

The Slow Arrival of Renaissance Influence on English Furniture: A Study of the 1519 Silkstede, Shanklin and the 1539 Garstang, Cirencester Chests

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There is a large number of surviving early chests in England, most of which are today found in churches, colleges and museums. However, a knowledge of the development of chests depends on being able to date their different types of construction and decoration.¹ The simple technology of dug-out chests can be misleading as they continue into the late seventeenth century. Incised dates are less reliable than dates that are part of a carved design, but are both almost unknown on pre-1500 chests in England. Sometimes, documentary evidence can be linked to a specific chest but most often it cannot. Occasionally, painted decoration is helpful, as in the case of the boarded de Bury chest from Durham Cathedral in the Burrell collection with its painted coats of arms.² In general, however, coats of arms have to be viewed with caution since they may have been added to augment the status of a later owner, or refer to families rather than to individuals. Stylistic analysis is not always useful since traditional preferences can mean that chest decoration lags behind the latest styles.

Given these limitations, the development of dendrochronology in recent decades has been of great help in dating early chests. This is especially true since the mid-1980s when it was realized that Baltic oak as well as domestic oak was in use in the construction of chests found in England.³ Nevertheless, dendrochronology only dates timber, so questions such as whether the dated timbers are original, whether undateable timbers would yield a different result, and when the timber was used are always a matter of judgement. By contrast, there is a very large number of surviving chests from the late sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, a small proportion of which are dated, which makes it easier to grasp how styles of construction and decoration were changing over that period. As Roe noted, ‘the majority of dates actually appearing on furniture belong to the seventeenth century, any previous to the last quarter of the sixteenth being of greatest rarity’.⁴

The period from 1500 to 1570 is in fact something of a ‘black hole’ in the study of chests. While chests described as belonging to this period (e.g. ‘Henry VIII’) are

¹ Chinnery’s typology of chest construction which distinguishes four pure types (dug-out, boarded, clamp-fronted and framed panelled) and allows for chests to combine pure types will be followed here [Chinnery (1979), pp. 69–74, 104–24]. This treats as secondary features lid shape, the presence of legs and plinths which are given more importance by Eames (1977), pp. 108–10.

² Chinnery (1979), p. 105.

³ Bridge and Miles (2011).

⁴ Roe (1920), p. 34.

available on the art market, scholarship in support of such attributions has lagged behind. Even dendrochronology has not been used much in this period. Of the thirty-four dendro-dated chests listed in a recent survey, only six are from 1500 or after, and, of these, two are dug-out chests, two are early sixteenth-century chests in Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and two are late seventeenth-century Black Mountains chests where clamp-fronted construction probably survived longest.⁵

The *Mary Rose*, which sank in 1545, yielded fifty crates and small chests, all of which were boarded. Only three of the latter were decorated. Two (both with legs) had lightly incised rectangular and diagonal patterns, or compass-drawn circles and were probably English. The other (without legs) had a façade with an incised merchant's mark within a shield flanked by simple fluting with circular depressions above and below (possibly a stylised reference to linenfold, and was probably Flemish). There were also walnut chests with dovetail joints, a technique well-known in chests from France, Spain and Italy but rare in England.⁶

Dated chests from the 1500–1570 period are thus extremely rare and dendrochronological analyses of chests in this period extremely few. The aim of the present article is to contribute to knowledge of chests in this period by documenting two dated chests from 1519 and 1539 and analysing their place in the development of chests in England and especially in the arrival of Renaissance influence on chests. The fact that the article is based on only two chests should be borne in mind; further detailed analyses are needed to test its conclusions. The construction and decoration of each chest will be described and then analysed, after which the focus will be on their place in the development of English chests. The two chests, which are located in St Blasius Church, Shanklin and the Garstang Chapel, St John the Baptist Church, Cirencester, are referred to as the Silkstede and Garstang chests.

THE SILKSTEDE 1519 CHEST IN ST BLASIIUS CHURCH, SHANKLIN

As one of the few dated or dateable early sixteenth-century chests the Silkstede chest has received surprisingly little attention (Figure 1). Its most notable feature is the inscription THOMAS SILKSTEDE PRIOR which connects it to Winchester Cathedral where Thomas Silkstede was Prior from 1498–1524.

A 1795 engraving of the chest by Charles Tomkins was published in his survey of the Isle of Wight; the chest was one of only four illustrated in Shaw and Meyrick's 1836 volume on early furniture; and a drawing by Stone appeared in 1890 (Figures 2–4).⁷ Roe included the chest, with a small photo, in his major 1902 study and again in his discussion of the few pre-late sixteenth-century dated chests in his *History of Oak Furniture*.⁸ Eames referred to it in a footnote in her survey of medieval furniture.⁹

⁵ Bridge and Miles (2011). Corpus Christi College was founded in 1517. The chests are 4 ft 6 in and 5 ft plain boarded chests with three Gothic lock plates, the larger one with iron straps on the front (Personal communication, Julian Reid, College Archivist, April 2015).

⁶ Knell (1997); Richards with Every (2013).

⁷ Tomkins (1796) and Stone (1890) cited in Smith (2002); Shaw and Meyrick (1836).

⁸ Roe (1902), pp. 104 and 110; Roe, (1920), p. 34.

⁹ Eames (1977), p. 178, fn. 458.



1 The Silkstede chest, 1519. Oak. *St Blasius Church, Shanklin, Isle of Wight*/photo Dave Dana

Only in 2002 was an article devoted to the chest, by Smith, which outlines its history, carving and the links of the carving with work in Winchester Cathedral but does not analyse it in detail.¹⁰ Smith states that St Blasius Church was the chapel of the Manor at Shanklin which was owned from the twelfth century by the Lisle family, ‘a Hampshire family well known to Bishop Fox and probably to Prior Silkstede’, and suggests the chest may have come from Winchester through this connexion.¹¹ The chest was in St Blasius church in 1795 when Tomkins engraved it, was later reported as being in storage at Manor Farm, and was placed back in the church sometime after its enlargement in the 1850s.¹² Further comments by the above authors will be introduced below. After examining the chest’s construction and decoration this section will focus on whether the chest is English or French, a question not discussed by earlier authors.

¹⁰ Smith (2002).

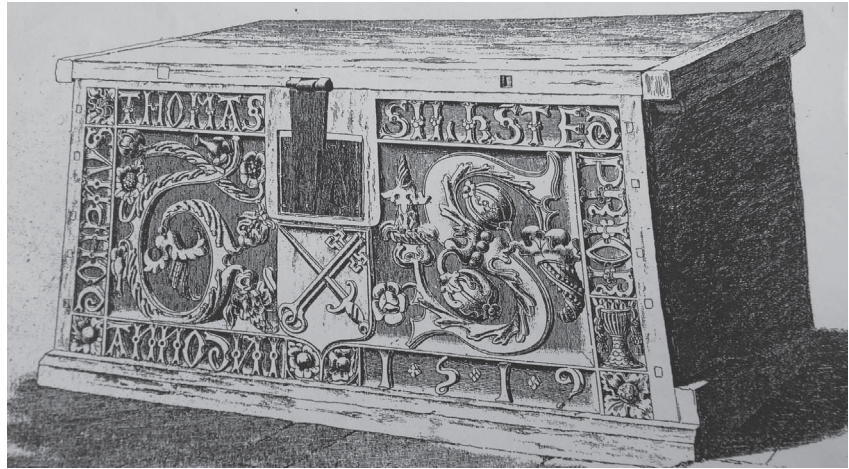
¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

