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People, possessions and domestic space in the late medieval escheators' records

Chris Briggs, Alice Forward, Ben Jervis and Matthew Tompkins

ABSTRACT:

The medieval English escheator was a royal official who seized the goods and chattels of felons, fugitives and outlaws for the crown's benefit. This article uses escheators' inquests and accounts to ask: what information exists about the location of forfeited possessions at the point of their appraisal by the escheator, and what is revealed about the use of space in the houses and outbuildings of lower status people? We also ask more general questions about contemporary understanding of the relationship between domestic objects and space. We find that there was limited interest in describing possessions according to their position within buildings. Nonetheless, one may use the order of items as they are recorded in the escheators' lists of forfeited goods to explore the issues raised in the article. The records reveal an emphasis on the difference between 'household utensils' and other movables, especially crops and livestock.

Introduction

Studies of the domestic world of ordinary people in English villages and small towns in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have tended to focus either on the layout and internal arrangements of their buildings, or on the number and value of their movable possessions. Thus on the one hand there is a large literature on the

peasant dwelling house of this period. Scholars have traced the origins and significance of peasant homes and their characteristic tripartite division into a central open hall, (lower) service end and (upper) chamber end; a basic arrangement that appears to have been ubiquitous despite regional variations in construction techniques, as well as the characteristics of the agricultural outbuildings that were typically grouped around the house itself.¹ Meanwhile, a growing literature explores peasant possessions, livestock and furnishings of this period.² Rarely, however, have attempts been made to look at both buildings and possessions together, though there are crucial exceptions, as noted below.³ Thus when material possessions have been discussed as evidence for economic status or cultural values, little attention has been paid to the location of the items, and what this might tell us.

This separation in the literature of buildings from the movable goods that they contained is not surprising.⁴ It is largely a reflection of the sources that are available for studying the material world of non-elites in this period, and of the approaches adopted in studying them. Surviving standing buildings offer some of the best

¹ Mark Gardiner, 'Vernacular Buildings and the Development of the Later Medieval Domestic Plan in England', *Medieval Archaeology*, 44 (2000), 159-79; Sarah Pearson, 'The provision of services in Medieval Houses in Kent', *Vernacular Architecture* 43 (2012), 28-46; Nat Alcock and Dan Miles, *The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England* (Oxford, 2013); Jane Grenville, *Medieval Housing* (Leicester, 1997); Christopher Dyer, 'English Peasant Buildings in the Later Middle Ages (1200-1500)', in Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (London, 1994), 140-1 (on house and outbuildings). For caveats about the degree to which these features were generally distributed, however, see below.

² Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c.1200-1520* (revised edn.; Cambridge, 1998), 169-75; Ben Jervis, Chris Briggs and Matthew Tompkins, 'Exploring Text and Objects: Escheators' Inventories and Material Culture in Medieval English Rural Households', *Medieval Archaeology* 59 (2015), 168-92; Chris Briggs, 'Manorial Court Roll Inventories as Evidence of English Peasant Consumption and Living Standards, c. 1270-c. 1420', in A. Furió and F. Garcia-Oliver (eds), *Pautas de Consumo y Niveles de Vida en el Mundo Rural Medieval* (Valencia: University of Valencia Publications), in press.

³ For a consideration of this issue in relation to elite households, see Mark Gardiner, 'Buttery and Pantry and their Antecedents: Idea and Architecture in the English Medieval House', in Maryanne Kowaleski and P.J.P. Goldberg (eds), *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2008), 41-6.

⁴ In this article the terms 'possession', 'object' and 'item' are used interchangeably to refer to all movable goods, including livestock and grain, and not just those found within the house itself.

evidence for trends in peasant housing, but it is difficult for architectural historians and archaeologists to use the information these provide to reconstruct the use of space or contemporary disposition of objects within spaces. Excavated village sites and the finds from them aid in understanding the size and spatial configuration of buildings, yet they can shed light on the question of the location of objects within peasant houses only in exceptional cases, since most archaeological objects are recovered from waste dumps; generally, we find objects deposited in pits, ditches and in middens, away from where they were actually used.⁵ Finally, and crucially, pre-1500 documents which provide lists of peasant goods typically do not mention rooms or buildings, a feature which the present article seeks to explore more fully. Where written lists of goods are concerned, the contrast with the post-medieval period is significant, since scholars have used the references to rooms found in early modern probate inventories (documents which are rare before the 1530s) to reconstruct the spatial distribution of objects, and thus the use of space, within the house and its outbuildings.⁶ That said, even for the sixteenth century this is not always possible, since probate inventories do not always mention rooms.⁷

In spite of these evidential difficulties, it does seem worthwhile to attempt closer scrutiny of the problem of the spatial distribution of possessions in non-elite households. In an ideal world, one would wish to be able to consider how far at this social level objects and possessions were given meaning by their positioning within

⁵ Christopher Dyer, 'Living in Peasant Houses in Late Medieval England', *Vernacular Architecture* 44 (2013), 22; N.W. Alcock, 'The Medieval Peasant at Home: England, 1250-1550', in C. Beattie, A. Maslakovic, and S. Rees Jones (eds), *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe c.850-c.1550. Managing Power, Wealth and the Body* (Turnhout, 2003), 459-60; A. Mudd, S. Cobain and C. Haines, 'A Medieval Building and its Contents at Island Farm, Ottery St Mary, East Devon: Excavations in 2014', *Internet Archaeology* 44 (2018). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.47.4>.

⁶ M. Overton, J. Whittle, D. Dean and A. Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London, 2004), 121-36.

⁷ For a discussion of room names in the early inventories of Stoneleigh (Warwickshire), see Alcock and Miles, *Medieval Peasant House*, 146-8.

space. Indeed, one would also wish to investigate more fully whether the positioning of moveable items formed part of the means by which the organization of the domestic interior led to the reinforcement of familial and social hierarchy and order, as has been argued with respect to the buildings themselves.⁸ Perhaps less ambitiously though, more can surely be said about the functions of space, and indeed about the more general issue of how far ordinary people in villages and small towns habitually thought about their material resources and possessions in terms of the location that these occupied within their built surroundings.

