

HUNTING THE COWLD IN NORFOLK AND SUFFOLK 1650-1725

Cowlds are the ultimate mystery item discovered in an examination of more than 900 Norfolk and Suffolk probate inventories.¹ This term seems to be exclusive to East Anglia for it does not occur in any of the texts relating to furniture so far discovered by the author. It is absent from dictionaries (even the dialect dictionaries for the area) and is not found in the glossaries attached to printed series of inventories.² It is even absent from those glossaries appended to studies of Norfolk and Suffolk inventories which terminate by 1641³. All this supposes a term which came into use by the mid seventeenth century and was defunct before the dialect men got to work sometime in the late eighteenth century: moreover, it was probably rather localised in its usage. Was this a new term for an old piece of furniture or did it come newly minted with something new? What was the beastly thing for and what did it look like? Did everyone own one or was this item exclusive in its distribution? Did other areas have these things or were they peculiar to East Anglia? Some of these questions were eventually answered by the source itself which gave up its information in a grudging and piecemeal manner.

The cowld is not to be confused with the coule which seems to have been a large vat or tub, possibly with two loops for carrying handles: fortunately, the price tends to differentiate these – the latter seem to have been worth something less than three shillings while the cowld was an expensive item with a median price of 10s in the period 1650-74.⁴ Moreover, the cowld was nearly always associated with pewter (less often brass and earthenwares): some of the inventories make this explicit:

'1 brasseboard or cowld'

'1 brasseboard with pewter and brasse full furnished'

'A could for pewter'⁵

This last one occurred in a Yarmouth merchant's house and was appropriately elaborate (it cost 16s) rather implying that cowlds were for display and not merely storage. Randle Holme explains just how important this factor was - the metalwares were 'to adorne their countrey houses and court cupboards: for they are not looked upon to be of any great worth in personalls, that have not many dishes and much pewter, brasse and copper and tynware set around about a Hall, Parlour and Kitchen'.⁶ In the East Anglian series of inventories the cowld was only found in a parlour on four occasions out of 104, being commonly located in kitchen or hall and especially the former. Locally, these were general cooking/living rooms not particularly storage areas - these functions being relegated to service rooms such as buttery or pantry where pewter was often found: yet the cowld was only located in service rooms 11.5% of the time and was almost never found in a chamber - a typical dumping ground for much domestic and commercial detritus.

Sometimes cowlds came equipped with curtains - useful to prevent tarnishing when visitors were absent

and the pewter need not be on view:-

'one could to put pewter in with curtains 12s'⁷

Now this phrase is significant - you, apparently, put pewter *in* a cowld and not *on* it. Does this then eliminate the court cupboard as the likely candidate for this piece of furniture?⁸ Of course, there is a sense in which there is an inside to a court cupboard because of its middle shelf so the phrase is merely ambiguous. Other evidence suggests that pewter was indeed ranged on top of a cowld and that the item had some height to it. When William Burton (minister of Catton near Norwich) sent a man home to check on his house during divine service sometime in 1684 he caught two thieves red-handed: they had already:-

'taken downe ye pewter off ye cold and laid it altogether upon ye table and also some silver spoons'.⁹

So a cowld came alongside a table but was higher than a table: this is useful because it probably eliminates the dresser from our search which, in any case, can possibly be excluded on other grounds. John Whaites, in 1717 had in the same room:-

'a keep, a coule and a dresser'¹⁰

Henry Rogers (1723) had a cowld with earthenware in his hall but he did have a dresser in the same room.¹¹ Now we are getting somewhere! A cowld is not a dresser. But what about:-

'one dresser coule' (Edm. Cunninham, 1712) or

'one dresser coule 6s' (Cleere Sewell, 1686)¹²

These are horribly ambiguous phrases. However help is at hand. Cleere Sewell had a 6s dresser in the same room with his 'dresser coule'. Daylight dawns at last - a cowld was obviously a rack to accompany a dresser. Pewter could be said to be put either in or on a rack and it would have sufficient height too so it fulfils all the semantic requirements of our piece of furniture. Moreover, Thos Hall, in 1695, had:- '1 Could Racke' in his backhouse (brewhouse)¹³ implying that a cowld was merely a type of the same species.

This would explain why, out of 271 inventories for 1675-99, a cowld and a rack occur together only twice out of the 100 occasions when either is present. In other words they are simply mutually exclusive terms - they generally do not occur together because they are, effectively, the same thing. I can see you nodding wisely at this point. I wouldn't if I were you! Thos Truston, a Bungay cutler in 1706 had :-

'a coule and racke' at 15s in his kitchen and no, this coule cannot be a coule tub because the same appraiser records:-

'a coule shelf' at 1s in the buttery.

Tubs do not have shelves. Nor is this an isolated case - Wm Barber of Yarmouth also had a cowld and rack in the same room in 1683.¹⁴ They were, clearly, quite recognisably different items.

