

Introduction

In September 1672, a man called Thomas Wale visited the renowned antiquary Elias Ashmole, and recounted to him a strange series of events that centred on a wooden chest. Wale, a warder in the Tower of London, rightly suspected that the contents of the chest would be of significant interest to Ashmole. The story began many years earlier, when Mrs Wale was shopping in London with her first husband, ‘one M:^f Jones a Confectioner’. Shortly after they were married, Jones

tooke her with him into Alde Streete among the Joyners, to buy some Household stuff, where (at the Corner house) they saw a Chest of Cedar wood, about a yard & halfe long, whose Lock & Hinges, being of extraordinary neate worke, invited them to buy it.

One day some two decades later, something quite unexpected happened:

[. . .] she & her s^d husband occasionally removing this Chest out of its usuall place, thought they heard some loose thing rattle in it, toward the right hand end, under the Box or Till thereof, & by shaking it, were fully satisfied it was so: Hereupon her Husband thrust a piece of Iron into a small Crevice at the bottome of the Chest, & thereupon appeared a private drawer, w^{ch} being drawne out, therein were found divers Bookes in Manuscript, & Papers, together with a litle Box, & therein a Chaplet of Olive Beades, & a Cross of the same wood, hanging at the end of them.

They made no great matter of these Bookes &c: because they understood them not; w^{ch} occasioned their Servant Maide to wast about one halfe of them under Pyes & other like uses, w^{ch} when they discovered, they kept the rest more safe.

A few years after this discovery Mr Jones died, and then during London’s fire of 1666, the chest unfortunately ‘perished in the Flames, because not easily to be removed’ (ironically, this ‘moveable’ was not so moveable when it really mattered), but the ‘Bookes &c’ were taken to safety ‘with the rest of M:^{rs} Jones her goods’. The widowed Mrs Jones ‘tooke care to

preserve them’, and after her second marriage to Thomas Wale, they were eventually brought ‘with her consent’ to the attention of Ashmole, who identified them as having belonged to the Elizabethan astrologer and magician John Dee. They included a manuscript of Dee’s ‘Conference with Angels’, as well as other works of occult philosophy and ritual magic, and Ashmole added them to his library, giving Wale a book about the Order of the Garter in return.¹

As Joad Raymond has observed, there are multiple stories at work in this narrative. The chest, a standard furnishing for a marital home in the seventeenth century, is bought by a couple who are attracted by its impressively worked lock and hinges. For many years it is literally part of the furniture, occupying its ‘usuall place’. But this seemingly quite ordinary chest turns out to be a surprise repository of mysterious hidden objects. In addition to its internal ‘Box or Till’, the chest contains a ‘private drawer’, inside which there are ‘divers Bookes in Manuscript, & Papers’ and a further ‘litle Box’ containing beads and a little cross. This chest, with its internal drawer, secret compartment, and boxes within boxes, encloses multiple mysteries. These multiple concentric containments lead to multiple revelations, and the jostling of the various objects in the story – boxes, books, beads – blurs the distinction between the material and the textual. The chest becomes a surprise meeting point for the material cultures of the household and of the book, while at the same time the now infamous detail of some of Dee’s papers being employed by the family servant ‘under Pyes & other like uses’ underlines the essential material contiguity of books with the rest of the domestic environment.

One way of appreciating the multiple stories here is to recognise the various temporalities embodied in the chest. The chest, an apparently ordinary piece of furniture, is revealed to be ‘polychronic’ or ‘multitemporal’, a palimpsestic object with the capacity to ‘articulate several different organizations of time’.² When it was first purchased by the Joneses, the chest already had an intriguing history – the shopkeeper told his newly wed customers that ‘it had ben parcel of the Goods of M:^r John Woodall

¹ This account by Elias Ashmole, recorded in British Library Sloane MS 3188, is cited by Joad Raymond at the opening of *Milton’s Angels: The Early-Modern Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 1–2. See also William H. Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 30 and passim.

² I borrow these terms from Jonathan Gil Harris’s discussion of Renaissance objects and their complicated relationship to history, in *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), pp. 13, 15, and passim.