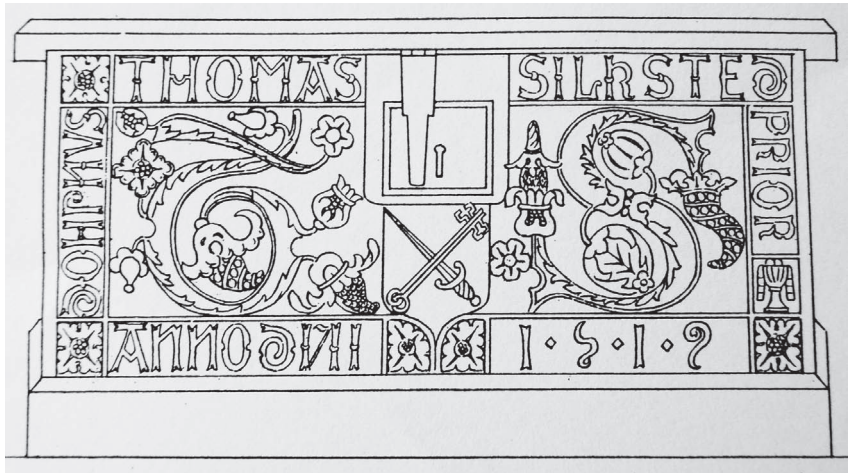
2 The Silkstede chest. Engraving from Charles Tomkins, *A Tour of the Isle of Wight* (1796)



3 The Silkstede chest. Engraving from Henry Shaw and Samuel Rush Meyrick, *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* (1836)



4 The Silkstede chest. Drawing from Percy Goddard Stone, *The Architectural Antiquities of the Isle of Wight* (1890)





5 Detail of the Silkstede chest, showing part of the inscription and lock plate and reserve.
The author

CONSTRUCTION

This is a large boarded chest which today rests on a stand.¹³ However, it has undergone various modifications which need to be identified in order to understand its original form. This will involve a close study of the chest itself; the engravings and drawing will also be referred to where relevant.¹⁴ The original timber has the close, straight grain, apparently of Baltic oak, a type associated with Germany, Poland and points east. This was the highest quality oak and was extensively available in western Europe and was most easy to work for the carver. The sides and lower front board are quarter (i.e. radially) sawn revealing hard medullary rays; the rest of the original oak is not quarter sawn. When examined close up, the grain of the front and sides shows ‘stripes’ of different colours (Figure 5).

The front, back and sides of the chest are each made of two horizontal boards, butt jointed and (later?) glued; all but the lower back board are original (Figure 6). The joints between the sides and the back and front are simple rebate joints held with square wooden pegs (five are visible above the plinth, one is presumably concealed)

¹³ It is not a ‘a framed and panelled rectangular box’ as stated by Smith (2002), p. 14. The lid is 143 cm wide and 67.5 cm deep, the box is 133 cm wide. The chest (including stand) is 88 cm high with lid closed. The lid is 5.5 cm thick (4 cm being original and 1.5 cm the later addition). The front, back and sides of the chest are 5 cm thick, making it a very heavy chest.

¹⁴ The latter images have some limitations, e.g. the artists may have been less concerned with the structure of the chest than with the carved façade and so details of the former may have been omitted. Also they contain some errors, e.g. the 1795 engraving has an empty square at the lower end of the right hand inscription band which does not exist, and the 1890 drawing does not show the detailed design of the lettering of the inscription, but these do not matter since the chest is extant.

- 6 The Silkstede chest, internal view of back.
The author



- 7 The Silkstede chest, showing hinge spiked into lid and back. *The author*



and later nails. The lid has two layers: the upper part (four long boards of re-used oak) has been fixed on top of the earlier, thicker, two-board part which has a shallow rebate all round to allow it to fit closely over the box (Figure 6).¹⁵ The oak of the earlier part is identical to that of the upper board of the back (it is dull and lacks the ‘striped’ grain of the front and sides), suggesting that they are of the same date. The lid has two short iron hinges which are spiked invisibly into the lid and back rather than being nailed on (Figure 7). A plinth made of narrow boards is applied to the base of the front and sides. It is not known whether the chest originally had a plinth, but the engravings show it had one by 1795, and that this was renewed between 1795 and 1836.¹⁶ The

¹⁵ The 1795 and 1836 engravings show the original lid with cleats extending it beyond the width of the chest. The upper part was added after 1836 but the 1890 drawing does not show the lid and lid cleats separately so a more precise date cannot be given. The earlier part of the lid shows old woodworm.

¹⁶ For Eames, the Silkstede chest is a ‘plinth chest’ but this term is ambiguous [Eames (1977), p. 178]. Some plinths are original to the chest, or are old replacements, whilst others are later additions, e.g. to support a chest whose stiles would otherwise need repair. Plinths have a mix of decorative and functional purposes.

current plinth, which has stepped corners, is different again and is thus at least the third. The stand looks twentieth century and this is supported by the fact that none of the images shows the chest with a stand.¹⁷ Inside the chest there were originally two till boxes for small items, but only the right-hand one survives. There is no groove in the upper half of the back for a high shelf. The lock is fixed within a recess in the lock reserve; it is contained within the thickness of the front and is not visible from inside. The lock plate is not original but has been there at least since 1836. Three old nails and nail holes are visible near the top right hand of the current lock plate suggesting that it is the fourth lock plate and that the others were only very slightly larger (Figure 5).¹⁸

INTERPRETATION

The Silkstede chest is a boarded chest. In both England and France there are many surviving examples of boarded chests prior to 1550.¹⁹ However, in construction they show a number of differentiating features. English examples are almost always butt jointed and held with nails or pegs, whereas French examples often, and especially on finely carved examples, have dovetail joints, which are almost unknown on English chests.²⁰ The pegged rebate joints found on the Silkstede chest are of a type found in both countries but are atypical of a French chest with high quality carving.

The lock plate is a later addition and is of the small–medium rectangular type current in England from 1550 to 1750.²¹ The types of lock plate current in England in the early sixteenth century were larger: the concave-sided lock plate (a design of Germanic origin),²² and the rectangular ‘Gothic’ lock plate often secured by buttress-like iron bands, as on the Garstang chest, both of which had ridged hasp protection (Figure 18). In France, in contrast, high-quality chests had large, and often elaborate, lock plates.²³ What is striking about the Silkstede chest is that there are no nail holes in the upper part of the lock reserve to indicate that the chest ever had a large, elaborate French lock plate. Figure 8 shows the lock plate on an imported French chest at the Church of the Holy Cross, Crediton, Devon.²⁴ Also, in general, unlike here, lock plates fit the lock reserve closely, implying coordination between the designer of the façade

¹⁷ The chest’s most recent restorations involve the use of deal. The lower part of the back is now a modern deal board. The bottom of the chest is made of five tongue and grooved deal boards fixed front to back to deal battens attached inside the stand. There are also narrow deal boards all round inside the front, back and sides. There are further supporting timbers to hold the chest together.

¹⁸ In 1795 the hasp is of stepped design, it has a very narrow end and a parallel-sided shutter is shown over the keyhole. In 1836 the lock plate and hasp have changed; the hasp has a wider end and the keyhole is covered by a tear-shaped shutter. By 1890 the hasp and lock plate are identical but the shutter is missing.

