

# The churchwardens' chest at St Andrew's, Wickhambreaux, Kent

The chest is 116 cm wide, 56 cm high (or 44 cm without the feet) and 49 cm deep, and made of single boards 2.5 to 3 cm thick. Its four sides are held together by dovetail joints, reinforced by pegs. The timber is pale-coloured oak. The body stands on sledge feet of good size (8 cm wide, 12 cm high). The chest is bolted down so the feet cannot be examined. It has a later internal partition.

Overall, it is a strongly-made chest which is not showing any signs of movement in the joints and has not had any major repairs. The three hinges are 42 cm long, of tapered shape and with splayed ends. The chest has had three locks: one central lock (10.5 cm wide  $\times$  6.5 cm high) without escutcheon, and the left and right locks (18 cm wide  $\times$  10.5 cm high) with escutcheons. On the proper left a lock survives with frame of multiple scribe lines on the back. The lock latches engaged with double staples fixed underneath the lid on short iron straps with angled ends. Today only the left hand staples survive; the rebate for the central iron strap is shorter than the

others, consistent with the smaller size of the central lock. The lid has a thumb moulding, and applied mouldings are attached to the front and sides at three heights. They increase in width from 3 cm (top) to 4.2 cm (middle) and 5.5 cm (bottom). The front of the chest has iron studs reading 'R 1697 S' with 'W' and 'T' below the 'R' and 'S'. Presumably these are the churchwardens' initials RS and WT. (The 7 looks like a 1 but is quite unlike the 1 in '16'; in the seventeenth century, figures were often carved at odd angles. Here the escutcheon constricts the space available for the 7). The churchwardens' accounts do not survive. The striking thing about this chest is the features it shares with a sizeable group of chests from the Avesnes/Thiérache area of eastern Picardy, adjacent to the Belgian border, dating from the 1650–1725 period, as shown in Laurence Fligny's major study of Picardy furniture (1990, pp 207, 265, 288–91).

1. dovetail joints (a rare feature on English chests generally, and usually limited to smaller size work, e.g. drawers from 1700 onwards)
2. pegs between the dovetails (shown on some Avesnes chests)
3. the mid-height moulding (shown on some Avesnes chests, rare on English chests)
4. pierced (iron) escutcheons of a particular design (found on some Avesnes chests, not known at this time in England).<sup>1</sup>
5. the size of the chest is close to the 'modest' size range of the Avesnes chests: width 120 cm, 65 cm height, 65 cm depth (p 265).

The similar recesses with angled ends for the three plates holding the lock hasps (only the left hand one survives) suggest the chest had three locks from the start. None of the Avesnes chests illustrated do so — but the chest may



Front view of the 1697 chest in St Andrew's Church, Wickhambreaux, Kent. *Photo Chris Pickvance*



