

A JERSEY 'ROBE' - THE FIRST FLATPACK FURNITURE?



It can readily be imagined that, with the use of a screwdriver, the whole piece can be dismantled very quickly and if the component parts are laid flat, one on another, the cubic space occupied is not more than a quarter of that of the fully erected clothes press.

A variant construction has the bottom section as a carcass containing the bottom drawer, with plinth and feet. The sides are tenoned into the top of this in the same manner as above. As clothes presses these pieces were probably all originally fitted with sliding shelves in the upper half, supported on runners glued and nailed to the sides. With the modern fashion of hanging clothes these have now mostly gone. It should be mentioned also that at one time - some thirty or forty years ago - when built in wardrobes were all the rage, many of these Channel Islands wardrobes were cut up for the sake of their timber, the door panels and sides yielding much good quality mahogany.

Fig. 5 Components of clothes press

A type of clothes press found on the south coast of England is commonly known as a Channel Islands wardrobe (in trade parlance a 'Jersey 'robe'). Though varying widely in style, all examples share one distinctive feature; they are made in sections which can be easily dismantled and reassembled. A typical example (fig 5) has a stoutly framed pine base, with a plinth mould of mahogany and plain bracket feet cut out of the same piece of timber. The sides are often plain sheets of mahogany with tenons at the bottom which fit into mortices cut in the base frame; similar tenons fit into the box frame which forms the ceiling and cornice of the piece. All these sections are held together solely by the weight of the box top. The two doors are fitted across the front of the piece (fig. 6) with hinges screwed to the backs of their stiles and rebated into the front edges of the sides. The pine back of the piece is panelled and made in two parts, divided horizontally (fig 7). Each half is divided by a muntin into two panels and the whole back is fixed with screws into deep rebates in the sides, top and bottom. The joint between the two halves of the back is also halved and screwed together. (The original screw holes all appear to have been countersunk by hand with a gouge). In some examples there is a low shelf slotted between the sides, with a deep drawer beneath.

Stylistically, examples noted vary from about 1750 to 1830, with plain or ogee bracket feet, swept feet and Regency turned feet. Dentil and "Gothick" cornices as well as swept and inlaid cornices have all been seen. Panels may be plain sunk, flush or fielded or inlaid ovals with the cross-banding. A few examples are veneered with satinwood.

From a study of existing examples of this distinctive piece of furniture two general conclusions may be drawn. The sectional construction, using screws and "dry" mortices was dictated by a need for space saving during transport. Secondly, these wardrobes were clearly designed for an English taste. This is evident both from their proportions and their decoration. Examples with simulated drawers on the lower half of the doors create a superficial impression similar to the standard English Georgian clothes press. Equally the decoration in each case, whether moulded, carved or veneered, conforms in precise detail with the canons of fashionable London made furniture of the period.

Although to date no research appears to have been done either on the production of these Channel Islands wardrobes or the means of their importation and distribution, the type at least can be accurately defined.

c.f. Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture: cupboards, presses and wardrobes: Figs 14, 15, 16.

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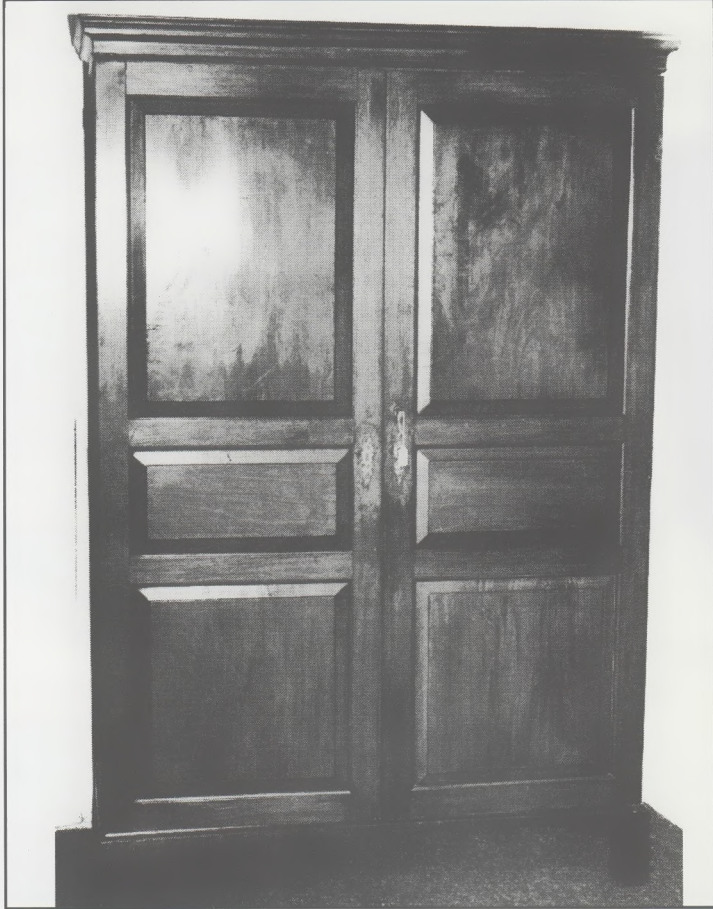


Fig. 6 Assembled press

Photographs courtesy of Martin Fry, Emery Down

Fig. 7 Interior of press. Two part panelled back

