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ABSTRACT

The amateur appraisers who prepared probate inventories were commentators on social and economic change in early modern England. This article considers the form these sources took, to illuminate the thinking of appraisers and the social context of appraising. Although historians recognise the limitations of inventories, they have paid little attention to them as records of the act of appraisal. Through a case study of one seventeenth-century town – Thame in Oxfordshire – individual styles of appraising are explored. Inventories were representations, based on conscious reflection about how to arrange these ordered lists. Appraising had its own history, and approaches changed over time in response to the growing number of household goods and spaces. Broad participation supported a culture of appraisal, but a small number of mostly better-off individuals were often able to control the process, using specialist skills. The study of appraisal brings to life the cooper Andrew Parslow, the town's dominant appraiser in the late seventeenth century, who devised an entirely new 'summary' format, and whose standing in society depended upon his role as an appraiser. Parslow's practice is significant in demonstrating how appraisers devised new ways of representing material culture during the century, as their understandings of possessions changed.

Probate inventories are valuable sources for the information they provide about the ownership of household goods, and historians of consumption and material culture have mined them extensively.[1] Research has focused primarily on their content rather than their form. The cultural significance of the acts of appraisal through which they were created has not been considered as a subject in its own right. This article asks whether new insights can be gained from these familiar sources by considering them from the viewpoint of those who prepared them, taking them as records not only of what appraisers saw but also of how they worked and what they thought. The usefulness of inventories for the study of

consumption is reduced because they provide a snapshot of an individual's possessions only at the end of life. Yet it has less often been observed that they also offer a snapshot of the event of appraisal, and thus a written record of the work and reflections of the individuals who prepared them. Appraisers were commentators on the goods they viewed, although their 'commentary' is necessarily highly formal and selective. Through the documents they prepared we may catch glimpses of how they understood the material culture of their time. This article considers how the form of inventories changed during the seventeenth century, through a detailed case study of a single town, and asks what this reveals about appraisal as a social and cultural process.

Appraisers were witnesses to economic and social change. There is general agreement among historians that consumption was rising from around 1550 onwards, as evidenced by the growing number and variety of goods recorded by inventories.[2] Households were becoming more embedded in the market, for which they produced goods and upon which they came to rely as consumers. Domestic material culture also changed, as households embraced new standards of comfort and designs of furniture, although there were differences between regions, town and country, and social groups.[3] Historians have debated whether the later seventeenth century saw the transformation of the nature and scale of consumption. For Jan de Vries, this period marked the beginning of an 'industrious revolution', in which a 'transformation of consumer desire' motivated households to work harder so that they could buy and sell more goods on the market.[4] In an innovative study that turns attention from inventories to statements of personal worth collected in ecclesiastical court depositions, Alexandra Shepard has argued that the period witnessed a fundamental realignment in the relationship between people and things. According to Shepard, there was a 'culture of appraisal' in early modern England, so that individuals were able to assess their own social worth. For most people in the early seventeenth century, the cash value of their moveable property was the main yardstick for the process of social estimation. In the late seventeenth century, she argues, possessions became at least as important as signifiers of status, as distinctive objects of display, as they were as repositories of wealth.[5] Probate inventories would seem to be the ideal source to confirm whether there was a 'culture of appraisal'. Not only was their purpose to determine an individual's worth in personal property, and so to facilitate the payment of any debts, but their preparation required neighbours to draw upon their own experience to estimate the value (market price) of these goods. The preparation of inventories depended upon the existence of a 'culture of appraisal' in early modern England, and also helped to create and reinforce it.

Historians have long been aware of the limitations and inconsistencies of probate inventories, which were rooted in law, convention, and practice.[6] The law defined which types of property should be included, and which should not. Due to the omission of

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[2]K. Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, 2000); C. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Houndmills, 1998).

[3]Overton *et al.*, *op. cit.*; Weatherill, *op. cit.*; C. B. Estabrook, *Urban and Rustic England: Cultural Ties and Social Spheres in the Provinces 1660–1760* (Manchester, 1998).

[4]J. de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution* (Cambridge, 2008); but see Overton *et al.*, *op. cit.*

[5]A. Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2015).

[6]M. Spufford, 'The limitations of the probate inventory' in J. Chartres and D. Hey (eds), *English Rural Society, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1990), 139–74; J. S. Moore, 'Probate inventories: problems and prospects' in P. Riden (ed.), *Probate Records and the Local Community* (Gloucester, 1985), 11–28; Overton *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 18, 31, 89. The best guide to probate and inventories is J. Cox and N. Cox, 'Probate 1500–1800: a system in transition' in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose (eds), *When Death Do Us Part* (Oxford, 2000), 14–37.

important categories of property, inventories provide an incomplete record of individual wealth and household contents, as has often been observed. Since they include only the possessions of the deceased, they omit other goods present within the house, such as the *bona paraphernalia*, or personal goods, of a surviving widow. As a result inventories cannot be taken as transparent texts. Lena Orlin warns that they should be read anecdotally and with scepticism, since neither the valuations of goods, the lists of rooms, nor the details of objects were necessarily accurate or complete.[7] These 'failures' of recording were the consequence of the legal framework within which they operated. Yet differences between appraisers were also a significant source of inconsistency.

It is tempting to blame the inconsistencies of inventories on the slapdash methods of some individuals whose principal motive was speed rather than thoroughness. Disparities between appraisers have also been attributed to unconscious differences in 'embodied knowledges', due to variations in knowledge and technique.[8] Insufficient allowance has been made for the possibility that differences were the result, not of carelessness or ignorance, but of deliberate decisions about how to represent goods, taken after a process of reflection and negotiation among appraisers and with family members. Giorgio Riello is one of the few historians who have looked at 'inventorying' for its own sake, in a study of early modern Europe. This article follows Riello in seeing inventories as 'subjective representations', which reveal the strategies of their creators.[9] It is based on a case study of one town, Thame in Oxfordshire, during the seventeenth century. As will become clear, the study of appraising is challenging. A detailed study of a single place enables the practice of individuals to be studied in depth and compared with the practices of others, but it also raises questions of typicality due to the lack of any regional dimension. Yet, through a local study of the practice of appraisers, we can gain a better understanding of how they viewed the world of goods.

Thame was a small market town in Oxfordshire, with a population of around 1800. Like many small towns, its economy depended on the surrounding countryside. In the seventeenth century it was home to markets for cattle, wool, and other agricultural products.[10] Around forty per cent of the men who went through probate had agrarian statuses, such as yeoman and husbandman. Over forty crafts and trades, from butcher to tailor, were also represented. In addition to parochial government, expressed through a busy vestry, the town still had active manorial courts which regulated markets, drainage, and petty offences. Thame is small enough to permit detailed analysis, but large enough to permit variations between individuals and over time to be studied. As a small peculiar, it administered probate independently from the jurisdiction of an archdeacon, and had its own court, sometimes presided over by the vicar as surrogate. The 335 probate inventories

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[7]L. C. Orlin, 'Fictions of the early modern English probate inventory', in H. S. Turner (ed.), *The Culture of Capital* (New York, 2002), 51–83. See also D. G. Vaisey (ed.), *Probate Inventories of Lichfield and District 1568–1680* (Stafford, 1969), 3–5.