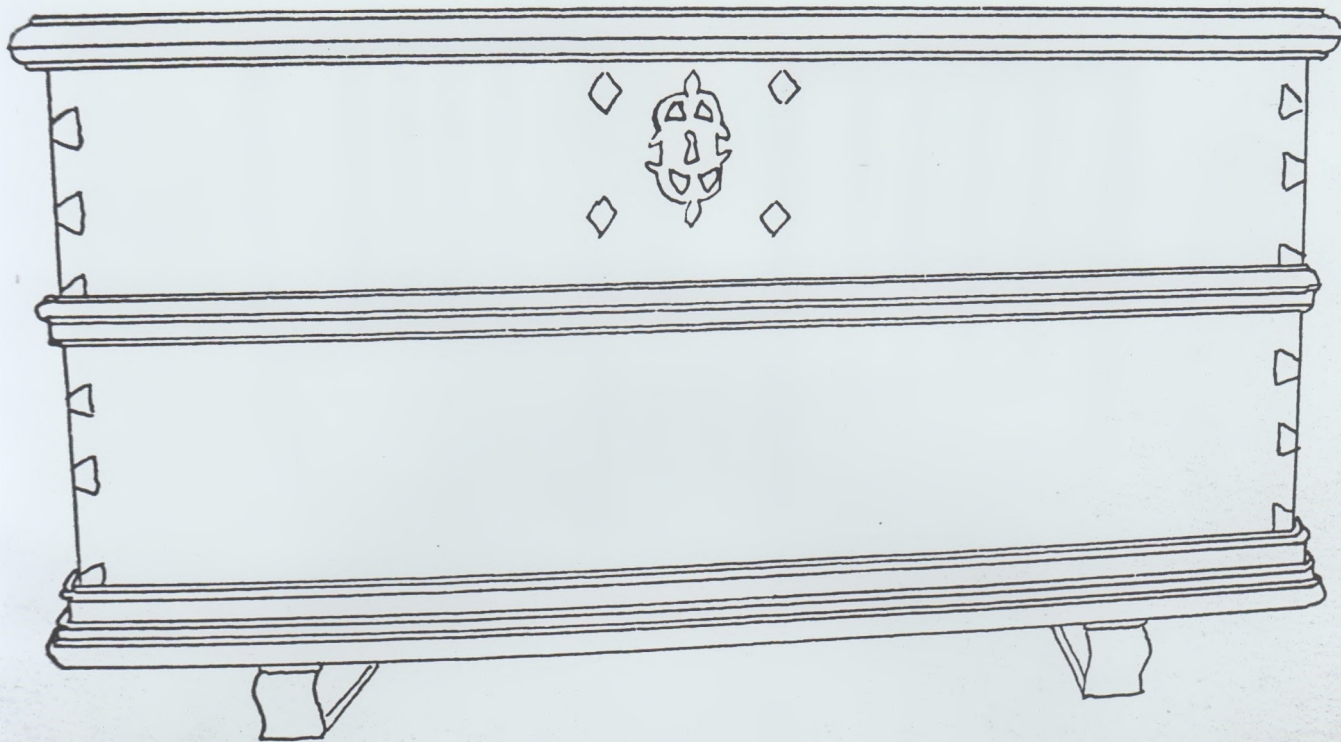


Inside view of the Wickhambreaux chest showing the strap hinges and the one surviving pair of staples on the lid.  
*Photo Chris Pickvance*



Lock showing the scribed lines on the frame. *Photo Chris Pickvance*





Drawing of an Avesnes area chest with three mouldings, 1650–1700. This chest is very similar to the Wickhambreaux chest.  
Laurence Fligny PIC 875

have been made for a particular client – even for French churchwardens (*marguilliers*). The tapered hinge is found both in France and England at this period.

However, the scribe lines on the lock are evidence of its English, not French, origin and the (iron) studded date and presumed churchwardens' initials are English in style. Studding starts in Spanish 17th century furniture to attach leather to wood. Functional and decorative studding on top of leather is well-known on Dutch and English furniture such as travelling chests, chests of drawers and side chairs in the late seventeenth century. Its use in 1697 is therefore in line with prevailing English fashion. 'Bible boxes' often have carved dates and owner's initials, but a few have studded dates and initials.

This suggests two possibilities: a) the chest was made as a churchwardens' (or similar) chest in the Avesnes area and imported soon after manufacture, with the studding added after it arrived in England, or b) the chest was made in England by an immigrant craftsman following the Avesnes model but adopting the English three lock/studded decoration model and using imported French escutcheons. It may be relevant that the years 1681 and 1685 saw large influxes of Huguenot refugees to England, including Kent (Edwards, 2002). The presence of an English lock, and of French escutcheons is compatible with both possibilities. In sum, a strong link between the Wickhambreaux chest and the Avesnes/Thiérache group can be established, but some uncertainties remain.

*Chris Pickvance*

<sup>1</sup> N.B. Some of the Avesnes chests have two iron brackets at the corners, and handles, unlike the present chest but as they were made over a 75 year period and clients' preferences would vary, some variation is not surprising.

Edwards, E. 2002 'Interpretations of the influence of the immigrant population in Kent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 123, pp. 275–92

Fligny, L. 1990 *Le Mobilier en Picardie 1200–1700*, Paris: Editions Picard

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