

The Harmouth Hutch,

OR

TOWN CHEST.

COMMUNICATED BY

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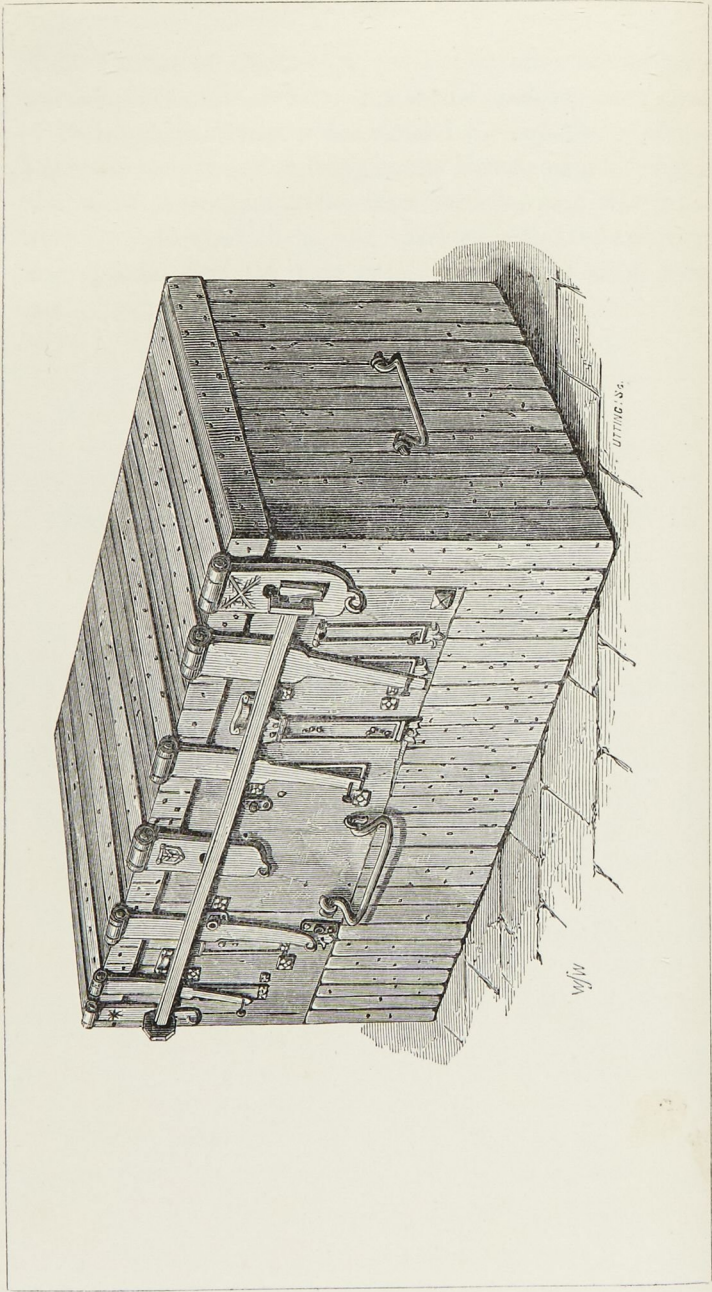
THE word HUTCH, derived from the Anglo-Saxon *hwaecca*, signified a large chest or strong box, in which corporations, both civil and ecclesiastical, as well as families, kept their charters, title-deeds, money, and other valuable effects.

Caxton, in his *Book for Travellers*, says "These thinges set ye in your whutche (huche) or cheste; your jewellis in your forcier (casket); that they be not stolen."¹ James Gresham, writing to John Paston in 1455, (as we learn from that mine of information the *Paston Letters*) says "they rifled his Hutch."

In churches they were used to contain sacred relics, plate, altar-cloths, and the rich vestments of the priests.

They were most commonly framed of wood and were frequently elaborately carved in panels and adorned with shields of arms and other devices. The interior of the lid was frequently painted; and in church chests scriptural subjects were most commonly introduced, Adam and Eve in the garden being a favourite one.

¹ Promptorium Parvulorum, i. 255.



THE YARMOUTH BUTCH.

In the dwelling-houses of the great they appeared as substantial and costly pieces of furniture, and when so used were richly painted. Reds and blues were the prevailing colours, green being sparingly used, but at all times gold was employed. Occasionally they were covered with velvet or cloth of gold, enriched with precious stones, ivories, pearls, and other costly ornaments. The nail heads, in these cases, were always picked out in gold or silver; and the locks, gemmels, and keys were then frequently of silver or silver-gilt.

If iron-bound, as the wooden chests frequently were, the wood-work between the iron was painted in various colours and a diaper pattern laid on; the shields of arms and heraldic badges being painted in their proper colours.

Chests wholly of iron were painted in a similar manner, the locks and keys being frequently of elaborate and curious workmanship, with many secret contrivances to secure safety. Sometimes ornamental metal-work was introduced within the lid, especially when locked from the top.²

In families the great hutch passed from generation to generation, and was frequently the subject of a special bequest.³

The CORPORATION of GREAT YARMOUTH appear from a very early period to have kept their charters and most valuable documents in a chest, emphatically called THE HUTCH, which, according to *Manship*, was placed in the vestry.

In 1556 it was ordered in Assembly that Mr. Betts should have the custody of the hutch; and at the foot of a very old MS. in the possession of the Town Council, containing

² The Town Council of Great Yarmouth possess a small chest of this description, which was lately in the Port Dues Office, but is now in the Record-Room. A similar chest, the bands painted a rich blue and the panels in diaper, was lately exhibited in the temporary museum of the Archaeological Institute at Worcester.

³ In one of the principal rooms at Knowle there is a large chest, called The Treasurer's Chest, richly ornamented. The Earl of Dorset was Lord High Treasurer to Queen Elizabeth.

