



Fig. 1

The Crediton Chest

The chest in the Church of the Holy Cross, Crediton is well known due to its inclusion in Cescinsky and Gribble's *Early English Furniture and Woodwork* (1922) and Charles Tracy's *Continental Church Furniture in England* (2001).

It has a five panel front with ogee arches and tracery carving separated by buttresses with now-empty niches and a central panel showing the Nativity; the sides have twin panels carved with tracery but without arches (Fig. 1). Made of oak it measures 5 ft 6½ in × 3 ft 1½ in × 24½ in (169 × 95 × 62 cm).¹ The high-relief carving is of great quality and is characteristic of a group of French chests around 1500. Below the façade and side panels are openwork panels and a plinth; in the centre of the front openwork panel is a (probably later) shield with a merchant's mark. We were fortunate to have a copy of a 1916 document in which John Yarde of Trobridge House, Crediton Hamlets, Devon, states that he gave the chest to the church in 1881, after having the white paint removed and the chest varnished, and that he later paid for the addition of the plinth.

Removal of the altar cloth allowed us to peer inside. The lid is later and the backs of the panels in the façade were stepped whereas those of the side panels were chamfered. Differences in the wood used for the front and rest of the chest were also noted. It was thought likely that the chest

was an original façade housed in a later structure.

However, subsequent comparison with a picture of the chest in the first Bruno Perrier sale (Ader Tajan, Paris, 6 April 1992) suggested the need for caution. This was slightly bigger all round, 5 ft 8½ in × 3 ft 9½ in × 27½ in (174 × 100 × 70 cm), but had an almost identical front, though lacking the Nativity scene, but including the atypical flower-heads in squares, and sides. Without looking inside the Perrier chest any conclusion about how much of the rear of the Crediton chest is later would be premature.

Charles Tracy suggested the Crediton chest might be from Normandy since the East Dereham, Norfolk, chest also has a central Nativity scene (but is otherwise different), and there is one similar to the latter in the Antiquities Museum in Rouen. The Perrier chest was described in the sale catalogue as Normandy work and from the same workshop as the Crediton chest. Related high style chests are found in several parts of France, but where they were made remains uncertain. Unfortunately there is no thorough study of regional variations of such chests.

It is possible that a few production centres made chests to order for far-flung wealthy clients and institutions following national designs, and that there was a more diverse local production drawing on both national styles and local traditions, especially for lower cost chests. Local differences may be apparent in the carving detail. The Crediton chest has a style of carving to the shafts and what John Allan calls 'spiky leaves' i.e. the projecting leaves

1. Thanks to John Allan for taking these measurements.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

which twist and fold over the arcading (Fig. 2), which he suggests were possibly Breton or Northern French. A boarded chest once owned by the Abbot of Saint-Melaine, Rennes, also has the spiky leaves.² However, such features can only help localize the place of construction of objects if their use was restricted to particular places – a question that remains to be researched.

Two other chests of interest were noted during the day. At Lapford, a plain oak boarded chest with semi-circular cut outs in the ends had the interesting feature of original tapering strap hinges inset into the outside of the lid. At Coldridge, hiding in a corner, we saw a carved-front boarded chest with the name of the churchwarden and date 1699 providing documentary evidence of the popularity of this carving style in south Devon. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4

Devon visit update

After the main report on the Devon visit had been prepared, John Allan discovered two sketches made in the late 18th century by John Carter of a French gothic tracery chest, similar to the Crediton chest, which was in Exeter Cathedral (British Library papers (BL MS 29931 fol.142). It is described as 'oak chest in the Registry for the deeds and leases of the Chapter'. Although the sketches only provide a partial view, this chest had four tracery-filled ogee-arched panels and a central panel with the Coronation of the Virgin and four shields. Below the front, at the left end, is a carved, probably openwork, spandrel, unlike on the Crediton chest. The chest is no longer in the cathedral.

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² See M. Le Roux-Paugam, *Le Mobilier Breton*, Ouest-France, 1996.