

## ‘KENTISH GOTHIC’ OR IMPORTED? UNDERSTANDING A GROUP OF TRACERY-CARVED MEDIEVAL CHESTS IN KENT AND NORFOLK

CHRISTOPHER PICKVANCE

This article describes and analyses a group of medieval chests, three of which are in Kent and three in Norfolk. They are at St Mary of Charity, Faversham, St Margaret’s, Rainham, and St John’s Hospital, Canterbury; Norfolk Museums Reserve at Gressenhall (formerly in St Margaret’s, Norwich), All Saints, Litcham, and All Saints, Wighton (Figs 1-6). The first three have been labelled ‘Kentish Gothic’ but the six have not previously been recognised as forming a group. It will be argued that the chests originate in neither Kent nor Norfolk but are Continental imports.

Medieval chests can be classified according to their construction type. There are three pure types: dug-out chests, boarded chests, and clamped chests (the type described here), but mixed types can be found (Chinnery 1979, 69-74, 104-124).<sup>1</sup> These types embody increasing levels of skill but do not represent an evolutionary sequence. In England the first three types co-existed in 1200, clamped chests were replaced by framed and panelled chests from the 16th century in most areas, dug-out chests were still being made in the 17th century, and boarded chests continued as a cheap form into the 18th century.

Chests had numerous uses. In ecclesiastical contexts they were used to store relics, legal documents (deeds, leases), vestments, altar frontals, platens and chalices, jewellery, books and money (e.g. alms, rents, money for crusades). Chests were not the only form of storage: vestries, treasuries, aumbries and cupboards were alternatives. In secular contexts they were used for storing family valuables, legal documents, clothes, textiles and books. Foodstuffs such as grain were also stored in chests (e.g. in arks). Medieval times were insecure and protection of the chest was a major priority. This could mean placing it in a secure location (muniment rooms, treasuries) and/or adding iron strapwork and multiple locks.

### Previous writing on the chests

A drawing of the Rainham chest was included in an article on Rainham church (Pearman 1887) (Fig. 7). Fred Roe, whose 1902 book *Ancient Coffers and Cupboards* was the first full length study of chests in England, included the Rainham and Faversham chests as examples of 14th-century chests as well as a related lost chest at Wittersham church known from an 1857 drawing (Roe 1902, 40-44). Soon after, in his book on oak furniture, Roe added the St John’s Hospital, Canterbury chest,



Fig. 1 Chest at St Mary of Charity, Faversham.



Fig. 2 Chest at St Margaret's, Rainham.



Fig. 3 Chest at St John's Hospital, Canterbury.



Fig. 4 Chest from St Margaret's, Norwich (now at the Norfolk Museums Reserve at Gressenhall).



Fig. 5 Chest at All Saints, Litcham.



Fig. 6 Chest at All Saints, Wighton.

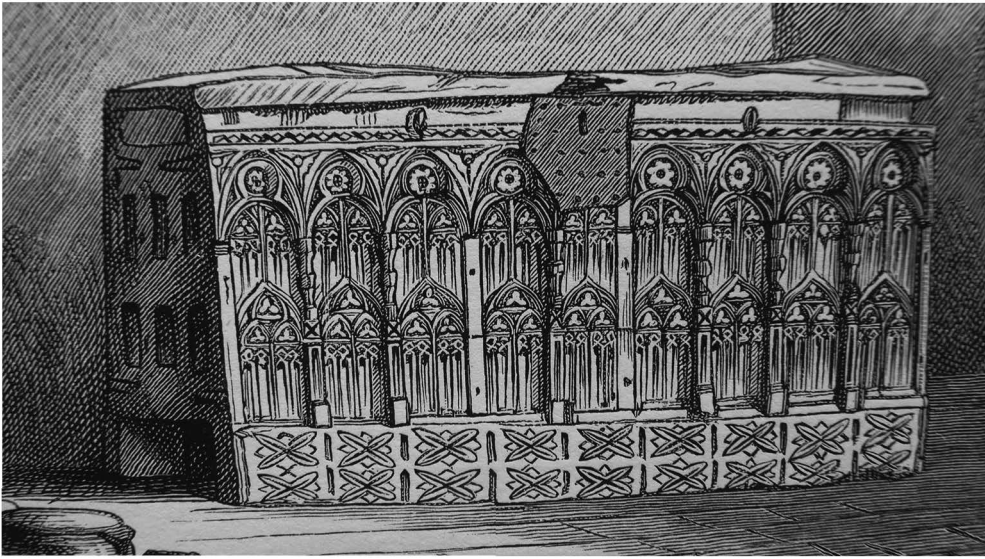


Fig. 7 Chest at St Margaret’s, Rainham. Source: Pearman (1887).

noting the three were ‘almost identical’ and that this left ‘little doubt that they are specimens of Kentish Gothic work produced by the same craftsman’ (1905, 118). The ‘Kentish Gothic’ label has been used ever since to refer to the three Kent examples. Sir Martin Conway (later Lord Conway), owner of Allington Castle, where he was building a collection of ‘Kentish’ chests, suggested that they and the Wittersham chest were ‘a distinctively Kentish product’ and were made possibly in Canterbury or by an itinerant craftsman (Conway 1909, 367), though, interestingly, he notes that some had considered the Faversham chest to be Flemish. In his later *History of Oak Furniture*, Roe included a photo of the Canterbury chest and a drawing of a further related lost chest drawn in 1835 at Sedlescombe church, in East Sussex (Roe 1920, plates 13 and 14). Intriguingly, in this book Roe refers to the Litcham chest in Norfolk but he continues to use the ‘Kentish Gothic’ label (1920, 5), no doubt thinking that the Litcham chest was made in Kent. Finally, Roe devotes five pages of his last book, on chests in the Home Counties, to the Faversham and Rainham chests and says the Rainham chest would have been ‘of fairly recent production’ in 1381 (1929, 99-100).

