

A Small Scottish Chest

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The object of this investigation is a small, panelled oak chest, 91 cm (36.5 in) wide, 42 cm (16.5 in) deep and 51 cm (20.5 in) high which, despite its dimensions, contains a wide range of interesting features which indicate an early date and suggest a Scottish royal connection (Figure 1). The framing is extremely heavily built for its size. The joints to the top and the front are all of the ‘mason’s mitre’ type. The top consists of two plain panels. The side panels are of horizontal linenfold. The back is a long, single panel. The two small front panels are well carved in differing Gothic designs. That on the right is made up of a multiple lozenge pattern, centred by quatrefoils, while that on the left consists of flamboyant tracery surrounding a pair of initials which are co-joined by a love-knot — ‘I&M’.

One of the first considerations when studying a piece of furniture which is potentially very old is that the further one goes back in time the fewer wholly original examples there will be with which to make comparisons. The usual vagaries of worm, rot, fire, accident and fall from fashion need to be taken into account, along with a greater incidence of violent upheaval and war. Invariably, such events led to social displacement, the dispersal of families and institutions, often accompanied by the destruction, theft and sale of their possessions. This makes the survival of any domestic furniture constructed before the Reformation very rare. The majority of surviving examples are relatively inconspicuous and unadorned chests and cupboards which have



1 Chest, Scottish, early sixteenth century. G. Wade

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passed the centuries tucked away in churches and institutions. However, such settings are immensely valuable because they can also contain the surviving fixed woodwork which is vital in aiding the dating and identification of regional characteristics in moveable furniture. In the pre-Reformation era high quality furniture constructed for non-ecclesiastical purposes was restricted to a small ruling elite and was therefore made in much smaller quantities than those demanded by the more settled and affluent society of later periods.

The first and absolutely fundamental step is to establish the authenticity of the chest. There have been many periods, from Horace Walpole's 'Strawberry Hill' in the late eighteenth century until the present day, when the faking and forgery of supposedly ancient furniture, so neatly described by Fred Roe as 'the gentle art', persisted.¹ There seems never to have been a shortage of early oak fragments and panelling available to the skilled faker, either to produce naive and obvious 'curiosities', or excellent forgeries deliberately designed to deceive the unwary. A skilled forger such as George Shaw of Manchester obviously had his market in mind before beginning work on, for example, his supposedly early Tudor 'Paradise bed' which he sold to the Duke of Northumberland for a startling £70 in 1846.² Equally, the pieces which were bought from T. Charbonnier by the Victoria and Albert Museum in the early twentieth century were almost certainly built with this specific customer, along with very healthy prices, in mind. Modern research has exposed these fakes.³ Financial gain from such carefully targeted clients was the incentive behind most forgery, so it must rarely have been undertaken without having a particular outlet in mind. If an insignificant small chest which happened to have four beautiful early panels had been discovered by such ingenious craftsmen it may well have reappeared as a valuable oak buffet. However, this also raises the vital question of whether anyone would incorporate high quality, orphaned early panels into such an insignificant piece. This chest has evidently not been seriously tampered with in recent times, having been repaired and re-hinged, probably in the early twentieth century, in a very utilitarian manner. To have ever been subjected to the 'gentle art' in order to enhance its value, it must have subsequently fallen from favour for a very considerable period before requiring these crude repairs. This would appear to make the window of opportunity for any fakery very early indeed. Panelled chests have always been considered to be the least interesting form of early oak furniture because they were the most common; it would be unlikely for an early forger to deliberately display panels of this quality at floor level in a small chest when he could have used them as the central elements of one of the large, lucrative, often fanciful specimens sought after by nineteenth-century collectors. As we shall discover, the monogram on this chest was scarcely known until the late twentieth century, so the only marketing ploy available to a Victorian forger would have been that this was an everyday little chest with some very old carving.

Because forgery is such a vital issue, this possibility must also be examined in technical terms. The oak of the panels, whether inspected inside or out, is consistent with

¹ Chinnery (1979), pp. 561–69; Roe (1905), chapter XVIII; Westgarth (2009).

² Christies (2004).

³ Tracy (1988), Cat. nos. 319, 320; see also www.collections.vam.ac.uk, nos. W47–1910, 262–1908.

the ancient timbers of the rest of the chest. Everything about their dimensions and decoration point to the two front panels belonging together and the same applies to the linenfold side panels. The fact that all four are of precisely the same height strongly implies that they were made for the same piece of furniture. The decorated areas of the panels fit perfectly into their spaces with appropriate, balanced borders, while the chamfers of the surrounding framework match the angles used in the tracery carved within the panels. It is sometimes forgotten that the mouldings which surround ornamented panels are an important and integral part of the overall decorative design. The panels are carved with secular iconography and are of such small dimensions that in practical terms they can only have been made for a small chest or perhaps for a much rarer buffet. They are also very substantial at 22 mm (0.875 ins) thick, significantly thicker than all but the largest fixed decorative panels from church furnishings so often altered and re-used by forgers. The panels are solid enough for that on the right to have been rebated so that, along with other constructional details, either originally or very early in its life, the chest evidently had a low internal vertical division held in place by this front panel. This division must have been fitted for practical reasons, as it would not make any sense as part of any possible forgery. The framework of the chest is clearly ancient, while the pegs are equally old and undisturbed, with some of them worm-ridden; the chest was evidently not built at a later date to accommodate the panels. Critically, however, both the frame's edge-mouldings and the pegs have particular characteristics, discussed below, which indicate that they share the same date and geographical source as the panels, thus further confirming the integrity of the chest.

