



A house in the main street in Cossington, Leicestershire which has the same hall-and-cross-wing plan form as the house of John Oswin the weaver. At the left-hand end a single-storey unit could perhaps have been a loom shop. *Photo Linda Hall*

## The 1669 Probate Inventory of John Oswin, weaver, Cossington, Leicestershire

I have been fortunate in my family history researches to have ancestors from counties where a lot of source material is readily available online, and when I eventually tracked my Oswin family back from Spitalfields to the village of Cossington just north of Leicester, I was delighted to discover that Leicestershire wills and probate inventories have been scanned and are accessible on Find My Past. Wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (wills with property in more than one diocese) are also readily available online through Ancestry, and it was one of these which led me to Cossington. The 1708 will of John Oswin, master baker of Spitalfields and my seven times great grandfather, popped up a few years ago as an Ancestry hint. It included the bequest to his youngest son Joseph of eight acres of land 'lately inclosed and taken out of the common field of Cussington [now Cossington] in the parish of Cussington in the county of Leicester which I lately bought and purchased of and from my brother Amos Oswin of Cussington aforesaid'. This in turn led to their parents John Oswin and Katherine Page, who married in Rothley in 1644 and were my eight times great grandparents. John died on 17 October 1669 — the parish registers recorded deaths rather than burials at this period. Probate was granted on 26 February 1669/70 — '1669 English style' as it says in Latin at the bottom.

John Oswin's probate inventory fascinated me because, unusually, it is specific enough to enable the exact layout of the house to be established. The rooms described — hall, kitchen, parlour towards the street, parlour towards the yard, and chambers over all rooms except the hall — suggest that this may have been a medieval house which still had an open hall, set parallel to the street, with a kitchen at the lower end and a cross wing containing two parlours at the upper end. Only the hall and kitchen appear to have been heated. There were beds in the front parlour and in the rear parlour chamber; the one in the parlour included curtains and valance and was presumably a tester bed where John and Katherine slept, while their five surviving children must have slept in the two beds listed in the rear parlour chamber. By the time John wrote his will their elder daughter Mary was married, leaving Katherine 22, Amos 19, Thomas 16 and John 14 at home. It is hard now to imagine a 22-year-old young woman sharing a bedroom with her three teenage brothers, yet the furniture listed in the inventory gives no other options. A dairy house was listed separately and may have been a detached building, or a single-storey wing with no internal access to the house. All in all it seems quite a substantial house for a weaver, although perhaps he was also dealing in cloth. His father-in-law William Page was also a weaver, but in 1650 when his son was apprenticed to a London blacksmith he was described as 'clothier'. John Oswin was also a smallholder as shown by the animals and crops listed at the end of the inventory which together account for about half of the total value. When

Cossington's open fields were enclosed in 1666 John was awarded a little over eight acres, presumably the same eight acres listed in his son's will.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the furniture is described as 'old' although as the kitchen contained as well as 'old' equipment some 'old firewood' one should perhaps not set too much store by that description. The hall has an old cupboard, and an old table and frame, one bench, three chairs and two joined stools. When we visited Westwood Manor (see p.23 below) I suddenly realised how this assemblage of furniture would have been arranged. The hall at Westwood has a table and frame, whose top could be turned depending on the use being made of it, with an armchair at each end, a bench on one side and three joint stools along the other side. This mirrors almost exactly the Oswins' hall, although they had three chairs and two stools rather than two chairs and three stools. Furniture is only listed in four of the eight rooms, the hall, both parlours and one of the parlour chambers, although the other parlour chamber has 'some old trestles and boards', perhaps a form of cheese rack as the room also contains cheese. There is no table in the kitchen, implying that the hall table was, like that at Westwood Manor, put to multiple uses, with the top having a 'best' side and a working side. There are in total four coffer, all of them 'old', one chest, one box, and 'some old furdale boxes'. Apart from the items in the hall, the only other seat furniture listed is one chair and one low stool in the parlour towards the yard. The parlour chamber which was a bedroom also has an old desk, which was a less common item of furniture at this period. However, John Oswin was literate, or certainly literate enough to sign his name as an appraiser in 1659 and 1661 and on his will, so perhaps he had used the desk to keep records of his weaving business. Other members of the wider Oswin family regularly turn up as appraisers and as churchwardens, always signing their own names and suggesting a family where the men at least were literate. When John's widow Katherine witnessed a will in 1690 she made her mark.

