

THE CHURCH CHESTS AT ICKLINGHAM, SUFFOLK AND CHURCH BRAMPTON, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

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TWO REMARKABLE CHESTS survive in the churches of St James, Icklingham, Suffolk (formerly in All Saints) and St Botolph, Church Brampton, Northamptonshire (Pls XI–XIV). The Icklingham chest is outstanding for its immaculate state of preservation and its high quality workmanship, while the Church Brampton chest, though not identical, was once its twin. The chests have rightly received considerable attention from historians but the details of their construction have not previously been studied.¹ Sir Henry Dryden drew the Church Brampton chest in 1837.² The earliest published reference is in John Henry Parker's book on the churches of the Northampton archdeaconry (1849) where it is described as a 'curious chest with original ironwork in front which seems to be coeval with the church' (Anon. 1849). Viollet le Duc selected it to illustrate the typical late twelfth-century travelling chest, found in England and France (Viollet le Duc 1863, 24). In fact, it was unlikely to be a travelling chest in spite of its handles, because it is very unwieldy and its simplified decoration on the back indicates it was intended to be seen mainly from the front (Pl. XIIIb). The Icklingham chest which has two handles front and back and one each end was first described by the Suffolk Institute in 1853 as having 'fine Early English scrollwork in iron' (*Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, 1, 304), while Johnston in 1907 describes it as early 13th-century with 'ironwork practically identical in design [to Church Brampton which] must have been forged by the same smith' (Johnston 1907, 263).

The two chests are made in the same simple way, of radial oak boards held together on all sides by iron straps.³ The Icklingham lid is slightly convex. A series of straight grooved lines are carved around the upper rim of the Brampton base. On the front, both chests are decorated with vertical iron straps which branch out into pairs of spiral scrolls, each with a grooved profile. The welded junctions of the scrolls are covered with a straight bar. A cluster of scrolls frames the lock plate. At Icklingham the whole lock mechanism is still intact right down to the concealed button which releases the flap covering the key-hole. When the key is turned, it slides two bars to release a central catch and three catches to either side, all underneath the lid. At either end of the front of the chest are hasps for padlocks (now absent) and just next to these are small lock plates, their mechanisms, which also held the clasps, within the thickness of the wood. Along the upper edge of the front are small iron spikes which fit into holes in the lid, to ensure correct alignment. Since the seating plates around the spike holes are fastened with modern screws, the entire alignment device may be a later addition. The elaborate locking mechanism and conveniently located handles, two on each side and one at each end, indicate that the Icklingham chest was intended for use as a portable safe. Inside the chest on the left is the customary partition or till with two wooden shelves but it may have been inserted later. There is no till in the Church Brampton chest and its original lock mechanism is lost. The backs of both chests, clearly not intended for display, are covered with simpler paired scrolls which end in flat discs instead of the delicate foliage used elsewhere. Only the bindings and lids have noticeably different designs (Pls XIIa and XIIIa). The Icklingham chest is bound around the edges with straight bars of iron while at Brampton the corners are clasped by delicate straps ending in trefoils and fleurs-de-lis. The Icklingham lid repeats the pattern of paired iron scrolls. The Brampton lid was carefully reconstructed on the drawings made in 1888 by Cory who was able to trace its design from marks left on the