The understanding of any early object is helped not only by the survival of a reasonable number of authenticated examples with which to make comparisons, but also well-founded reference material. It is likely that the very shortage of pre-Reformation furniture is responsible for the equal shortage of reliable reference works. Just as recent years have seen serious doubts raised over supposedly genuine pieces of medieval furniture held in major public collections, so some of the earlier studies such as *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* by Henry Shaw (1834) and the first volume of *A History of English Furniture* by Percy McQuoid (1904) are no longer considered to be trustworthy sources. In contrast, two excellent works produced in the 1970s, *Medieval Furniture* by Penelope Eames (1975) and *Oak Furniture: The British Tradition* by Victor Chinnery (1979), continue to be highly regarded. The fact that Eames focuses on institutional and ecclesiastical pieces ranging across England, France, and the Low Countries, in order to cover a small number of well researched examples could not demonstrate more clearly the scarcity of genuine early domestic furniture. Chinnery acknowledges this dearth of early pieces and therefore concentrates largely on the much more widespread surviving British joined oak domestic furniture made between the mid-sixteenth and early eighteenth century.⁴

The study of this chest has necessarily involved an unusually broad range of research. The first step was to investigate its recent history. As it was purchased from a specialist dealer this was not straightforward; dealers are always, perhaps understandably,

⁴ Chinnery (1979), p. 412.

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unwilling to divulge the sources of their stock. It was only after several months of communicating with early oak enthusiasts that it came to light that the chest had passed through a general fine art sale at a provincial auctioneer's rooms in south-east England. Along with several other pieces at the same sale, it had come from the contents of a 'good' private house but had not been considered significant enough even to be pictured in the sale catalogue. In contrast, in the days before the auction it had raised a considerable amount of interest and the bidding, driven by two of the country's leading specialist early oak dealers, took the price many times over the sale estimate. This combination of a credible provenance and strong commercial interest from leading specialists certainly made for a promising start to the investigation.

Further significant progress was made when a collector who had viewed the auction provided detailed images. These showed the chest with one of the panels of the lid in a 'raw' unfinished condition on its inner surface; obviously a rough replacement. The images also showed the lid attached by simple steel butt hinges fixed with steel screws. Their old, rusted appearance suggested that they had been fitted in the early twentieth century. These makeshift, insensitive repairs showed that the chest must have led an unappreciated, unloved existence for many decades as a simple, workaday piece of furniture.

In commercial terms the chest, with its crude repairs as seen at the auction, was not in a fit condition for a leading dealer's showroom, so in the eighteen months before it was again offered for sale it had acquired a much more convincing replacement panel to the lid, a new pair of period-type long strap hinges, which conveniently helped to mask the replacement of the panel, and a period-type lock plate where there had been none. These modifications were probably inevitable. However, the photographs taken at the auction were important because, apart from the replaced panel to the lid, they helped confirm the chest's integrity.

CONSTRUCTION AND CONDITION

The joints to both the chest's front and top are of the early 'mason's mitre' type. The stiles are 45 mm (1.75 in) thick, with those on the left 102 mm (4 in) wide and those on the right 121 mm (4.75 in). Due to decay to their bases, the stiles vary in height from 444 mm (17.5 in) at the back left, to 464 mm (18.5 in) at the front right. All of the lower rails and the front upper rail are 38 mm (1.5 in) × 82 mm (3.25 in); the upper rear rail is 38 mm (1.5 in) × 89 mm (3.5 in). The upper side rails are 32 mm (1.25 in) × 82 mm (3.25 in). The central muntin is 127 mm (5 in) wide with identical edge moulding inside and out.

The framing of the top is 89 mm (3.5 in) × 32 mm (1.25 in) apart from the right-hand and central members which are respectively 108 mm (4.25 in) and 102 mm (4 in) wide. This hinged top consists of two plain panels 242 mm (9.5 in) × 304 mm (12 in). The replaced left-hand panel has a similar amount of surface worm-damage to the surviving original panel. However, the latter has some major splits and is quite fragile. The entire top has been turned over at what would appear to have been some considerable time in the past. The present inner surface of the lid has suffered considerable worm damage, wear and decay. The lack of polish and colour further confirm that the inversion of the lid took place a long time ago. There are old 7 mm holes drilled into the tops of



2 Rear view of chest. *G. Wade*

the front stiles which would have aligned with corresponding holes, now filled, in the lid when it was in its original orientation. This indicates that at some time the lid was screwed or pegged shut. There are small oak patches in the back rail of the lid where the earlier hinges have been attached as well as the corresponding remnants of nails for hinges in the back rail of the chest where they would have originally been in alignment with those in the lid. The current hinges are at least the third set to have been fitted to the chest. The back consists of a long, single panel, 660 mm × 210 mm (26 in × 8.25 in) (Figure 2).

