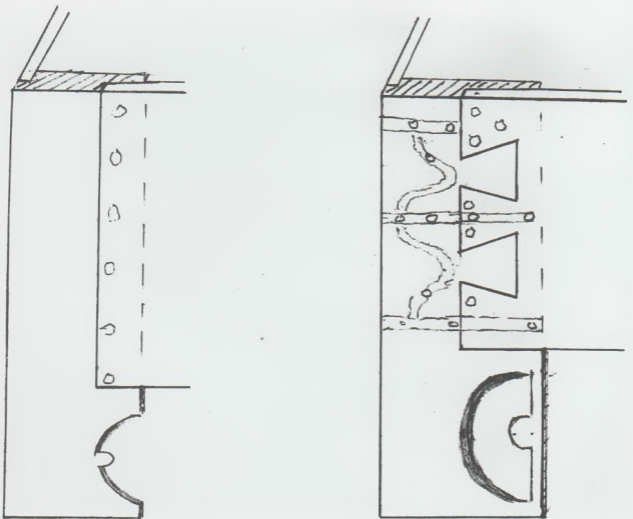


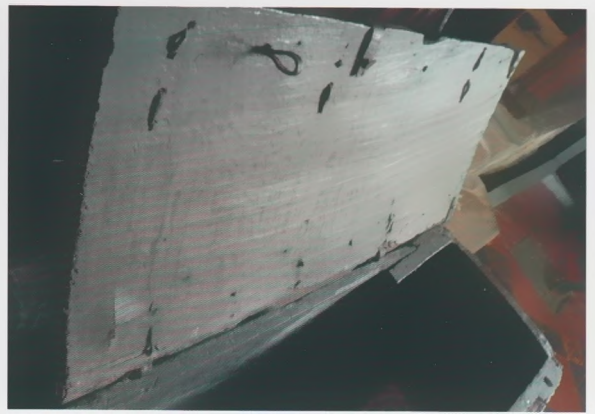
Medieval chests in Shropshire: early examples of regionality?

The Shropshire churches we visited had a rich collection of medieval chests. As I had expected they were very different from the clamped chests I was familiar with in the South and East Anglia. There was a large early dug-out chest (Morville A) but the other eight had a distinctive type of construction. The fronts were fixed to the stiles by nailed lap joints, not by mortise and tenon joints as found on clamped chests. The lap joints were of two types, straight (Morville B, Quatt and Hughley), and dovetailed (Bitterley, Eaton under Heywood, Ludlow, Neenton and Tong). The rebates for these joints are cut in the stiles. The sides were nailed to straight rebates in the stiles and the base boards were nailed to the walls, not held in grooves as in most clamped chests. The typical shape of the eight chests was wide and shallow. The feet often had openwork lunettes (a type which goes back to 1200) or simplified versions carved in the solid.

The Bitterley and Ludlow chests are particularly fine. Both are over 2m wide and have ridged lids, decorative ironwork, large-headed nails, and evidence of original sliding bolt locks, a type which is common on Kent and Sussex chests from 1250–1350, which is a likely date range for them. Dating is helped by Geddes, *Medieval Decorative Ironwork in England*, 1999. The Hughley chest has large-headed nails, is also of great width and is probably 1350–1450. The more lightly built Neenton chest which has a ridged lid and a carved front showing



Nailed lap joints, two types, Hughley (straight) and Bitterley (dovetailed)



left Bitterley chest, c. 1250-1350

above Right hand lid at Bitterley showing lid staple (part of the sliding bolt lock)

lozenges, quatrefoils and flamboyant gothic tracery is early sixteenth century. Interestingly it still has nailed dovetail lap joints. Such joints are also found on seventeenth-century chests attributed to the Black Mountains which have openwork L-shaped feet, a further simplification of the lunette.

It would be convenient to conclude that chests with stiles and nailed lap joints are an exclusively Shropshire regional feature. However, they have also been found in Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Suffolk and Warwickshire, so all one can say at present is that they are relatively frequent in Shropshire. Their geographical distribution and how it came about requires further research.

Chris Pickvance

The geographical spread is strange – a band generally spreading south-east towards London then hopping over to Suffolk. It would be a major piece of research to determine why.

One thought is based on the fact that the Welsh Marches drew in the senior aristocracy who had lands in other parts of England. As the major funders of church expenditure maybe Marcher aristocracy moved the

furniture they had funded to where they saw a greater need or perhaps more likely brought craftsman or commissioned furniture in their preferred familiar style. This would require a researcher to determine who held the advowson of the various churches that have or have had dovetail chests.

A second thought is that it could be related to particular religious order(s) who were involved with the churches. If a number were collegiate churches of a particular order that could lead to a standard design being requested. A check on the historical status of each church with such a chest would be needed.

A third thought is whether there is evidence of greater use of dovetails rather than mortice and tenon in certain counties. I think you would call it a lapped dovetail joint which seems to me quite complex to make. Could it be that the carpenters working on building and rebuilding Marcher castles – castles often visited by sovereigns – were a higher quality of carpenter and leaned towards a complex visible joint? A check on the extent of the use of dovetail joints in Marcher castles' carpentry would throw light on this.

Jeremy Rycroft



Hughley chest, probably 1350-1450