Producer, not Consumer: The Paradox of Eighteenth-Century Sheffield and Its 'Missing' Middling Society

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Since Geoffrey Chaucer's reference to a 'Sheffield thwitel' in the Reeves Tale, the town of Sheffield and its surrounding hinterland of Hallamshire have been acknowledged as a distinct country famous for the manufacture of metal goods.[1] In 1537, iron ore from Spain, Austria, Sweden, Germany, and Russia was being imported to the region and by 1662 it had become the principal centre in England for the manufacture of knives, tools, scythes and other bladed instruments. By 1721, the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire claimed that more than half their products were sold abroad, especially to America.[2]

In the 1740s local industries received considerable stimulus from the invention of Sheffield plate by Thomas Boulsover and crucible steel by Benjamin Hunstman, which coincided with a rapidly growing demand for fashionable and affordable goods.[3] As dining become more sophisticated and leisurely, the Sheffield trades adapted their output, and plate and cutlery manufacturers became world-renowned for table-wares that complemented designs by Paul de Lamerie, Chippendale, Adam, Hamilton, Wedgwood and Flaxman.[4] Their success relied upon energetic and inventive entrepreneurs whose manners and outlook were neither parochial nor colloquial and who could convince investors of their creditworthiness, reliability and skill. Attracted by improving communications, high wages for skilled workers and a host of facilities for the fashionable socialite, between 1672 and 1736 the population of the town of Sheffield more than trebled and that in the surrounding hinterland doubled, at a time when the overall population of England grew only slowly.[5]

Why is it then that histories of the region have consistently focused on a labouring and rough population that allegedly became increasingly radicalised and dissident as the century progressed? The potential for Sheffield to have been a consumer of fashionable goods and a place where polite entertainments could be enjoyed by a sophisticated, urbane and confident middle, or middling, sector of society has remained unacknowledged and unexplored.

Remote from the civilising influence of London and lacking national leaders or a resident aristocracy to set the social tone for eighteenth-century gentry, travellers' first encounter with an industrial city was often bewildering. Visiting Sheffield in 1759 Charles Burlington claimed that, 'Indeed, elegance is not to be expected in a town where

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[1] Fuller (1840), vol. 3, p. 395.
[2] Sheffield City Archives, Sp St 60502; Hey (1980), p. 158.
[3] Fuller (1840), vol. 3, p. 3; Hey (1980), p. 95.
[4] Clifford (1999); Fairchild (1993).
[5] Wrigley & Schofield (1981), pp. 207–10.

there are so many people employed in useful manufactories'.[6] In 1792, the Honourable John Byng, later Viscount Torrington, summarised the stock anxieties of the day when he declared:

> I dread trade, I hate its clamour: as a gentleman born, I scowl at their (over) advantages. It is in the trading towns, only, where rioting and discords begin: and yet they want representatives; why of all places they are the last that should be represented; for their members will be most falsely, and violently chosen and their towns for ever convulsed by faction.[7]

Not all commentators were so negative. During his journeys through England between 1724 and 1726, Daniel Defoe visited Sheffield and admired its size and industry, its spacious parish church and handsome spire, fine hospital and substantial mills.[8] In an article entitled 'Natural History of Sheffield', a local incumbent, the Rev. Edward Goodwin, described Sheffield in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1764 as a well-ordered town with good connections to the metropolis, modern buildings, wide streets and a host of civic facilities for the fashionable socialite.[9]

Historian Rosemary Sweet has shown how these contrasting approaches typified the conflicting attitudes towards the towns during the eighteenth century. Some saw them as rapidly expanding cradles of urban civilisation and economic growth, essential to the spread of polite society, the stability of society and the promotion of the arts, science and architecture. Others saw their squalor, anonymity, and lack of regulation as threatening the existing social order.[10] At the same time as condemning the cultural pretensions of merchants, tradesmen, and manufacturers who were 'too fond of maximising their profits to risk the levels of expenditure necessary in the cultivation of true taste', yet another school branded towns devoid of the cultural life necessary for polite society.[11]

The belief that industry and elegance were incompatible informed the writings of the Rev. Joseph Hunter who, in 1819, published his county history, *Hallamshire The History & Topography of the Parish of Sheffield in the County of York*.[12] At the start of the eighteenth century, Hunter declared that in Sheffield:

> The want of a due mixture of persons well-educated and of a superior situation in life, rendered Sheffield at this period less distinguished by the elegancies and refinements of social life than by feelings of independence and rugged honesty, by hospitality and a rude and boisterous conviviality.[13]

Revising and extending the work some fifty years later, the Rev. Alfred Gatty felt able to add that at the start of the eighteenth-century, the town was no more than 'a mean colony of cutlers, in all its naked poverty'.[14] A dynasty of commentators and

6 Burlington (1779), p. 563.
7 Byng (1935), 4 June 1792.
8 Defoe (1962), p. 183; Young (1771), pp. 131–32.
9 Goodwin (1964).
10 Sweet (1999), p. 223.
11 Ibid., p. 224.
12 Hunter, (1819); Gatty, (1869).
13 Hunter (1819), p. 153.
14 Gatty (1873), p. 100.