[8]A. B. Evans, 'Enlivening the archive: glimpsing embodied consumption practices in probate inventories of household possessions', *Historical Geography* 36 (2008), 40–72, esp. 51.

[9]G. Riello, '"Things seen and unseen": the material culture of early modern inventories and their representation of domestic interiors' in P. Findlen (ed.), *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke, 2013), 125–50. See also M. R. Brown, III, 'The behavioral context of probate inventories' in M. C. Beaudry (ed.), *Documentary Archaeology in the New World* (Cambridge, 1988), 79–92; M. Johnson, *An Archaeology of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1996).

[10]P. Clark and J. Hosking, *Population Estimates of English Small Towns 1550–1851*, revised edition (Leicester, 1993), 117–18, using figures from Compton Census of 1676. On Thame's economy and occupational structure, see Victoria County History, *A History of Oxfordshire* (London, 1962), vol. 7, 178–85; P. Motla, 'The occupational structure of Thame, 1600–1700', *Oxfordshire Local History* 4 (1994), 62–77. See also A. Dyer, 'Small market towns, 1540–1700' in P. Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 2000), 425–50.

that survive from the period provide the basis for this study, supplemented by other local records and contemporary guides to practice.[11]

Several features of inventories suggest that their form and preparation deserve detailed consideration. Although they represented an official record, they were not written by officials or notaries, as they were elsewhere in Europe. Their preparation by amateurs made possible variation within, and even outside, the frameworks of law and convention, and involved hundreds of individuals with no formal training. Inventories were formal in nature, but they were not formulaic, exhibiting significant differences in organization, suggesting that appraisers had a degree of discretion. How this worked in practice, given that inventories were prepared by several individuals, is unclear. These documents offer insights into local social relationships, because their production depended upon the cooperation of others. Appraisers operated within local frameworks of status and authority, but appraising, like local office, could also be a source of status.[12]

Yet the task of interpreting the views of appraisers from the records they left is not straightforward, and the results may seem disappointing. Inventories are austere documents, offering little scope for recording personal impressions. Possessions were briefly described at best, with 'old' being the most common descriptive adjective.[13] Whereas wills enable the study of relationships with family, friends and servants through the bequest of 'best' and 'second best' clothing and other objects, inventories lack information about relationships or the personal meanings of particular objects.[14] During the seventeenth century, the range of household goods was limited, with few that were novel or luxuries. Inventories also provide few details about the appraisers who prepared them beyond their names and signatures or marks. Often it is not even certain whether the 'signatures' at the bottom of the page were written by the appraisers themselves or by a scribe. Although further information can be gained through record linkage with other local records, such as tax records and vestry resolutions, even this process is limited by families' habit of re-using first names in generation after generation. Perhaps the largest methodological obstacle is disentangling the contents of a house from the stylistic traits of particular appraisers, particularly since appraisers rarely worked on their own. This is possible only through comparison of several inventories prepared by the same person, a daunting task even in a study of a small town. In order to study the practice of particular appraisers, I have analysed the handwriting of the signatures and text of inventories, looking for distinctive letter forms, something that is only feasible in a community study.[15]

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[11]The original inventories are held by the Oxfordshire History Centre (OHC), Oxfordshire Diocesan Records: Wills and Probate Documents for Peculiar Jurisdictions 1547–1856, PEC, and The National Archives (TNA), Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB. The 'Thame Inventories Database' [data collection] (2016), http://researchdata.gla.ac.uk/312/, was constructed from transcripts kindly provided by Mary Hodges and the Thame History Research Group. See also J. Bell, M. Bell, D. Bretherton, J. Cray, H. Fickling, L. Grof, D. Hammond, A. Hawkins, M. Hodges, P. Motla and P. Williams, 'Thame, Oxfordshire in the Seventeenth Century' [data collection] (2000), UK Data Service, SN: 4132, http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-4132-1. The Thame inventories are the basis for A. Buxton, *Domestic Culture in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2015).

[12]J. Kent, 'The rural "middling sort" in early modern England, circa 1640–1740: some economic, political and socio-cultural characteristics', *Rural History*, 10 (1999), 19–54.

[13]'Thame Inventories Database', *op. cit.* See also M. C. Beaudry, 'Words for things: the linguistic analysis of probate inventories' in Beaudry, *Documentary Archaeology*, *op. cit.*, 43–60; Overton *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 114–16.

[14]M. Berg, 'Women's consumption and the industrial classes of eighteenth-century England', *Journal of Social History*, 30 (1996), 415–34; E. Salter, 'Reworked material: discourses of clothing culture in early sixteenth-century Greenwich' in C. Richardson (ed.), *Clothing Culture, 1350–1650* (2004), 177–91; but see L. C. Orlin, 'Empty vessels' in T. Hamling and C. Richardson (eds), *Everyday Objects* (Burlington VT, 2010), 299–308.

[15]For a similar methodology used with wills, see M. Spufford, *Contrasting Communities* (Cambridge, 1974), ch. 13.

This article is not intended to provide yet another warning of the dangers of relying too heavily upon probate inventories. Its purpose is to demonstrate that further information about consumption and material culture can be gleaned by considering the form of inventories and the practice of appraising. The article will start by demonstrating why inventories should be viewed as representations, created through a process of conscious reflection, and will show that approaches to appraising changed over time. Next, the local social context within which these documents were prepared will be explored, through analysis of who appraised, who controlled the process, and how. This will confirm that there was a 'culture of appraisal', which operated within the framework of status and authority. Finally, the article will consider the practice of a single individual, Andrew Parslow, who was the dominant appraiser in Thame in the second half of the seventeenth century. As will be demonstrated, Parslow devised an entirely new inventory format, and his changing practice reveals how his understandings of household goods developed over time.

'A discription or Repertorie'

'An Inventory is a discription or Repertorie, orderly made of all dead mens goods and Chattels.' So wrote William West in the *First Part of Simboleography*, a formulary first published in 1598. This was one of a small number of handbooks available to executors and appraisers, although appraising was the primary subject of none of them. In Henry Swinburne's well-known *Brief Treatise of Testaments and Last Wills*, the preparation of the inventory seems an afterthought in a work which devotes most of its pages to probate and property law.[16] *Simboleography* devoted only two pages to inventories, but was the only contemporary guide to show appraisers what an inventory should look like. To seventeenth-century readers, a 'Repertory' was both a treasury (although this usage was often figurative) and a list that was ordered systematically, meanings which neatly summarized the purposes of the probate inventory.[17] As a treasury, it treated the personal estate of the deceased as a store of value, a list of goods which could be sold to pay debts and bequests, through the thriving second-hand market.[18] As an ordered list, it served as a finding aid like an index or a catalogue. This may have served the practical function of helping executors to locate and identify particular goods, but it also had an intellectual aspect. It was up to the appraisers to decide how to list possessions, ordering them according to whatever system they chose.

