

The aim of this brief introduction to the third and final selection of Bristol probate inventories from the records of the Bristol deanery is to consider some of the issues and opportunities associated with the large-scale analysis of inventories in the study of Bristol history. It will complement the discussions in the two previous volumes in the series, and in the introduction to the Guide produced by Edwin and Stella George in 1988.<sup>i</sup> In particular, it will not consider the use of inventories to study urban housing, as Roger Leech has already illuminated this, both in his previous introduction and in his work based on the inventories.<sup>ii</sup> However, in one respect his research exemplifies a central theme here, namely that inventories are best understood, and best used, when they are combined with other sources. This not only helps one to allow for, and to some extent overcome, the limits in inventory data, but also helps one to understand the inventories themselves better, by placing each document in the context of time, place and family circumstance in which it was created.

Apart from Roger Leech, only two historians have made extensive use of Bristol inventories, namely the present author and Carl Estabrook, who made them central to his comparative analysis of Bristol and its rural hinterland between 1660 and 1780.<sup>iii</sup> Both of us have focused largely on the household possessions found within the inventories, and especially those with a cultural or ‘luxury’ dimension. Such a focus has been typical of much of the recent work using inventories, which has used them to study ‘consumption’ in general, and the growth of certain new types of consumption in particular.<sup>iv</sup> However, it is important to stress that other urban historians have successfully used inventories in a range of other ways, and that the latest and most sophisticated projects using inventories have tried to integrate a range of themes. In particular, they have sought to see production, consumption and retailing as multiple aspects of ‘household’ economies in early modern England, all of which need to be understood together if we are to unlock the full range of information contained within probate inventories.<sup>v</sup> There are endless opportunities for such an approach to be applied to the Bristol material.

It is perhaps odd that Bristol inventories have not been more exploited, given that two historians based in Bristol made pioneering use of them, namely Patrick McGrath in his collections of material on Bristol merchants, and John Moore in his work on the Bristol rural hinterland.<sup>vi</sup> Both of these authors saw the opportunity to use inventories to illuminate the nature of particular occupational groups, or of specific communities. This was typical of the early use of inventories by urban and rural historians in general, prior to the emergence of three specialist themes within the study of inventories, namely the nature of housing, the nature and spread of agricultural crops and technologies, and, as noted above, the spread of a consumer society. By and large, integrated urban studies using inventories have tended to focus on smaller towns, with very little recent work on the major regional centres, or on London.<sup>vii</sup> In part this is a consequence of the laudable desire to connect inventory data with other sources, since the larger and more diverse the community, the harder this is to achieve. However, recent work on Liverpool offers a significant comparison which Bristol historians may wish to follow, especially in relation to the marine economy.<sup>viii</sup> Here Bristol has, for the first half of the eighteenth century, a very distinctive source, in the shape of the 1486 inventories which record the wages due to mariners on Bristol ships, though these cannot really be compared with probate

inventories proper (a substantial proportion of which relate to those in marine occupations, of course).

As these 'wages due' inventories suggest, however, there are some complex issues associated with comparing inventories. Any comparison of the Bristol inventories before and after 1704 which did not exclude such inventories from data on wealth or household possessions, or simply counted occupational percentages, would be completely misleading. Many of the other inventories lack information on the occupations of those inventoried. A smaller proportion do not specify which parish within the Bristol deanery they are from, which causes problems if one tries to compare urban and rural patterns, as Estabrook does. Indeed, it is not straightforward to separate rural and urban areas: Estabrook treats Clifton and Barton Regis as part of the rural hinterland, but in my own analysis I have treated them as part of the city, as they were increasingly suburbs of Bristol. There are also major differences in the information provided within each inventory. These particularly effect one's ability to compare overall wealth of individuals or groups, or to study the changing significance of wealth held in different forms. It is well known that freehold property was not included in inventories, though the value of leaseholds and other bonds can be (but how consistently?), but a large proportion of the wealth identified in many inventories is in the form of debts owed to the deceased. How far these should be included in measures of wealth is a very complex question. Debts are often divided into 'sperate' and 'desperate', reflecting the different levels of hope (spes in Latin) that they would be honoured – are 'desperate' debts really a part of wealth? On the other hand, except in the small minority of cases where we have probate accounts (115 urban cases), we cannot know what debts were owed by the deceased: any overall measure of wealth should obviously deduct debts owing from those due, but this cannot normally be done.<sup>ix</sup> Furthermore, some occupations, like shopkeeping, require large investment in a stock of goods which are valued within an inventory, while others (including wealthy groups like merchants and lawyers) may not.

