

A Dressing Box for a Valentine

In pre-Covid days when 14 February approached, I would set off on a weekend looking, in local car boot

sales, for a Valentine offering. One year I went to the old Ever Ready battery factory at Tanfield Lea, near Stanley in County Durham, on the trail to find my annual gift. One stall was obviously a workshop clear out and lying on the floor was a small box with lid detached, half filled with nuts and bolts and soaked in a mixture of sawdust, iron filings and black oil. Underneath the muck, I could just make out some lettering, so a couple of pounds changed hands and I came home and hid the box in our garage at Beamish village, awaiting investigation.

Careful cleaning with a gentle solvent and use of rags to soak up the black oil, revealed the box shown in the photograph. It was basically a deal carcass with burr walnut top veneer, additional stringing of ebony, and what looks like stained holly. The lid was missing its walnut top veneer and the inside mirror was missing though leaving a small fragment in one corner. But what a perfect inscription roughly carved into the lid, for a Valentine offering!

THIS:AND THE:GIVER ARE:YOURS:FOR:EVER
WHEN:THIS:YOU SEE:REMEM:IW BER:MEE



Dressing box, burr walnut veneer, stringing of ebony and stained holly, late seventeenth-century. *Photo John Gall.*



Interior of the box, showing the inlaid inscription:
THIS:AND THE:GIVER
ARE:YOURS:FOR:EVER
WHEN:THIS:YOU
SEE:REMEM:IW BER:MEE
Photo John Gall.

We later found some thin glass and had the lid restored by Stephen Robinson Gay of Kirkharle, Northumberland, who just happened to have some burr walnut veneer, which had been lying round for some thirty or more years. A fairly plain box but brought to life by a roughly carved inscription from a romantic Geordie!

I am grateful to Adam Bowett for the following details:

This is a late seventeenth-century dressing box – it could be early eighteenth-century, I suppose, but no later. The trade and collectors call them ‘lace boxes’ or ‘glove boxes’, but they were originally fitted with compartments and small boxes (for combs, brushes, powders &c) and had a mirror in the lid, as here. In almost all cases the interior fittings have been removed, but I have seen intact ones. The lining was usually of silk, often quilted, mounted on card; the divisions were of also of card covered with silk, so no wood was used and there were no tell-tale grooves or rebates on the inside to give a clue to their arrangement. This is why they are so frequently mis-identified. The inlaid inscription is typical of the period, with its exaggerated serifs and the capital I with a crossbar in the middle. The pale wood is most likely holly, although any whiteish wood will do.

John Gall