Most inventories look similar to the example in *Simboleography*. After a prefatory paragraph, with the names of the deceased and appraisers and the date of appraisal, the body of the document lists household goods, money, apparel, tools, merchandise, corn, cattle, leases, and debts as a succession of grouped items, each assigned a value. The names of the appraisers, and often their signatures, appear again at end. In practice every inventory was different in its contents and organization. Of course, the main reason inventories varied is

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[16]W. West, *The First Part of Simboleography, which may be termed the Art, or description, of Instruments and Presidents* (London, 1598), sections 1, 354; H. Swinburne, *A Brief Treatise of Testaments and Last Wills* (York, 1590); both were published in multiple editions. R. Burn, *Ecclesiastical Law* (London, 1763) borrows liberally from Swinburne.
[17]*OED Online* (Oxford University Press, December 2015), accessed 6 February 2016.
[18]B. Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life* (Manchester, 2005); L. Fontaine (ed.), *Alternative Exchanges* (New York, 2008); B. Blonde, P. Stabel, J. Stobart and I. van Damme (eds), *Buyers and Sellers: Retail Circuits and Practices Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout, 2006).

that they described different houses and goods, but another lay in the decisions appraisers took in how they chose to represent the goods they saw.

If different men appraised the same goods, they might organize the inventories very differently, as is demonstrated by a rare example surviving from seventeenth-century Thame. Two inventories were prepared four months apart for the widow Elizabeth Eldridge, who died on 2 February 1670. The first inventory was prepared a week later, on 9 February, before she was even buried; the second was taken by new appraisers on 31 May.[19] We do not know why two inventories were needed, or why both survive in the probate records. Perhaps the first inventory was temporarily misplaced or there were questions about its validity. There was certainly a delay in finding someone to administer the estate. Elizabeth's granddaughter Elizabeth Wharfe was finally tracked down in London, and in October 1671 she was appointed administrator. Nor is it clear under what authority the appraisers had acted, although significant that they recognized the need for an inventory, even with no one to administer the estate. The two inventories record many of the same goods and similar valuations. Since no objects disappeared, and indeed the later document includes some objects missing from the first, any differences cannot be explained by the removal of goods in the intervening four months. Although their contents are similar, the two documents are organized according to different principles. The February inventory mentions a chamber, and goods may also have been present in another room, perhaps a hall. It starts with a group of bedding, and goes on with groups of wooden furniture, pewter plate, brass cooking utensils and ironware on the hearth. The May inventory, by contrast, mentions no rooms, and lists and values most of the household contents individually, including the nine brass utensils with which it begins. The later inventory is more detailed, describing the condition of some possessions, and recording individual items of clothing and the titles of three books, details which had been omitted in February, and indeed are rarely found in any inventory. The spelling and hand of the May document suggest a scribe who had only a modest education, and the overall impression is one of inexperience and uncertainty, as indicated by his failure to follow the conventional practice of beginning each line with 'Item'. These examples reveal two different approaches to ordering the contents of an inventory.

So appraisers could exercise discretion over how they ordered inventories, how they described goods, and even what they included, since there might be disagreement over which possessions had belonged to the deceased. They had much to consider, not only about the second-hand value of objects, but also where they were located, what they had in common, and what differentiated them. It should not be assumed that appraisers simply listed goods in the order they saw them. Some chose to group together goods that were similar, in material and function. The inventory provides a record of the decisions that appraisers took, while revealing how familiar they were with the goods, the process of appraisal and how to draw up the formal document. More experienced appraisers developed their own styles, so the format of the inventory depended upon who they were. Since an inventory was prepared by several people, its format also reveals who controlled the process. Appraisal involved negotiation among appraisers, and also between them and any family members who were present when the inventory was taken. Styles of appraising changed over time, providing clues about how people came to understand the domestic environment. Since every testator

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[19]OHC, PEC 37/4/34 (Eldridge).

Table 1. Type of inventory by number and percentage prepared in Thame, 1600–1700.

	1600–24		1625–49		1650–74		1675–99	
List	11	14%	23	25%	14	20%	13	14%
Room	63	82%	68	74%	44	62%	33	35%
Simplified					1	1%	2	2%
Summary					7	10%	44	47%
No goods	3	4%	1	1%	5	7%	2	2%
Total	77		92		71		94	

Source: 'Thame Inventories Database' (see note 11).

owned different possessions, analysis of an inventory's content alone reveals little about the work of the appraiser. It is necessary to look at the form of the document, and especially at how it was organized and how detailed it was. Appraisers differed in their use of such terms as 'other lumber' to summarize unidentified objects and of descriptive adjectives. The most significant differences between appraisers lay in the organizational principles they adopted in presenting the list of goods (see Table 1).

By the early seventeenth century it was common to organize details of household possessions in inventories by room location, although some regions were slower than others to adopt this approach. Styles of appraising were defined locally, reflecting differences in local custom and terminology, as well as varying paces of economic and architectural change. A bedstead and bedding were described as a 'bed and its furniture' in Thame, but as a 'bed performed' in Uffculme.[20] In Oxfordshire, by 1590, over half of inventories already named at least two rooms. In Devon, appraisers began to organize inventories by room early in the seventeenth century, but those in the northern township of Sunderland did not do so until the 1620s. At the start of the century, 63 percent of Kent inventories recorded room names, but only 7 percent did so in Cornwall.[21]

Appraisers may have devised the room-based approach on their own, to meet local needs, but contemporary handbooks discouraged the practice. *Simboleography* acknowledged that appraisers *might* 'set downe what is in every severall rome', yet despite giving an example of the contents of a bedchamber West argued that it was better 'to sort all thinges of one kind togeather: as all brasses togeather, all pewter together, all bedding together etc'.[22] Swinburne assumed that the normal practice of appraisers was to walk from room to room, but gave no advice about how the inventory should be ordered. By 1668 George Meriton's *Touchstone of Wills, Testaments and Administrations* had caught up with local practice, and advocated listing 'Household-stuff as it stands in every Room, beginning in the Hall, and so from Room to Room in order throughout the House.'[23]

Almost eighty percent of inventories written in Thame before 1670 were either organized by room or recorded at least one room name. These figures include both documents that used headings to separate the contents of each room and those that included room locations

[20]P. Wyatt (ed.), *The Uffculme Wills and Inventories: 16th to 18th Centuries*, Devon and Cornwall Record Society n.s. 40 (Exeter, 1997). See also B. Trinder, 'The wooden horse in the cellar: words and contexts in Shropshire probate inventories', in Arkell, Evans and Goose, *op. cit.*

[21]Havinden, *op. cit.*; Wyatt, *op. cit.*; J. Briggs (ed.), *Sunderland Wills and Inventories, 1601–1650*, Surtees Society 214 (Suffolk, 2010); Overton *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 122 (Table 6.1).

[22]West, *op. cit.*, sect. 654.

