Strong-box

Place of origin: London (probably, made)
Date: 1680-1700 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown (maker)
Materials and Techniques: Oak, veneered with walnut and rosewood, and fitted with brass mounts
Credit Line: Given by Mrs Florence Harris-Burland as widow of John Burland Harris-Burland, author
Museum number: W.10-1951
Gallery location: Furniture, Room 135, The Dr Susan Weber Gallery, case BY1, shelf EXP

Public access description
This box appears decorative, but it was also very difficult to break open or steal. It has a strong lock and two bolts concealed in the sides, so that it could be screwed down into floorboards if necessary. Its owner probably used it when travelling to keep valuable items secure. Inside, hidden compartments (a standard feature of the boxes) also added an additional layer of security for small items such as a folded paper or jewels, against those unaware of their location.

Strong-boxes such as this were luxury objects. They were apparently sold by cabinet-makers who would have constructed and veneered the carcase, often using tropical hardwood veneers, and mounted it with sets of mounts, handles and locks bought in from brass founders. The elaborate veneering and conspicuous brass mounts show that the appearance of these objects was important, as does the enhancement of the grain of the veneer both inside and outside in this example. Some, were displayed on purpose-made gilt-wood stands, soon after, if not at the time of purchase, indicating that they were items of display as well as practicality.

Descriptive line
English or Flemish 1670-1700, brass mounts

Physical description
Strongbox with fall front, veneered and with brass mounts.

Design
Rectangular box with hinged lid, and hinged fall-front. The front and lid are veneered with walnut, with some decorative graining. The sides and back are veneered in oak. The exterior lid, and front are fitted with brass mounts in the form of a cross with fleur-de-lys finials, which extend to form hinges, and on the central lid mount, a lock hasp with spring button to access the keyhole. The three hinges extend down the back, and under the bottom in a plain strap. The front is fitted with a large cartouche shape lockplate. The hinge and lockplate fittings are bolted through the full thickness of the wood, and held with a 'pig-nose' nut on the inside, but are otherwise held from the outside with metal pins. The mounts on the sides are similar to those on the lid and front, but with only a half cross-piece, and are held with metal pins. Between the side mounts is a bale handle (broken on right side). All eight corners are fitted with a three-part corner mount, held on metal pins.

The base is of plain oak, revealing the mortise and tenon framework.
In each side panel a long vertical floor-bolt is fitted in the centre, which would have operated with a T-bar (missing).

The inside of the box is veneered in rosewood (about 1mm thick) and has one dust board (forming the floor of the main internal compartment) above two wide drawers (one missing). The underside of the lid is fitted with a hinged, bolted flap which opens on a shallow tray, presumably for a folded paper. There are five secret compartments inside the strongbox, all made of oak, and made very neatly in the same way: two sheets of quartered oak glued onto two rectangular oak rods.
Two (with sliding lids) inside the lid, sliding left and right, concealed behind trapezoid mitred mouldings of solid rosewood around the 'sight edge' of the lid hatch; one with sliding lid concealed within the drawer divider; two without lids that fit vertically into the static front board, accessed via removable trapezoidal fillets of veneered oak in the dustboard. Its not clear what the two rectangular infill sections of veneer on the internal faces of the sides represent.

Construction
The body of the box is of oak, the static front, back and sides apparently formed from boards grained side to side, which are joined at a mortise and long tenon joint. The bottom board appears to be a floating oak panel held in grooves in the static front, back and sides. The exterior parts (except the bottom) are veneered, the back apparently with oak, the other parts with walnut are 1.5 mm thick, and have been grained, perhaps with black ink. The sides and back are unpainted 4mm oak veneers.

The lid is presumed to be in the form of a joined frame, faced (inside and out) with a board, leaving an interior space.

The single surviving drawer is of oak, grained in black and red to resemble the rosewood veneer used inside the box, and has a single silk pull held by a peg. They are dovetailed at the front (and apparently at the back with one large dovetail though this is difficult to see), with the
bottom board (grained front to back - to be checked) glued into rebates in the sides and back. It is now missing the original pull (probably a green silk ribbon).

The secret compartments are of glued, butted oak (about 2mm thick), plain except for any show surfaces which are veneered; some have sliding lids.

The hinged fall-front appears to be an oak board which sits within two ‘stile battens’ applied to the static front. It is held closed by an internal sliding, brass bolt.