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Chirurgeon'. Ashmole adds parenthetically that this man was 'father to M:^f Tho: Woodall late Sergant Chirurgeon to his now Ma:^{tie} King Charles the 2^d... My intimate friend', and it was 'very probable he bought it after D:^f Dee's death, when his goods were exposed to Sale'.³ There are various different pockets of time in Ashmole's account, but this is because there are multiple parcels of time enclosed in the chest itself, whose secret contents, discovered in the 1660s but not fully understood until a decade later, point back to the Elizabethan past, and also further back to a more distant past. The cross and beads, for example, are ritual artefacts reminiscent of pre-Reformation devotional practices, and were probably used by Dee in his experiments in the summoning of angels during the 1580s, recorded in the manuscript identified by Ashmole as Dee's 'Conference with Angells'. When the chest's contents were first discovered, these historical intricacies were not fully revealed, partly because the Joneses did not understand the books and papers, though they rightly suspected that they might be worth saving from the kitchen, and from fire.

The multiple stories in Ashmole's account also weave together a network of different figures across almost a century: Ashmole himself, John Dee and his conversations with angels, Thomas Wale, his wife and her first husband and their servant, the shopkeeper who sold them the chest, and a possible previous owner of the chest, the well-connected surgeon-general of the East India Company, John Woodall. Two protagonists remain constant in this chain of events: the chest, and Mrs Wale, formerly Jones. Although it is Thomas Wale who approaches Ashmole about the books and papers, it is noted that he does so with his wife's 'consent', and it is she who recounts everything to Ashmole. The chest, after all, predates Mr Wale in its relationship with Mrs Wale, and its contents move with her from one marriage to the next, after her first husband's death. It is clear that Mrs Wale maintains at least a sense of entitlement to, or responsibility for, this moveable. Thus one of the important stories here is about gender, and the chest as a domestic object with particular significance for women, who might marry, and be widowed, and marry again, bringing valuable objects like this with them, in which their own histories are invested.⁴ The

³ John Woodall was the first surgeon-general of the East India Company, whose responsibilities included supplying ships with surgeon's chests. He wrote *The surgions mate, or A treatise discovering faithfully and plainely the due contents of the surgions chest* (London: Edward Griffin for Laurence Lisle, 1617), the first good medical textbook of its kind in English, which described the instruments and medicines of a sea-surgeon's chest, and their uses. He would doubtless have owned many chests. This detail may be true, or perhaps it was a cunning marketing ploy by the shopkeeper.

⁴ The principle of coverture would have meant that Mr Jones legally owned the chest, not his wife. He could have bequeathed it to her, or if he died intestate, Mrs Jones would have been entitled to a third

other woman in Ashmole's narrative, the Jones's 'Servant Maide', is depicted as wasting some of the papers in the kitchen, but even as it is rather disparaging, this comment tells us something about the agency of a household's other women in relation to places of storage and potential secret-keeping, like chests. In this case, an unnamed servant presumably has access to the chest, shares her employers' ignorance about the literary significance of its surprise contents, but resourcefully puts some of the papers to practical uses.

The Jones/Wale chest turns out to be not just one container, but a concentric collection of containers, its secret drawers and boxes hiding further mystifying contents. Even when discovered, the 'divers Bookes in Manuscript, & Papers' still conceal their full historical significance until brought to the expert antiquarian eye of Ashmole. Initially it is the material potential of some of these some papers that is realised: for the Jones's servant, the chest offers a convenient source of waste paper. Ashmole's identification of these papers as relics of John Dee shifts the focus to their intellectual content, and makes the chest into a miniature library or even a kind of bookbinding or case, which has preserved the vulnerable leaves for future readers. The material and intellectual relationship between the sheets of paper and the 'binding' around them is another important part of this story; the chest as container is transformed by its own magical contents, in a disorientating blurring of the distinction between book and box. In turn, the books and papers themselves are box-like, requiring the expertise of Ashmole to unlock them.

While this is for Elias Ashmole a story about the chance survival of some historically significant manuscripts, it is also a narrative about the object that enabled their survival. It is the wooden chest with its lock and complex interior of secrets that is the agent of preservation, keeping safe what turn out to be significant literary discoveries, even while it is moved between different owners, marriages, and households, over a period of several decades. In the description of its ending – it 'perished in the Flames' of the Great Fire – the chest becomes martyr-like, an almost sacred vessel whose precious contents are miraculously saved from the same fate. The story of the chest tells us something about gender and the relationship between women and material goods, and it also reveals something about social class, for the buying of such a piece of furniture by the Joneses signals at least moderate affluence. In this story, the chest

of all things. On 'ordinary' women and how they owned, managed, and inherited property, see Amy Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993).