¹⁹ The two main surveys of medieval and Renaissance French furniture are Boccador (1988) and Thirion (1998). The dates given in these works are based on stylistic analysis. Boccador relied on Thirion to check the dates of the furniture in her book [Jacqueline Boccador, personal communication]. Only in the last fifteen years has dendrochronology been applied to French furniture — see www.dendro.fr.

²⁰ The two surveys each include only one pegged, carved, boarded chest [Boccador (1988), p. 94; Thirion (1998), p. 38].

²¹ Chinnery (1979), p. 144.

²² An example from the 1510s is the Brasenose College Bursar’s chest [Eames (1977), pp. 160–62].

²³ See Eames (1977), Fig. 43c; Thirion (1998), p. 77; Tracy (2001), p. 146. The possibility that some such lock plates are later copies cannot be ruled out.

²⁴ Tracy (2001), p. 146.



8 Elaborate French lock plate on a chest in the Church of the Holy Cross, Crediton, Devon.
The author

and the supplier of the lock.²⁵ On the other hand, the hinges are interesting as they are of a type used in France in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries where the hinge is spiked invisibly into the timber (Figure 7). This is a sophisticated alternative to the iron strap hinges prevalent on most English chests before 1500. The nailed-on butt hinge was probably introduced in England on chests only around 1500, e.g. it is present on the Brasenose College Bursar's chest.

In sum, in terms of its construction, the Silkstede chest is not typical of finely-carved boarded French chests of the period because it lacks dovetailed joints and never had a large lock plate, but its hinges and lock plate are not typical of English chests either.

DECORATION

The carved front of the Silkstede chest consists of an inscribed frame and vigorously decorated central reserve. The inscription, which is interspersed with rosettes, has been read in various ways. In their brief comments, Shaw and Meyrick read it as: DOMINUS THOMAS SILKST: D. PRIOR ANNO DNI 1519; for Roe it read: DOMINUS THOMAS SILKSTED PRIOR, ANNO DNI 1519; and for Smith: DOHPNUS [*sic*] THOMAS SILKSTED PRIOR ANNO DMI 1512.²⁶ The date is part of the design. The central reserve with the decorated initials TS and a coat of arms is

²⁵ The fact that the lock plate is recessed is also unusual; this may have been necessary to allow the (later-fixed?) hasp to enter the hasp slot.

²⁶ Shaw and Meyrick (1836), p. 38; Roe (1920), p. 34; Smith (2002), p. 15. Another reading is DOM'NUS PRIOR THOMAS SILKSTED, PRIOR, ANNO D'NI 1519 — see the anonymous review of Shaw and Meyrick in *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, Vol. 35, p. 156. The tilde over the N in DNI indicates omitted letters.



9 Detail of the Silkstede chest, showing 1512/9 date. *The author*

discussed in detail below. The space left between THOMAS and SILKSTEDE for a lock means there is no doubt that the façade was designed to be a chest front rather than being a carved fragment later used as a chest front, which is not unknown.

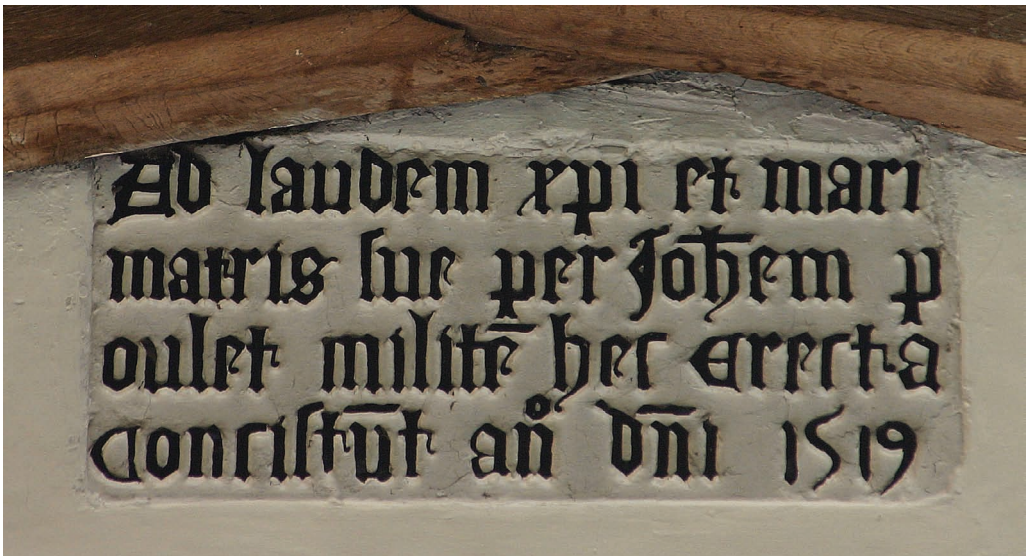
Regarding the date, the Tomkins engraving shows it as 1512 (Figure 2) and Smith also reads the date as 1512, whereas it was read as 1519 by Shaw and Meyrick, and Roe. The 1795 Tomkins engraving shows a clear 2 (and an unbroken 5) whereas Shaw and Meyrick show an incomplete digit which they read as a 9. Smith prefers 2, since she notes that today the 9 is incomplete and contains a replaced lower part of lighter oak, which she considers to be compatible with an original 2 (Figure 9).²⁷ However another possibility is that the last digit was 9 and was damaged by the time Tomkins made his engraving and that he wrongly ‘corrected’ it to read 2. Evidence supportive of this comes from two examples of dates on a presbytery screen in Winchester Cathedral and a donor panel in Basing, Hants church in which the 2 is ‘open’ and the 9 is ‘closed’ (Figures 10 and 11).²⁸ The ‘closed’ top of the 2 on the façade today, and the downward curve are unlike the 2 in figure 10 and like the 9 in figure 11. On balance, therefore, the 1519 date seems more likely than the 1512 date. The precise date may have a bearing on why the chest was made, but it is the fact that it was made in the 1510–1520 period which is most significant in terms of Renaissance stylistic development.

²⁷ Smith (2002), p. 16. The bottom of the 5 is also missing. The position of the 2 close to the bottom edge of the chest means that it would have been vulnerable to damage, as has been the 5. The fact that the chest has had at least three plinths is compatible with the likelihood of damage along the base of the chest.

²⁸ I am indebted to Nicholas Riall for this information.



10 Presbytery screen, Winchester Cathedral, 1525. *Nicholas Riall*



11 Paulet donor panel, Basing church, Hampshire, 1519. *Nicholas Riall*

The carved front of the chest is an exceptional piece of work. Roe wrote that the chest is ‘an instance of a conventual piece of furniture enriched with the fanciful lettering of the early Renaissance’ and later, noting the Silkstede/Winchester connection, that ‘it is seldom, indeed, that the origin of a movable piece of furniture is so clearly indicated by its carved decoration as in the case of this fine coffer’.²⁹ The carving of the chest is of high quality; for the highest quality compare with the two chest fronts at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs or the Azay-le-Rideau chest in the Louvre.³⁰

The lettering is in a Renaissance style in which the serifs have a distinctive split or wedge shape. This started in Italy in the early fifteenth century and English, Welsh and Scottish examples are found throughout the sixteenth century.³¹ The style is found on the Garstang chest, dated 1539, discussed below, and on the Cotehele cupboard front whose date is debated.³² There is some variation in the carving of the letters. For example, the three Hs are all decorated in different ways, and in the top row and right-hand side many of the letters have triple ‘petals’ half way up the central stems rather than a single hole; these resemble the Chinese ‘cloud band’ motif which appeared on Iznik ceramics around 1500 (Figure 5).³³

As mentioned above, both Shaw and Meyrick and Roe read the first word as DOMINUS, although it appears to read DOHPNUS, as Smith notes. This is an interesting divergence. In fact DOHPNUS was a variant spelling of DOMPNUS, the classical Latin being DOMINUS, a term used for Benedictine monks in the Middle Ages — Winchester being a Benedictine foundation.³⁴ Shaw and Meyrick and Roe, perhaps with a greater knowledge of Latin, may have been aware of this since they read it as DOMINUS but did not feel the need to point out the variant spelling.