This brings us back to the dresser ('but she has already proved that a cowld cannot be a dresser' I hear you silently scream). Keep calm. We naturally associate racks with dressers because they later got attached to them but what if, when racks first spread into general usage, they were associated with several kinds of furniture, even the court cupboard, to which they might have seemed but a wall-mounted extension. Moreover, some members of the court cupboard family



Fig. 6 Could this be a version of the elusive cowl? The photograph shows a detail from Jan Steen's 1664 painting entitled 'The Celebration of the Birth'. This particular item of display furniture has no curtains, cupboard sections or drawers but it is easy to see how they might be located. The hooded nature of the piece is very evident.

look not unlike precursors of the dresser - they are just a bit higher. I am thinking of those semi-enclosed pieces that Chinnery reluctantly calls 'joint standing livery cupboards' for want of a better term.¹⁵ These have their middle stage cupboarded in but the upper surface left clear and a shelf below. They look uncommonly like an early, ungainly form of potboard dresser to me and are clearly related to the court cupboard in structure. So, what is the evidence that cowlds are really just one of these 'standing livery cupboards'? Nicholas Mallett, a Norwich blacksmith had:-

'one old press cowl'
in his kitchen alongside a dresser. Elsewhere the appraiser lists:- a 'dale [deal] press cupboard' so this is not just another term for a press itself. The Strumpshaw clerk's appraiser, in 1669, made things clearer. He recorded:-

'A Pewter Coul wth Presses'¹⁶
So the presses [cupboard sections] seem to have been an optional extra to the piece of furniture - in other words, your court cupboard could be partly enclosed

or not. Another occasional feature was the addition of drawers:-

'1 pewter coule and drawers' (1710)

'1 cowl'd for pewter with drawers' (1715)¹⁷

The piece of furniture which was commonly higher than a table but occurred alongside it; had shelves and was sufficiently open to need curtaining; was used for displaying pewter and brasswares both in and on; could be partly enclosed with cupboards or have a drawer fitted and was decorated enough to be an expensive item was almost certainly the court cupboard. But if this is so why did it need a special name in an area of East Anglia that, far from being isolated, contained the second city in the kingdom and which was so closely linked to London? Why did the name itself rip across the urban hierarchy in the manner of a fever (fig 8 shows how), lingering in the outer rural area (25 miles from Norwich) until after 1725 but then being consigned to oblivion so that it remained unrecorded by dialect researchers barely 50 years later?

It is at this point that certainty begins to dissolve like mist on a sunny morning and horrible doubts emerge. If a cowl'd is simply an East Anglian term for a court cupboard then why are there none at all of such a well-established good in the outer rural area (the most conservative in its domestic preferences) in the period 1650-74, followed by a subsequent rise? The whole pattern exhibited on fig 8 is typical of that generated by relatively new items which take time to penetrate the outer rural fringes, 20 or 30 miles from the city, and are often already in decline in the major towns as they are still rising in popularity lower down the urban hierarchy. No. This is no good. We shall simply have to look at the evidence again.¹⁸

For those fit enough to read on - help is at hand. It came for the author as a throwaway line in a seventeenth century will (about will number 200 in the current series under review). Henry Blomfield, in 1670, bequeathed

'my dresser and the colde over the dresser in the kitchen'.¹⁹

This makes the cowl'd sound more like a rack after all - certainly, no court cupboard. It was plainly some kind of superstructure but, as it was always recorded as a separate item, it is reasonable to assume that it was physically separate also. A cowl'd is, therefore, very probably a rack-like form. But one problem remains: why did it merit a separate name; what distinguished a cowl'd from a rack? At least two sets of appraisors, remember, had noted *both* a cowl'd *and* a rack in the same room - they must have had certain physical differences despite the similarity of function.

Perhaps nomenclature can help here. The early alternative name for a cowl'd was a 'brassboard' (in the singular). Perhaps racks, then, had multiple shelves and cowl'ds did not. The very name 'cowl'd' and its spelling variants may also shed some light on the matter. Dr Eser of Cologne University informs me that the word is unknown in early Dutch or German (the most likely areas of influence for seventeenth century



Fig - 7 The cowld in context.

'The Celebration of the Birth' by Jan Steen 1664. This appears to be a wealthy tradesman's kitchen/living room (possibly Leiden): the proud father clutching the swaddled babe is still in his apron; cooking is going on round the hearth and the guests cluster round the table (largely seated on rush chairs) while the wicker cradle waits for the infant nearby. This could easily be a Norwich kitchen of the period save for the bed in the corner (much more likely to be in an upper chamber), the x-form chair and the chequered marble floor - oak boards or good red Norfolk pammments would be more typical. The upraised hand behind the baby's head shows that the good father has been cuckolded, but that is a different story. (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the Wallace Collection)

