

# West Country-type chests in East Anglia: further thoughts on Penny Rumble's article 'Some East Anglian chests'

In 1991 Penny Rumble published a brief, well-illustrated article on East Anglian chests which was based on the 'almost 200 examples [of local chests] from small salerooms in East Anglia' she had handled. She drew particular attention to one type of panelled chest with a boarded lid, lightly-carved geometric foliage patterns, sometimes with red and black polychrome, and often with a supporting cross brace on the underside (1991, Figs 11–14), illustrated here. She said that it was of the same style as a type of chest found in the Dorset area and noted that the 1735 date of a dated example was later than the dates found on Dorset examples. A chest, described as Somerset/Devon, with the same carving and a cross brace is shown in Figures 4 and 5 of Gabriel Olive's 1990 article.

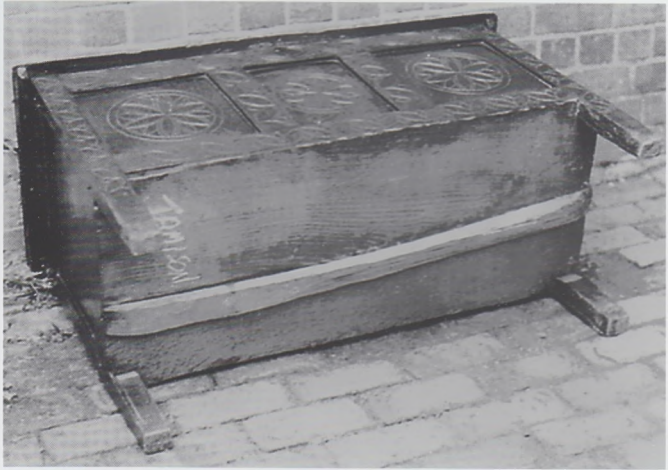
Rumble reported that in a five-year period about 25 chests of this type had emerged in salerooms in the border areas of Hertfordshire and Essex, in towns like Bishops Stortford, Hitchin and Tring. She also demonstrated that the same West Country motifs could be found on fixed woodwork in churches and houses in East Anglia, such as the sounding board of the pulpit at Barrington church in Cambridgeshire (1991, Fig. 9) and an oak chest carved with quatrefoils, but with East Anglian characteristics, which was acquired in Norwich (1991, Fig. 8). She suggests that 'perhaps, a younger generation of furniture makers moved from the Dorset area to Herts./Essex, where they maintained their traditional methods of construction and decoration, or possibly there was a trading link between the two areas' (1991, p. 50).

Today, nearly thirty years later, although furniture is moving around the country more than ever, mainly due to internet auctions, it is still more often found in its region of origin.

Are these West Country-type chests still emerging today in East Anglia? Michael Cox (2020), a conservator and early English oak specialist based near Saffron Walden, has found chests in and around north Essex and Cambridgeshire with quatrefoil and double heart motifs which he generally considers to be of West Country manufacture and style. He does not recall many chests of the distinctive Dorset type mentioned above on the market in recent years but has acquired a boarded box



Herts/Essex border oak chest. *Photo Penny Rumble*



Herts/Essex border oak chest showing underside cross brace. *Photo Penny Rumble*

with decoration similar to Figures 11–13 in Rumble's article. However, he does not think lozenge, applied moulding, lunettes, and arcaded panels are regionally specific. For Rumble, the lightness of the carving is an East Anglian feature.

It is generally accepted that much of the very highest quality carving in East Anglia was the work of migrant craftsmen from the Low Countries (Wells-Cole, 1990). There are also grounds for thinking that migrant craftsmen from the South West came to East Anglia bringing with them their regional methods of construction and carving styles. After the Civil War, Dorset experienced a century or more of economic hardship and Michael Cox has suggested that it is very likely that some joiners and journeymen left the area and moved to more prosperous towns and cities in East Anglia, as far north as Ipswich and Norwich, bringing with them West Country construction methods and decorative styles, which in time spread across the area.

Interestingly, the West Country and East Anglia are linked almost directly by Britain's oldest road, the Ridgeway, now only a route between Avebury in Wiltshire and Ivinghoe Beacon near Tring in Hertfordshire. The Greater Ridgeway route links Lyme Regis in Dorset and Hunstanton in Norfolk via what is now the Wessex Ridgeway, the Icknield Way, the Ridgeway and Peddars Way. Now largely forgotten, the Ridgeway was an important trading route dating back to Neolithic times and during medieval times was used by

drovers moving livestock from Wales and the West Country. Until the 1750 Enclosures Act the route was a series of informal trails mainly following chalk surfaces on the higher ground. The route was always a well-established and important trading route between the West Country and East Anglia. It is thus possible that people left the areas in decline in Dorset looking for work and that the Ridgeway was the link that brought their methods of construction and regional styles to the area around Essex, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and East Anglia. This does not exclude the possibility that the Ridgeway was also a channel by which pieces made in the West Country arrived in East Anglia.

A study of fixed woodwork in East Anglian churches and houses would be helpful to pursue the question of the extent of influence of West Country regional styles in East Anglia.

### *References*

- Cox, M. Personal communication, July 2020.  
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Wells-Cole, A. 'Oak furniture in Norfolk, 1530–1640', *Regional Furniture*, IV (1990), pp. 1–41.