A WOODEN CHEST FROM THE ROMAN VILLA AT BRADWELL, MILTON KEYNES, BUCKS.

During the excavation of the site of the Roman villa at Bradwell in the summer of 1976 the remains of a wooden chest with iron fittings was discovered. The work was directed by Mr. H.S.Green for the Milton Keynes Development Corporation and the Department of the Environment, and we are indebted to them for permission to display the find. Of the circumstances of the discovery Mr. Green writes, 'The context of this chest is ambiguous. It lay in the fill of a first/early second century A.D. ditch which underlay a circular building of third/fourth century date. The chest was placed upright and lay obliquely to the line of the ditch as if the latter was no longer recognised as an entity at the time of deposition. The interpretation that the chest was deliberately buried under the house floor is an attractive one. The time of the burial of this old, but evidently valued strong-box, cannot be precisely given beyond a broad second/third century time-span. However, a hint as to the possible chronological horizon of the date of deposition is given by the discovery of a small hoard of coins of the period 317-330 A.D., recognised as such by Dr.C.E.King, and found dispersed by ploughing over the surface of the house-floor.' The most reasonable explanation, therefore, is that the chest had been set in the floor of the building as a strong box, in much the same way as the larger, but simpler box excavated by the Rev.J.G.Joyce (Archaeologia 40, 411) in house XXIII.1 at Silchester. But there is a notable difference between the two, in that the Silchester box had iron fittings only on the lid, as is logical in a box which was neither intended to be seen nor subject to the strains of movement, and where any attempt to force it would be made from above. The Bradwell chest by contrast, has distinctly decorative iron bindings of a type which would appear unnecessary in a floor-box. One

is left, therefore, with the strong presumption that this was not its original function.

The remains of the chest were exposed as a rectangular soil block with eight iron corner brackets in position and partially bound with two parallel iron bands hinged at the top to take the lid and evidently attached to its undersurface. The lid strappings had broken away near the hinges (presumably due to soil pressure) and had sunk into the box although retaining their correct relative positions in plan. The wooden sides had of course decayed away but visual inspection on site suggested that some wood had been preserved where it was in contact with iron as often happens.

Following the discovery of the chest, the excavator contacted the A.M. Laboratory and a small team went to the site to lift the soil block and bring it back to the laboratory for detailed examination and conservation. Before the remains could be lifted, fissures within the soil block, and cracks in the iron, were reinforced with a cellulose nitrate consolidant. The block was then encased in tissue paper, bandaged with scrim and covered with aluminium foil. A plywood box (also lined with foil) was placed over the block and the space between the two filled by pouring in polyurethane foam. The cased block was then freed from the ground, inverted, sealed and brought back to the laboratory.

X-ray examination of the block showed that the chest was probably empty and this was confirmed by the subsequent micro-excavation during the course of which all the iron fittings were removed. These were then cleaned with the aid of a microscope (x12.5 magnification) by picking with a sharp needle held in a pin-vice, considerable care being exercised so as to reveal and not disturb the replaced wood (identified as oak) present on the corroded metal surfaces which had been in direct contact with the chest. Detailed examination

of the wood revealed that the chest had been constructed with dovetail joints (1). The evidence indicates that this jointing was not continued above and below the brackets, these parts being finished with mitred joints.

The dimensions of the chest (shown in reconstruction in fig.0) are 45cm by 37cm by 34cm, which, as a Roman foot is equivalent to 29.6cm, would give it dimensions of 1.52 by 1.25 by 1.14 Roman feet, or 1½ by 1¼ by 1⅛ Roman feet; or, if the thickness of the lid (2.6cm) is included, 1½ by 1¼ by 1¼ Roman feet; too exact to be coincidental. The corner brackets, with their carefully shaped ends, were clearly intended to be decorative as well as functional, and in detail they closely resemble the tips of certain hinges, although not, interestingly, those on the chest itself. Each was attached by two nails hammered over at the ends on the inside, and measurement of the distance between nail heads and hammered end gives a wood thickness of 2.6cm. Although angle brackets are quite common, the elaboration of this group would seem to make them unique. The use of angle brackets, of the extended hinge straps and of the dovetailing, should have held the chest absolutely rigid and secure, but in fact each bracket was duplicated by a long nail (up to 8cm in length) which had been driven through the front or back panel into the side. In most cases these additional nails were hidden by the brackets, but a few will have been partially or completely visible. The apparent crudity with which these nails have been used is in such striking contrast to the rest of the work as to suggest that they are secondary, but an obvious objection to this is that so many of them lie under the original fittings. One is apparently left with the alternatives of either assuming that neither the maker nor his customer minded these nails being visible, or that at some time the iron fittings were removed and the chest consolidated by the use of these additional nails. The roughly clenched

nails used to hold the ironwork in place would then date from this period rather than the original manufacture. Nails had also been used to attach the base - two on each side and one at each end of the base strap. Ten nails hammered over at their ends on the inside attached the strapping (average width 3cm) to the chest; three each on the top, back and sides and one in the front. All of these nails were of the commonest type, with a flat, round head and tapering, square sectioned stem (Manning Class I). The hinges are of the strap variety with a circular plate at the end of one arm set between paired plates on the other, the whole being held with a central pivot.

One other oddity is the complete absence of any method of securing it, which might be expected on a chest of this type. A possible explanation may lie, in fact, in the original quality of the piece, for this is such as to suggest that it may have carried a lever lock of relatively elaborate form probably set on the front with a hasp attached to the edge of the lid. If so, by setting it in a hole in the ground the lock will have been effectively rendered useless and its value would justify its removal.

As a whole the chest appears to be unique, and although the individual components can be paralleled in a general sense the discovery of a complete set <u>in situ</u> is of considerable interest.

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FOOTNOTES

(1) The detailed conservation of the chest was undertaken by Miss M.Robson and the specialist examination of the replaced wood by Mrs.C.Keepax. The reconstruction of the chest has been drawn by Mr.J.Thorne.

CAPTION FOR FIG.

Reconstruction of a wooden chest from the Bradwell Roman Villa

who first recognised the dovetailed construction, the detailed evidence for which she will be publishing elsewhere.