[23]G. Meriton, *Touchstone of Wills, Testaments and Administrations* (London, 1668), 200–201. J. Giles, *Every man his own Lawyer* (London, 1736), 100, gives a short example of an inventory of goods taken by distraint that was organized by room.

within the descriptions of household items; the latter approach leaves some doubt that *all* rooms have been mentioned. Other Thame inventories provided simple lists of possessions, valuing household contents in the same way that they valued shop goods, animals and agricultural implements; rare survivals of sales from sales followed the same format.[24] The Eldridge inventories exemplified these two formats; one naming a chamber, the other no rooms at all. The room-based format was used only for domestic goods; other categories of property were valued separately, including apparel, financial instruments, shop stock and outdoor goods, including animals and crops. It was most likely devised in response to growing house size and ownership of household goods, for the value of goods was considerably higher in inventories organized by room. The median value of household goods was £17.22 in room-based inventories prepared before 1670, compared to only £4.70 in those that were list-based.[25]

Room-based inventories took a variety of forms, and might be very detailed, especially at the beginning of the century. For example, three inventories prepared between 1603 and 1605, all in the same hand, came close to describing the layout of rooms, carefully listing separately a cupboard, long table, little table, and even a portal and wainscot; if attached to the wall, the final two were part of the house and should not have been included at all.[26] In another, prepared in 1625, the contents of the shop and hall were interspersed with those of three chambers, suggesting that the appraisers had worked their way around the hall, going into each chamber in turn, before returning to describe more hall goods.[27] Yet other inventories used room location for some household goods, but not others. An inventory prepared in 1662 thus recorded the room location and value of each bedstead, but valued all of the bedding together.[28] Goods whose value lay primarily in their weight, such as pewter, brass and feathers, were often valued together, rather than by room. These goods may have been brought together from all over the house, or appraisers may have kept a running total.[29] Thus, the need to value goods sometimes overrode the principle of spatial organization.[30]

After the Restoration, however, the room-based inventory began to be replaced in Thame by a new 'summary' format, in which all household possessions were valued together, and no details of either room names or individual domestic goods were given. In the last three decades of the century almost half of the town's inventories adopted the new format, while only a third named room locations. The first 'summary' inventories were prepared in 1661. The peculiar court at Thame had continued to administer wills throughout the 1640s, with one estate going through probate as late as December 1650.[31] In 1653 jurisdiction was taken over by the new central Court for Probate of Wills, through which twenty-eight Thame estates were proved in the 1650s.[32] Although no inventories survive in the central records from this period, they were still sometimes taken locally; one of the first acts of the Thame court when it was re-established was to register inventories taken up to four years earlier.

[24]See, for example, P. A. Kennedy (ed.), *Nottinghamshire Household Inventories*, Thoroton Society Record Series 22 (Nottingham, 1963), 85–92.
[25]'Thame Inventories Database', *op. cit.*
[26]OHC, PEC 52/3/12 (Tippinge), 52/3/13 (Tippinge), 38/3/9 (Veary).
[27]OHC, PEC 46/1/46 (Morrice).
[28]OHC, PEC 46/2/26 (Maund).
[29]For example, TNA, PROB 4/11011 (Nixon).
[30]Brown, *op. cit.*, 81–82.
[31]TNA, PROB 11.
[32]C. Kitching, 'Probate during the civil war and interregnum', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 5, 6 (1976), 346–56.

The Thame court proved eight wills alone on 10 January 1662. Three 'summary' inventories proved on that day were prepared by the same men, all in the same format and handwriting, and all described as 'A noate or Inventory'.[33] This description and annotations that two had been prepared in December 1661 for men who had died three years earlier indicate that these 'noates' were hastily prepared to enable probate to be cleared in the newly restored court. Presumably, the surviving widows still owned many of the same goods, so that it was possible to estimate their value. Yet any disruption caused by the Civil Wars was short-lived. Other inventories proved in 1662, dating from 1658 and 1659, followed the familiar detailed room-based format.[34] Some appraisers who had been active during the 1630s and 1640s, such as Thomas Striblehill, were still living and able to draw upon past experience.

The 'summary' format then disappeared for a few years, but from 1670 it became increasingly popular, accounting for over half of all inventories in the 1680s. Much of the credit for this must go to Andrew Parslow, who re-introduced the format and continued to develop it for the rest of his life. The inventory that he and Matthew Crews prepared for the butcher John Calcott in 1675 provides an example of the format:[35]

Imprimis all his tables formes stooles Bedsteds beding linnen brasse pewter furnace brewing vessel and all other his household goodes at	71 18 06
Item his wareing apparrell	06 00 00
Goods without doors	
Imprimis Three acres of barly	07 10 00
Item eight sheepe and eight lambs	09 00 00
Item a mare and a parcell of hay	06 00 00
Item some timber in the backeside	07 00 00
Item foure loade of firewood	03 08 00
Item about ten loade of hay	10 00 00
Total	£114 16s 6d

All household goods were now assigned a single value, and the details of individual possessions found earlier were replaced by a short list of the most common types of goods. The change in format did not affect the valuation of other types of property, such as apparel, animals, and crops. To the researcher, the Calcott inventory seems disappointingly brief, giving details neither of the ownership of particular goods nor of the use of space. One might easily pass over it for one with more information. Yet it is worth noting that the value of the household goods in this inventory was substantial, representing almost two-thirds of Calcott's estate.

'Summary' inventories have gone largely unnoticed by historians.[36] They differ from the 'simplified' form observed by Jeff and Nancy Cox, but rare in Thame, in which each room was valued separately without listing detailed contents.[37] The 'summary' format does not seem to have been widely used outside Thame during the seventeenth century, although it may have become more common later. For example, in the town of Marlborough only two

[33]OHC, PEC 35/2/3, 41/4/3, 47/2/9. The appraisers were Thomas Kinge, Thomas Inot, Will Brookes, and John Messenger.
[34]For example OHC, PEC 51/3/1, prepared by Thomas Striblehill, William Sumner and William Towne, proved 7 December 1661.
[35]OHC, PEC 35/2/32.
[36]For an exception, see Overton *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 18 (Table 2.1).
[37]Cox and Cox, *op. cit.*, 34. Only three 'simplified' inventories were written in Thame.

Table 2. Median value of inventoried household goods in Thame, 1670–1700.

Format	Median	N
List	£5.07	17
Room	£18.72	40
Summary	£30.00	49
Total*		112

*Including three inventories with no household goods and three 'simplified' inventories. Sources: 'Thame Inventories Database'; 'Thame, Oxfordshire in the Seventeenth Century' (see note 11).

inventories prepared between 1660 and 1700, and only five prepared between 1700 and 1730, were summary.[38] Thame anticipated by almost a century the form of an inventory included in Burn's *Ecclesiastical Law*, in which 'Plate and other houshold goods' were valued together.[39] Where did the new format come from? Certainly not from contemporary handbooks, which all agreed that each possession should be valued individually, 'everything severally by it selfe', in West's words. Meriton stated firmly in *The Touchstone* that 'goods ought to be particularly prized … and not hudled up together several things in a gross sum'.[40] Since *The Touchstone* had been published as recently as 1668, a change in legal procedure seems unlikely to be the explanation. As we will see, Parslow devised the format on his own, perhaps with some assistance from Crews.

