

SOME EAST ANGLIAN CHESTS

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The area of East Anglia embraces several large and prosperous counties; together they show a dramatic contrast in countryside from the rolling Suffolk downs to the bleak and inhospitable flatlands of the Fens. Norfolk, by far the largest county, boasts more parish churches than any other county in England. During the 1660s the county town of Norwich was England's second biggest city. Other East Anglian towns such as Ipswich, Great Yarmouth and Cambridge were also in the Top Ten most populated towns and cities, statistics which were to be permanently altered by the Industrial Revolution of the early nineteenth century.

During the seventeenth century English carving traditions were maintained throughout the Eastern counties; sometimes by comparing the carving on the fixed woodwork of churches or private houses it is possible to draw comparisons with the carving on movable furniture such as chests, joined armchairs and cupboards. Figure 1 is a chest from the Norwich region of Norfolk with scratch-carved arcades and incised leaf patterns on the stiles. This is a typical example of a local chest and many pulpits in Norfolk also show this particular style of fresh, light carving.¹

In fact woodcarvers in East Anglia seemed to favour the arcade as a design feature and Figure 2 shows another arcaded chest with unusual decorative infill resembling a fish-scale pattern. This particular piece was provenanced to a private house in the Norwich area. Another chest from a neighbouring village is shown in Figure 3, here the arcade is *applied* instead of carved; split balusters and eggs provide extra ornamentation. The lid is fixed in the medieval tradition with wooden end-hinges set in the back stiles which run along the outside of the chest. This style is also found further south in market towns along the Norfolk/Suffolk borders such as Diss and Beccles. This highly architectural form of arcaded design can also be seen on many Norfolk pulpits and is an early form of decoration which probably dates as far back as the Charles I period.

Figures 4 and 5 show a type of six-plank chest found all over Norfolk and Suffolk. They are frequently constructed from elm as well as oak and represent a primitive style which had been popular since the sixteenth century although these particular examples date from the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century with their pin hinges and bold, well-carved lunettes. This simple style is not, however, exclusive to East Anglia and is found in many other areas of the country.

Essex was another well-populated East Anglian county during the seventeenth century, which is not surprising since its southern borders touch the perimeter of London. Figure 6 was found amongst deceased effects in Saffron Walden, whilst in the same year two more were acquired from the town of Bishop's Stortford which lies approximately twenty miles south of Saffron Walden. The large local church of St Mary owns two pieces of furniture with the same lozenge motif. One is a chest which is constructionally exactly the same as the former example (Fig. 7). These 'transitional' chests have a single plank running along the back and planked sides with a deep V gouge for the feet. The carved lozenge (a popular motif throughout the country) is only very lightly executed and tulips decorate the sides of each lozenge. Occasionally a fleur-de-lis is carved at each point of the lozenge but, in



1. Oak chest with three-panelled carved front and plank top, c. 1700



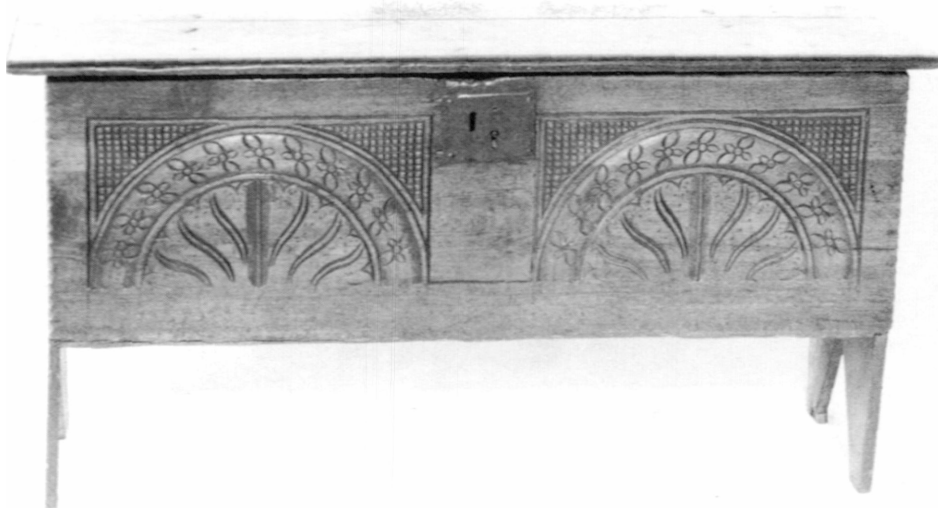
2. Three-panelled carved oak chest with plank top, c. 1680