“Ordinances for buying and selling of Merchandize,” there was written, “Extracted out of the Old Golden Book *in the Hutch*, 1570.”

The town seal and the seal of the Staple were also kept in the hutch, which was likewise used as a money chest; for we find that, in the reigns of Henry VII. and Henry VIII., the profits arising from the half dole, which was exacted from each fishing vessel towards the reparation and sustentation of the haven, were placed in the hutch, to the intent that they might be applied to those purposes only.⁴

Besides the “Golden Book” already mentioned, we find that the “Domesday Book,” the “Great Black Book,” and the “Little Red Book” were kept in the hutch; all, no doubt, containing valuable information touching the rights and privileges of the borough, but these books are unfortunately lost.⁵

What became of this hutch, which was probably entirely of wood, is not known. It was superseded in 1601 by a “Great Iron Chest,” which in that year was presented to the Corporation by Mrs. Alice Bartlemew. This chest has ever since been denominated THE HUTCH, and in it the Corporation have preserved their charters up to a very recent period.

It was originally placed in the old Guildhall by the church gate, and afterwards in the new Guildhall, which was erected on the same spot in 1728. It remained there until 1850, when, that building having been pulled down, the hutch was removed to the Gaol, where it remained until the present year. It has now found a more suitable resting-place in the Record-Room lately erected by the Town Council and annexed to the Town Hall.

⁴ See some valuable and interesting “Notes on the Records of the Corporation of Great Yarmouth,” published in the fourth volume of the “Norfolk Archeology,” p. 239.

⁵ Many towns had their “Domesday Book,” in which were entered the peculiar customs and privileges of the place.

This chest, which is of oak completely covered and banded with iron, is 5 ft. 4 in. long, by 2 ft. 5 in. in breadth, and is 2 ft. 8 in. in depth. It has a flat lid, furnished at the back with seven hinges, and in front are seven iron hasps, four of which cover as many locks, to which there are four large square keys, having different wards, and two pipe keys which belong to the central lock. All the hasps are kept down by an exterior bar of iron running across them.⁶ The keys are of ornamented iron-work in the Decorated style, and are probably of the fifteenth century, to which period, if not earlier, we may attribute the chest itself.⁷

The keys were kept by different officials, so that the hutch could not be unlocked unless all were present; but notwithstanding these precautions many documents and other effects which were in the hutch have disappeared.⁸

In the fashion of the last century, this chest was be-daubed with thick coats of black paint, on the recent removal of which (since the hutch has been in the Record Room) a curious discovery has been made. On the front of the chest there appeared a scroll in the fashion of the time of Queen Elizabeth, upon which was painted, in old English, "The Gift of Alice Bartlemew, 1601;" clearly proving the chest to be the identical one which was presented in that year to the Corporation. At the foot were two lines extending across the chest, in black letter upon a white ground, which could not be accurately deciphered, but they seemed to express the gratitude of the Corporation for the

⁶ A fine and huge old chest in Cratfield Church, Suffolk, is banded with iron and secured in a somewhat similar manner.

⁷ These keys are engraved in the Notes to *Manship's* "History of Great Yarmouth," p. 213.

⁸ In 1631 it was ordered that one key should be kept by the Churchwardens, another by the Chamberlains, and a third by the Treasurer of the Plate Money, and that the Town Clerk should have the custody of the Guildhall where the hutch was placed.

gift. So far as they could be made out they seemed to run thus—

“We cannot shew ourselves more grateful to a liberal giver than thankfully to receive that what has been given to us. They set before the Magistry do greatly to be evermore thankfull.”⁹

On removing the thick coats of paint from the hasps, it was found that the centre one had engraved thereon the Trinity banner, whilst on the hasps at either end were engraved sacred symbols.

From these circumstances it is very probable that it had been a church chest,¹ and sold when, in 1548, the “plate and other rich and costly ornaments and *utensils* belonging to the church” were disposed of for £977. 6s. 6d., and the money applied for the repair of the haven;² or it may have been a chest belonging to one of the religious houses then lately dissolved. In either case it no doubt fell by purchase into the hands of John Bartlemew, who was Bailiff of Yarmouth in 1582, and again in 1595, in which year he died whilst serving that office; and in 1601 his widow presented the chest to the Corporation, probably not knowing what else to do with so cumbrous a piece of furniture. The Corporation appear on their part to have been sufficiently grateful, for they not only recorded the gift on the chest itself, but

⁹ It seems to have been customary to record the gift on the chest itself, for we learn from *Suckling* that on the Cratfield chest there was this inscription—

“Ragor Walsche gaf thys cheist;
Pray for hys sowle to Jhū Christ.”

¹ Chests very similar in size and construction may still be seen in the churches of Blickling and Great Hautbois in this county. In the Yarmouth Hutch there is a slit in the lid through which money could be dropped, as was usually the case in chests of this description.

² It may indeed have been the identical chest “in the new vestry,” where the sacred relics were preserved, comprising some of the oil of S. Nicholas, part of the Holy Thorn set in silver, and a piece of the True Cross set in gold.

caused the lady's name to be inscribed in the list of benefactors placed in S. Nicholas' Church.

Upon a further removal of the paint with which it had been coated, including that put on in 1601, it clearly appeared that this chest had originally been painted in colours in the mediæval style, a bright diaper pattern being introduced between the bands. The traces of form and colour were, however, too indistinct to be accurately restored; but since its removal into their new room, the Record Committee have caused the hutch to be re-painted by that excellent artist Mr. C. J. W. Winter, of Gorleston (from whose drawing of the hutch before it was re-painted the annexed engraving is taken) the patterns being copied from the rood-screens for which Norfolk is celebrated; and it now forms a highly interesting and ornamental piece of furniture.