Although a division was posited above between those commentators who look at buildings and those who look at objects, scholars have occasionally overcome the limitations of the evidence that make it hard to look at the two together. Most notably, this has been attempted in studies by Jeremy Goldberg and Christopher Dyer. These authors make particularly full use of a small collection of Yorkshire probate inventories which, unusually, survive from the fifteenth and very early sixteenth centuries, and in some cases mention rooms.⁹ In analysing these and other inventories Goldberg distinguished between 'household' items (i.e. those located within the residential building) and 'outside' items (those located in outbuildings, workshops, or fields). This distinction underpinned Goldberg's important argument that there was a contrast between peasant households and urban 'bourgeois'

⁸ Matthew Johnson, *English Houses 1300-1800: Vernacular Architecture, Social Life* (Harlow, 2010), 65-86, 135-52.

⁹ P.J.P. Goldberg, 'The Fashioning of Bourgeois Domesticity in Later Medieval England: a Material Culture Perspective', in Kowaleski and Goldberg (eds), *Medieval Domesticity*, 124-44; the Yorkshire lists formed part of Goldberg's 'rural' sample of inventories which he compared with an urban sample drawn mainly from larger towns; Dyer, 'Living', especially 20-3 (in Dyer's sample of 31 such inventories, 17 mention at least one room). The inventories are printed in P. Stell ed., *Probate Inventories of the York Diocese, 1350-1500* (York, 2006). In the present special issue, Goldberg turns to this material again in analysing the uses of space in urban houses. Wills also mention domestic spaces but such references do not provide much related information about objects; for examples, see Pearson, 'Provision of Services', 35. Coroners' rolls also provide useful incidental information about the use of objects in specific locations: see Alcock, 'The Medieval Peasant at Home'; C.M. Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England 1200-1500* (New Haven and London, 2016), 26-41.

households in terms of material culture, with the peasantry placing relative importance on the accumulation of 'outside' goods such as farm equipment, grain and livestock, while townspeople were more likely to invest in the consumption of 'household' goods and to place particular cultural importance on distinctive objects such as silver spoons and cushions.

Like Goldberg, Dyer noted the relatively low number and value of household possessions in the Yorkshire peasant inventories, and the high value attached to livestock and farm gear. Yet he also used the inventories to explore the use of space. In discussions of armour and weapons and of basins and ewers situated in peasant halls, he argued that these inventories do provide glimpses of a special significance being attached to objects by virtue of their positioning and display. Yet his main conclusion was that 'the ideal of hall, chamber and kitchen, each with its appointed furnishings, equipment and function was disrupted by the flexible allocation of space to different activities, with brewing vessels in the hall and sickles in the chamber'.¹⁰ Thus according to this view, the importance of the non-elite household as a site of production as well as consumption was such that objects were distributed within buildings in a manner that reflects a blurring of the distinction between living and working spaces.¹¹

This article attempts to build on these insights by using a hitherto underexploited documentary source – the lists of the goods of felons, fugitives and outlaws contained in the royal escheators' accounts of the late fourteenth and

¹⁰ Dyer, 'Living', 26. For similar conclusions based largely on the same evidence, see Christopher Dyer, 'Medieval Peasant Buildings 1250-1550: Documents and Historical Significance', in Alcock and Miles, *Medieval Peasant House*, 109-11.

¹¹ See Pearson, 'Provision of Services', 41, for similar points about sixteenth-century probate inventories.

fifteenth centuries – to see what can be discovered about the spatial disposition of possessions within the buildings of sub-elite residents of villages and small towns.

Objects and domestic space before 1500: the wider inventory evidence

The general rarity of references to buildings and the spaces into which they were divided has been commented on by those who have used lists of late medieval peasant goods. Why such references are so rare, and what this might signify, has however not been considered at length. As already noted, the rarity of probate inventories before the mid-sixteenth century means that they cannot provide a major source for the period under consideration. Subsequent sections of this article focus on the escheators' records and thus allow a new and much more extensive body of evidence bearing on this problem to be discussed. First, though, in order to provide context for the discussion which follows, this section offers a brief overview of a third, rather miscellaneous body of sources from the late medieval period which were produced neither as part of the church courts' system of probate, nor in response to the demands of the royal escheator. The aim here is to establish what information, if any, the inventories of goods in this miscellaneous category can provide about the spatial location of objects belonging to people at a range of social levels.

Manorial records are perhaps the most important larger category of source material for the study of later medieval English peasantry, and these records do occasionally provide inventories of goods of named peasants. Typically, such lists are embedded within the records of the manor court. The reasons behind the creation of such inventories were evidently varied, but in every case they related in some way to the exercise of a manorial lord's rights over his peasant tenants. Lists

of peasant goods were seemingly made for one of three main reasons. First, the listing may concern goods considered to belong to the *principalia*, that is, those goods that were not the customary peasant's own but belonged to the holding; second, an inventory could arise from the assertion of a lord's rights over his tenant's goods in case of intestacy (i.e. where the tenant died without making a will); and finally, a lord might seek to seize and therefore list a tenant's goods where the latter had been convicted of a crime, had been outlawed following a process of royal law, or had otherwise fled the manor (the latter circumstance was itself often connected with an accusation of crime). Typically, whatever the motivations, the record generated consists of a list, sometimes comprising a handful of items but occasionally longer, of goods as appraised and valued by a local jury.¹²

Given what has already been said it is not surprising that such manorial lists or inventories hardly ever mention the location of the items described. For instance, a sample of 14 such lists dating from between the later thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries displays a complete lack of such references.¹³ That said, it is incorrect to say that peasant inventories located in manorial records never note buildings or rooms. The detailed inventory of substantial peasant William Lene of Walsham le Willows (Suffolk) who died in 1329 was published some years ago and is thus well known.¹⁴ The majority of William's possessions are not clearly assigned a spatial location, but the inventory does begin with a listing of items in his 'principal house' (pots, pans, a posnet, a basin and ewer, a board with trestles, three forms and chair), and refers about halfway through to different kinds of grain in his 'granary house'. Why these particular locations are specified is not entirely clear but it is

¹² See Briggs, 'Manorial Court Roll Inventories'.