The coat of arms is that of the See of Winchester and consists of two addorsed keys crossing a sword.³⁵ In heraldic terms this is described as: ‘Gules two Keys endorsed and conjoined at the bows in bend wards in chief the uppermost Or the lower Argent a Sword the point in chief interposed between them in bend sinister of the third pomel and hilt Gold’.³⁶ This implies the keys are gold in front of silver, the sword gold and the background red. However today there is no sign of paint on the coat of arms or the rest of the façade.

The initials T and S are submerged in exuberant decoration which is a pure expression of what French writers call the ‘first Renaissance’.³⁷ This includes a variety of foliage, flowers, and fruit or seed heads including flowers with heads similar to the rosettes that space the inscription. Some of these are completely fantastic, e.g. the conical flower whose contrasting plain and beaded striping is also found on the columns of carved woodwork of the period in northern France.

²⁹ Roe (1902), p. 104; Roe (1920), p. 34.

³⁰ Thirion (1998), pp. 69 and 72; Thirion et al. (2002), pp. 88–89.

³¹ Ullman (1960); Harrison (2012); Riall (2012), p. 37.

³² Riall (2012); O’Connor (2014).

³³ Atasoy and Raby (1989), pp. 90–95.

³⁴ I am indebted to Ishbel Barnes for these points.

³⁵ Smith (2002).

³⁶ <http://www.civicheraldry.co.uk/ecclesiastical.html>

³⁷ Boccador (1988); Thirion (1998). See Thirion (1998), pp. 66–69 for similar motifs. For wider surveys see Windisch-Graetz (1983) and Gruber (1994).

The concept of a carved reserve within an inscribed frame has no precedent in English chests in the early sixteenth century. Although in the Silkstede case the façade is made in the solid, the concept is that of a separate frame and panel, which originates in the Italian Renaissance. There is in fact a striking similarity between the design of the Silkstede chest and that of the base of the estate bed of Antoine, Duke of Lorraine, now in the Musée Lorrain, Nancy (Figure 12).³⁸ This bed, which is of walnut except where later repaired, has a headboard and three sides originally held with pegged mortice and tenon joints to the corner posts. The three sides are single boards carved with three ‘panels’, i.e. the panels are carved in the solid as in the Silkstede chest.³⁹ The upper and lower frames are inscribed with the motto I[JJ]’ESPERE AVOIR, separated by addorsed BB (for Bourbon). The columns between the ‘panels’ are decorated with the Bourbon spiral ‘belt of hope’ bearing the letters ES PE RE(tilde) CE (*esperance*), surrounding a feather (Figure 13). The reserve of each panel contains either a) AR on either side of two coats of arms under a single crown or b) two Lorraine crosses and two coats of arms with crowns either side of a bent arm holding a sword. All the letters are in the wedge-serifed Renaissance style. The bed is gilt and polychrome, except where restored. The initials A and R refer to Antoine and Renée de Bourbon, who married in 1515, and the coats of arms to their families. The museum catalogue description dates the bed’s manufacture to 1516/7. The decoration of the sides of the Lorraine bed is thus heraldic but the headboard is carved with intersecting Renaissance *chapeaux de triomphe* which resemble the wreaths of medallion heads. Overall, therefore, the decoration is a combination of Renaissance and heraldic.

The fact that the decoration of the Silkstede chest is fully Renaissance in style suggests that whoever carved it was abreast of the latest stylistic developments. For Eames ‘this important chest is in line with metropolitan developments, for the best known early example of Renaissance ornament in England is provided by Pietro Torrigiano’s commission for Henry VII’s chapel in Westminster Abbey, c. 1519’.⁴⁰ The immediate origin of the chest’s framed design is unknown; it may have come from a design book or from a piece of furniture. The closeness of its date to the Lorraine bed suggests that its carver was either aware of the bed or, more likely, familiar with similar designs or pieces of work. How much emphasis should be placed on copying of designs and how much on local adaptation and innovation is debated. For example, Thirion writes that ‘all the ornamentation that one sees on furniture can be found in engravings, but if ornament lends itself well to copying, it lends itself even better to adaptation’, and that French examples of carving are lighter than Italian originals whereas German examples are heavier.⁴¹

An exploration of the Silkstede/Winchester link reveals further support for a French connection in understanding the Silkstede chest. Whereas the Silkstede pulpit in Winchester Cathedral, with its silk skein rebus and dated to around 1498, is Gothic in

³⁸ Compare also the Belgian cradle of 1478–79 which has a wedge-serifed inscription along the lower edge of the side, rather than around all four sides (Eames, 1977, Plate 34A; Thirion (1998), p. 61.

³⁹ The description here is based on the Museum’s catalogue description (Inv. No. D95.255). Thirion (1998), pp. 85–87; Thirion et al. (2002), pp. 78–81; personal communication from Frédérique Gaujacq (April 2015) and examination of Figures 12 and 13.

⁴⁰ Eames (1977), p. 178, fn. 458.

⁴¹ Thirion (1998), p. 67. For example, there are fifteenth-century cassoni that could have served as models for French carved work [Schottmuller (1928), pp. 40–49].



12 Estate bed of Antoine, Duke of Lorraine and his wife Renée de Bourbon, who married in 1515. © Musée Lorrain, Nancy/photographer Michel Bourguet



13 Detail of figure 12, left side panel. © Musée Lorrain, Nancy/photographer Michel Bourguet

style, the Silkstede stalls in the Lady Chapel, which Riall dates to 1518–22, have some Renaissance elements, e.g. dolphins, foliated scrolls (*rincaux*) and chalices.⁴² But also located in Winchester is the Hospital of St Cross whose choir stalls have an openwork carved Renaissance frieze of which Riall says ‘there really is nothing like it to be found anywhere else in England, apart from the Silkstede stalls in Winchester Cathedral, which share just a few characteristics of the St Cross work. The nearest parallels to

⁴² Jervis (1976), p. 25; Riall (2014), p. 6; Riall (2008).

14 Hospital of
St Cross, Winchester,
c. 1515–17,
Renaissance frieze,
urn with dolphins.
The author



15 Hospital of
St Cross, Winchester,
c. 1515–17,
Renaissance frieze,
Romyne head with
fantastic figures and
birds. *The author*



St Cross are to be found in France' (Figures 14 and 15).⁴³ Riall lists nine early Renaissance works in Hampshire with their possible construction dates, ranging from 1513–23 (the St Cross frieze) to 1525–30.⁴⁴ In his 2008 article Riall suggests the St Cross frieze was probably completed by 1515–17.⁴⁵ It can thus be seen that the Silkstede chest was not an isolated example of Renaissance woodwork in Winchester in the 1510–1520 decade.

