

# A BRUTE AND BEASTLY SHIRE? DATED OAK FURNITURE IN LINCOLNSHIRE

Anthony Wells-Cole

Lincolnshire throughout the Middle Ages and the Tudor period was amongst the most isolated of all English counties: there was no royal visit between 1541 and 1617 and Henry VIII (in a mood of exasperation, as Hodgett points out)<sup>1</sup> described its inhabitants as 'the commons of one shire and that one of the most brute and beastly of the whole realm.' It was also the most northerly county to be governed from London, all those north of the Humber coming under the control of the Council of the North in York. In the mid-1720s, however, the county of Lincoln, 'an old dying, decayed, dirty city', was described by Daniel Defoe as:

a most rich, pleasant, and agreeable country; for on the north, and again on the south east, the noble plain, called Lincoln Heath extends itself, like the plains about Salisbury, for above fifty miles . . . though not with a breadth equal to the vast stretched out length; for the plain is hardly any where above three or four miles broad. As the middle of the country is all hilly, and the west side low, so the east side is the richest, most fruitful, and best cultivated of any county in England, so far from London; one part is all fen or marsh grounds, and extends itself south to the Isle of Ely, and here it is that so vast a quantity of sheep are fed, as makes this county and that of Leicester an inexhaustible fountain of wool for all the manufacturing counties in England.<sup>2</sup>

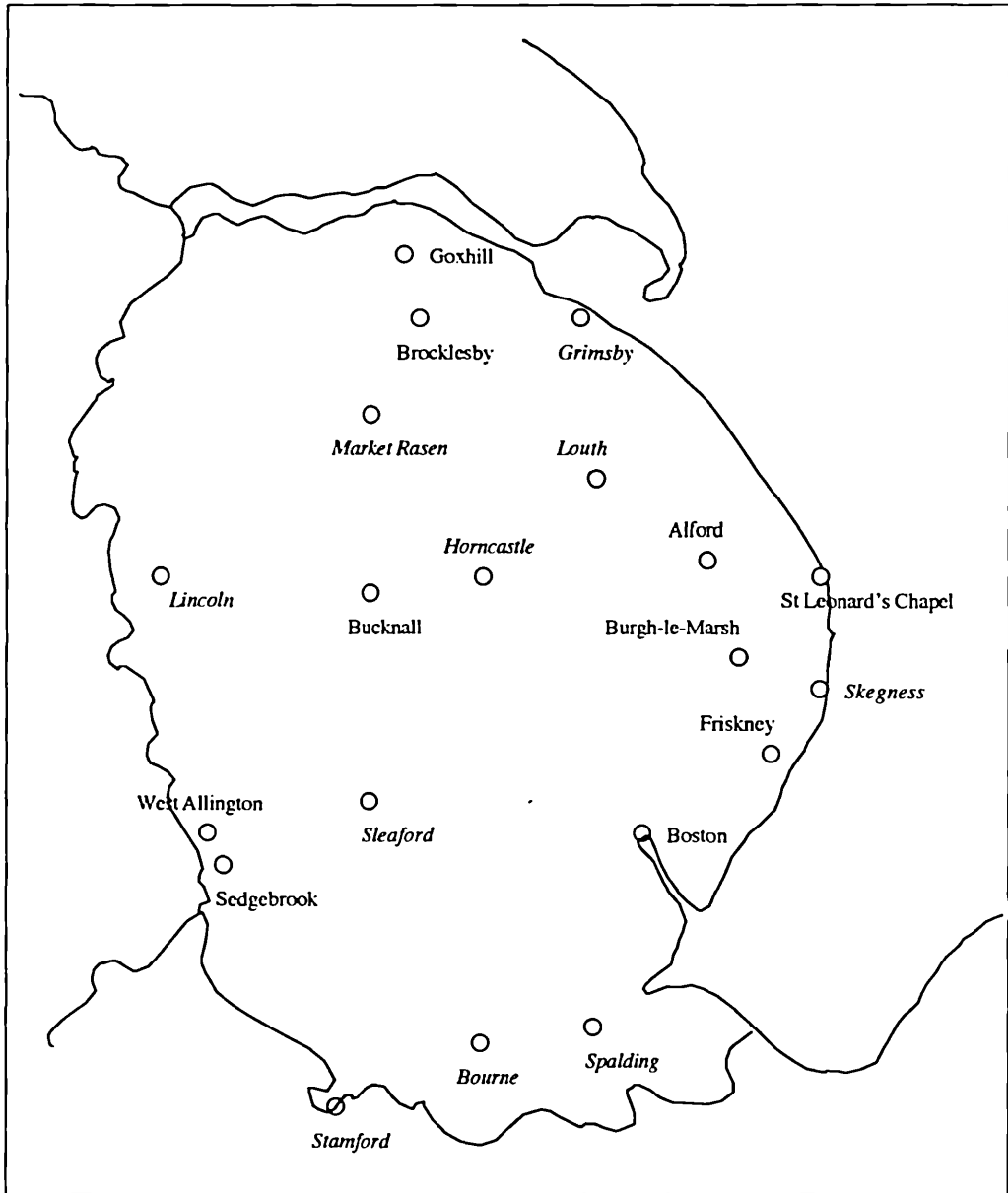
The greatest days of prosperity for Lincoln and Lincolnshire came during the Middle Ages when wool was the principal source of England's wealth and when the diocese of Lincoln included those of Ely, Peterborough and Oxford. A barometer of the county's wealth is provided by her principal port, Boston, which at the beginning of the thirteenth century was second only to London, had been granted the staple for wool and other goods in 1369, and boasted a Hanseatic steelyard.<sup>3</sup> However, situated on the least accessible corner of the Wash, Boston's prosperity declined in the face of competition from Lynn in Norfolk so that by 1582 her merchant fleet was reduced to four ships of over ten tons.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Defoe found Boston still 'a large, populous, and well-built town, full of good merchants, and has a good share of foreign trade, as well as Lynn.'<sup>5</sup> This ensured that, although geographical factors (mainly the low-lying fenland to south and west) ensured Lincolnshire's isolation from the rest of England, contacts were maintained with the continent. We should therefore expect to find evidence of continental influence in the furniture of the county. Indeed, survivals of Stuart furniture attest that Lincolnshire was, in the seventeenth century, still relatively wealthy, her wool being produced not for foreign markets but for home consumption. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to publish a selection of dated furniture and woodwork which may be of use as a foundation on which a fuller picture of Lincolnshire furniture's regional personality can be constructed.<sup>6</sup> There are indeed dated objects belonging to half the decades of the seventeenth century but these cannot be taken as providing a coherent picture of

