

# THE GOWER COFFOR BACH

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During the second half of the eighteenth century a small group of carved coffers, quite unlike anything then produced in Wales, was made at Gower,<sup>1</sup> a peninsula stretching for nearly twenty miles to the west of Swansea. It is my belief that both the design and the carved decoration on these coffers were introduced from non-Welsh sources. A likely region of influence is the West Country which has traditionally enjoyed close economic and cultural ties with Gower through seaborne traffic.<sup>2</sup> The prosperous agricultural peninsula of Gower was anglicised following the Norman Conquest. Its dialect, for example, aroused comment as early as 1696 when Edward Lluhd in his survey of Wales asked, 'wherin doth the English of the vulgar in Pemrokeshire and Gowerland differ from the western counties of England?'. A late eighteenth-century tourist observed that 'the language of the Gower people was English, the dialect broad and coarse, so that a traveller might fancy himself in the west of England'.<sup>3</sup> Swansea Museum has in its collection two West Country sgraffito-decorated slipware jugs dated 1747 and 1753, ornamented with tulips, daisies and birds with curious hooked beaks. These design elements form the basic idiom found on this group of Gower coffers. Gabriel Olive in his article on West Country coffers, chests and boxes (*Regional Furniture*, 1990), illustrates a carved box dated 1753,<sup>4</sup> which is decorated with designs allied to those found on Gower coffers.

A typical Gower coffer, now displayed at Kennixton, a traditional seventeenth-century Gower farmhouse re-erected at the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans, although lacking its original lid and drawer linings, exhibits the salient features of this group. It is made predominantly of oak but has a pine back-board which displays evidence of the original staple hinges (Fig. 1). No dovetails have been used in the construction of this coffer which is 22 inches wide. Instead it is nailed together, with rebated corners carved with notches at the front to give a serrated effect. The most striking feature is the front which is coarsely carved, almost scratched, with a pair of stylised urns or vases, each containing two tear-shaped leaves and three tulip heads alternating with a pair of daisy-like flower heads. These decorative features flank a brass lock plate of shaped, unpierced, mid-eighteenth-century design. Just below is a heart and the initial JD, presumably identifying the original owner. The single drawer below is carved with two pairs of stylised birds with long hooked beaks. The chest is raised on plain bun feet.

A more elegantly carved example is shown in Figure 2. Only 21 inches wide, the coffer is constructed almost entirely of oak boards rebated at the corners and nailed together. The lid was originally fixed with staple hinges and the back-board is of pine. The design on the front, almost identical to that in Figure 1, is worked on a finely punched or matted ground and bears the initials MH. The moulding beneath the drawer forms a framework, in place of a solid board, which is overlapped at the corners and then held in place by the circular tenons projecting from the bun feet. The crispness of the carving has been skilfully enhanced through a colour wash, accentuating the contrast between the plain and carved areas of the design.

The coffer in Figure 3 has a solid base board pierced with holes to accommodate the bun feet. The front, carved more deeply than in Figures 1 and 2, is similarly decorated. This example differs from the previous two in that the front is dovetailed to the sides as well as nailed. The drawer, which has been re-lined, originally had a moulding above and below it, now missing.

The coffer illustrated in Figure 4 is almost identical in size to that in Figure 2, but has no drawer. The carver has merely enlarged the design featured on the front of the coffer, omitting the pattern on the drawer. This is also true of the one in Figure 5. Both have lids and base boards formed of single oak planks.

Gower coffers are substantially different from the 'traditional' *Coffor Bach*<sup>5</sup> which is rarely, if ever, carved and usually has a projecting base containing drawers. Figure 6 shows a typical panelled example, probably dating from around 1760–80, with a detachable lid secured with wooden strut hinges which slot into recesses in the back-board. Another typical example is illustrated in Figure 7, where a joined front has been enlivened by the addition of chequered inlay and the date 1781 on the apron. Inlay, joined panels and fretworked friezes were the most popular forms of decoration found on these otherwise simple oak coffers.

Dating individual Gower coffers has proved somewhat difficult. The different handle and escutcheon designs are helpful, suggesting a period of production from perhaps the 1730s to the 1780s. Although the basic iconography of the carving on the coffers is the same, its variable quality and style and some difference in construction point to several makers. This was the view expressed by Iorwerth Hughes Jones in an article on the subject,<sup>6</sup> published over forty years ago in conjunction with an exhibition at the Swansea Institute where five of these coffers were displayed. Two bore dates of 1770 to 1782. Other dated examples were sought at the time but none was found earlier than 1770. Indeed, an elderly antiques dealer interviewed by Mr Hughes Jones had handled more than forty such coffers but could not recall an example dated earlier than 1770. Regrettably recent inquiries have also failed to uncover further dated examples.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### REFERENCES

1. Although no documentary evidence has come to light which would unequivocally link these coffers with Gower, provenance based on family tradition and the presence of relatively large numbers in the region make it reasonable to assume that they were produced there.
2. W. G. V. Balchin (ed.), *Swansea and its Region* (Swansea, 1971), ch. XI — 'The Industrial Revolution'.
3. *Ibid.*, ch. X — 'The Norman Conquest and the Medieval Period'.
4. *Regional Furniture*, IV (1990), Fig. 22.
5. Stuart Williams, *Glamorgan Historian*, x. The chapter by Moelwyn I. Williams on Glamorgan Houses and their interiors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where we are told that 'the importance of the Bible in the life of the inhabitants of pre-industrial Glamorgan cannot be over emphasised'. Also, 'the wills and inventories of the period reveal that the number of labourers and small farmers who possessed copies of the Bible, the New Testament, and the book of Common Prayer, was surprisingly large', this may help to explain the popularity of the *Coffor Bach* in South Wales as a receptacle for these prized books.
6. *Gower* (The Journal of the Gower Society) IV (1950). The chapter entitled 'The Gower Dower Chest — a speculation on its origins' by Iorwerth Hughes Jones.