Cescinsky and Gribble’s major study of oak furniture included the three Kent chests and the Litcham chest in a list of 14th-century chests and noted that ‘only those of exceptional quality, as a rule, appear to have been preserved’ (1922, Vol. 2, 30). The origin of the Faversham chest was sufficiently established for it to be illustrated in the *Dictionary of English Furniture* first published in 1924 and the Rainham chest is also discussed there (Macquoid and Edwards 1954, Vol. 2, 6).

More recently, the chests have received little scholarly attention. They were not among the chests included by Eames (1977) in her magisterial survey of medieval furniture in England, France and the Netherlands, nor does she comment on them in passing. Tracy’s (2001) survey of Continental church furniture in England also

omits them, presumably because he considers them to be English.<sup>2</sup> The Rainham entry in *Buildings of England* mentions the similar Faversham and Canterbury chests (Newman 2002, 467) but the East Anglian chests have been ignored. In 2007 the present writer published a comparison of the Kent chests with a group of 14th-century carved chests, together with a dendro-dating of the Faversham chest, but at that time had not studied any of the Norfolk chests, learning of the Wighton chest in 2014.

#### The arrival of the chests in their present locations

A major problem in the study of medieval chests is the paucity of documentation allowing chests to be identified or recording their provenance. Inventories are more likely to list the valuables contained in chests than to give details of the chests themselves. Churches may have had chests made to order, purchased existing chests, received chests as gifts, bequests or transfers, or kept privately-owned chests for which they originally provided a safe location.

Of the six chests of interest here there is potential documentation relating to only two. A 1512 inventory of St Mary's, Faversham, lists, as well as an iron chest with four great chalices, an iron-bound 'spruse' (Prussian) chest with relics, and a 'cheste unlokked' containing the 'churche evidences' (all in the Treasury), a chest outside the 'Quire door' containing painted cloths, silk banners, a pewter basin, etc., about which a footnote says: 'This may possibly be the richly decorated one of flamboyant work, which has been often described, and is now to be seen in St Thomas's Chapel' (Giraud 1889, 105-112). Roe (1902 126, fn. 10) considers that the Faversham chest is mentioned in this inventory. The 1505 will of Thomas Reade referring to Faversham Church adds more information. It states that 'the two altar cloths of arras, a vestment of purple damask, with all the parrell, a chalice of silver and parcel gilt, and all other cloths with appurtenances in a chest standing in the Chapel of St Thomas the Martyr, shall remain to the said Altar of the Chapel for evermore, and the key of the chest and stuff remain and abide in the custody of Robert Withiot and Robert Deve and of their assigns to the use abovesaid, and none otherwise' (Duncan, 1906). This illustrates the idea of a chest which contains the accoutrements of a specific altar. Although, again, the description is insufficiently detailed to confirm that it refers to the Faversham chest, the reference to custody of 'the key of the chest' (rather than three keys) is consistent with the Faversham chest which was made with a single lock. If so, the chest has been in situ for over 500 years.

For St John's Hospital, a 1546 inventory records three chests as being in the Hospital chapel but gives no further description (Holland 1934, 18-19).<sup>3</sup> Most of the Hospital's records were lost during an air raid in 1942 but a 1785 study by Duncombe and Battely records that St John's 'hall' (today called the refectory) is 'now only used for the annual feast on St John the Baptist's Day, the admittance of members and the reading and sealing of leases. And there, in a strong chest, the ancient charters, etc. are deposited' (1785, 193). The same study reports on an attempt to sort out the 'greatest confusion' of the charters and deeds in the hospitals of Harbledown and Northgate, which had a common foundation, and says that 'there are drawers within the chest belonging to St John's Hospital' for

this purpose’ (viz. keeping separate the charters and private deeds) (1785, 216). It also refers to ‘money to be laid up in a treasure-house, in a coffer with three several keys and locks’ (1785, 217). The Canterbury chest, currently in the hospital refectory, has three (later) locks of 17th-century type, and is thus consistent with the last chest referred to; it may thus have been there for over 200 years.

#### DESCRIPTION

It is very rare to find a group of chests which are almost identical. At first sight the chests are distinctive because of their deeply-carved façades and carved lids. It will be shown that they are also all constructed in a very particular way.

The six chests are all capacious. The Faversham chest (163cm wide) is the largest, and the Norwich chest (133cm wide) the smallest. Losses to the stiles mean that precise measures of original height are difficult. The article concentrates on the original form of the chests, and points out divergences from the standard type; the **Appendix** describes their dimensions and later alterations. The Rainham, Canterbury, and Norwich chests are the most intact; only the façade and lid of the Faversham chest remain and the Litcham and Wighton chests have had major repairs. Attention is focused on the first four.

#### *Construction*

The six chests are of ‘clamped’ construction in which the horizontal boards of the four walls are pegged into long mortices in the wide stiles (uprights). The four stiles are 20-25cm wide and taper in cross-section from 4 or 4.5cm to 2.5 or 3cm (**Fig. 8**).<sup>4</sup>

The lids are made of three boards which are butt-joined and dowelled; the front board is tapered in cross-section from 4cm to 2 or 2.5cm, the middle board is parallel-sided at 2cm and the tapered back board is 3-4cm at its rear. The lid boards are pegged to the cleats underneath each side of the lid which help hold the lid together. The cleats have a curved side profile matching the tapered shape of the boards, so the surface of the lid is flat (**Fig. 9**). The cleats terminate in tenons which fit neatly into rebates in the top of the front stiles. An intriguing and unexplained detail on all the chests, possibly a maker’s mark, is the two horn-like indentations opposite these rebates (**Fig. 10**).

The front, back and sides are also made of three boards, except for the Norwich chest where they have two. The upper board tapers from 3cm at its top edge to 2cm at its lower edge; the middle board is 2cm thick and the lower board thickens out to 4cm at its lower edge. The result is that the four walls of the chest show curved internal shaping (**Figs 11 and 12**).

The bottom is made of three long boards held in grooves in the lower boards of the four walls. The bottom has two front to back supporting battens underneath and a centre batten on top which are morticed into the lower boards of the walls (**Fig. 13**). The hinges, lock, and bottom are all fixed to the thickest parts of the boards, a sign of a long tradition of making, in which advantage is taken of the tapered section produced by cleaving the trunk, though further shaping and smoothing is also carried out.