The base of the chest uses the form of construction typically found in medieval chests. The thin, riven base boards of later sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century chests were generally nailed onto the bottom of the lower rails, usually with a rebate at the front to hide their front edges. Instead, in this earlier form of construction the 25 mm (1 in) thick longitudinal base board with evidence of saw-marks visible underneath is rebated into the rails and stiles all round. This type of construction was common in medieval chests and persisted most notably in grain arks, where a particularly well-sealed base was specifically required.⁵ Despite being only 344 mm (13.5 in) wide, it is notable that the base is made up of two boards of 102 mm (4 in) and 242 mm (9.5 in) joined by pegs in their broad edges. A crude 18 mm × 12 mm (3 in × 0.5 in) pine board has been nailed to the base at some time in the past to cover a narrow shrinkage gap between the boards. The side panels are 210 mm (8.25 in) high,

⁵ For example, Sotheby's (November 2001), lots 1, 2, 3, 7 and 8 (examined by the author).

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316 mm (12.5 in) long and 19 mm (0.75 in) thick. They are carved in a simple, early style of horizontal linenfold.

The front panels are the most striking feature of the chest. They are 210 mm (8.25 in) × 270 mm (10.5 in) and 22 mm (0.875 in) thick. Unlike the other panels, where the grain is horizontal, in these two panels it runs vertically. This frequently occurs in such chests where, as in this example, the vital elements of the carved panels also run vertically. This orientation makes the carving much more durable. The backs of the panels are not tapered, but 'squared' in the early fashion, where they are rebated into the surrounding framework.⁶ A significant feature of the right hand panel is that its inner edge on the inside of the chest nearest to the central muntin is rebated and the front rail slotted to create a groove 18 mm (0.75 in) wide, rising 200 mm (8 in) from the base board. There is a corresponding slot in the lower back rail, indicating that they were designed to take an upright board to create a 200 mm (8 in) high vertical division (Figures 3 and 4).

There are also slots in the inner faces of both the right-hand stiles at exactly the same height. This would indicate that the space to the right hand side of the vertical divider also had a lid, creating an enclosed space alongside and extending below the existing till. This space would have been 200 mm (8 in) high and 275 mm (11 in) from the divider to the till, with a further 150 mm (6 in) high and 900 mm (3.5 in) extending beneath the till. The deep till is 140 mm (5.5 in) high and 70 mm (2.75 in) wide. It has a lid with integral pivots fitted into holes in the stiles and has the same edge moulding as the rest of the chest's framework. The combination of constructional features throughout the chest strongly suggests an early sixteenth-century date.

One interesting feature of the chest is that unusually large pegs are used throughout. It is clearly difficult to investigate all known examples of very early joinery, whether in fixed woodworking or in furniture, but it seems that no research has been conducted into the size of such pegs. Clearly the joints in large timbers in the framing of buildings and even in large tables necessitate large pegs. However, the majority of panelling and framed furniture from this period appears to have been made with pegs measuring 7–8 mm (0.25 in–0.3 in). In contrast, the pegs employed in this chest are 10–11 mm (0.4 in–0.45 in).

Apart from the replaced ironwork and the left-hand panel of the lid already discussed, there are no irregularities in the form of inexplicable holes, pegs or nails. The heights of the panels and dimensions of all its elements are completely consistent.

In May 2010 a dendrochronological study of the chest was undertaken by AOC Archaeology Group Ltd, Edinburgh. The upper ends of the two largest timbers, the right-hand stiles, 121 mm (4.75 in) × 45 mm (1.75 in) were chosen for analysis. Fifty-eight growth rings were found on the front-right stile. This is far short of the two hundred rings that are normally required for a complete analysis, so it is not surprising that neither date nor provenance for the timber was established. However, after taking and examining casts of the stiles and a thorough visual examination it was confirmed that all components of the chest, both framing and panels, were grown from irregular, fast-grown timber. The fact that the base-board, despite its meagre dimensions, is made up of two edge-joined boards further confirms that the broad, fine-grained,

⁶ Chinnery (1979), p. 115.



3 Interior of chest, showing rebate on inside of right-hand front panel. *The author*

4 Interior of chest, showing slots in lower back rail and stile. *The author*



high-quality oak boards from the slow-growing trees of Scandinavia, the Baltic or Germany were not used by the joiner who made this chest. As the Low Countries relied almost entirely on such imported wood after their own forests had been felled in the early medieval period, it seems much less likely that this chest is Flemish than either British or French where both imported and native-grown oak were widely used. There is a possibility that there may have been symbolic reasons for using native timber.

The front, sides and present upper surface of the lid all carry traces of a thin coat of the black stain which was so popular during the Victorian period.⁷ Most of this surface has worn off, with the remnants largely confined to the recesses of the carved panels and the mouldings. The stain may have been applied at the same time as the lid was reversed.

⁷ Ibid, p. 218.

