

An Interesting Harpsichord:  
the “Jesses Cassus”



This harpsichord, with an inscription that has been read as “Jesses Cassus,” has been the subject of intrigued speculation since 1956, when it was mentioned and illustrated with two photos in the first edition of Donald Boalch’s *Makers of the Harpsichord and Clavichord*. Its apparent significance has stemmed from the interior decoration of the case, which is quite similar to that of English virginals made between *circa* 1570 and 1684. As an English harpsichord of the “virginalist” period, the “Jesses Cassus” would be of extreme rarity, since only three pre-1700 English harpsichords are known, made in London by Lodewijk Theewes (1579), John Hasard (1622), and Charles Haward (1683).

Although many questions remain, it is clear that the instrument was heavily rebuilt, that is, made up from various antique and new parts between about 1880 and 1925. To summarize the discussion below: while the interior decoration and parts of the case may be seventeenth-century English, the soundboard, together with the wrestplank veneer, wrestplank, registers, and lower guide are most likely from a German harpsichord larger than the present case. Enough remains of the soundboard and associated components to undertake a plausible reconstruction of the original form of the instrument from which they came. The keyboard was adapted from a third instrument. With further detailed study, the authenticity of the English-style decorative elements and case parts might be established. If so, some aspects of the instrument might be reconstructable.

Long in private ownership in California, the “Jesses Cassus” harpsichord is now available for acquisition by a venturesome institution or curious individual. Although quite compromised as an example of historical harpsichord building, the instrument is a fascinating study piece containing highly significant and extremely rare historical material, including substantial portions of a seventeenth-century German harpsichord, one of only a handful known.



## The “Jesses Cassus Harpsichord Re-examined

John Koster

### 1. Previous Studies

The late owner of the “Jesses Cassus” supplied information to Boalch, Raymond Russell, who mentioned the instrument in *The Harpsichord and Clavichord* (1959), and Frank Hubbard, who discussed it in some detail in *Three Centuries of Harpsichord Making* (1965). The only first-hand account published to date was by Thomas McGeary, who examined the instrument for his 1973 article, “Early English Harpsichord Building, a Reassessment.” (Full bibliographical information on cited sources is given below.) Boalch (p. 15) reported that *Jesses Cassus* “the very uncertain reading of a signature ... on the wrestplank and normally invisible, presumably relates to a repairer” and observed that the “decoration on the nameboard [the piece forming the back surface of the instrument’s keywell, which, as here, often does not have the maker’s name written on it] and round the roses suggests English workmanship of the middle of the seventeenth century.” He included two photographs in the “United Kingdom” section of his plates (nos. xxi and xxii), indicating in his caption that the instrument was “probably English, circa 1650.”

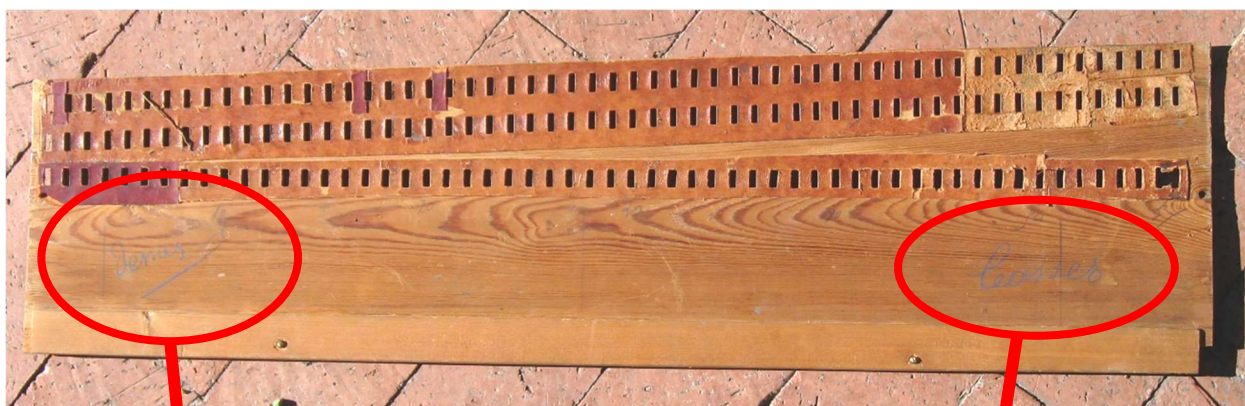
Russell (p. 70) noting some apparently Italianate features – the sharp curve of the bentside, the short scaling in the treble, and the angled registers, farther from the nameboard in the bass – suggested the possibility that “this may be an Italian harpsichord with English decoration.” Hubbard (pp. 143–144), also noting Italianate features, regarded these as exemplifying “the Italian influence we know to have been exerted in England during the period.”

McGeary (pp. 15–16), observing marks of previous bridge positions on the soundboard realized that “the instrument has been through several alterations” and “it may be that either the case or soundboard has been cut down [in size] or is from another instrument.” Noting a mixture of Italianate and early northern European features, he observed astutely that “the case is much too deep” to actually be Italian. Overall, McGeary concluded “that the ‘Jesses Cassus’ has been altered too often to provide any evidence to determine (a) if it is indeed English, or (b) to assess its role in the history of English harpsichord building.”

Since McGeary’s examination of the “Jesses Cassus” harpsichord nearly fifty years ago, it has not been available to specialist researchers and therefore has not been reconsidered in the light of current scholarship. I am grateful to the current owner for the opportunity to examine and photograph it in some detail in 2016. In general, I can confirm many of McGeary’s observations and contribute a number of refinements and additions.

### 2. Inscriptions

“Jesses Cassus,” thought to be the name of the maker, a repairer, or an owner, is not a name. The inscription, to be read correctly as *dessus* and *basses*, written in blue crayon on the underside of the plate-like lower guide (not, as Boalch reported, on the wrestplank), was made by a modern restorer or rebuilder to indicate the treble and bass ends of this piece (see Figure 1).



*dessus* = treble  
(formerly misread as “Jesses”)



*basses* = bass  
(formerly misread as “Cassus”)

*Figure 1.*

*The underside of the lower guide (temporarily removed from the instrument during examination) with inscriptions written by a modern restorer/rebuilder.*

The use of French words on the lower guide and elsewhere (see Figure 2) suggests that the modern rebuilding was done in a Francophone workshop, most likely in France but conceivably in Belgium or Switzerland.