wood.⁴ The drawings show straight hinge straps punched with small flowers and a zig zag border, which still survive, and the spaces between them filled with separate bunches of iron foliage, now lost. All over the Icklingham chest, the nails holding the scrolls have squared raised heads, increasing the decorative relief of the scrollwork (Pl. XIIa). The nail heads at Church Brampton are round and slightly convex but not forged with the uniform accuracy of Icklingham. The scrollwork on both chests ends in 'cut-out' foliage terminals. These were made by flattening the end of a bar of iron and cutting it with a tool shaped rather like a biscuit mould. In this way almost identical two-dimensional terminals could be reproduced quickly and accurately.⁵ Plaster casts taken from the two chests show that the terminals reproduce the same basic design although seemingly not cut from the same template (Pl. XIVb). The design repertoire consists of a flower, asymmetrical leaf, trefoil, fleur-de-lis, poly-lobed leaf and 'cleft' quatrefoil. The Brampton cleft quatrefoil was only used on the lid and is now lost. A detail which both sets of terminals share is a circular punch used at the base of the asymmetrical leaf and between the lobes of the poly-lobed leaf. This detail is also found on the very simple straps on the chest at Tythby, Nottinghamshire. The close similarity between the overall design of the Icklingham and Church Brampton chests and their detailed decoration suggests they were both made by the same smith or in the same workshop. The Tythby chest is probably of the same date but its quality bears no comparison with the other two. A fourth chest with cut-out foliage terminals is found at Adderbury, Oxfordshire. Its smooth, regular boards and ball feet, together with the hinge straps and locks would appear to be co-eval with the inscription carved on its front: 'Tho Wyat Tho Bagley Ch Wardens 1725'. However the decorative straps attached to the lid, sides and corners without any function could well be reused from a medieval chest. The straps on the lid, in particular, are too short for the present chest and are attached back to front. Their decorative terminals point to the back and the plain stumps which should curl over the back to form hinges, point towards the opening edge. The straps are covered with a heavy punched design, end in a crude form of fleur-de-lis, and have three or four pairs of asymmetrical cut-out leaves branching from them (Randall 1980, 92, Pl.96).

Because the two chests were clearly related in origin, Dr John Fletcher kindly agreed to give them a dendrochronological examination. In calculating these dendrochronological dates it is generally assumed that all oak trees have about twenty-five years growth of sapwood which has to be stripped from the durable heart wood before a board can be used. If no sapwood is present, it is impossible to deduce more than a *terminus post quem* from the remaining rings: the carpenter may have trimmed several decades of heart wood growth to make his boards fit. However the boards on these chests are all quite wide (see note 3) and an economical carpenter would try to use wood which required the minimum trimming. The Icklingham wood was in excellent condition and came from a tree that was around 400 years old. Its latest ring was 1230 but because no sap wood was present, the estimated date of felling was 'after 1255'.⁶ The Church Brampton boards were badly decayed and hard to measure but they produced a terminal ring date of 1217 from a sequence of 169 rings. The estimated date of felling is therefore about a decade earlier than the wood of the Icklingham chest. However, the two sets of boards were not from the same tree.

Without knowing the history of the chests, dating their construction and ironwork poses a problem. Their style and technique suggest a date of c.1290–1330, which is rather late for the dendrochronology. The earliest known example of cut-out ironwork is on the doors of St Elizabeth's Church, Marburg, made in the 1270s (Kastner 1924, 28–31) and the technique remained widely used in Germany during the Middle Ages. The first dateable example in England is on the (much restored) west doors of Lichfield Cathedral, probably

completed in the 1290s, perhaps by the death of Bishop Longespée in 1295 (Irvine 1882, 249–53; VCH Staffordshire, 150). Cut-out decorations on wrought ironwork gradually superseded the much more delicate stamped technique which flourished in England from c.1240–1350. To produce stamped designs in relief a smith had to carve a die in hardened iron, a process closely related to coin manufacture. Starkie Gardner surmised that cut-outs were ‘just the sort of rendering we might get from a smith set to work from a drawing without sections and unacquainted with the process of stamping’ (Starkie Gardner 1927, 87). In its early stages, cut-out iron decoration derived its inspiration very closely from the contemporary stamped work. Both made use of tight spiral scrolls: the stamped decoration of the York Chapter House vestibule doors, made in the 1290s, is comparable to the cut-out work at Lichfield. Also the use of a neat bar to cover welds is found for instance on the stamped work of Thomas of Leighton on the Eleanor Grille of 1294 at Westminster Abbey (Geddes 1975, 396–97), and on the Icklingham and Brampton chests. Lastly the stamped and cut-out terminal designs themselves are comparable around 1300 but develop differently later in the century. Initially with both techniques, small designs (up to c.5cm) of trefoils, lobed asymmetrical leaves, poly-lobed leaves are common. These designs continue to be used on later stamped work, for instance on examples of c.1350–70 on the doors of Wacton and Wickmere churches in Norfolk. With a few notable exceptions on the church doors at Eastwood, Essex and Worksop Priory, Nottinghamshire (R.C.H.M. Essex IV, 41–44; Starkie Gardner 1927, Pl.16), cut-out designs became simpler, cruder and larger. Lobes are omitted from the asymmetrical leaf, and the poly-lobed leaf becomes a simple ogival terminal as on the chests from the Durham Court of Chancery c.1345⁷ and Mattishall, Norfolk,⁸ and the church door at Meare, Somerset, 1456–93.⁹ Within this framework of development in England, the Icklingham and Brampton chests are clearly products of the early phase of the cut-out technique c.1290–1330, with their designs still related to contemporary stamped work. However, the detail of the punched rosettes on the lid straps of the Brampton chest would be most unusual at this date. Such rosettes are commonly found on late 14th-century strap hinges on church doors, for instance at Wacton and Hellesdon, Norfolk and Letchworth, Hertfordshire. It is therefore possible that the Brampton hinges are a later addition, perhaps replacing straps more like the corner brackets on the same chest.