In France boarded chests carved with Gothic arcading filled with tracery and usually with dovetailed joints were being made in the 1480–1520 period. Framed panelled chests with parchemin panels started in the 1450s but large all-over designs required the large façade provided by boarded chests. By the early sixteenth century, Renaissance designs were appearing on French chests, e.g. profile heads on framed panelled

⁴³ Riall (2014), p. 6.

⁴⁴ The others are the Silkstede stallwork, presbytery south screen, north screen door and frieze (Winchester Cathedral), the Lisle monument and Lisle chapel at Thruxton, the Draper chapel at Christchurch Priory and the Norton tomb at East Tisted [Riall (2008)].

⁴⁵ In his later booklet he narrows this to 'around 1515' [Riall (2014), p. 12].

chests and full-width designs on boarded chests.⁴⁶ In England, on the other hand, there are no chests generally accepted as English with Gothic arcading with tracery. The earliest English chests with Renaissance decoration covering the whole façade do not appear to start before the later sixteenth century (if more chests in the 1500–1570 period are dendro dated this statement may need to be revised). This means that in terms of its decoration the Silkstede chest would be fifty years ahead of any other English chest if it were English.

In conclusion, whereas apart from its spiked hinges the construction of the chest is not typical of French chests of the period, the fact that its façade is carved within a frame in full ‘first Renaissance’ style, probably in 1519, with similarities with the Duke of Lorraine’s estate bed, marks it out as totally exceptional in relation to the development of English chests but in line with French Renaissance taste of the time.

Three final questions arise: who made the chest, where was it made and for what purpose? The evidence presented above supports the idea that the chest was made by French craftsmen. On the ‘where’ question Tracy argues that, as a general rule, whereas high value and relatively portable woodwork is more likely to be imported, ‘more bulky furnishings such as screens and stalls were usually made in Britain by immigrant craftsmen’.⁴⁷ This implies that as a ‘portable’ item the chest might have been imported but that the St Cross woodwork would have been made in situ by French craftsmen. In his 2008 article Riall in fact states that ‘such was the complexity of fitting this work [the stalls and frieze] into its setting at St Cross that it is improbable that any part of it was created elsewhere; it must rather have been made either at St Cross or nearby’.⁴⁸ Unfortunately there is no direct evidence of the presence of French craftsmen in Winchester but it must be regarded as virtually certain. Further west, in Devon, the presence of immigrant carvers is undisputed; they carved largely in flamboyant Gothic or early Renaissance styles or in a mixture of the two.⁴⁹ It can thus be proposed that despite the portability of chests in general the Silkstede chest was made by French craftsmen in Winchester. If it was made by craftsmen not accustomed to making chests and out of touch with locksmiths this could explain its atypical joints and lock plate. In the absence of documentation one can only speculate about the purpose of the chest. If, as is most likely, it was made in 1519, it could have been a simple gift or tribute to Prior Silkstede or a commission by him.⁵⁰ The 1512 date would place it before the start of the St Cross frieze work; the 1519 date would place it after.

⁴⁶ Thirion (1998), pp. 65–79.

⁴⁷ Tracy (1999), and cited in Allan (2014), p. 331; Tracy (2001).

⁴⁸ Riall (2008). He also suggests that they may have included craftsmen who had worked at the Chateau of Gaillon. However, in his recent booklet, Riall suggests the St Cross stalls and frieze were made in northern France (near Amiens or Rouen) and imported [Riall (2014), p. 12].

⁴⁹ Allan has shown the influence of mainly Breton carvers in Devon in the 1500–1525 period in the form of church woodwork and the Morlaix-type maison à pondalez, St John’s Tavern, in Exeter. He suggests this was a period of great prosperity in the south-west with extensive church building, creating a strong demand for carvers [Allan (2014)]. Also in Devon, White has used churchwardens’ accounts to show that structural work was done by local carpenters while itinerant carvers, both French and Flemish, did the fine work [White (2010)].

⁵⁰ If it was made in 1512 by craftsmen soon to be engaged on Renaissance woodwork, it could have been a demonstration of their ability to work in the new style in order to win the St Cross contract, perhaps encouraged by a patron. Riall discusses possible patrons [Riall (2008)].

THE 1539 CHEST IN THE GARSTANG CHAPEL, ST JOHN
THE BAPTIST CHURCH, CIRENCESTER

The second chest discussed here has also received surprisingly little attention given its rarity as a dated early sixteenth-century chest. It is described in the local church guide where it is suggested that it may be a marriage chest and is included in Geddes's survey of medieval decorative ironwork because of its lock plate.⁵¹ The chest was brought from the vicarage to its present place in 1979 but 'its history between 1539 and 1979 is unknown'.⁵² If the George family attribution, discussed below, is correct it was made for a well-known local family which is commemorated elsewhere in the church. It is likely that the family was engaged in the wool trade, the basis of Cirencester's prosperity at this period. Its construction and decoration are discussed in turn.

CONSTRUCTION

This is a small boarded chest of six boards with applied mouldings on the front (Figure 16).⁵³ The chest is made of elm apart from the applied, true mitred, frame of the lid which is of quarter-sawn oak battens.⁵⁴ The battens have a double half-round, moulded profile on their inner edges and are fixed with wooden pegs. The presence of paint prevents one from knowing whether other applied pieces are also of oak. The lid is hinged by two slightly shaped strap hinges held by nails (Figure 17). The straps are roughly and partially inset underneath the lid and fixed externally to the back. The iron strap holding the hasp is inset under the lid; the hasp is plain but has a knob at the end. Inside the chest there are grooves on each side where single tier till boxes once fitted. There is also a groove across the back about one third of the way down from the top which may have held a narrow shelf as on some other early chests (Figure 18). There is a space below the bottom of the chest of 3–4 cm which is visible where the bottom crenellated moulding has broken off.⁵⁵

The facade is divided into three vertical sections by four Gothic buttresses spaced across the chest: these are held on by (probably four) neat small square pegs. The two outer buttresses are single pieces of wood 2.5 cm deep. The two middle buttresses are made in two parts: a flat part and a buttress-shaped part (3.2 cm deep in total).

Boarded and pegged construction was a method widely used at this time for smaller and larger chests. It was often accompanied by iron straps in the case of larger chests, as in the large, plain, iron-bound churchwarden's chest in Cirencester church. The chest is therefore of the construction type that would be expected for a small size, English-made chest for a well-off client in 1539. Elm furniture rarely survives which suggests the chest has been kept in favourable conditions.

⁵¹ Ingram (1981); Geddes (1999).

⁵² Ingram (1981).

⁵³ The chest is 85.5 cm wide, 41 cm deep, and 47.5 cm high. The front, back and sides of the box are 2.4 cm thick and are pegged together by large pegs (the three at the bottom of each side are *c.* 1.5 cm diameter). The lid board is 2.5 cm thick and the frame 1.8 cm, giving edges of 4.3 cm.

⁵⁴ Thanks to Adam Bowett for identifying this.

⁵⁵ The internal depth (with lid open) is 37 cm compared with 43.3 cm outside (including the thickness of the bottom).