stylistic progression: in a county which was (until 1974) the second largest in England it would be improbable that joiners were all aware of each others' work.

Lincolnshire is not particularly well-endowed with great Tudor and Stuart country houses with indigenous decoration and furniture. There have been many losses: Glentworth (built by Sir Christopher Wray c. 1567–68 but altered c. 1753) is a decaying ruin, others have disappeared completely: Kettleby House (the Tyrwhitt family), Scrivelsby Court (house of the Dymoke family, champions of England), Langton Hall (built by Sir John Langton between 1583 and 1616),<sup>7</sup> Sempringham (built before 1586 by Lord Clinton) and Thornton College at Thornton Curtis. This was the most interesting of all, built by Sir Vincent Skinner around 1610, possibly adapted from Jacques Perret's Protestant Temple (a design related to Wollaton and known to John Thorpe)<sup>8</sup> published in 1601. Of the survivors, Burghley, near Stamford, is in the county only by virtue of association with a town that incontrovertibly is; most of its Elizabethan decoration has been covered up by later-seventeenth-century work, although fragments of contemporary panelling have recently been revealed in two closets either side of the central bay of the Gallery on the first floor of the West Wing.<sup>9</sup> Otherwise Grimsthorpe (12th/13th century, enlarged in the mid-16th), Doddington (built 1593–1600 to a design by Robert Smythson) and Brocklesby (originally of 1603) are the most important although all have been altered externally or internally and do not retain much early furniture. In fact the largest group of seventeenth-century furniture is probably that now housed in the Old Hall in Gainsborough (a house of 1470 onwards, altered 1597–1600); most of this, however, is on loan and belongs stylistically in the neighbouring county of Yorkshire.