3. Oak chest with applied decoration, *c.* 1640–50



4. Six-plank oak chest with carved lunettes, *c.* 1660–1720



5. Six-plank elm chest with carved lunettes, c. 1660–1720



6. Three-panelled oak chest with plank top and carved decoration, c. 1680



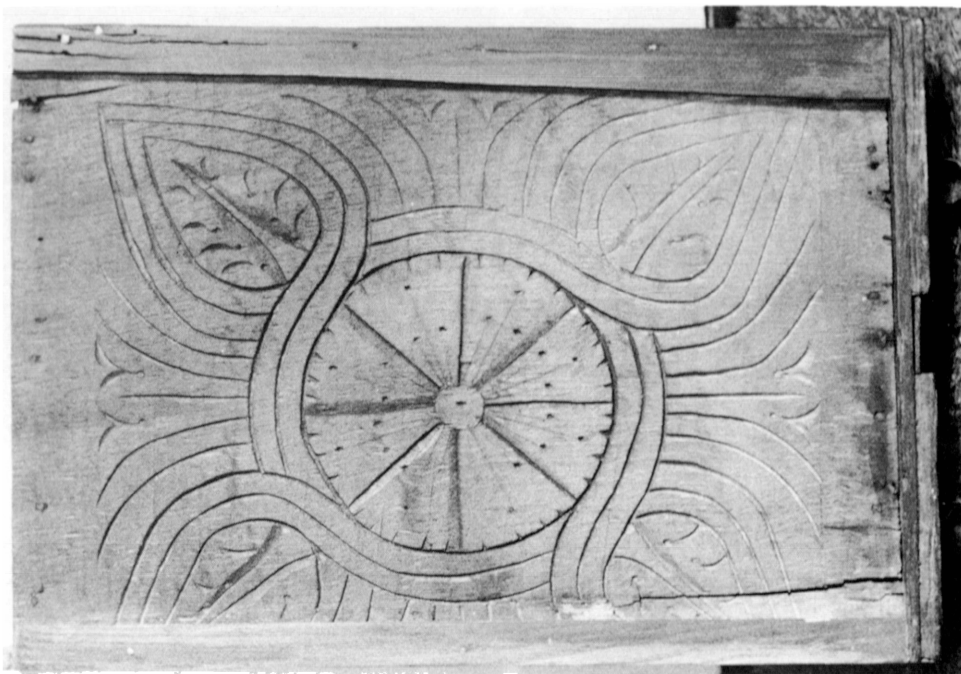
7. Oak chest, Saffron Walden Church, Essex



8. Oak chest with three-panelled carved front and plank top, c. 1660



9. Sounding board of pulpit, Barrington Church, Cambridgeshire



10. Oak drawer lining from East Anglian press cupboard of seventeenth-century carved timber



11. Oak chest with three-panelled carved front showing compass decoration, late seventeenth or early eighteenth century



12. Oak and fruitwood chest with carved and painted decoration, late seventeenth or early eighteenth century



13. Oak chest similar to Figure 12



14. Underside of chest illustrated in Figure 13 showing a typical cross brace

general, the basic designs are the same. Wood panelling in some of the private houses of Saffron Walden also show similar incised lozenges; so we have to presume that at least one woodcarver was practising this type of design in and around the area.

Some styles of carved decoration have turned up in East Anglia which, from the evidence of past research, should originate from a totally different area. For example Figure 8 is an oak chest acquired from Norwich with quatrefoil carved panels, a popular motif throughout the whole of the south-west.² Yet this particular piece is typically East Anglian with its light, crisp carving, plank top and flattened gadroon along the top rail. As a single example this is hardly a very important discovery but motifs have been found on fixed furniture in the area. For example the sounding board on Barrington pulpit (Fig. 9) is carved with the same swirling pattern, whilst Figure 10 shows the drawer bottom of a typical East Anglian press constructed during the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. The drawer linings have been composed of older timbers and the quatrefoil motif, although unfinished, is quite clear.

In the more recent past links have been established between similar furniture styles in England and America. For example the hoop-back Windsor chair attributed to Yealmpton, Devon is a very distinctive design, yet similar examples were made at the same time in Connecticut, America. Likewise the joined chest with double-heart motif was made both in Wiltshire, England and New Haven Colony, America. Perhaps similar links can be established on a much smaller scale, between counties within this country.

A style of chest which was produced in and around Dorset was also made in the border towns of Hertfordshire and Essex such as Hitchin, Bishop's Stortford and Tring. Over the past five years approximately twenty-five of these chests have emerged from this area and Figures 11, 12, and 13 illustrate three such examples. Constructionally they are exactly the same as the Dorset style of chest,³ with an oak crossbar running along the single planked base (Fig. 14). They have high, narrow stiles, a plank top with pin hinges and many show traces of red and black paintwork (Figs 12 and 13). The only dated example to have been recorded was inscribed 1735, which is a much later date than the records show of dated Dorset chests. Figure 12 has a fruitwood lid and many have fruitwood panels, although apart from oak no other indigenous timbers have been noted.

Perhaps a younger generation of furniture makers moved from the Dorset area to Herts./Essex where they maintained their traditional methods of construction and decoration, or possibly there was a trading link between the two areas.

Due to the enormous appeal of local chests on the commercial market it has been my privilege to have handled almost 200 examples from various small salerooms in East Anglia; thus providing valuable information concerning the study of regional furniture design.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

1. A. Wells-Cole, 'Oak Furniture in Norfolk', *Regional Furniture*, IV (1990), Fig. 42.
2. V. Chinnery, *Oak Furniture the British Tradition* (1979), p. 457, Fig. 4.85.
3. G. Olive, 'West Country Chests', *Regional Furniture*, IV (1990), Figs 4 and 5.