

Making the global local? Overseas goods in English rural shops, c.1600-1760

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Abstract

This paper draws on probate inventories from 36 villages in four counties to examine the shifting place of overseas goods in the stock of English rural shops. It shows that a range of colonial groceries and Indian textiles were to be found in village shops from the early seventeenth century, but that their availability varied considerably, as did their relative to the retail business. Whilst they rarely appear to have underpinned the viability of the shop, their early and persistent presence draws the village shop and the rural consumer into the mainstream of consumption and retail transformation.

Key words

consumption; retailing; colonial groceries; calicoes; probate inventories; shop goods

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In July 1724, William Armstrong placed a notice in the Newcastle Courant, advertising the sale of: ‘all Sorts of Coffee and Tea, with a Permit, viz. Fine Bohea Tea ... fine Peco ... fine Green Tea ... fine Imperial ... Raw Levant Coffee ... Roasted Coffee ...’. Around the same time, Daniel Defoe was penning his famous diatribe against chintz and the East India trade more generally, complaining that the fabric ‘crept into our houses, our closets, and bedchambers; curtains, cushions, chairs, and at last beds themselves, were nothing but calicoes and Indian stuffs’. They then passed from ‘their floors to their backs; from the footcloth to the petticoat’.¹

As these two examples make clear, goods from East Asia and also those from the Atlantic colonies were being keenly promoted and eagerly consumed by the middling sorts of early eighteenth-century England. Historians have thus accorded these overseas goods a central position in a so-called consumer revolution: they transformed domestic environments and social practices, and facilitated the construction of new social identities, defined through material goods.² These same products have also been seen as crucial to the transformation of retailing, the sale of colonial groceries underpinning the provision of other goods and making shops viable in places where demand had previously been insufficient. Shammas outlines this logic in detail: ‘once shopkeepers stocked tobacco, sugar and caffeine drinks that were bought frequently but in small amounts, it made sense to stock other provisions purchased in the same way, such as salt, soap, starch, candles, butter, cheese, flour and bacon’.³ In other words, colonial groceries stimulated the growth and spread of shop retailing into rural areas because the rapid turnover and high margins on these goods made shops viable in greater numbers and in more places than ever before.

Recent research has revealed a rather more variegated and nuanced picture than this allows. Stobart, in particular, has argued that imported groceries were often introduced and sold alongside a range of other goods, rather than vice versa, calling into question the causal

¹ Newcastle Courant, 25 July 1724; Defoe, *State of the British Nation*.

² See, for example, Shammas, *Pre-Industrial Consumer*; Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture*; Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability*; Cowan, *Social Life of Coffee*; Ellis, Coulton and Mauger, *Empire of Tea*.

³ Shammas, *Pre-industrial Consumer*, 259.

mechanism identified by Shamma. ⁴ More generally, there is growing awareness of the dynamism of village shops and the wide range of goods offered to local consumers, from the gentry to agricultural labourers. Mui and Mui's analysis of the Cheshire shopkeeper William Wood paints a particularly vivid picture of a shop busy with ordinary rural folk buying small quantities of everyday provisions, whilst Bailey's research on the purchasing patterns of the genteel Gibbards in early nineteenth-century Bedfordshire shows their extensive patronage of village shops, where they acquired both local produce and imported goods. ⁵ Importantly, diversity of stock, broad customer bases, and growing numbers were all characteristic of rural shops from a much earlier period, as the work of North, Cox, Stobart and others makes clear. ⁶

It is on this burgeoning literature that I wish to build by exploring in detail in the changing quantities and types of imported goods stocked by English village shops, thus offering new insights into the supply of and demand for exotic overseas goods amongst the English rural population. This is important because it re-evaluates our understanding of both the mechanisms and venues through which imported goods reached rural consumers, and the development of rural shops more generally. Rural in this context is taken to mean any form of settlement not recognised by contemporaries as a town. This included substantial villages, such as Tarporley in Cheshire, Newington in Kent and Tregony in Cornwall, which had populations running to several hundred around the turn of the eighteenth century and which shared some characteristics with small towns, including a complex occupational structure; but it also incorporates much smaller places amounting to little more than a handful of farms and rural craftsmen and with populations of well under 100 people, including Grandborough in Northamptonshire, Woodford in Cheshire and Rucking in Kent. I focus on the classic period of transformation for English consumption and domestic material culture, 1660-1740, but also look to earlier decades to assess the longer term trajectory of overseas goods in rural shops.

