

# SOME PLAIN OAK FARMHOUSE CHESTS FROM SOUTH WALES

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The chests considered in this article are described as 'plain' because they lack carved ornament. Carved chests occur commonly in South Wales, as elsewhere, but to date no consistent local decorative styles have emerged. Many plain chests, however, can be attributed to this region, by long family ownership or design. The ones described here all come from Glamorgan or Breconshire, and it appears that other types take over in the Western counties of Carmarthenshire and Pembroke.

An important use for chests in farmhouses, up to the present century at least, was the storage of foodstuffs, but the advent of metal containers and packaging is presumably responsible for the virtual disappearance of chests made for this purpose from present day farms. By contrast, many chests for storing textiles are still to be found.

A rare instance of three food storage chests being kept *in situ* has come to light in a hill farm, high in the Glamorganshire valleys. Once a lonely and self-sufficient homestead, it is now an island of antiquity in an industrialised area. All three chests were originally kept in garrets within the farmhouse. Two have been brought downstairs, and one of them (Fig. 1) is still in use, in an outhouse, for storing potatoes. It is heavily constructed with deep top and bottom rails all round, the long sides divided by single muntins, and the spaces filled by chamfered panels. The end rails are mortised through the corner posts. The top (with modern repairs) is of two plain boards connected by three four-peg cross-tongues (Fig. 4) and hinged originally with characteristic wooden hook-rails. These are rails nailed across beneath the lid, their back ends formed into wooden hooks which connect with holes or recesses in the back. They form effective hinges, and allow the lid to be detached when raised to the vertical position.

The bottom of this chest is a modern replacement, but a second chest (not illustrated) has a bottom of boards nailed on cross-wise, with the ends showing; the edges are rebated together, presumably to form a joint which would remain close despite shrinkage, to retain flour and so on. This second chest resembles the first in all respects except that it lacks the muntins and has heavier corner posts. Both are entirely plain and utilitarian, and their continued existence on the farm through time and family vicissitudes suggests that such pieces were regarded almost as fixtures. The farm had its own watermill, where it no doubt ground its own and its neighbours' grain,<sup>1</sup> but occasionally food chests were used instead for storing bacon, bedded down in bran, as an alternative to hanging it.<sup>2</sup>

Because of their plain character and heavy use these two chests are virtually undatable, but the third one, which is still in a garret, is of an early type and completely different construction (Figs 2 and 3). This piece is of 'clamped-front' form, having wide linear stiles on the long sides; the back and front are made of boards which are chamfered on both sides at the ends to taper into big V-shaped grooves in the stiles. The boards too are grooved together, secured at the top with pegs through the stiles, and at the bottom by tenons formed

at the ends of the boards, to strengthen the base. The ends, also of grooved-together boards, are housed into the stiles with tenons at the bottom, which pass right through, and were originally secured with cross-pegs; at the top the ends are tied with external cross-rails, also mortised right through and cross-pegged.

The bottom is of two lengthwise boards, grooved together and grooved in all round, supported also by a central cross-rail beneath. The whole structure, though much lighter than the two joined chests, is thus made with tight, flour-proof joints. The lid, which is missing, was flat, and two shallow tapered recesses in the back indicate a simple form of rail hinge. There is a lock recess in the front, and a second one (possibly a late adaptation) at one end. This chest has shallow channel mouldings worked on the stiles. These appear also on a low planked door giving access to the small garret where the chest was previously kept, which has an iron lock encased in a wooden cover. The high security of this flour storage reflects the need to conserve an essential commodity, hard-won at all times on a hill farm, and doubtless rationed in times of shortage.

In general the construction of this piece is typical of the earlier forms of ark, but with a flat lid. The use of the V-groove and chamfer joints, and in particular the very large grooves on the stile edges (7.5 cm deep and 2.5 cm wide at the edge) indicates medieval construction. We know that the 'twybill' or 'axe-adze', was used for forming grooves on the edges of planks, and a small version of it survived until recent times as a hurdle-maker's tool.<sup>3</sup> The big grooves in the stiles suggest the use of the big twybill, which in Britain is not supposed to have outlasted the Middle Ages, although it is probably still in use on the Continent.<sup>4</sup> It is reasonable therefore to attribute this chest to the sixteenth century, particularly when the continuity of family ownership is taken into account, dating from the 1580s.

