



Heritage Stewardship Fund – Heritage Council 2022

Offaly County Council repairs to Dowry Chest – Hawkswood House



2018 – in outbuilding



2022 – June removed for repair

The project relates to essential repairs to the Dowry Chest – Hawkswood House, This project came about as part of research into Vernacular Architecture in County Offaly – Fixtures and Fittings. The Dowry Chest at Hawkswood was the only example found within the county as part of five years research.



Hawkswood House is a beautiful Thatched house outside Killiegh. Described by the NIAH as a detached four-bay single-storey thatched house, built c.1800, with direct-entry plan. Pitched oaten straw roof with lines of scolloping and bobbins to ridge and having twine to eaves. Rendered chimneystacks. Pebbledashed stone walls. Square-headed timber sash windows. Porch with flat concrete roof, timber sash windows and timber battened door. Single-bay extension to rear with pitched tiled roof, with flat-roofed link to original building. Rendered boundary wall and piers with wrought-iron gate to road boundary. Appraisal: This thatched house is sited at right angles to the public road, a familiar feature of vernacular architecture. The simple form of the roof with its row of ridge bobbins and lines of scolloping to the ridge makes this building a representative example of the county's vernacular architecture.





Early twentieth century painted dowry chest - Nós Conservation Services description extract: Bottom section: chest with two over one drawers, panelled frame construction with ash legs and pine rails and panels. Turned drawer pulls and painted steel escutcheons. Tool markings from pit saw/hand saw, but also machine markings - bandsaw/circular saw, indicating possible earlier and later components. Top section: possibly later construction, top opening chest of butt joined and nailed panel construction, with divided interior. Fixed to bottom at front edge with quadrant beading. Steel clasp and eye catch painted. Different leg heights may have been designed to level the piece on an uneven floor, Hawkswood.

The Dowry Chest

The dowry (or hope) chest was filled with embroidered bed and table linen, clothes and valuables for a prospective bride, packed over time in anticipation for her wedding day. They were sturdy and often decorative, transportable and in some cases 'in two separate halves or removable sections'.¹ The lower section contained drawers for bed linen, an expensive luxury that was highly desirable as part of a dowry and thought to have given rise to the expression 'bottom drawer'.² The items were cherished within the family and sometimes rolls of fabric passed as heirlooms for two generations without being used.³

The form of this chest derived from a modest storage box promoted to a piece of fine furniture, put on a base with bracketed feet and, in some cases, elaborate decorative detail. The lidded box sat over a stand fitted with drawers. The box is usually detachable and the join concealed by heavy moulding, often a rope-work pattern. Decorative examples applied false drawers to the upper half, thus enhancing a large plain frontage. Some also contained documents, concealed drawers or compartments for money and small valuables. The lid was often sloped, like the meal chest to prevent the storage of items on top, but could also be used as a writing surface for household accounts.⁴

1. Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950*, p146

2. C. Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven and London, 2006), p40

3. O'Neill, *Life and Tradition in Rural Ireland*, p24

4. Loughnan, *Irish Country Furniture*



The Hawkswood dowry chest - top left: side view of top and bottom section, top right: upper section divided in two compartments. The upper half has a flat, hinged lid, painted interior with two compartments and some remaining wallpaper lining, which rests over the drawers below. Bottom: lower section, two drawers over one bottom drawer. Two lockable drawers and the lower, lockable full width drawer for bed linen. The chest is raised off the floor keeping the contents dry.

The Dowry Chest was not in use, infested with woodworm but kept on site within the outbuildings. Its discovery was a cause of great excitement as part of the Vernacular Architecture book – refer to draft text extract. The lower section was made up of one full-width drawer and two upper drawers.

The top half provided deep storage with uneven division and a fold-up hinged lid.