Parslow himself wrote over half of Thame's fifty-one 'summary' inventories, including four he wrote as an overseer. He had prepared his first inventory in 1665, as a scribe rather than an appraiser, using the familiar room-based format. Five years later, now an appraiser, he participated in his first 'summary' inventory, valuing together all the 'Goods within dores'.[41] The new format does not appear to have been devised for estates where a detailed record was not required because all goods had been left to the executor. In one room-based example, Parslow valued the bequeathed household goods separately, before lumping together all of the other household and shop goods, worth £32, which were to go to the executor. This was unusual, however, for he also used the summary format for estates where the wills recorded bequests to other individuals.[42]

Nor was the new format developed for poorer estates with fewer household goods, for which appraisers continued to use the simple list format. On the contrary, it was for those individuals who left the most household goods that 'summary' inventories were prepared. To demonstrate this, we must rely upon analysis of valuations, since the format precludes counting the number and type of goods. As Table 2 shows, the 'summary' format was used for estates with more value in household goods, the list format for the poorest estates. This was particularly true of Parslow and Crews, who prepared the most inventories in the new 'summary' format. Only once does it appear that Parslow used this format for household goods, described as 'very old and meane' and valued at only £5, which were of little consequence.[43] Otherwise, the higher the value, the more likely he was to use the 'summary' format, employing it for ninety percent of estates with more than £50 in household goods. This pattern is even more pronounced in the practice of Crews. His eleven

[38]L. Williams and S. Thomson (eds), *Marlborough probate inventories 1591–1775*, Wiltshire Record Society 59 (Chippenham, 2007).
[39]R. Burn, *Ecclesiastical Law* (London, 1763), 768; Cox and Cox, *op. cit.*, 29.
[40]Meriton, *op. cit.*, 201.
[41]OHC, PEC 39/5/18 (Groome).
[42]OHC, PEC 44/1/5 (Ingram).
[43]OHC, PEC 49/1/26 (Parker).

most valuable inventories were all in the 'summary' format; those he organized by room were among those with the lowest values of household goods.

This is strong evidence that the 'summary' format was devised in response to the proliferation of household goods. It did not reflect the reduced importance of these goods, and indeed the substantial value shows that the format presented no obstacle to valuing household possessions. Even when a more detailed inventory does not survive in the court records, one still may have been prepared in note form and served as the basis for the final copy. Household possessions had become so common that some appraisers decided to develop a new approach. Because in its most developed variant this reduced the list of goods to the types most likely to appear in houses, it offers insights into the thinking of appraisers. Furthermore, because appraisers worked together close comparison of the inventories prepared by one individual with different partners casts some light on how they worked together. The impetus for change can be demonstrated to have come largely from one man, Andrew Parslow, who played a major role in the preparation of inventories in Thame in the years from 1670 to 1695. To understand his influence, we need to look more closely at who appraisers were.

Participation and specialization among appraisers

The history of appraising in Thame shows how much influence the preferences of individuals had on local practice. Analysis of those who appraised reveals two apparently contradictory features: broad participation and the leadership of a small number of specialists. In practice, these features were entirely consistent. Indeed, it was because so many inexperienced men acted as appraisers that the probate system relied upon a few experts to guide them. The 335 inventories from Thame list 365 unique names of appraisers, a figure which, given the repeated use of the same names across generations, must understate the number of individuals who acted.[44] This suggests widespread participation in the process. Since 1130 marriages were recorded in the town's parish registers, roughly one in three adult male inhabitants appraised during the seventeenth century. Two-thirds of them did so only once, a proportion which was replicated elsewhere.[45] Although specialist knowledge might be useful when valuing tools and trade goods, it was not essential, and the occupations of appraisers often differed from those of the deceased. Widespread participation may have relied upon a 'culture of appraisal', according to which people were able to assess their own worth in moveable property, but it also helped to develop such a culture. In this way, as the *London Tradesman* would later observe of the valuation of second-hand furniture, 'The Trade is learned by experience'.[46]

The selection criterion laid down by statute encouraged widespread participation and helped to ensure that a variety of people were involved, including both those with a direct interest and those able to value goods. Executors were to choose appraisers from creditors and legatees, and in their absence were to choose honest kin or other honest men, which we may take to mean those of good credit.[47] Comparison of names of appraisers and creditors, when the latter are available, suggests that creditors played little role in appraisal. Swinburne

[44]'Thame Inventories Database', *op. cit*.
[45]'Thame, Oxfordshire in the Seventeenth Century', *op. cit*. See also Wyatt, *op. cit*.
[46]R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman*, 3rd edition (London, 1757), 175.
[47]On the importance of credit to reputation, see Muldrew, *op. cit*.

stressed that those chosen should include men who were able to value the goods. Cox and Cox suggest that appraisers and valuers may have been different people, but it is also possible that Swinburne was simply explaining the meaning of the statute, which was itself written in the context of valuing an estate in order to assess liability for fees.[48] To appraise was to value. Personal relationships played an important part in the selection of appraisers. By nominating their 'very good friends' or 'good neighbours' as overseers in their wills, testators could identify experienced men to help survivors to settle the estate by serving as appraisers, scribes, or advisors; the token legacies they left served to remind overseers both of the deceased and of their obligations. Thus John Ives commanded his executrix, his daughter, 'to be ruled and guided by the directions of my saide Overseers'. One of those he named was Andrew Parslow who, acting as scribe, not appraiser, wrote the inventory according to his usual format.[49]

Given the statutory guidance that appraisers were to be honest men, it is to be expected that appraisers tended to be drawn from the more substantial inhabitants and their sons. Such men were sufficiently independent and financially stable to be trusted to undertake such a responsible task. Yet, although appraisers tended to be of higher status and wealth, appraising went deep into the middling sort, excluding only those of highest status and the poor. Those at the peak of local society, such as Lord Wenman and the manor's lessee, Robert Barry, also rarely appraised. Three sources cast light on the social position of appraisers: probate records, hearth tax lists, and selection of churchwardens. The occupational statuses can be established for only eight-four appraisers. Of these, more were described as gentlemen and fewer as husbandmen than was true of males who went through probate overall. Otherwise, the occupational structure was similar to that of the male population, with yeoman the most common occupation. Only labourers were entirely missing from the ranks of appraisers, although thirteen men were described in this way in a will or inventory. Inventories were prepared for fifty-two appraisers, and these show that appraisers were wealthier on average; the median appraised value of their estate, £74, was one and half times the overall median for men.[50]

The hearth tax presents a similar picture, although its analysis is not straightforward, since neither of the surviving lists, from 1662 and 1665, is complete. Sixty percent of those who appraised during the 1660s can be linked to one of the surviving lists; the others (including Andrew Parslow) were most likely not yet householders. Appraisers represented only fourteen per cent of men paying on a single hearth, but were seventy-five percent of those paying on from six to eight hearths. The majority of appraisers and tax payers fell between these extremes, paying on two or three hearths. None of the forty-eight individuals who failed to pay the tax in 1662 served as appraisers; many of them were rated on a single hearth and were probably exempt due to poverty.[51] Office-holding demonstrated the same combination of broad participation and the expertise of a few. At least ninety appraisers served as churchwarden, but it was the most active appraisers who were most likely to do so.[52] Of the eight who were most active (listed in Table 3), six were selected to be a

[48]Cox and Cox, *op. cit.*, 29; 21 Henry VIII c.5; Swinburne, *op. cit.*, 220–21.