*Figure 2.*

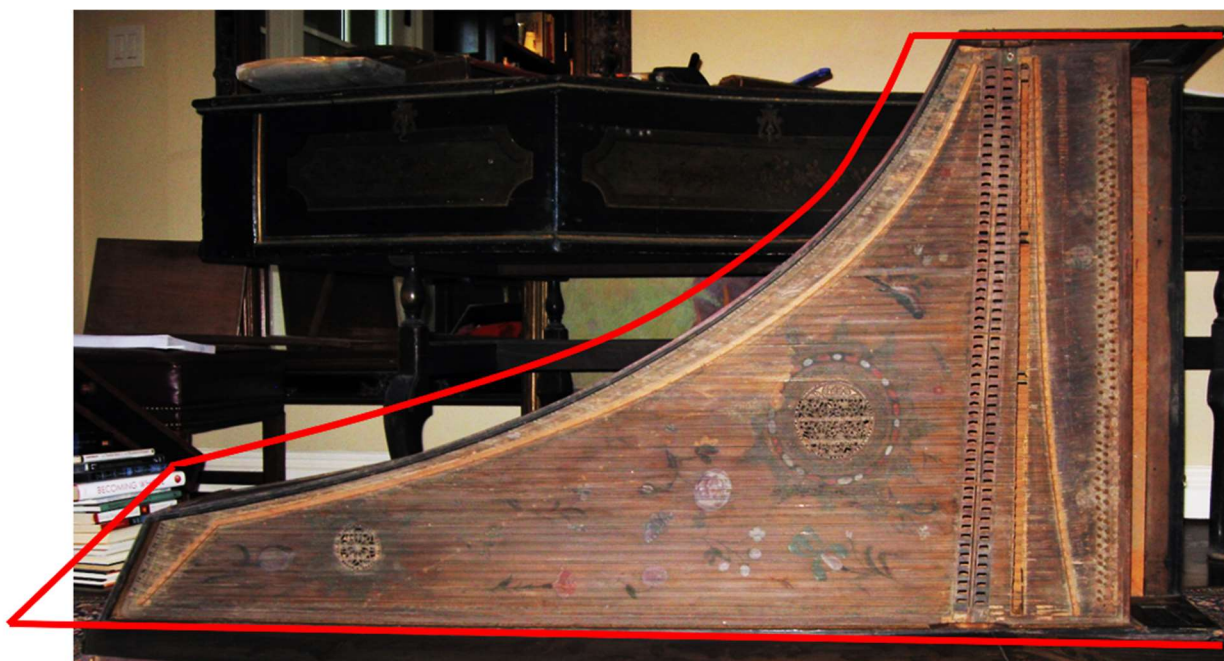
*Inscriptions “côté des dessus” (“treble end”), written on a block under the wrestplank, and “vis” (screw), on the key levers to indicate a screw in the keyframe underneath.*

### 3. The Soundboard and Associated Components, and Their Decoration

As is obvious from the plan view (Figure 3), the bridge is extremely, one might say impossibly, close to the bentside. Although both the bridge and the nut are recent replacements, they are clearly in their correct positions on the soundboard: they are placed between pairs of painted borders and their positions correlate well with the rest of the decorated soundboard. The soundboard, therefore, now cut down at the bentside and tail, was originally in a larger case with an outline more or less as reconstructed in Figures 4.

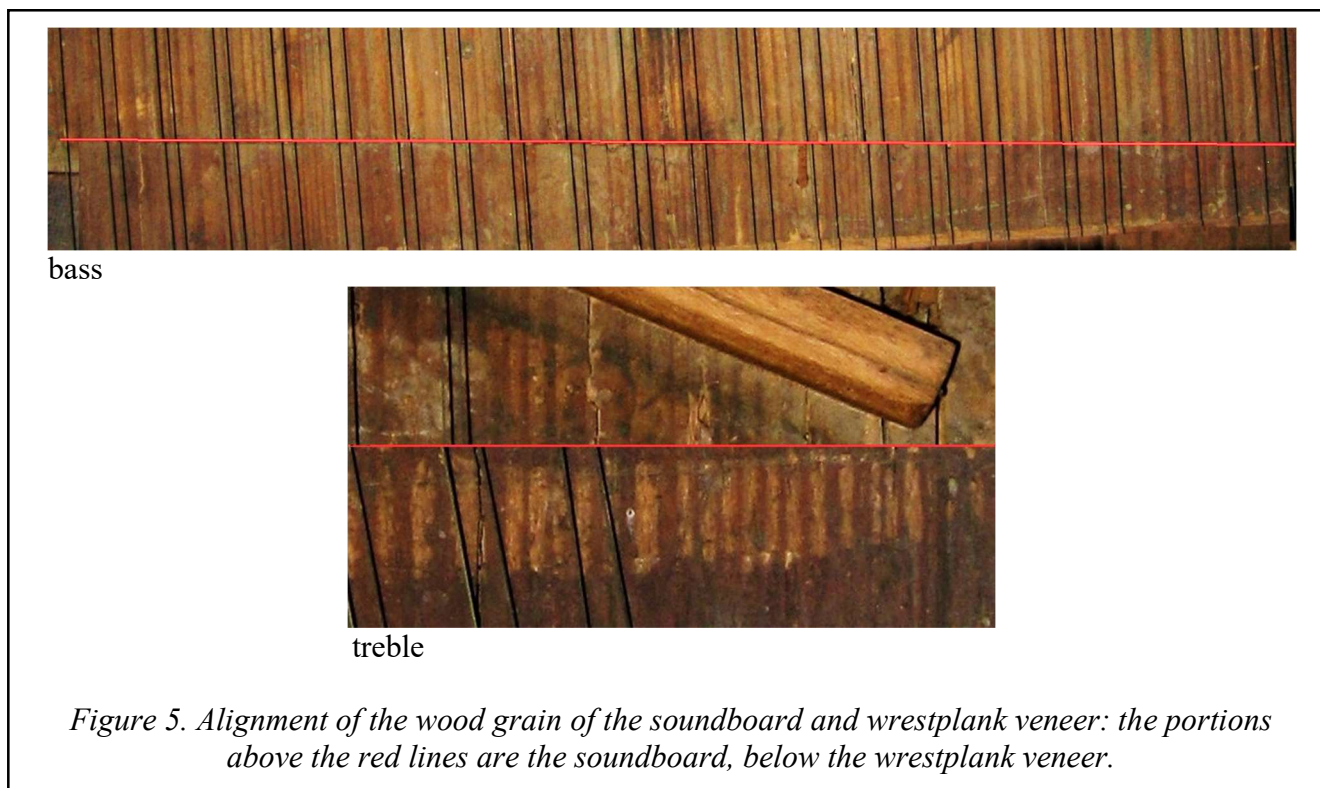


*Figure 3. Plan view*



*Figure 4. Plan view with reconstructed original case outline.*

The alignment of the wood grain of the soundboard and wrestplank veneer shows that they were made from the same panel and therefore belong together (see Figure 5).



Quite likely the soundboard and wrestplank veneer were installed in their original case as a single panel with cutouts for the jacks to pass through. Such a construction, with the soundboard extending to the nameboard, is found in several early northern-European harpsichords, for example, by Hans Müller, Leipzig, 1537 (Figure 6); by Lodewijk Theewes, an immigrant from Antwerp working in London, 1579; and illustrated by an engraving in Marin Mersenne's *Harmonie universelle*, Paris, 1636–1637. This is usually associated with a very narrow wrestplank, with the “veneer” layer functioning as a separate soundboard under the nut. This construction, in fact, seems to have been so in the present instrument. The oak wrestplank (see Figure 7), only about 60 mm wide, must have been left attached to the soundboard (including the portion under the nut) when it was installed in the present case.