Metalwork (based on advice from Metalwork dept. Nov. 2011)
The mounts appear probably to have been cast from a wood model pressed into sand, then the edges filed clean (as opposed to having been cast from an iron mould, a more expensive process used for high numbers of castings, or alternatively, sawn from a rolled or cast sheet of brass). The colour and surface ‘graininess’ is characteristic of late 17th century brass with a proportion about 80/20 brass/zinc. Traces of gilding (mercury gilding) appear to survive at the edges of the mounts (which could be confirmed by XRF.) Various of the retaining pins appear to have been replaced (sitting proud, and with rounder heads). The threaded bolts appear to be brass, and were probably cast in one piece from a wax mould.

**Losses**
one interior drawer missing
broken mount (on back)
broken handle (right side)
3 modern screws replacing original nails

**Dimensions**
Height: 23.7 cm, Width: 40.9 cm includes handles, Depth: 24 cm Includes protrusions of mounts

**Museum number**
W.10-1951

**Object history note**
Wooden box, one of 2 boxes given by Mrs Ida Webster, on the instruction of her sister, Mrs Florence Harris-Burland, to be presented in memory of her late husband John Burland Harris-Burland, author. Correspondence with the Museum mentions that 'The French cassette or jewel Box Contains five Secret drawers'.

Acquisition description gives the box as veneered with lignum-vitae, with a wrought iron key and two drawers (one missing), Flemish 17th century.

RF retains a ms letter (presumed to have been found with the box).

Notes from R.P. 1226 - 51
11/4/51 Gift Form
lists as "Flemish - 17th century - - brass mounts"

Minute Notes
suggest accepting the Flemish one (W.10) for circulation. The other (W.11) is "puzzling and of considerable interest"

Note
the notation "793-1896" appears without additional comment on the 1951 minute papers. This is a reference to an English "Treasure Chest" (originally recorded as Spanish, crossed out and changed to English) similar in size and design to W.10 in the museum collection.

21/4/51 letter, Mrs D M Cumberbatch (friend of Mrs Webster) to the Museum
referring to a Connoisseur article of June 1912 (vol. XXXIII) about the carved box (W.11 is the carved box) and also explaining that "in the opinion of the late W.Fred Roe this box is dutch and of the middle of the 17th century" (she seems to be referring still to the carved box, W.11, but it is W.10 that is listed as 17th Flemish/ W.11 is listed as 18th C. Scandinavian)

28/4/51 draft letter, Thorpe to Mrs Webster (not issued)
Also refers to some papers found in the brass bound box (W.10): an autograph book containing a recent copy of parts of a late 17th century receipte book inscribed Ann Seymour her book 1695, together with praises of her by her servants and a visiting card of Mr Charles Barnett, of Cleeve Hill, Gloucestershire (the book and the visiting card are subsequently returned to Mrs Webster, but an additional item is discovered in 1952

14/1/52 Thorpe instructs Registry
"register this MS with care and attach RP 1226/5/ from Mrs Ida Webster W.10 - 1951"
A brown envelope labelled "MS 52/249 - Webser Ida Mrs"
It contains an original piece of correspondence dated 1727 to Charles Seymour Esq from Wm. Waters

Guard Book description of W.10 - 195
"Box. Transatlantic (?) wood, with veneer of lignum-vitae, bound with three ornamental hinges and lock-plate and with brass corner pieces; fall front showing two drawers/one wanting) and compartment in lid, wrought iron key. Flemish; 17th century. H: 9 1/4" (235mm), L: 15"
Historical context note

Strong-boxes such as this were luxury objects. They were apparently sold by cabinet-makers who would have constructed and veneered the carcass, often using tropical hardwood veneers, and mounted it with sets of mounts, handles and locks bought in from brass founders. Adam Bowett (Furniture History Society newsletter, No. 157, February 2005, pp.2-3) cites the example of the cabinet maker Edward Traherne, who appears to have made strong boxes, and whose clients included members of Charles II's government and household. A box that appeared at auction in 2004 (Christies, New York, 8/4/2004, lot 188) was formerly in the collection of Elihu Yale, Governor of Madras and a Governor of the East India Company.