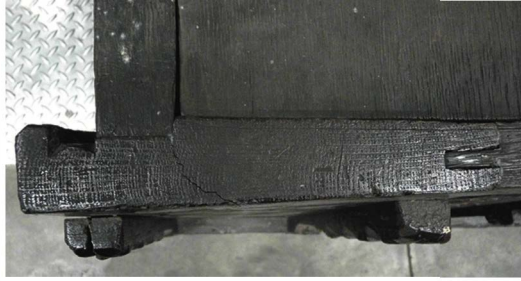


Fig 8 Stile showing tapered section, Norwich.



Fig. 9 View of side showing lid construction (and repair batten), Norwich. ●18



Fig. 10 Stile showing horn-like indentations, Canterbury.

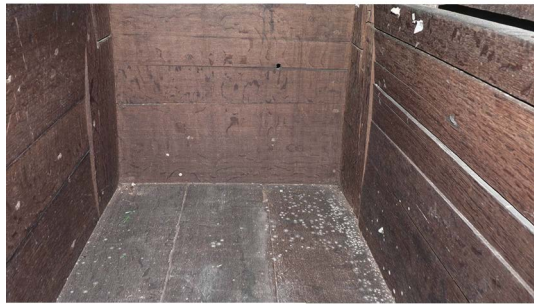


Fig. 11 Internal shaping, Canterbury.



Fig. 12 Internal shaping, Norwich.



The Rainham, Canterbury and Litcham chests have an applied grid of battens pegged on to the sides and jointed to the stiles (**Fig. 14**). This helps strengthen the joints between front and back, and sides. On the Norwich chest a later low rail has been added at one side for the same purpose.

The front and sides of all the chests slope inwards at the top; only the back is vertical; the angle of the joints between side rails and front stile reveals this (**Fig. 14**).<sup>5</sup> All the chests have a carved apron pegged to the lower board of the façade and the stiles (**Figs 1-6**). The Norwich chest also has carved spandrels below the apron. The chests have between eight and twelve buttresses pegged across the front. The two largest chests have a narrow applied board extending the full width of the chest containing the heads of the carved arches. The boards used in the construction of the chest vary in width and hence can be of trapezoid shape. This probably saved labour but meant adjacent boards had to be matched to form the rectangular lid and walls.

Each chest had a lidded ‘till box’ on each side for storing small items: one of the Faversham till boxes had a hidden lower compartment. Often the grooves in which they were held are the only evidence of them. All the chests had a high groove running along the full width of the back which would have held a narrow shelf, again for storage (**Figs 11 and 12**).

### *Ironwork*

All of the chests had a reserve in the carved façade design for a single lock. The lock plate had concave sides matching the sides of the reserve. Only the Norwich chest has a lock of the original shape today but it is a later example (**Fig. 15**). Originally all the chests had three or four short knuckle hinges; the hinges or their former positions are easy to see (**Fig. 16**). These were noted by Roe (1929, 101). Unlike the knuckle hinges on modern doors which are rebated to fit flush with the surface of the door and jamb, the hinges here are morticed into the top board of the back and the rear board of the lid. The hinges have two flanges which at Canterbury are about 3.3cm wide at the knuckle, tapering to 2.2cm, and 3.4cm deep (**Fig. 17**). The flanges are inserted into slit-like mortices and held by single nails through the hole in the centre of the flange. None of the chests has handles.

### *Decoration*

The lids of the two large chests are carved with two rectangles formed of deeply carved arcs (**Figs 18 and 19**). The smaller chests’ lids are carved with a pair of large rectangular quatrefoils with opposed stems (**Fig. 4 and Fig. 20**). In all the chests the lid design is incised with two lines.

The façade of each chest is carved with two registers of traceried arcading with trefoils above double lights. The two large chests have an upper row of round-headed arches; all the chests have gothic arches in the lower register. The applied buttresses are of gothic shape. The stiles and apron are carved with large quatrefoils which differ in detail only; the aprons of the two large chests have a double row of quatrefoils.

The surface finish of the Faversham and Rainham chests is discussed by Macquoid



Fig. 13 View underneath showing supporting battens and pegs fixing apron, Norwich.



Fig. 14 Side view showing inward-sloping front and side with applied grid, Canterbury.



Fig. 15 Replacement lock plate of original shape, Norwich.



Fig. 16 'Bites' showing two of original four positions of mortised knuckle hinges, Faversham.



Fig. 17 Example of mortised knuckle hinge with flange out of mortise, Norwich.



Fig. 18 Lid decoration,  
Faversham.



Fig. 19 Lid decoration, Rainham.



Fig. 20 Lid decoration, Litcham.



Fig. 21. Detail of  
arcading showing  
colour, Faversham.



Fig. 22 Detail of  
arcading showing  
colour, Canterbury.

and Edwards who say that ‘both examples, which are of noble proportions, retain considerable traces of the original tempera decoration’ (1954, Vol. 2, 6) and Roe who noted their ‘red ochre traces’ (1929, 99-100). Today, however, the Rainham chest is bare, having apparently been scrubbed clean of all colour. The Faversham façade is exceptional in retaining bright pink colour in the recesses of the tracery (Fig. 21). The Canterbury chest façade has lesser remains of red colour in its recesses (Fig. 22). The lids and façades of the Faversham, Canterbury, Litcham and Norwich chests all show dark brown stain or paint.

## ANALYSIS

*Dendrochronology*

Dendrochronological analyses were carried out on the oak in the Faversham and Canterbury chests to produce an estimated felling date range and a most likely origin for the timber (Table 1). The method is more accurate when the heartwood/softwood boundary is found as was the case for the Canterbury chest which thus has a narrower felling date range than for the Faversham chest.