*Figure 6. Harpsichord by Hans Müller, Leipzig, 1537 (Museo degli Strumenti Musicali, Rome), with soundboard extending to the nameboard. (The bridge is displaced from its original position.)*

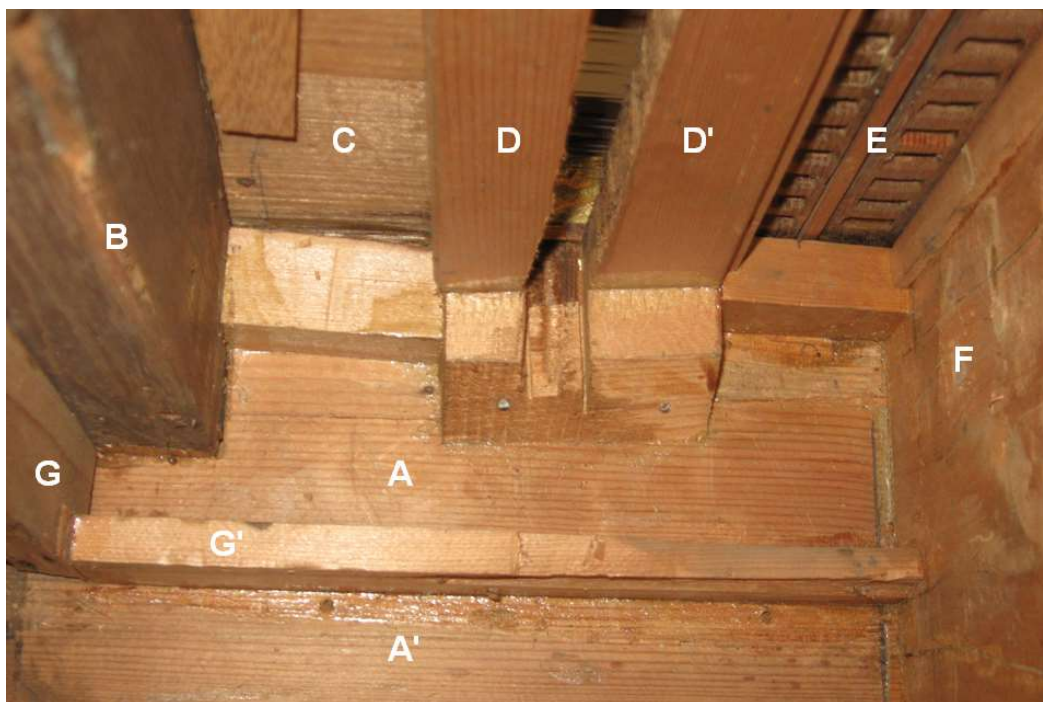


Figure 7. Interior view behind the nameboard towards the bass, showing: the spine (A–A'); the wrestplank (B); the soundboard under the nut (C); a block (D–D') added by the modern rebuilder and later cut through for the nasal register; the two main registers (E); the belly rail (F); and battens (G/G') to which the lower guide (removed for this photo) is attached.



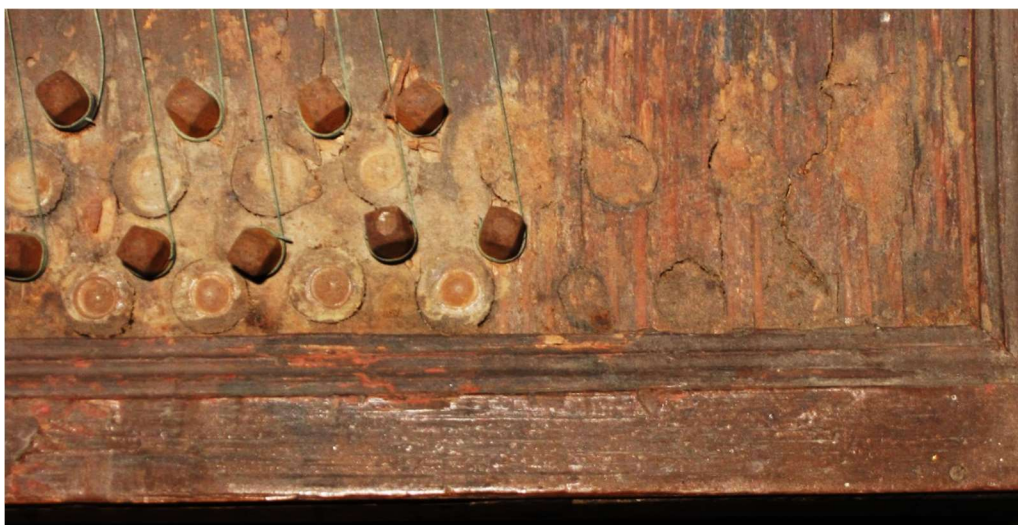
Figure 8. The upper side of the lower guide.

The plate-like lower guide (Figures 1 and 8) of leather-covered pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) 3.5 mm thick, with mortices for three 57-note sets of jacks, including a nasal register, certainly also belonged to the instrument from which the soundboard and wrestplank were taken. Also made for a compass of 57 notes, the two remaining registers (or upper guides; see Figures 7E and 9), which, of leather-covered wood about 3 mm thick, match the lower guide, would also stem from this instrument. The nasal guide, however, was evidently discarded during the modern rebuilding, when the added block (D–D' in Figure 7) closed the slot through which the jacks passed. Later, it seems, a slot was crudely cut through the block in an abortive attempt was made to reinstate the nasal register. It is likely that the three registers originally rested on top of the soundboard.



*Figure 9. The bass end of the registers. Note also the modern batten, with painted blue borders, filling the gap in the soundboard for the former nasal jacks.*

There are two sets of strings, as doubtless there were originally. The present two rows of modern wrestpins are slightly farther from the front edge of the wrestplank than the two original rows, now plugged up (See Figure 10). The top several notes are lacking in the present stringing, which extends only to the longer  $d^3$  string.



*Figure 10. The treble end of the rows of wrestpins.*

That the present string lengths are close to Pythagorean in the treble (that is, they double in length for each octave lower, as between  $c^3$  and  $c^2$  or  $c^2$  and  $c^1$  in the table below) indicates that the soundboard and bridge are very close to their original positions relative to the nut and the “wrestplank veneer” portion of soundboard behind the nameboard. Possibly, the nut and bridge

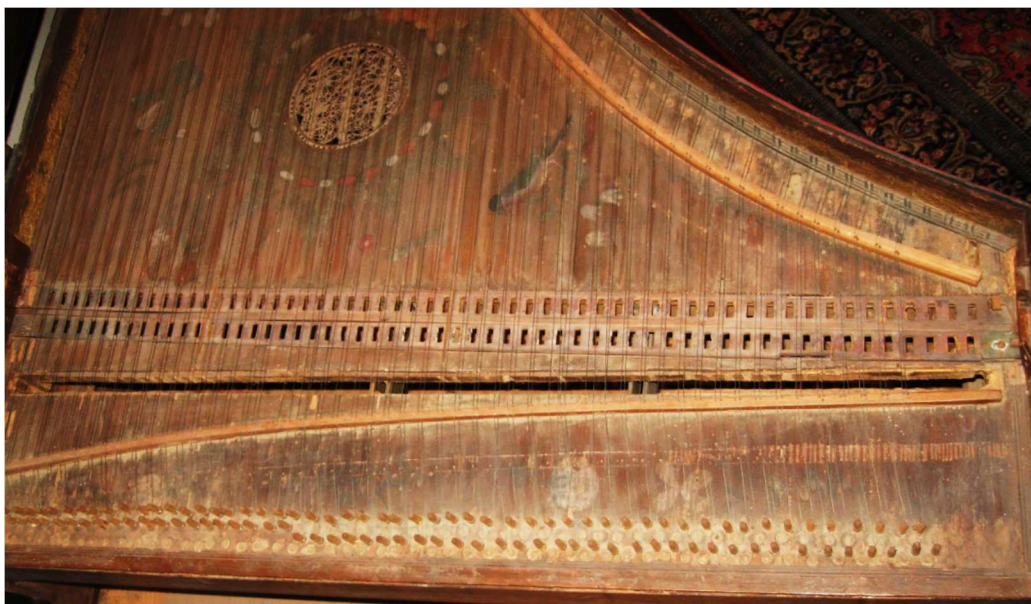


are now farther from each other by about 3 mm than they were originally, as the adjusted measurements in the right-hand column are perfectly Pythagorean.