¹³ Briggs, 'Manorial Court Roll Inventories'.

¹⁴ R. Lock, ed., *The Court Rolls of Walsham le Willows 1303-50* (Suffolk Records Soc. XLI, 1998), 133-5.

surely relevant that William, who possessed some 40 acres (16 hectares) of land at death, was a comparatively wealthy peasant, and that his inventory is much lengthier and more detailed than most other manorial lists of the period.

This suggestion that the propensity to mention rooms and buildings increased with economic and social status is supported by the evidence of gentry inventories from the fourteenth century. This feature is present, for instance, in an inventory dated 1339 relating to the minor Norfolk lord John de Fyncham.¹⁵ This lengthy list of goods groups items according to location, naming the cart-shed, stable, barn, bakehouse, granary, kitchen, chapel, hall, pantry, lord's chamber, and larder. The 1374 inventory of Sir Edmund Appleby is structured similarly, and mentions chamber, pantry, buttery, hall, kitchen, larder, bakehouse, chapel, stable, byre and grange.¹⁶ Although the motivations behind the production of such inventories is not always apparent, they were obviously made for different reasons than the peasant inventories preserved in manorial records, and yet the greater tendency at higher social levels to link objects to spaces remains clear.

There are several possible explanations for these features, beyond pure scribal idiosyncrasy. It is possible that the kinds of inventorying process that affected those at modest social levels may not have required information about the initial location of items to be preserved, for example where the fate of those items was that they were to be removed from their locations and sold or otherwise dispersed. Alternatively, where the inventory concerned a relatively humble peasant, the small number of objects in question may have been found in just one or two spaces, making specification of location redundant. Another, connected possibility is that

¹⁵ W. Blyth, *Historical Notices and Records of the Village and Parish of Fincham, in the County of Norfolk* (King's Lynn, 1863), 149-52.

¹⁶ G.G. Astill, 'An Early Inventory of a Leicestershire Knight', *Midland History* 2 (1974), 274-83.

juries and scribes did not need to state where an item was, because there were shared understandings of where items of different kinds would normally be found. To explore these possibilities further it is necessary to consider a larger set of lists of non-elite goods, and we therefore turn now to the records of the royal escheator.

Objects and domestic space before 1500: escheator's lists

The crown exercised the right to seize the goods and chattels of felons (including suicides), fugitives and outlaws (for convenience the term 'felon' is used here for all these groups), and a key agent in this was the royal escheator.¹⁷ Each escheator was responsible for a county or group of counties called an escheatry, and one of his responsibilities was to carry out seizures of felons' chattels within his escheatry. Details of the felon's goods and chattels were recorded, and a significant number of the resultant lists survive among the voluminous records of the escheator within the exchequer archive.¹⁸

The escheator was required to hold an inquest for each felon at which local juries listed the possessions of the person concerned and their value. For instance, on 5 August 1416 at Wellingborough (Northamptonshire), such an inquest was held before escheator John Mortymer concerning the property of John Coupere of Wellingborough, who had been outlawed for an unspecified felony, and who (as we shall see) evidently did indeed work as a cooper, as his name suggests. Twelve named men provided evidence on oath, reporting that on the day of the inquest John

¹⁷ As implied in the previous section, local lords sometimes challenged this right of the crown and asserted their own rights to the forfeitures of felons among their tenants. For an important new study of this issue, see S. Gibbs, 'Felony Forfeiture at the Manor of Worfield, c.1370-c.1600', forthcoming in *Journal of Legal History*.

¹⁸ For further discussion of these sources, see Jervis, Briggs and Tompkins, 'Exploring'.

held one small table, one ale barrel, one empty herring barrel, one salt barrel with half a bushel of salt inside, two kinderkins (a kind of barrel), one small chest, one 'board bed' (*bordebedde*), one pail, one tankard bound with iron, one bucket bound with iron with chains, old wood, a pair of door-trees (i.e. door-posts), one small lead (a brewing vessel) in a 'furnace' (*in fornaci*), 100 cooper's hoops (*couperhopes*), two brass pots, a small brass skillet, two brass pans, and 'other small household utensils'. Each item was valued, the whole coming to around £1 8s. Finally, the jurors are reported to have stated that John held no lands, tenements, or further goods and chattels in the county which were capable of being valued.¹⁹ After such an inquest, the escheator was obliged to answer at the exchequer for the value of the goods, which was apparently realised through their sale. The records of such inquests are preserved in the escheators' files (TNA class E 153), though it is clear that the records of many inquests no longer survive in the files. Details concerning the income from felons' goods are recorded in the escheators' particulars of account (E 136), and in the escheators' accounts (E 357), in which all the particulars of account for a group of years were enrolled in a single location. Sometimes the detailed lists from the inquests were written up, in the same format and order, in the accounts; at other times, only the total valuations of goods appraised at the inquests were enrolled. However, enough lists of felons' chattels survive across the three record series in combination to provide a resource of huge value for historians of the material world of English peasants and small artisans.

A large number of such lists relating to 15 English counties are currently being collected and analysed as part of a three-year Leverhulme Trust research project which combines archaeological and documentary evidence in a wider exploration of

¹⁹ The National Archives [hereafter TNA], E 153/1280, m.6.

peasant material culture and living standards.²⁰ The counties under investigation are Cornwall, Devon, Kent, Middlesex, Northamptonshire, Rutland, Norfolk, Suffolk, Yorkshire, Cumberland, Westmorland, Northumberland, Hampshire, Wiltshire, and Worcestershire (the last two providing in-depth case studies). The present article is based on an interim version of the escheators' records database. Although more material will be added to this database, the files and accounts trawled so far have been selected on a random basis, so should offer a fairly representative picture of the contents of the surviving corpus of escheators' records. The material analysed in the present article covers the period 1372-1468, dates which correspond roughly to the beginning and end of the period in which detailed records of felons' goods were generated and kept by the escheator. The great majority of the lists discussed below concern villages but some relate to small towns; evidence from larger towns is excluded.²¹ Similarly, although clerics of various kinds feature quite prominently among the felons, overall the sample is dominated by evidence concerning relatively humble people. Persons of obviously high elite status (such as knights) are excluded. Most of the people whose goods are listed are small-scale agriculturalists and are best described as peasants, though as the case of John Coupere indicates, craftsmen also feature, as do a number of persons described as labourers. Not all of those for whom lists of possessions have been preserved had been convicted or accused of crime, since many of the outlaws were not criminals but persons who had failed to appear in civil proceedings. Nonetheless, the fact that forfeiture was often

