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24 Tuesday Oct  
2017

## Let's Build a Mary Rose Chest

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By *Laird Coinneach Mac an Leigh*

### Tags

*Camping, equipment,  
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It is common practice in the SCA to use small chests for storage as well as seating at camping and other events. With a little care, these chests can be made in a historically accurate way, enhancing the authenticity of our sites.

The chest in this article is called the Little Mary Rose Chest because it uses the same joinery techniques as the Purser's Chest on the *Mary Rose*, a carrack in the navy of King Henry VIII. The *Mary Rose* was lost in 1545 in battle in the Solent, the strait separating the Isle of Wight from England. Raised in 1971, she is a treasure trove of Henrician artifacts administered by the Mary Rose Trust.

To build this chest, you will only need two boards: a 1×12 six feet long, and a 1×16 eight feet long. A 1×16 is probably a glued-up panel—a series of small boards glued and planed at the factory to make a wide board. If you

feel like it, you could glue up your own panel, but this article won't tell you how to do that.

Take the 1×12 and start by cutting the ends of the chest to 17-1/4" long. On each board, mark a line 3" up from the lower end, then a second line 0.75" up from the first. These lines mark the edges of a dado, a groove across the grain of the board with a flat bottom and square sides.

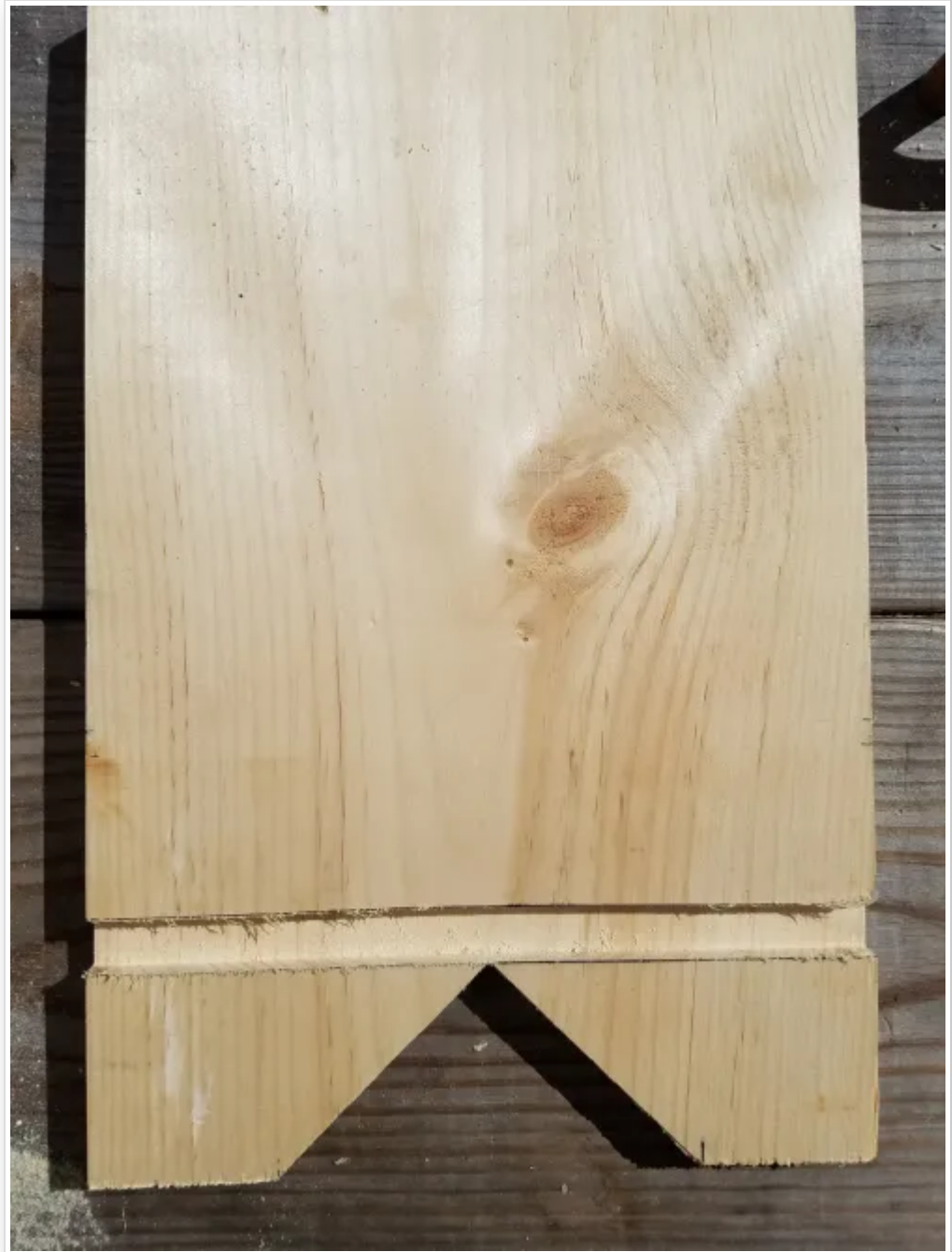


— An end board with the dado and boot jack laid out.

You can cut this groove by sawing on the waste side of each line halfway

through the thickness of the board and clearing out the waste with a chisel. In period, the bottom of the dado would be leveled and smoothed with a tool called an "Old Woman's Tooth," which is an early form of router plane. Nineteenth-century router planes can often be found in antique shops. Of course, if you want to use modern tools, you can cut the dado with a router.