16 (above) The Garstang chest, 1539. Oak and elm. *Church of St John the Baptist, Cirencester / photo Bill Cotton*



17 (left) The Garstang chest, inside view of lid. *The author*



18 The Garstang chest, inside view of back. *The author*

The true mitred, applied frame of the lid was a relatively new feature at this time. Chinnery suggests that the true mitre joint is found in England from *c.* 1540, prior to which mason's mitre joints were the norm.⁵⁶ In contrast, the lid of the Flemish St George and Dragon chest in York Minster dating from the mid-fifteenth century already had a true mitred frame.⁵⁷ The till box is a normal feature of chests but the groove in the back, probably to hold a shelf, is more often found on Continental chests than on English ones.⁵⁸ The two inner buttresses are made of two layers and are thus examples of laminated construction. However, unlike the laminated construction found in the 1510s choir stalls at Amiens Cathedral and considered a Continental feature, where the laminated elements are glued in order to deceive the observer, here the motive is likely to be economy in construction since the pegging of the buttresses is very visible.⁵⁹ Gothic lock plates were in use over a long period; Chinnery suggests 1450–1700.⁶⁰ The lock plate is thus characteristic of its date and has some decorative features and so is neither as plain nor as elaborate as some others. The hinges and hasp are inset into the lid, a feature found on other English chests considered to be mid-sixteenth century, including the pre-1545 chest 81A1413 found on the Mary Rose whose hinges are similarly shaped.⁶¹

DECORATION

The lid, sides and front of the chest are painted mid-brown except where decorated with other colours. On the lid, red, pale yellow and dark (black?) colours can be seen on the brown background. Some of the paint has worn off, but a pale yellow *fleur-de-llys* is painted in each corner (Figure 19) and the remains of further painted motifs can be seen in the centre of the lid. The inside of the lid is stained brown whereas the inside of the box is pale and unstained. This may be because the inside of the box was originally concealed by whatever was kept in the chest, whereas the stained underside of the lid was visible whenever the chest was opened.

The facade of the chest is decorated in bold style by a mixture of applied mouldings and carved elements, all of which are painted in plain colours. At the top left and right hand corners of the upper section of the façade are narrow reserves containing the carved letters AG I(J)G in gold, and a shield with the front of a dog between gold flower heads. The shield matches a crest in Rodmarton church, south west of Cirencester, described in heraldic language as 'A demy Talbot sa. car and jam(b) arg. collared or' and which is attributed to the George family.⁶² Beneath these reserves are crenellated, applied mouldings which match the 2 cm deep crenellated moulding along the bottom. The pegs which presumably hold this on are not visible as they are no

⁵⁶ Chinnery (1979), p. 118.

⁵⁷ This date is based on the similar dendro-dated 'Boughton Monchelsea chest' sold at Christies, 3 November 1999

⁵⁸ Von Stülpnagel (2000); Pickvance (2014).

⁵⁹ Tracy and Harrison (2004), pp. 141–46; Allan (2014); Riall (2014).

⁶⁰ Chinnery (1979), p. 144.

⁶¹ For pictures of the chest see Knell (1997), p. 68; Richards with Every (2013), p. 302. The presence of rebates for the iron straps was confirmed by Chris Dobbs of the Mary Rose Trust (Personal communication, February 2015).

⁶² Were (1905), p. 263. Talbot = a hunting dog, Sa = salient (forepaws drawn), Jam(b) = leg, Argent = silver, Or = gold.)



19 The Garstang chest, corner of lid with *fleur de lys*.
The author



20 The Garstang chest, lock plate.
The author

doubt located in recesses in the design and over-painted. The crenellated mouldings are painted red, mid-brown, blue or green, black (?) and gold(?). In addition, the front-facing recesses have a series of decorative vertical gouge marks, which are largely obscured by the paint layer(s).

The large Gothic lock plate is 14 cm wide, 13 cm high and is likely to be original as there is no evidence of old nails inside or out (Figure 20). It is held on by two Gothic buttresses secured inside and the plate has a hasp guard whose edges incorporate a wavy line, below which is a wavy bottomed reserve. The key hole has no flared key guide to help the user locate the key hole. When seen from inside the chest, the lock casing has straight sides and is rounded above and below.

The lower section of the facade has three main parts. In the centre is an applied shield held on by four small square pegs, with a central red band on a pale background of indeterminate original colour (now murky yellow) and three mid-brown birds. This matches a shield in the Garstang Chapel: 'Arg. a fess gul betwe 3 falcons wings elevated az' and another in Rodmarton church: which are attributed to the George family.⁶³

⁶³ Were (1905), p. 263; <http://www.heraldsnet.org/saitou/parker/Jpglossa.htm>
Argent = silver, Fess = horizontal bar, Gu(les) = red, Az(ure) = blue, Sa(ble) = black.



21 The Garstang chest, JG roundel with dragon's head. *The author*

To the left is a large pale brown (once gold?) roundel containing a red shield with a pale brown flat scroll above IHS above the 1539 date. Between the pale brown inner and outer rings of the roundel is a dark brown scrolling leaf design. To the right is a large roundel with a pale brown I(J) and G joined by a red tasselled loop in the centre and dark brown guilloche between the pale brown inner and outer rings of the roundel. The G terminates in a finely carved dragon's head (Figure 21).

The main importance of this chest is that it is dated at a time when dated chests are very rare; its original hinges and lock plate, and old paintwork are further desirable features, though without analysis it is impossible to say whether the paint is original. Moreover, the decoration of the front of the chest is very elaborate, combining applied work, polychrome and a variety of motifs.

The buttresses and crenellations are Gothic features. Buttresses are of course common on Gothic lock plates as well as on Gothic churches. The Consistory Court armoire in York Minster, dated by Geddes to 1390–1410, has a crenellated cornice as do some large fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Continental cupboards.⁶⁴

The style of lettering on the chest is the same early Renaissance form seen on the Silkstede chest and discussed earlier. On the Garstang chest the lettering not only has wedged serifs but is carved with central ridges, and the straight elements are given concave sides. The two roundels with their double rings are a specifically Renaissance

⁶⁴ See Roe (1902), p. 89; Geddes (1999), pp. 219, 392.

feature and often contain a profile head. Such heads were found on Roman buildings and were then used in Renaissance stonework and in fixed woodwork, such as paneling, and furniture (especially cupboards) in Flanders and France. In England and Scotland they arrived later, probably in the 1520s, but were only used widely for wall panelling in large houses from the 1530s; the Salkeld screen in Carlisle Cathedral dates from between 1541 and 1547. The ceiling of medallions with profile heads in Stirling Castle dates from c. 1540.⁶⁵ The guilloche design in the right hand roundel is a Renaissance feature, but the foliage trail in the left-hand roundel, while popular in Renaissance decoration, has Gothic origins.

The large shield and the small coat of arms draw on heraldic motifs which go back to the early middle ages. The George family lived in Baunton, a village 1½ miles north of Cirencester, and their patent dates from 1528. The family's Rodmarton connection appears to be later. Ingram notes that 'the family were prominent in the life of the town for two centuries and the same coat of arms can be seen above the altar on the east wall of the [Garstang] chapel' in a memorial.⁶⁶ In the 1520s, 50 coats of arms per decade were granted in England, a figure that had reached 525 by the 1580s as the rise of new social groups sought confirmation of their gentry status.⁶⁷ This suggests that the George family was probably an early-rising and hence very wealthy family. The significance of the *fleur de lys* painted on the lid is not known. It is a widely used symbol and may or may not have had a particular meaning for the George family.