“Jesses Cassus” harpsichord: length of the longer string in mm		
	as measured	less 3 mm
$f^3$	82	79
$c^3$	114	111
$c^2$	225	222
$c^1$	447	444
$c$	851	847
$C$	1310	1307

Although the lines of 57 slots in the jack guides correspond to the 57-note AA– $f^3$  compass of the present keyboard, the original keyboard of the instrument from which the soundboard, wrestplank, and guides came might have had a different 57-note compass such as CC/EE– $c^3$  (or C/E– $c^4$ ), CC– $g^2, a^2$  (or C– $g^3, a^3$ ), or the 1683 Haward harpsichord’s FF,GG– $d^3$ . Because of this uncertainty (perhaps eventually to be clarified by finding pinholes for marking-out the bridge position for C or some other principal note in each octave) it is impossible to estimate the pitch, which, with the present compass, would have been rather high, approximately a minor third to a fifth above modern pitch, depending on whether the strings were of brass or iron.

Scars on the soundboard (see Figure 11) show that a bridge and nut were attached forward of the present positions. This former bridge and nut arrangement, crossing over the painted decoration, must have been a makeshift solution done during or after the modern rebuilding in order to place the bridge a reasonable distance from the bentside while keeping the string lengths more or less the same by moving the nut closer to the nameboard.



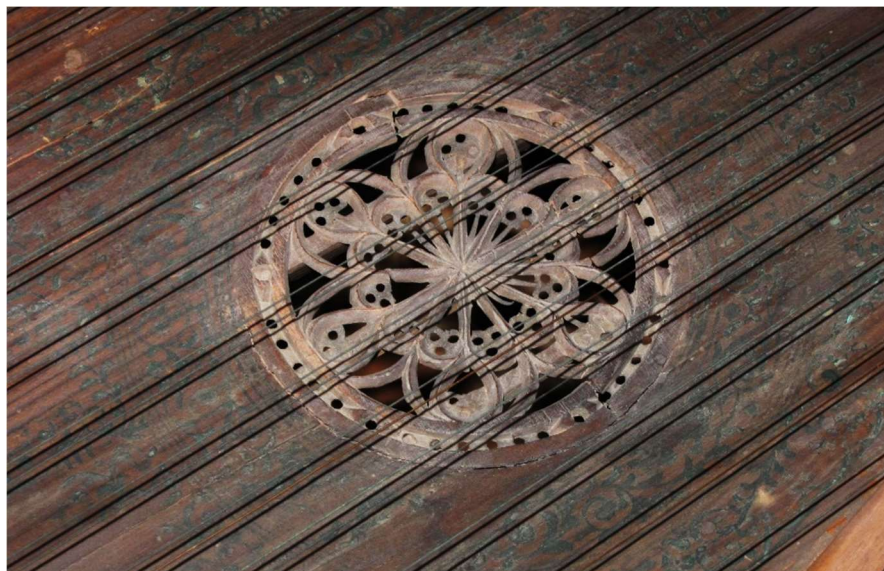
*Figure 11. Detail of the soundboard and wrestplank.  
Note the marks of a former modern bridge and nut crossing over the painted decoration.*

Various distinctive features of the soundboard and associated elements are suggestive of where the instrument from which they were taken was likely or unlikely to have been made. France and Flanders can immediately be ruled out, as registers angled away from the nameboard in the bass are unknown in Flemish and French harpsichord making, and nasal registers are unknown in France. Both these features as well as multiple roses, platelike lower guides, and nuts on resonant soundboard are found both in England and Germany.

Three features, however, point away from England and towards Germany. First, the soundboard was made of fir (*Abies alba*), a wood which English makers did not use. Second, as can be seen in Figures 12 and 13, the geometric roses, made of layers of parchment and wood, are covered, at most, with a layer of varnish: English roses (as in Figure 14) were almost always gilded. Third, the paint on English soundboards (as in Figure 14) is typically quite thin, more like watercolor than gouache or tempera. That on continental soundboards (Flemish, French, and German schools) is generally much thicker, especially in the blue borders and arabesques, which have an actual three-dimensionality and tend to flake off.



*Figure 12. The large rose.*



*Figure 13. The small rose.*



*Figure 14. Virginal by Stephan Keene, London, 1668 (Edinburgh University):  
the main rose and surrounding painted decoration.*

All in all, then, the evidence suggests that the soundboard (including the portion in the wresplank-nut area), the wrestplank, the lower guide, and the two remaining registers of the “Jesses Cassus” instrument are the remains of a fine seventeenth-century German harpsichord.

#### 4. The Case

It is immediately clear that the case in its present form could never have housed a properly designed harpsichord. Some historical harpsichords are better designed than others, but it is implausible to the highest degree that anyone would have made an instrument with so constricted an area of soundboard in the treble, in the cheek/bentside corner indicated by the red oval in Figure 15. One could imagine that the case contained a reasonable soundboard with its front edge approximately as indicated by the blue line. But then the keyboard end of the instrument would have to be longer, approximately as indicated by the green lines. If the keyboard end of the case was indeed shortened, presumably by the modern rebuilder who installed the old German soundboard and the other components associated with it, some physical evidence of this (perhaps, for example, scars from where the wrestplank had been attached) conceivably remains to be found. Indeed, some irregularities in the surface of the paint on the exterior of the cheekpiece (see Figure 16) might indicate the housing for a wrestplank wider but less thick than the present wrestplank associated with the German soundboard.