Now cut the "boot jack" on the ends. Mark a centerline down the length of the end boards. Mark the lower end of the board 3" to either side of the centerline and 3" up from the bottom. Cut out this triangle.



— Dado and boot jack cut.

Cut the board for the bottom of the chest from the rest of the 1×12. Make it 23-1/4" long. Carefully fit the bottom into the dadoes of the ends and secure with nails. You can use regular modern nails, but if you can find cut nails they will both hold better and be more authentic.

Now it's time to take the 1×16 and cut the front and back of the chest. Cut both to a length of 24" and a width of 14-1/4". On each end and one long side, mark a line 3/4" in from the edge. This marks the edge of a rabbet, a shoulder cut in the edge of the board. Saw along the waste side of the line half the thickness of the board then remove the waste with a chisel. There is a specialized plane called a rabbet plane designed to cut these joints. You could also use the router again.



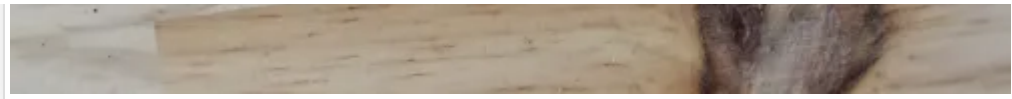


- Inside of front board showing the rabbets. The back is identical.

Now carefully fit the ends and bottom into the rabbets in the front and back pieces. Secure them by nailing through the front and back into the ends and bottom.

Cut the lid so that it overhangs the chest on all sides by about 1/2". The original chest on the Mary Rose had its lid secured by strap hinges on the outside of the back and the underside of the lid. If you can't find strap hinges you can use modern butt hinges or, for more authenticity, you can use snipe's-bill hinges. These are easily made from a pair of cotter pins joined at the eye and inserted through drilled holes in the chest and lid.





