

A 19TH CENTURY INSCRIBED BOX FROM CARMARTHENSHIRE

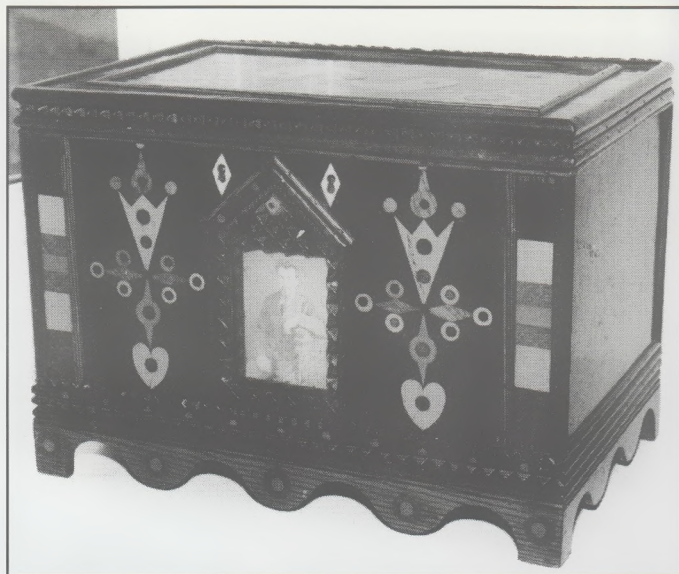


Fig. 8

In March 1990 Carmarthen Museum acquired at auction, through a gift of the Friends of the museum, a marquetry and painted box with hinged lid and removable, compartmentalized tray (fig 8).

To the front of the box is applied a framed photograph of a man, possibly in his thirties, posing casually on an intricately carved armchair. The box was felt to be an appropriate first gift from the Friends of Carmarthen Museum; with its range of inlaid motifs akin to those found on certain types of love spoon, it was, with good reason assumed to be a token of affection.

The box is approximately twelve and three quarter inches wide and nine inches high. It is constructed of a pine carcase. The sides, front and lid are veneered with mahogany. Motifs such as stars, heart shapes, and linked pairs of "tear-drop" motifs are inlaid in varying combinations or groupings, in a variety of local woods (sycamore, oak and fruitwood, possibly apple⁽¹⁾) (fig 9).

Non indigenous timbers such as mahogany (used as a veneer) and pitch pine (used as part of the banding to the lid and as part of the "waved" apron between the bracket feet) are also incorporated. The back of the box is decorated with applied half round mouldings forming three smaller and larger rectangular panels, each centred with a metal flower shaped "boss". The whole of the back has been given a painted surface to simulate wood grain, probably oak, and scratched into this surface is the name "Thomas Jones, Ddeunant, Pencarreg, Lampeter, Carmarthen" (fig 10) The interior, with removable tray divided into three compartments, is lined with an off white paper decorated with silvered dots. As to the question of its use, its size and lined, compartmentalized interior suggest that it may have been intended as a sewing box (fig 11).

Perhaps significantly in relation to the manufacture of the box, on the 14th August 1880, a Thomas Jones, carpenter, married a twenty two year old spinster from Tower Hill, Llanybyther, called Margaret Evans⁽²⁾. Llanybyther was, as it is today a scattered settlement lying a matter of a few miles from Pencarreg. It has not been possible to establish with certainty the location of Thomas and Margaret's married home. Ddeunant, Pencarreg is recorded as the place where Thomas was registered for the purpose of the census in the year after his marriage, in 1881. His mother, Sarah, is recorded as a widow, head of the household and 65 years of age. Her occupation is listed as "dressmaker". Thomas, at this time, is recorded as being married, but there is no record of his wife on the census return.

The technique of woodgraining and the scumble effect, which was used to embellish part of the box, suggests that Thomas Jones had also acquired the skills associated with the activities of a 19th century household decorator.

