

St Mary's Church, South Creake

John and I were pleased to host a visit to this church on the evening before the conference. There are several notable things in this fine Norfolk 15th-century church, including a domed chest that Chris Pickvance describes below, and a bier recorded in the Churchwardens' accounts for 1688 as being made by Goodman Foster for £1 6s 6d (there is an almost identical bier from Shropshire in the English Heritage Collections. *Ed.*)

However, the piece that we most wished to show members was a very large mediaeval chest. This is massive (H 84 cm (33 in) × L 213 cm (7 ft) × W 92 cm (3 ft)). There



Fig. 3. The iron covered chest, St Mary's Church, South Creake



Fig. 3. Detail of one of the locks and its punched decoration



Fig. 4. The domed chest with its lid open. It is just discernible how shallow is the domed lid and the missing central lock-plate

is no visible wood; it is entirely covered with studded iron bands. It has the usual complicated locking system of keys, bolts and levers; each of the five exposed keyholes is covered by a very large flap or lappet. These are highly decorated with an elegant variety of incised scrolls, flowers and small geometric shapes in a very distinctive style. Four of the five keys survive, also very decorative, each surmounted by a crowned fleur-de-lys. This device plus the style of the decoration has always suggested to me that it is French; not all members agreed with this.

There is no evidence of how the chest arrived in South Creake (it is first mentioned in a terrier of 1857) or where from. NADFAS church recorders quote Arthur Mee as saying that it came from North Creake Abbey but this seems very unlikely. North Creake was a very small foundation; Binham or Walsingham are both possibilities. Binham had strong links with France and if you are in the pro-French camp this seems the best bet.

The decoration is so distinctive that it is very frustrating that we have made no progress in recognising where it was made. A query to the Musée de Cluny, Paris, elicited no response.

The final mystery is how it was moved to South Creake. It took eight RFS members to lift the lid. The interior is disappointingly plain).

Marjorie Stabler

(A chest identical to that in St Mary's Church has subsequently been found at Shipdham, 24 miles south of South Creake. *Ed.*)

South Creake domed chest

The majority of domed chests with iron straps have a strongly domed lid. The chest at South Creake is distinctive in having a flattish domed lid and lacking the splayed rebate joints at the four corners of the box. Its softwood lid is also uncommon (lime appears to be most common). It has a mix of gable-headed and large round-headed nails as often found on other domed chests. The chest has undergone extensive repairs, e.g. the original central lock is missing and a wooden insert has been added, very old repairs have been done to the iron straps on the lid. Taken together these features suggest that it is a close relation of the more common strongly domed chests, and is likely to be a predecessor. Since the dates for the domed chests at Mendlesham, Suffolk and Fordwich and Ickham, Kent range from 1393 to 1420 the South Creake chest may well go back to c. 1350.

Chris Pickvance