Churches, therefore, retain the best examples of woodwork in the county and the location of those whose pulpits are illustrated here is shown on the map (Fig. 1). Leaving aside a celebrated chest surviving at Haconby which was illustrated by Henry Shaw in a plate dated 1832 (and subsequently published in his *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* in 1836), the best-known piece of Lincolnshire furniture is probably Sudbury's hutch, a two-door cupboard of chest form given to the church at Louth by Thomas Sudbury before 1504: it has busts of a king and queen, said to be Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, and may just have been made to commemorate her coronation in 1487. Unlike Norfolk,<sup>10</sup> Lincolnshire seems to have little furniture left that can reasonably be dated in the sixteenth century. One possibility is an armchair at Epworth between Gainsborough and Crowle in the extreme west of the county which bears the date 1560 on the back of a rail: narrow-backed, and with a shaped apron below the seat-front, the decoration of the chair consists of a lozenge in the main panel (with a rather attractive frame of geometrical inlay) and fluting in the subsidiary panel and in the cresting. Appropriately, the finest Jacobean woodwork is to be found in the church of St Botolph, Boston (Fig. 2). Here the pulpit is dated 1612. It is an elaborate mannerist piece, fluted Ionic columns at the corners in pairs, supported on shaped brackets terminating in Corinthian capitals forming pendants; round-headed arches frame panels of low-relief grotesque ornament topped by Prince-of-Wales feathers below panels carved with lambrequin-like motifs and garlands (Figs. 2 & 3);<sup>11</sup> guilloche rails, cornice of egg and dart and dentils. The back-plate is flanked by Ionic pilasters carved with arabesque ornament and has two panels superimposed, carved with low-relief ornament; the sounding-board, with its obelisks





1. Map of Lincolnshire showing the location of churches mentioned in the text

and decoratively fretted taffrils, is Jacobean in style but may date from the eighteenth century. Architectural in form and continental in decoration, this must be by a craftsman either himself Flemish or well-versed in Flemish mannerism. From these heights the pulpit dated 1615 in the church at Croft, twenty miles up the coast near Skegness, is something of a comedown. It is not only very much simpler but the architectural character of the earlier example has become debased (Fig. 4): the Ionic columns have here become colonnettes, almost identical at capital and base, and all vestiges of architrave have disappeared. The main panels are subdivided by mouldings<sup>12</sup> and separated from the horizontal panels above (some carved with lunettes, others with alternating circles and rectangles of strapwork) by a guilloche rail; odd little addorsed flying fish in the frieze are a hangover from sixteenth-century Italianate grotesques. An inscription on the book-rest reads: .WILLIAM.WORSHIP.DOCTOR IN DIVINITIE. The lavishly-decorated pulpit dated 1623 at Burgh-le-Marsh (Fig. 5), no more than five miles away in a north-westerly direction, must represent a mature work by the same craftsman. It is inscribed IOHN:HOVLDEN, presumably the name of the incumbent. Here are the same corner colonnettes, the flying-fish frieze, the strapwork; but the horizontal panels now have *rincaux* of flowers, leaves, acorns and other fruit, the rails have stylised versions of the *rincaux* instead of guilloche (Fig. 6). The paired scrolls used at Croft have come down to ornament the posts of the Burgh-le-Marsh back-plate which boasts the royal arms in the main panel (Fig. 7). The sounding-board has pendants, paired scrolls, a carved *rincau* frieze, consoles and cornice (Fig. 8). The carver clearly suffered from an advanced case of *horror vacui* for no surface is left undecorated. Rather less overheated is the handsome font cover, by the same craftsmen, in the same church (Fig. 9). Most of the same elements are present in different combinations, the most curious features being the Ionic capitals above the cornice, united by barbed scrolls and topped by openwork obelisks. The crowning feature is a stiff-looking eagle standing on an open book, with two unexplained flasks hanging out of its beak.<sup>13</sup>

Ionic corner colonnettes are also to be found on the fascinating pulpit at Alford, seven or eight miles north. This is undated but must be approximately contemporary. Here continental influence is even stronger for the colonnettes are accompanied by term figures, some on tapering pedestals, by grotesque masks and sea monsters in the frieze panels (Fig. 10). One of the main panels is subdivided by mouldings in an unusually elaborate manner (Fig. 11), somewhat reminiscent of the even more complicated panels of a room from the Star Hotel at Great Yarmouth.<sup>14</sup> Another church nearby was equipped with a pulpit around this time. This was St. Leonards Chapel, due east, on the coast near Skegness — one should say beyond the coast, for the church is one of five in the county lost to the sea<sup>15</sup>, but its very simple pulpit dated 1626 survives at Walesby near Market Rasen (Fig. 12). It is severely plain (and looks more so, having been painted, perhaps in the eighteenth century), no arches, just horizontal panels towards the top of the drum carved with double scrolls, and curious three-tiered fluting in the equivalent panel in the back-plate.

