

Bench Chest

By Baroness Kaleeb the Green Eyed

Chests, sea chests, trunks, coffers and chest benches are all terms which are used interchangeably in books and museums. Very few chests have survived the ravages of time because they were not considered valuable. The value was held in the contents of the chest. Of the chests and trunks, which have survived most are held in churches or museums and are highly decorated. Those chests and trunks are not the focus of this paper. The preservation conditions of the Mary Rose ship give us a glimpse into the world of everyday storage. “105 records in the database relating to chests or possible chests, from which a minimum of 49 can be identified” (*Before the Mast*, p.387) That is a lot of wooden material to have survived. It is enough to be able to make some generalizations on use, size and materials.

“Before the Mast” roughly divides the chests into three groups and then into a further four groups. The basic groups are:

Type 1, Base rested directly on deck, no hinges or lock.

Type 2: Base rested directly on deck, hinges and lock fitted.

Type 3: Base raised from deck (ie, it had legs), hinges and lock fitted.

Sub-type.1: Nailed, boards butted together.

Sub-type. 2: Nailed boards affixed through “fitting” rebates up to 5mm deep cut along the edges of some carcass elements.

Sub-type. 3: Pegged, boards affixed through “fitting” rebates cut along the edges of some carcass elements.

Sub-type. 4: Nailed with ends and sides dovetailed together. (*Before the Mast*, p.387)

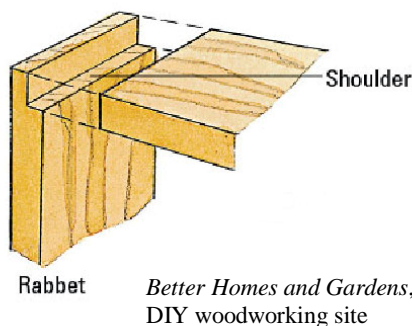


Highly decorated chest from 1500 at the Victoria and Albert Museum , item number W.428-1922 m

I have chosen to make a chest bench for the storage of personal goods, over a long voyage.

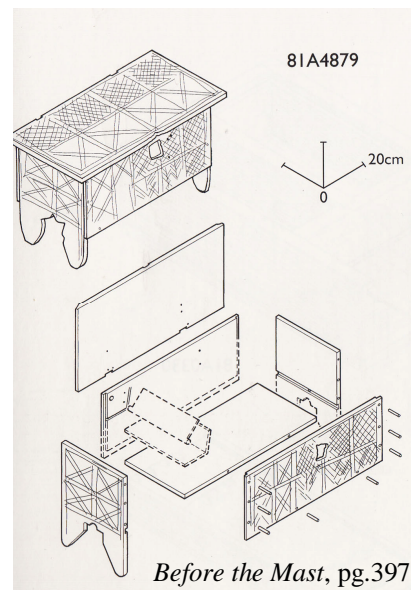
While medieval locks have long fascinated me, my chest bench does not have a lock. It should have a lock. I have chosen to make a Type 3 chest of the sub-type 2. In other word my chest bench will have rabbet joints, nails, a till and legs. It will be possible to sit on the chest, as you would sit on a bench.

My chest bench is made from pine. It should be made from oak. From the start of this project I have intended to paint the chest bench a nice red. Chest 81A3907 had traces of red and white paint on it. I cannot justify the cost of oak to put a finish of paint over it, hence the use of pine. I have also embarked on a journey to learn a bit of more of advanced furniture construction, hence the need to practice on cheaper materials. I have also used power tools to make my chest benches: a non-period use of equipment to gain a reasonable facsimile of a period piece in a manageable amount of time. Plus I do not have the correct hand tools to do the job and if I made the chest with hand tools, there is no way anybody would be allowed to use the piece or take it camping. (I do not make things which cannot be used.)



The first pass at making a type 3, sub-type 2 bench was done with the help of my son. It has rabbet joints and no till. I simply forgot to cut the grooves for the till. I initially questioned the use of nails to hold the chest bench together. Further research has indicated the medieval glues were all water soluble, which is a problem on a boat. The simple solution is to add a few random nails for reinforcement, that seems to be what was done with the Mary Rose chests. Rabbet joints make a joint which is stronger than a butted joint. They were surprisingly easy to make and use.

Figuring out the dimensions on the chest benches was not difficult, however it was less straight forward than I thought it would be. Appendix 1 has a very clear list of all of the chests and pieces found. Chest 81A0917 had a nice list of objects found in it. It was found standing on end and it was missing one of the three dimensions needed to make an exact copy. I tried to scale the drawing from the book, it did not look right. I finally settled on a general average of chest sizes and a height of 16-18 inches. 18 inches is a modern standard for chair seat heights and 16 inches was an earlier average for seat heights. When I started to put the chest together the inside did not look very big. I second guessed myself and added 3.5 inches. The next chest built does not have the extra depth and I think it looks better. My second chest is also a little smaller, this was because of a problem with “measure twice, cut once.” I got it backwards and I still needed to learn how to insert the till.



On the ends or leg parts of the bench chest there is a groove where the base slots into the end. This type of joint is called a dado joint. I have had a lot of trouble with this joint. The first attempt with a chisel was not pretty. The second attempt with the chop box was better, but still not as nice as I would prefer. The third attempt with the wrong fence and the router scared me, so I tried the chop box again. The fourth attempt with the correct fence on the router still scares me, but at least it is not dangerous. I needed to master the dado style of joint to be able to put in the till. Further research into how to use a chisel, and not have a beaver hewn project, has proven successful.

Adding the extra small decorative feet on the front of the bench chest was easy. I think it makes the chest look sturdier and more like a piece of furniture. When attaching the feet it is important to use predrilled holes. The overlap on the lid of the chest bench and till is there to make the chest easy to open. A simple solution to remove the need for a handle. I have also used a simple piece of vegetable tanned leather and tacks to create a hinge. The chests on the Mary Rose have hinges and a lock fitted or hinges and a lock not fitted. Too much time and possible money has been spent looking at restoration hardware sites for hinges. A low technology solution was needed to advance the project. The leather hinge was applied after the painting was completed, in order to seal as much of the wood as possible. The nails used are from a company called Tremont Nails. They manufacture nails for house restoration. The nail heads do not look modern.