TABLE 1 RESULTS OF DENDROCHRONOLOGICAL STUDIES OF THE FAVERSHAM AND CANTERBURY CHESTS

	Date of analysis	Best fitting chronology <sup>6</sup>	Est. felling date range	Est. date of construction <sup>7</sup>
Faversham	2007	Southern Vistula, (Poland, south of Gdansk) t=5.37		1390-1420
Canterbury	2015	Pomerania (Northern Poland, west of Gdansk) t=6.8	1400-1419	1402-1421

Source: Tyers (2007), Bridge and Miles (2016).

The results for the two sizes of chest are therefore consistent. They suggest that chests of different sizes and with two different patterns of lid carving were being made in the early 15th century. The presence of what is always referred to as ‘Baltic oak’ does not itself prove that the chests originated from what is now Poland, but is clearly compatible with this origin. Baltic oak was widely exported from the 13th century onwards and valued for its straight grain, light weight and ease of working (Salzman 1952, 245-8; Simpson and Litton 1996; Simpson 2014). The different origins within Poland of the timber are most likely to be due to the massive scale of timber exploitation and the mixing of supplies in timber yards before transfer to the makers; Baltic oak from different sources can even be found in the same chest.<sup>8</sup>

*Comparison with English and North German chests*

As shown earlier, three of the six chests were labelled ‘Kentish Gothic’ on the basis

of the location of the Rainham, Faversham and Canterbury examples and ignorance or neglect of the Norfolk examples. The argument for challenging the Kentish (or Norfolk) origin of the chests is their exceptionality among English chests and the features they share with a group of North German chests. Knowledge of the latter group was not available in the early 20th century and has only developed in the last three decades. The key reference is von Stülpnagel's (2000) book which contains a survey of chests in North German and Scandinavian museums and a very detailed study of chests in four Luneberg Heath monasteries, 57 with dendrochronological dates. Each feature will be compared in turn.

### *Constructional features*

*Lid.* The construction of the lid (three boards, the two outer ones being tapered in cross-section and the middle one untapered) is not distinctive. It is found on the East Kent group of arcaded gothic chests at St John's Hospital Canterbury, Graveney, Wormshill and Norton which date from 1250-1335 (Pickvance, forthcoming). The difference is that the thickness of the timber on the East Kent chests is much less. Lids of identical construction are also found on the 13th- to 15th-century North German chests studied by von Stülpnagel (2000).

*Walls.* As mentioned earlier, the walls of the chests narrow from the top and widen towards the bottom. Wall profiles are only now being studied and it is too early to say whether this profile can be found on English chests. The East Kent arcaded gothic chests have a quarter-round internal 'lip' over the groove holding the bottom boards and most of the Sussex and Surrey pin-hinged, clamped chests (plain or with roundels) have a lip with a canted edge above the groove for the bottom boards (Johnston 1907; Pickvance, forthcoming).<sup>9</sup> Von Stülpnagel illustrates a number of types of wall profile, including the canted lip (2000, 81-88). However, he also shows a complete drawing of a chest with no lip above the grooves for the bottom boards, exactly as on the chests in question here (2000, 234, **Fig. 23**).<sup>10</sup> He refers to this as the 'late Luneberg' construction type and dates the chests which show it to the 1400-1500 period, which includes the dendro-dates for the Faversham and Canterbury chests (von Stülpnagel, 2000, 257-263). Last, applied grids are very widely found on pre-1500 clamped chests in England and the rest of Northern Europe.

*Inward-sloping sides and façade.* Inward-sloping sides are found on the great majority of 13th- and 14th-century clamped chests in England: they allow the lid cleats to be accommodated within the width of the chest. The inward-sloping façade is not found in English chests to the writer's knowledge. It is however also found on the 'late Luneberg' group of North German chests (see Fig. 23).

*Till boxes and high shelf.* One or two till boxes are found in most chests of all periods: they are responses to the impracticality of searching for small items in the main chest space. Much less common are till boxes with false bottoms concealing either a second flat bottomed box (as shown by grooves on the back of the Faversham chest front), or a box that tapers towards the bottom of the chest (as

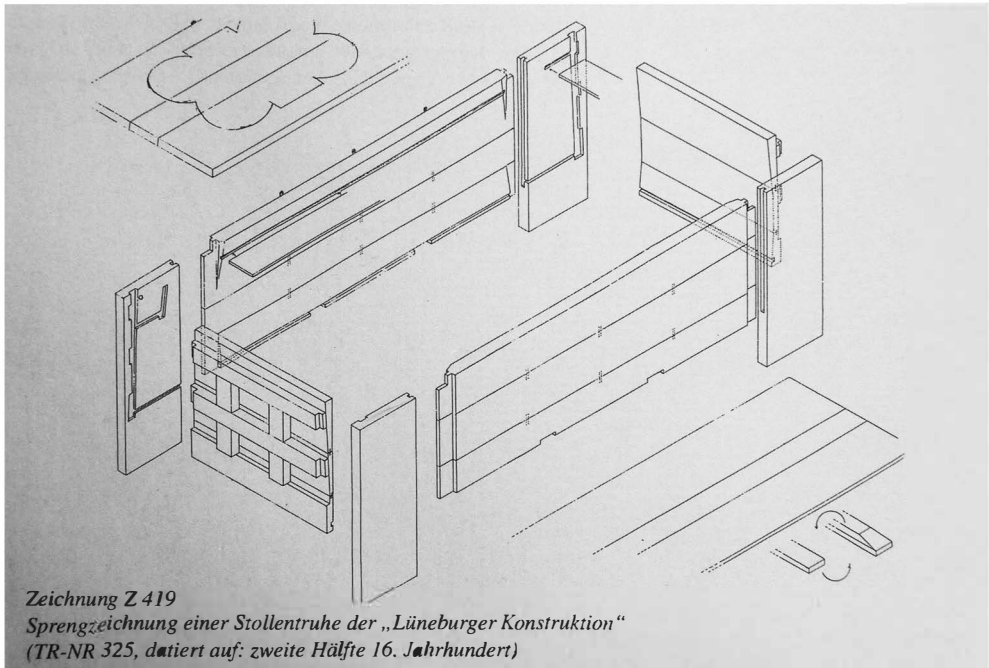


Fig. 23. The 'late Luneberg' construction type. Source: von Stülpnagel (2000, 234).