More fundamentally, it is very unlikely that these inventories capture either a majority, or even a representative sample, of Bristol society. They are largely restricted to adult heads of household (86% male, and almost all the rest widows). Given how goods owned will vary across the lifecycle (building up into middle age, and then perhaps being dispersed, and of course often reflecting items inherited or bought long before they are inventoried), issues such as the age at death of those inventoried and pre-death distribution of items will be crucial. It is particularly interesting to compare the inventories of a dying man with that of his widow later, to see which items have remained in her possession. Inventories were not required of the poor with no possessions to pass on, and were much more likely to be taken in some kinds of probate circumstance than others: this applies particularly at the end of the period, when many of the surviving inventories are found in 'cause papers' reflecting a disputed probate. Above all, the inventories surviving in the Bristol probate registry are only those which were proved in Bristol. Probate cases involving property in several dioceses (and Bristol bordered Bath and Wells diocese and was not far from Gloucester, and had many traders with property in other places) were proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, and are now housed at The National Archives. Between 1663 and 1780, I would estimate that inventories for about 370

Bristolians are held in London, with a further 75 or so between 1780 and 1838 (when there are almost none in Bristol). These will include many of the wealthiest in each occupation and period.

If we look at the basic inventory data in light of these considerations, we can get a broad sense of how representative the inventories will be. Only 11 inventories survive before 1609, for which year 84 survive for the whole deanery. Numbers then stabilise at about 33 pa in the 1610s and 50 pa between 1620 and 1650, of whom about 28 pa were urban. Very few survive for the 1650s, when the probate system was disrupted. 1660-89 sees the high point of full inventories in Bristol, with 60-64 pa in the deanery, of which 35-41 pa are urban, plus the first PCC inventories for about 5 Bristol residents pa from 1663. The 1690s saw a fall in the number of inventories, with 44 pa in the deanery, of which about 27 pa are urban. Excluding the 'wages only' mariner's inventories, the numbers then continue to fall in the deanery with about 33 pa 1700-19 (of which 18-21 are urban), then 16-18 pa 1720-309 (9-11 pa urban), and then ten or less pa after 1740, of whom only about 6 pa are urban, until 1764, after which the surviving inventories in Bristol are found in cause papers or family materials, not in the main probate bundles. PCC inventories of Bristolians, by contrast, continue at about 3 per annum throughout the eighteenth century. My own study, which took about a 40% sample (211 of c.550) 1620-39, and then all surviving inventories for Bristol 1640-1769 (2454), looked at 2665 inventories, excluding those obviously incomplete – if one added the PCC inventories, that would imply about 3370 full Bristol inventories surviving for the period 1620-1769.

How does that compare with the total population? During the 1620-1769 period there are probably about 8700 wills held locally, of which about two-thirds (c.5800) are urban, and a further 4500 for Bristolians in the PCC files. (It is fairly astonishing that more than 40% of all surviving Bristol wills for this period are PCC ones.) The will-leaving population will themselves be only a skewed subset of all the adults dying (nationally it is estimated that perhaps 15-20% of adult males left wills in the early seventeenth century), but even within this group it looks as if we only have just over five inventories for every ten wills proved locally (3000/5800), and less than a tenth of the PCC probates (370/4500). This makes it even odder than only about 50% of the locally proved inventories matches up with a surviving will. Out of a total of about 11800 Bristolians who have left a surviving will or inventory, only about 1870 (about one sixth) have left both, with a further 1500 or so (about one in eight) leaving only an inventory, and the remaining 8430 (71%: 4300 local and 4130 PCC) only leaving a will. This would suggest that our surviving inventories are likely to cover less than ten percent of the adult male Bristolians who died during this period. They are likely to be best representative of the middling sorts, with the poor excluded by lack of wealth, and the richest more likely to be in the (proportionally much less inventoried) PCC class. It would be extremely interesting if someone was to look both at parish registers and at available tax data, like the hearth taxes or the 1696 marriage duty lists, to see what percentage of adult Bristolians do leave a probate record, and how this varies by location and wealth.

