

Three-piece Suite

Furniture expert David Harvey considers three 17th-century kingwood pieces possibly by the maker Thomas Pistor, and wonders if they once belonged to the same wealthy owner



Fig 1. The oyster veneered kingwood escritoire which may have been the work of Thomas Pistor

Fig 2. Its companion piece: a slightly smaller two-door cabinet on chest

Fig 3. A kneehole desk, the pattern on the top is identical to the escritoire fall



Fig 4. The escritoire open



Fig 5. The interior of the cabinet on chest

TWENTY YEARS AGO I ACQUIRED a remarkable William and Mary period oyster veneered kingwood escritoire (fig 1), which I showed at the BADA Fair. Such was its quality that the furniture historian Dr Adam Bowett asked for pictures of it to be included in his forthcoming book on early furniture.

In correspondence with him and the equally expert Christopher Gilbert, the name of Thomas Pistor kept cropping up. Mention was made of an article in *Country Life* featuring Buxted Park, the home of Sir Basil and Lady Ionides (*CL* August 1950) which illustrated a conforming parquetry inlaid kingwood escritoire, commenting that it bore the makers' label for Mr. Thomas Pistor, Ludgate Hill, London.

After Sir Basil Ionides's death, Buxted Park's contents were auctioned by Sotheby's, on November 1, 1963, where the escritoire ('Lot 168 A William and Mary Olivewood *Secrétaire Cabinet in richly figured circular parquetry, the upper part with a cushion drawer*

and a fall front enclosing pigeon-holes, small drawers and a cupboard, with two short and two long drawers in the lower part, on bracket feet, 3ft 1in. wide by 4ft 11in high) was withdrawn at the last moment. Over the last 50 years its whereabouts, and the reason for its withdrawal, have been lost in the mists of time!

Mighty kingwood

One could debate forever whether calling this example 'olivewood' is a mistake, but it certainly looks very like kingwood to me, particularly in the original print of the article. Dr Adam Bowett comments in his book *English Furniture 1660-1714 from Charles II to Queen Anne* (Antique Collectors' Club, 2002) that, as kingwood (or princeswood) was the most expensive and rarest exotic veneer available at the time, it was only ever used on the very best and most prized items.

Little is known about Thomas Pistor, although a major article on him and his son, also Thomas, by Adriana Turpin was published

in the *Journal of the Furniture History Society* in 2000. She rightly states that Pistor's work is on a par with the royal cabinetmakers – John Gumley and Gerrit Jensen and, indeed, all three worked for Colonel James Grahame, a high-ranking courtier to James II. (See *FHS Journal* 2000, pp 43 to 60.)

As the years rolled by, imagine my surprise when I was offered the companion piece to the escritoire (which I had sold to an American collector) only this time it was a two-door cabinet on chest (fig 2), of slightly smaller dimensions – but with striking similarities. When the escritoire came back into my possession I had the opportunity to carry out closer comparisons between the two.

Similarities

Both the escritoire and the cabinet on chest have the same 'wave' inlay across the frieze drawer and the same circular geometrical patterns to the sides. Both have the same pattern of inlay to the drawers at the base



Fig 6. The escritoire's interior has the same patterns to the internal drawers with crossbanded edges and crossgrained mouldings



Fig 7. Unlike the escritoire, which has pigeon holes above the central door, the cabinet on chest has further drawers



Fig 8. The escritoire fall front turned through 90 degrees



Fig 9. The door from the cabinet on chest



Fig 10. The top of the kneehole desk

and if you could turn the fall on the escritoire through 90 degrees, there is the same pattern on the fall of the escritoire and on the doors of the cabinet on chest.

The inside back boards of the base on the escritoire were used for setting out the veneers for the doors of the cabinet on chest and still show the original crayon lines and circles (fig 16), so we know they were both being worked on at the same time.

Some of the boards have had pieces spliced on where there has previously been worm damage. It is also interesting to compare the internal fittings of the two pieces. Rosewood is used for the internal drawer fronts on both, the same step to stop the internal door over closing, and a single line holly inlay to both.

The interiors of both pieces also have the same patterns to the internal drawers with crossbanded edges and crossgrained mouldings, although the escritoire has pigeon holes above the central door where the cabinet on chest has further drawers (figs 6 and 7).

Kneehole desk

My third and final piece, a kneehole desk (fig. 3), is also currently in stock in my Witney showrooms and again shows the same construction details, with the pattern on the hinged top being identical to that on the escritoire fall and cabinet doors and, yet again, the same circular inlay on the sides.

All three have identical inlay detail to the internal doors of the taller pieces and the central cupboard door to the desk. Again, as

with the other two pieces, this desk has the same ends, and the inside of the folding top is veneered in rosewood like the internal drawers on the two other pieces which, again, shows the consistency between all three pieces.

We can see in the desk that, because of the size of the drawers, the maker has opted for the wave pattern as seen on the internal drawers of the other two pieces with the same crossbanding (fig 14).

It is interesting to note that where the drawer fronts are veneered onto softer deal with the rest of the drawer linings being non-veneered oak, a slip of oak runs along the top edges of all the drawers to deceive anyone opening it that it was constructed entirely in the more expensive wood. All three items have this feature (fig 15).

Former owners

For whom were these three pieces made, were they all created for the same home but later separated? They all appear to have come from the same workshops and share many idiosyncrasies and we know for a fact, as stated in *The Dictionary of English Furniture Makers*, that Thomas Pistor died before March 1711 when his stock in the Ludgate Hill premises – which included items in princeswood (kingwood) – was sold.

The sheer cost of making these items means they must have been commissioned, rather than being made for stock. The calibre of the suite also suggests it could only have been afforded by members of the royal family, the aristocracy or the wealthiest families.

Was it made for some royal favourite who was breathlessly anticipating a royal visit? If so, could they really afford to furnish a suite of rooms in this manner? Or, from a prestige point of view, could they afford not to splash out in this way?

If all three pieces were made at the same time as part of one commission, which house were they made for and how did they then go their separate ways?



Fig 11. The side of the escritoire



Fig 12. The side of the cabinet on chest



Fig 13. The side of the kneehole desk

If, as seems highly likely, Thomas Pistor had established his workshops' reputation for producing exquisite cabinets such as these and you were in the market for a piece like these, why would you go elsewhere?

And here's the most important question: why are there no comparable kingwood

cabinets from this period illustrated anywhere bearing labels for other London cabinetmakers?

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Figs 14. The three drawers of the (l-r) escritoire, cabinet on chest and kneehole desk



Fig 15. The inside of the drawers showing the oak caps above the deal drawer fronts



Fig 16. The inside of the escritoire back boards showing the pattern for the cabinet on chest doors so we know they were both being worked on at the same time

'Scumbling' natural kingwood

Another delightful aspect of the escritoire's interior can be observed when any of the pigeon-hole sections are removed revealing bare pine that the maker has gone to great lengths to 'scumble' or simulate to look like the rest of the interior, and you may be surprised to see just how purple and black this is, thereby showing us the true original colour of these pieces. This also shows us why kingwood or princeswood is known elsewhere as 'violetta' or 'bois violet'.

After the restoration of the monarchy Charles brought his love of all things French to the British court, as William and Mary did with the Dutch influence. It is no coincidence that in both France and Holland in the 17th century, much of the most sought-after highly-fashionable furniture was veneered in tortoiseshell and of course kingwood here would have been more like tortoiseshell in its freshly-produced state.



The 'scumble' hidden behind the removable pigeon-holes in the escritoire



Kingwood in its natural or raw state without any polish