The elaborate veneering and conspicuous brass mounts show that the appearance of these objects was important, as does the enhancement of the grain of the veneer both inside and outside in this example. Some, such as Yale’s box, were displayed on purpose-made gilt-wood stands, soon after, if not at the time of purchase, and the evidence of the Ham house inventory (1677, 1683) recording 'Two strong boxes...frames to the boxes' in the Duchess’s bedchamber indicates that such boxes were items of display as well as practicality. However, it is clear that the show surfaces of some boxes (inside and out) were enhanced by graining, a cheap method of simulating exotic veneers using paint. Further investigations may show whether the graining was added before or after the mounts were applied. Whether these savings in cost were passed on to the purchaser is unclear, but the use of graining on less expensive veneers, and occasional lack of secret compartments perhaps suggests that such strong-boxes were made in different cost-options, presumably aiming at a wider market than the wealthiest purchasers only.

Various aspects of design relates directly to the practical needs of security for small valuables at home, and while travelling. Their most notable feature, apart from their very stout construction and internally-fixed bolts and hinges, is the two screw-bolts set into the sides of the box that could be turned with a T-bar (missing from this example but surviving with others) to attach the box securely into floor boards, effectively immobilising it. This feature allowed these portable boxes to be securely attached to a surface, even when travelling. As the screws could only be turned while the box was opened, only the key holder could move it. The key hole itself is accessed by an unobtrusive spring-button catch, which would also allow the user to close the box quickly (unlocked) if necessary. Inside, hidden compartments (a standard feature of the boxes) also added an additional layer of security for small items such as a folded paper or jewels, against those unaware of their location.

Numerous strong-boxes similar to this one survive in public and private collections, in a range of sizes and with similar brass mounts of varying design. The boxes conform to a basic pattern, with fall front enclosing two drawers below a well, fitted with various secret compartments, and a hinged panel in the lid, also accessing secret compartments.

Examples in the V&A collection:

Museum no. 793-1896 (21.6 x 36.2 x 23.8cm) has almost identical brass mounts, with 'fleur de lys' details, the main difference being the lack of cross arms on the front mounts. 793-1896 has a much simpler interior, with evidence of a lost sliding panel that concealed a drawer. However, it lacks the elaborate hidden compartments, suggesting that a standard basic design could be adapted by the cabinet-maker according to need, and presumably, budget.

Museum no. 2421-1856 (23.2 x 40 (incl. handles) x 22.5cm), Metalwork collection
With similar interior and mounts. The mounts however may however be 19c replacements on account of their smooth, even surface (characteristic of 19th century zinc extraction processes), and lack of 17th century ‘graininess’.

Museum no. W.13-1966 (28.5 x 51 x 29.5cm)
In size and the character of mounts, this box conforms more closely to the Ham/Yale model c1675-80

Another example V&A Circ. 504-1913 was written off in 1953.

Adam Bowett (Furniture History Society newsletter, No. 157, February 2005, pp.2-3) notes that the similarity of the brass mounts on the surviving examples of strong boxes suggests that they were bought from brass-founders, and fitted to cabinets of slightly differing designs. The highly elaborate wood veneers that are a feature of these boxes do not seem to correspond in design with the shape of the mounts, again suggesting that the mounts were made separately to the boxes. The particularly elaborate oyster veneering of an example that appeared at auction in 1995 (Christies (?), South London, 19th May 1995) does not relate very well to the mounts, particularly on the front panels.

The design of strong boxes such as this may have originated in France, as with other luxury objects of this period, and they have traditionally been called Flemish. However there is also evidence that they were made in England, as suggested by Bowett’s example of the cabinet-maker Edward Traherne (died 1675), whose records suggest he made strong boxes. His stock-in-trade lists component parts of strong boxes, such as brass fittings. This supports the indication that a cabinet maker might have sets of brass mounts that could be fitted to boxes as born out by an examination of surviving boxes. Bowett cites the examples of two boxes that survive at Ham House, and another formerly in the collection of Elihu Yale, and offered at auction in 2004 (Christies, New York, 8/4/2004, lot 188) and dated to about 1680. One of the Ham House boxes is on a gilt stand of about 1730, while the Elihu Yale example is on an elaborate giltwood stand that may be contemporary, and is designed to accommodate the fall front of the box when opened. It is likely that the boxes were not manufactured with stands but may have had stands made for them. The similarity of the two boxes also suggests to Bowett that they could have ‘a similar source’.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O167479/strong-box-unknown/