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A close examination of the surface reveals small deposits of an earlier finish, with visible traces apparent in recessed areas of each front panel and in the mouldings of the framework to both the front and the sides. These traces are all of a dull yellow colour. Samples of this finish have been analysed using polarised light microscopy and infra-red spectrometry by Northumbria University. The results show the presence of litharge (yellow lead oxide), red ochre, yellow ochre, charcoal and chalk. These pigments were all widely used during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. While it is impossible to be absolutely certain that this colour is the original decoration, such a painted surface would be entirely consistent with furniture made before 1550.⁸ The survival of the same early colour on several components of its construction is a significant further indication of the chest's integrity.

CARVING AND MOULDINGS

There are three main decorative elements to this chest; the edge-mouldings of the framing, the linenfold side panels and the Gothic front panels. The edge-mouldings are consistent throughout the exterior and interior of the chest. They are also the same above and below the linenfold on the side panels, inside the central front muntin and on the lid of the till.

A common feature of French and Franco-Flemish panelled furniture of this period, often associated with linenfold and Renaissance panels, is that the mouldings at the top corners of the panels are not square, but consist of tightly rounded corners. Not all French furniture possesses this feature, but it is generally accepted that if it is in evidence, then it points strongly towards a French origin. There is an entirely different and less sophisticated treatment of such mouldings in this chest which may be a specifically British feature. The run-mouldings of the inner edges of the stiles which frame the panels do not stop at the top of the panel. In a high quality chest, most French joiners would have created a rounded corner while British pieces made from approximately 1530 onwards would have a square corner with the moulding mitred, then continuing along the top of the panel. However, on this chest the run-mouldings of the stiles which frame the panels run the full length of the stile, from floor to the top of the chest (Figure 5).

This moulding is not to be confused with that which might be used in later periods purely to decorate the stile, but appears to be associated with the earliest examples of panelled furniture employing the mason's mitre joint. A study of images in auctioneers' and dealers' archives appears to connect this very particular feature specifically with panelled furniture which, through the observation of entirely separate characteristics, is dated to the beginning of the sixteenth century and described as English. It is found not only on chests and cupboards but also on examples of that very English type, the rare 'merchant's' or 'counter' table which, being of the same period, often bears similar panels of horizontal linenfold or parchemin.⁹ This distinctive feature of full-length run-moulding of the stiles is not mentioned in any of the standard literature, so perhaps

⁸ Ibid., p. 199.

⁹ Sotheby's (September 2001), lots 1153, 1154; Wolsey and Luff (1968), pl. 2; www.marhamchurchantiques.com, 'GALLERY', 204, 231, 252, 0405.



5 Full-length run-moulding of stile.
The author

6 Horizontal linenfold panel to side
of chest. *G. Wade*



it has simply never been considered noteworthy. It may possibly prove to be a useful indicator of a British rather than a Continental provenance.

The profile of the mouldings is unusually broad at 30 mm (1.2 in) and bold for such a small piece. The chamfers slope directly from the panel surface and, along with the plain dust chamfers below each front panel, their slope is the same as on the angled sides of the deep ribbing within the Gothic patterns of the front panels. The design of the moulding is therefore integral to the decorative scheme of the chest's front. To the outer side of the chamfers the profile of the mouldings is in a distinctive 'S' shape; a sharp edge to the top of the deep chamfer begins a semi-circular concave section which smoothly runs into another semi-circular convex profile on its outer side.

The side panels of horizontal linenfold are in a simple, early and unadorned style; full, curly and rich (Figure 6). It is carved in a distinct 'block' with a consistent margin around all four sides, typical of late fifteenth-/early sixteenth-century British, Flemish and French work.¹⁰ While later linenfold was almost always used vertically, in its earliest applications it was often used horizontally.¹¹ The use of such good quality carving to the side panels of the chest indicates an unusually high status.

The two front panels are of differing designs, carved to a very high standard, especially for work executed in fast-grown oak. The simple, deeply carved ribbing used to form both patterns is in matching triangular cross-section while the carved area and the borders around it are consistent on both panels. The right-hand panel consists of

¹⁰ Eames (1977), pl. 58b; Thirion (1998), pp. 21–22.

¹¹ Chinnery (1979), p. 239, fig. 3:13.

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7 Right-hand front panel.
G. Wade



8 One of a group of panels
believed to have come from a
chest near Dumfries. *The
Royal Museum of Scotland:*
photo the author



one large lozenge shape, sub-divided into four smaller lozenges, each carved with a central quatrefoil. Each corner section is centred by a matching trefoil (Figure 7). Similar examples of this pattern are to be found at the Royal Museum of Scotland, but less precisely carved, in a group of panels, *c.* 1500, which are believed to have come from a chest-front in the Dumfries area, possibly from Sweetheart Abbey (Figure 8). Further examples of similar panels are in the headboard of the bed mentioned by Shaw at Lovely Hall, Lancashire, *c.* 1500–1530.¹² Shaw describes the discovery of this bed ‘... observed by the Rev Allen in the course of his professional duties, in administering to a dying parishioner the last consolation of religion, and purchased by him after the decease of the sick person from his list’.¹³

The left-hand panel of the chest is decorated with tracery in the Flamboyant style (Figure 9). In England this form of decoration had been ‘... banished from large scale masonry architecture more than a hundred years earlier, but preferred to Perpendicular by many carpenters and joiners, particularly in the northernmost counties of England,

¹² Chinnery (1979), p. 391, fig. 3:458; Wolsey and Luff (1968), frontispiece and pl. 84.