[49]OHC, PEC 44/1/6 (Ives).

[50]'Thame Inventories Database', *op. cit.*; 'Thame, Oxfordshire in the Seventeenth Century', *op. cit.*

[51]TNA, E179/163, 255; M. M. B. Weinstock (ed.), *Hearth Tax Returns, Oxfordshire 1665*, Oxfordshire Record Society 21 (Oxford, 1640).

[52]F. G. Lee, *The History, Description, and Antiquities of the Prebendal Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Thame* (London, 1883), 157–62; OHC, PAR 273/4/F1/2.

Table 3. Appraisers of ten or more inventories, Thame 1600–1700.

Name (occupation)	N	First	Last
John Trinder (vicar)	44	1602	1627
Humphrey Jemett	14	1618	1641
Thomas Striblehill*	12	1638	1667
William Sumner (miller)	11	1638	1677
Matthew Crews	16	1658	1697
Stephen Cook	10	1660	1697
Richard Smith*	13	1663	1682
Andrew Parslow (cooper)	35	1670	1695

*indicates names shared by two or more people, but the data here relate to a single person. Source: 'Thame Inventories Database' (see note 11).

churchwarden at least once, and another was ineligible as vicar. The leading appraisers were drawn from the chief inhabitants of the town, although repeated experience as an appraiser might also increase an individual's social standing.

Widespread participation in appraisal both depended upon and reinforced a culture of appraisal. Although they may have known the market value of goods, many had little experience in the formal processes of appraising and writing out inventories, and some were unable to write. The probate system therefore relied upon the presence of a small number of more experienced appraisers, who took a leading role in appraising and writing out inventories. Alongside the large army of men who appraised only once, only eight appraised as many as ten times. At their head were John Trinder and Andrew Parslow.

Trinder and Parslow dominated appraising in Thame, the former for the first three decades of the seventeenth century and the latter for the final three decades. Their personal styles not only characterized the periods in which they appraised, but also helped to shape the practice of others. Trinder's dominance was doubtless based on his position as vicar of the parish, from 1589 until his death in 1629. We get some insight into both his character and his dominance from the fact that he appears sometimes to have written the churchwardens' accounts.[53] Trinder appraised almost half of the inventories made during the years he was active after 1600. Since only one Thame inventory survives from the 1590s it is not known if he appraised during that decade. Many of Trinder's inventories listed only one room, often the hall, embedded within the description of the first item's goods, in a format similar to the example in *Simboleography*. Even if, as seems likely, these houses had only one room, this nonetheless suggests that the vicar recognized the usefulness of information about room location. Trinder worked in partnership with fifty-eight men, sometimes several times, and in this way he must have been able to influence others and to consolidate the popularity of the room-based inventory.

We know less about Andrew Parslow (1637–1697), who appears never to have married (at least in Thame) and who left neither a will nor an inventory, although we know that he was a cooper from a mention in another man's will. His father William was taxed on three hearths in 1662, so was above average wealth; William was churchwarden in 1656–1657 and served as a juror on the New Thame view of frankpledge.[54] Andrew was the second of three sons, and appears to have been successful in his own right. By 1686, when he began two years as churchwarden, he had acquired the title of 'Mr', and his signatures on three vestry

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[53]OHC, PAR 273/4/F1/2.
[54]Bodleian Library, MS Top Gen c.44.

resolutions from between 1684 and 1696 indicate that he had achieved a level of prominence in the town.[55] His fellow churchwarden was Robert Barry, who was lessee of New Thame and Old Thame manors. Parslow appraised one-third of the inventories recorded from 1670 to 1695, working with forty different partners. He established a good reputation as an appraiser, not only within Thame but more widely within the county. When, in 1687, the Quarter Sessions needed to appoint men to estimate the value of household contents lost in a fire, Parslow was one of those to whom they turned.[56] His influence on others can be seen in the example of Matthew Crews, with whom he prepared four inventories in 1674 to 1682. Although Crews had previously prepared room-based inventories, after working with Parslow he adopted the summary format exclusively in eight other inventories. It is to the interactions between appraisers that we turn next.

Most inventories were prepared by two or three individuals, but little information survives about how they collaborated. Appraisal involved negotiation, and perhaps also sociability. Payments in probate accounts show that appraisers were often given food and drink, either in the house itself or in a local inn.[57] These occasions facilitated discussion among appraisers and with family members, and may also have been the time for writing out the document. Appraisal was often a quasi-public event, in which appraisers viewed a house that was still occupied, by a surviving wife (often the executor), children, servants, overseers and other witnesses.[58] Family members and servants were on hand to show appraisers around the house, and might take this opportunity to negotiate over whether or not certain goods should be included. When appraisers came to value the goods of her deceased husband in 1663, Frances Marsh of York was attended by a servant, who at their request showed them the contents of a chest. She was able to convince them that its contents and her rings and jewels were her possessions and should be omitted as *bona paraphernalia*. She had less success in persuading them to include a bond for £400 that her husband had given to their daughter before he died. By including the bond, the widow sought to maximize the value of the estate, to which she was entitled to a share in the Province of York.[59] When the inventory for Nicholas Hill, of Witney in Oxfordshire, was prepared his son told the appraisers that all of the goods in the parlour had been given to him by deed five years earlier, 'the which deede was shewed and Read unto us that were the prisers of the sayde goods and in the day of dooing the same'.[60] The eighteenth-century shopkeeper Thomas Turner noted that when an inventory was taken of a bankrupt's goods the agents of two interested parties were present, who challenged every valuation.[61]

The form of the inventory in itself provides a glimpse of the negotiations among appraisers over its organization. The relationship between appraisers was not one of equals. Both Trinder and Parslow were usually, but not always, able to control the appraisal process. Four-fifths of Trinder's inventories followed the characteristic room-based format he preferred, while two-thirds of Parslow's inventories were in the new 'summary' format that he had

[55] OHC, PAR273/4/F1/2.

[56] M. S. Gretton (ed.), *Oxfordshire Justices of the Peace in the Seventeenth Century*, Oxfordshire Record Society 16 (Oxford, 1934), 37–38.

[57] I. Mortimer (ed.), *Berkshire Probate Accounts 1583–1712*, Berkshire Record Society 4 (Reading, 1999), 35, 75, 107, among other examples.

[58] OHC, PEC 41/2/55 (Hytchingtone).

[59] Marsh c. Marsh, Borthwick Institute, CP.H.5985, York Cause Papers, http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/causepapers/search.jsp. The deceased was Richard Marsh, the late Dean of York Cathedral.

