

# A LAKELAND CHEST DATED 1683

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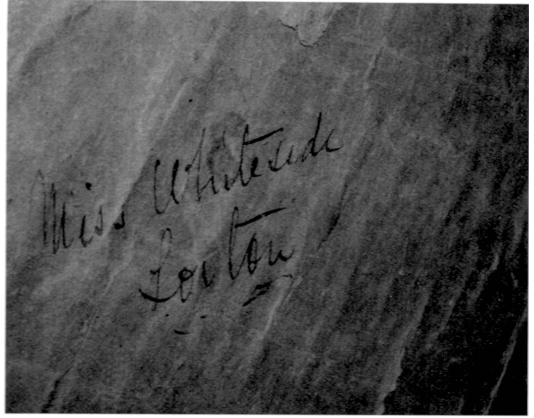


1. Oak chest from Lorton, Cumberland  
*Private Collection*

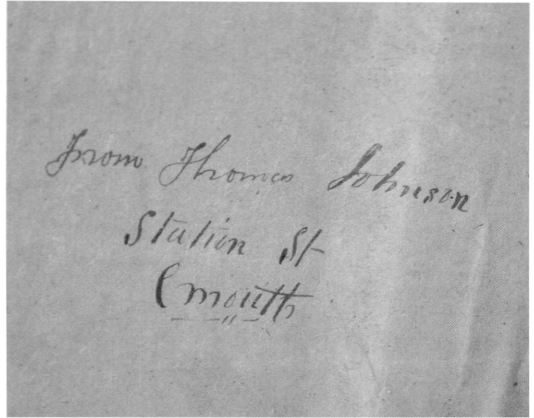
The oak 'joined' chest<sup>1</sup> in figure 1, which measures 30 inches in height by 46 inches width by 20 inches in depth was acquired with an oral history. It was offered for sale in the auction rooms of Thomas Wm Gaze & Son, Diss, Norfolk, during 1999. As for details of provenance, the vendor stated that it had been bought from a deceased Oxfordshire schoolmistress and it was suggested that the date, 1683, commemorated the opening of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford

However the former information was pure speculation with no research basis and was soon proved to be erroneous. More useful information was found written inside the chest in black ink. This revealed details of the chest's previous ownership, and is written on either side of the end panels of the brown paper lining. Hand-written script on the left reads, '*Miss Whiteside Lorton*' (Figure 2) and on the right in a different hand, '*from Thomas Johnson Station St Cmouthe*' (Figure 3) and underneath, the inscription, '*R.S. Whiteside Esq. Lorton*' (Figure 4). It is most probable that these are signatures of former owners of the chest. The lining paper has the signs of age and the appearance of

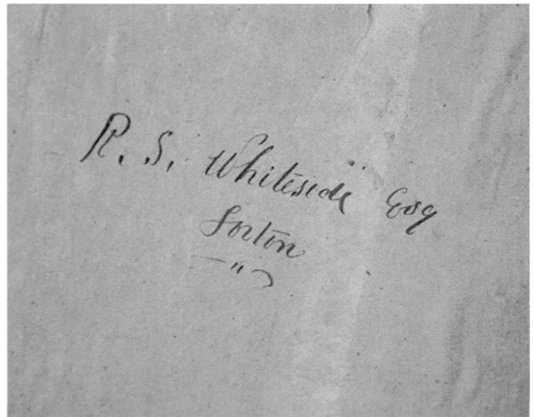
2. Inscription inside chest:  
'Miss Whiteside Lorton'



3. Inscription inside chest:  
'From Thomas Johnson Station St Cmouth'



4. Inscription inside chest:  
'R S Whiteside Esq. Lorton'



nineteenth century manufacture. The style of writing would seem to verify this dating. Turning to the regional location suggested by the content of these inscriptions, this would seem to be the northern Lake District. Cockermouth is situated in West Cumberland on the north west fringe of the Lake District, whilst Lorton and Lorton Vale extend south east of this town toward the lakes of Crummock Water and Buttermere. But the written information, whilst giving possibilities of previous owners, does not in itself give indication of regional origin of such a portable piece. However, a search of *Bulmer's Directory of Cumberland* revealed corresponding records of a 'Mary Whiteside (Gentlewoman) of Kirkfell Lorton' and a 'Thomas E Johnson (Tailor and Draper) of Station Street, Cockermouth'.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, from *Principal Inhabitants of Cumberland and Westmorland 1829*, it was revealed that a certain 'John Whiteside' of 'Highside, Lorton' was listed as once residing there.<sup>3</sup>

Once the inscriptions had been studied and researched, more detailed attention was given to the chest's general appearance. Construction details conform to seventeenth century convention. The front, sides, hinged straight top and back are made with panels, rebated into stiles, muntins and rails. The frame components are fixed together by mortise and tenon joints, stabilised by fixing tapered pegs or 'dowels' of (initially green) wood<sup>4</sup> driven through the joint union (Figure 5).