¹³ Wolsey and Luff (1968), caption to frontispiece.



9 Left-hand front panel. *G. Wade*

East Anglia and Wales'.¹⁴ A spectacular example was the coving which originated at Durham Cathedral and was tragically destroyed in the fire at Brancepeth Church in 1998.¹⁵ There are survivals of similar flamboyant tracery in woodwork at Carlisle Cathedral and smaller remnants at Hexham Abbey.

It is interesting that Michael Dann refers to this late northern use of such tracery in the analysis of an English great hall dresser, *c.* 1490–1500, which, while very heavily restored, has nine original, differing tracery panels within their original surrounding framework.¹⁶

Scotland contains the most remarkable relics of this high quality late flamboyant tracery in oak. The most notable of these is the outstanding interior of King's College Chapel, Aberdeen (1506–07), along with remnants from St Nicholas's East Kirk (1507–08) in the city centre which are now in St Mary's Chapel in the kirk's undercroft. There is also a chair at Trinity Hall, Aberdeen, made from more of these fragments.¹⁷ This period of flamboyant design in Scottish woodwork was brief. By the end of the first quarter of the sixteenth century the new choir stalls at Dunblane Cathedral were showing the change to Renaissance design, following the same trend as Continental woodwork, but over a generation later.¹⁸ Another example of this work dating from

¹⁴ Marks and Williamson (2003), p. 351.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pl. 120.

¹⁶ Dann (2005), pp. 1–8.

¹⁷ Chinnery (1979), p. 415, fig. 4:6; Jellinek (2009), p. 170, pl. 202.

¹⁸ Geddes (2000), pp. 74–97.

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10 and 11 Details of panel framing at King's College Chapel, Aberdeen, 1506, showing distinctive profile of 30 mm-wide mouldings and large pegs.

Courtesy The University of Aberdeen: photo the author

around 1500 is the pair of less sophisticated rood-screen doors which share the church at Easter Fowls, Dundee with their better-known medieval painted wood panels. There has been much debate about the craftsmen who created such carving: itinerant French and Flemish carvers worked throughout the West, Wales, Northern England and Scotland.¹⁹ There also appear to have been local workshops, such as that of John Fendour in Aberdeen to whom the work at both King's College and St Nicholas' Kirk is attributed. Fendour may himself have had Flemish origins.²⁰

There are two technical features which the construction of the chest shares with the panelled work at Aberdeen. First is the use of unusually large pegs and the second is the use of a 30 mm (1.2 ins) wide moulding with the same distinctive 'S'-shaped profile sequence: chamfer from panel, sharp edge, concave, convex (Figures 10 and 11). The use of larger panels, particularly those in thinner, open tracery, together with heavier framing members of 55 mm (2.2 in) necessitates the form being that of a marginally more elongated 'S' than that in the chest. However, the dimensions and profile of the mouldings on the chest and those at Aberdeen are remarkably alike. Further examples of this moulding can be found at St Nicholas' Kirk (Figure 12).

This particular and distinctive profile might well be found outside Scotland, but exhibits at the Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh show that, with minor variations in width, this very specific form appears to have been very widely used in early sixteenth-century Scottish woodwork. There are choir stalls made by John Fendour in Aberdeen in 1507, panels from a hospital of 1516 at Cambuskenneth and an armorial panel of the same period from Linlithgow Palace.²¹ Further exhibits with the same moulding profile include a door from a house in Leith with Gothic and

¹⁹ White (2010), pp. 121–78.

²⁰ Geddes (2000), p. 93.

²¹ Royal Museum of Scotland, inv. nos. H.KL200, H.KL125, H.KL61.



12 30 mm wide moulding and large pegs in panelling at St Nicholas' Kirk, Aberdeen, 1507. *Courtesy St Nicholas' Kirk, Aberdeen: the author*



13 Detail of moulding profile on a door from the home of Mary of Guise in Edinburgh, early sixteenth century. *The Royal Museum of Scotland: the author*

Renaissance panels and a door from the house of Mary of Guise in Edinburgh (Figure 13).²² Almost all of this panelling from 1500–1530 is constructed with the same unusually large pegs as this chest, so their use was evidently another distinctive characteristic of the best Scottish joinery of the period.

As it would be a lifetime's task to investigate all of the widely scattered ancient woodwork of the period, it would appear logical to use the chest's distinguishing constructional and decorative characteristics — the unusually large pegs, the profile of the mouldings and the late use of flamboyant tracery — in order to identify a source where they all converge. This striking combination of features points towards early 16th-century Scotland.