[60] M. A. Havinden (ed.), *Household and Farm Inventories in Oxfordshire, 1550–1590* (London, 1965), 304.

[61] D. Vaisey (ed.), *The Diary of Thomas Turner 1754–1765* (Oxford, 1984), 306–307.

devised. Trinder and Parslow's control is apparent, not only from how the documents were laid out, but the fact that they were in their own handwriting. Both men had clearly established a reputation as proficient scribes, and they wrote many wills and inventories, sometimes even when they were not appraising. Trinder's expertise came from his position as vicar. In a similar fashion, the schoolmaster William Welsh wrote at least six inventories as appraiser between 1626 and 1643 and also witnessed twenty-five wills. Parslow's role as scribe is perhaps more surprising, since he was a cooper. The selection of these men as scribes reflected their management of the process, but it also facilitated it. The legal process required two copies of the inventory to be made, one for the court and one for the executor. A third copy might also be made, in the form of a rough set of notes, which was later written up as a formal inventory. Inventories were sometimes written by a clerk, rather than an appraiser, who might be paid for his professional services. Berkshire probate accounts include payments to clerks in which the taking of an inventory in note form and the writing out of the formal document are viewed as separate stages. Thus Ralph Munday was paid 'for his pains in helping to take an inventory and for writing the same'. Another administrator reported payments 'to a Clarcke for writing all my noates, and my Inventoryes anew'.[62] A Shropshire court case provides a more detailed example. Two different clerks assisted in preparing and writing out the inventory, neither of whom was an appraiser. Joseph Jeffries accompanied the appraisers when they viewed the house, fields and animals, taking notes in the form of a 'foul draught', a description which suggests cross-outs and corrections. The others did not consider Jeffries an appraiser, even though he suggested values for some of the goods, and they testified that he had not signed the document, as they had. The draft was later taken to another clerk, Joseph Powell, 'to be wrote fair', although witnesses suggested that some items were omitted from this copy.[63] The re-writing of an inventory provided an opportunity to improve its presentation and amend its content, as the inventory of Margaret Roper of Thame shows. Two copies survive, and although they include the same objects, some miscellaneous 'lumber' was moved and an error in valuation was corrected.[64]

The survival of inventories from Thame on which all of the appraisers put their mark, rather than signing their names, shows that clerks were used there as well. Yet Trinder and Parslow were far from being clerical assistants; they used their scribal skills and mastery of the form to control the process. There is no evidence that they were paid. Their literacy and experience enabled them to decide how to lay out inventories, even when they were not themselves appraisers. Parslow was the dominant actor in many of the inventories he prepared. His partnerships with William Sumner, an experienced appraiser, demonstrate his control over the process. Sumner was to leave one of the largest estates of moveable property in Thame, but he was apparently unable to write, for he applied a cross-like mark to his inventories. As a result, he had no say over the format of the document. The first nine inventories he prepared were all organized by room, the format preferred by fellow appraisers, including William Welsh and Thomas Striblehill. The remaining three, all written by Parslow, used the summary format. Parslow's specialist skills explain why four testators appointed him to be an overseer, so that he could supervise the process. Although his writing skills no doubt helped, his proficiency as an appraiser doubtless earned him the respect of those with whom he worked. Matthew Crews appears to have deferred to Parslow when

[62]Mortimer, *op. cit.*, 60, 35.
[63]TNA, E134/4 W&M/Mich 39, 4&5 W&M/Hil 22. See also Cox and Cox, *op. cit.*, 29.
[64]OHC, PEC 50/2/21 (Roper). See also OHC, PEC 41/2/55, to which missing objects were added.

they worked together, but to have used his own scribal skills to control the process when he worked with others.

Yet clerkship did not guarantee control. The age, social status and friendship of appraisers, as well as the social prominence of the deceased, might all be factors. Parslow sometimes deferred to a fellow appraiser who was older or of higher status, as the following evidence suggests. He prepared three inventories with George Burrows, a prosperous draper, that were organized by room, even though he wrote them himself. Burrows had been appraising since 1658 and served as churchwarden in 1671; his occupation and active participation in the vestry suggest that he was of higher status than Parslow. The personal relationship between these men may have been an additional factor, for when Burrows' son, a London merchant, died in 1693 he left Parslow a ring in recognition of their friendship.[65] Parslow prepared another room-based inventory with Robert Barry, who as a gentleman and lessee of Thame's manors, was a leading member of Thame society. Barry's name appears on more vestry resolutions than any other resident, always near the top of the list, below the vicar's signature. The social prominence of the testator could also be a factor, as in the cases of the room-based inventories of the vicar Thomas Middleton and the gentleman Anthony Price. Since chief inhabitants like Burrows and Barry were more likely to be chosen to appraise the goods of individuals of higher status, these factors were mutually reinforcing. Parslow's status as an office-holder put him in a position to work with such men, but it also appears that his experience as an appraiser helped to increase his social standing within the community, for when he became churchwarden he had already been appraising for sixteen years. Matthew Crews grew in status from his experience as an appraiser; his payment of tax on only one hearth in 1662 suggests modest means, but he was made churchwarden in 1680–1681, and in 1687, after appraising for almost thirty years, he served as High Constable. This may have been one reason that the Quarter Sessions chose Parslow and Crews as appraisers, alongside men of higher status like Barry and Burrows.

An innovative appraiser

Andrew Parslow's approach to appraising was doubly innovative. First, he replaced the detailed room-based inventory, prevalent both in Thame and elsewhere, with a concise format that reduced household goods to a single value. The development of the 'summary' inventory was a significant intellectual achievement in itself, reflecting his familiarity with these goods and with their values. Through his experience and his proficiency as a scribe, he was often able to control appraisal and to impose the new format on fellow appraisers. His second innovation was to add a brief list which summarized the main categories of goods found in a typical household at this time. We can see this in its longest form in the inventory we considered earlier, which he wrote for John Calcott in 1675, five years after his first summary inventory. At this point, Parslow was following an order that had been in use for over 75 years. West's *Simboleography* provided a list of ten household goods, from tables to brewing vessels, although this was hardly comprehensive, since it omitted such key objects as bedsteads and seating. Seventeenth-century editions of Swinburne also supplied a brief list, now of fourteen objects, of those goods which were 'household stuff', which was added because, according to the marginal annotation of a contemporary, the category

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[65]TNA, PROB 11/415/286. Family details in the bequests show that this was the will of George's son.

was 'oftner stated than understood'; the list included tables, seating, bedsteads, pots and pans. George Meriton elaborated further in 1668, listing twenty-eight goods, again starting with tables, but adding trunks and chests, bed accessories, and various pewter utensils.[66] The expansion of these ordered lists over time is itself evidence of the increasing variety of consumer goods during the first half of the seventeenth century, while the decline in the position of wall hangings from second to fourteenth is testimony to changing fashions.

