

The Cope Chest at Wells Cathedral

Like everyone else I had known the cope chest for years and never really paid a great deal of attention to it. It was obviously very old and seemed quite undatable. It stands behind the high altar just outside the lady chapel and has done since early in the last century. It was the cathedral archaeologist, Professor Warwick Rodwell, who got it radiocarbon dated and the result showed that it was made between 1111 and 1143. This meant it is the oldest piece of scientifically dated wooden furniture in the British Isles. At 880 years old it is also the oldest piece of furniture to have been in continuous use. It is older than the present cathedral and must have been in the undercroft when that was being built as it is too large to go through the door.

It had been dismantled and repaired when it was put in its present position. In 1902 the then bishop, George Wyndham, loaned the cope he had worn at the coronation of Edward VII to St Andrew's Church at Wiveliscombe and presented them with a very fine arts & crafts style cope chest for displaying it. It is safe to assume that cope matters were on his mind and that this was when the chest was moved.

There are seven medieval cope chests. They are used to store the copes which are the cloak-like vestments worn by the bishop and other clergy. There are two each at York and Gloucester cathedrals and one at Westminster Abbey, all of which are of similar plan to that at Wells. The one at

Salisbury Cathedral is semicircular with a single lid that takes two people to lift.

The Wells cope chest is shaped like a slice of cake 2m along each side and with an angle of 70 degrees. The top is in two sections, hinged along each side, with a small apron piece at the apex. The copes are semi-circular when spread out flat and would be folded, edges to middle, and then laid in the chest. They would have been thick, to keep the wearer warm during the long services and because they were covered in rich decoration. It would have been necessary to take out all the copes above the one required.

The chest is made of oak. The sides and front have top and bottom rails with cut-in stepped decoration which supported the pilasters which are now missing. The curved front is from one plank, about 1/2in (12mm) thick, which was steamed and bent. The side panels are made up of several vertical boards of varying widths, two of which are replacements: the one on the right had been a drawer bottom. The boards are bevelled together with the joint being covered by the pilaster. There are the remains of pins from the pilasters.

The lids are made of tapered boards held together by battens underneath. The present hinges are blacksmith made and probably date from the repairs of 1902. There are signs of previous hinges. The lids themselves may date from 1409 when there is a record of payment for lining the chest.

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The finish of all areas is rough and suggests that the chest may have been covered in gesso and painted, although no signs of colour were found. The chest had areas of the lower rails which had become soft, probably due to immersion when the undercoft flooded. The side panels had become loose and were irregular. The front leg in the middle had been repaired and was not in its correct position.

A schedule of works with a full risk assessment and method statement was agreed with Dr Nigel Bamforth of the V&A, the aim being to conserve as much as possible while putting the chest in a condition to face the next few hundred years.

With the chest raised and the lining removed it was possible to see that the floor had been replaced some centuries ago and the supporting struts repositioned. It had been hoped to pull up some of the joints between the rails and the back post but doing so would have meant reducing the floor boards. The front leg had become detached from the front rail and had been tilted forward by the central floor support. The front leg was removed and the patch lifted off the front of it, revealing patina. When the leg was returned to its original position it was clear that the patch was doing nothing, so it was not replaced. The leg was fixed in position using polyester repair paste with oak packers where needed. The soft areas of the lower rails were strengthened with epoxy resin. The side panels were held in place by gluing cotton strips on

the back. There was lot of colour variation, particularly of the repaired parts and the former drawer bottom so these areas were sealed with an acrylic sealer and a little colour added over the sealer. The whole thing was then given a light coat of wax.

The public showed much interest in the work and a lot of time was spent explaining what was being done. Seeing it with one lid open, and the curved front, a surprising number of people thought it was a grand piano!

Donal Channer



Inside the cope chest