1. Coffor, oak with pine back-board, carved JD, eighteenth century, second half, from Gower  
*National Museum of Wales*



2. Coffor, oak with pine back-board, the front treated with a colour wash, initialled MH, eighteenth century, second half, from Gower



3. Coffin, oak, eighteenth century, second half, from Gower



4. Coffin, oak, carved IR, eighteenth century, second half, from Gower





5. Coffor, oak, carved PR, eighteenth century, second half, from Gower



6. *Coffor Bach*, oak, c. 1760–80, Welsh



7. Coffe, oak with inlaid decoration, initialled and dated DT 1781,  
Welsh

# THE WELSTON COFFER

Philip M. Havard

It is rare to find a piece of Welsh country furniture with a provenance; this fine example appeared at auction in 1990<sup>1</sup> following the death of Brigadier J. O. M. Ashton of Welston Court near Tenby, Dyfed (Fig. 2). An inventory prepared by the Brigadier's mother,<sup>2</sup> Mrs Gladys Ashton, at the turn of the century describes the coffer and lists the previous owners. It was apparently made for Michael Devonald, gent., who lived at the Court or 'Cwrt' near the village of Eglwysrw in North Pembrokeshire. His date of birth is unknown but he was church warden at Eglwysrw in 1745 and died there in July 1790. He married twice: there is no record of Michael Devonald's first marriage in the register for Eglwysrw which begins in 1740, it is therefore likely that it took place before this date; his second marriage occurred in October 1776. According to a copy of his will he had three daughters, the one from his first marriage being named Mary. On 3 September 1770 Michael Devonald witnessed the marriage of Mary to Richard Jones; their daughter, Leah, who married in December 1799, was Brigadier Ashton's maternal great-great grandmother.<sup>3</sup>

The coffer is made entirely of oak of semi-boarded construction. The joined front is secured to the vertical sides using large wooden dowels and iron nails. The single plank



1. Detail of bog oak and holly inlay on the Welston coffer



2. Oak coffer, inlaid MD, Welsh, eighteenth century, second quarter, Lg. 58 in.



3. Oak coffer, Welsh, eighteenth century, second quarter  
*Courtesy of Richard Bebb*

moulded-edge lid, which originally had staple hinges, encloses a small lidded till on the right-hand side. The front, inlaid with holly and bog oak, frames three rectangular fielded panels, each is surrounded by a broad band of diagonal chequer inlay. The central panel (Fig. 1) is inlaid with four interlaced tendrils, with bifurcated floral terminals, issuing from an open flower-head base.<sup>4</sup> The two outer panels are inlaid with a lozenge, a design which is repeated between the two lower drawers. Each drawer front features two inlaid panels with rounded ends, they have dovetailed linings and bottom boards running front to back. Beneath the drawers is an ogee-shaped apron. The vertical ends, which are shaped at the bottom to give the pretence of feet, have narrow strips of timber nailed to the top edge, perhaps to counter the effect of warping. Unusually, the mouldings are fixed to the front of the coffer with wooden dowels. The handles, drawer escutcheons and front feet have been replaced.

It is reasonable to assume that this coffer was made during the second quarter of the eighteenth century to commemorate Devonald's first marriage or perhaps the birth of his eldest daughter. Elements of the design seem archaic for the period but it is not unusual for popular motifs to persist. A well-known coffer on stand in the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans offers an interesting analogy.<sup>5</sup> This piece, also from Pembrokeshire, could stylistically date from the late seventeenth century; it is however dated 1734. The type of inlay and the combination of joined and boarded construction used in the Welston coffer is consistent with other examples from Pembrokeshire; one such piece is shown in Figure 3.<sup>6</sup> Although its lid, drawers and feet are later, it displays the same characteristic inlay and semi-boarded construction.

#### REFERENCES

1. Phillips Auctioneers Cardiff, 15 November 1990, Lot 1080: 'The dispersal sale of the contents of Welston Court'.
2. The Brigadier and his parents moved from Cardigan to Welston Court in 1920: the inventory was compiled prior to this move.
3. Information kindly supplied by the Department of Manuscripts and Records, The National Library of Wales Aberystwyth, also the Pembrokeshire Record Office, The Castle, Haverfordwest, Dyfed.
4. This distinctive style of inlay is discussed by Richard Bebb in *The Antique Dealer and Collectors Guide*, March 1991.
5. See Ralph Edwards' *Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture* (1964), p. 205, fig. 25, where this oak box on stand is incorrectly described as pine.
6. It shows evidence of applied mouldings and staple hinges.