

West Country Households 1500–1700

Edited by John Allan, Nat Alcock and David Dawson.
The Boydell Press, 2015. 439 pages, 22 colour plates,
199 b&w pictures. £30.00

This book is a collection of essays that reflect the latest thinking on the development of ordinary households in what is technically called ‘the early modern period’; that said it is the most fascinating and diverse book. It is heavily illustrated with colour plates, black and white photographs many line drawings, maps, plans and elevations; in fact everything that one would expect from an archaeological monograph and more. There are seventeen essays in the book, all written by noted experts in their field and the subjects range from Godolphin House in the far west of Cornwall to bronze foundries in Somerset. A link to the North Devon Conference and the possible Portuguese chest in Braunton St Brannock is an essay on Portuguese pottery imported to the West Country.

Those who went on the Exeter visit two years ago and last year’s North Devon Conference will know, John Allan, one of the editors – indeed there is a picture of him, Adam Bowett and Jeremy Rycroft in the last Newsletter No. 63. Another author in the book is member Peter Brears in an essay on a lime-plaster ceiling in 144 Fore St, Exeter. In a chapter titled Dinner on the Ceiling Peter writes about the plaster decoration, c. 1678, that diners might have seen laid out on the table; the large central panel has fish head – possibly a large cod, a popular boiled dish – on a platter flanked by a pair of lobsters and opposed by a pair of

unidentified fish. The oval layout would be reflected in the late 17th-century fashion for gate-leg dining tables and possibly prepared for a Lenten feast. It is the most illuminating chapter, as one would expect from Peter Brears. He also contributed two other essays on kitchen-related matters.

One of the Society's founder members, James Ayres contributes a fascinating piece on a set of early 18th-century stained wall hangings in a south Devon farmhouse. Such painted linen hangings are extraordinarily rare, let alone still being in the house for which they were painted (there are two colour pictures of the hangings).

John Allan at the North Devon Conference gave us a lecture on the early pottery from the area, examples of which had been found in early colonial sites in Virginia and we saw some of the impressed pattern tiles in the church of Tawstock St Peter. In his essay in the book he expounds on the story of this little known – outside of the West Country – pottery.

Altogether an intriguing, if quite dense, book filled with wonderful details concerning the way that West Country people lived in the 16th, 17th and early-18th century.

Treve Rosoman