

CHESTS, COFFERS AND TRUNKS IN EAST ANGLIA, 1650-1730, A STEP TOWARDS DEFINITION

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The following report can be found in *The Ipswich Journal* for August 1726:

*‘Of North Bradley, a village near Trowbridge in Wiltshire, it is recorded’ “that there was lately found there (hid in a coffer or large box) the body of the widow Crabbe an antient woman of that place”*¹

For furniture historians, the salient point about this extract is the fact that the writer felt the need to explain to his south Suffolk readership what he meant by a *coffer* and the nearest he could get to a definition was to call it ‘a large box’. Janet Pennington has corresponded on this matter of description and tells me that, in her study of the Steyning inventories,² there are no coffers after 1559 (a relatively early date for record) although there are plenty of chests, trunks or boxes. Does this not imply that a coffer was an equivalent term for chest, box or trunk and that the synonym merely fell out of use here at an earlier date than in other areas?

The only way to settle the synonym question is to look at one specific area in which all terms are used and to study a long run of data such as that contained within wills and probate inventories. These survive in reasonable numbers for the later sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. Most of the data presented here is derived from south east Norfolk and north east Suffolk wills and inventories and relates to the 1650–1725 (subdivided into three twenty five year periods).³ The bulk of the references come from rural parishes or small market towns.

First then; was a coffer a chest? There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to indicate not. The following excerpts provide samples:

‘A chest five coffers two boxes’ (Inventory, Diss, 1667)

‘A chest and a box and a coffer’ (Inventory, Bracon Ash, 1668)⁴

There is also statistical evidence that separates the types:

1. INVENTORIES OF RURAL HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHESTS AND COFFERS			
Date	Chest or coffer	Both chest and coffer	Percentage
1650–74	85	38	44.7
1700–25	103	38	36.9

So, more than a third of households had both items if they had either and the percentage did not alter all that much over fifty years – something that we might expect

if one version of a name was gaining or losing in popularity. The data for location of these items by room is even more compelling:

2. RURAL INVENTORIES WITH CHESTS AND COFFERS IN THE SAME ROOM
(Where rooms can be distinguished)⁵

Date	Both items in same room	Percentage
1650-74	23 (of 35)	65.7
1700-25	23 (of 35)	65.7

So, thirty five inventoried households, in each period, had both chests and coffers, and, of these, a steady 65.7% had them in the same room. This does not look like coincidence; the appraisers were seeing these items rather frequently, often in the same room and were calling them something different in rather a regular way. The impression is that the terms really were quite distinct.

Perhaps then, coffers were just trunks in disguise. Chinnery, for example, groups both together and gives the defining features as domed tops, no feet, often with carrying handles and leather covered or iron bound.⁶ Roe thought so too, being heavily influenced by Egbert Buys's *Compleat Dictionary of English and Dutch* (1766), which gives *koffermaaker* as trunk maker and *kistmaaker* as joiner or cabinet maker.⁷ Peter Thornton, also heavily influenced by Continental sources, is pretty dogmatic, stating 'coffers had rounded lids'. He goes on to describe the *coffer de chamber* of a Breton country house of 1688 as being covered in black leather.⁸

It may be no coincidence that chests seem to have doubled as bedside tables but that trunks, (and perhaps coffers), could not do this and so were relegated to other positions in the house. So, in a rural will of 1622 we find 'the chest standing betweene the two beds in the plor and the coffer standing at the posted beds foote'. In the same room we find 'the coffer nexte ye plor dore'. In a Norwich will of 1630 we have 'a chest standing by my beds syde' but a Bungay, Suffolk, will of a year earlier gives 'one trunke standing at her beds feete'.⁹

Clearer distinction comes from the list of customs dues on imported goods as set out in the subsidy granted by the king for tonnage and poundage.¹⁰

3. TONNAGE AND POUNDAGE ON IMPORTED GOODS, 1660

Chests

Iron	£5-£6.13.4 (according to size)
Cyprus wood	£8 (nest of three)
Spruce or Danske	£1.10s (nest of three)
Painted	£2 per dozen

Coffers

Covered with gilt leather	£2 (per dozen)
Covered with velvet	£4 (per dozen)
With iron bars	£1.12s (nest of three)
Plain	13.4d (nest of three)
Painted	16s (nest of three) ¹¹

This set of imports gives some idea of relative values, while it makes abundantly clear, also, that the parliamentary draughtsmen of the time thought of chests and coffers as different and the latter as 'trunk like'. Nowhere in the list is the word trunk used at all, (boxes were separately itemised but usually described by function). So, for coffer read trunk.