historians have accepted and perpetuated these views.[15] As recently as 1991, the extent to which 'a manufacturing town such as Sheffield [could] respond to the polite culture of assembly rooms, theatres, dignified public buildings, race courses and so on', was dismissed as 'both tardy and modest'.[16]

Sheffield is not alone amongst the many provincial towns dismissed by commentators and historians whose perceptions were shaped by metropolitan ideals. However, it is now known that the natural reference point for many northern towns seeking social and cultural models was not London but Manchester and Liverpool, and that such towns were much more diverse, flexible, confident and self-determining than previously understood.[17] Hannah Barker describes a co-operative process of 'cultural borrowing' between towns where admired elements were taken and adapted to suit another town's particular needs and understandings.[18]

Prior to the 1970s, historians largely dismissed the eighteenth-century as a period of stagnation and decline. Since then, interest in documents that were previously considered too ephemeral and transient in nature to be worthy of study have begun to offer new ways of understanding the past. Exploration of everyday records and documents such as probate inventories, household accounts, handbills, letters, journals, minute books, advertisements, decorating schemes, timetables, regional newspapers and subscription lists has shown that the eighteenth century witnessed considerable social and cultural change, especially in the northern provincial towns of England.

In her major study of consumer behaviour in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, Lorna Weatherill studied probate inventories from different parts of the country to argue that 'material goods were, … indicative of behaviour and attitudes', and that they possessed a 'symbolic importance as well as physical attributes and practical uses'.[19] Despite their well-documented limitations, exploring probate inventories offers a way to allow the social and cultural composition of industrial towns such as Sheffield to be re-considered.[20] They provide insights into the changing ways in which homes were organised and equipped and, arguably, they can indicate the presence of hitherto overlooked middle sectors of society.

THE MIDDLE SORT OF SOCIETY AND THE ROLE OF POLITENESS

A key feature of eighteenth-century urban life is now recognised to have been the formation of an influential and affluent middle sector of society. By creating places for learning, leisure and entertainment, where they could meet and socialise on equal terms away from the noise and bustle of the street, 'middling' citizens sought to control their environment and create for themselves a distinct identity. However, their particular environments and circumstances shaped these influential urban and urbane middling societies so that the combination of behaviour, wealth and outlook amongst merchants,

[15] *Sheffield Register*, 7 July 1787; *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXI.2 (1811), p. 603; Gatty (1869), p. 148, and(1873), pp. 78–79; Lloyd (1913), p. 148; Walton (1948), p. 62; Hey (1991), pp. 230–31.
[16] Hey (1991), pp. 249, 280.
[17] Sweet (2002); Weatherill (1996), pp. 77 & 191–93, Table 2.1, p. 26, Table 3.3, p. 49, Table 4.3, p. 80;. Love (2003), p. 33; French (2000); Grady (1989), pp. 99, 103.
[18] Barker (2004).
[19] Weatherill (1996), p. 5.
[20] Overton et al. (2004), p. 14; Berg (2005), p. 223; Vickery (1993); Breen (1994).

traders, shopkeepers, professionals, and lesser gentry in one town might not be recognised as 'middling' in another. Helping to offer some sense of cohesion and shared identity, politeness was adopted as a code of conduct and understanding by which the middling sort could establish their identity and pursue their social and commercial aims regardless of their background. Professor Lawrence Klein stresses the significance to the middling sort of a behaviour and mentality with the 'scope of politeness [that] could encompass material and visual cultures, [the] organisation of space, the construction of social and political identities, the character of intellectual and artistic life, and even institutional structures'.[21]

As with the nature of middling identity, politeness could be expressed in different ways, at different times, in different locations and by different people using different goods.[22] Much more than a mechanism simply to help ease daily interaction and avoid confrontation, historians have shown how, during the late seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries, politeness became an essential arbiter of middling behaviour and identity.[23] In the increasingly complex arena of urban environments, Michael Snodin and John Styles claim politeness offered a 'model of how people should behave to one another … that did not deny the legitimacy of social rank, but required the different ranks to mix with each other in an agreeable manner'.[24]

In the public sphere, new social venues such as assemblies, concert halls, libraries, theatres, racecourses, coffee houses and shops cultivated and relied upon polite interaction to span social and cultural divides and attract custom. Essential for the development of the commercial world, politeness facilitated exchanges between producer and retailer, shopkeeper and customer, patron and entrepreneur on equitable terms, allowing direct negotiation without the need for intermediaries.

The newly affluent middle sort also embraced the philosophy of politeness as a means of ordering and organizing the home. Requiring a move from traditional forms of display, even the organisation of wealthy households could appear seemingly inchoate to the modern eye. Rooms were equipped to support multiple activities from sleeping to entertaining to business, and old and new goods that were bought, exchanged, inherited, and given throughout the life cycle of the household were displayed and used in different ways at different times and in different spaces. Politeness offered a means of managing the disorder of everyday life. Servants and lodgers were segregated from family members, communal rooms acquired specialised roles and were equipped with new and fashionable goods that supported the entertainment of peers in private and comfortable surroundings.