Beginning with a survey of overseas goods in village shops from across four English counties (Cornwall, Kent, Northamptonshire and Cheshire), I use a sample of 70 probate inventories

⁴ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 41-55.

⁵ Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 154-9, 209-12; Bailey, 'Consumption and status'; Bailey, 'Squire, shopkeeper and staple food'.

⁶ Cox, 'Retailing tradesmen in north Shropshire'; North, 'Galloons, incles and points'; Stobart 'The village shop'; Fowler, 'A rural tailor'.

to trace the changing availability of products like tea, coffee and sugar, tobacco and spices, dyes and drugs, and textiles such as calicos and chintzes. By their very nature, probate inventories form a snapshot of the goods in the shop when the retailer died. Unless death was sudden, it is likely that stock levels were run down as the shopkeeper grew old or became ill, so they probably give us a conservative picture of the goods available. Nonetheless, they are well established as a source for this kind of analysis, not least because they are generally good at distinguishing shop from household goods; groceries, for example, would generally be excluded from domestic inventories.⁷ With this in mind, I draw on the inventories firstly to identify which goods were most commonly stocked and then to trace their appearance across different places – both at a county and village scale. This gives us a much clearer picture of the extent to which the world of goods penetrated rural society, tying the global with the local. In the second half of the paper, I explore a small number of shops in more detail to assess the variety of overseas goods found in particular places. The key question here is whether these things formed a sprinkling of exotica in otherwise more mundane, locally sourced goods; or whether they were, in fact, more a fundamental part of the stock in trade and thus essential to the viability of the village shop.

The availability of overseas goods: key commodities

Much of the literature on the impact of exotic overseas goods focuses on colonial groceries, most notably caffeine drinks, sugar and tobacco, and on Indian textiles.⁸ All of these things were found in English village shops by the 1720s, but the frequency with which they were stocked and the date at which they first appeared both varied considerably (Table 1). To begin with the most iconic items, tea and coffee were stocked in only a small minority of the shops sampled here, and not at all before 1720. This may reflect under-recording, some shopkeepers choosing to sell tea without a licence or even trading in smuggled tea – a particular problem in coastal communities where the landing of contraband in small vessels was difficult to police.⁹ However, it is also an indication that the rural consumption of tea and coffee was slower to develop. Weatherill's analysis shows that, as late as 1725, only 6 per

⁷ Cox and Cox, 'Probate, 1500-1800'.

⁸ See Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*; Walvin, *Fruits of Empire*; Cowan, *Social Life of Coffee*; Riello, 'The globalization of cotton textiles'; Ellis, Coulton and Mauger, *Empire of Tea*.

⁹ Mui and Mui, 'Smuggling and the British tea trade'; Ellis, Coulton and Mauger, *Empire of tea*, 161-78; Janes, 'Fine Gottenburgh Teas'.

cent of rural households possessed utensils for hot drinks.¹⁰ This may underestimate real levels of consumption, but widespread concern about the deleterious impact of tea drinking on the rural poor only rose to prominence in the second half of the eighteenth century, underlining the limited penetration of the rural market in the early eighteenth century.¹¹ Things changed a little after about 1720: tea and coffee were more widely stocked, appearing in about one-third of the village shops that carried overseas goods and invariably being sold together. Some shopkeepers, such as George Hodges (d. 1740) even offered a choice of bohea and green teas, whilst Mary Rich (d.1731) and Thomas Wright (d.1756) also sold chocolate or cacao.¹² The quantities involved were generally quite small: Rich had just 12 ounces of chocolate and her contemporary, Richard Johnson (d.1725), had 1½ lbs of coffee and 1 lb of bohea tea. Stobart has shown that even middling-sort consumers often bought tea in half-ounce lots, so these stock levels were not insignificant; but it was only after the Commutation Act of 1784 that prices began to fall dramatically, making tea a viable option for the rural poor and thus boosting demand from village shops.¹³ That this happened quite quickly is apparent from the presence of tea amongst the ‘typical basket of goods’ bought from William Wood’s Didsbury shop in the mid 1780s.¹⁴

[Table 1 near here]

Tracing the trajectory of Indian calicos and muslins is more problematic, in part because the partial (1701) and later total ban (1721) on the sale and use of such items exempted white calicos or muslins, but also because of the related spread of English ‘cottons’, which were themselves often sold as calicos or muslins.¹⁵ Nonetheless, there are some striking patterns. Calicos were found amongst a minority of village shops from the early seventeenth century to the early eighteenth century in quantities ranging from the 6 yards listed for Thomas Johnson (d.1686) to the 26½ yards of coloured, 24 yards of white and 4 yards of blue calico held by

¹⁰ Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 88.