To the next decade belongs a well-known piece of Lincolnshire furniture, the chest inscribed THIS.IS.ESTHER.HOBSONNE.CHIST.1637. (Fig. 13).<sup>16</sup> This has a seemingly impregnable history of ownership in no more than three local families: the Hobsons were tenant farmers on Lord Yarborough's north Lincolnshire estate at Brocklesby, ten



2. St. Botolph's, Boston, pulpit dated 1612



3. Boston pulpit, detail



4. All Saints, Croft, pulpit dated 1615



5. St. Peter and St. Paul, Burgh-le-Marsh, pulpit dated 1623



6. Burgh-le-Marsh, pulpit detail



7. Burgh-le-Marsh, pulpit detail



8. Burgh-le-Marsh, pulpit detail



9. Burgh-le-Marsh,  
font cover

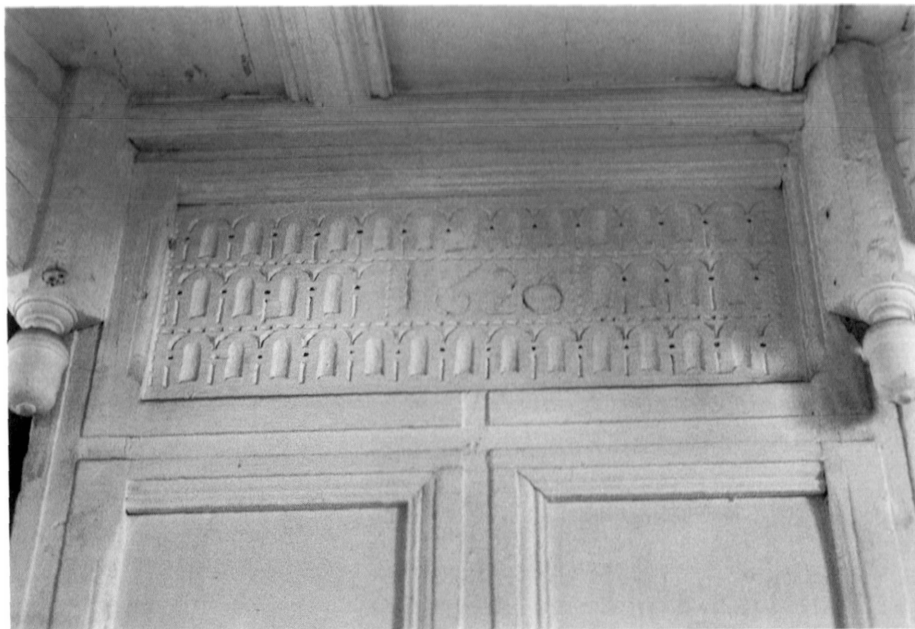




10. St. Wilfrid,  
Alford, pulpit



11. Alford pulpit



12. St. Leonard's Chapel, pulpit dated 1626 (now at Walesby)



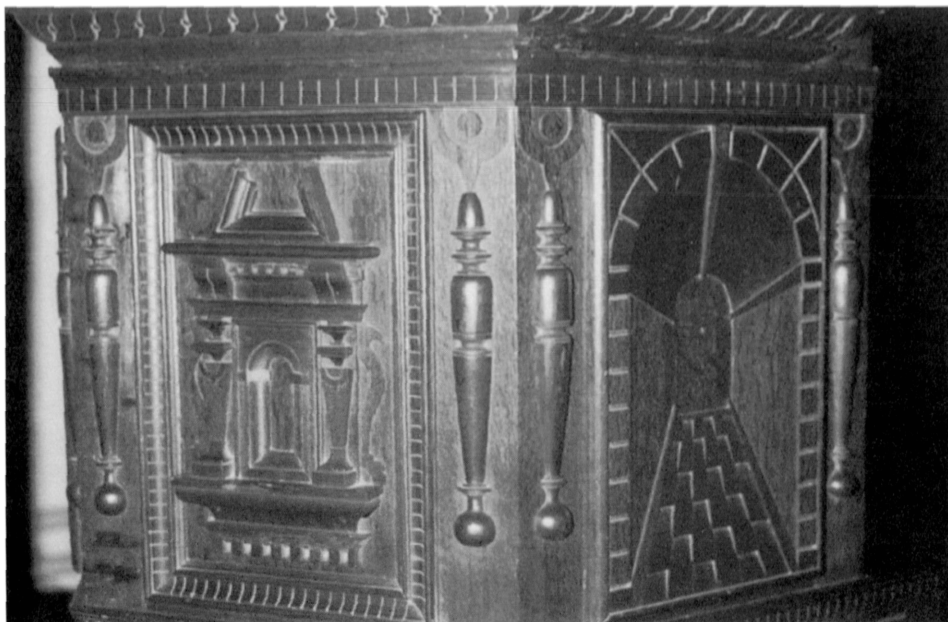
13. Esther Hobsonne's chest, Victoria & Albert Museum



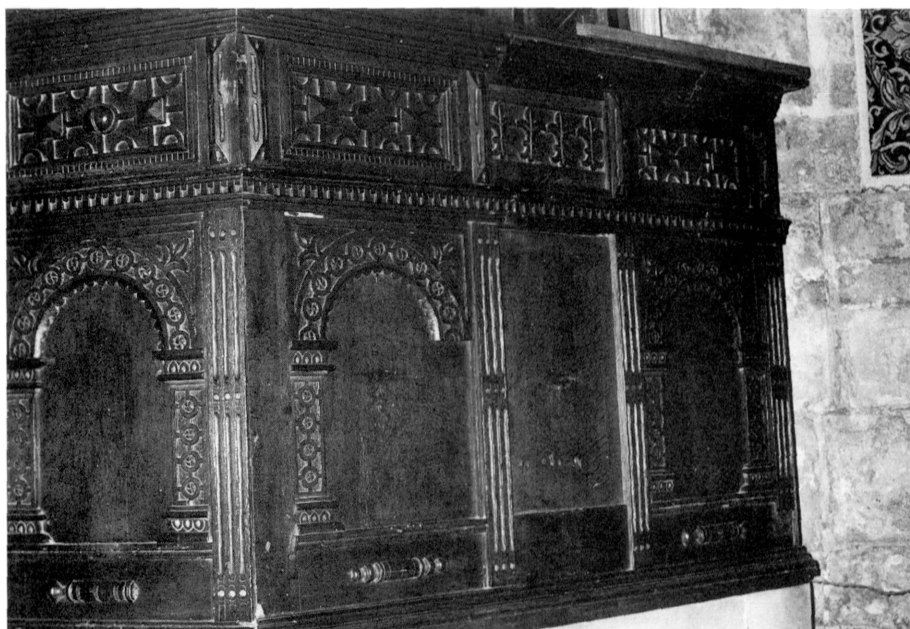
14. All Saints, Goxhill, pulpit dated 1634