The economic historian Jan de Vries describes this as a shift from 'old luxury' whereby household goods were traditionally employed to enforce status and hierarchy to 'new luxury' where they facilitated urban sociability and inclusiveness: key indicators of polite behaviour.[25] Polite behaviour emphasized personal grooming, table manners,

[21] Klein (2002).
[22] Barker (2004).
[23] Klein (2002).
[24] Snodin & Styles (2001), p.183; Bryson (1998), p. 279; Abel Boyer, *The English Theophrastus* (London, 1702), quoted in Klein (2002).
[25] de Vries (2002).

sociability, learning and comfort, and the presence of goods associated with these activities can help identify the polite and middling household.[26] Assembled in curtained and upholstered comfort, mirrors, cutlery, glassware, china, and punchbowls; clocks, weatherglasses, books, paintings, musical and scientific instruments; gaming, sewing and tea tables helped convey the taste, decency and learning of their owners.[27] So closely did the ritual of taking tea become associated with polite behaviour that Lawrence Klein claims that 'the map of the social and geographical spread of tea services in households provides a tangible picture of the spread of politeness'.[28]

Simple ownership of new goods was not enough. John Brewer claims that 'politeness and refinement had little value unless they were shared; they had to be put on display to be shown to others'.[29] Michael Snodin and John Styles emphasize that in order to convey the sophistication, taste, decorum and politeness of their owners, goods such as those outlined above, had to be in the appropriate style and deployed in the correct manner.

> Upholstered sofas and knives and forks, tea services and snuff boxes were indispensable props in the genteel performances that constituted politeness, whether in the dining room or the assembly room. Your gentility was judged by whether you owned the right items, whether they were sufficiently genteel in their design and whether you were capable of using them in the correct way.[30]

In her extensive study of probate inventories, Lorna Weatherill found that goods associated with polite behaviour such as those listed above were regularly recorded in probate inventories and that ownership of these items was most prevalent amongst members of the middling society. Some caution is required as not everyone with the means to acquire new goods and new spaces chose to do so, and some who did would not have used them in ways that were perceived as polite. Furthermore, the absence of these goods from probate inventories should not be taken as proof that a household was neither middling nor polite. Hence, evidence from inventories alone cannot show if teacups, forks and coffee pots symbolised the genteel and polite behaviour, characterised by W. G. Hoskins as a culture of 'cushions and conversation'.[31] Nevertheless, exploring inventories from Sheffield and Hallamshire to see whether patterns of ownership for new goods can be found may help establish the presence of a hitherto unacknowledged middle society who engaged in polite behaviour.[32]

In order for as much information as possible to be obtained, amongst 1300 known surviving probate inventories from the period 1680–1788, samples were randomly selected from those that provided the testator's name, occupation, location, total inventoried wealth and year of death. In addition, they had to itemise and value possessions on a room-by-room basis, or at least provide a notional indication of the value of individual goods within named spaces. Although the implementation of such

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[26] Clifford (1999); see also: Overton et al (2004), pp. 111, 119; Fairchild (1993).
[27] Campbell (1996); Berg (1999).
[28] Klein (2002).
[29] Brewer (1997), p. 107.
[30] Snodin & Styles (2001), p. 184.
[31] Hoskins (1957), p. 199; Glasby (2005).
[32] Weatherill (1996), p. 3.

criteria may have inclined the selection towards wealthier members of society it allows for a comprehensive and comparative picture of middling households in the region to be formed. Within the available 1300 inventories, considerable duplication of some occupations and patterns of consumption was found. For example, cutlers formed 25% of the sample and a further 10% were described as widows. Thus, to avoid unnecessary repetition and represent as fully and proportionally as possible the population of Hallamshire between 1680 and 1788, a random sample of 329 or some 25% of inventories fitting the above criteria was made.

SHEFFIELD IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Sheffield was the capital of an area known as Hallamshire, 'that southern corner of the West Riding [now South Yorkshire] where Yorkshire ends, where Derbyshire begins and of which Sheffield is the capital'.[33] Many variations of this definition may be found and it is defined here as the town and parish of Sheffield with those parishes immediately abutting its borders under the jurisdiction of the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire. Incorporated by Act of Parliament in 1624, the Company issued hall-marks, determined working practices, registered and controlled the number of apprentices in the metalworking trades and fined those producing shoddy goods or breaking its rules.

To the north and west of the town and parish of Sheffield lay the extensive parish of Ecclesfield, populated by a mix of farmers, nail-makers, fork makers and tradesmen, together with its largely agrarian and remote Chapelry of Bradfield. Home to scythe and sickle makers, to the south were the north Derbyshire villages of Norton, Norton Lees, Meersbrook, Greenhill, Woodseats, Bradway, Dore and Totley. To the east lay Rotherham, populated by a mix of small traders and metalworkers and, in the early eighteenth century, yet to establish the infrastructure and facilities to attract an active middling society (Table 1).

Of note is the early appearance of new goods in Hallamshire, not in urban Sheffield or Rotherham, but in the gentry households of rural Norton, whose long-established wealth was founded on the region's scythe and sickle industry. Although evidence is compromised by the lack of pre-1680 Sheffield inventories, a variety of new goods were listed in Norton several years before they appeared in Sheffield, and considerably earlier than in the region's second urban centre of Rotherham. Norton was serviced by good transport links and David Hey notes how, in this southernmost tip of Hallamshire, a concentration of well-connected gentry 'deeply involved in industry and commerce' produced considerable wealth which they invested in their 'superior accommodation'.[34] By the early eighteenth century, Sheffield's wealth and influence had eclipsed that of Norton and new goods became increasingly listed in urban inventories.