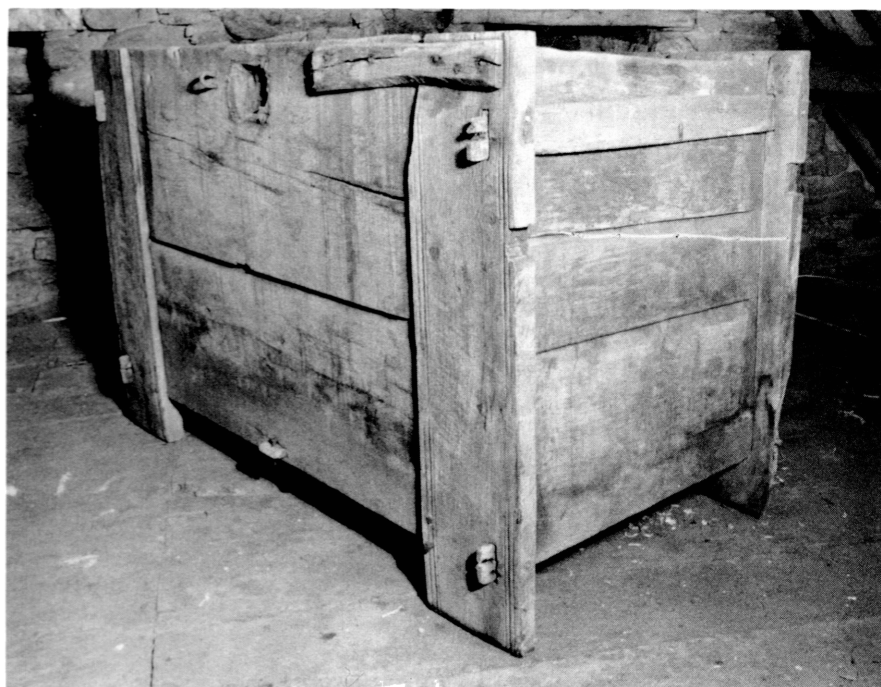
Arks and ark-type chests seem to have survived longer in Wales than elsewhere in Britain, and were described in Welsh as 'styffyllog'<sup>5</sup> (literally, 'stapled') referring to their knock-down construction, using cross-pegged tenons. This must have been essential, as in this case, to allow such large pieces to be dismantled and reassembled in lofts and attics with very restricted access. There is evidence that English usage in this area conformed to southern terminology,<sup>6</sup> calling such pieces 'hutches'.<sup>7</sup> This example therefore represents a completely different tradition from the two joined chests described earlier, and one that developed in its own way, culminating in the eighteenth century when many 'hutches' were framed with fielded panels.

Many of the chests which are still to be found in South Wales farmhouses, and were designed for storing textiles and personal possessions, are of seventeenth-century type. Two examples from a farm at Bonvilston in the prosperous lowlands of the Vale of Glamorgan show some variety. The first (Fig. 5) has vertical plank ends, each of two boards butt-jointed with three four-peg cross-tongues. The panelled front typically has mouldings worked in the solid, the rail mouldings mitred into the corner-posts, and the muntins scribed over the rails. The whole front is nailed to the ends, while the back is of three boards also nailed on, and the bottom is of two lengthwise elm boards nailed through the sides and ends. The lid is of two boards joined by four four-peg cross-tongues, with external cross-rails at the ends and two hook-rail hinges within. The two drawers are missing, their spaces filled by later panels.

Chests with plank ends are not rare, but fully-planked chests, or coffers, which were common in the West Country during the eighteenth century, are hardly found in South Wales. These pieces, described by Gabriel Olive in *Regional Furniture*, 1990, were mainly



1. Plain food storage chest, seventeenth or eighteenth century



2. Ark-type flat-lidded chest, sixteenth century, lid missing



3. Detail of Figure 2 showing chamfered planks grooved into the stile, and one recess for a hook-rail hinge



4. Detail of a pegged cross-tongue joint



5. Plank-ended panelled chest, seventeenth century, Vale of Glamorgan, drawers replaced.



6. Panelled corner-post chest, Vale of Glamorgan, seventeenth–eighteenth century



7. Multi-panel chest, Glamorgan, early eighteenth century, the plinth moulding feet are missing



8. Multi-panel chest, early eighteenth century, from Neath Valley, Glamorgan



9. Multi-panel chest with ogee top panels, eighteenth century, from Ogmore, Glamorgan



10. Multi-panel chest, late eighteenth century, from Cadoxton, Neath, Glamorgan



11. Multi-panel chest with three drawers and shaped apron, eighteenth century, from Breconshire



12. Multi-panel chest with one long drawer, late eighteenth century, from Breconshire



13. Early nineteenth century multi-panel chest, with three-reed mouldings, from West Glamorgan



14. Late eighteenth-century multi-panel chest, converted in the 1930s

of elm, and he considers that the availability of wide elm boards led to the dominance of this type. Conversely, in South Wales the relative scarcity of elm and profusion of oak may have caused the perpetuation and development of the joined panelled chest.