THE 'I&M' MONOGRAM

The main feature which shows that the chest has secular rather than the more common ecclesiastical origins of the period is that in the centre of the left-hand panel is a well-executed monogram, consisting of the letters I and M joined by a love-knot (Figure 14). In the sixteenth century and earlier the letter 'J' was represented by 'I'. The letters are in a distinctive style, with a round bulb mid-way up the vertical elements of each letter. These vertical elements are castellated at their upper and lower ends, while the central 'V' of the letter 'M' only extends halfway down the full height of the letter. There appears to have been little research into this lettering style, known in German

²² Ibid., inv. nos. H.KL63, H.KL127.

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14 Monogram on front of chest (actual height of lettering 70 mm or 2.75 in). *The author*

as ‘fru-humanistische Kapitalis’ or, roughly translated, ‘humanistic capitals’, because it appears to coincide with the ‘humanist’ period in European literature, between 1475 and 1545. Apart from being used by the Nuremburg brass-founders, there are scattered examples in Southern Germany, France, Sweden and Italy. This lettering was also used in stone and woodcarving during this period in Britain.²³ It was particularly widespread for inscriptional display in early sixteenth-century Scotland; for example it is used over gateways at both Holyrood and Linlithgow Palaces. It is also evident in the stone armorial of King James IV on the outside of King’s College Chapel, Aberdeen, inside the chapel on the carved wooden arms of Bishop Elphinstone as well as on a later carved oak armorial panel in Aberdeen’s Marischal College Museum, dated 1537 and believed to have come from James V’s Royal mint.

The co-joining of two initials with a love-knot is naturally linked with marriage and often with wedding-gifts. This symbol first came into use around 1450 and then faded out during the early sixteenth century as Renaissance iconography replaced Gothic. This rare medieval device is important in Western art because it is one of the very first examples of personal, secular symbolism rather than religious emblems to be used in public display. Its use was restricted to the very highest levels of society. One of the earliest instances of the love-knot appeared on the Gruuthuse in Bruges in 1455, where

²³ Neumuellers-Klauser (1988), pp. 315–28.

'L&M', linking the first initial of Louis de Gruuthuse with that of his wife Margaretha, Lady of Borsselle is carved into the stonework above the entrance. Louis was not only stadtholder of Holland and Zeeland between 1462 and 1477, but was appointed Earl of Winchester by Edward IV. Another later instance is at Bourg-en-Bresse in central France, where a spectacular church and tomb begun in 1506 were built by grieving widow Margaret of Austria in memory of her late husband Philibert the Fair, the Duke of Savoy. The tomb carries many examples of their first initials connected by a love knot. There are a handful of similar high-status stone monograms carved in stone and wood on buildings of the period in France and the Low Countries. This type of monogram is also depicted in important illuminated books of the period. There are examples of the initials of Charles the Bold and his wife Margaret of York — 'C&M' — in the work of both Simon Marmion and The Master of Fitzwilliam (both 1475). There is also a late, stark, 'H&K' for Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon in the work of Lucas Horenbout (1528), perhaps a bleak reflection of their marriage at that stage.²⁴ The only other use of this monogram found on a piece of furniture is the cradle of Philip the Fair or Marguerite of Austria (1478–79). The foot panel bears the painted initials 'M&M' for their parents, Mary of Burgundy and Maximilian of Austria, joined by a love knot.²⁵ In contrast to the distinctive letter form and prominent bulbs with short, straight 'bristles' to the ends of the love-knot on the chest, these Continental examples use more common forms of Gothic script, while their love-knots typically terminate in tightly-knotted, flowing tassels (Figure 15).

England's other examples of love-knots are later and also show Renaissance influences alongside the spread of such symbolism to less regal levels. There is an example in a Holbein drawing of a design for a book cover for Thomas Wyatt the Younger and his wife Jane Haute who were married in 1537. It was to be executed in black enamel over gold, but it includes three interlinked initials instead of the two used in earlier examples.²⁶ Another instance of marriage iconography becoming more popularised as the 16th century progressed is the Garstang Chantry Casket at Cirencester. This casket is carved in a transitional Gothic/Renaissance manner. While it retains Gothic remnants by carrying the initials 'I&G' joined by a tassel-ended knot, it also shows later influences by enclosing this monogram within a medallion opposite a second medallion carrying the Christian symbol 'IHS' and the date 1539. It also carries two pairs of initials; IG and AG and the arms of the George family. Further evidence of this transition of marriage symbolism into Renaissance iconography and to less regal levels of society are evident on two early sixteenth-century marriage chests. One portrays the heads of an unknown husband and wife in plain Renaissance medallions without initials, while the other is a boarded chest carved with portrait medallions and flanked by further medallions containing their initials 'RT' and 'AG'.²⁷

These later examples indicate that the conjoined initials displayed on this chest belong to the Gothic period when they were also the preserve of the very highest levels of society. The next challenge is to try to identify the owners of the 'I&M' initials. As

²⁴ Kren & McKendrick (2003), pp. 113–14, 253, 435.

²⁵ Eames (1977), pls. 34a & 34b; Thirion (1998), p. 61.

²⁶ Foister (2006), pl. 90.

