



1. An elm 'joined' chest made in the north of England and dated to the mid seventeenth Century. These items of furniture are becoming increasingly popular for the storage of linen and blankets etc. A characteristic of elm wood is its vulnerability to warping and woodworm, hence elm chests are less common in the market than oak. This chest is in good condition with little restoration, has an attractive patination and is a rare item. Valued at around £1000-£1200.



2. Front of Chest showing 'nulling' decoration on the top and bottom rails, styles and muntins. The panels are carved with a 'Yorkshire' diamond motif containing a simple flower/rosette design. Also seen is the iron lockplate, with the hasp missing.



3. Inside of the chest showing the position of the 'till'. This lidded box was used for storage of small items. Although often called the 'candle' or 'herb' box, it was more likely used for keeping things such as quills, documents, cutlery and small personal possessions. Not all chest were built with these boxes and many chests have them missing, damaged or without the lid. A complete and undamaged till will add value to the chest. Note at the back of the chest the fixing of the 'staple' hinge.

Old but modern the popularity of the chest

by Graham Gower

If there is one word which could encapsulate the spirit of old England, it must surely be 'oak'. This majestic wood, epitomised by the hewn and fashioned timbers seen in the old buildings of England is legendary. 'Solid as oak', 'old as oak' and 'Hearts of Oak' are common sayings and reflect the abiding association we have with this particular wood. From this association comes one of the great traditions of furniture making. Plentiful in the forests of England, oak was the choice until supplanted by the popularity of walnut and mahogany from the late seventeenth century.

Nonetheless the tradition of using oak continued and was to regain its popularity during the gothic revival of the Victorian period and later with the rise of the arts and crafts movement. A further interest was shown during the 1930s, with the 'tudoresque' influence seen in architecture and interior design. However, the heyday of English oak furniture was undoubtedly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period when woodworkers turned their skills to producing a range of fine and functional furniture.

Interest in early oak furniture has never been stronger. Prices begin at around £600 and reach thousands of pounds for quality or rare examples. A pleasing piece of furniture from this period can be obtained for under £1500. For example you could buy a joint stool, a small side table, a panel backed chair or a boarded chest. Naturally prices will reflect the merits of a particular item and condition and those carrying a lower price tag will invariably carry some faults or restorations.

Highly popular in this price range are chests, which are considered to be functional and decorative items for the modern home. Perhaps one of the oldest items of domestic furniture, chests originated during the Middle Ages when they were used for storage purposes, as well as doubling up as tables and seats. Quite often these pieces of furniture are called 'coffers', although the term chest is generally used, a coffer being seen as a smaller, portable box with a rounded lid. In addition there are hutches, arks, trunks, boxes, mule chests, dower chests and chests with drawers, names given to various forms of box like constructions used for storage.

Historically the chest was considered an important item of household furniture, as shown in the many surviving wills and probate inventories of the period. In a Surrey will dated 1607 we read - 'one Waynecott Chest wth the locke and keye wch heretofore was my Fathers', while another records 'one greate joyned cheste' (1603). These family chests would have been used to store a variety of household goods from clothes to weapons. With the passage of time a bottom drawer was added to the base of the chest. This was to offset the inconvenience of removing top layers to reach items stored at the bottom, an innovation which gradually led to the development of the now familiar chest of drawers.

Usually the wood chosen to make chests was oak due to its durability and strength. Some are found made of other woods such as elm, which is prone to warping, chestnut and interestingly cedar, which was noted for its



4. Back of the chest showing the linked iron wire staple hinge in situ, irregular saw marks and rough chamfering on the back panels. These are indicators of the originality of the chest, which is further shown by irregular shaped dowel pegs, shrinkage of panels, boards and lid along the grain and discolouration of wood where expected after generations of use.

moth-repelling properties. Imported oak from northern Europe was also used. Commonly known as 'wainscot oak', this was desired for its finer and more even grain and used for making better quality chests.

