

A Deal Furniture Tradition in Kent?

Some years ago I reported on a deal mule chest,¹ dated 1749 that had a family history which located it in mid-Kent.² I have recently recorded two further deal mule chests in Kent churches.

The deal mule chest at St Nicholas church, Sturry, 3 miles NE of Canterbury, has the date 1757 drilled into the upper panel of the right hand side and the central rear panel. The chest is of high quality construction. (Figs 1–3) The front has three splayed fielded panels and the frame around them and the legs are ovolo-moulded. The chest is 54 in w, 35 in h, 26½ in d with 2 in-thick top rails (137 cm w, 89 cm h, 67.5 cm d, the top rails are 5 cm thick); it has great weight and solidity. The lid is of sophisticated construction, with three boards held together by the original internal blacksmith-made iron strap hinges, butterfly-inserts, and mortised mitre-ended cleats (through tenons visible in Fig. 2). The locks are attached to the staples on the lid. The most interesting feature is that like the 1749 chest it is lined inside to produce a flush surface, which avoids the risk of snagging stored fabrics (Fig. 3). Whereas the 1749 chest was lined with thin horizontal boards covering the framework, the Sturry chest is lined with vertical deal boards placed between the stiles and muntins, and has two low internal partitions. The fact that the dates are drilled through the lining panels shows that they are original rather than later additions. Today the Sturry chest is used for storing linen, in line with tradition.

The deal mule chest at the nearby church of St Martin's, Herne is of cheaper, composite, construction (Fig. 4). The front of the chest is joined, with three plain panels, framed by a cyma curved moulding, and two plain-fronted drawers below. The sides, on the other hand, are boarded (two vertical boards), as is the back (three horizontal boards). The chest's dimensions are 48½ in w, 27¼ in h and 19½ in d with a front rail 1½ ins thick (1 m 23 cm w, 69 cm h, 49 cm d, and the top front rail is 3 cm thick. The front has not been made flush internally by additional boards, though the boarded back and sides provide a smooth surface. The lid is of simple construction: three boards held by cleats underneath at each end; the short hinges are now broken. Open woodworm tracks suggest the outside was previously painted or varnished.

These three chests raise various questions. Are deal mule chests found throughout the country? Are they often found with the framed insides made flush? Do domestic



Fig. 1 The Sturry chest



Fig. 2 Side view of the Sturry chest showing the date and lid tenons



Fig. 3 Interior of the Sturry chest

1 The Victorians coined the name mule chest but in 18th-century inventories it would have been described as a chest with drawers. The term deal is used throughout as a generic term for various softwoods such as pine, fir, spruce etc that, as Adam Bowett points out, cannot be easily distinguished.

2 A Kentish pine mule chest 1749, *Regional Furniture Society Newsletter*, No. 46, Spring 2007.



Fig. 4 The chest from Herne



Fig. 5 New Romney: the box pews



Fig. 6 The Ringwould chest

inventories reveal in which rooms such chests were placed? These are matters for research. *Miller's Pine and Country Furniture Buyer's Guide*, Tenterden, 1995, mainly illustrates 19th-century objects, but includes a few earlier deal items, including one chest with an early 18th-century Kent provenance (p. 145). David Knell shows a boarded 'possibly South East' deal mule chest dated 1766 and an 18th-century deal, stained brown, low dresser from West Sussex.³ However, of the ninety-two 17th- and 18th-century mule chests recorded as for sale on www.the-saleroom.com between September and November 2013, only one was of deal, suggesting that deal mule chests are much less common than oak mule chests.⁴ If deal in the 18th century was a cheap imported timber used mainly as a carcass wood,⁵ why was it not used for mule (or other?) chests more often?

Mule chests are not the only example of the use of deal as a 'primary' wood in Kent. For example, St Mary the Virgin church, Fordwich, St Augustine's church, Brookland and St Nicholas church, New Romney all have deal box pews. (Fig. 5) Finally, at St Nicholas church, Ringwould there is a deal chest, carved with the date 1635 and with the churchwardens' initials securing its provenance (Fig. 6).⁶ The fact that it is painted brown to make it look like oak could be an acknowledgement that, when made, deal was a substitute for oak. However, the high quality construction of the Sturry chest shows that the cheaper wood did not necessarily mean a cheaply-made chest as in the case of the Herne chest. Without evidence of the relative cost of deal and oak mule chests, it is hard to say whether the use of deal was due to cost or easy availability or a matter of preference, but it is possible that there was a tradition of deal furniture in Kent in the 17th and 18th centuries. How widely it existed elsewhere too as a second choice to oak is a matter for research.

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3 *English Country Furniture*, Barrie and Jenkins 1992, pp. 82 and 91.

4 Mule chests start in the 17th century but date mainly from 1700–1800.

5 Adam Bowett, *Woods in British Furniture-Making 1400–1900*, Oblong, 2012, pp. 290–91 Bowett points out that deal was also used as a primary wood for joinery and cheap furniture.

6 Strictly speaking, it is only matter of inference that the Sturry and Herne chests are of Kentish origin.