

## **INVENTORIES AND DOMESTIC CULTURE**

**A study day in conjunction with Oxford University  
Department of Continuing Education at Rewley  
House, Oxford on Saturday March 20th.**

The first talk was given by Mary Hodges, a local historian and great expert in the interpretation of parish records, wills and probate inventories. She started by pointing out that up to one million probate inventories still exist in local archive centres and the National Archives. Inventories were generally created to effect the smooth winding up of the financial affairs of those of middling rank and above, under legislation drawn up in the Middle Ages and amended in the time of Henry VIII. This stipulated that at time of death a 'true

and perfect inventory' should be drawn up of all the moveable assets of the deceased by two trusted appraisers. The probate would then be granted most commonly from a local deaconry court, or, in the case of gentry, at the more senior Prerogative Court of Canterbury. A scale of charges applied to the probate of estates of differing values. Most commonly employed in the 16th and 17th century, their use diminished after this date. As furniture comprised a significant part of the moveable assets of people in this rank, probate inventories can be an invaluable tool in discovering the contents of houses of this period. As the inventories were part of the winding up of estates they represent principally those who held property and other assets; men and widows. The archives in which particular inventories are located are listed in guides such as Jeremy Gibson's *History of Probate* and the National Archives now has much of its data online.

Nathaniel Alcock from Warwick University next described his detailed research into the history of houses in two Warwickshire villages; Stoneleigh and Ashow, published as *People at Home; Living in a Warwickshire Village 1500-1800*. His research has been blessed with the exceptional existence of inventories from the archdeaconry court in Stoneleigh and extant timber framed buildings of the period, where it has been possible to make a match between inventories and around sixty dwellings, despite the fact that some inventories may be incomplete. He has thus been able to identify in existing buildings the rooms listed in the inventories, and through their furnishings their probable use. In addition, where inventories exist for a series of successive householders, he has been able to build up a fascinating picture of the evolution of the form of the house from the inventories, as well as from the archaeological record, and the manner in which the function of different parts of the house changed over time. He had, for example, been able to see the way in which the hall declined from the social hub of the house in the early Tudor period, to become a space for servants in the 17th century, with the master retiring to a heated parlour. In addition the nomenclature of rooms alters; the hall and chamber becoming the kitchen and the parlour. A particular change of social habit is indicated by the use of the term smoking parlour. In addition, as the inventories list room contents often in sequence, it has been possible for Dr Alcock to identify those parts of the house used for agricultural and domestic purposes, such as dairies, pantries and brewhouses. We were fortunate to have such a clear exposition of the great use to which inventories can be put in understanding the history of houses and their contents by one of the leading researchers in this field.

The next talk was by Victor Chinnery, undoubtedly one of the most knowledgeable researchers in the history of British oak furniture and thus the pieces of furniture described in the inventories. He first addressed the problem of nomenclature; the fact that items of furniture might not only be spelled differently but described differently from inventory to inventory; for example a buffet stool in Cheshire inventories might variously be described as a staked chair, or a boarded, turned or joined

stool. A 'table' might describe the object we know by that name today, but might equally describe a painting, a 'pair of tables' or a backgammon board. He also warned against the misnomers of the Victorian antiques trade, romanticising the folding table into a 'credence' table where such an object probably never had association with a church. He emphasised how useful a source such as Randall Holmes' *Armory* could be in giving contemporary images and descriptions of furniture. There then followed a large number of slides with the names by which they might be listed in an inventory, an invaluable lesson for any involved in researching or planning to research this source.

Following lunch Antony Buxton spoke of his work studying domestic culture. The potential insights into domestic life that inventories might reveal were considered including changes over date and location, the status of the householder, the possible size and layout of their dwelling and the nature and value of their furnishings. The possible uses for this wealth of information were then discussed. Antony likened the study of inventories to archaeological excavations, the extraction of information being compared to the unearthing and display of artefacts. It was suggested that in both cases whilst the 'display' of artefact or information was of great value, much could also be learned from considering their significance. Examples of such consideration of data gleaned and 'displayed' from inventories were given as:

- its analysis, internally (within the document) and externally within the wider scope of historiography;
- the context of the household - its social and economic profile in comparison with other inventories;
- the relationship between different elements contained in an inventory, including the location of items within the house, the relative values of different areas, and the association between objects. The understanding of the differentiation of space this might reveal could give insights into the social use of the dwelling.

For such a study of domestic culture the division of the home into a conceptual framework of four elements was suggested:

- the physical shell and its subdivision;
- furnishings and their function as signified by their association;
- social use and significance indicated by differentiation of space;
- the symbolic value of the home in relation to security and status.

A dual path approach to studying inventories was recommended, looking at individual houses to gain detailed insights, and groups of inventories to establish 'norms'. Examples of both were shown from work completed to date on an extensive series of transcribed inventories from Thame in Oxfordshire. These revealed much of interest including suggested room use within individual households, and the analysis of changes in the nature of such room use over both status and time using the value and nature of their contents.