²⁷ Wolsey & Luff (1968), pl. 11; Dann (2005), pp. 24–31; Sotheby's (2002 lot 203 & 2005 lot 52).

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15 Monogram over a door lintel in Dijon, showing a love-knot ending in typical flowing tassels with standard mixed-case Gothic lettering. *Roderick and Valentine Butler*

discussed earlier, the peg size, the form of the mouldings and the unusually late use of flamboyant tracery point towards the north of Britain and specifically to Scotland. Three Scottish examples of the initials 'I & M' joined by a love-knot have come to light. Despite having spent centuries and hundreds of miles apart, buried at Linlithgow in Scotland, in England's National Archives and in the National Library in Vienna, the three are virtually identical and relate to the same marriage. Their lettering is in the same 'humanistic' capitals as on the chest. Furthermore, the lower terminations of the love knot do not end in tightly-knotted flowing tassels, as they do in the Continental and Garstang examples; all three have bulbous, short-bristled endings like those on the chest. The significance of this form only becomes clear upon close inspection of both of the examples which are painted in colours rather than that which is moulded into a clay tile; this device is actually a Scottish thistle.

Linlithgow Palace was a magnificent rural retreat, midway between the fortresses of Edinburgh and Stirling. It was built and gradually extended by a succession of Stuart monarchs between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. In 1861, archaeologist Andrew Kerr was exploring the ruins of the palace, which was burned down by English troops in 1746. Under the moss and weeds he came across an original floor, made up of a combination of flagstones and tiles. Although most of the tiles were broken, several



16 Floor tile from
Linlithgow Palace
(actual height of
lettering 55 mm
or 2.2 in).
RCAHMS
Enterprises

were embossed with a shield containing the 'I&M' monogram. Only one tile survived intact (Figure 16).

In his report, Kerr made no attempt to identify these initials.²⁸ Only after more intensive archaeological study in later years did it become clear that the apartment containing this floor was the king's Presence Chamber of the west wing of the palace which was built by James IV. The significance of this very personal symbolism on the tiles is that James is known to have given Linlithgow Palace to his bride as a wedding gift.²⁹ There is a room in the ruins still poignantly known as the Queen's Chamber where she is said to have vainly awaited his return from the disastrous defeat at Flodden in 1513.

This almost-forgotten monogram, which had until then only been of minor academic interest, received wider public attention with the publication of Duncan Macmillan's *Scottish Art 1460–2000*, which publicised the two other examples.³⁰ First is the *Book of Hours of James IV*, which is widely regarded as one of the most important Books of Hours in existence and is attributed by some to Gerard Horenbout and by others to Simon Bening.³¹ The book was given by James IV to his queen, Margaret

²⁸ Kerr (1881), Vol. 15, pp. 194–98.

²⁹ Paul (1901), Vol. 2, preface, p. ix.

³⁰ Macmillan (1990), pp. 24–26.

³¹ Anon (1987).

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17A Enlarged detail from 17B

17B Folio 14 of Gebetbuch Jakobs IV von Schottland (actual height of lettering 10 mm or 0.4 in).
Osterreiches Staatsbibliothek,
Vienna



Tudor, and was clearly a wedding gift of the highest status. It contains nine small examples of the monogram 'I&M' on three pages; three on folio 14, five on folio 184 and one on folio 244 (Figure 17A and B). On two of the pages the lettering is in the same 'humanistic' form as on the chest, while on the third they are picked out in pearls, considered to be the jewel of Scotland. On all three pages the love-knots end in thistles. The book is said to have been later given by Margaret to her sister Mary, then to have spent its life in Continental royal collections and it is now kept at the National Library of Austria, Vienna.

Macmillan also illustrates the third example of the 'I&M' monogram. It is on the *Ratification of the Marriage Contract* between James IV and Margaret Tudor which, along with the *Treaty of Perpetual Peace* between England and Scotland, was painted by Sir Thomas Galbraith in 1502.³² In this beautifully executed margin, decorated with roses, thistles and marguerites, and below the royal arms, are the same initials in gold, in exactly the same lettering as the chest, with the love knot terminating in two coloured

³² Macmillan (1990), pl. 17; National Archives, E39/81.



18A Detail from the margin of 18B

18B The Ratification of the Marriage Contract of James IV of Scotland and Margaret Tudor. *The National Archives, Kew, C39/81*



thistles. As this document involves matters of state rather than being a personal gift, this example of the Royal monogram bears a gold crown (Figure 18A and B).

In March 2003 the Princess Royal opened an exhibition at Stirling Castle entitled 'The Thistle and the Rose' to mark the 500th anniversary of this momentous marriage. The Linlithgow tile, the James IV Book of Hours, on loan from the National Library of Austria and the royal marriage contract and the peace treaty were the centrepieces

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of this historic exhibition. It was the first time these little-known artefacts had been together in five centuries. Two copies of the marriage contract and the treaty were originally produced, one of each for England and for Scotland. Only one of the four documents remains in Edinburgh, a copy of the peace treaty. England holds the other copy but has both of the marriage documents. This appears to indicate that James VI took Scotland's copy of the document south with him in 1603, exactly 100 years after the marriage, to prove his claim to the throne as James I of England. Only on one of the two documents is Galbraith's artwork still legible, the other having almost completely faded due to the ravages of time and damp. It is only through good luck that these examples of the royal monogram have survived and their historical significance has been recognised. Without them there would be nothing with which to compare the identical monogram on this little chest.