Regardless of wealth or occupation, the sample showed that traditional forms of display persisted across all five Hallamshire parishes. In 96% of the sample, inventories listed a cooking range, bed(s), chairs, table(s), pewter, and iron pots. Buffits, stools, forms, cushions, cupboards and frying pans were listed in 55% of the sample. In

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[33] Mensforth (1972), frontispiece.
[34] Hey (1991), p. 224.

Table 1   Occupations as Percentage per Parish in the Hallamshire Inventory Sample
1680–1788

Parish	Bradfield	Ecclesfield	Norton	Rotherham	Sheffield	All Hallamshire
Agriculture	51.3	26.7	24.2	15.2	4.9	20.3
Gentry & Merchants	7.7	3.0	12.2	0	4.9	4.8
Professional	0	3.0	3	0	7.3	3.9
Metal trades	5.1	32.7	15.2	6.1	38.2	26.8
Trades/Services	30.8	26.7	39.4	78.7	39.8	38.7
Widow	5.1	7.9	6	0	4.9	5.5
Total no. inventories per parish	40	101	35	33	120	329

contrast with the uniformly high occurrence of traditional goods, evidence from the Hallamshire inventories indicates the distribution of new goods was far more varied, with each parish having its own patterns of consumption. In sharp contrast, ownership of new goods and the proportion of total median inventoried wealth invested in the home appears to have been governed by a complex amalgam of factors ranging from location, wealth, occupation, access to new goods, the outlook of leading, or chief inhabitants, and the persistence of traditional parish hierarchies.

The social world of rural chief inhabitants was smaller, more homogeneous and less competitive than that of their urban counterparts. Consisting of an established and familiar circle of associates and kin, their place in the local hierarchy was more assured. They had little need to acquire new goods with which to establish their status or to facilitate polite exchange with strangers. Thus, inventories from the Chapelry of Bradfield, the most remote and agrarian region of Hallamshire, show little engagement with new goods (Table 2).

Like their rural counterparts, urban chief inhabitants were generally wealthier than their neighbours and occupied larger properties. However, urban chief inhabitants moved in wider and more fluid social circles than their rural counterparts and had to acquire a greater number and variety of goods to gain distinction from their neighbours. Their wealth did not rely upon tradition, land or hierarchy but came from a variety of sources suggesting that access to middling society was not restricted. Some came from long-standing local families and others, such as Thomas Diston and Field Sylvester, had only recently settled in the area.[35] Some were ironmasters, such as the Fells, Milners, Barlows, Speights, and Parkins; other such as the Clays, Nodders, and Lees were lead merchants. The Chappells, Sitwells, Banks, Wrights, and Batties were attorneys, and the Waterhouse, Lee and Carr families represented the medical profession.[36] Many also held positions of parish or civic authority such as Church

[35] Borthwick Institute, inventory of Thomas Diston, October 1703; inventory of Filed Sylvester, July 1717.
[36] Mr Arthur Jackson on 'Old Sheffield', *The Sheffield & Rotherham Independent*, 10 April 1893.

Table 2 Percentage of Inventories with New Goods by Parish 1680–1788

PARISH (No of inventories)	Bradfield (40)	Ecclesfield (101)	Norton (35)	Rotherham (33)	Sheffield (120)	Hallamshire (329)
Books	17.9	16.7	29.4	6.1	30	21.9
Cane chairs	2.6	2	11.8	0	11.7	6.4
Chairs, leather or upholstered	2.6	4.9	23.5	0	34.2	14.3
Chest of Drawers	10.3	20.6	14.7	39.4	55	33.1
China	5.1	19.6	5.9	18.2	23.3	17.6
Clock	23	53.9	11	30.3	55.8	46.2
Curtains	2.6	10.8	20.6	15.1	31.7	18.8
Glass	7.7	17.6	17.6	33.3	37.5	25.5
Jack	15.4	11.8	17.6	21.2	32.5	21.3
Looking glass	20.5	36.3	29.4	18	65.8	46.2
Oval/round table	28.2	34.3	11.8	16	51.7	38.9
Pictures	5.1	13.7	17.6	27.3	45.8	26.1
Punch bowl	0	0	0	0	5.8	2.1
Saucepans	20.5	22.5	23.5	30.3	49.2	32.8
Silver	15.4	22.5	23.5	24.2	48.3	31.3
Spoons	23	19.6	23.8	21.2	30	24.3
Table Forks	5.1	5.9	2.9	3	9.2	6.4
Table linen	30.8	17.6	44.1	33.3	55.8	38.6
Table, mirror, stand	2.6	0	2.9	0	11.7	4.7
Tea/coffee goods	5.1	12.7	8.8	12.1	32.5	19.5
Window curtains	2.6	10.8	20.6	15.1	31.7	18.8
Total inventories per parish	40	101	35	33	120	329
Median inventoried wealth: household goods	22.40%	32.70%	33.40%	44.70%	38.30%	33.60%
Median household contents £	£19 11s	£18 7s	£20 16s	£14 12s	£28 4s	£20 19s
Median total inventoried wealth £	£75 10s	£45 4s	£78 4s	£27 2s	£96 3s	£67 14s

Burgesses, Town Trustees, Overseers of the Poor, Feoffee or Warden of the Company of Cutlers. They were at the fore in adapting their homes to accommodate polite behaviour and they were in the public eye; unlike their rural counterparts, they were further united by being given the tile of Mister or Gentleman (Table 3).