It is not clear where the loom was located as it is listed separately after the dairy house. One possibility is that there was a hall chamber containing the loom and its appurtenances but nothing else that the appraisers felt worth mentioning, so it wasn't named in the inventory. Would there have been enough headroom for a loom, or was it perhaps in the rear parlour or in a separate loom shop? The only house we saw in Cossington which now takes the form of this hall-and-cross-wing house has a single-storey cell at one end which could perhaps have been a loom shop. John was clearly weaving both woollen and linen cloth, as the inventory lists 'some woollen yarne and Lynen yarne unwrought' but it is not clear if other family members were spinning the yarn for him. The description of 'some old Wheelles & a little old Course wooll' could imply items no longer used, although that may be reading too much into the word 'old'. Other Cossington inventories of this period list spinning wheels for both wool and flax, which suggests that John could have obtained his yarn from other people in the village. In the period 1623-1690 one other inventory is for a weaver, also in 1669, and no spinning wheels are listed. Eight other inventories list 'wheels', four of them unspecified and

four having both linen and woollen wheels. Two list 'linen yarn and flax' and 'flaxen yarn', while a yeoman in 1673 has a stone of wool in a chamber but no spinning wheels. The occupations are varied; of the eight inventories listing wheels there are two labourers, a carpenter, a 'paperman' (ie a paper maker), two widows, one man of unspecified occupation and, interestingly, one bachelor; one wonders who was using his spinning wheels, or whether they were unused items inherited from his father. Looms were certainly important items passed down in families, hence the word 'heirloom', and spinning wheels would have been equally important.

There is clearly much to be learned about life in one small community from even a relatively small group of wills and inventories, and I intend to do further analysis of them and the furniture they contain.

A true Inventory of the Goods Chattles Lands Creditts of John Oswin late of Cossington in the County of Leicester weaver deceased Taken & prised the Seaventeenth day of November Ano dm 1669, As followeth

	£	s.	d.
Imprimis his purse and Apparrell	1	0	0
Item in the <u>hall</u> one old Cupboard, one old table & frame, one Forme, 3 chaires, 2 Joyned stools, with Racke fire Irons & other Small things	0	13	4
Item in the <u>parlor towards the street</u> one bedstead & upon it one flock bed, one bolster, 3 old blankets with old Curtayns & valence, 2 old Coffers & some old furdale boxes <sup>10</sup>	1	10	0
Item in the <u>parlor towards the yard</u> , one chest, one old Coffe, one Box, one chaire, & one low stoole	0	5	0
Item in the <u>Chamber over the said parlor</u> one Bedstead & upon it one Flock bedd, 4 old Blanketts, 2 old Bolsters & one other old Bedstead with old furniture, one old Coffe, one old desk & some other small things	2	0	0
Item in the <u>Chamber over the Kitchin</u> some Malt & a little Barley	1	0	0
Item in the <u>Chamber over the parlor towards the street</u> , somme cheese somme old tresles & Boards, one Baskett & some other small things	1	0	0
Item in the <u>Kitchin</u> some old Tubbs and pails, one old Cheesepress, One old Salting Tubb & some other old Lumber with a few Coales & some old fire wood	0	6	8
Item the Brasse & pewter of all sorts about the house	2	10	0
Item the Lynens of all sorts & some new flaxen cloth	2	0	0
Item some woollen yarne and Lynen yarne unwrought	0	15	0
Item in the <u>dairy house</u> some ticknall ware <sup>11</sup> & other things belonging to the Dairy, with two old Barrells	0	5	0
Item one Loom with warpfatt Geere <sup>12</sup> and other Implements belonging to the trade round about	3	0	0
Item 2 Cowes, one Heifer and two Calves	6	13	4
Item one little Swine Hogge	0	10	0

Item the Hay, & some Barley and pease in the <u>Barne</u>		4 . 0 . 0
Item 19 Sheepe young & old		5 . 0 . 0
Item some timber wood worke about		0 . 6 . 8
Item some old Wheeles & a little old Course wooll with the pullen & other things unseen unprised and forgotten		0 . 5 . 0
Taken & prised by us		
Thomas Oswin	Suma total	33 . 0 . 0
Will Oswin		
Geo: Ellyott		

*Linda Hall*

<sup>9</sup> Skillington, Florence E., Post-Medieval Cossington IV, *Trans Leicestershire Antiq Archaeol Soc* 19 1936-7, p. 10 of the PDF

<sup>10</sup> **Furdale** or firdale – a plank of fir (Dictionary of Scottish Building)

<sup>11</sup> **Ticknall ware** is pottery from Ticknall, Derbyshire, common across the Midlands

<sup>12</sup> **Warping vat**: British-History.ac.uk: A term that appears only once in the Dictionary Archive as '1 winding mill and warping vat' [Inventories (1720)]. The OED has both 'Warpfat' and 'Warping vat' and suggests both may be variant names for a warping trough. Another possibility is that it was a name for a vessel in which the size was kept for soaking the skeins of warp before they were placed on the warping bar. *Yorkshire Historical Dictionary*: a textile term, the vat in which the warp could be placed, probably for sizing. 'ii lomes his warpinfat' in John Syther's will 1578 and '2 lomes 11 peire of geires...