The evidence of the monogram suggests that this chest was made for James IV of Scotland and his wife, Margaret Tudor and that, like the Book of Hours, is likely to have been a personal wedding gift from the king to his bride. While it might be possible to trace a major artefact through records and inventories, for example a great bed or table which may have stayed in the same house for generations, this is extremely difficult when dealing with a small chest from a household which only lasted for ten years. The National Library of Scotland holds the detailed *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer*, thirteen large volumes covering the period from 1473 to 1580. These comprehensive records suggest that the royal household of James IV owned remarkably little furniture. Apart from '*coffrez*' (coffers) carried by packhorse and '*the king's new cadgeatis*' (a hat container for carriage by packhorse), the only other items of furniture mentioned over several years are the king's cupboard, the king's '*aumry*' (aumbry) and '*the great cypir kist* (cypress chest) of *the thesaure hous* (treasure house)'. Moving these larger pieces between royal residences was a regular expense. Carrying the king's cupboard or the cypress chest from the treasure house with the king's plate by hired cart to '*Striveling*' (Stirling) or back to Edinburgh again were arduous, costly and noteworthy undertakings. Even the payment to seven '*pinouris*' (labourers) of a few pence to carry the King's cupboard from Edinburgh Castle to Holyrood Palace or back is recorded. Amongst this activity is a typical payment to a boatman recorded in volume 4 '*for bearing the Queyn's coffrez and beddes over the water*'. The water was almost certainly the Forth at Queensferry and the beds were listed in the accounts as '*fedder*' (feather) beds which, if they did have any framework, would be collapsible 'trussing-beds' for carriage by packhorse rather than fixed pieces of furniture.³³ Such logistical issues point to the importance of packhorse carriage when roads were simply non-existent.³⁴ The constant royal progressions described in 'The Accounts' between Edinburgh, Stirling and the other royal residences highlight the importance of suitably small chests for transporting their valuables. Before the later development of flat-bottomed, domed and weatherproof trunks specifically designed for transport, footed chests of this packhorse-size would be painted or enclosed in 'bahuts' to protect them from the weather.³⁵ Most chests had carrying handles, but in an example of this high status with its linenfold side panels, appearance would take precedence over practicality.

³³ Wolsey and Luff (1968), p. 58.

³⁴ Crofts (1967), pp. 1 and 8.

³⁵ Eames (1977), pp. 112–13; Chinnery (1979), p. 199.

A forty-two-page section of volume 2 of the *Accounts* lists approximately five hundred items of expenditure incurred '*pro Rege et Regina*' for the Royal marriage of 1503. The vast majority of the purchases relate to fine clothing, other textiles and gold, as well as an intriguing description of the importation of five '*Chayres of State*' from Bruges for the wedding. There is one particularly interesting reference to '*ane pair of coffrez and ane saddel boght fra Balfour £6*' just before the wedding in August 1503.³⁶ The '*saddel*' shows that they were intended for transport by packhorse. The very high cost suggests that these were probably not ordinary travelling trunks when compared with the 14s paid for a single coffer in October 1506 and the same £6 paid for '*ane hors*' (one horse) for the king' or for 'two ounces of gold' or considerably more than the £4 paid to the goldsmith for a gold ring with a ruby and two diamonds for the Queen. However it is impossible to know whether this chest is one of that pair of '*coffrez*' bought for the wedding or indeed of the later pair, with saddle, 'bought for the Queen' on 2 December 1506, at the same cost of £6. The construction of this chest from locally-grown oak in an age when symbolism was so important raises the intriguing possibility that a gift from a Scottish king to his bride might conceivably have been deliberately made from Scottish oak despite the ready contemporary availability of broad boards of close-grained, easily-carved Baltic timber, just as royal wedding rings are by tradition still made from Welsh gold.

CONCLUSION

The spectacular but brief reign of James and Margaret came to a dramatic and tragic end after Scotland's defeat and his death at Flodden in 1513. Their households were widely scattered and during the most difficult stages of the following few years Margaret had to sell personal belongings in order to maintain herself.³⁷ Some possessions she took with her while others which she had hurriedly left at Linlithgow Palace and Tantallon Castle were sent south later while she stayed with her brother Henry VIII for a year in 1516–17, before returning to Scotland.³⁸ It is therefore almost impossible for any surviving artefact from this brief, soon-forgotten reign and its tumultuous aftermath to have had a continuous provenance during the intervening five centuries. Perhaps the only piece of furniture which can plausibly have had such exalted beginnings, survived the ensuing turmoil and then quietly served countless generations unnoticed as a classless and timelessly useful domestic item is a small, innocuous chest. The evidence gathered here suggests that this chest can justifiably claim such a provenance.

³⁶ Paul (1901), Vol. 2, p. 219.

³⁷ Buchanan (1985), p. 158.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

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