If we look at the wealth characteristics of my own Bristol study (bearing in mind the reservations expressed above about measuring 'wealth'), then we can see some basic

patterns. As table 1 shows, throughout the period 1620-1767 (though with only 64 cases after 1739), just under 25% of the non-PCC full inventories were valued at less than £10, just over 25% at £10-24, a further 35% more at £25-99, leaving 20% at £100 or over, of which a tiny 3% were worth over £500. By and large these distributions, especially that of 50% being under £25, remained consistent, although the smaller numbers in the eighteenth century led to some greater variability, and there is a small upward drift in values, though mostly in the early decades when inflation might lead one to expect this (the period 1650-1750 saw general price stability). The most significant variation on this pattern came in the 1690s, when the proportion of inventories in the bottom category rises to 35%. Given the disruptions to the Bristol economy caused by war, taxation and credit problems in the 1690s, it is possible that this dip (from which the inventories gradually recover in the early eighteenth century) represents a true fall in Bristolian wealth, but it could be a sampling shift. Given that, as discussed below, there is a broad tendency for any type of goods to be held more by the wealthier groups, it is important for any study that compares ownership of particular goods over time to be aware of the possible effects of these shifts in wealth proportions.

Many of these considerations are significant when considering the most extensive analysis of Bristol data, namely that provided by Carl Estabrook. Estabrook (like me) does not include PCC inventories in his sample. His analysis employs a number of different subsamples, usually organized into three time periods (1660-1699, 1700-39 and 1740-80). In all he considers 4752 urban and rural inventories 1660-1780, of which 3787 cases are within the core 1660-1739 period (2637 urban and 1150 rural). Of these 1711 are 1700-39, 1337 urban and 374 rural, but this includes a large number of the 'wages only' mariners inventories (probably about 800), so in terms of full inventories, the ratio is more like 537 urban to 374 rural, more like the 1660-99 ratio of 1300 urban to 776 rural. Within these groups, Estabrook has two sub-groups. One is what he calls his 'comparison group' of 1455 inventories, of which 1419 have a known location, which are the inventories with significant presence of luxury goods, debts and credit provisions. His wealth distributions are based on this group of 1455 inventories only; it is interesting to note that they include a disproportionate number of women (22% compared to a norm of about 15% of all inventories). Within this group, 1020 are identified as a further group owning 'luxury items' (915 in the period 1660-1740). When considering his arguments about change over time, or about urban-rural distinctions, it is very important to look carefully at which of these groups he is using (and the implications of not including PCC inventories).

There is insufficient space here to offer a close analysis of the changing contents of the Bristol inventories, but three further tables drawn from my own work may indicate the potential for close analysis of differences in time and wealth. Table 2 shows overall ownership of four types of goods, namely books, pictures, timepieces and musical instruments. It will be seen that there are very different patterns of change over time, with books and musical instruments, if they exhibit a pattern at all, tending to decline in frequency over time, pictures showing no linear trend until the early eighteenth century, but then rising rapidly, while the ownership of timepieces grows steadily throughout the period. As both Estabrook and I have looked in more detail at the evidence for books and

music elsewhere, I will offer here some further detail on the other two categories. Tables 3 and 4 show the percentage ownership of pictures and timepieces broken down by valuation range (that is, the total valuation of the inventory), and in the case of timepieces, between clocks and watches. For ease of reading, I have only given percentages, except for the total column, where the absolute numbers help to remind us how small the samples can be in certain decades, especially after 1720.