²⁰ Leverhulme Trust RPG-2016-219, 'Living standards and material culture in English rural households 1300-1600'. The project team comprises directors Chris Briggs (Cambridge) and Ben Jervis (Cardiff) plus Research Associates Alice Forward, Tomasz Gromelski, Max Satchell, and Matthew Tompkins (the last-named being responsible for the archival research on the escheators' records); for details, see <https://medievalobjects.wordpress.com/>.

²¹ We define as 'larger towns' the 50 largest towns by number of payers of the 1377 poll tax.

connected with felony does tend, rather unusually, to exert a downward bias on the social profile of individuals in this particular dataset.

<Table 1 here>

Attention is restricted here to 350 lists which comprise three or more items, or groups of items (Table 1). It is important to note that for the purposes of this article, no attempt has been made to disaggregate groups of items of the same kind, since the emphasis here is on broad categories of object, and not so much on their number or value. Thus, for instance, a flock of 20 sheep is counted here as just '1' in the 'animals' row of Table 2, which categorises objects (see below). In most cases, the lists are ostensibly comprehensive schedules of all items appraised at the escheator's inquest. In principle, few if any of the felon's goods were excepted from forfeiture to the crown.²² However, in reality it would be a mistake to treat the lists as 'complete' inventories of all the felon's possessions, since many of them seem far too short to consist of more than just a few of the most significant possessions, and some objects abundant in the archaeological record, most notably pottery, are almost never mentioned.²³ It is probable that in some instances the juries ignored certain items, or that others were removed before the appraisal took place. Other lists, however are surprisingly extensive and detailed, and the reasons for this contrast are not easy to fathom. The mean number of items (or groups of items) per list is eight, and the median is five. The total of 2797 items or groups of items comprises a broad range, though 'essentials' such as animals, grain, tools, pots,

²² See Jervis, Briggs and Tompkins, 'Exploring'.

²³ B. Jervis, *Pottery and Social Life in Medieval England: Towards a Relational Approach* (Oxford, 2014), 40-47.

pans, and farming equipment predominate. That said, we do find examples of the kind of object singled out by Dyer (see above) as possessing greater value or significance than the purely utilitarian.²⁴ For instance, the lists feature armour and weapons quite frequently, and the total in Table 2 includes 24 basins and 25 ewers for handwashing before meals, many of them in peasant possession.²⁵

<Table 2 here>

To what extent do the 350 lists in Table 1 mention buildings or rooms? Are they similar to the manorial inventories, discussed earlier, in that they display a propensity to omit such information? The answer is clearly yes. Of the 350 lists examined, just four describe objects in relation to the room in which they were located, though as a consequence these four are particularly interesting. Perhaps the least useful is that of Northamptonshire outlaw John Cuellewether, whose list mentions only that he possessed 'diverse instruments' in a chamber, before going on to list various livestock and grain. The same inquest noted that William Cuellewether, apparently a relative of John and like him an outlaw, also had 'instruments' in his chamber, as well as 'instruments', brass vessels and wooden vessels in the brewhouse; malt, drage, wheat and peas in his barn; three mares in his stable; and four bullocks in his cowshed (no hall is mentioned).²⁶ The inquest into the goods of John de Stonton Wyvill, parson of Titchmarsh (Northamptonshire) notes a table, trestle, bench, basin and ewer in the hall, and wooden and brass vessels in the brewhouse and kitchen, as well as various other items with no specified location.²⁷

²⁴ Dyer, 'Living'.

²⁵ For basins and ewers, see also Jervis, Briggs and Tompkins, 'Exploring'.

²⁶ TNA, E 153/1249, m.5 (October 1379). Place of residence was not stated.

²⁷ TNA, E 153/1249, m.4 (June 1379).

Finally, and most notably, Thomas Molundre, a parson of Great Brington in the same county who had been imprisoned on suspicion of felony, possessed a table, bench and 'plate of iron' (*plate de ferro*) in the hall; a worn 'countour' (probably a counterpane) in the chamber; numerous cooking and dining utensils in the kitchen, including a pot, pan, mortar, chargers and a pitcher; a tub, cask, pipe and sieve in the brewhouse; and wheat plus other grain in the barn.²⁸ A further seven lists mention just a barn, and describe these barns as containing grain only. Overall, these 11 lists give a strong sense that distinct rooms and buildings had distinct uses. The only object that can be perhaps be seen as 'out of place' is one axe located in the kitchen of Thomas Molundre. The status of his 'plate of iron' in the hall is less clear, but it could easily be explained as a cooking implement or part of the hearth.²⁹

The title ascribed to the parsons discussed in the previous paragraph suggests that they were holders of rectories, and thus were comparatively wealthy members of the parish clergy. The total valuation of Molundre's 26 items (or groups of items) comes to £26 17s, which comparison with John Coupere's inventory above (total valuation £1 8s) confirms was a relatively high sum. As was the case with the wider body of pre-1500 inventories, we therefore have the impression that on the rare occasions where reference to rooms and buildings did occur in the escheators' documents, the inventoried person tended to be someone from above the middle ranks of village society. A consideration of some of the escheators' lists relating to persons of gentle status, who due to their elevated rank are otherwise excluded from the analysis in this article, gives further support to his impression, since such lists do sometimes mention rooms and buildings. Like the parsons, such individuals no doubt

²⁸ TNA, E 153/1250, m.3 (October 1380).