on the Godalming, Bosham and Stoke d'Abernon chests). In North Germany flat-bottomed lower till boxes are also found but not tapered examples (von Stülpnagel 2000, 95-99). The high shelf running across the back of the chest is a well-known feature of North German chests: it can either have a lip to retain small objects, or not (von Stülpnagel 2000, 99) (see Fig. 23). A chest in England which may have originally had a high shelf but which now has a row of pigeon holes held in a high groove is the chest at St Mary Magdalen Church, Oxford, which on stylistic, constructional and dendrochronological grounds is argued to be North German/Polish and of c.1330 (Pickvance 2014).<sup>11</sup>

#### *Decorative features*

*Lid decoration.* On English chests of any period it is exceptional to find decorated lids. The best known medieval examples are from the 14th century: the boarded de Bury chest from Durham Cathedral, now in the Burrell Collection, which has painted shields, and the clamped Dersingham, Norfolk, chest with its 'Jesus of Nazareth Crucified, King of the Jews' lid inscription (in Latin) and evangelists' symbols and tracery on the façade (Chinnery 1979, 136-7, Roe 1902, 47). Again, North Germany provides the key. Von Stülpnagel (2000, 104, 138-9, **Fig. 24**) shows the range of lid designs he found and describes Z 365 as the design typical of 'late Luneberg'; this is precisely the lid design on the Canterbury, Norwich and Litcham chests. Charles Tracy, whose specialism is church woodwork and

der Truhe TR-NR 321 (Z 366), die Umrisse der Vierpässe mit drei Linien gezogen, die Umrisse der Vierpässe mit drei Linien gezogen. Gelegentlich laufen die Bänder der Vierpässe dort, wo die Kreise zusammengeführt werden, in kunstvollen Formen aus (TR-NR 718, Z 368 und Z 367, Museum für das Fürstentum Lüneburg, Inventarnummer: 1:1975). Zeichnung 369 gibt die Rekonstruktion des verzierten Deckels der Truhe TR-NR 326 wieder, bei der aus zwei Fragmenten (gestrichelte Linien) die Vierpässe wieder zusammengesetzt wurden. Eine seltene Form ist ein Vierpaß, der sowohl durch einen senkrechten als auch durch einen waagerechten Balken auseinandergezogen ist (TR-NR 703, Z 370).

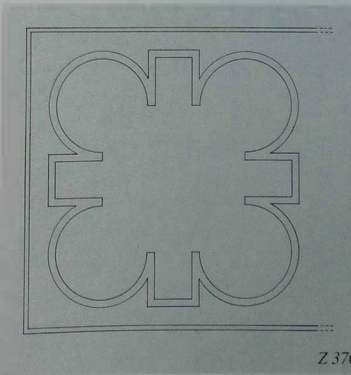
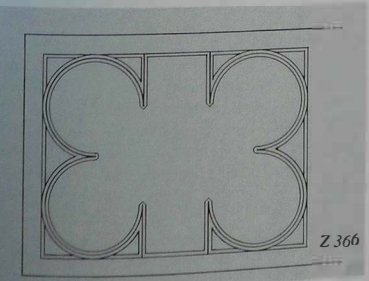
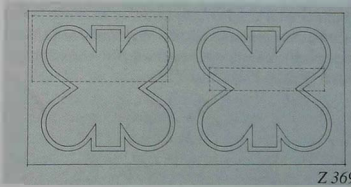
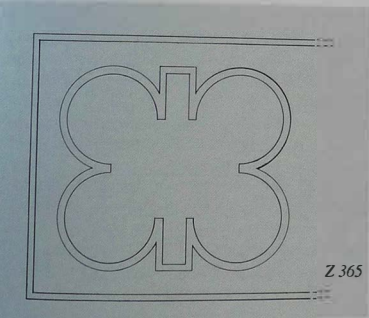
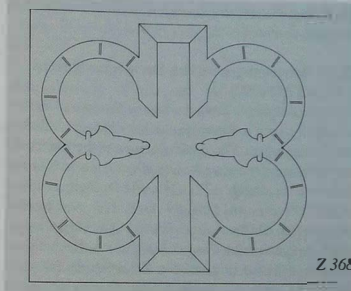
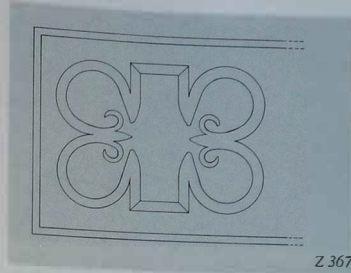
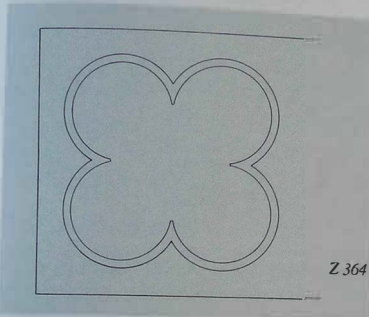


Fig. 24. Designs of lid carving on North German chests. Source: von Stülpnagel (2000, 139).

furniture, when seeing the Canterbury chest lid for the first time commented ‘this is not English carving’ (*Pers. Comm.*, April 2016).

*The façade design.* The carved façade contains three elements: a double register of traceried arcades, gothic ‘buttresses’ and quatrefoils on the stiles and apron. Professor Norbert Nussbaum of Cologne University, author of *German Gothic Architecture* (2000), was asked his opinion of the design of the carving on the Faversham chest. He responded: ‘all of them [Faversham and some others] derive from Rayonnant style between 1280 and 1330 (which should be a *terminus post quem* for the chests). The Faversham tracery has its origin in the ‘court style’ somewhere between Amiens and Paris, 1240-1260, but possibly filtered through the Strasbourg façade lodge. What reminds me of Strasbourg is the fact that the mullions of the upper tracery stand immediately on top of the lower tracery arch. There are prototypes for such a design in the Strasbourg façade designs around 1270 to 1300 and during the first half of the fourteenth century this type of tracery spread over northern and eastern Germany. But again, I know not a single example that resembles the Faversham pattern exactly’ (quoted in Pickvance 2007, 83). The gap between 1300-1350 and the dendro-dates of 1400-1420 shows how far chest decoration can lag behind new architectural styles. In other words, ‘tradition’ leads to a preference for established designs, a point often made by writers on furniture (Roe 1902, 36-40, Schmitz 1956, 22-25.)