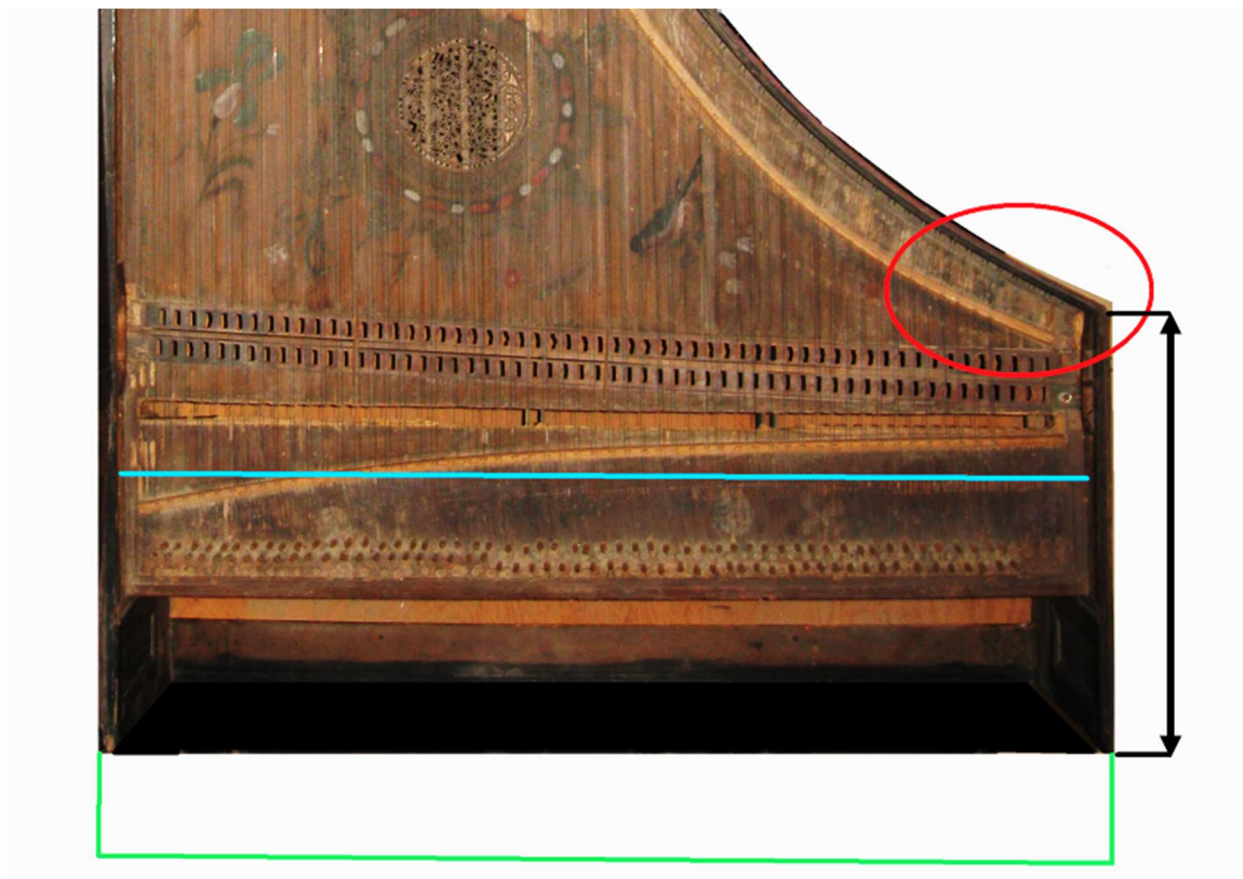
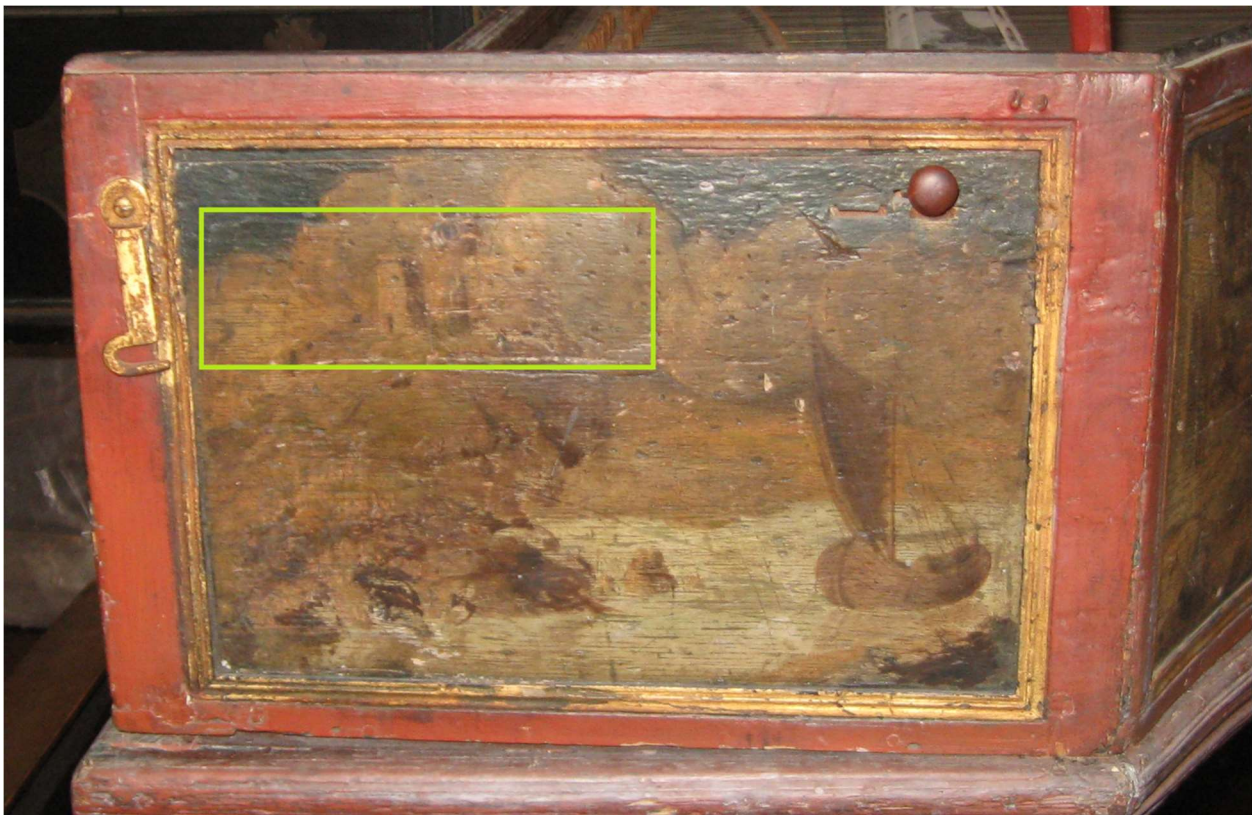


Figure 15. Keyboard end with indications of how large it might have been originally, with the front edge of the soundboard approximately at the blue line, to provide a sufficient area of soundboard in the corner indicated by the red oval.



*Figure 16. The cheekpiece: irregularities in the paint surface might indicate the position of a previous wrostplank, appromiately as indicated in the bottom image.*

One could conceive that the modern restorer/rebuilder, rather than just shortening the keyboard end of an old harpsichord case, executed a more radical reconfiguration by disassembling it and modifying the pieces to make up the shape of the present instrument. If so, it should be clear that any putative older form of the case is extremely unlikely to have been that which originally housed the German soundboard. The radius of the bentside curve is longer than the radii of the curves of the German bridge and of a bentside more or less parallel to it, that is, the curve of the present bentside is less pronounced.