The author Randle Holme, a native of Chester, was more specific, stating:

*'A coffer is... a necessary thing for the safe keeping of pretious and secret things; as jewels, money, ornaments; as also bookes, evidences and recordes of judgements. If it have a straight and flat cover it is called a chest; which in all otherthings represents the coffer save the want of a circular lid or cover'*¹²

This appears to establish a conclusive definition, in which coffers and trunks are interchangeable, but analysis of the five Norfolk/Suffolk inventories shows a different picture. For instance, the following descriptors were sometimes attached to trunks:

'painted' (1702), 'frostwork' (1662—possibly inlaid with metal), 'portmantle' (1662), 'black' (twice, e.g. Mendham, 1673), 'hair' (thrice in 1712, 1710 — perhaps leather dressed so as to retain a short pelt).¹³

All the above descriptions are recognisably trunk-like but, significantly, none of these words is ever, at any point, applied to a coffer. For further clarity we can turn to statistical analysis:

4. COFFERS AND TRUNKS IN S.E. NORFOLK AND N.E. SUFFOLK INVENTORIES

(All locations)

Date	Households with coffers or trunks	Households with coffers and trunks	Coffers and trunks in same room
1650-74	96	37 (38.5%)	23 (69.7%)
1675-99	90	38 (42.2%)	21 (63.6%)
1700-25	74	29 (39.2%)	15 (55.6%)
Total	260	104 (40%)	59 (63.4%)

This seems pretty clear: a remarkably consistent 40% of inventories (collected from both urban and rural locations) had both of these items in the house. Of these, a high percentage (averaging 63%) were appraised as having both items in the same room. This cannot have been merely a slip of the tongue in a period of changing terminology — the figures are too high and too consistent.¹⁴ It certainly does look as if trunks and coffers were visibly distinct and worthy of recording separately. The table below demonstrates why this was so:

5. MEDIAN INVENTORY PRICES FOR TRUNKS, CHESTS AND COFFERS¹⁵

Date	Chest	Trunk	Coffer
1650-74	5s 6d (71 items)	3s (27 items)	1s 8d (19 items)
1675-99	4s (70 items)	2s 9d (20 items)	2s (12 items)
1700-25	2s (54 items)	2s 3d (16 items)	1s 6d (13 items)

Until 1700 chests were always worth more than trunks and both were always worth more than coffers, whatever the period. Of this triumvirate, coffers were clearly the inferior partner. It is also clear now why there are fewer coffer valuations than those for chests. It is that they were worth so much less and were not deemed worthy of a separate line on the inventory. No wonder that townsmen who were disposing of chest furniture in general by the end of the seventeenth century were shedding coffers most quickly of all. (It is these townsmen who gave rise to the slight decline seen in column 4, table 4.) Even rural dwellers preferred chests to coffers but this tendency was most marked in the more fashion conscious, inner rural area around Norwich. The latter maintained a steady 2.9 chests to each coffer from 1650 to 1725. By contrast, the outer rural fringe (another ten or fifteen miles further out) has a lower ratio at first – 1.37 chests per coffer, 1650–74, then does some catching up in the first quarter of the next century, ending up with a ratio of 2.2.

How, then, can a coffer be distinguished from a box? Here is what Ann Smith left in her will of 1685:

*'One chest, one trunk one coffer and one box'*¹⁶

This is quite specific, as wills are supposed to be. The executors do not have to be told how to tell a coffer from a trunk or a coffer from a box – they are expected to know.

Here is another clue contained in the will of Richard Brackitt, clerk, in 1634. He left:

'One yello cheste one coffer of oken bourde' and elsewhere, *'one greate cheste of waynescott'*¹⁷

This is ambiguous because wainscot, although it implies panelling, could just refer to the imported oak used for it, but oaken board also implies boarded and nailed construction so we have a nice antithesis here.¹⁸ Is Gabriel Olive right after all – are coffers simply boarded chests? Olive came to this conclusion some time ago but some of his evidence was not convincing¹⁹ – the fact that there are more spelling variants for coffers than chests does not necessarily imply that the former are locally made products of a regional culture while chests are not. It could be that 'chest' is a shorter word and is easier to spell. Moreover, although he picked up on the price differential between chests and coffers, this evidence was derived from only fourteen inventories. Trunks were excluded from his study altogether on the grounds that they would be too expensive for farm and cottage inventories. This is misleading on two grounds: firstly, trunks were usually cheaper than chests (items which he did include) and secondly, anyone who left an inventory at all was usually not impoverished. The legal process attached to the administration of probate came at a fee.

So what then is the evidence that coffers were simply chests of board construction, while chests were joined and panelled? Between 1650 and 1674 243 East Anglian inventories mentioned twenty chests described as either 'joint' or 'framed'. Coffers were never so described. Certainly, if they were merely trunks in disguise then they would not be, but we know now that this cannot be the case. This association of chests with joiners work was pointed up in the Buys *Dictionary* of 1766. This author stated that a *kistemaaker* was a joiner or cabinet maker but, as a complication, a *koffermaaker* was

also said to be a trunkmaker. Most of the differences we have found between coffer and trunks and coffer and chests are structural in kind; coffers are never leather or hair covered like trunks, nor are they of joined work like chests. But there is one structural difference that puts coffers clearly into the chest camp and apart from trunks. The latter were also sometimes described as coming 'with feet' or 'with frames', as if these were separate, special cases.²⁰ Coffers and chests were never so described, as if the feet were an integral part of each.