¹¹ Ellis, Coulton and Mauger, *Empire of Tea*, 179-201; King, ‘Pauper inventories’.

¹² Kent Archive Services (KAS), 11.80.134, Mary Rich (1731); Northamptonshire Record Office (NRO), Thomas Wright (1756); KAS, 11.77.190, Richard Johnson (1725).

¹³ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 205; Mui, ‘The Commutation Act’, 234-53.

¹⁴ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 202.

¹⁵ Riello, ‘The globalization of cotton textiles’, 273-4. See also Lemire, *Fashion’s Favorite*.

Caleb Dell (d.1632).¹⁶ Muslins appear in the 1690s and are found in almost two-thirds of inventories between 1710 and 1724, often in rather larger quantities than was seen with calicos; lengths greater than 20 yards were carried by John Clarke (d.1710), Catherine Gubbs (d.1720), Stephen Lawrence (d.1721) and Richard Reade (d.1723).¹⁷ Both types of fabric vanished from the shelves of village shops in the early 1720s, shortly after the ban came fully into force, and there is little indication that rural shopkeepers routinely replaced them with English check and stripes as many of their urban counterparts appear to have done.¹⁸

Without doubt, English village shopkeepers sold caffeine drinks and calicos, but neither were a defining element of their stock, at least during the period studied here. They were almost invariably sold alongside an array of other exotic, European and domestic goods, so that their impact on the stock, and by extension the viability and vitality of the shop as a business, was evolutionary at best. Rather than undermining Shamma's claims about the importance of such goods in the development of country shops, this focuses attention onto other imported groceries that were more established in the stock of English rural shopkeepers: spices, tobacco and, above all, sugar.¹⁹ Of the 70 shopkeepers stocking overseas goods, 84 per cent sold sugar, 74 per cent had tobacco and 71 per cent spices of some sort; 80 per cent sold at least two of the three commodity types and over half sold all three (Table 1). This prevalence was established early and persisted strongly: rural shopkeepers in the early decades of the seventeenth century were already stocking these types of goods and they continued to form the core of their exotic goods into the middle decades of the eighteenth century, with only a slight tailing off in stocks of spices thereafter.

In some ways, these patterns are unsurprising. Sugar had been present in England from at least the twelfth century; initially used for medical purposes or as part of the repertoire of spices, it became popular as a sweetener from the sixteenth century as supply improved and prices fell. Colonial production in the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries led to a huge surge in consumption across Europe.²⁰ Many references to sugar in the shop

¹⁶ Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (CALs), WS1686, Thomas Johnson; Cornwall Record Office (CRO), D354 Caleb Dell, 1632.

¹⁷ KAS, 11.70.224, John Clarke (1710); CRO, 1505, Catherine Gubbs (1720); CRO, Stephen Lawrence (1721); KAS, 11.75.115, Richard Reade (1723).

¹⁸ See Stobart, 'Taste and textiles', 160-78.

¹⁹ Shamma, *Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 259.

²⁰ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 85-108; Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability*, 90-103; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 30-33, 44-6

inventories do no more than record its weight and value; some do far less, simply noting sugar amongst an array of other groceries. The quantities can be impressive, William Bastard (d.1720) having 4 casks of sugar (each weighing between 112 and 224 lbs) and a further 178 lbs in loaf sugar.²¹ As this makes clear, not all sugar was the same: it came in different levels of refinement that were suited to different uses and different purses. The cheapest forms were brown or coarse sugar, molasses and especially treacle, all of which could be used to sweeten a variety of simple dishes and even tea. All were widely consumed in poorer households – treacle was even recorded amongst the food provided to paupers in Chester – but were also used by the middling sorts including the Lancashire nonconformist clergyman and smallholder, Peter Walden.²² These were the most common types of sugar stocked by village shopkeepers, one or other being found in over two-thirds of the sample. It would be a mistake, though, to see rural householders as unrefined in their consumption of sugar. A minority of shopkeepers also stocked finer grades, including loaf and powder and two, John Read of Lenham in Kent (d.1692) and Stephen Lawrence of Tregony in Cornwall (d.1721), sold double-refined – the best type. This suggests that there was local demand for such high quality items, albeit that this was probably limited to the wealthier households where it most likely formed part of polite rituals of tea-drinking or went into the growing range of sweet dishes and confectionary that adorned the tables of the middle ranks and gentry.²³

Spices had also formed part of the English diet for centuries, although they were traditionally a mark of wealth and cultural ‘reach’, their direct association with distant lands and especially the orient giving them a mystique as well as social cachet.²⁴ The frequency with which spices were found in village shops and the variety stocked by some shopkeepers strongly suggests that both wealthy and ordinary rural householders were buying and using spices. Those most widely stocked were pepper, ginger, cloves, nutmeg, mace and cinnamon – a range which matches closely the spices appearing most commonly in contemporary recipe

²¹ CRO, 1508, William Bastard (1720).