Clocks and watches were relatively valuable: mostly over £1, depending on age, material of casing and, for clocks, length of operation between winding (8-day or 30-hour being the two standards). Hence we can expect them to be noted by all appraisers, unlike the cheaper hourglasses or dials, costing only a few pence, which they gradually replaced. Over the whole period, 119 people owned clocks and 104 watches (and larums, a type of hanging watch), between 4 and 5% of the whole sample. However, ownership was heavily concentrated in the period after 1710 when numbers of inventories fell. Watches were slightly more common than clocks before 1710, but both were under 2.5%, but after then over 17% have clocks and 12.5% watches, with twice those proportions in the very small samples after 1740. Interestingly, these trends are visible within each valuation range, and equally the proportion of timepieces owned (especially clocks) is always higher as the valuation ranges increase. It seems that watches may have been more common among the very rich before 1670, when the rest had neither, but thereafter watches became more widely available to different wealth groups than clocks. In terms of occupations, gentlemen and the professions seem to have had a particularly high proportion while bakers, for obvious practical reasons, seem to have had timepieces of all kinds. Similar practical concerns may explain why, after 1680, the kitchen was the favoured spot for the clock, although others were found early on in hall, lobby or gallery, and later in parlour, dining room or forestreet chamber, or on a passage or stairs. Sadly the inventories throw little light on the craftsmen who enabled this 'revolution in time'.<sup>x</sup> The only inventories being those for Thomas Browne, who died in 1680, and his widow, who kept up the business till her death in 1684. In 1680 the shop contained postdials at 6d each, watches in various stages of completion valued at £2 or so, an old clock worth 15s and an old watch and larum worth 10s.<sup>xi</sup> In 1684 there were 2 hanging dials at 10s and £1, a brass striking clock at £1 5s, and 4 brass watches and one silver valued in all at £2 5s, which seems a very low valuation.

In contrast with timepieces, the category of 'pictures' is much more varied, with a strong likelihood that the cheaper woodcuts and prints would have been ignored or classed in with other 'lumber'. The mean price of 1717 pictures priced is 14.68d, but the great majority of those listed are valued at less than a shilling, more often 6d or less, and were probably engravings, woodcuts or paper prints. The most valuable were the three family pictures valued at £4 10s of the joiner Charles Foxell in 1739. All pictures were probably valued (certainly by the appraisers, and maybe by their owners) as much for their frames and glazing as their artwork, probably being assessed along with the many looking glasses, whose gilt and ornateness determined their worth. It is often difficult to judge, except by prices, what the term 'pictures' signified, as it could be used to describe prints as well as paintings, although after 1710 the terms prints or 'paper pictures' are used more often. Both the rising numbers and the falling value of the pictures in eighteenth-

century homes are probably associated with the spreading availability of prints, rather than a growth in paintings. Before that, as the table shows, there is no clear pattern, with the percentage of inventories with pictures rising until 1670, then falling dramatically to the 1690s, before rising steadily until a majority of the very small sample after 1740 have pictures. As with timepieces, ownership increased with wealth, although pictures were more widespread, with the only clear break in valuation ranges coming with the poorest group (under £10). But picture values varied enormously, and those with pictures worth over £1 or with a great number, were always worth at least £50 and usually more. The average value of the pictures in an inventory with them is just under ten shillings, less than half a per cent of the average total value of such an inventory. The decline in overall ownership around the 1690s is partly caused by the growing proportion of inventories in the lower wealth categories at that period, but the same broad chronological trends can be seen within each valuation range, except perhaps the wealthiest, whose purchasing appears to have changed least over time. Pictures were always more scattered around the house than clocks, but they are most commonly found in the front rooms, such as forestreet chamber or parlour (or the hall in the earlier decades), or perhaps in dining rooms, although the kitchen becomes more common as pictures get cheaper. Within each room they were often found above the fireplace, on what was called in Bristol the ‘clavy’.<sup>xii</sup>

