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*Dug-out Church Chests in Herefordshire and
Worcestershire*

This paper discussed research carried out on dug-out
church chests in the counties of Herefordshire and

Worcestershire, presenting details of four chests recently dated by dendrochronology.

The injunctions of Archbishop Aelfric (d. 1005) tell us that dug-out chests were among sacred items in churches long before the Norman Conquest, after which various edicts were issued for their construction by kings and popes throughout the medieval period. Antiquarians and scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth century placed dug-outs in the earliest phase of chest development, given their simple and crude design, believing that once the tools and techniques were developed to make other forms of chest, they were no longer made. However, recent research challenges this theoretical framework.

With funding from the RFS, dendrochronology was carried out on six dug-out church chests in Herefordshire and Worcestershire in December 2020; four of the chests tested returned dates spanning from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.

The chest at St Michael's and All Angels Church in Kingstone, Herefordshire, returned a felling and conversion date between 1243 and 1273, Orleton II chest at St George's Church, Herefordshire, has a felling and conversion date between 1347–1377, the chest at St John the Baptist Church, Feckenham, Worcestershire, returned a date of between 1435–1465 for the felling and conversion of the chest base, and the chest in St Lawrence Church in Lindridge, Worcestershire has a felling and conversion date between 1519–1549.

Each chest was made from a locally grown tree. The Kingstone chest is the oldest dated dug-out chest in Britain and has the most intricate ironwork. The Lindridge chest, being the simplest in design, with simplistic ironwork, is the youngest of the four chests.

This research demonstrates that, contrary to the belief that dug-outs were crude, simple and easy to construct and should therefore be ascribed to the earliest period for church chests, they actually persisted the longest amount of time, from pre-Norman to post-Reformation. Evidence shows that they continued alongside other types throughout the medieval period and as late as the seventeenth century.

This research highlights that consistent and systematic recording of chests surviving in parish churches is much needed to form a chronology of the varying styles of dug-outs and their ironwork, and that county studies of church chests are vital to further our understanding of how important these artefacts were during the medieval period.



Chest in St Michael's and All Angels Church, Kingstone, Herefordshire. *Photo Rachel Sycamore.*