The earliest method of construction was basic, using planks cut to length and fixed together using oak dowel pegs or iron nails. Occasionally the back and front boards overlapped the sides or were rabbeted for greater strength. The lid was attached using wrought iron strap hinges or linked iron wire staples, and the end panels were carried down beyond the base board. These were cut with an inverted 'V' shape to form crude feet. On the front an iron lock plate was usually fitted with a hinged and shaped hasp fastening. These constructions are commonly known as 'boarded' or 'plank' chests. Decoration used was often minimal and relied on carved geometric or floral designs with some chests being painted. Generally smaller than 'joined'

chests these simpler items can be purchased upwards of £500-£600. However for well decorated examples and those of an early date prices will be higher.

For most people the traditional looking chest is the 'joined' or 'panelled' chest, which broadly describes its construction. Popular near the end of the seventeenth century these chests were skillfully made, using a joined frame construction fixed by mortise-and-tenon joints and dowel pegs. In this construction the stiles were extended below the bottom boards and rails to form the legs, which can vary in length. Between the top and bottom rails and the four stiles, thin oak panels with chamfered backs were fitted, with each separated by muntins. The front panels carried the main decorative work, usually carved and enhanced by designs on the framework, for example a 'lunette frieze' along the top rail.

The lids of these chests are either of panel or board construction, with the latter usually having battens fixed at each end for fixing and stability. Under the lid but attached to one end of the chest and running full depth is often found a 'till', a narrow and shallow lidded box, sometimes referred to as a 'candle' or 'herb' box, in which small items were kept. These compartments are also found in boarded chests and both types of construction share similar forms of iron locks and hinges.

The desirability of owning an 'old oak chest' has pushed prices upwards of £2000 for those with quality carving in fine condition. However you can still buy a quality chest for between £600-£1000 although the buyer must be wary. There are many reproductions chests, particularly from the nineteenth century, plus those made from, or which incorporate antique timbers, which to the untrained eye can be deceptive. Also the carved decoration may not be all original, having either been enhanced or added to at some later period, particularly when it comes to carved dates and initials.

As to be expected after centuries of use most chests will show some repairs, such as replaced baseboards, restored feet or a mended lid. Many will have lost their original hinges or locks or have the till removed. There will be varying degrees of wood shrinkage, splitting or warping, usually taken as an indicator of age and authenticity. But above all one cannot mistake the mellow patination that comes with furniture of some antiquity, especially with pieces of early oak. Moreover, it goes without saying that those chests which have been extensively repaired with old or new wood, or badly damaged through woodworm or misuse should be priced accordingly.

Familiarity with construction methods, styles and woods is an advantage when buying. Nevertheless a prospective buyer should seek out a reputable dealer in early oak furniture. This will ensure the satisfactory purchase of a genuine 'old oak chest', thereby bringing a piece of history into your home.

Our website at www.antiques-info.co.uk carries an 8,000 Specialist Dealer directory which includes oak furniture. See p90.

Price Guide

Below are nine examples of coffers from the Auctions Price Guide on our website at www.antiques-info.co.uk These have been chosen to give the reader a good indication of the price range and the different types of chests and woods available in the auctions market.

Remember that you are usually buying 'as seen' at auction and that the prices quoted below are hammer prices so add about 15%.



John Taylor, Louth, Lincs. Late 17thC oak coffer. £570.



Woolley & Wallis, Salisbury, Wilts. An early 18thC oak and pine coffer, incised initials T H, 4ft wide. £180.



Cheffins, Cambridge. A Charles II oak coffer, three panelled hinged top above an s-scroll carved frieze, 100cm wide. £780.



Dockree's, Manchester. An antique oak coffer, rearranged, partly 17thC. £280.



Lambert & Foster, Tenterden, Kent. A 17thC oak coffer. £1,100.



Dockree's, Manchester. An 18thC oak mule chest, 52in wide. £440.



Gorrings, Lewes, Sussex. A 17thC Spanish walnut coffer with planked top. £1,700.



Lambert & Foster, Tenterden, Kent. 18thC three panelled coffer, 37.5in wide. £470.



Clevedon Salerooms, Bristol. 17thC elm coffer, the apron carved 'THE 24 MAI ANO 1646 JAMES GRIFFIN'. £7,000.