Between the front edge of the soundboard and the bottom board is a thick once-piece belly rail (Figure 17) with five large holes arranged in the form of a cross near each end. This piece is patently modern, from the “French” assembly of the various parts into the present instrument. Through the holes one can see the interior structure (Figure 18), including the unpainted surface of the oak bentside and the framing, the fresh-colored wood of which indicates



*Figure 17. The modern belly rail with its set of holes in the bass; another set is in the treble.*



*Figure 18. The interior under the soundboard, viewed through one of the holes in the belly rail.*

that it was added or replaced by or for the recent owner during the 1950s or 1960s. The plywood bottom must also stem from this later intervention. The foremost portion of the older solid softwood bottom, about 10½ mm thick, remains. It, like the plywood bottom, is attached to the underside of the case walls (not between them, as in Italian instruments). That the bentside and cheekpiece are oak excludes the possibility of an Italian origin, as Russell suggested.

### 5. The Decoration of the Case and Lid

The cheekpiece, its length indicated by the black arrow in Figure 15, too short for any type of historical harpsichord, either was made entirely new by the modern French rebuilder or was cut down from the cheekpiece, about 9 cm longer, of a putative larger case. In either circumstance, since there is no apparent evidence that the painted decoration on the exterior of the cheekpiece and the molded frame around it have been altered, one can conclude that this decoration and the matching decoration on the bentside (Figure 19) and tail were applied at the time of the modern rebuilding. These panels were said by the former owner to represent the Spanish Armada (1588). In any event, during the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, harpsichords, musically obsolete and expected, at most, to give a quaint little plunk, were often embellished with lavish decorations to serve as pretentious pieces of furniture redolent of olden times.



*Figure 19. Painted decoration, evidently late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century, on the bentside.*



*Figure 20. Painting on the lid interior.*

*Above: the main lid.*

*Left: the lid flap.*



The painting on the interior of the lid (Figures 1 and 20) appears to have been done by a different, more skilled artist than the one who painted the case exterior. This can be seen, for example, in the figures, which on the exterior were drawn almost as stick-figures, while those on the lid have a fuller, more rounded three-dimensionality (see Figure 21).



*Figure 21.*

*Left: detail of figures on the case exterior.*

*Below: detail of figures on the lid.*



Further, while the paintings on both the case and the lid are harbor scenes, the architecture of the buildings is quite different: a brick, perhaps northern-European building on the lid, Classical- or Renaissance-style pavillions on the case.

Because of these differences, it seems plausible that the lid painting is from a different period than the case painting, perhaps from the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The former owner claimed that the lid represents Portsmouth, but this seems implausible, as the topography of this port city and surrounding areas does not include the hill with fortifications at its base along the water's edge to be seen in the background of the painting. The scene, if based on an actual place, and the painting itself could be Continental. Further study of the topography, architecture, costume, and other details might serve to identify the place and time.

In any event, it is certain that the painting, with the grain of the wood panel oriented vertically on the flap but horizontally on the main part and with the overall composition conforming to the shape of a harpsichord lid – the tall trees and building at the left sweeping

down to the horizon at the tail end – was made for this purpose. However, that the scene ends abruptly and awkwardly at the left edge and that some of the elements towards the tail end – the masts of the boats and the red-shirted figure on the jutting rocks – seem rather constricted by the bentside edge suggest that the lid was originally made for a larger harpsichord and was cut down to fit the shape of the present instrument. Additional evidence of this is that the division between the flap and the main lid falls in front of the jackrail rather than behind, as in historical harpsichords of all schools. If the lid were slid back two or three inches so that the division fell behind the jackrail, the flap, correspondingly wider at its left edge, would be able to accommodate a more reasonable pictorial composition, and the main part of the lid would correspond to a longer instrument with a reasonably long cheekpiece. Further, a possible indication that the curved edge of the main lid was modified by cutting off material towards its midsection (around the large boat in the painting) in order to accommodate a more deeply curved bentside is that the end of the middle hinge is closer to the bentside than the others (see Figure 22).



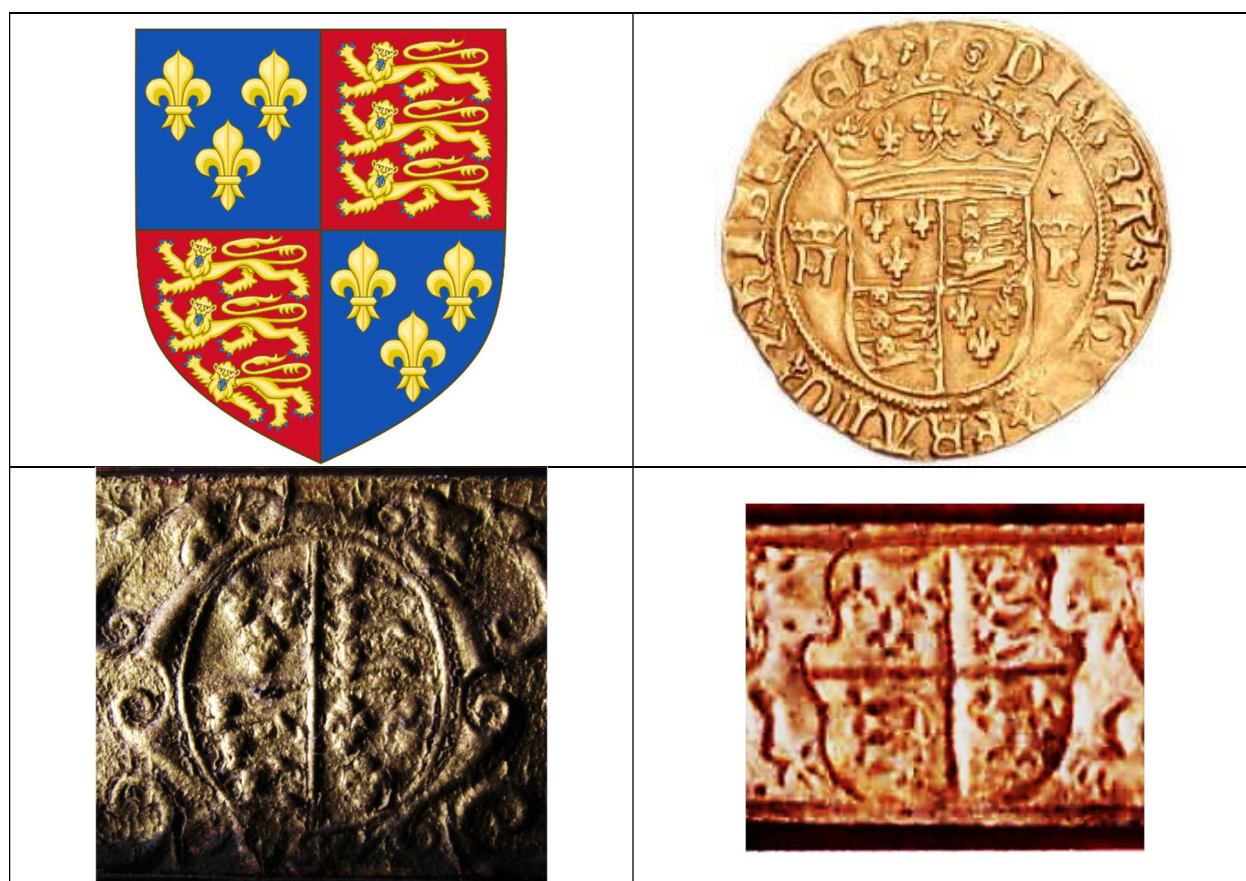
*Figure 22. The exterior of the lid with its hinges.*

The most distinctive decorative elements, those suggestive of a late-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth-century English origin, are the gilt embossed paper on the nameboard and surrounding the soundboard, as well as the painted decoration on the nameboard and jackrail. The paper (Figure 23) includes the royal arms (Figure 24), consisting of the arms of England (three lions) and France (three fleurs-de-lis), each in two quadrants. This shield was in use, with brief interruptions, from the reign of Henry IV, beginning in 1399, to the death of Elizabeth I in

1603, after which, under James I, the arms of Scotland and Ireland were incorporated. It cannot, however, serve as evidence that the instrument from which the papered elements on the “Jesses Cassus” harpsichord might have been taken was made during the reign of Elizabeth I (or earlier), as it is found on English virginals made from 1638 to 1664 (e.g., in Figure 24, lower right), perhaps intended as a subtle political statement.