Perhaps unconventionally, the chest has hand-made nails with crude uneven heads holding a planked base to the under-frame. These planks are affixed front to back, which, as Noël Riley points out, is common to cupboards and chests of the Lake District and Yorkshire<sup>5</sup> (Figure 6). The stiles of the underframe are rebated to 'let-in' the bottom planking. This is a feature observed in the geographical area noted above.

The stiles, rails and muntins on the front and sides are channel moulded. The back stiles and rails are similarly shaped and so are the top rails and muntins. This feature is typical of pieces recorded in the area by Victor Chinnery.<sup>6</sup> This characteristic was noted, also, by Riley as 'grooving' and referenced to the channel moulding observed in Yorkshire pieces by Peter Thornborrow.<sup>7</sup> The chest lid is hinged by forged iron ring and hoop fixings. The fixing ends are crudely driven through the frame and bent over to form a right angle in the manner of a paper clip (Figure 7). The chest has lost its iron lock, but evidence of three different keyholes on the top frieze can be seen on an uncarved rectangular section. (See figure 8.) Particular attention is drawn to the figure '1' of the carved date that is treated in the characteristic interlacing style seen on so much carving from the Lake District. The chip-carved background and deep cutting of the carved decoration to the panels and frieze gives highlights and shade that have also been recorded by Chinnery as distinctive of 'Lakeland joinery'.

The remarkable continuity of Scandinavian decoration from Norse settlers together with the geographical isolation of the Lake District was a determining factor for adoption of elaborate interlace seen in seventeenth century Lakeland carving. It remained fashionable until the mid eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> There is further evidence of revival and continuing tradition in nineteenth century monuments such as the nineteenth century furnishing scheme of the house at Townend, Troutbeck.<sup>9</sup>

Comparison can be made between the subject chest and a joined armchair (Figure. 10) dated 1662, at St. Bartholomew's Church, Barbon, near Kirby Lonsdale, Cumberland.<sup>10</sup> Although the left panel on the chest front bears a continuous interlace device that may be



5. Pegs driven through the joint unions and channel moulded framed panels



6. Base planks fixed from front to back





7. Iron ring and hoop fixings on chest lid



8. Detail of front panels and frieze with three closely positioned keyholes



9. Left front panel of Lorton chest,  
dated 1683



10. Back panel from armchair at St  
Bartholomew's, Barbon, dated 1662



11. Upper left panel from  
tester bed at Townend, Troutbeck,  
dated 1672



12. Door panel from cupboard at Green  
End Farm, Hawkshead, Cumberland,  
dated 1692



13. Detail of carved face on left front panel of Lorton chest



14. Portrait of St John from the MacDurnan Gospels, 9th century  
*Lambeth Palace Library, ms 1370*



15. Stone cross shaft at Kirby Stephen Church,  
Cumberland  
*Royal Commission for Historic Monuments*

described as a 'Celtic Knot', its symmetry can be compared with the chair's double interlaced 'S' scroll and fern leaf terminals. The fern leaf device is used in a different manner of decoration between the two examples but the overall appearance is extremely similar, particularly the centre knot cross-over. The chest's right panel is the same decorative device as the chair, but terminates in a six leaf stylistic floral terminal as opposed to fern leaf. The basic overall shape of the presented decoration is identical. Observation of these apparently localised motifs can be made, also, on a tester bed dated 1672 at Townend, Troutbeck<sup>11</sup>. (Figure 11) Further comparison can be made with a built in cupboard at Green End Farm, Hawkshead, dated 1690 (Figure 12) and the upper left bed panel in the Townend bed. The Hawkshead central cross-over knot is identical to the chest's left panel. The centres of the knots feature stylised rosettes, but the balance of design is the same. The upper left bed panel central cross-over motif and the same feature on both end panels of the chest are also closely comparable.

On the headboard at pillow level on the bed at Troutbeck and slightly below the level of the linen covering it is to be found a panel which uses both the S scrolls and interlace seen in the right and centre panels of the chest. Closer comparison of the floral designs shows similar six leaf plants placed symmetrically and identically in four positions at the centre of the S scrolls.

