in 1840, when the boundary was known as Walrow Lane, the roadway followed a straightish line and did not follow the contours of the local properties. He is known to have lived in this house until at least 1871. Unfortunately for the purposes of this research, the house was at some point demolished and the site is now occupied by a property called 'Elmwood'.

Joseph's wife, Sarah Turner, was buried in August 1846 at the age of 75; and, according to the 1851, 1861 and 1871 censuses, Joseph was recorded as living on his own, being described as a retired carpenter. He died in 1874. One of the local papers, the *Bridgwater Mercury*, printed the following obituary in May of that year:

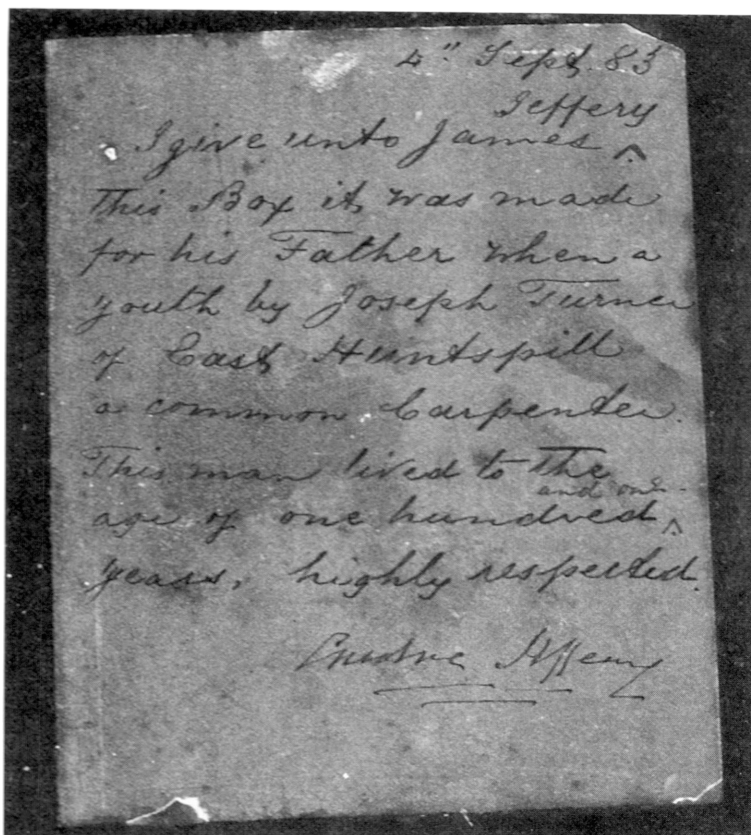
HUNTSPILL

On the 28th ult. there died at Walrow, near this place a man named Joseph Turner, who had attained the age of 101 years and two months. The deceased, a carpenter, possessed a remarkably strong constitution, and only kept his bed a fortnight previous to his death. Up to the last his faculties were very clear, and when high wages and the dearth of provisions forced the topics of conversation he would refer to the time when he worked for half-a-crown a day, and paid 1s. 10d. a loaf for bread, and the same price per foot for timber. Turner brought up a large family, and by prudent habits had saved sufficient to maintain himself in comfort to the end of his unusually long life. A correspondent adds:— 'Joseph Turner was born in the parish of North Petherton, Somersetshire. He had seven children, 34 grandchildren, 31 great-grandchildren, and one great-great grandchild. Deceased settled in Mark in the year 1799, but removed in the following year to Watchfield, in Huntspill, and lived there in the same house 74 years, having retired from business about 20 years ago. He was a man of industrious habits, and was much respected by the farmers of the last generation, for whom he principally worked. He remembered all about the war times, and would frequently contrast the conditions of tradespersons in those days with those of the present, being much amused at the workmen riding to their work on bicycles, he having had many a time, before the country was so well drained as it is now, to walk miles to work over his boots in water. He was in full possession of his faculties to the last minute; and as he heard the clock strike nine, on the morning of his death, 25th April, quietly remarked "That's the last time I shall ever hear the clock strike".'

The recipient of the chest, James Jeffery, must have come from a working family with sufficient income to buy new furniture, and there are records of two families of that name in the area during the early nineteenth century. It is quite intriguing to think of what Joseph Turner would have used as a prototype for his own piece. He must certainly have seen a chest of drawers made in this style; the mock-cockbeading is done with consummate skill and even shows shadows against the mahogany ground. It may have been made to complement a chest owned by the Jeffery family and match it as a 'pair'. It is worthwhile here to quote Christopher Gilbert's comments on the painting of furniture: 'Painting became a cheap and popular way of embellishing pine furniture during the nineteenth century. Surfaces could be painted a single colour, grained to imitate a finer wood or ornamented with fanciful patterns. The treatment never became



1. Chest by Joseph Turner of East Huntspill, c. 1800-10, elm painted in imitation of mahogany



2. The written provenance pasted on to the top of the lockable till fitted inside the chest

as widespread in England as it was abroad, but many items of kitchen furniture, lodging boxes and cradles were finished in a manner indicative of showy woods. However, pieces which exactly copied highly decorative veneers, such as rosewood or bird's-eye maple were, on the whole, restricted to inferior rooms in large houses'.⁵ When one considers that Joseph Turner died in 1874 at 101 years old it is likely that the chest was made around 1800–10 when he was in his late twenties or early thirties. The style of this chest, with dated bracket-feet, would not have been very fashionable during this period and this would again be indicative of Turner having had an older model to copy. It is of course likely that changes in furniture styles took much longer to take effect in rural Somerset. The pressed brass handles, which do appear to be originals, do however date this chest to the end of the eighteenth or beginning of the nineteenth century.

To conclude, it would be appropriate to give a brief recent history of the chest. It was offered for sale at a Bristol auction room in late 1995 and was purchased by a West Country antiques dealer who subsequently sold it on to its present owner who lives in the Huntspill area. Now residing in its home territory, it is likely to stay there for the foreseeable future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

1. David Knell, *English Country Furniture, The National and Regional Vernacular 1500–1900*, Barrie and Jenkins, 1992.
2. Printed statistical return for 1801 available at Somerset Archival Records Service (SARS), Obridge Road, Taunton, Somerset TA2 7PU.
3. Electoral Register, 1832, SARS, as above note 2.
4. Original Censuses, SARS, as above note 2.
5. Christopher Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture 1750–1900*, Yale University Press, 1991, p. 4. See also the article by Dr Bernard Cotton, 'Painted Furniture A Vernacular Tradition' in *The Antique Dealer and Collectors Guide*, October 1987, pp. 43–46.