15. St. Lawrence, Sedgebrook, pulpit dated 1634



16. St. Margaret, Bucknall, pulpit of 1646



17. All Saints, Friskney, pulpit dated 1659



18. Friskney pulpit, detail



19. Friskney pulpit, detail



20. Armchair,  
1660-70



21. Armchair, 1660-70





22. Holy Trinity, West Allington, pulpit



23. Armchair, 1690-1700

miles due west of Grimsby.<sup>17</sup> Like the Burgh pulpit, every square inch of the front is carved, the stiles with repeated foliate motifs and circles enclosing rosettes, the muntins and frieze with leafing and fruiting *rinceaux*, the lower rail with lunettes and completely abstract motifs originating as acanthus leaves and the four panels with two patterns: a stylised flowering plant, and a biaxially symmetrical composition with fruiting plants and leaves. If the tradition of ownership is trustworthy, this is an important document for north Lincolnshire furniture. Goxhill, only a few miles away, just north of Thornton Abbey, has an interesting pulpit dated 1634 (Fig. 14), though clearly not by the same joiner who made Esther Hobsonne's chest, for the decoration is limited to guilloche, paired scrolls and tiny lunettes with heart-shaped pendants. The same year, the church at Sedgebrook, four miles north-west of Grantham, acquired a new pulpit. This could hardly be more different (Fig. 15). The drum is divided into three zones, a squarish panel with a horizontal one above and below, the main panel having two round headed arches with a pendant between, all decorated with applied jewel ornament; the upper panel has paired scrolls, the lower a motif of repeated interlocking lunettes, upright and inverted. This is an early instance in the county of a motif which became very popular, as we shall see shortly. Rather more distinguished than either of these 1630s pulpits is the example at Bucknall (Fig. 16), midway between Lincoln and Horncastle. This was given to the church in 1646 at a cost of £100.<sup>18</sup> It is an isolated example in the county of the later Flemish or Dutch mannerist style: the main panels have either a perspective arch with squared pavement or a mannerist *aedicule* consisting of a miniature round arch flanked by tapering pilasters, topped by an improbably-angled broken pediment. Split balusters hang from applied strapwork pendants on the stiles. This late-mannerist style was popularised in print by Paul Vredeman de Vries's *Verscheyden Schrynwerk* published by Claes Ianss. Visscher in Amsterdam in 1630, but had already appeared in England during the 1620s.<sup>19</sup> This Lincolnshire manifestation is, therefore, about twenty years behind the times. And yet it is crisply executed and (broken pediment apart) convincingly continental in character.

Of dated pulpits accessible during my fieldwork this only leaves the example at Friskney (Fig. 17), back down in the Marshes north of the Wash and approximately halfway between Skegness and Boston. Here the decoration has become highly stylised, round arches in the drum, carved with circles of strapwork linked together, each enclosing a rosette; a similar panel in the back-plate (Fig. 18), with another above which is subdivided by mouldings; slightly more elaborate strapwork in the frieze (one panel with repeated *fleurs-de-lys*) and the inscription on a rail: WP 1659 WC. There is much use of superimposed sections of fluting on frame members, and applied split-balusters and jewel ornament, all features associated with continental work of the first half of the seventeenth century. Perhaps the most significant element is the sounding-board (Fig. 19) which, besides the conventions of corner-blocks with acorn pendants, has shaped aprons and frieze panels consisting of the interlocking upright and inverted lunettes first encountered twenty-five years earlier at Sedgebrook.

This was a motif much favoured in the county. It reappears, for instance, on the head of a bed dated 1667 which, purchased at auction in Sheffield, was said to have come from a house in Lincolnshire.<sup>20</sup> It also occurs in the plinth area of the undated pulpit drum at Silk Willoughby as well as on a slope-top desk and, as a deep frieze rail, on an

important chest.<sup>21</sup> Two chairs in the extreme north-west of the county have the motif too. These chairs (Figs. 20 & 21), from their formal similarity to Yorkshire types, may date from the 1660s.<sup>22</sup> In both the motif was carved on the subsidiary horizontal panel above the distinctively-carved main panel in the back. With these features and their double-scroll cresting rails which oversail the back-posts, these chairs can fairly be claimed as a Lincolnshire type despite their lack of a cast-iron provenance. It would be wrong, however, to think that the interlocking lunette motif was exclusive to Lincolnshire: it occurs in Norfolk on the pulpit at Stanfield<sup>23</sup> and in Nottinghamshire at Blyth, so it may well have come into Lincolnshire from one of these neighbours. There is another distinctive motif which appears on a couple of pieces of furniture in the county. This is a rail carved with S motifs in handed pairs repeated along its length and it is found on a pulpit at West Allington (Fig. 22), north of Sedgebrook, in combination with a round arched panel carved with a highly stylised flowering shrub apparently growing from a mound treated as three semi-circles. These last, in the medium of textiles, are considered to be a convention to represent the hillock on which shrubs are depicted as growing, a reference to Oriental originals. It is possible that the carver here found inspiration in some Oriental carpet or textile, or in a piece of English embroidery. Both these features, the S-carved rail and the flowering shrub panel, occur on a chair in the county which, from the distinctive character of the carved leaves, must date from the very end of the seventeenth century if not the early eighteenth (Fig. 23). Highly stylised flowering shrubs seem altogether to have been a popular choice for the decoration of panels in Lincolnshire, but it is not possible to isolate a distinctive local style as it is, say, in Yorkshire or some of the western counties of England. Lozenges were rarely carved on panels; panels were most often left plain.