Figure 1 Chest of cedar, cypress, or juniper wood, Portugal or England, c. 1603–49.
 86 × 156 × 59 cm. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

carries out its intended function of containment, but it is also a miraculous hiding place for things other than household necessities: mystifying books, ritual objects, secrets. Its secure wooden structure opens onto the present and various moments in the past simultaneously, merging the mundane and the magical, the everyday and the occult, the profane and the sacred, and the materialities of the kitchen and the study. Thus this chest is not merely an inert container, but an epiphanic technology or instrument, enabling many organisations of time, space, and things.

When the Joneses bought this chest in the middle of the seventeenth century, they were investing in an important piece of ‘Household stuff’ – a lockable wooden box that would furnish their marital home, enabling them to store, protect, and transport their material possessions. Several details from the account in Ashmole’s manuscript suggest that this chest may have been similar to one that now survives in the Victoria & Albert Museum (Figure 1). Made in the first half of the seventeenth century, the V&A example measures 156 cm wide (loosely comparable to the ‘yard and a halfe’ of the Jones/Wale chest), 86 cm high, and 59 cm deep. Mrs Jones/Wale remembers that they went ‘among the Joyners’ to buy their chest, which is a significant detail here, as it tells us something about the quality of this object. Its construction must have involved the more refined techniques of joinery requiring shaped wooden joints and glue, like the

mitred dovetails of the V&A example, in contrast with a chest made by carpenters, which would be constructed more crudely from boards held together with nails. Like the Jones/Wale chest, the V&A example has a lock and hinges securing the lid, and it is fitted with a till (similarly at ‘the right hand end’, the most convenient arrangement for the majority of people).

No details of the exterior appearance of the Jones/Wale chest are given in the Ashmole manuscript, other than it being of ‘Cedar’, with lock and hinges of invitingly ‘extraordinary neate worke’, but it may have been carved or, like the V&A example, engraved on its front panels. The engraved design on this chest, enhanced with a black paste of pine resin, features the Stuart royal arms as well as some more unusual imagery, including a double-headed eagle.⁵ This style of decoration, and the fact that it is made of cedar, cypress, or juniper (these woods are not always easy to distinguish between), suggest that the V&A chest may well have been imported to England from the Mediterranean. Although Mrs Jones/Wale remembers going ‘among the Joyners’ to choose it, it is possible that with its history of passing between multiple owners over almost a century the Jones/Wale chest, also of cedar, might well have originally been imported too.⁶ By the time that Mr Wale went to Elias Ashmole, John Evelyn had suggested that although cedar was not grown in England, ‘this precious *material* may be had at such tolerable rates’ from abroad that ‘our more Wealthy *Citizens of London*, now Building, might be encourag’d to use of it [. . .] for *Shelves, Comptoirs, Chests, Tables, Wainscot, &c*’, pointing to the novelty of imported cedar for furniture-making in the 1670s. (When the Jones/Wale chest was built, presumably in the latter decades of the sixteenth century, oak would have been the more usual source, if it was not imported but made in England.) One of the advantages of cedar, ‘beside the everlastingness of the *wood*’, is that it deters insects, so it ‘would also be a means to preserve *cloth*, and other *Ware* from *Moths* and *corruption*’.⁷ The Jones/Wale chest, now known for its miraculous

⁵ If the Jones/Wale chest is ‘multitemporal’, the V&A example might be said to be ‘multilocational’. The V&A online catalogue entry for this object notes that the double-headed eagle is associated with the Holy Roman Empire, and may be a reference to James I’s daughter Elizabeth of Bohemia: www.collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O60641/chest-and-stand-unknown/. According to Victor Chinnery, similar examples of chests embellished with English heraldry suggest they were ordered from abroad as tourist souvenirs: see his *Oak Furniture: The British Tradition* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1979; rev. 2016), p. 130.

⁶ If the first owner was indeed John Woodall of the East India Company, as Ashmole’s narrative suggests, it could well have been imported.

⁷ John Evelyn, *Sylva, or, A discourse of forest-trees, and the propagation of timber in His Majesties dominions* (London: J. Martyn and J. Allestry, 1670), R2v–R3r.

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preservation of John Dee's papers, was originally intended to protect and preserve other domestic goods, especially textiles.