*Figure 23. One repeat of the gilt embossed paper.*



*Figure 24.*

*The English royal coat of arms, 1399–1603:  
a modern rendering (upper left); on a coin of Henry VIII, mid-1540s (upper right);  
on the “Jesses Cassus” harpsichord (lower left);  
on a mid-17<sup>th</sup>-c. virginal (upper right; after Martin 2003).*

White arabesques painted on a black ground, like those in the two panels on the nameboard (Figure 25), and painted borders with repetitive patterns are typical in English virginals (as in Figures 26 and 27). The nameboard, however, is atypical in that the outer ends of the panels containing the arabesques do not continue around the corner to the keycheeks, as they always do in English virginals (see, for example, Figure 27) and in the one surviving early English harpsichord decorated in a comparable manner (Figure 28). Rather, the keycheeks are decorated with white-on-black arabesques (Figure 29) similar to those on the nameboard. Overall, the keywell (Figure 30) presents a rather incoherent appearance, with the plain black borders around the keycheek panels against the rich gilt paper and colored outer border of the nameboard. Possibly, the keycheek arabesque panels, in their original state, were also surrounded by decorative borders and/or gilt paper. It certainly remains possible that the nameboard and the decorative elements on the keycheeks might have been taken from an English instrument – perhaps a harpsichord – in which the treatment different somewhat from the norm of English virginals.



*Figure 25. The nameboard.*



*Figure 26. Virginal by Adam Leversidge, 1670 (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), case front to the right of the keyboard.*



Figure 27. Virginal by Gabriel Townsend, 1641 (Mus. Instr. Museum, Brussels).



Figure 28. Harpsichord by Lodewijck Theewes, London, 1579 (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).



*Figure 29. The bass keycheek.*



*Figure 30. The keywell.*

Even if the nameboard was reused substantially intact from an earlier instrument, there seem to have been at least some minor modifications to fit the present instrument. As can be seen in Figure 31, the outer borders at the ends of the nameboard were evidently painted by a different hand than that which painted the upper border. Visible on the latter are the scribed lines to guide the layout: a horizontal line along the middle and the circles, with compass points at their centers. These marks are not present on the end borders, in which the edges of the central small circles are smooth, not serrated like those in the upper border. One should note that the lack of a painted border on the lower edge could be original, as this is also absent in many English virginals. Also to be noted is that there is a hole in the nameboard in the middle of the upper frieze of gilt paper, presumably for a small screw to hold the board in place, but there is no corresponding hole in the wrestplank behind.



*Figure 31. The treble end of the nameboard. The border at the right (like that at the left, seen in Figure 25) was made by painter other than the one who did the border at the top.*

The jackrail (Figure 32), with its white-on-black arabesques matching those on the nameboard and keychecks, presumably came from the same source. In construction and decoration it differs significantly from the jackrails in English virginals (e.g., Figure 33).



*Figure 32. The bass end of the jackrail. Note that the left end of the arabesque has been cut off.*



*Figure 33. A typical English virginal jackrail, with applied moldings and gilt embossed paper (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).*

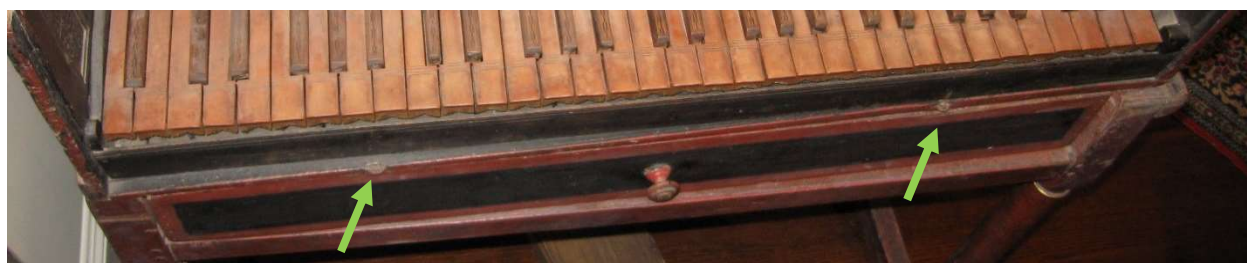
That the bass end of the arabesque has been cut off indicates that the “Jesses Cassus” jackrail was made for an instrument requiring a jackrail approximately 8 mm longer, perhaps to be held in a mortice cut in the upper edge of the spine. Since the jackrail is about 8 mm wider than the average English virginal jackrail serving one row of jacks, it is wide enough for two rows, therefore made for a harpsichord.



The final decorative elements to mention are the lid hinges (Figures 22 and 34, left), which are similar in design to ones on English virginals (Figure 34, center and right).



The presence of the hasp on the lid flap calls attention to the keywell flap, now detached, which it would have secured. The two wire hinges that held the flap remain at the front edge of the bottom board (Figure 35).



*Figure 35. The arrow indicate the remains of wire hinges for the keywell flap.*

The stand, which should eventually be examined in detail, is presumably modern. One should note, at least, that the knob of the drawer would prevent the keywell flap from hanging straight down.

## 6. The Keyboard

The keyboard now has the compass AA to  $f^3$ , but the lowest two and highest five notes are additions to the original compass of BB to  $c^3$ . The boxwood playing surfaces of the added natural keys are thinner than the rest (Figure 36), and the balance rail has been extended at both ends to accommodate the added keys (Figure 37). Evidently, when the present instrument was



*Figure 36. The extreme bass and treble keys. Note that the boxwood surfaces of the first key and the last three are thinner than the rest.*