²⁹ Dyer, *Standards*, 173.

occupied more complex dwellings than the bulk of the people considered in this study, and the escheator may also have invested more time and effort in appraising their goods, given their higher values. A good example of such a 'gentle' felon whose domestic spaces are differentiated in the record would be Edmund de Clepisy, who to judge by the forfeited properties listed in the relevant escheator's account was a major landowner in north-east Norfolk. The listing of his movable possessions refers to items in his hall, buttery, bakehouse, and kitchen.³⁰ As a high status felon whose list of forfeited goods gives spatial information Clepisy is not alone, since a list of goods in Northamptonshire arising from the outlawry of Reginald Lucy 'chivaler', probably in the year 1400, mentions 'a certain chamber', a kitchen and a barn.³¹ Yet equally, it must be conceded that not all high status lists note rooms or buildings. For instance, a lengthy list of goods forfeited by Thomas Lord Despenser following his execution for rising against the king in 1400 makes no mention of the location of the items.³²

Overall, therefore, those who were responsible for appraising goods in escheators' inquests and for writing up the records of those inquests displayed, like their manorial counterparts, relatively little interest in the issue of space when carrying out their work. In explaining why references to rooms and buildings do occasionally appear, we should not rule out the possibility that this is due simply to the working practices of particular scribes. All four Northamptonshire lists analysed above arise from inquests taken in in 1379-80 before one escheator, John Karnels. Karnels (or his scribe) may have taken a deliberate decision to record this information, though it should also be noted that none of the lists of possessions in an

³⁰ TNA, E 357/11 (Norfolk escheator's account, Jan-Oct 1392).

³¹ TNA, E 357/14 (Northamptonshire and Rutland escheator's account, 1398-1403).

³² TNA, E 357/14 rot. 3d mm. 1, 2.

account of particulars associated with Karnels, dated 1372, mentions buildings or rooms.³³ Again, therefore, we are thrown back on a choice: was this information unrecorded because it was of no use for the inquest and its sequel, or because there was no need to distinguish between items on the basis of location because the goods were so few in number and the spaces so simple in arrangement? Alternatively, does the general absence of references to rooms and buildings reflect an unspoken assumption that particular kinds of objects would always be found in particular spaces? In other words, we remain torn between the pragmatic explanation for this feature, and an explanation which privileges mentalities and values.

The ordering of objects in escheators' lists

Given the general rarity of references in the documents to buildings and rooms, how can one exploit the escheators' lists to extend discussion of the use and understanding of space within non-elite interiors? One possibility is to look at the order in which items are recorded, information which is available for every list.³⁴ It would certainly be dangerous to assume that the order in which objects were written down reflects the movement of juries of appraisers around a house and its outbuildings, with clusters of items in the sequence representing the contents of successive rooms, though it is often thought that the arrangement of listed goods in early modern probate inventories follows in some way the pattern of appraisers' work

³³ TNA, E 136/11/27.

³⁴ For analysis of the language and textual organization of inventories of goods from late medieval Mediterranean households (and many other stimulating topics) see D.L. Smail, *Legal Plunder: Households and Debt Collection in Late Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016).

as they moved around the property of the deceased.³⁵ Similarly, when considering what the organization of a list of objects might tell us (if anything) about the spaces in which those objects were located, we must beware of circular reasoning; that is, we must avoid the temptation to decide first where an item is most likely to have been situated, and then investigate how far the ordering of items in the list follows the predicted pattern.³⁶

It is thus clear that an enquiry into the order of items in a list cannot generate a precise indication of the interior spaces in which particular objects tended to be located, used, consumed or displayed. Nonetheless, there might be some merit in an approach which focuses on organization of the written lists, provided one restricts oneself to a search for signs of general consistency in the way in which objects were distributed in space within the dwelling and outbuildings belonging to the felon's household. The internal arrangement of the written lists might also reveal something about the location of the possessions deemed most important or valuable by contemporaries.³⁷ This approach must also acknowledge explicitly that the order of objects in a list is likely to reflect the priorities and decisions of a number of actors. In what follows we assume that the escheator's scribe simply wrote down the objects in the sequence that they were reported to him by the inquest jury. Yet even if this assumption is justifiable (and we have no reason to think otherwise), it remains likely that the order of each list reflects the input of at least two main parties: first, the felon and his household, who were responsible for the spatial arrangement of goods in their buildings; and second, the escheator's inquest jury, whose members decided

³⁵ Johnson, *English Houses*, 135-6; Overton *et al.*, *Production and Consumption*, 123.

³⁶ For this point, see Dyer, 'Living', 21.

³⁷ For this suggestion, Pearson, 'Provision of Services', 36.

which of these goods to include, and the order in which they would be reported and valued.

The method employed in this section takes its inspiration from Goldberg's study of medieval urban and rural inventories, discussed above in the Introduction. It is also based on available research concerning the range and layout of buildings typically occupied by a peasant household at the period covered by the escheators' lists, as well as the information that those lists do occasionally provide about spaces in buildings and their contents (see previous section). Goldberg separated possessions in the inventories he used into two categories, 'household' and 'outside'. We adopt the same kind of division here (Table 2). All 2797 items, or groups of items, from the 350 lists are placed in one of these two broad categories, the exception being 76 cases where the item is 'unidentifiable'. The two broad categories are then further subdivided into 11 smaller categories, five of which belong to 'outside', and six to 'household'. 'Outside' items represent those which are most likely to have been found in barns, byres, cattle sheds, workshops, and other outbuildings. 'Household' (or 'inside') items are those which are most likely to have been located within the house itself: in the chamber or hall; in the variety of rooms associated with food preparation and storage found at the house's service end; or in detached buildings associated with the same activities, especially kitchens, brewhouses or bakehouses.