As this brief glimpse into the life of one particular object illustrates, boxes play an important role in domestic space, offering protection, order, and convenience, as well as the possibility of privacy and secrecy. In such ways, they are essential to how people construct, inhabit, and interact with their environments. Some of the fundamental appeal of the box is articulated particularly poetically by Primo Levi at the beginning of a short essay in which he suggests that '[T]o fabricate a receptacle is a clue to two qualities, which, for good or evil, are exquisitely human':

The first is the ability to think about tomorrow. There certainly are animals 'not incautious of the future': ants, bees, squirrels, certain birds, and some of them in fact build receptacles: bees in particular, with admirable skill and economy of material, but their small hexagonal cell is only one, and their art, although at least one hundred million years old, has remained what it was, while ours, in a few millennia, has given origin to a myriad of objects. The second specifically human quality is the capacity to foresee the behaviour of matter: if we keep to the subject of receptacles, we know how to foresee what container and content 'will do', and how they will react to each other, at the instant of their contact and in time.

A boundless jungle of subjects has sprung from these two exigencies, each endowed with its own particular development; and, consequently, an assortment of receptacles (casks, pitchers, vials, bags, suitcases, baskets, sacks, buckets, ink stands, jars, goatskins, cylinders, boxes, bowls, crates, lead capsules for radioactive elements, cages, snuff boxes, trash cans, flasks for gunpowder, cans for tomato paste, mail boxes, velvet-lined jewel cases, scabbards for swords, pyxes for hosts, needle cases, air tubes, carry-this and carry-that, gasometers as large as cathedrals, cribs, urns, and biers) so jagged as to make one want to set up a classification, as one has always tried to do with animals, plants, and rocks.⁸

As Levi puts it, the capacity to 'think about tomorrow', and to 'foresee the behaviour of matter' are characteristics that distinguish humans from all other creatures, even from those like bees or ants whose habitats are also based around receptacles they build themselves, for the purposes of security, storage, trapping, and display.⁹ While honeycombs and anthills of course imply a sense of the future, and certainly demonstrate mastery of

⁸ Primo Levi, 'A Bottle of Sunshine', in *Other People's Trades*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), pp. 19–23 (pp. 19–20).

⁹ Mike Hansell, *Built by Animals: The Natural History of Animal Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 24.

matter, human capacity for these things is infinitely more varied, and infinitely more adaptable than in the animal domain. These two characteristics underpin some of the distinctive ways in which humans have always responded to the world, as we seek to bring order to material things we use and encounter, and to lay down resources – physical, intellectual, or spiritual – that may be needed in the future.

The items in Levi's catalogue of receptacles range from the tiny to the very large, the profane to the sacred, and from the ancient to the modern. The very specific – 'scabbards for swords, pyxes for hosts' – are intermingled with the rather vague – 'carry-this and carry-that', while the everyday – 'cans for tomato paste' – jostle with the less familiar – 'flasks for gunpowder'. Threatening to overflow his parentheses, Levi's extensive but inevitably incomplete list plays out on the page the need for a 'classification' system, to make further distinctions between a collection of things which, while they might all be 'receptacles', suggest many different shapes, sizes, materials, uses, processes, places, and contexts. They are associated, variously, with containment, temporary or permanent storage, protection, transportation, consumption, convenience, sanctification – and they signal many other ways in which we engage with our environments. 'Box' is the only noun to appear more than once in Levi's expansive list, as a plural noun, but also in the more specific 'pyxes', 'snuff boxes', and 'mail boxes'. Amidst his assemblage of receptacles, boxes represent the very general, but also the very specialised, and they are also scattered across time, emphasising a continuity – 'snuff boxes' evoke luxury and consumption in the past, while 'mail boxes' speak of the more familiar present. As these two particular examples imply, a box can be ornamental, or practical, or personal, or several of these things at once. Levi's list demonstrates that as well as recognising the synchronic social, cultural, and aesthetic contexts of any particular box, we need to admit the temporal complexities of the box as a pervasive form of material culture.