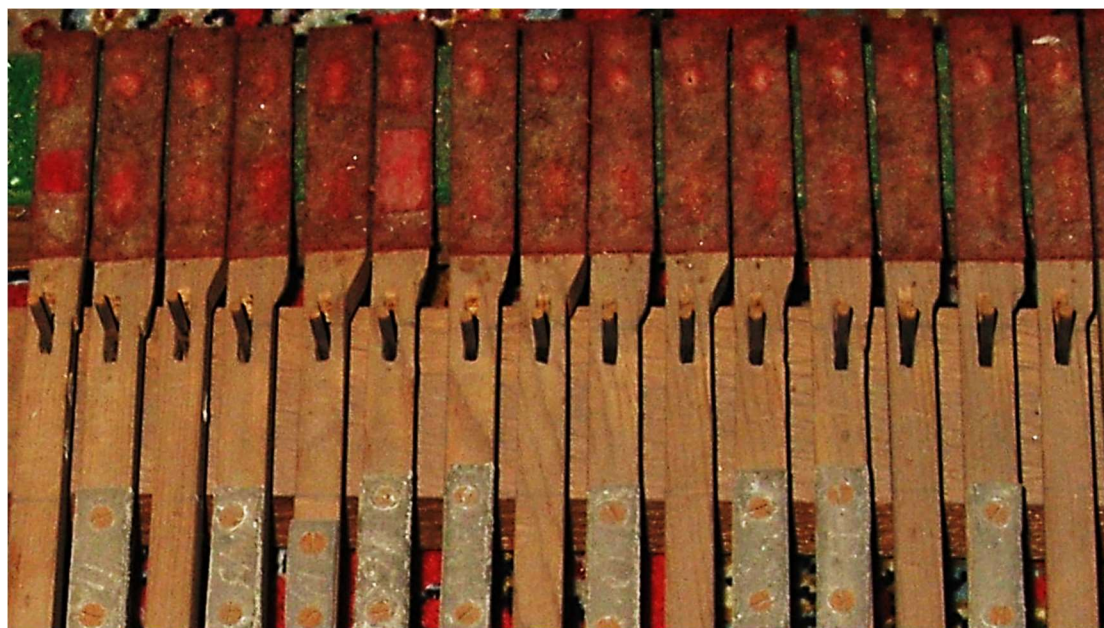
*Figure 37. The arrows indicate the additions to the bass and treble ends of the balance rail.*

assembled from various pieces into its present state, parts of an old 50-note keyboard – the boxwood natural covers, the balance rail, and the bass side rail (possibly also part of the treble side rail) – were used in making a new keyboard with levers gradually shorter from bass to treble configured to fit the soundboard and the angled registers associated with it. Because the nasal register was suppressed, no pads for its jacks were ever attached to the new key levers. There

seem to have been some carelessness and miscalculation in rebuilding the keyboard, as the treble addition to the balance rail is somewhat different from the bass addition; the new back guide rail was at first not made long enough, necessitating an addition for the two lowest notes; the panel from which the keyboard was cut seems first to have been made only wide enough for the old 50-note compass, as the wood for the added notes differs from the rest; and, as can be seen in Figures 38 and 39, the levers, towards their distal ends, were sawed apart several millimeters too far to the left, such that, for proper alignment with the registers and jacks, the left side of each lever had to be cut or planed away and new material glued to the right side of each lever under the pads for the jacks, such that each lever is cranked to the right.

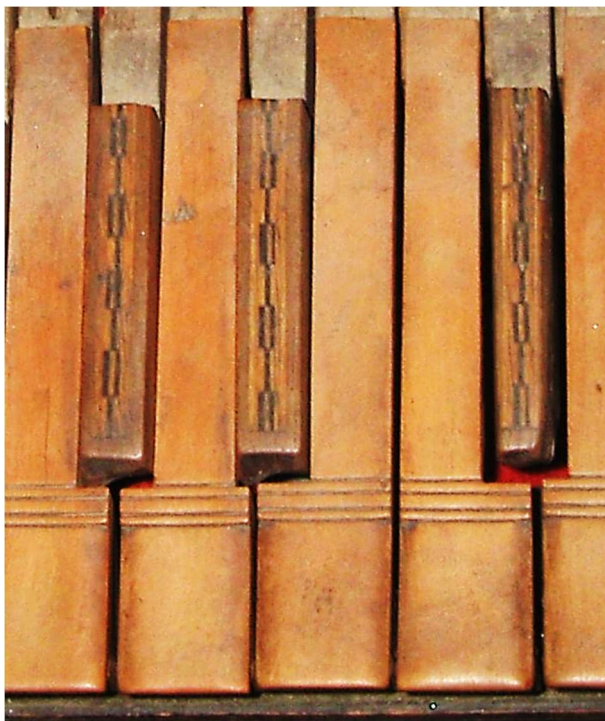


*Figure 38. The keyframe (with most of the keys removed).*



*Figure 39. Detail of the corrective cranking of the distal ends of the keys.*

The construction of the new belly rail, with its flat face immediately behind the back row of jacks, did not permit a normal guide rail behind the keys. Vertical guide pins, as here, passing through slots in front of the jacks were normally used only for the upper keyboards of two-manual harpsichords.



*Figure 40. Detail of the inlaid sharps.*

The sharps (Figure 40), decoratively inlaid on their upper surfaces in a manner similar to that in several English virginals, all appear to have been made at the same time and therefore were likely all newly made when the keyboard was rebuilt. Another indication that they were not taken from an antique keyboard is that the positioning of the inlay (perhaps cut from commercially available strips) varies. In Figure 40, for example, the inlay on the sharp to the left differs in placement from the other two. No historical maker would be so careless. The sharps are also too short, leaving an unsightly gap in front of the nameboard. This could have been covered by a “dustcatcher” batten, as present in some English virginals between the keyboard and the nameboard, but there is no evidence of one having been provided.

As can be seen in Figure 36, the arcades (keyfronts), like the sharps, are all uniform, made throughout the compass of the same material and cut with the same rotary tool. These, too, are modern and unlike English keyfronts, which in the seventeenth century were typically made of embossed paper and in the eighteenth were cut from molded wooden strips.

## 7. Summary and points to be investigated further

The “Jesses Cassus” harpsichord was assembled from various antique and new parts in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The most important antique elements, all taken from a seventeenth-century German harpsichord, are the decorated soundboard extending to the nameboard, the wrestplank, the lower guide, and two of the original three registers. The compass of this instrument, which was longer and differently shaped than the present case, was 57 notes.

The keyboard, while incorporating the boxwood natural covers from a 50-note, BB-c<sup>3</sup> instrument and some parts of the keyframe, is substantially modern.

The case was made or remade in its present form in the decades around 1900. The exterior decoration on the cheekpiece, bentside, and tail are modern. Remaining to be determined with further detailed examination and scientific analysis are whether substantial parts of the case were taken from an old instrument; whether that instrument was a harpsichord or a virginal; whether the associated decorative elements – the embossed gilt paper, the jackrail and nameboard, the panels with white-on-black arabesques, hinges, and moldings – are also old and were part of that instrument, thus indicating an English origin; and whether the lid belonged with the putative old case; whether the lid painting is old and, if so, where it might have been painted. That the inlaid sharps appear to be modern, while resembling those in some English virginals, suggests that whoever did the work had some knowledge of the decorative style of seventeenth-century English instruments and some ability to imitate it. Conceivably, this skill could have extended to reproducing the characteristic embossed papers.

If, after all, substantial portions of the case and its decoration should prove to be English of the virginalist period, it might be possible to reconstruct the form of the original instrument as a plan on paper and eventually as an actual new instrument. This would be in addition to the reconstruction, as outlined in Figure 4, of the original form of the German instrument from which the soundboard and its associated parts were taken.

John Koster, August 2020

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