The inventories of those designated ‘painters’ throw little light on which, if any, of them might have helped fill Bristol’s walls with pictures. The only with any detailed list of pictures was John Roseworthe, who was probably only passing through Bristol when he died in 1675, although like travel artists (often called ‘miners’ he may have worked in Bristol. His estate included: 18 pictures ‘of the best sort’ at £18; ‘Three Roman ladies giving their father suck’ £3; ‘6 faces ordinary and 8 better’ £4 15s; 8 ‘landskips’ for £3 and one ‘large old landskip’ 7s 6d; various pictures of battles or leading military figures, including Cromwell (Roseworthe had been a Parliamentary colonel and military engineer) for between 5s and 15s; parcel of prints of all sorts 15s; and assorted canvasses, imperfect pieces, pencils, paints and drugs, making up most of his total wealth of £47.<sup>xiii</sup> Two of his appraisers were Bristol painters, one of whom, John Beville ‘armes painter’ (i.e. heraldic painter) died 3 years later worth £69 17s 6d., but it is not clear whether the five large and fourteen small paintings (part of a group of items valued at £3 2s 8d) he left in his hall were part of his stock in trade or his household furnishings.<sup>xiv</sup> The same decade also saw the death, in 1677, of the most wealthy painter, Richard Jordan, whose inventory was valued at £231 2s 10d, and who had a ‘house in the Park’ with five pictures and a scutcheon, worth 10s, as well a dwelling house in Broad Street, but there is no sign of any trade in pictures. William Berrow, who died in 1725 worth £25 10s, had 37 large and small pictures in his parlour, valued at £5, and a further £5 worth of ‘oil and colours’ in the kitchen next to the pavement. Probably his work was largely in decorating, although he may have done work gilding and decorating monuments, as may Walton Short, who left £76 in 1758, as in addition to ‘an oyle pot’ and red paint, he has stone mallets, carver’s tools an old glass and diamond.

The utilitarian character of these inventories should remind us that, however interesting it is to trace unusual types of goods, or unusual occupations, the vast majority of the items

recorded in inventories, and the great majority of occupations they can help us to study, are much more practical, and that the proportion of inventoried wealth devoted to the luxury items was always very small. Overall it is clear that in Bristol, as everywhere, the vast bulk of household investment was on textiles, in the form of clothing, bedding, table linen and coverings for floors, walls, sideboards, tables, chairs and windowseats, or metal utensils, with the most valuable items in many houses the gold and silver utensils and plate. The dominance of these two sets of items provides the underlying continuity in inventories, reminding us that we are still observing an artisanal culture in which the craft production of items of cloth and metal predominated. But this should be taken to signify that these items lacked ornament and artistry, or remained unchanged. From the earliest inventories many of them were highly decorated – textiles with embroidery, needlework or gilt. Over time, however, further forms of specialization and development can be discerned. Textiles, for example, became diversified both in fabrics (satin, silk and calico) and in colours (with the overwhelming green colouring of early houses joined by a rainbow of colours), leading to the fashion for colour-coordinated rooms, with printed paper fittings joining tapestries and painted floorcloths. An equally important change was taking place in the kitchen, as a range of new utensils and heating devices changed the fundamentals of cooking, even more significantly that the appearance of coffee items (from the 1680s) and tea (from the 1710s).

It is to be hoped that these selections from Bristol's inventories, which have been made accessible to us by the painstaking work of Edwin and Stella George, will inspire others to undertake research in the numerous areas of Bristol life which they can (in conjunction with other sources, if possible) do so much to illuminate.

---

<sup>i</sup> Edwin and Stella George, 1988, *Guide to the probate inventories of the Bristol deanery of the diocese of Bristol (1542-1804)*, Bristol: Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society.