Although Parslow initially followed the same ordering as Meriton (a sign that he may have owned a copy), albeit with a drastically reduced list of goods, he soon made changes to reflect further changes in domestic interiors. Meriton had listed more goods, but in starting with heavy wooden furniture his ordering was old fashioned. These durable items were becoming the scaffolding for displaying new types of textiles, which were both less hardy and more susceptible to changing fashions, and thus more likely to be the focus of consumption.[67] This is perhaps why, starting in 1681, Parslow moved bedding and linen to the beginning of his lists, and heavy furniture to the end, if he included furniture at all. His omission of bedsteads from several inventories that recorded bedding reveals his own understanding of the declining importance of durables. Parslow also shortened his lists slightly, making them less comprehensive, but he nonetheless occasionally introduced unusual goods that he thought were noteworthy, such as woollen goods in 1686, and trunks and coffers in 1694. Yet it is significant that he did not use these lists to highlight the presence of novel or distinctive goods, such as looking glasses and window curtains, although these were present in other houses that he appraised. Although only a few individuals owned such objects in Thame, more did so in the later seventeenth century. Four of the estates that Parslow appraised had window curtains and three had looking glasses. No Thame households yet owned utensils for preparing hot drinks. Parslow most likely omitted such goods from his summary lists because they were absent, although it is impossible to know for certain. Summary inventories listed possessions which appraisers would have expected to find in most houses. Andrew Parslow understood these goods and knew how to incorporate them into his schema. When individuals owned novel distinctive goods, he 'displayed' them in a room-based inventory.

Andrew Parslow was a highly capable appraiser. Besides being a skilled valuer and scribe, he was also able to reflect on the nature of household goods, to analyse what he saw and to reduce variety to a concise list of types. He knew which goods were common, but was sensitive to change, and he demonstrated new understandings of material goods. Parslow appears to have been unique among appraisers, in Thame and elsewhere, but he was not the only person to develop schema for understanding household goods in the second half of the seventeenth century. This can be seen in two very different intellectual systems for summarizing the world. In *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668), John Wilkins grouped objects by 'likenesse and unlikelesse', in order of increasing complexity.[68] His tables included not only plants and animals, but more mundane 'oeconomic' possessions, such as knives, tables, pots and dishes, ordered according to

[66]West, *op. cit.*; Swinburne, *A Briefe Treatise* (London, 1640), 44; Swinburne, *A Brief Treatise* (London, 1590), annotation on contents page; Meriton, *op. cit.*, 135.

[67]J. Whittle and E. Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth-Century Household* (Oxford, 2012), 137; B. Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 1992).

[68]J. Wilkins, *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (London, 1668), 257–62. On Wilkins and the philosophical language movement, see V. Salmon, *The Study of Language in 17th-Century England* (Amsterdam, 1979); M. M. Slaughter, *Universal Languages and Scientific Taxonomy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1982); M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London, 1970).

function and material. Wilkins thought 'That the reducing of all things and notions to such kind of Tables … would prove the shortest and plainest way for the attainment of real Knowledge, that hath been yet offered to the World.' Randle Holme's encyclopaedic *Academy of Armory*, ostensibly a guide to heraldry, included a chapter listing almost one hundred household goods, in which he also described how the furniture might be arranged in a dining room. Holme knew the role household goods played in social display, commenting 'they are not looked upon to be of any great worth in personalls, that have not many dishes and much pewter, Brasse, copper and tyn ware; set around about a Hall, Parlar, and Kitchen'. Even the humble fire shovel might be ornamental. It is unlikely that Parslow was aware of Wilkins's *Essay*, and sadly Holme ran out of money before he could publish his chapter on household goods, but in different ways these three men showed their awareness of the growing importance of domestic objects.[69]

Conclusions

This article has shown that inventories were more than descriptions, and has re-directed attention from the contents of these documents to the individuals who prepared them and the ways in which they thought about goods. Andrew Parslow's personal and working life have left few traces. We know him primarily through his work as an appraiser and scribe. His example shows us that appraising practices were not only local; they emerged from individual decisions and preferences. Appraising was a public service and an intellectual activity. For some men it was also helped to define their identity, and was a career through which they were able to attain considerable prominence in the local community. It is significant that, whereas the vicar was the leading practitioner in the 1620s, by the 1680s this role was taken by a cooper, a leading member of the middling sort.

An inventory was a 'repertory', an ordered list, a catalogue, and it was the appraisers who decided how to order it. Yet the personal character of appraising presents us with a problem. How much can the example of single individual like Andrew Parslow tell us? Even if few others adopted the same approach, his practice is nonetheless significant, for it provides insight into how individuals made sense of the increasing presence of material goods. Given the heavily formulaic nature of the inventory, it is more surprising that he developed a novel approach than that it was not followed more widely. Legal procedures left little scope for individual expression, but although they might guide they did not fully dictate practice. Every inventory was in itself a representation, the result of a number of negotiated choices about what to include and how to present household contents.

It was because a significant proportion of the community shared the experience of appraising that a 'culture of appraisal' could be consolidated. Probate inventories enable us to assess the depth and sophistication of this culture in more detail. Appraising skills were most developed in the middle and upper reaches of the middling sort. These men usually owned a larger number and variety of household goods, and those who were most active

[69]Randle Holme, *The Academy of Armory, or, A Storehouse of Armory and Blazon Containing the Several Variety of Created Beings, and How Born in Coats of Arms, Both Foreign and Domestic* (Chester, 1688); Randle Holme, *The Academy of Armory, or, A Storehouse of Armory and Blazon*, vol. 2, ed. J. H. Jeayes, Roxburgh Club 144 (London, 1905).

had the writing skills and familiarity with the preparation of documents they needed to control the process. Although those of lower status also appraised, the poorest members of society rarely did so. Labourers could calculate their own worth, as has been shown, but in Thame their inventories often reveal little investment in household goods, with estates that consisted largely of money and bonds.[70]

By the middle of the seventeenth century, probate inventories had been prepared for at least two centuries, and their function was well understood. They privileged older understandings of moveable property, which treated possessions as savings from which debts could be paid. This makes it more difficult to detect new attitudes towards moveable property, for example as objects for social display.[71] Nonetheless, attitudes towards personal possessions were changing, even before the dissemination of new groceries and luxuries, and these changes influenced even the formal business of preparing an inventory. The new formats found in Thame suggest that there were significant changes in people's understanding of goods during the seventeenth century. The summary inventory could be said to reduce movable possessions merely to their value as savings, because it did not record the details of individual objects. Yet Parslow did not forget the goods; he merely reduced them to their essential categories, demonstrating the consolidation of his understandings of material culture. The room-based inventory was also still available to 'display' distinctive goods in words. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed substantial growth in the numbers of goods and of the spaces in which they were located, and the room-based and summary formats were both responses to this growth. Over time, appraisers came to understand the kinds of goods most households owned, and they developed new ways of representing them. The inventories they prepared constitute a written record of how their thinking about possessions changed.

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[70]Shepard, *op. cit.*, 64–68. For examples of labourers' inventories, see OHC, PEC 46/1/35 (Morris), PEC 54/3/17 (Woodbridge).
[71]Although see Weatherill, *op. cit.*, 28.