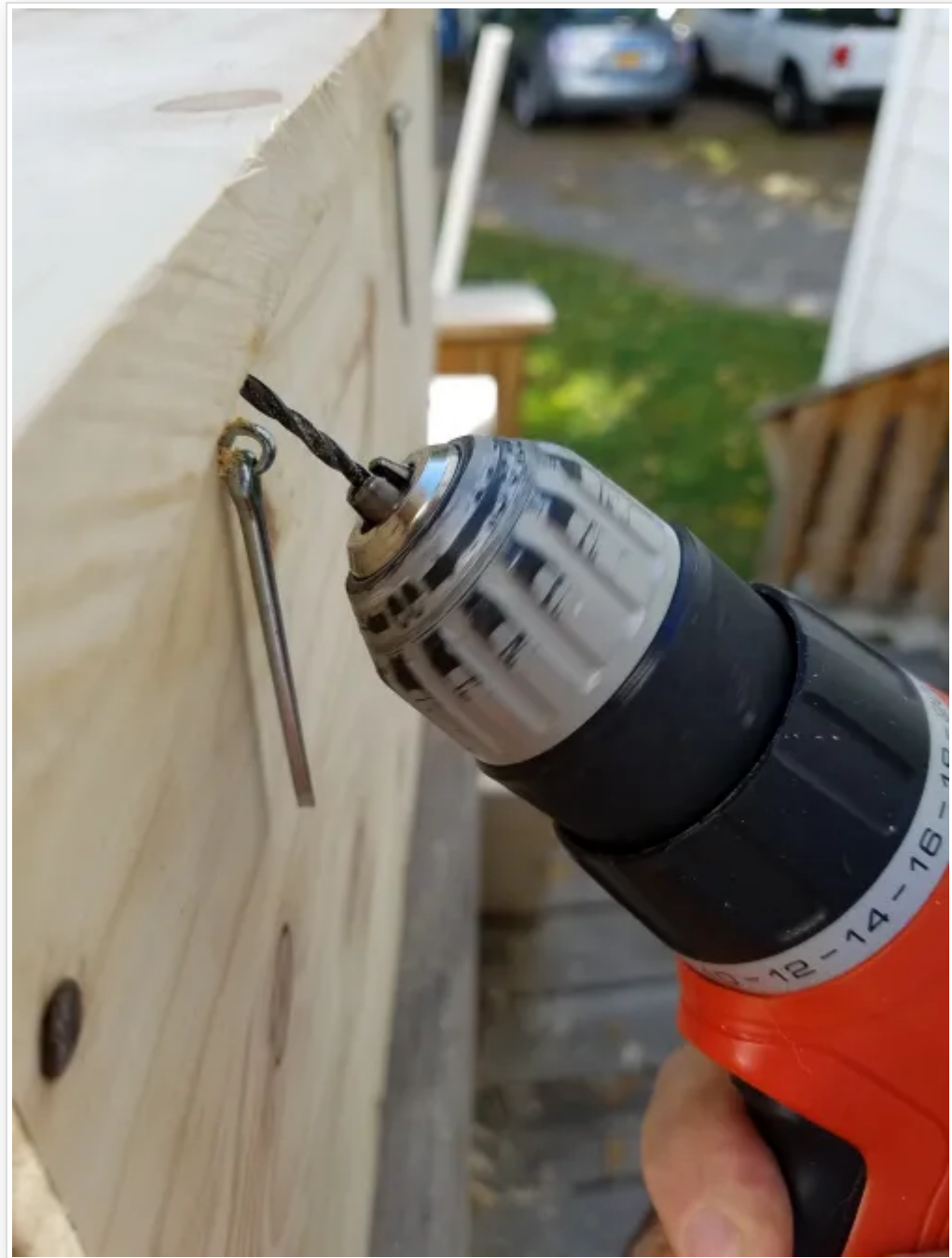
- Cotter pins joined to make snipe's-bill hinges.

To do this, drill a 1/8" hole in the back of the chest at the edge, at about a 45-degree angle downward.



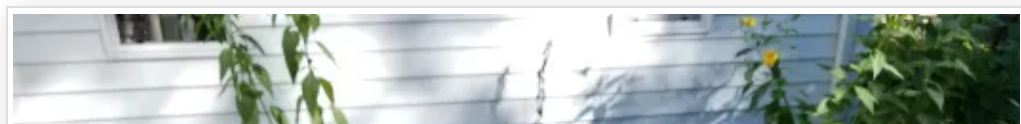
- Drilling the back of the chest for the hinges.

Slide in one of the cotter pins and spread its legs on the inside of the chest. Hammer the legs flat. For the lid, drill your 1/8" hole at an upward angle, insert the other cotter pin, and spread its legs as before.



– Drilling the lid.

Two or three such hinges provide a historically accurate way to hold the lid to the chest.





- Three snipe's-bill hinges. Left: tips of the legs bent outward. Center: bending the legs outward. Right: legs hammered flat.

The original Purser's Chest is an article of furniture, but the Little Mary Rose Chest is more an item of luggage, so you should think about adding some sort of handles. There are several types of handles seen in other chests from the Mary Rose, and they can easily be adapted.

The easiest handles to make are simply ropes passed through two holes in each end of the chest and knotted on the inside. You can make the ropes as long as needed to make the handles convenient.

Another option is to attach wooden brackets to each end, with a hole in the bracket and a loop of rope (called a grommet) through the hole. You can make these grommets by unlaying a strand of rope, then re-laying it around itself three times. This is a very attractive option; if you do it well, people will say you know how to make rope heal!

A third option, more difficult than the others, is to attach square iron plates with iron rings to the ends. This is a more expensive option, but quite attractive.

So there you have it. You now have a small chest, 24" long by 12" wide by 18" high. You can finish it with oil-based paints for historical accuracy or any other finish of your choice.



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