MISTERS, GENTLEMEN AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW IDENTITIES

In his work on the definition and social identity of the 'middle sort', Henry French claims that the attribution of genteel titles acknowledged identities that 'embodied social distinction, political autonomy, intellectual authority and material independence', which the more prosperous chief inhabitants of a parish could further mark through their household possessions.[37] Evidence from the Hallamshire inventories supports the notion that the titles 'Mister' and 'Gentleman' were employed in a carefully nuanced hierarchy to acknowledge those whose status and wealth distinguished them from their peers and whose distinction was tangibly expressed through the furnishing and size and of their homes.

For those on the first rungs of the social ladder, equipping the home with goods that could be associated with politeness, refinement and Enlightenment thinking offered tangible assurance of their good intent, solvency and worthiness in civic affairs. Throughout the sample, the term 'Gentleman' was applied to men whose wealth, possessions and status established them as chief inhabitant in their parish. Although Gentlemen and Misters were generally more affluent than their neighbours, Gentlemen could generally be distinguished from Misters by holding more traditional titles of authority, possessing greater wealth and new goods, and occupying larger homes. Amongst the fourteen testators (4.2% of the sample) described as Gentleman, 64% held positions as churchwarden, Master Cutler, Church Burgess, Town Trustee, Overseer of the Poor, or Feoffee. Of the fifteen (4.5% of the sample) called Mister, only 38% held similar positions of authority.

Significantly, evidence from the inventories suggests those called Mister and Gentleman had different approaches to the proportion of their wealth invested in the home. Gentlemen invested a median 29% of their total median inventoried wealth in the home compared with the slightly higher median of 33.7% for the full sample. However, their greater overall wealth meant this figure represented a median sum of £103.78 compared with the median £61.70 for the full sample. At £224, total median inventoried wealth of those called Mister was slightly less than that found amongst Gentlemen. However, the median sum of £69.35 they had invested in domestic furnishings represented a median of 41% of their total inventoried wealth and which was significantly higher than any other social group within the sample (Table 4).

According to urban historian Peter Borsay, the term 'Mister' was popular amongst those on the first rungs of gentility, especially amongst the professions in urban areas.[38] Amongst the Hallamshire inventories the title is found only amongst a small number of Sheffield retailers, professionals and wealthier merchants, hardware-men and mercers associated with the metal trades. Inventories indicate those who held similar

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[37] French (2007), pp. 201–03.
[38] Hey (1991), pp. 99–101; Borsay (1989), p. 228.

Table 3   Percentage Inventories Containing New Goods Owned by Gentlemen,
Misters and Professionals 1680–1788

Item	Gent	Mr	Urban Professionals (all called Mr)	Rural Professionals (none called Mr)	All Hallamshire
Books	64.3	58.3	50	57.1	21.9
Cane chairs	50	50	33.3	0	6.4
Chest of drawers	64.3	87.5	83.3	14.3	33.1
Chimneypiece	14.3	20.8	16.6	0	2.7
China	28.6	58.3	83.3	0	17.6
Clock	78.6	66.6	66.6	42.8	46.2
Corner cupboard	14.3	8.3	16.6	14.3	9.7
Glassware	57.1	66.6	100	0	25.2
Jacks	78.6	70.8	66.6	42.8	21.3
Leather chairs	28.6	37.5	33.3	14.3	19
Looking glass	86.7	91.6	100	57.1	46.2
Oval/round table	71.4	62.5	50	42.8	38.9
Pictures	57.1	91.6	100	28.6	26.1
Punch bowl	0	20.8	16.6	0	2.1
Saucepans	64.3	87.5	83.3	14.3	32.8
Silver	78.6	79.2	83.3	28.6	31.3
Spoons	42.9	62.5	50	14.3	24.3
Table Forks	21.4	41.6	16.6	0	6.4
Table linen	64.3	75	66.6	28.6	37.7
Table, mirror, stand	7.1	41.6	33.3	0	4.7
Tea/coffee goods	35.7	75	100	14.3	20.4
Upholstered chairs	21.4	79.2	83.3	14.3	10.9
Window curtains	57.1	62.5	83.3	14.3	18.8
Median Household Goods £	103.58	69.35	50	31.75	20.3
Median Total Valuation £	252.25	177.4	143.38	126.7	61.7
% House contents	29	36	63.5	66.2	33.7
No in sample	14	24	6	7	329
% of sample	4.2%	7.3%	1.8%	2.1%	100%

Table 4   Median Inventoried Wealth, Expenditure on Household Goods, and House Size of Gentlemen, Misters and Professionals