Thomas's occupation in the 1881 census is recorded as "carpenter (builder)". This entry gives a small insight into the shift in emphasis, which was occurring in the woodworking trade during the last quarter of the 19th century throughout West Wales and the country as a whole. Until this time country carpenters and joiners were occupied for much of their time with woodworking connected with farming activities. In the latter part of the 19th century a gradual change from this relative specialization took place, which led towards the creation of less specific trade groupings such as general house builders who would work on a contract basis⁽³⁾. The use of mahogany and pitch pine indicates a readiness to use materials not previously available to cabinet makers in rural West Wales.



Fig. 9

As to the recipient of the box and its purpose, several possibilities suggest themselves. The symbols decorating the front and lid of the box and their similarity to motifs found on certain love spoons from South Wales have led to the reasonable assumption that it was intended as a token of affection to a sweetheart. Thomas Jones's marriage in 1880 may establish a possible marker for the date of the box's manufacture, as well as its possible recipient. The fact that there is a photograph of the presumed maker adorning the front of the box in rather shrine like manner is slightly unusual. This has led to the suggestion that it was intended as a more sombre commemoration - possibly of Thomas Jones's death ⁽⁴⁾ (similar photographic memorials from the second half of the nineteenth century are known to exist), although the photograph surrounded with accepted and somewhat happier symbols of love would seem to militate against this idea.

Could another possibility be that Thomas Jones intended the sewing box as a gift of a practical nature and as a token of a different form of affection, to his mother, a dressmaker? Either explanation reinforces, in small measure, what we know of the strong social traditions of rural Wales - that of the giving and receiving of hand-worked wooden gifts between lovers and the pivotal place, which Welsh mothers- "our Mam" - held (and hold) in the lives of their offspring.

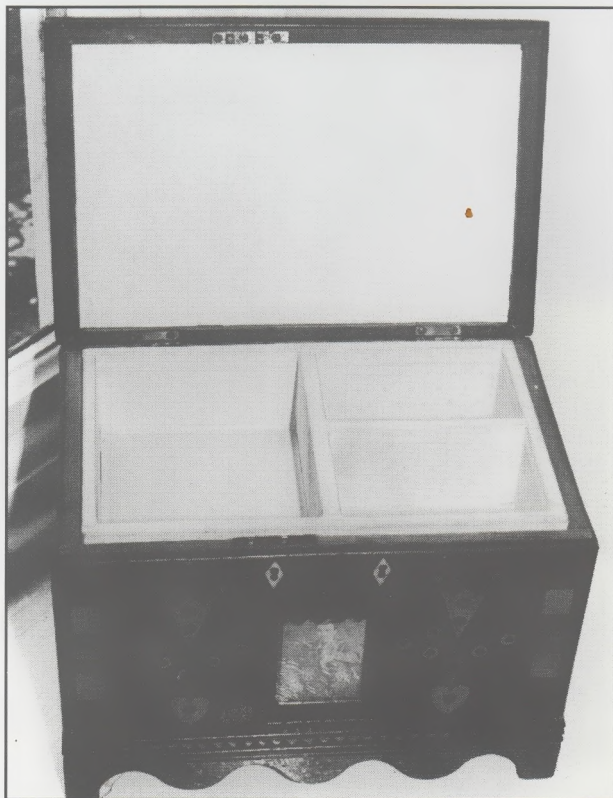


Fig. 11 Compartmentalized interior



Fig. 10 'Thomas Jones, Ddeunant, Pencarreg, Lampeter, Carmarthen' scratched onto the painted surface.

What then can be stated from the evidence of the box itself and the sketchy details contained in this article regarding its putative maker and his family? We can be reasonably sure that the box dates from circa 1880. We can also surmise that it was made at a time when changes were taking place in the working lives of men, who had traditionally concerned themselves solely with the working of wood in a farming context. It would seem that despite this shift in working pattern, and the introduction of new materials, at that time and in that part of Wales, the production of special objects decorated with traditional and symbolic pan-Celtic motifs can be found, as evidenced by this carefully crafted item, to be a continuing tradition.

Robin Jones

- (1) *The appearance of related motifs is referred to in Luke Millar's article in RFS journal 1991 pp. 1-15.*
- (2) *Pencarreg marriages post - 1837.*
- (3) *See C. Gilbert "English Vernacular Furniture" (1991) pp. 15-18*
- (4) *I am grateful to Richard Bebb for this suggestion.*

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