Carved English chests of the 14th century have not been systematically studied. There is a group of probably 14th-century chests in England with traceried arcading most of which have mythical beasts in rectangular reserves on the stiles, e.g. at Brancepeth (lost), Chevington, Derby, Hacconby, Kirkleatham, Saltwood and Wath and at the V&A (W49-1912, W18-1920) (Roe 1902, 36-48, Pickvance 2007, Sherlock, 2008, 27-8, 54-5, 2011, von Stülpnagel 2000, 313). Their origin is not yet established.<sup>12</sup> Hence it would be risky to treat them as English comparators. The same applies to a group of chests with traceried arcading and roundels in Lincolnshire (Simpson, 2014).

Again, von Stülpnagel’s survey of 13th- to 15th-century clamped chests is instructive. He shows numerous chests with traceried arcading which he dates from the first half of the 14th century to the 16th century, and a second group with quatrefoils on the stiles and the base of the façade and with arcading containing stylised linenfold which he dates from the first half of the 15th century to the 16th century) (von Stülpnagel 2000, 150-186). The early 15th-century date of the six ‘Kentish Gothic’ chests with traceried arcading and with quatrefoils on the stiles and apron thus fits comfortably with the dates of these two groups. However, von Stülpnagel’s survey does not show any chests with identical façades to the six of interest: none have two registers of arcading, and where quatrefoils appear along the bottom of the façade they are not carved on applied aprons but on the stiles and lower board. Spandrels are often found on early chests but the apron extending across the whole width of the chest appears to be exceptional on pre-1500 North German and Swedish chests. Plinths, which extend all the way round, are common in France and Spain but it is difficult to tell which are original and which have been added to conceal losses to the stiles. The carved façade design thus shows close linkages but not an absolute match with the North German comparators.



*Ironwork*

*Locks.* All of the six chests originally had one lock. This runs against the belief that medieval chests invariably had three locks. There are other groups of clamped medieval chests with single locks such as the arcaded gothic chests in east Kent and the Surrey and Sussex group of chests of probable similar date referred to earlier. Likewise, the North German chests illustrated and studied by von Stülpnagel invariably have one lock. This is, therefore, a shared feature.

All six chests were designed with lock reserves for locks with concave-sided lock plates. Eames (1977, 142-3) notes that this was a common feature on the Continent as shown by the Flemish chests at Harty, York Minster and (formerly) Boughton Monchelsea (Eames 1977, 145-8, Christie’s 1999). She says ‘While I would not suggest that the presence of so simple a feature as the integrated lock plate [in the design] indicates an imported chest, its absence in a work as late as the 14th or 15th centuries does seem to imply the object in question is English’ (1977, 143). Forty years later, with more chests dendro-dated and with more comparative studies, the present writer would be more confident that integrated lock reserves in chests before 1500 are indeed invariably a Continental feature.

The concave-sided type of lock for which the chests were designed is found extensively on North German chests from the early 14th century onwards (von Stülpnagel 2000, 227, 246) and is thus consistent with our group of chests being from North Germany or a nearby region. However, this lock type is not diagnostic of a North German origin since such locks were also exported to England and the Low Countries (Geddes 1999, 233-4). They may also have been imitated in England. According to Chinnery they were in use in England from 1300-1550 (1979, 144).

*Hinges.* A second aspect of the ironwork is arguably the most intriguing feature of the chests, namely their morticed knuckle hinges. The contrast between the three or four small hinges and the weight and thickness of the chest lid is striking (Fig. 16). Large chests from 1200 onwards generally have either iron strap hinges which are fixed to the outside of the back and across the full depth of the surface of the lid, or pin (or pivot) hinges in which the lid cleat rotates on an iron rod fixed in a rebate at the top of the rear stile. (Some chests have both.) Iron strap hinges offer more security and are more costly. Hinges have not been systematically studied but the first English knuckle hinges the writer is aware of are on the Brasenose College Bursar’s Chest of 1500-1515 (Eames 1977, 190-2, Chinnery 1979, 119). However, these are fixed to the surface rather than being morticed. The only pre-1500 chests in England with morticed hinges the writer knows of are the Oxford chest, mentioned earlier, of c.1330 and of probable North German origin, and the later (1435-60) Boughton Monchelsea chest which, like the similar York Minster and Harty chests, is of Flemish origin (Pickvance 2014, Christie’s 1999).<sup>13</sup> This is good evidence in favour of the Continental origin of the chests studied here and is thus consistent with their originating in North Germany or a nearby region.

This observation raises the question of why morticed knuckle hinges were used. The Oxford chest and the six chests studied here have in common a lid with carved decoration; the Oxford chest has a lid design of gothic arcading at each end of the

lid with trefoil heads and an empty field in between. Since, if iron strap hinges were nailed onto a carved lid they would partly obscure the lid design, it is possible that the idea of small morticed knuckle hinges in place of a pin or strap hinge was an innovation triggered by the desire to show the full carving on the lid.<sup>14</sup> The Flemish Boughton Monchelsea chest, made 40 years later than the chests studied here and also with small morticed hinges has a single panel lid with a thick frame, a structure which makes the fixing of iron strap hinges difficult. Again the nature of the lid may have led to the use of a more compatible type of hinge. There are also mid 15th-century (framed and panelled) chests with morticed hinges at the Hotel-Dieu, Beaune, founded by the Duke of Burgundy, Nicolas Rolin (François, 1996). The Burgundian link to Flanders suggests a channel of influence to this institution and the chests have early parchemin panels with addorsed arcs of the type found in Flanders. Ideally it would be convenient to report that von Stülpnagel found short, morticed, knuckle hinges on the five chests with carved lids he studied in Luneberg Heath monasteries. In fact, none of them had such hinges; the 1330 chest No. 402 had iron pin hinges and the 15th-century and later chests Nos 324-7 had short strap hinges, showing that there were alternatives to morticed hinges where lids were carved.