<sup>ii</sup> Roger Leech, Introduction, in ed. Edwin and Stella George, *Bristol Probate Inventories 1657-1689*, *Bristol Record Society*, 57, ix-xiv and references therein.

<sup>iii</sup> Carl Estabrook, 1998, *Urbane and rustic England: cultural ties and social spheres in the provinces 1660-1780*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Jonathan Barry, 1985, *The Cultural Life of Bristol 1640-1775*, Oxford University D.Phil thesis; 1985, *Popular culture in seventeenth-century Bristol*, in ed., Barry Reay, *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, Beckenham: Croom Helm, 59-90; 1991, *The press and the politics of culture in Bristol, 1660-1775*, in ed. Jeremy Black and Jeremy Gregory, *Culture, Politics and Society in Britain 1660-1800*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 49-81; 1993, *Cultural patronage and the Anglican crisis: Bristol c.1689-1775*, in ed., John Walsh et al. *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 191-208

<sup>iv</sup> Lorna Weatherill, 1988, *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain, 1660-1760*, London and New York: Routledge.

---

<sup>v</sup> Tom Arkell et al., ed., 2002, *When death do us part : understanding and interpreting the probate records of early modern England*, Oxford: Leopard's Head, 285-305; Mark Overton et al., 2004, *Production and consumption in English households, 1600-1750*, London: Routledge.

<sup>vi</sup> Patrick McGrath, ed., 1955, Merchants and merchandise in seventeenth-century Bristol, *Bristol Record Society*, **19**, 71-100; John S. Moore, ed., 1981, *Clifton and Westbury probate inventories 1609-1761*, Bristol: Bristol University; John S. Moore, ed., 1976, *The goods and chattels of our forefathers : Frampton Cotterell and district probate inventories, 1539-1804*, Chichester: Phillimore:

<sup>vii</sup> Some important studies of larger towns are: Alan Dyer, 1973, *The city of Worcester in the sixteenth century*, Leicester: Leicester University Press; Michael Reed, 1981, Ipswich probate inventories, 1583-1631. *Suffolk Record Society*, **22**; 1981, Economic structure and change in seventeenth-century Ipswich, in ed. Peter Clark, *Country towns in pre-industrial England*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 87-141; J. A. Johnston, ed., 1991, Probate inventories of Lincoln citizens, 1661-1714, *Lincoln Record Society*, **80**; David Hey, 1991, *The fiery blades of Hallamshire: Sheffield and its neighbourhood 1660-1740*, Leicester: Leicester University Press; John Beckett and Catherine Smith, 2000, Urban renaissance and consumer revolution in Nottingham, 1688-1750, *Urban History*, **27**, 31-50; Lorna Scammell, 2000, Town versus country : the property of everyday consumption in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in ed. Jon Stobart and Alastair Owens, *Urban fortunes : property and inheritance in the town, 1700-1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate), 26-49.

<sup>viii</sup> Diana E. Ascott, Fiona Lewis and Michael Power, 2006, *Liverpool 1660-1750 : people, prosperity and power*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

<sup>ix</sup> Peter Spufford, ed., 1999, Index to the probate accounts of England and Wales, 2 vols, *Index Library* **112 and 113**.

<sup>x</sup> John Landes, 1983, *Revolution in time: clocks and the making of the modern world*, London: Bellknapp Press of Harvard University Press.

<sup>xi</sup> Inventory no. 70 in Edwin and Stella George, ed., Bristol Probate Inventories 1657-1689, *Bristol Record Society*, **57**, 107-8.

<sup>xii</sup> Compare Carol Gibson-Wood, 2002, Picture consumption in London at the end of the seventeenth century, *The Art Bulletin*, **84**, 491-500.

<sup>xiii</sup> Inventory no. 50 in Edwin and Stella George, ed., Bristol Probate Inventories 1657-1689, *Bristol Record Society*, **57**, 78-9

<sup>xiv</sup> Inventory no. 57 in Edwin and Stella George, ed., Bristol Probate Inventories 1657-1689, *Bristol Record Society*, **57**, 89-90