

NOTE ON A 17TH CENTURY COFFER
 BELONGING TO LOUGHTON CHURCH.

By CLIVE ROUSE

The Rector of Loughton, Bucks, the Reverend F. Crosby, was recently showing me some documents and sundry articles connected with his church, when the coffer, which is the subject of these notes, came to light. It measures 14 ins., by 9 ins., by 7 ins., and is of wood covered with leather studded with iron nails. Ornamental brass-headed nails are used to form the initials "I. O." (those of a Churchwarden or Clerk in the 17th Century probably) on the lid, and in groups of four to ornament the lid and front. Also on the lid and front are four squares of parchment or thick paper fastened down lozenge-wise by nails, and having a pomegranate partially opened painted on them in red with green leaves. The lid has a crude wrought iron handle: and in the front is a small hasp lock and plate of the normal 17th century type. It was probably used to keep the more private papers of the Rector or Churchwarden relative to Church matters.

The most interesting feature of the coffer, however, is the paper linings it contains. Upon examination these proved to consist of parts of a 17th century periodical and of several sheets of a service book also probably 17th century of distinctly Romish character which had been banned and "damasked." That is to say the book was seized, like all "sedicious and schismaticall" (unauthorised) literature at that period, and either destroyed or the sheets defaced, or "damasked" as the term was, by being printed all over with a design from a wood block so that they could not be used. The arms of one of the city companies sometimes appear. In the present instance the design used consists of a central coat of arms in a circle—3 stags regardant, with helmet crest,



LOUGHTON
17th Century Coffer, belonging to the Church



LOUGHTON
17th Century Coffer, showing paper lining "damasked"
by a wood block design

mantling and supporters (stags), not indented—flanked by four chequered squares, foliage and flowers, and four figures in the corners, two men and two women in period costume holding flowers, the whole within a triangular chequered border: a charming design.

It has not been possible to identify the particular book of which the six pages used to line the top and bottom of the coffer once formed a part. The number of such works is very great. The present one must have been extensive, since one of the pages is numbered 302. It includes such services as "Litanies of the Life and Death of our Saviour," "Litanies to God the Holy Spirit," and "Litanies of the Eucharist." Some of the English is of that superbly dignified quality that the 17th century seemed to produce in such wealth. A full transcript has been made, and it is hoped to be able to identify the book.

The other lining papers consist of portions of two issues of a 17th century periodical of some interest—"The True Protestant Mercury, or Occurrences Foreign and Domestick, Number 37, from Wednesday, May the 11th, to Saturday, the 14th," and Number 38 from Saturday, May the 14th, to Wednesday, May the 18th, 1681. This paper belongs to a series of bi-weekly publications of the 1670-80's, many of which are to be found in the State Paper Department of the British Museum (Reference, Burney, 83). One of the earliest is the "Domestick Intelligence or News both from City and Country (published to prevent false reports)".

These new sheets I am afraid were not as "impartial" as they made themselves out to be; nor can they themselves escape the slur they cast on other "reports" as being "false and scandalous." They were in fact pretty scurrilous, and, as their titles suggest, violently Protestant and anti-Catholic, the Pope being habitually referred to as "his Un-holiness." The period is an extremely interesting one, full of religio-political plots (true or supposed) and controversies, and was wildly anti-Romish. As an example we may quote from a

piece of the 1681 issue which lines the top left-hand side of the coffer. "*London*, May 15th. We hear that a woman who was perverted to the Popish Faction was lately Disciplined very severely by her Father Confessor (who is said to be one Huddleston) for some pretended misdemeanour: but she not well understanding this whipping religion, hath made complaint thereof to a Magistrate in this city, but what will be done therein we do not yet hear)." Unfortunately the piece of paper ends here.

But undoubtedly the most interesting fragments found as part of the lining in the box are those portions of the 1681 periodical having almost contemporary references to an echo of the famous Titus Oates plot of three years previous.

It is the examination of a man named Fitz-Harris, suspected of being concerned in the murder of Sir Edmundbury Godfrey that is the subject of several items of news in the two issues of the Protestant Mercury so unexpectedly found lining the old box in Loughton Church.

The portions of this paper preserved also contain items of news about the appointment of a Master to the Merchant Taylors' School; the damage caused by fires in the towns largely built of wood (the Fire of London in 1666 was fresh in memory); and numerous spicy items of anti-Popish gossip. There is also part of a typical Quack's Advertisement that is highly diverting. A full transcript has been made.

The Protestant Mercury was printed in London for Langley Curtiss on Ludgate Hill.

I wish to express my thanks to Mr. Clifford Smith of the Department of Woodwork at the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, for examining the coffer and giving me his opinion; and also Mr. C. C. Oman, the wall-paper expert at the same museum, for his notes on the "damasking" of banned publications in the 17th century. The excellent photographs were kindly taken for me by Mr. D. C. Sutherland.