Two questions then arise: who is the JG in the right-hand roundel and who are the JG and AG in the upper left reserve? At first sight JG is easy to interpret. Harrison refers to the tasselled loops as a love knot and cites examples from the Continent from 1450. He says their use faded out there in the early sixteenth century and suggests that English examples are later, citing a 1537 Holbein painting as well as the 1539 Garstang chest.⁶⁸ However, it is not clear whether the tasselled loops linking the J and G should be interpreted as a love knot. At the Vyne there is a 1530s door lock plate in which the iron plate has been cut away to show WS in split end capitals, with tasselled loops linking the W and S. Howard and Wilson interpret this as referring to William Sandys, the owner of the house, not a couple (Figure 22).⁶⁹ On this evidence, the love knot interpretation is only one possibility and JG may refer to a single person.

Regarding the identity of JG and AG, one possibility is that they refer to John George and his wife, Alice George. According to one source, a John George was Lord of the Manor of Baunton, and lived from 1470–1556, and his wife Alice from 1472–1557.⁷⁰ According to another source, John (d. 1556) and Alice George (d. 1557) had twelve children of whom six were named Christopher, Gyles, John (junior), Anne,

⁶⁵ Steer (1975). It is attributed to French craftsmen recruited by King James V after his second French marriage in 1538.

⁶⁶ Ingram (1981), p. 35.

⁶⁷ Cheeseman (2014); Kuin (2014).

⁶⁸ Harrison (2012). Love knots are also found on Lake District chests and press cupboards of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

⁶⁹ Sandys inherited the house in 1496 and died in 1540; Howard and Wilson, 2003, front cover, pp. 43 and 48. Tasselled loops are also found in isolation from initials.

⁷⁰ <http://www.geni.com/people/John-George/600000005605290053>



22 Lock plate, c. 1530, bearing the initials of William Sandys on the door to the Tapestry Room at the Vyne. *National Trust/photo Helen Sanderson*

Elizabeth and Maria.⁷¹ It also states that John (junior) married a Margaret and their children were born between 1563 and 1576 which is consistent with John junior being born in 1539 and his parents marrying around 1536–39. There appear to be two possibilities. If John and Alice's 1470s birth dates are correct the chest would have been made when the couple were in their 60s and is unlikely to be a marriage chest. If John and Alice's death dates are correct and their birth dates are wrong, they could have married in 1539 and then had children. In both cases JG and AG refer to John and Alice. On the first interpretation, the JG in the roundel would refer to John senior. On the second interpretation, JG refers to his son, and the chest would celebrate the son's birth. In both cases, the interpretation relies on JG being a male rather than a couple. However, neither of the above may be true: the genealogical data in the two sources may simply be incorrect. Lastly, IHS, the monogram referring to Jesus used particularly in Catholicism, may be a symbol of personal religiosity. It does not necessarily imply the chest was made for a church. Indeed, the combination of Catholic symbol with a date during the dissolution of the monasteries makes it more likely that the George family was Catholic and that the chest was made for private use in their own home.

⁷¹ <http://www.multiwords.de/genealogy/george01.htm> This is based on Major Thomas George, *Pedigrees and History of the Families of George and Georges*, privately printed in 1903.

DISCUSSION

How does the Garstang chest relate to the development of English chests? In terms of construction it fits easily but, in terms of decoration, there is no generally accepted sequence of English chests that registers the arrival of Renaissance influence in the 1500–1570 period. In particular, it is not agreed that chests with profile heads exist before the late sixteenth century. In my view, the most convincing ‘Romaine’ chests (the panelled V&A ‘Fere God’ chest and the boarded Selly Manor Museum chest) are late examples likely to date from 1560–1600.⁷² Many putative English ‘Romaine’ chests prove to be early Romaine panels placed in later structures or to be imported, but this is a field in need of research.⁷³ Most accounts of the rise of Renaissance decorative influence in England focus on architecture, sculpture, books, metalwork and textiles.⁷⁴ However, while fixed woodwork such as domestic wall panelling is mentioned, furniture receives scant attention. The most obvious explanation is that English furniture in the 1500–1570 period with Renaissance decoration was very limited in quantity compared with Renaissance wall panelling. An alternative explanation is that it existed but suffered extreme losses.⁷⁵

Given the absence of a series of documented chests in the 1500–1570 period against which to assess the Garstang chest, it is therefore necessary to relate it to other types of furniture showing Renaissance decoration. Only a small sample is considered here but the aim has been to focus on pieces which are considered ‘right’ by specialists. The item of English furniture most often referred in writings on Renaissance influence is the V&A’s painted writing box which dates from *c.* 1525 and is thought to have been made for Henry VIII by Flemish craftsmen in the royal workshops. It is made of oak, walnut, leather and possibly shagreen and is described as ‘a rare survival of luxury furniture’ (Figure 23).⁷⁶ The decoration is Renaissance and includes ‘interlaced strapwork, enclosing the badges of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, ... the arms of Henry VIII encircled by the Garter, and with putti blowing trumpets as supporters, ... Figures of Mars in armour, and Venus with Cupid, each under Renaissance canopies. The lids in the interior are painted with a medallion head of Christ and Saint George and the Dragon below a canopy. The front, above the three small drawers, is decorated with a male and a female profile head and scrollwork designs; the falling flap bears profile heads of Paris and Helen, inscribed ‘Paris de Troy’ and ‘Helen de

⁷² V&A, 833–1898.

⁷³ Chinnery (1979), p. 426; Roe (1929), p. 103. The re-use of early decorative panels in later structures is an unexplored subject; the V&A has recently re-categorised two of its sixteenth-century parchemin panelled chests as nineteenth-century creations (W11-1938, 1750; 1, 2-1869).

⁷⁴ Snodin and Howard (1996); Wells-Cole (1997); Marks and Williamson (2003); Snodin (2004); Styles (2004).

⁷⁵ The absence of records means this is an irresolvable question. I favour the first explanation since the inflow of Continental craftsmen and the extent of imported sixteenth-century furniture can be taken as indicators that Continental furniture with Renaissance decoration in the 1500–1570 period was greater in quantity and decorative quality than English; in other words, English furniture did not experience a disproportionately high rate of loss. On importation, see Eames (1977), p. 108; Tracy (2001); Harris (2007); Pickvance (2012 and 2014). On the current art market there is still a much larger quantity of sixteenth-century furniture in France, often restored, and a continuing flow of imports to England where it is more highly valued.

⁷⁶ V&A, W29:1 to 9-1932; descriptive notes are at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk>.



23 (above) Painted writing box, c. 1525.
Walnut, oak, gilded leather and other
materials. *Victoria and Albert Museum,*
London. W.29:1 to 9-1932



24 (right) Box armchair, c. 1540. Oak.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
W.39-1920

Greci' on a ground of arabesques'. Clearly this box represented the cutting edge of design available to the highest social circles.⁷⁷

Somewhat less exotic is the V&A's box armchair of c. 1540 which has a Renaissance panel above two linenfold panels in the back, and further linenfold panels below the seat (Figure 24).⁷⁸ Like the Garstang chest, it represents a combination of late Gothic and Renaissance.⁷⁹ In contrast, the V&A's caquetoire chair is now considered to have a nineteenth century Romyne panel in the back (see website description) and has been demoted (Figure 25).⁸⁰ Another chair, the Welsh Rhys ap Thomas chair, which has a face with rinceaux terminating in dolphins in the top rail of the back, and guilloche in the seat rail, has been dated on the basis of the coat of arms in the back to 1507 (Bebb)

⁷⁷ Henry VIII's inventory lists hundreds of items of furniture, but what is striking is that Renaissance design is often mentioned in the case of textiles but not on furniture [Starkey (1988)]. Moreover, the contribution of Spanish furniture to this inventory means that it cannot be read as a catalogue of English furniture in royal hands in 1547. Leather covered items are numerous, as are chairs covered (upholstered?) with velvet and satin cloth, and 'moresco' decoration. Aguilo Alonso (1993) is probably the most relevant guide.

