

An unusual chest at Goodwood House, Sussex

West Sussex is a county known for its group of clamped chests, many with chip-carved roundels, dating from 1250–1350. In researching this group, I visited Goodwood House to examine a chest with roundels which had been reported there.¹ The chest is 172 cm wide, 59 cm high and 57.5 cm deep, of clamped construction and made of oak. The lid is a single board 4 cm thick at the back, and 3 cm at the front, with clusters of knots.

The lid has a bold scratch-block frame with three intersecting round-headed arches at each end, within which are trefoil gothic heads, with small trefoil or quatrefoil details. The lid is largely in original condition but has later iron strap hinges and signs of an earlier iron strap for a hinged hasp.

The main part of the façade has five high relief round-headed arches with trefoil gothic heads, the central one with a defaced figure, with a cloak and possibly a mitre, and the others with a fox rampant. This part shows considerable wear from polishing and is well-patinated, whereas the upper part of the façade, where the lock would have been fixed, has been replaced by a full-width modern oak board. The stiles have large carved roundels of contrasting design, show no wear and the outer edges have been restored. The left and right sides of the chest have applied strengthening grids, a common feature on clamped chests in Northern Europe from 1300 to 1500, but are modern replacements.

The most striking feature of the lid is that it is carved, which is a very rare feature on English chest lids of any

period but is found on some types of North German chest. The carving is similar to that on two North German chests with two-board lids, both dendro-dated to around 1330: the St Mary Magdalen, Oxford chest, and a chest at Wienhausen Monastery (Pickvance, 2014, Stülpnagel, 2000, 138, 379). The former lid has four gothic arches with trefoil heads at each end and the latter three gothic arches with trefoil heads and is divided into two fields. The intersecting round-headed arches of the Goodwood House chest and different lid frame suggest a later date (still fourteenth century?) for the lid. This is consistent with its apparent age, which, in my view, makes it the oldest part of the chest.

Stülpnagel's book on gothic chests shows a large number of fourteenth and fifteenth century chests in North German and Swedish museums whose carved facades include gothic arches, gables, tracery, animals (real and mythical, with one showing foxes — 2000, 154). In every case the design is dense and leaves no uncarved areas. A wider search of German sources confirmed this. In contrast, the Goodwood House facade is notable for its simple carved arcading and for the blank space around it which suggests it is either an atypical one from Germany or is from elsewhere. The defaced figure is hard to interpret; the cloak could be a chasuble and the figure may be a fox wearing a mitre. The satirical idea of the preaching fox was common in medieval woodcarving (Grössinger, 2000, 115–9). The damage could have been done during the reformation, or by a subsequent owner for personal reasons.

Last, the large relief-carved roundels are in complete contrast to the simple chip-carved roundels which are the sole decoration of the English pin-hinged clamped chests in Sussex. The design of the roundels is



Goodwood House chest, façade, with high relief arches, a defaced figure and foxes rampant. *Photo James Peill*



Goodwood House chest, lid, showing intersecting round-headed arches and trefoil gothic heads. *Photo Chris Pickvance*



Goodwood House chest, roundel on left stile. *Photo James Peill*



Goodwood House chest, roundel on right stile. *Photo James Peill*



Goodwood House chest, modern applied grids. *Photo Chris Pickvance*



St Mary Magdalen, Oxford chest, lid. *Photo Chris Pickvance*



Kloster Wienhausen, Germany chest lid. *Photo Chris Pickvance*

compatible with German gothic style but it is likely that they are later additions to the chest to emphasize its gothic character as they lack the normal distortion due to shrinkage across the grain on fast-grown oak.

In sum, the chest appears to be composed of elements probably from four periods: the fourteenth century lid, the façade (probably fifteenth century), the stiles (fifteenth century but with later-carved roundels) and the modern (probably twentieth century) restored sides and upper front board. There are no family records of the acquisition of the chest but James Peill suggests it may have been brought from Halnaker House, the third Duke of Richmond's previous family house, in the early 1800s.

'Medieval furniture' ranges from completely original pieces, to heavily restored pieces, to 'marriages' which preserve fragments in usable ways, to plain pieces carved in gothic style. For example, the V&A has identified chests combining original parchemin panels with later structures (W.11-1938) and a caquetoire chair with a later renaissance-style back panel (W.45-1925). The Goodwood House chest's lack of a lock shows that it was not intended to be taken as an original medieval chest by a knowledgeable collector. However, its historical value is that it preserves a rare type of carved early lid and a probable fifteenth-century façade.

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Grössinger, C., *The World Upside Down: English misericords* (Harvey Miller: London, 2000).

Pickvance, C.G., 'The tracery-carved, clamp-fronted, medieval chest at St Mary Magdalen Church, Oxford in comparative North-West European perspective', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 94 (2014), 153-171.

Stülpnagel, K.H. von, *Die Gotische Truhen der Lüneberger Heidekloster*, (Museumsdorf Cloppenburg: Cloppenburg, 2000).

¹ Thanks to James Peill, Curator of the Collection, for allowing me to see the chest, which was not on public display, and for photos and advice, and to Norbert Nussbaum, Noah Smith, Karl Heinrich von Stülpnagel and Joe Thompson for their comments.

The possible origin of the Hindringham chest

A problem in studying medieval chests is to know whether they have always been in their present location. In the case of the Hindringham, Norfolk chest, I reported in my *Regional Furniture*, XXXIV (2020) article the suggestion that it might have come from Binham Priory, a nearby Benedictine monastery. Tim Pestell, Curator of Archaeology at Norwich Castle Museum, has drawn my attention to the activities of William Somerton, prior at Binham in the early fourteenth century, who is said to have diverted the wealth of the Priory in pursuit of his obsession with alchemy. 'He took from his church two high quality chalices, worth much more than all those that remained, and also got rid of three copes, six chasubles, two cruets, a silver thurible, cloths of silk, seven gold rings, the gifts of pious people of olden days, silver bowls and spoons. What a sad story! To further his own ends he did not even refrain from removing the silver cup and corona in which the

body of our Lord was accustomed to hang over the high altar' (Clark and Preest, 2019, pp. 642–3). This does not prove that the Hindringham chest was removed from Binham Priory at the same time, but it does suggest that very valuable objects were being disposed of at this period.

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Clark, J. G. (ed.) and Preest, D. (trans.), *The Deeds of the Abbots of St Alban's. Gesta Abbataum Monasterii Sancti Albani* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2019)