

More on the Early Chest in Braunton St Brannock Church, Devon



Fig. 1 (above) Overall view of the 'seaman's chest', note the dovetails at the corners (see right detail)



In *RFS Newsletter 63* a report on the North Devon Conference and in particular, the visit to the medieval church of St Brannock in Braunton, near Bideford there were three pictures of a large cedar-wood chest, with figures inscribed onto the surface. Although there was no date on the chest the clothes worn by the carved figures looked mid-16th century. The chest also had very strikingly decorative vertical dovetail joints at the corners (see Fig. 12 in *RFS Newsletter 63* for a detail picture).

There was a great deal of discussion concerning the origins of the chest and a consensus that it was probably Portuguese. However, in a recent, 7 June 2016, sale in

Swolders, Stansted, there was a smallish, flat-topped, cedar chest. As it had rope handles attached to the sides, though a later addition, it was described as a seaman's chest. Dated on the top in small brass nails was the date 1619, and it had the same distinctive dovetails on the sides. There seems little to doubt the probability of the date being accurate. No more, otherwise, is known about this 'seaman's chest' but the date, the decoration and the dovetails are very like the Braunton chest.

There was discussion at the time as to whether the wood was cedar or cypress. Cedar was certainly used in Bermudan chests of the 17th and 18th centuries with the



distinctive corner dovetails. On reading Adam Bowett's *Woods in British Furniture-Making 1400–1900* there is a somewhat similar chest (p. 282, Fig. C13) with shallow incised decoration and chunky, decorative side dovetails, but it is North Italian.

It would appear that the origin of these chests and their decorative joints would make a neat subject for future study. Perhaps a wood analysis would be an excellent starting place to determine what woods were used and, possibly, where the timber comes from.

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Fig. 2 (top) Detail of the date outlined in tiny nails on the top

Fig. 3 (bottom) Detail of the incised decoration on the front

(All photographs courtesy of Sworders, Stanstead)