The second Bonvilston chest (Fig. 6) is of finer construction, with four corner-posts and panelled ends, otherwise the construction of the panelling and lid is the same as Figure 5, but lacks the cross-tongues. The back is framed into the corner-posts, with three wide boards and a central muntin.

This construction can be regarded as the norm for South Wales chests. By contrast, fragments of a piece from Tythegston in the Vale of Glamorgan show panelled construction with double-rebated corners, and stand out as an aberration, or possibly a 'foreign' import.

Given their durability and unchanging usefulness, it is likely that the Bonvilston pieces, and the many plain panelled chests to be found, are of seventeenth-century date. Further evidence for this is the emergence in the eighteenth century of a distinctive regional type which, in its varieties, is so common that it may account for a large proportion of the chests made in Glamorgan and Breconshire during the century. It can best be described as 'multi-panel'.

Figures 7 and 8 show two early eighteenth-century examples. Figure 7, from Llanharan House<sup>8</sup> in the Vale of Glamorgan, unusually has a framed top with a single centre panel, a framed back without corner posts (the end rails are mortised through it) and squared front posts with planted mouldings against them; the bottom (replaced) was of lengthwise boards, and the base shows traces of missing plinth mouldings and feet. The lid had hook-rail hinges, and the top rail bears the initials A M and the date 1713, all picked out in iron nails. There are traces of later knobs fitted to the lower panels, but another chest (Fig. 8) has traces of contemporary false handles on the panels, and bears an original matching keyhole escutcheon. This chest, from a farm at Seven Sisters in the Dulais valley near Neath, Glamorgan, has a row of rectangular vertical panels above the horizontal ones. The bottom is of cross-wise boards nailed on, and the two-plank lid has the usual hook-rail hinges. A deep plinth moulding covers the ends of the bottom boards, otherwise the feet are left plain.

The feet of these chests seem to have been treated in a variety of ways, often by nailing on a plinth board moulded at the top and shaped into corner brackets. This is seen well on a splendid chest (Fig. 9) originating from farms near Ogmere on the Vale of Glamorgan coast. A fine row of vertical ogee-topped panels has been added, and unusually the chest has iron staple hinges. Perhaps the most typical of all these pieces is shown in Figure 10, from a farm at Cadoxton, Neath, a late eighteenth-century piece of refined construction. The lid is of two boards joined with six dowels, cross-rails and hook-rail hinges. The crosswise bottom boards are covered outside with a cove moulding, and the corner post feet are covered by nailed-on concave reeded panels. One is missing, and in general the feet of these pieces are so vulnerable that they have usually gone, leaving bare corner posts with traces of old nailing. This piece also has a contemporary keyhole escutcheon, an oval plate indicating a date of 1780 or later.

Numbers of chests of this pattern occur, smaller ones having only three rows of panels. There is a tradition that such pieces were made from oak grown at Cwmbach<sup>9</sup> in the Aberdare valley in Glamorgan, and they are certainly numerous in the adjoining Neath valley. The origin of the multi-panel style is obscure, but it certainly represents an economical use of timber, because the narrowness of the panels virtually eliminates

problems of warping as well as shrinkage. This enabled plain-cut wood from small trunks to be used; to date no multi-panel chest has been recorded which shows quarter-cut, figured grain.

Further variety is illustrated by two chests from a farm at Pontsticill in the Brecon Beacons. Figure 11 shows one with a developed three-drawer base, made by nailing on a wide plinth board and shaping it into an apron. The feet are nailed-on fluted panels, not unlike Figure 10. Figure 12 shows another from the same source, with a single long drawer and missing feet. The panel mouldings here are ogees, unlike the usual ovolos, but the muntin mouldings are still scribed over the rails in the usual way.

Delicate and varied mouldings seem to be a feature of the later chests, and in Figure 13 we have a remarkable late example which has typical early nineteenth-century three-reed mouldings around the panels and a reeded plinth moulding over nailed-on bracket feet. It is in every other way typical (hook-rail hinge, crosswise bottom, etc.) and illustrates the persistence of a well-loved form which was updated by applying a minimum of current fashionable detail. It also illustrates the continuing popularity of the chest more than one hundred years after the first development of the chest of drawers. The prosperous farmers who owned these pieces would doubtless have possessed chests of drawers as well, retaining the chests because they must have preferred them for certain purposes.

This piece originates from the Glamorgan/Carmarthenshire borders. Multi-panel chests are common in Breconshire and Glamorgan, but are hardly known further West in Carmarthen and Pembrokeshire,<sup>10</sup> where tall panels with ogee tops predominate. A final example is the classic big multi-panel shown in Figure 14, from a farm near Sennybridge, Breconshire. It was adapted by a local cabinet maker in the 1930s. The lid is now fixed, the end panels have been turned into drawers, and an oak-glazed bookcase has been added to the top. As a piece of skilful vernacular conversion, it has made the chest 'work' for its owner in a situation where there is no room for redundant furniture.