This book takes as its starting point the historical fact that boxes of many different kinds proliferated in early modern England, for numerous purposes and settings. Recent quantitative work by historians of space and consumption has highlighted the prevalence of objects we can categorise as boxes in early modern material culture. Across a broad social spectrum, these studies have revealed that boxes are among the most numerous of all of the furnishings typically listed in early modern probate inventories. Over ninety per cent of the Kent inventories examined by Mark Overton and colleagues in their study of production and consumption in

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English households across the seventeenth century mention chests,¹⁰ and similar inventory patterns of multiple chests, coffers, and boxes have been noted by Antony Buxton in his microhistory of the non-elite households of the market town of Thame in Oxfordshire throughout the seventeenth century.¹¹ In their exploration of how ‘behaviours were located within the material environment of the household, shaping and being shaped by it’, Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson have more recently focused on the middling level, emphasising that this was not a cohesive group, but included a diverse range of artisans, tradesmen, and educated professionals. Their project combined quantitative and qualitative analysis to offer a highly persuasive shift from ‘the study of “material culture” to the broader consideration of “materiality”, encompassing not just objects but the whole material world through which individuals understand their social, cultural and spiritual position’. In their list of the thirty objects most frequently listed in chambers in 215 inventories from Faversham, Kent in the period 1560–1600, the most numerous are chests: 728, compared with 148 chairs, and 182 tables.¹²

As collections such as that of the Victoria & Albert Museum and the National Trust also attest, plenty of early modern boxes, chests, coffers, and trunks have long outlived their original contents, and in many English parish churches today, lockable chests and other boxes are often the only remaining moveable objects from before the Reformation. Paradoxically, these ‘moveables’ are often so large and heavy that they are difficult to move, hence their survival (although as the story of the Jones/Wale chest demonstrates, sometimes the immovability of things actually proves fatal). Now often empty, filled with junk, or missing their keys, they were originally important civic, bureaucratic locations, used for storing parish registers, accounts, books and other valuable objects.¹³ As the chronological range of the Kent inventories examined by Overton and colleagues illustrates, the seventeenth century saw the development of chests of drawers, cupboards, and cabinets – variations on the more basic form of the box or chest, which divide and subdivide space, manipulate size and

¹⁰ Mark Overton, Jane Whittle, Darren Dean, and Andrew Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600–1750* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 90.

¹¹ Antony Buxton, *Domestic Culture in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015), pp. 198–200.

¹² Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500–1700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 4, 15, 41–2.

¹³ Church chests have been the focus of specific studies by geographical area or diocese, such as David Sherlock’s excellent *Suffolk Church Chests* (Ipswich: Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History, 2008).

scale, and are associated with evolving practices of consumption, collection, and display. These furnishings invite specific forms of engagement, and might be much more ostentatious objects that do more than simply contain, detaining the eye and the mind and emphatically drawing attention to their own identity as more elaborate kinds of boxes. Such objects, especially early modern cabinets, have been the focus of much critical attention by scholars of the early modern interior, in both English and European contexts.¹⁴

Boxes and Books in Early Modern England is about the material and metaphorical importance of the box, an object as imaginatively rich as it is physically ubiquitous in this period. Drawing on a wide range of textual sources including wills, inventories, Shakespearean drama, poetry, sermons, and religious polemic, it reveals how boxes readily furnished minds as well as domestic, institutional, and sacred spaces. It explores the broad scope of what might be contained in the idea of the box, looking closely at real and imagined objects including chests, caskets, reliquaries, and books, which were frequently thought about in box-like terms. The doctrinal debates of the Reformation unsettled traditional ideas about the relationship between material things and access to the divine, and boxes inspired creative and often polemical ways of thinking about interpretation, confessional identity, and the book as both text and object.

Boxes and books, real and metaphorical, could be powerful ideological focal points in the changing picture of religious culture during and after the Reformation in England. From the 1540s, parish churches were required by royal injunction to have ‘a strong Cheste for the poore mennes boxe, and set and fastened the same, nere to the high aultar’, and clergy were supposed to

have diligently called upon, exhorted and moved their parishoners, and specially when thei make their Testamentes, to geve to the saied poore mennes Boxe, and to bestowe that upon the poore Cheste, whiche thei were wont to bestowe upon pardonnes, pilgrimages, trentalles, Masses satisfactory, deckyng of Images, offeryng of Candelles, gevyng to Friers, and upon other like blynde devociions.¹⁵

¹⁴ In addition to the studies by Mark Overton et al., Antony Buxton, Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson mentioned above, see the following: Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, eds., *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (London: V&A Publications, 2006); Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997); Peter Thornton, *Seventeenth-Century Interior Decoration in England, France, and Holland* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978); Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant, eds., *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior Since the Renaissance* (London: V&A Publications, 2006).

¹⁵ Anon., *Articles to be enquired of, in visitacions to bee had, within the Diocese of Cantorbury* (London: Richard Grafton, 1548), Biv.