On the evidence illustrated here, Lincolnshire was not an exciting county for furniture during the Tudor and Stuart period. With the exception of the pulpits at Boston and Burgh-le-Marsh there are no really memorable examples of fixed woodwork in churches, and nothing in the county quite as exciting as, for instance, two communion tables in Norfolk, one painted black with gilding, having a gothic-style pierced apron set between Italianate legs, and an inscription drawn from the Prayer Book of Edward VI; the other elaborately carved and painted in blue and ochre.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, direct continental influence is much less apparent in Lincolnshire than in Norfolk: far fewer immigrants may have settled in the county than did in Norwich and the surrounding country. If Boston (or Lincoln, for that matter) was at any time the centre of a local style of carving, as Exeter was in the years around 1600, there is now no substantial evidence left.<sup>25</sup>

## REFERENCES

1. Gerald A. J. Hodgett, *Tudor Lincolnshire*, Lincoln, 1975, p. 1.
2. Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 412.
3. Nikolaus Pevsner and John Harris, *Lincolnshire*, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 462.
4. N. J. Williams, *The Maritime Trade of the East Anglian Ports, 1550-1590*, Oxford, 1988, p. 59.
5. Defoe, p. 414.
6. Like recent articles on furniture from Cornwall and Norfolk — Anthony Wells-Cole, 'A Last Outpost of the Known World: Vernacular Furniture in Tudor and Stuart Cornwall', *Regional Furniture*, II, 1988, pp. 6-18 [Wells-Cole 1988], and Anthony Wells-Cole, 'Oak furniture in Norfolk, 1530-1640', *Regional Furniture*, IV,

1990, pp. 1–41 [Wells-Cole 1990] — this one is based on fieldwork undertaken (in my spare time) many years ago. Other commitments have prevented me from devoting any energy to original research in archives but I hope that the illustrations, at least, which offer glimpses of some of the more interesting fixed woodwork in this county, will prove valuable.

7. It was a fine house with an almost symmetrical gabled entrance facade, the projecting bay with the entrance door being matched by another lighting the high end of the hall), see Terence R. Leach, *Lincolnshire Country Houses & Their Families: Part One*, Lincoln, 1990, Figs. 16–17.

8. David Roberts, 'John Thorpe's drawings for Thornton College, the house of Sir Vincent Skinner', *Lincolnshire History and Archaeology*, 19, 1984.

9. I am most grateful to Dr. Eric Till for showing this to me.

10. Wells-Cole 1990 [at note 6].

11. The design of these panels is regrettably confused by later gilding.

12. Did the joiner get the idea from his own experience or was he inspired by the nearby monument of William Bond (died 1559)?

13. Pevsner & Harris, p. 206.

14. Margaret Jourdain, *English Decoration and Furniture of the Early Renaissance*, London, 1924, Figs. 58, 59.

15. Pevsner & Harris, p. 28n.

16. Victoria & Albert Museum, 527–1892.

17. Thereafter, a member of the Hobson family gave the chest to the landlord of the Woolpack Inn at Brigg, from whom it passed into the possession of Edward Peacock of Bottesford Manor, being purchased from his sale by the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1892; H. Clifford Smith, *Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Woodwork: Catalogue of English Furniture & Woodwork Vol. II — Late Tudor and Early Stuart*, London, 1930, No. 575, p. 18, Plate 22.

18. Pevsner & Harris, p. 204.

19. The complete plates were reprinted by Simon Jervis, *Printed Furniture Designs Before 1650*, Leeds, 1974. Nos. 322–40. For their use in England see Wells-Cole 1990, pp. 36–37, Figs. 26–29.

20. *Country Life*, 23 May 1968, p. 1369.

21. At Boston and Coleby respectively.

22. These are at Epworth and Haxey, close to the border with Yorkshire.

23. Wells-Cole 1990, Fig. 34.

24. Wells-Cole 1990, Figs. 1 & 38.

25. For Exeter see Anthony Wells-Cole, 'The Montacute Bed: a Study in Mannerist Decoration', *Furniture History*, xvii (1981), pp. 1–19.