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this brief study, the main emphasis has been on constructional methods as a guide to regional attribution. South Wales has seen much population movement since the early nineteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution began to have a serious effect on patterns of employment and wealth. Before this, at least two centuries of commerce with the West Country, Bristol, London and Ireland exercised a profound influence on life in this part of Wales.<sup>11</sup> The obvious implication of these factors is that we cannot assume a regional origin for anything unless consistent local features can be identified. The importance of structural attributes is that, once established, they could accommodate changes of style and form, so methods that persisted for a long time may be our most reliable regional attributes.

The pegged cross-tongue as a way of securing long butt joints is possibly a uniquely Welsh feature (Fig. 4),<sup>12</sup> and was used on a wide variety of furniture types. Its absence from the lids of the later multi-panel chests suggests that it may have been a seventeenth- and perhaps early eighteenth-century device, which in turn would date other furniture, such as long farmhouse tables, earlier than is currently considered wise. But then, the persistent idea that everything Welsh was remote and much behind the times is simply not borne out by what is known about life in the southern and western coastal counties.

The persistence of the hook-rail hinge may also be significant. It is found too on chests in West Wales and the border counties, and was used in the small *coffr bach* (still referred to as 'bible boxes'), although iron staple hinges are more usual for these. It appears to have developed from the ark lid hinges, which were formed on the back ends of the lid sides, and pivoted on the external projecting stiles. With the adoption of the square-cornered, flat-lidded chest, they were moved inside.<sup>13</sup> They also minimised the joiner's dependence on the smith's work when completing a chest.

Corner post construction is of course ubiquitous, but even this may have some value as a regional indicator when used consistently in conjunction with other features. The way chest bottoms were made may indicate the uses to which chests were put rather than their regionality. The standard way for multi-panel chests was to nail boards on crosswise, the least tight method, because shrinkage opened up the maximum number of joints. It is obvious that the grooved or rebated boards, almost always lengthwise, in food storage chests were designed to retain ground cereals and food in a dry state, but lengthwise boards are sometimes found also in chests (i.e. ones with drawers beneath) designed for storing textiles.

Perhaps further, wider studies will provide some answers to this problem. In general, the validity of the whole structural hypothesis can only be tested by comparative studies in all regions.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to Philip Havard for much practical help and advice; to Alun Davies, of the Welsh Folk Museum, for the same, and to the many owners of the chests for their kind permission to record them.

#### REFERENCES

1. J. Geraint Jenkins, *Life and Tradition in Rural Wales* (1976), ch. 2.
2. Verbal information on the farm.
3. R. A. Salaman, *Dictionary of Tools* (1975), p. 244: Hurdle-maker's tools.
4. Present-day chest-making in the woods of Hungary has been recorded in 1955 in a film made by Dr Klára Csilléry of the Budapest Ethnological Museum. The use of the twybill for making grooves on plank edges, and the draw-shave and brake to make tapered edges to fit them, are clearly seen. The film was shown at the RFS conference and AGM at West Dean in July 1990 by Philip Walker, who has kindly supplied this information.
5. From Alun Davies, Welsh Folk Museum, St Fagans.
6. Victor Chinnery, *Oak Furniture* (1979), p. 357.
7. Fonmon Papers, Glamorgan Record Office, Ref. No. DD/F 178: 'A Noate of such goods as Collonel Jones hath left in his house at Swanzey with major Richard Dutton, May 26, 1663 ... In the Seller ... a Hutsh to keepe korne in ...'.
8. This chest was bought at the Llanharan sale in November 1953. The catalogue records three 'antique oak coffers' on the main landing, vernacular storage pieces in the thoroughfares of a gentry house.
9. L. Twiston-Davies and H. J. Lloyd-Johnes, *Welsh Furniture* (1950), pl. 58. A large multi-panel chest with three cocked-beaded drawers, plinth moulding and bracket feet like a contemporary chest of drawers. Dated (perhaps too early) at 1740.
10. I am indebted to Richard Bebb, of Kidwelly, for this information.
11. David Williams, *A History of Modern Wales*.
12. The Welsh regional nature of this joint was first noticed by Gabriel Olive, and is described in the *RFS Newsletter*, Winter 1991.
13. A flat-lidded ark-type chest with a panelled front, currently in Garreg Fawr farmhouse, Welsh Folk Museum, St Fagans, has large hook-rails close inside the ends of the chest.