#### DISCUSSION

The approach adopted here has been to start from a group of similar chests and identify features which they share which are distinct from those of chests considered to have been made in England and which are exclusively found on chests in the purported country of origin.

How convincing is the evidence presented here that the six chests are indeed imported from what is now the North Germany-North Poland region? We have shown that a number of features of the chests are consistent with such an origin: the use of Baltic oak, the lid construction, and the concave-sided type of lock. However, these features are not in themselves diagnostic of the chests' origin since they are not restricted to the region. The features which are quite distinct from those common in England were shown to be the inward-sloping front, the high shelf, the apron, carved lid decoration (and its specific kind), the integrated lock reserve (probably) and morticed knuckle hinges.<sup>15</sup> Six features is a large number and the first two in fact appear in Fig. 23. It is therefore considered likely that the six chests studied here are closely related to the 'late Luneberg' type of North German chests, which von Stülpnagel dates to the period 1400-1500, which includes the early 15th-century dendro-dates obtained for the Faversham and Canterbury chests.

The proposal here that the 'Kentish Gothic' chests in Kent and Norfolk are in fact imported chests is not entirely new. As mentioned earlier, Conway reported that, for some, the Faversham chest was Flemish, but the consensus has been that they were domestic products. There is a lot of evidence of imported chests in inventories and port records. Eames's study makes great use of inventories and notes that many medieval chests are named by their assumed place of origin, e.g. Flanders chest, Danske (Danzig) chest, spruse (Prussian) chest (Eames 1977, 137, Pickvance 2012, 108-112, Sherlock, 2008, 10-12). Port records are more concerned with the dutiable contents of chests than with their containers. Indeed there is sometimes

doubt about whether a chest is a crate for transport or a piece of furniture (Tracy 2001, 11-15). Eames (1977, 108-134) has discussed the many varieties of chest, their shapes, uses and the names used (coffer, chest, kist, etc.). The hope that usage will be consistent within and between countries and over time is likely to be false so any conclusions are likely to be provisional.

The importing of timber from Germany and subsequently from the eastern Baltic started in the 13th century and the result is the extensive use of Baltic oak in England especially in planked form rather than as structural timbers (Bowett 2012, 242-251). Tyers (2004) has suggested that the straight growth of Baltic oak meant that it was easier to convert into planking and that this was the key to the demand for it. There is some evidence that in the 1200-1500 period timber imports peaked around 1400, exactly the time when the ‘Kentish Gothic’ chests were made (Childs 2002, Daly 2007, 197-202). Moreover, the sixteen domed standard chests in Kent, which are part of a national group of 130 concentrated in the eastern coastal counties, proved also to date from the first two decades of the 15th century, precisely the same decades as the Faversham and Canterbury chests (Pickvance, 2012, 2015).<sup>16</sup> This suggests that the chests studied here may have been part of a single Hanseatic export drive.

Postan (1933) argues that Hanseatic merchants were strongly favoured by the English state to ensure supplies of corn, timber and wood products but that this was later challenged by English merchants’ demands for reciprocity. The reasons for the probable 1400 peak are complex. According to Postan (1987) the expansion and contraction of international trade was more influenced by piracy, war and international politics than by supply, demand, cost and profit. But how this applies to the flow of timber or wood products requires detailed economic data as well as information on the power of the Hanseatic towns and the entrepreneurial and military Teutonic order, which reached its zenith in 1400. The right gained by English merchants in the later 14th century to import goods from Baltic ports in English ships may be relevant to the 1400 peak (Simpson 2014, 240).

It is believed that timber and timber products were exported from a series of ports such as Stralsund, Danzig and Riga, and that chests were made near the port rather than a long way inland near the oak source. There is evidence of the importance of Danzig for timber processing and export and on the export of chests and coffers from Danzig to Hull in the 1450-1500 period (Childs 1986, Pickvance 2012, 145-6, Simpson 2014). Lynn is believed to have had a larger volume of trade with Danzig; the six chests studied here are likely to have arrived through Lynn and Sandwich. The distance over which Baltic oak was exported within the region is unknown; some undoubtedly went to Sweden to make chests. The result is that, faced with six chests made in a single constructional and decorative style and of Baltic oak, we can infer that they were made in a single workshop but we cannot be sure where within a region extending from North Germany to North Poland they were made. The fact that the ‘late Luneberg’ chests found in the Luneberg Heath are made of local oak makes it more likely that chests of similar construction made of Baltic oak come from North Poland, closer to the Polish timber source, or from parts of North Germany close to it.

This article has relied on the very detailed work of von Stülpnagel on the Luneberg Heath monastery chests. However, there is a risk that too much importance is

given to this set; the monasteries lie within a small area of 30km radius. The North Germany-North Poland region is very wide (from Luneberg to Gdansk is over 500km) and, given the well-known autonomy of German medieval towns, it is possible that many other chests were made, few of which have survived, with different workshops drawing on the same repertoire of motifs in distinct ways. It thus becomes easier to understand that while the construction of the chests studied here matches the 'late Luneberg' type no precise match for their carved façades has so far been found.<sup>17</sup>

In the early 20th century, English writers tended to assume that a chest in Kent was made in Kent. The term 'Kentish Gothic' was thus a self-evident description for the chests studied here. There was an awareness of imports but often not of their extent or quality; in some writings one can detect an equation of 'German-made' with rough or inferior. The Litcham chest fitted uneasily under this label and was not given much attention. The discovery of the Norwich and Wighton chests also in Norfolk, a county well-placed to receive Hanseatic imports and one of the four counties (with Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Kent) with the largest number of imported iron-bound domed standard chests, is a further challenge. The argument here that the six chests are imported has built on the greater knowledge of medieval chests now available, and has been helped particularly by dendrochronology and the internet, and especially by the pioneering study of von Stülpnagel.

