



The Bishop of Ely chest, showing the carved front

Bishop of Ely chest at Christchurch Mansion

In their oak room amongst other interesting pieces we viewed a boarded chest with a carved front.

It was not easy to examine the chest well as the lighting was not good and the inside of the chest has newspaper (19th-century *Ely Standard*) stuck to it. But it does appear that it is a complete piece of furniture as even though it has replacement hinges, there is evidence of three old pin hinges in the lid and back.

The chest has been owned by Ipswich Borough Council since prior to the Second World War and was acquired from a large farmhouse via an antique dealer. It was loaned in 1936 to a heraldic exhibition held at Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery. I have been researching this chest as I own two oak panels that I believe are related to it.

The carving consists of a central panel with three crowns, surrounded by two animals, plants, feathers and some animal heads. The carved subjects on the chest front are I believe heraldic symbols, some of religious meaning relating to a particular person from the medieval period.

The central panel depicts three Ducal crowns and is the symbol for the See or Diocese of the Cathedral City of Ely. Two panels contain ostrich feathers and a further two a kind of plant, most likely representing a woodstock. Both these images relate to Edward Woodstock, also known as the Black Prince (1330–1376). The woodstock is a symbol of his family, the Plantagenets, and the ostrich feather was his personal emblem, still used today by the Prince of Wales.

The various animals/heads can be seen to have religious meanings, as described in M. W. Tisdall's book, *God's Beasts* (1998), in which he explains the meanings of over one hundred animals found in medieval church carvings. In the large panel to the left of centre is an antelope whose antlers are shown with serrated edges. These are representative of the Old and New Testament. An individual who knew his bible well could saw off all vices sent by the Devil, such as greed and pride, much as the real antelope was said to disentangle itself from brambles if it became stuck.

The other animal shown is a laden camel which represents humility, as the camel kneels to take on its burden in the same way that Christ humbled himself to take on the sins of the world. Two of the four animal heads are griffins, mythical animals with the fore part of an eagle and the hind part of a lion. They were said to be ferocious and held in high regard as guardians, protecting the Tree of Life and fallen knights. Dante used the griffin as a symbol of Christ. The other two heads are of collared dogs, or Talbots, which are a symbol of undying faithfulness and love.

I looked initially for a connection between Ely and the Black Prince, whether he had an allegiance to the city or had lived nearby, but found nothing. Then I came across the name of a Bishop of Ely, one John Fordham who was born c. 1340 and died in 1425. He was Bishop of Durham from 1381 to 1388 and then, after apparently falling out with the citizens there, was transferred to become Bishop at Ely from 1388 to 1425. Of even greater interest was his connection to the royal family. In 1375 he was appointed as secretary to the Black Prince and was the executor of his will when the Prince died in 1376. The following year the Black Prince's father, King Edward III, died and John Fordham was appointed keeper of the Royal Privy Seal for the ten-year-old King Richard II, son of the Black Prince. It was said that Fordham loyally supported the young king in the difficult early years of his reign.

He remained active in politics and religion, living through the reigns of Henry IV and V, and even features in Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

In summary, the symbols on the Christchurch chest would seem to relate to John Fordham, Bishop of Ely, the Ely crest, heraldic symbols and badges of the Black Prince, with strong religious tones and the reference to a faithful guardian all pointing to this individual.

Chris Pickvance examined the chest and his input was greatly valued (see appended comments below). His thoughts were that the large space left for the lock plate above the Ely symbol was a sign that this chest had a Flemish/ Continental origin and that the leaf and bud carving surrounding the various symbols dates the piece as late 15th to early 17th century. I have certainly seen very similar floral carving on a North Norfolk church pulpit dating from 1470. East Anglia was very closely associated during this period with the Continent, with both goods and craftsmen crossing the North Sea. Nearby Kings Lynn (formerly Bishops Lynn) was a member of the Hanseatic League, a trading association made up of a group of towns around the Baltic and North Seas.

Many questions are raised by this fascinating chest. Was it made for or in memory of John Fordham, as who else would relate to the carved symbols in such a strong way? As to date of manufacture, sometime prior to the Tudor period would be most likely, owing to the symbols claiming an allegiance to the Plantagenet lineage. It would surely have been seen in this unsettled and dangerous period as treasonous propaganda to display such a piece and could possibly have led to severe punishment. Is it possible that John Fordham himself had this chest made during his lifetime as self-promotion, stating his faithful service to the Black Prince and Richard II and his deep religious position and beliefs? If so, it would date to before

1425, making it an important and rare connection to the Plantagenet royal family.

It is difficult to give a definitive opinion of a piece of furniture made centuries ago and other thoughts I am sure will be made about the origins and meaning of the symbols. I will continue my research on this chest, particularly a thorough examination (all sides and base), with some better quality photographs. Hopefully I will then publish a further report in the *RFS Newsletter* with news on that inspection and details of the two panels that I think relate to Kings Lynn and this Ely chest as they have extremely similar carving.

Tony Howe

The inside of this chest is covered with newspaper, so it is not possible to see whether it was made as a chest or whether a carved façade has been made into a chest. The space left in the design for a lock is found on Continental chests in the 15th and 16th centuries which suggests the carver was familiar with Continental practice; the leaf and bud design in the corners is found from the 15th–17th centuries. The strongly carved backgrounds to the symbols are unusual. If the symbols point to a specific Bishop of Ely, as Tony Howe suggests, the facade could date from the 15th century, but it could also be made later in celebration of this bishop, and perhaps made into a chest even later. There are too many unknowns to be certain.

Chris Pickvance