It is not claimed here that Table 2 represents the 'reality' of the arrangement of movables within the domestic space of non-elite households. Instead, it is offered as part of a model which may aid thinking about this topic. The model views the spaces of the peasant house and outbuildings as a continuum, running from the private sleeping space of the chamber at one end (unequivocally 'household'), to the

external working space of the barn at the other (unequivocally 'outside'). The model also divides the family's space according to its primary activities: sleeping, living, preparing food, eating, consumption ('household'); and working, production (especially for sale), and agriculture ('outside'). The continuum is divided into two at the halfway point. This is because craft production is assumed to have taken place in locations external to the main house (such as a workshop) and is therefore 'outside', while food preparation is assumed to have taken place in the house or in a detached kitchen, brewhouse or bakehouse, and is therefore 'household'. It is worth noting that some of the activities under consideration may be regarded as more or less 'public', while others were 'private', yet that dichotomy, which is widespread as an approach to the analysis of domestic space, is of limited relevance in the present context.

It is recognized that the model developed here, and particularly the sharp division into 'household' and 'outside', is artificial and debatable. It has been pointed out that in some spaces the activities could be varied.³⁸ For instance, the hall could be used for craft production (e.g. textiles) as well as living and eating, and chambers could be used for storage of grain or agricultural items.³⁹ The contents of a detached brewhouse that only brewed ale for sale on the market would be hard to categorize as 'household' objects. The model proposed here does not seek to deny that some spaces could be used in a variety of different ways. Equally, one might question our assumption that the majority of English rural or small town households of our period occupied a dwelling arranged on a tripartite division and accompanied by a number of outbuildings, since this may be to overlook the evidence for more varied arrangements across the country and for the continuing presence of simpler

³⁸ Dyer, 'Living'; Johnson, *English Houses*, 148.

³⁹ For the evidence of storage of grain within the interior of a Devon longhouse, see Mudd *et al.*, 'A Medieval Building and its Contents'.

domestic spatial forms (such as longhouses accommodating animals), and houses accompanied by very few or no outbuildings.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, despite its flaws we offer the model as an ‘ideal type’ which can now be compared against the evidence provided by the escheators’ lists.

As for the items themselves, Table 2 shows that the biggest categories were animals; grain and fodder; furnishings; and items for food and drink storage, preparation and serving. The ‘household’ and ‘outside’ categories appear on the face of it roughly similar in terms of the numbers in each. However, the ‘outside’ categories are much more likely than the ‘household’ categories to include multiple items within a single group of items, i.e. where a list may typically include (say) six cows or 20 sheep, it is less likely to include more than one or two pots, or one or two pans. Although the value of items or groups of items is not considered here, it is highly likely that the overall value of items in the ‘outside’ category is higher than that of the ‘household’ category. Some objects are of course hard to place with confidence in a single category. For instance, John Coupere, mentioned above, clearly worked as a cooper making barrels and perhaps other wooden products. The 100 cooper’s hoops in his inventory clearly belong under ‘craft equipment and materials’ (‘outside’), but what about his barrels and kinderkins? Were these objects John had made which were awaiting sale, or vessels which, like many other households in the records, he was using in his own house to store food or other materials? The fact that John’s barrels and kinderkins were only five in number, and

⁴⁰ For such forms, see e.g. N. Alcock, ‘The Development of the Vernacular House in South-West England, 1500–1700’, in J. Allan, N. Alcock and D. Dawson (eds), *West Country Households 1500–1700* (Woodbridge, 2015), 9–34; M. Biddle, ‘The Deserted Medieval Village of Seacourt, Berkshire’, *Oxoniensia* XXVI-XXVII (1961–1962), 70–201; A. Russel, ‘Foxcotte: The Archaeology and History of a Hampshire Hamlet’, *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club Archaeological Society* 41 (1985), 177–186; D. Martin and B. Martin, ‘Detached Kitchens or Adjoining Houses? – A Response’, *Vernacular Architecture* 32 (2001), 20–33; Pearson, ‘The Provision of Services’.

that at least one had contents, suggests we are perhaps not looking at stock ready for sale. These vessels have therefore been counted as 'food and drink storage'. However, there are many such debatable cases and it should therefore be borne in mind that the categorization of items is necessarily subjective and approximate.

<Table 3 here>

Once the items in the 350 lists had been placed into categories, the lists were then further divided according to whether they contained 'outside' items only, 'household' items only, or both 'outside' and 'household' items (Table 3). The majority (209 out of 350) contained at least one item (or group of items) from each category. The ordering of the items in these 209 was then analysed more closely to assess whether the 'household' and 'outside' items appeared mixed up in no particular order, as opposed to in a pattern whereby the list moved through all the 'outside' and then all the 'household' items (or vice-versa).

The results of this investigation are interesting (Table 4). Of course, the fact that most lists are quite short, with a median five items, makes the chances of a 'jumbled' ordering smaller than it would be if the lists were longer on average. However, it is still striking that such a large proportion of lists proceed without interruption from 'outside' to 'household' (or 'inside'), or from 'household' ('inside') to 'outside'. There are 120 lists which fit this description, representing 57 per cent of the total of 209 lists which feature goods from both categories. This would seem to represent a degree of regularity that one would not expect had the items in the lists normally been recorded in random order. In other words, a significant share of the lists appear to conform to the model which underpins Table 2. This militates against

the view that items were distributed in a haphazard way across internal space, and supports the idea that particular objects were associated with particular spaces, and that spaces within houses and outbuildings were quite highly differentiated according to function.

<Table 4 here>

Qualitative examination of the lists confirms this impression. There are plenty of lists which do not conform strictly to the 'outside-household' or 'household-outside' patterns, and therefore do not appear in columns C and D of Table 4, but which on closer inspection nonetheless display much regularity. A prime example is the lengthy list (62 items or groups of items) of the goods of Worcestershire yeoman William Wodeward of Abbots Morton, dated 1418.⁴¹ The list starts with William's coverlet, sheet, blanket and mattress; proceeds to items such as clothing, a basin and ewer, cushions, a towel and napkins; then goes on to note (for instance) a posnet, pans and pewter dishes, before moving on to mention a plough, a cart, various animals, and then grain, hay and straw in stacks. In other words, William's list almost perfectly epitomizes the model sketched above, in that it starts with goods that one would be most likely to associate with the chamber, then shifts to goods associated with the hall and kitchen, before listing animals and grain which one would be inclined to link to various outbuildings. There are only two reasons why William's list does not appear in Table 4 column D. One is that between his six pewter dishes and two vats (both in the 'household' category), one finds a reference to 'three small pigs from a small pig, price 2s 6d' (*iii paruas porcin' de paruis porc'*