However, we have based our argument on existing knowledge, but emphasized that that knowledge is limited. In particular, identifying the features of chests that are specific to one country and those that are found more widely, the basis of our method, requires detailed studies of medieval chests from locations throughout Europe, which in practice are fragmentary. Our conclusions are thus advanced with caution and future research will undoubtedly modify them. The level of detail presented in this article is considered necessary to help build the bigger picture of medieval chests across Europe.

#### APPENDIX THE CHESTS: DIMENSIONS AND ALTERATIONS

*Canterbury.* 148 x 83 x 66cm. The chest is intact. Two later iron strap hinges of different lengths have been added. Front to back central batten over bottom is missing. Battens added under lid and across the outside of the back at top and bottom. Two later 17th-century type locks and signs of former hasps and staples for padlocks. The chest has a dark brown stain; some red stain or paint remains in the recesses of the carved façade.

*Faversham.* 163 x 93 x 72cm. Only the lid and façade (with apron) remain; they are now attached to a pine structure. The lid has four later battens and is now attached by three modern iron strap hinges. Two later rectangular locks have been fitted to left and right of the original lock recess. The red stain in the recesses of the carved façade is very clearly visible. Brown stain on lid.

*Litcham.* 148 x 76 x 66cm. The rear stiles have been replaced and the applied grids are incomplete and/or have been repaired. Strengthening battens have been

added to lid, back and front. The hinges have been replaced. The lock plate is later but in a rectangular 15/16th-century style. The chest has dark brown stain.

*Norwich*. 133 x 87 x 62cm. (Gressenhall No. L1974.29.3) The chest is intact except for the base of the rear left stile which has been replaced by a narrow batten fixed to the side of the chest. Two lidded lockers replace the original till boxes; only the lid remains of the right hand locker. The lid has an added batten and the right hand cleat is loose. The chest does not have applied grids, but has had a later rail (now missing) dove-tailed to prevent the right hand side from splaying apart. The lid still has its original knuckle hinges; the right hand hinge is loose. The lock is later but made in the original concave-sided style. Signs of a former hasp and staple for a padlock. The chest has brown stain.

*Rainham*. 160 x 88 x 72cm. The chest is intact but side aprons were added after 1887, the date of the engraving in Fig. 7. Later timber has been added to the rear stiles. The back has later vertical and horizontal iron straps and straps passing underneath. There are very old (original?) iron brackets at the corners. The lid is abraded and is now on two long, later, internal strap hinges; iron surface straps have been added to strengthen it. There are small inserts to the façade and right hand lid cleat. Five buttresses have been replaced and re-fixed with nails; one buttress is now loose. The lock plate has been replaced by a metal cover. There are filled keyholes of later locks. There is no sign of colour; the chest appears to have been cleaned.

*Wighton*. 136 x 66 x 58cm. (Bundock, 2012) The lid and hinges are later and six of the eight buttresses are missing. There is an insert in place of the lock plate. The feet of the stiles and lower part of the apron have been cut off, reducing the height. Both till boxes are now missing. John Stabler reports (September 2014): ‘resembles the Litcham chest but the bottom 8 inches or so has been sawn off, the lid had been replaced with a plain pine one, and the hinges changed, no signs of applied grid fixings’.<sup>18</sup>

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Chinnery's typology treats features such as lid shape, the presence of legs and plinths as secondary; they are given more importance by Eames (1977, 108-130) who uses the term hutch for this type of chest. Geddes (1999, 32) uses the term stile chest, close to the German term *stollenruhe*.

<sup>2</sup> They do not appear in his list of 'late medieval chests' which have 'long been recognised as of Continental origin' (Tracy 2001, 15).

<sup>3</sup> The preceding list of 'movable goods' suggests the chests were used to store church plate, altar and other cloths, a latten cross and censor, and mass books. Thanks to Sheila Sweetinburgh for this reference.

<sup>4</sup> There are diagonal holes in the front upper corners of the stiles at Norwich only. These are also found on the Dersingham chest and the lid of the Buxted ark. Their purpose is unknown: it could be for concealed pegs for additional security, or for tying down when being transported.

<sup>5</sup> Roe (1902, 43) suggested that the back of the Rainham chest was also inward-sloping but this is a misunderstanding, perhaps based on the 1887 engraving – see Fig. 7.

<sup>6</sup> The chronologies are continuously evolving as more samples are taken: t values reflect the prevailing state of research.

<sup>7</sup> The date refers to when the timber was felled, after which two years is usually allowed for seasoning for oak of 5cm thickness as in these two chests, to provide a *terminus post quem* for the date of construction (Miles 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Ian Tyers (*pers. comm.*, October 2016)

<sup>9</sup> This is based on the author's current research on this group.

<sup>10</sup> This drawing does not show the tapered cross-section shape of the stiles of the six chests.

<sup>11</sup> A groove for a high shelf was also present on the Boughton Monchelsea chest, discussed below, which suggests that the idea extended later to Flanders (Christie's 1999).

<sup>12</sup> The V&A chests were acquired in Germany. For Tracy they are Continental imports from the Low Countries or Germany (2001, 15-16).

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Jan Chinnery for her detailed notes on this chest (*pers. comm.*, November 2015.)

<sup>14</sup> Another solution would have been to use pin hinges which would not obscure the carved design; this is still a subject requiring research.

<sup>15</sup> The combination of tracery and quatrefoil carving on the façade may also be distinctive, but research on English chests does not allow us to say so yet.

<sup>16</sup> Postan describes these two decades as 'normal years', very favourable for exports; Baltic timber arriving in England cost twice its cost in Danzig, whereas by the 1430s it cost ten times as much (1987, 203).

<sup>17</sup> The Sedlescombe and Wittersham chests mentioned earlier, which have slightly different façades, show that other workshops made related chests. Likewise, the great variation in the ironwork of the domed standard chests show that they were produced in many workshops (Pickvance 2015).

<sup>18</sup> All Saints, Wighton, was rededicated in 1412 which may be related to the acquisition of the chest.