The use of 'zoomorphic' detail in this region, as discussed by Wells-Cole and Chinnery<sup>12</sup> opens an insight into the carving detail found on the left panel of this chest (Figure 9). So-called 'Celtic' influence can, of course, be derived from many sources; the Lindisfarne Gospel cruciform page has been cited as an example by Wells-Cole,<sup>13</sup> but an interesting direct local comparison here is indicated in the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments, Westmorland Inventory.<sup>14</sup> This shows under the heading 'Pre-Conquest stones' a cross shaft recorded at Kirby Stephen Church, Cumbria in 1936 (Figure 15). The pointed chin, head shape, eyes and nose profile of the carved figure is bears a similarity to the panel form. (Figure 13) Reference is also drawn to the composition of head details in a portrait of St. John from the MacDurnan Gospels, a 9<sup>th</sup> century Irish manuscript<sup>15</sup> (Figure 14).

The aforementioned inventory notes a number of court cupboards and built in beds that are excellent reference points upon which to compare moveable furniture carving styles. At Common Farm, Windermere, two three-stage cupboards are illustrated<sup>16</sup> with a provenance that the homestead was that of the Williamson Family, supporters of the Society of Friends. The earliest cupboard (dated 1628) has a fern pattern on the outer doors, whilst the central door has a rose or floral carving and fern motif, all similar to the patterns on the subject chest. Again at Wood Farm, Troutbeck, a cupboard with identical double interlaced S scrolls is shown.<sup>17</sup> At a yeoman farm dwelling at Fusethwaite Yeat, Windermere, another built-in cupboard with initials EE is dated 1683<sup>18</sup> and has interlaced S Scrolls and fern carving that are identical to the end panels on the subject chest.

Between the hamlet of High Side, and Kirk Fell, at the edge of Lorton Vale, is a stone farmhouse, part of the furnishing of which is a large freestanding court cupboard with a carved frieze and dated 1705. The property's present owner has stated: 'It was too large ever to have been moved from the room',<sup>19</sup> which is borne out by the only access which is through a low and narrow latch type panel door. Inscribed on the frieze of the

cupboard, next to the date and a stylised eight petal flower are carved the initials W and M with a further letter W slightly above, between the two. This type of carving, referred to by Christopher Gilbert as a 'Brideswain' inscription,<sup>20</sup> is almost certainly a celebration of marriage, with the family name as the central top initial. Chinnery points out 'they are not always marriage initials, but may represent only the head of the household.'<sup>21</sup> However, what these initials represent as far as has been understood for the last three hundred years is, **William and Mary Whiteside** who were resident in the early eighteenth century and whose family descendants are known to have resided in the Lorton area until the mid twentieth century. By a combination of object analysis and documentary research, a little more can now be said about the ownership of oak furniture and the survival of characteristic local patterns in the north western Lake District.<sup>22</sup>

## REFERENCES

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5. Noël Riley, 'A Lake District Cupboard' *Regional Furniture* (1999, Vol. XIII), p.55 & Fig. 5, p.57.
6. Chinnery, op. cit., p.492.
7. Peter H. Thornborrow, 'Canopied Cupboards of Aire and Calder Valleys, West Yorkshire' *Regional Furniture* (1997, Vol. XI), p.93 & Fig. 21.
8. H.S. Cowper, *Hawkshead* (1902), p.299; Wells-Cole, loc. cit., p. xi; also Chinnery, op. cit., p. 489; and Susan Denyer, *Traditional Buildings & Life in the Lake District* (Gollancz, London 1991), pp. 37-40.
9. Susan Denyer, op. cit., p. 43.
10. Wells-Cole, loc. cit., p.x, & p. 15; also Chinnery, op. cit., p. 487, Fig. 4:170a.
11. Denyer, op. cit., p.50; also 'Townend Cumbria' *National Trust* (2000), pp. 12-13.
12. Chinnery, op. cit., p.489.
13. Wells-Cole, loc. cit., p. v.
14. Royal Commission of Historic Monuments, Westmorland Inventory, R.C.H.M. (H.M.S.O., 1936), plate 7.
15. Ian Zaczek, *The Art of the Celts* (Parkgate, London 1997) p.76.
16. R.C.H.M. op. cit., p.32, plate 4.
17. R.C.H.M. loc. cit., p.120, illustration 2.
18. loc. cit., plate 40.
19. Personal communication from current property owner (anonymity requested) on 22nd April 2003.
20. Christopher Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture 1750-1900*. (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1991), p.40; also J.C. Atkinson, *Forty years in a Moorland Parish* (London 1891), p. 210; and *A Glossary of Cleveland Dialect* (London, 1868). pp. 71-2.
21. Chinnery, op. cit., p.493.



16. Oak court cupboard in farmhouse at Kirk Fell, Lorton Vale



17. Detail of carved frieze and date on Kirk Fell court cupboard