E. Anglia were northern European) so the term probably has an English origin. Was the word derived from the cowl (a hood) so that 'cowl'd' was something cowed or hooded and the numerous coule/cowell spelling variants are merely versions of the noun rather than the adjectival form? Now a picture begins to emerge of a heavily hooded, perhaps single-shelved, wall-mounted structure, very reminiscent of the 'joined mural canopy' (sometimes called a 'sayling hance') illustrated in Chinnery's *Oak Furniture*.²⁰ Perhaps, then, the 'canopy board' recorded in a Yarmouth beer brewer's inventory in 1678 is merely another, less gnomic, description of the same thing?²¹ Might we not also suggest that the open, third stage of a Welsh *cwprdd tridarn* is simply a cowl'd which has been fixed to a press just as multi-shelved racks later became attached to dressers?²² However, this fixing process perhaps never took place in E. Anglia because cowl'ds had almost disappeared from the larger towns by 1700 and, in any case, never seem to have penetrated more than 20% of middle class households at any time after 1650. The cowl'd did not remain popular for long enough to become a fixture in any sense at all and it is no wonder that this particular piece of furniture has entirely disappeared from our houses. If your stamina has been great enough to get you to the end of this particular shaggy-cowl'd story then you will have learned one useful lesson. Rich as inventory sources are, they are highly ambiguous and the information in them must be treated with very great care. Moreover, the English language is able to conceal more than it may reveal.

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Figure 8 THE DISTRIBUTION OF COWLDS ACROSS AN URBAN HIERARCHY

Place	Level	% households with good 1650-74	1675-99	1700-24
Norwich	1	22.8	6.9	7.4
Yarmouth	2	23.7	6.7	nil
Beccles	3	-	-	2.1
Diss	4	12	10	17.7
Attleborough Harleston Bungay				
Inner Rural sample	Hinterland to level 1	26.7	32.6	11.1
Outer Rural sample	Hinterland to level 4	nil	19.7	20.3

Footnotes

¹ These were gathered from Norwich, Yarmouth, Beccles and a series of smaller, local market towns together with an inner rural area around Norwich and an outer rural area along the eastern Norfolk/Suffolk border. These places represent levels within the local urban hierarchy and samples for each were collected in roughly equal quantities and spread evenly over time between 1650-1725.

² Robert Forby, *The Vocabulary of East Anglia*, 2 vols, (London, 1830); Francis Grose, *A Provincial Glossary with a Collection of Local Proverbs and Popular Superstitions*, (London, 1790); James Orchard

Hallitwell, *A Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words* (London, 1850).

³ Michael Reed, ed, *The Ipswich Probate Inventories 1583-1631* (Suffolk Record Society, XXII, 1981) and J.H.Wilson, ed, *Wymondham Inventories 1590-1641* (Centre of East Anglian Studies, U.E.A., 1986)

⁴ Prices subsequently dropped (as they did for furniture generally) to an average of 6 or 7s.

⁵ NRO DN INV 49A60; 49B32; 52B17

⁶ (See Randle Holme, *The Academy of Armory*, vol II, ed, I.H.Jeayes, London, 1905). Jeayes published Holme's unpublished manuscript which probably dates to the third quarter of the seventeenth century.

⁷ NRO DN INV 54A13

⁸ The term 'court cupboard' occurs only once in all the inventories examined, although there are plenty of plain 'cupboards'.

⁹ Quarter Session Rolls NRO. C/S3/55a, 1684, roll 3.

¹⁰ NRO DN INV 73/236. Coule as a term for a tub had long been in disuse by the end of the seventeenth century so we can probably read coule here as cowl'd.

¹¹ NRO DN INV 75B98

¹² NRO DN INV 71/37; 64/76

¹³ NRO DN INV 67A40

¹⁴ NOR DN INV 87/249; 63/43

¹⁵ Chinnery is probably right in guessing that the term 'livery' refers to function and not form. In the present series of inventories livery cupboards are nearly always associated with bedrooms and almost never with kitchens or halls and never with pewter. (See Victor Chinnery, *Oak Furniture, the British Tradition*, Woodbridge, 1990, pp3 18-21).

¹⁶ NRO DN INV 33/65; 53B137

¹⁷ NRO DN INV 71/145; 71/281 (See also, Chinnery, *Oak furniture*, p317)

¹⁸ Perhaps at this point you would care to make a pot of tea/have a cold shower/take the dog for a walk - high blood pressure is said to be injurious to health.

¹⁹ NRO NCC Alden 177.

²⁰ Fig 3.331, p342.

²¹ NRO DN INV 60B112

²² (See Fig 3.332, Chinnery, *Oak Furniture*, p342). Chinnery suggests that the Welsh *tridarn* was a post-1660 feature. This is not too far adrift in time from the period when cowl'ds appear in E. Anglian inventories. However, one wonders whether there is any evidence that the early *tridarns* started life as two separate items? Were they all, indisputably, built as one from scratch? A search of Welsh inventories might prove fruitful in this regard.