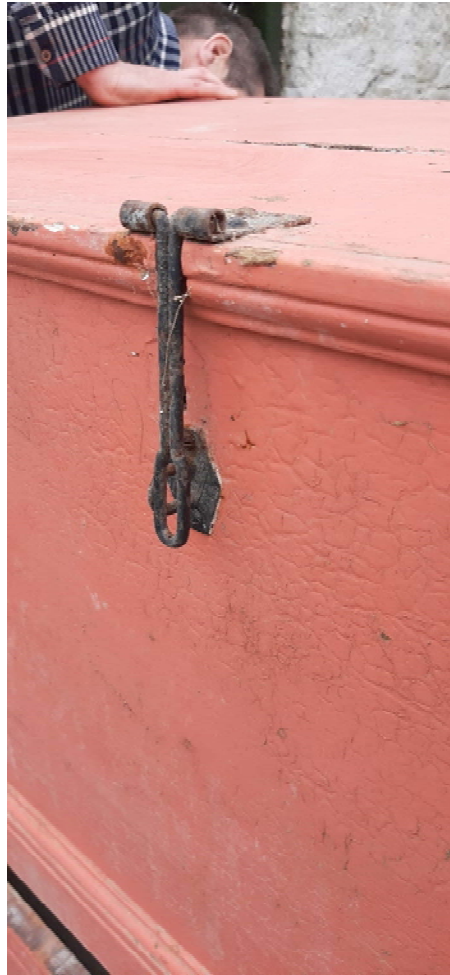
Minor repairs were proposed.



A report was prepared by Nós Conservation and works agreed. It was noted that the chest had legs of different heights on each side, which seemed to have been designed for an uneven floor. It was removed for workshop repair 2022_0613



The chest was painted cream inside on the upper section and had some wallpaper linings within the drawers. Each of the drawers had a separate lock and the top section had a former key lock replaced by a padlock option.



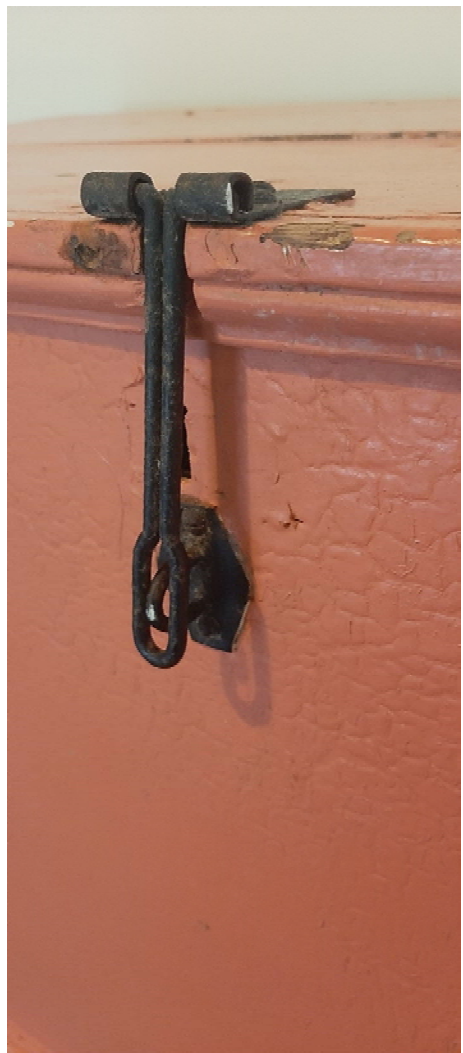
Refer to N6s Conservation Final Report

The Dowry Chest was returned to the house 2022_0729 and is currently in the kitchen. The size of the piece of furniture is difficult to portray (owner included for scale) – it is vast!



This magnificent piece of furniture with such historic connotations is back within the family home and may continue as a useful piece of furniture for the foreseeable future – to date the only Dowry Chest located as part of five-year research into Vernacular Architecture. It has been treated for woodworm, the missing legs made based on existing and essential repairs carried out, as per report.





Heritage Stewardship Fund – Offaly County Council 2022 – Hawkswood House – Dowry Chest Repair - RMckenna



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	2022	G1	2022