⁷⁸ V&A, W.39-1920; Chinnery (1979), p. 24. Celia Jennings, the early carvings specialist, supports an English origin and a date of c.1530/40 and writes that 'the carving doesn't seem as sharp as I would expect a Flemish carving of that type to be' (Personal communication, March 2015).

⁷⁹ The frequency of such combinations suggests that the styles concerned were not perceived as discordant. The language of 'adoption' of new styles implies an ineluctable trend and underestimates the strength of traditional preferences.

⁸⁰ V&A, W.45-1925) Chinnery (1979), p. 246. Chinnery dated it to c. 1530.



25 Caquetoire chair (date uncertain). Oak. *Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*
W.45-1925



26 Chair, bearing the arms of Rhys ap Thomas, c. 1527 or earlier. Oak. *St Fagans National History Museum, Cardiff*

or 1505–1527 (Chinnery), remarkably early dates; it too shows an awareness but not a full adoption of Renaissance style (Figure 26).⁸¹ Finally, two examples of full Renaissance decoration can be mentioned. One is the little-known joined oak, folding table with a polygonal top and scrolling leaf and tendril decoration on its frieze and baluster legs, described as mid-sixteenth century.⁸² The other is the well-known group of side chairs, beds and forms dated 1562–72 and the marquetry panelled room from 1575 at Sizergh Castle which are almost certainly immigrant made.⁸³

At first sight the limited number of Renaissance decorative features on the Garstang chest might be taken to reflect its provincial origin. But as these other types of furniture

⁸¹ Bebb (2007), 1, pp. 174–76; Chinnery (1979), p. 242. Victor Chinnery considered the chair ‘right’ [Personal communication]. I have not examined it. As noted earlier, coats of arms can be an insecure basis for dating.

⁸² Dreweatt and Neate, Boarsney House sale, 18 September 2006, lot 192. The table is 90 cm wide and the legs are carved in the solid rather than turned. Victor Chinnery was consultant for this sale.

⁸³ V&A 3-1891 and 86:15-1896; nationaltrustcollections.org.uk. The nationality of the craftsmen is not yet known. The curvaceous shape of the forms suggests a connection with Italian sbagelli; the style of marquetry is reminiscent of Northern Italy, Switzerland or Southern Germany.



27 (above) Boarded chest, dated 1571, Sizergh Castle. Oak. *National Trust/photo Jane Clarke*

28 (right) Lock plate from figure 27, showing date and initials WS 1571 AS. *National Trust/photo Jane Clarke*



show, its combination of Renaissance features (lettering, roundels, and guilloche) and Gothic features (crenellations, buttresses and lock plate) is characteristic of the 1500–1550 period. Full Renaissance decoration is confined to the very top of the social scale (the 1525 writing box) or to a later date (the Sizergh pieces.) Interestingly, the three large oak chests on trestle feet at Sizergh Castle dated 1571 are boarded rather than panelled, and plain rather than carved with Renaissance decoration except for the decoration around the lock plate (Figures 27 and 28). Given the evident wealth of the Strickland family, these chests may have been considered too utilitarian to merit elaborate decoration. This suggests that the Garstang chest owes its highly elaborate and original decorative scheme to its probable celebratory character.

CONCLUSION

The Silkstede and Garstang chests thus have very different places in the development of English chests. The Silkstede chest is a French chest in terms of its decoration and hinges; it deviates from the norm only in its small, English-style, lock plate; its pegged boarded construction is not typical but not unknown on French chests. But its dedication to Prior Silkstede makes clear the English context in which it was made. Winchester was a place where there was much evidence of French workmanship in the 1510–20 decade and the balance of argument, including the lock plate evidence, in my view favours it being made by a French craftsman working in Winchester rather than its importation from France. The chest is a pure example of the latest style of decoration (first Renaissance within a framed ‘panel’) and must have been regarded as a quite exceptional piece in comparison with the English chests of the time.

What is equally important is that it did not serve as a model for the construction of chests in England, judging by surviving chests at least. It therefore stands apart from the development of chests in England. Did it represent too strong a change of direction in chest design for English patrons? The openwork frieze at the Hospital of St Cross shows that this body was willing to adopt the new fashion, which implies that the development of chests follows a different course.⁸⁴ Henry VIII’s inventory provides only limited descriptions of the chests and coffers but the paucity of references to carved chests and coffers, and the number which are described as covered with leather or velvet, or painted or gilded shows that there were several alternatives to carved decoration.⁸⁵ The Silkstede chest can thus be seen as a French chest which could have assisted the introduction of Renaissance decoration on chests, but on the available evidence, did not.

The Garstang chest, on the other hand, is part of the slow development of Renaissance decoration on English furniture, which only really takes hold after 1580.⁸⁶ It shares with the non-chest examples a combination of Renaissance and late Gothic features. However, if, as suggested, Renaissance influence was particularly slow in the case of chests, the elaborate decoration of the Garstang chest makes it exceptional in the development of English chests.

Lastly, the provincial origin of the two chests throws interesting light on how design influences work. The Garstang chest and the later, fully Renaissance, Sizergh Castle pieces challenge the idea of a vanguard metropolis leading backward provinces. The George family, believed to have commissioned the Garstang chest, was almost certainly very wealthy and were subsequent benefactors of the church in Cirencester, but frustratingly little is known about their wider connections. The Stricklands, who greatly expanded Sizergh Castle in the 1550s and 1560s, were a leading family in

⁸⁴ However, the fronts of the choir stalls had linenfold decoration, an example of the combination of styles referred to earlier.

⁸⁵ Starkey (1998). The inventory is surprising for the very small number of chests and extremely large number of coffers listed. The latter term seems to cover a diversity of sizes. Whether these terms are used consistently in the inventory is unknown.

⁸⁶ According to Wells-Cole, by this time Netherlandish influence was predominant [Wells-Cole (1997), p. 169].

Westmorland with close connections with Court through Catherine Parr.⁸⁷ The Silkstede chest testifies to the role of Winchester Cathedral and the Hospital of St Cross in commissioning advanced woodwork from French craftsmen, perhaps through the familiarity of patrons with France.⁸⁸ The Devon evidence referred to earlier shows how parish churches commissioned a Renaissance/Gothic combination.

What remains unknown is how craftsmen were organized and found work. Some may have been recruited through the international, national or local links of patrons, and once established they may have been passed from one patron to another. But the accounts of conflict provoked by the influx of immigrant craftsmen suggests there was another part of the labour market where workers arrived without prior connections. In brief, one cannot read off decorative preferences from a knowledge of wealth or region; more complex social processes are involved.

In sum, it is hoped that by documenting the two chests in question in detail and making relevant comparisons, this article will be a useful building block in the study of chests in the 1500–1570 period. Two is a small number and there is a need for much more research on chests and furniture generally in this period if we are to identify the work of domestic and foreign craftsmen, the role of imported furniture, and how Renaissance influence was mediated. This will no doubt lead to some of the interpretations put forward here being challenged.

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⁸⁷ In 1464 Sir Thomas Strickland married Agnes Parr, Catherine Parr's great aunt [National Trust, 2011, pp. 42–43].

⁸⁸ Riall (2008).

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