⁴¹ TNA, E 153/1992, m.1.

precii ii.s. vi.d.). These slightly mysterious items have been categorized as ‘piglets’, and therefore belong in the ‘outside’ category, though it is quite possible that the words refer to pork (i.e. ‘food’), which (like the dishes and vats) might reasonably have been found in the kitchen. The other reason why William’s list does not appear in column D of Table 4 is that the very last item in the list is his money (*pecunia munerata*), which is counted as a ‘household’ item. Yet even with these small interruptions, one gets a very clear sense of the flow of the list from ‘household’ to ‘outside’ (interestingly, the penultimate item in the list is ‘timber lying in the courtyard’). This list is by no means the only one to display these features. For instance, the list of John Spark, a husbandman of Martin (Wiltshire), to all intents and purposes shows the same movement from ‘inside’ to ‘outside’, starting with a pan and basin, and ending with barley which was still standing on three acres of land, and was therefore emphatically ‘outside’.⁴² Spark’s list does not appear in Table 4 column D because the sequence of ‘household’ items contains one sarpler (a sack for wool), one ‘wood hook’ and one auncel (a type of balance), all of which have been counted for the purposes of this analysis as ‘outside’ items.

To be sure, there are lists that appear quite ‘jumbled’ in that they switch between ‘household’ and ‘outside’ items as they proceed. For instance, the list of John Neet, a butcher of Cosham (Hampshire), is ordered as follows: cow, bullock, cow, calf, yearling calf, mare, foal, yearling foal, sheep, sheet, coverlet, malt, winnowing fan, cloth (russet), cover, coverlet, mattress, cauldron, grain in sheaf, and finally ox.⁴³ This list starts with ‘outside’ items, then switches to ‘household’ (sheet, coverlet), then back to ‘outside’ (malt, winnowing fan), before returning to ‘household’

⁴² TNA, E 357/26 rot. 38d m. 2 (November 1420).

⁴³ TNA, E 357/24 rot. 23 m. 1 (November 1413).

(cloth to cauldron) before finally switching back to 'outside' (grain and ox). Here is a list that seems to support the view that contemporaries neither saw nor expected a regular pattern in the distribution of items across interior space. In particular, the malt and winnowing fan appear amongst goods that one might associate with the hall or chamber, such as the coverlet and mattress. That said, even here a general clustering within the list of items into 'inside' and 'household' goods is discernible.

Perhaps more striking overall than such 'jumbled' lists, however, are those which display an uninterrupted sequence running from 'outside' to 'inside', or vice-versa, and therefore are included in columns C and D of Table 4. Just one example of many will suffice here. This 1414 list concerns John Plumme, an outlaw of 'Clyve' in Kent (probably Cliffe at Hoo or St Margaret at Cliffe).⁴⁴ John's list runs as follows: cow, bullock, sow, piglet, wheat, malt barley, barley, brass pan, brass pot, basin, ewer, [unidentifiable], hauberk, chest, featherbed, tester, coverlet, sheet, blanket, table cloth, pipe of wine, 'other household utensils'. In other words, the ordering of the list conveys a very clear division between 'outside' and 'inside'.

What importance ought we to attach to this evidence of the ordering of objects?⁴⁵ The findings presented in this section largely militate against the view that the distribution of objects across interiors was casual, lacking in pattern, or disordered, though given the nature of the evidence, we of course cannot rule out the possibility that felons in our sample kept and used tools in their chambers, brewing vessels or grain in their halls, and so on. If we take the order in which goods were listed to be indicative of a sense of their relative importance both to the inventoried persons and those who did the appraising, we get a further interesting

⁴⁴ TNA, E 357/24 rot. 20 m. 2

⁴⁵ It is interesting that an explicit division of movable goods into those present inside and outside the house is evident from c.1500 in the use in Scottish and borders contexts of the nouns *insight* and *outsight*; see *Oxford English Dictionary*.

finding. Overall, most (59 per cent) of the lists begin with 'outside' objects, while among those that include both categories of item, 63 per cent start with 'outside', a category in which animals, grain and fodder of course formed the largest component. These figures may give some insight into the priority attached to the 'outside' category among the social group most fully represented in the sources used here.

'Utensilia domus'

One final way in which we can use the escheator's records to investigate objects in domestic space is via the references to 'household utensils', or 'utensils of the house' (*utensilia domus*), which appear in 75 of the 350 lists. In these cases – an example would be the list of John Plumme, given above - the list mentions certain items (or groups of items) by name, but lumps together a number of other unidentified items as *utensilia domus*. This catch-all category may have had a specific technical or legal meaning, though no firm evidence on this point has yet been found.⁴⁶ What is apparent is that if we take *domus* in this context to mean 'house' in the physical sense, then the many references to *utensilia domus* in the escheators' documents in fact represent useful further evidence on the location of appraised objects. Even if we choose not to interpret *utensilia domus* literally as utensils situated in the dwelling house, the use of the phrase nonetheless shows that certain objects were perceived to have possessed a shared character which distinguished them from the 'outside' goods.

⁴⁶ The sixteenth-century Year Books do feature some legal discussion of the nature of *utensilia domus*, if not a definition; see e.g. *Y.B. Pasch. 27 Hen. VIII*, p. 3a, pl. 10.

In terms of the value and importance that contemporaries attached to different categories of belongings, it is important to note that it was the goods of the house that were in many cases not deemed worthy of listing out individually, but were placed instead under the heading *utensilia domus*. No other categories of goods were grouped together and given a general description in this way. Furthermore, it should be noted that in 61 of the 75 lists that mention *utensilia domus*, this category comes last in the list. Once again, all this should not be pushed too far but it is perhaps evidence that the greatest importance and value, at least in peasant contexts, was attached to livestock and crops. One could argue that the *utensilia domus* were typically household items of small value that it was not worthwhile to list and value individually. That may have been so in some cases, but perhaps not all. Quite often the collective value of the *utensilia* was quite high; sums of £1 and £2 are common. Yorkshire outlaw John Whitworth of Cantley forfeited goods worth £14 6s 8d, including 'other *utensilia domus*' worth £7.⁴⁷ Thus the use of the formula *utensilia domus* might be indicative of short cuts taken in the process of taking and recording escheators' inquests, but it may also reveal something of contemporary thinking about objects and domestic space, and the lesser importance attached in many non-elite circles to objects that belonged within the household rather than 'outside'.

