

# John Lombe's Piedmont chest

I am assisting a small research team in connection with the redevelopment of the Derby Silk Mill as a museum. We are trying to trace the whereabouts of an old chest possibly from Piedmont, Italy. It is thought to be a key object in the foundation of the silk-throwing mill in around 1717, as it reportedly conveyed models and designs obtained from Italy. Three brothers of the Lombe family, Thomas, John and Henry, from Norfolk, were involved in establishing the mill.

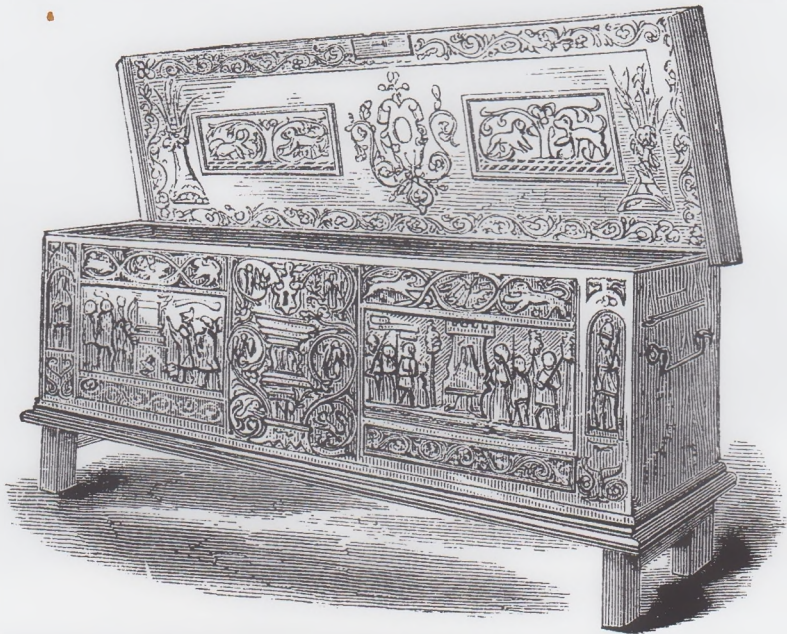
The earliest reference to the chest in the mill is an article in *The Penny Magazine* in 1843:

In a kind of warehouse near the entrance is a curious memento of John Lombe ... It is an old box or trunk, six or seven feet long, and between two and three wide and deep. It is made of a very hard kind of wood, and is carved all over with curious devices ... it still contains numerous documents, once probably belonging to the Lombe family.<sup>1</sup>

The illustration shown here was published in 1860. Llewellynn Jewitt (1816–86), a well-known antiquarian and former owner of the chest, described its significance in *The Antiquary*, 1886:

The models of machinery and other things John Lombe got together in Italy, he brought over in a remarkably curious and, even in those days, old, chest, carved and painted in the most elaborate and artistic manner. This chest, many years ago, passed into my own hands by purchase, and remained my property until a few years ago.

Jewitt was co-founder of Derbyshire Archaeological Society. He lived at Winster Hall until 1880, when he moved to Duffield, a few miles outside Derby. It is not known what happened to the chest after Jewitt disposed



Engraving illustrated in John Timbs, 'John Lombe and the first silk-throwing mill in England', in *Stories of Inventors and Discoverers in Science and the Useful Arts* (London: Kent and Co., 1860), p. 325

THE CHEST IN WHICH JOHN LOMBE BROUGHT FROM PIEDMONT THE FIRST SILK MACHINERY INTO ENGLAND.

of it. Nick Humphrey (V&A) has described the chest as typical in form (apart from the rectangular feet which will have been added) and decoration. It must have been at least a century or so old in 1715 and would be an early instance of an English traveller bringing back an antique piece of furniture. It could well have been purchased in Liguria c. 1700.

Any assistance would be much appreciated. Further details are available on request.

*David Purdy*