

Dating Gower *coffors bach*

According to Richard Bebb, whereas boxes with or without drawers were made throughout Wales, *coffors bach* are unusual in being miniature versions (around 2ft wide) of large coffers, and this association is peculiar to Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire.¹ They were made in the 18th century and are particularly associated with marriage, often descending through the female line.

The Gower *coffor bach* is a subgroup and was the subject of an article by Philip Havard which was illustrated by five examples.² A.J. Conybeare illustrated a further three examples in one of his books on boxes.³ Whereas *coffors bach* in general have inlaid decoration, the distinctive feature of the Gower subgroup is that they have carved decoration: the carving is shallow and there is no attempt at relief carving. The main features are the pair of stylised urns or vases with five or seven flowers (tulips alone or with daisies) and leaves or commas against a punched background. In the centre below the escutcheon they have a decorative feature (e.g. tulip, fleur de lys, pinwheel, twin hearts), and/or in some cases initials (presumably of their owners). They are of nailed construction, usually have bun feet and where they have full width drawers the drawer fronts are decorated with two pairs of birds (doves according to Conybeare).

The dating of these pieces is intriguing. In many ways they have much in common with table/desk boxes of the 17th and early 18th centuries. Indeed Conybeare dates his Figures 46 and 48 to the early 18th century. However none of the eight examples referred to above is dated and Havard comments that 'dating individual Gower coffers has proved somewhat difficult.'⁴ However, he refers to pictures of two published in 1950 which bore dates of 1770 and 1782 and says 'other dated examples were sought at the time but none was found earlier than 1770'. He also refers to an antique dealer who 'had handled more than 40 such coffers but could not recall one dated earlier than 1770'.⁵

The illustrations show two Gower *coffors bach* which are in private collections and have not previously been published. The example in fig 1 is of particular interest since it bears 'AE' initials and a 1770 date which supports the above comments about their dates. Its additional features, four hearts and eight diamonds, are unusual. Fig 2 shows an undated example with 'WB' initials, which conforms to the pattern of the other eight previously published; its escutcheon has lost its upper securing nail. Neither *coffor* may have its original feet.

Of course a single date cannot establish the range over which Gower *coffors bach* were made but it does support the idea that dated examples at least fall into the 1770-1782 range. Many of the undated examples bear many

similarities to fig 1 and may reasonably be dated to the same range. However we do not know whether one or more workshops were making these pieces, or why their makers chose carved decoration at a time when inlay was more common. On the other hand, Conybeare's figs 46 and 48 look earlier and were possibly made in a different workshop. Neither has feet. In one case the bottom is a replacement so we cannot tell whether feet have been lost, while in the other the author makes no comment on whether the bottom is original and showed signs of having had feet.

The question remains why, when decorated *coffors bach* in general used inlay and were made throughout the 18th century, the Gower version revived the use of carved decoration.

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Fig. 1 Gower *coffor bach* dated 1770



Fig. 2 Gower *coffor bach* with initials but no date

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- 1 Richard Bebb, *Welsh Furniture*, Vol 2, Saer Books, Kidwelly, 2007, pp 70-73.
- 2 Philip Havard 'The Gower *Coffor Bach*', *Regional Furniture*, Vol. 6, 1992, pp. 86-91.
- 3 A.J. Conybeare, *A Discourse on Boxes*, Rosca Publications, Hanley Swan, 1992, figs 46, 48 and 50.
- 4 Havard, op. cit., p87.
- 5 *ibid.*