Although the dendrochronological evidence has suggested construction dates ‘after 1245 and after 1253’ for the chests, all the comparable ironwork comes from the end of the 13th century and later. Even if the chests were made in the Empire and were contemporary with the ironwork at Marburg (1270s) they would still be considerably later than the tree ring date. However the ironwork does not resemble examples in the Empire, and both its layout and details fit into an English context around 1300. It would therefore appear that the carpenter removed more than the sapwood when he prepared his boards.

Any definite historical connection between the two chests is unknown. In ironwork (if not in carpentry) they are far superior in quality of workmanship to most other medieval church chests (even in Suffolk which has many good examples). They are more likely to have been made for one of the great religious houses such as Ely Cathedral or Bury St Edmunds Abbey and been acquired independently by the two churches some time afterwards. Icklingham, only seven miles from Bury, was once part of the liberty of St Edmund. There is a grant of land of c.1182–1211 to one Ralph son of the smith of Icklingham (*Radulpho filio fabri de Ichelingham*) recorded in the Kalendar of Abbot Samson (Davis 1954, 144–45). Robert of Icklingham was sacrist and prior in c.1390–1425 (Thompson 1982, 93–95). But such connections do not explain the presence of the other chest at Church Brampton which was formerly in the Lincoln diocese. Much later, the

manor of Church Brampton and the right of presentation to the living belonged to Sir Christopher Hatton, the distinguished Elizabethan statesman and antiquary. There is no record of his having owned or known of the chest but he did acquire parts of the Bishop of Ely's palace in Holborn. Bishop John de Kirkeby (1286–90) who founded the palace could well have employed East Anglian craftsmen there or had such a chest brought from Ely.

NOTES

- 1 Icklingham: *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.* 1 (1853), 304; Anon. 1904, 205; *East Anglian Miscellany* 1905, no. 1548 – W.L.J. of Bury St Edmunds states that the ironwork in 1905 was in a good state of preservation and had been restored in 1866; St James's church was restored by Charles Edward Gibbs and re-opened in 1866 (*Directory and Gazetteer of Suffolk 1868*, 275); Lueer 1904, 36; Johnston 1907, 265; Starkie Gardner 1927, 84. Church Brampton: Dryden; Anon. 1849; Parker 1850, 125; Viollet le Duc 1863, 24; Labarta, n.d.; Roe 1929, 13–15; Johnston 1907, 263.
- 2 Dryden 1837. This rough pencil sketch shows the chest almost as battered as it is today. On the front of the chest there was still a pair of scrolls on the bottom of the centre-right strap.
- 3 The Icklingham chest is 176cm long, 44cm high, 54cm wide; Church Brampton 190cm long, 46 cm high, 51cm wide.
- 4 Drawings by M. Cory, Aug. 1888, entitled 'Oak Chest at Church Brampton restored', now deposited in Northamptonshire County Record Office, NAS 55/3–6. Dr Geddes would like to thank the Revs Jepps and Smith of Church Brampton for their help.
- 5 A full discussion of the cut-out technique in ironwork is in Geddes 1978, 162–74.
- 6 Dr Geddes would like to thank Dr Fletcher for coming to examine the chests and making his material available before publication; Fletcher and Tapper 1984, 123, table 5.
- 7 Cescinsky and Gribble 1922, II, 8–9. The chest is closely dated by its painted heraldry.
- 8 Now in St Peter Hungate Museum, Norwich.
- 9 Pevsner 1958, 234 and Pl. 24b. Nave built by Abbot Selwood 1456–93.

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Abbreviations for MSS

- Dryden Sir Henry Dryden, drawing of Church Brampton chest in 1837, Dryden Collection, Central Library, Northampton.

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