	All Gentlemen (14)	All Misters (15)	All Professionals (13)	Urban Professionals (9)	Non-urban Professionals (4)	Hallamshire Median (329)
Total Median Inventoried Wealth	£263	£224	£126.70	£126.70	£60	£61.70
Median inventoried value of household goods £	£103.78	£69.35	£41.05	£48.05	£22.45	£20.30
Median proportion total inventoried wealth to household goods %	29%	41%	64%	63.90%	64%	33.70%
Median number of rooms per dwelling	13	11	8	8	7.5	6

occupations, but lived outside the town and parish of Sheffield, were not accorded the title. This could be attributable to parish custom, the practice of their particular appraisers, or a reflection of Borsay's description of the title being an urban phenomenon. The nineteenth-century Sheffield historian and journalist, R. E. Leader implied as much when he noted that the town's professional class 'all lived in town streets hardly more than a stone's throw from the Market Place or the Church', and whose shared physical proximity and over-lapping connections may have helped give shape to a distinct and shared material culture.[39]

Amongst the inventories of those called Mister there was a higher proportion of new goods such as punch bowls, china, cutlery, tea and coffee wares, which could facilitate new forms of sociability than those addressed as Gentlemen. Henry French argues that for members of this 'pseudo-gentry', 'material possessions became tokens of the manner of life through which their gentility was conferred'.[40] The greater attention given to new forms of sociability by those called Mister suggests they were ensuring their homes gave the appearance of credit-worthiness and polite sociability as part of their efforts to be accepted into society.

The need to offer forms of sociability that spanned social and cultural divides was arguably why a further pattern of consumption was identified in which, regardless of the tone set by the parish hierarchy, new goods were present in households whose activities required family members to engage with those from beyond their immediate social or parish boundaries. In the northernmost part of the Chapelry of Bradfield, the Bolsterstone glassworks of Robert Blackburne (d. 1727) attracted purchasers for the fashionable goods he made there and which he dispatched to retailers in London.

[39] Leader (1906), p. 189.
[40] French (2000).

Denis Ashurst notes that 'Bolsterstone was making glass vessels in the Nailsea style prior to the opening of the Nailsea Glassworks in 1788', and that 'there is good reason to suppose that Bolsterstone serviced the local elite', including the earl of Strafford.[41] Blackburne's business affairs did not enclose him in the close-knit circle of Bradfield's agrarian gentry and the presence of new goods in his home suggests new forms of sociability may have been deployed to offer support in his business affairs.[42]

Probate inventories of the Carr family of Ecclesfield show how changing social and cultural circumstances could lead to the reorganisation of the home. Yeoman farmers and churchwardens in the parish of Ecclesfield, Samuel, John, and Robert Carr died between 1727 and 1731. Each left total inventoried wealth of between £199 6s and £277 16s, of which a median £47 or 16.9% was attributed to household goods.[43] Samuel (d. 1727) and John (d. 1728) both left well-furnished homes equipped with longsettles, forms, buffits and stools. Both served meals from trenchers, earthenware and pewter and neither owned new goods such as china, cutlery, hot drinks equipage, looking glasses, window curtains, pictures or books. Robert (d. 1731) had a few new goods including a tea bottle, coffee can, clock and looking glass in his kitchen at the time his inventory was taken, but his home was otherwise sparsely furnished. The family had farmed in the parish of Ecclesfield since the early sixteenth century and as church-wardens would have been seen as chief inhabitants who helped set the social and cultural tone. The fourth member of the Carr family, Joseph, inherited the family home at Birley Edge from his father, which he rebuilt *c*. 1705. Joseph Hunter states that Joseph Carr (1665–1725) 'was brought up to the medical profession' and his son, Richard, joined the legal profession in Sheffield.[44]

Described in his inventory as a Gentleman, Joseph left inventoried wealth of £241 5s, of which £148 8s or 61.5% was attributed to his household goods. This was a pattern found amongst other professionals living in Sheffield and suggests that Joseph aligned himself more with fellow professionals than his rural relatives. In his Best Chamber, a bed and furniture were traditional markers of wealth alongside which were listed fashionable goods that could be used to offer polite sociability to a number of guests.

> BEST CHAMBER: bed & furniture & window curtains £20, 10 cane chairs, a looking glass, chest of drawers, a table £6. 12. 6, chimney piece, fire piece, tea table & furniture £1. 12. 0, 12 delft plates, 2 delft plates & glasses 13/-[45]

Visitors were assessed and impressed in the Hall equipped with a clock, wooden chairs, tables, cushions, a range and a weatherglass. Those who gained further access could be entertained in the Best Chamber or Nether Parlour furnished with a range, easy chairs, tea table, gilded pictures, a looking glass, cushions, glasses and silver teaspoons. An extensive collection of pewter, delft plates and pots, a silver flagon, silver

41 Ashurst (1987); Kenworthy (1914), p. 6.
42 Borthwick Institute, inventory of Robert Blackburne, February 1727/28.
43 Borthwick Institute, inventory of Samuel Carr, February 1726/27; inventory of John Carr, December 1728.
44 Gatty (1869), p. 503.
45 Borthwick Institute, inventory of Dr Josiah Carr, February 1726.

spoons and a dozen knives and forks were available according to the status of the guest and occasion.[46]

