

## Spring locks in medieval chests

In studying medieval chests locks can be helpful in dating if one can show that certain types were in use in certain periods. This short note is an appeal for help.

There is a type of lock in which a vertical rigid iron hasp with an arrow-shaped head is fixed under the front edge of the chest lid. When the key is turned, sprung jaws which grip the corners of the arrowhead are forced apart, releasing the hasp and allowing the lid to be opened. The type is self-locking; the weight of the lid is sufficient for the hasp to force the jaws apart.

The website [www.historicallocks.com](http://www.historicallocks.com) illustrates two locks of this type, one with a circular spring, and has a photograph of one which it describes as 'mid-16th century South German'. It describes them as found on chests from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. I first came across this type of lock behind an unobtrusive keyhole on a Danish or north German boarded chest of

about 1600 with a densely carved front with two large romayne heads, which is consistent with the idea that the type is Continental, at least in origin.

The photos show the locks on two clamped chests in Kent and Essex. The oak of the former has been provenanced to Kent. The lock plates are of different shapes but both have a single keyhole. They lack the usual slot for a hasp, because the hasp is not the common hinged hasp, but enters the mechanism from above (see photo of Essex chest, view of top), though, unfortunately, the hasps are missing on both chests. The mechanism of the lock on the Essex chest with two sprung jaws in a V-shape can be seen in the back view, but in the Kent chest the photo shows that the mechanism is almost entirely missing.

The chests date from 1250–1350 and both show evidence of having had earlier locks of the sliding iron bolt type. I have been informed by a key specialist that the profile of the keyhole seen in the front view of the



*left to right* Lock on Kent chest, front and back views. *Photo Chris Pickvance*



*left to right* Lock on Essex chest, front, top and back views. *Photo Chris Pickvance*

Essex chest lock is c. 1500 in date. The keyhole seen in the front view of the lock on the Kent chest lacks the curve at the base and may be earlier. This would make the locks illustrated here precursors of those illustrated on the website mentioned.

The questions are when did spring locks start and what was their distribution in medieval times in England. Is their observation in Kent and Essex an indication of a Continental origin, or are they widely distributed? Were the locks imported or made locally? If members come across these locks I should be very interested to hear.

*Chris Pickvance*