Conclusion

Those who provided the information that went into the lists of goods and chattels forfeited by peasants, craftsmen and the non-elite residents of small towns in the later middle ages displayed remarkably little interest in the location of the objects that

⁴⁷ E 357/25 rot. 3d m. 1 (November 1415).

they named and valued. This was in partial contrast to those listings which related to more elite groups such as the upper parish clergy and gentry, whose goods were more likely to be broken down in the lists according to the buildings or rooms in which they were located at the point of appraisal. On one level, the general lack of information concerning the physical situation of items may reflect the processes involved in escheators' inquests into felony forfeiture, just as it may also reflect the similar processes that took place when lords sought to seize the movable goods of their tenants and caused an inventory to be inserted in the manorial records. It may simply have been that information on the location of goods, as opposed to their number, character and value, was superfluous to requirements, for instance in a situation where the goods were removed from their original locations in order to be sold. That said, we currently have no concrete evidence to support this explanation for the general absence of references to physical location. Furthermore, the existence of the few lists of forfeited goods which do mention room and buildings suggest we should be cautious in saying that information on physical location was useless.

A more plausible explanation suggests that within most non-elite contexts, the number of interior spaces was generally rather small, perhaps typically no more than five or six, such as (for instance) chamber, hall, kitchen/brewhouse, stable and barn. Occasional manorial evidence on peasant buildings and rooms supports this view, such as the record of repair presentments in Stoneleigh manor court of 1481 which mentions tenants with four, five or six spaces/rooms.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the number and variety of objects to be found within those spaces was also rather limited in most

⁴⁸ Dyer, 'Medieval Peasant Buildings 1250-1550', 116-17 (in two cases: hall, chamber, kitchen, barn and oxhouse; a third had the same plus a bakehouse, while the fourth had the same apart from the kitchen).

cases. As such, it may not have been necessary to specify where an item was, since there was only a limited number of goods, and a limited number of places where each of them would normally be found. Although one might query the value of the analysis of the order of items in the escheators' lists, it does appear to show that there were – or were held to be - certain recurrent and familiar categories of items, each of which belonged in fairly predictable locations within the buildings occupied by peasants, artisans and lower status townsmen. There is relatively little evidence that unexpected objects appeared in unexpected spaces to any degree in the social and cultural contexts under consideration here.

As previous work has argued, the fairly standard arrangement of entrances, rooms, and divisions within the peasant and lower status houses of the late medieval period meant that the movement of people around the domestic space was limited to certain familiar patterns: one entered via the passage at the lower end, and moved 'upwards' through the hall towards the chamber, a motion that (it is argued) helped to emphasize the ideas of hierarchy that found expression in vernacular architectural forms.⁴⁹ Although, as we have noted, it is possible to exaggerate the degree of uniformity exhibited by the spatial 'grammar' of late medieval vernacular buildings, this feature might also help to explain the striking degree of patterning in the many escheators' lists of forfeited goods which run interrupted from 'outside' to 'household', or vice-versa. It may be that the order of goods in these lists corresponds to the appraisers' movement through a range of spaces where there was a natural direction of flow, and little scope for alternative routes: such appraisers may have moved either from a starting point at the upper end of the house (the

⁴⁹ Johnson, *English Houses*. On this theme see also R. Suggett, 'Peasant Houses', in C. Gerrard and A. Gutiérrez (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Later Medieval Archaeology in Britain* (Oxford, 2018).

chamber), through the hall, to the lower end, and then outwards to the outbuildings; or, in reverse, by starting with the furthest outbuildings and moving through a sequence of spaces that terminated in the chamber as the most private division of the domestic space. Along the way, one may argue, the appraisers who made up the inquest juries would usually have encountered a familiar range of objects in familiar locations. One might posit that in elite households the organization of space was more complex, and the number of movables much greater (including possible duplicates of particular items in multiple locations), leading to a greater need to mention buildings and places in inventories. In non-elite households, by contrast, an understanding of what objects belonged where was unspoken, and juries of appraisers could generally overlook location and confine themselves instead to reporting the number and value of the items they encountered.

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Table 1. Lists of goods from the escheators' records containing three or more items, or groups of items

Total lists	Total no. items/groups of items	Mean no. items per list	Median no. items per list
350	2797	8.0	5

Source: escheators' inquests and accounts database (see text)

Table 2. Numbers of items, or groups of items, in escheators' lists in various categories

Category	Number of items
<i>'Outside'</i>	
Animals	674
Grain and fodder	371
Farming equipment	129
Craft equipment and materials	114
Fuel	14
<i>Total 'outside':</i>	1302
<i>'Household'</i>	
Food and drink storage, preparation and serving (includes brewing equipment)	519
Foodstuffs	31
Furnishings	692
Clothing	69
Cash	33
'Household utensils'	75
<i>Total 'household':</i>	1419
<i>Unidentifiable</i>	76
<i>TOTAL</i>	2797

Source: escheators' inquests and accounts database (see text)

Table 3. The presence of 'household' and 'outside' items in the escheators' lists

'Household' items only	'Outside' items only	Both 'household' and 'outside' items	Total lists
65	76	209	350

Source: escheators' inquests and accounts database (see text)

Table 4. The order of items in escheators' lists which include both 'outside' and 'household' items

A	B	C	D	E
Starts with 'outside' items	Starts with 'household' items	List proceeds uninterrupted from 'outside' to 'household'	List proceeds uninterrupted from 'household' to 'outside'	Total lists
132	77	83	37	209

Note: Total items in these 209 lists: 2118

Source: escheators' inquests and accounts database (see text)