A coffer, then, seems to have been the name attributed to a cheap, footed storage item, probably constructed of boards. In other words, a boarded chest (at least this was so in south Norfolk and the adjacent fringes of Suffolk in the later seventeenth and earlier eighteenth century). No wonder it was being rejected by town dwellers faster than other chest furniture and no wonder it was relegated so often to an upstairs room. (in 74% of the given sample)

However, this still leaves us with one or two unresolved problems. Why did appraisers feel they had to describe a significant number of chests as 'joint' or 'framed' if this was the essential, definitive difference between these and board chests? Why is the word coffer so linked to that of cofferer and therefore to trunk like forms? Why was Randle Holme so convinced that the defining characteristic that separated off seventeenth century coffers from chests was the former's domed lid?

The only explanation that makes sense is that during the period in question a semantic shift was taking place that affected regions differentially. Both joined and boarded construction had an equally early history, just as the chest and the coffer were in use contemporaneously. But it was only in the 1570s that the joiners disassociated themselves from the carpenters and formed their own company. It may be from this point that it was important to stress the joined nature of the construction and we can guess that the name 'joint chest' became attached to any such piece in an effort to distinguish it from the inferior, boarded type. This would leave all other 'strong boxes' with the name coffer and it would be as a later development that the word trunk became attached to the typical lightweight, leather or fabric covered object that we associate with the name in a similar effort to separate off the superior item from the crude board chest. This would leave the latter in exclusive possession of the name 'coffer'. The argument laid out here is a theory; there are no doubt other explanations for which cases can be made. However, there are one or two small pieces of evidence that happen to support the present argument. Firstly, the O E D regards 1609 as the date when the pre-existing word 'trunk' became applied specifically to the domed travelling box described above. This fits in neatly with the time sequence developed in this article. Secondly, the fact that the descriptor 'joint' or 'framed' was still being applied to some chests, as late as the 1670s, would make sense if the appropriation of the word chest by the joiners were of relatively recent occurrence. Fortunately for our theory the inventory records show that, for the 135 rural chests found between 1700-25, no appraiser has found it necessary to use these terms. This is just as it should be if the process of appropriation of the word 'chest' by the joiners was complete by this date.

REFERENCES

1. The same coffer was 'at the stair's head'. *Ipswich Journal or Weekly Mercury* no. 316, 1726, p2. ESRO. ESRO=East Suffolk Record Office
2. Janet Pennington and Joyce Sleight, 'Furniture in Steyning, a Sussex Parish, 1587-1707: A Study of Documentary Sources', *Regional Furniture*, vol. I, 1987, pp41-9
3. None of the parishes is more than 35 miles from any other in the sample
4. This evidence makes it appear that coffers were not boxes either (see NRO DN INV. 52B99 and 53A25). NRO = Norfolk Record Office
5. It was not necessary for an appraiser to set out an inventory by room and though they often did so, this was not always the case.
6. Victor Chinnery, 'Furniture Terminology in Post-Modern, Middle Class Inventories', *Regional Furniture*, vol. IV, 1991, p26
7. Quoted in F Gordon Roe, *English Cottage Furniture*, London 1961, pp57-9
8. Peter Thornton, *Seventeenth Century Interior Decoration in England, France and Holland*, Yale, 1990, pp295-6. Note that Chinnery regards the cofferer primarily as a worker in leather, and explains that the term evolved from the French verb *cuivrier*. See Victor Chinnery, *Oak Furniture, The British Tradition*, Woodbridge, 1990, p125
9. NRO. NCC. Bradstritt110; OW13 (for 1630); Purgall 197
10. Danby Pickering, *The Statutes at Large*, vol VII, Cambridge, 1763, Cap IV, pp362-413
11. These were rateable values and the actual rate paid was about 5% of this. I am indebted to Adam Bowett for help on this.
12. Randle Holme, *The Academy of Armory*, vol II, ED. I H Jeayes, London 1905, pp14
13. NRO. DN INV. 86/4; 50A1; 52A90; 61C47; 56/112; 58A15; 71/154 and ESR O. FE1/10/59. ESRO
14. The slight decline in row 4 is marginal in effect and may be explained the information that comes after it
15. 'Great' or 'small' versions of the good were excluded, as was the handful of expensive cypruswood examples or the few versions with a drawer. This leaves a price list derived from the more general, run of the mill items. (Note that chests, trunks, and coffers were all capable of containing a drawer
16. NRO. NCC.Calthorpe 483
17. NRO. NCC Playford 226
18. Chinnery gives this parallel meaning for wainscot. Chinnery, 1990, *ibid*
19. Gabriel Olive, 'West Country Chests, Coffers and Boxes', *Regional Furniture*, vol. IV, 1990, pp50-1
20. NRO DN INV. 64/133C; 74A20; 68B64