The appearance of new goods alone cannot confirm that they were being employed to support new forms of sociability. Yet probate inventories also show how some homes were being re-organised so they could better accommodate leisure, learning, and polite sociability in privacy and comfort. In many households, custom and lack of space meant that daily tasks, entertaining casual visitors, food preparation and consumption were carried out in a single space called a 'house'. Homes with more than six rooms were able to offer a degree of choice and flexibility so that specialised and private areas could be created. Key indicators of potential changes in behaviour were the creation of a kitchen allowing food preparation to be removed from the house, which could then be used either as a dining room or second parlour. Beds and their costly hangings were traditional indicators of wealth and were usually displayed downstairs in the best parlour, which was also used for guests too important to be entertained in the house. Beds were now removed to an upper, more private chamber to create more space for entertaining. Furnishing upper chambers with tables and chairs created further social spaces, especially in urban areas. Evidence from plans, sketchbooks and other sources indicate how homes were becoming, lighter, brighter and more comfortable spaces in which families and friends could be 'sociable, pleasurable, decorous, edifying, in a word, polite'.[47] Those who could afford to do so incorporated into their homes the classical facades and symmetrical forms that alerted the visitor to a home organised on polite principles and which gave them a 'social acceptability and cultural authority'.[48]

In 1690, William Taylor, a tallow chandler of Darnall in the parish of Sheffield, died leaving inventoried wealth of £306 6s of which £76 8s (24.9%) was attributed to household goods. Meals in his twenty-two roomed home could be taken in the hall or one of two parlours, all of which were equipped with long or short tables, longsettles, forms, chairs and cushions. His tableware consisted of fourteen stones of pewter, and 45 lbs of brass, accompanied by 'a silver taster, [and] a little silver spoon'. An absence of cutlery was compensated by '3 dozen napkins, 2 huggaback tablecloths, and 6 towels'.[49] Comfortably furnished with a bed, textiles, a looking glass, pictures and curtains, textiles added a degree of comfort to 'The Farre Parlour'.

William's son, William jnr., built on his father's success but did not pursue his father's 'dirty' trade as a tallow chandler. Instead, he became a mercer and in 1713 was one of the eight Sheffield mercers who helped break the monopoly of London factors in the cutlery trades. He traded with the Attercliffe group of forges owned by the non-conformist Fell and Milner families and his successes earned him election as a Town Trustee.[50] Taylor enjoyed a wide social circle and his interests that took him beyond the confines of the region.[51] Debts due to Taylor at the time of his death in 1719 included £568 6s 3d from his brother Joseph and £120 from a Captain Morgan then in

46 Ibid.
47 Klein (2002).
48 Leader (1905), pp. 161–62; McKellar (1999), p. 221.
49 Borthwick Institute, inventory of William Taylor, March 1690/1.
50 Hey (1991), pp.158–62; Leader (1897), pp. 326, 484.
51 Hey (1991), pp. 161–62.

1 Norwood Hall, *c.* 1705. *Museums Sheffield*

Carolina. Taylor left inventoried wealth of £888 of which £201 10*s* or 22.7% was attributed to household goods and his inventory was appraised by some of the region's chief inhabitants.[52]

William jnr. set out to acquire a home that reflected his status and *c.* 1705 he built Norwood, a country home and grounds on the boundary between the parishes of Sheffield and Ecclesfield. In contrast with his father's home in which the commercial and domestic activity jostled for space, Norwood was a tall, fashionable brick dwelling reflecting a mix of classical motifs and traditional styles, and well away from any trade (Figure 1). A centrally–placed doorway under a portico was echoed on the third floor by a round window providing additional light to the central staircase decorated with a 'large landskip, a map of the world and 40 small pictures'. A double-hipped roof surmounted three storeys of regularly spaced windows, with each storey marked by a stone string course terminated by classical pilasters running the height of the building. Outside, an adjoining building contained the domestic offices and stabling and to the front, a formal walled garden incorporated a path leading to the door and a garden house.

[52] Christopher Broomhead, Church Burgess, Town Trustee, Master Cutler, Governor of the Grammar School and Churchwarden; Ezra Cawton, Town Trustee, Master Cutler and Churchwarden, and Joseph Nutt, another former Master Cutler.

In contrast with his father's trestles and forms, William jnr's dining room was equipped with chairs in the 'French fashion', a 'dutch table', pictures, window curtains and valances, a 'pair of fine bath metal candlestirks', punch bowls, knives and forks.[53] Further cases of bath metal knives and forks, tea tables, china, coffee pots, and silver plate could be summoned from adjoining rooms when required. Other rooms were equipped with leather, cane and upholstered chairs, birdcages, books, tea tables, figurines, sconces, clocks, looking and weather glasses, whilst In the chamber over the parlour, 'Five figures & Bleinheim House' added décor and, perhaps together with his adoption of French style, may have indicated Taylor's Whig sympathies.[54]

A DISSENTING AND SOCIABLE SOCIETY

In addition to new goods being found in the homes of those called Mister and Gentleman and those whose associations extended beyond Hallamshire, inventories and associated parish records indicate that many who owned new goods and spaces were religious Dissenters. Sheffield had a large Dissenting population whose social and economic networks spanned the country. Figures based on the Compton ecclesiastical census of 1676 indicate an estimated 10% of the population in Sheffield to be Dissenters compared with a national figure of 4%. In 1715, John Evans's List of Dissenting Congregations put the number attending the town's Upper Chapel at 1,163, or between 16–17% of the town's population, not counting those who came from further afield.

Amongst the merchants, ironmongers, tradesmen, shopkeepers, newspaper editors, booksellers and innkeepers who attended Upper Chapel, many, such as the Fells, Clays, Milners and Sylvesters, were from the town's leading families, but their non-conformity excluded them from parish hierarchies, universities and political office.[55] The large Dissenting presence amongst Sheffield's leading families has often been equated with an austere and abstemious outlook that rendered the town reluctant to engage with Peter Borsay's 'urban renaissance', in which the landscape of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century provincial towns underwent a social and cultural revival.[56] However, in his analysis of rational consumption, William Kilbourne argues that a belief in moderation and duty by dissenting Protestant groups contributed to their considerable commercial success whose rewards they believed could be enjoyed, providing indulgence and excess were avoided.[57] Rosemary Sweet notes how entrepreneurial, independent and ambitious Dissenters employed polite forms of sociability to foster commercial and social allegiances.[58] Economic historian Peter Earle notes how Dissenting associations cut across local and national divisions of wealth, status and politics and how, in London, they were found at all levels of society.[59] This pattern was

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53 Bath metal is an alloy of copper and zinc.
54 Borthwick Institute, inventory of Mr William Taylor, March 1719.
55 Hey (1991), p. 254–55.
56 Ibid., pp. 249, 279–80.
57 Kilbourne (2003).
58 Sweet (1999), p. 195.
59 Earle (1989), p. 267.

also found in Hallamshire where 'Sheffield's leading Dissenting families often had links with the surrounding rural gentry and with well-to-do London Dissenters'.[60]

Perhaps to expand their social and commercial horizons, the inventories of many Dissenters indicate that they readily engaged with new goods. Lorna Weatherill records how urban tradesmen and shopkeepers were often amongst the earliest owners of new goods and historian Helen Berry cites Fanny Burney's play, *The Witlings*, of 1778 to show how retailers employed 'polite' refreshments to aid business.[61] The inventory of Sheffield bookseller Neville Simmons (d. 1730) suggests offering 'polite' refreshments in sympathetically furnished spaces was well established amongst local retailers. Arriving in Sheffield sometime during the latter part of the seventeenth century, his father, Neville senior, came from an established family of book dealers in Kidderminster and London, and is linked to Samuel Simmons who published Milton's *Paradise Lost*.[62] Specialising in the publication of non-conformist works, Simmons appears to have found a solid demand amongst the large dissenting community. On his death in 1730, Neville jnr. left total inventoried wealth of £96 5s, of which £59 13s or 62%, was attributed to household goods. The Little Parlour of his eight-room house and shop was furnished with bass [cane?] chairs, tables, punch bowls, glasses, brandy measures, silver mugs, teapots, and china. A stove grate and curtains kept the room warm and comfortable and at the time of his death 'the presence there of 'licquor of all kinds and fruit' suggested customers were well entertained when calling for news and to make purchases.[63] Maxine Berg notes how politeness could offer particular value in commercial environments such as Simmon's bookshop where, 'shopkeepers sold to customers who expected interiors and displays to accord with the goods to be bought; customers expected conversation along with advice and not merely a sales pitch'.[64]

CONCLUSION

During the first half of the eighteenth century, politeness became an essential tool for the newly prosperous middling sort whose dealings took them increasingly beyond the familiar boundaries of kinship and parish and who lacked the traditional genteel signifiers of land, lineage or wealth. Politeness could help them secure a respectable place in the social hierarchy and further their social and commercial ambitions. Its significance in easing the mechanisms of social and commercial life was acknowledged by entrepreneurs and manufacturers, professionals and shopkeepers.

Despite the limitations of probate inventories, no other source can offer the ability to explore domestic patterns of consumption across a broad section of households or indicate how they changed over time.[65] This brief examination of domestic consumption in Sheffield and Hallamshire shows how probate inventories may help redefine the

[60] Hey (1991), pp. 249, 308.
[61] Weatherill (1996), p. 187; Berry (2002).
[62] Hester (1893); http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/69230; Leader (1905), pp. 309–11.
[63] Borthwick Institute, inventory of Neville Simmons jnr, July 1730.
[64] Berg (2005), p. 233.
[65] Overton et al. (2004), pp. 138–47.

social and cultural landscape of eighteenth-century provincial towns. Contradicting previous assumptions, London was not the role model adopted by northern towns, and in the construction of identities that best addressed their particular needs and circumstances metropolitan ideals had to compete with ideas and understandings taken from Manchester and Liverpool.

New goods with the potential to support polite behaviour were most prevalent in the homes of a group of socially mobile urban professionals, retailers and merchants, whose interests extended far beyond the confines of parish boundaries. Many were also Dissenters who, excluded from traditional positions of authority, may have employed politeness to help them establish common ground with those with whom they wished to do business. Inventories belonging to those described as Mister or Gentleman listed the greatest number of goods associated with politeness, which may have been an important asset in their ambition to become chief inhabitants and to acquire positions of social responsibility.

Evidence from probate inventories shows how Sheffield was socially and culturally much more diverse than it has persistently been portrayed. Progress could be slow, cautious and subject to local interpretations but it is now possible to argue that Sheffield was home to a confident, independent and influential middling population which used politeness to help construct their identity, further their ambitions, and find solutions to the problems of urban living and accommodating difference.

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