²² CALS, PC 51/22 Overseers’ Accounts: St John’s, Chester; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 217-21; Royle, ‘Peter Walkden’, 144-5. Conversely, there is no evidence that Walkden consumed tea or coffee during the years in the 1730s covered by his diary.

²³ Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability*, 171-88; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 222-37; Pennell, ‘Recipes and reception’; Bailey, ‘Squire, shopkeeper and staple food’.

²⁴ Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise*.

books such as W.M.'s *Compleat Cook* (1663) and Howard's *England's Newest Way* (1708).²⁵ Although it is very unlikely that many rural housewives owned or consulted such recipe books, it is apparent that they shared in the wider tastes in cooking and eating that they represented, even if spices formed an occasional treat rather than an everyday ingredient. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, Thomas Turner rarely ate anything that required spices beyond the plum or raisin puddings that he enjoyed when dining in company. At most, his wife would have needed small quantities of pepper, nutmeg and perhaps mace.²⁶ However, we know that by the 1780s the customers of William Wood's shop in rural Cheshire were buying cloves and pepper, as well as sugar and tea.²⁷ Moreover, village shops were following broader trends in the types of spices deployed – saffron, for example, disappeared from the shelves, whilst Jamaica pepper grew in popularity – which suggests that their customers were also in the broad swim of their times in culinary terms.

Tobacco was also a mainstay of the village shopkeeper, again reflecting its position as an established part of rural cultures of consumption. Its use had spread quickly following its introduction in the early sixteenth century and smoking was widespread amongst all classes by the end of the century.²⁸ Tobacco was normally smoked in pipes, which were also widely available from village shops, with stocks sometimes running into the hundreds. Stocks of tobacco could also be considerable. William Bastard had a total of 2675 lbs in his cellar and workshop, but he was probably supplying other shops as well as retail customers; William Barrow's (d.1710) 548 lbs of best and ordinary tobacco were more representative.²⁹ There was generally little attempt to distinguish different types or grades of tobacco, although Thomas Wright of Burton Latimer in Northamptonshire (d.1756) had coarse and Spanish as well as ordinary tobacco. By this time, the fashion for taking snuff had spread to some villagers: over half the admittedly very small set of inventories from the 1740s and 1750s including small stocks of snuff.

²⁵ W. M. *The Compleat Cook*; Howard, *England's Newest way in all sorts of Cookery*. Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 225 shows that pepper, nutmeg, mace and cloves were each used in over 25 per cent of recipes in both books; ginger was declining in use, from 12.4 per cent of recipes in W.M. to just 3.9 per cent in Howard; cinnamon was steady at around 10 per cent of recipes.

²⁶ Vaisey, *Diary of Thomas Turner*, 75, 169, 214.

²⁷ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 234-5, 202. See also Pennell, 'Material culture of food', chapter 5.

²⁸ Brooks, *The Mighty Leaf*, 35-44; Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability*, 164-7.

²⁹ CRO, 1508, William Bastard (1720); KAS, 11.70.62, William Barrow (1710).

Locating overseas goods: patterns and hierarchies

The exotic world of goods to be found in the early-modern English village shop was thus characterised more by sugar, spices and tobacco, rather than tea, coffee and calicos, although all of these goods – and more besides – could be bought from rural shopkeepers by the mid eighteenth century. So long as they had good credit, a small taste of the exotic was thus readily available to rural households. We should be cautious, however, of seeing overly deep penetration of the exotic into village shops. This is the aggregate rather than the local picture; in reality the availability of overseas goods varied enormously from one shop to another. At one extreme, there were men like Thomas Sackett of Minster in Kent (d.1689), who stocked only sugar and dried fruit; at the other were the likes of his contemporary, William Rumfield of Wye, also in Kent (d.1694), who had at least 18 different types of exotic goods in his shop, and William Bastard, with his huge stock of tobacco worth around £83.

How do we best understand these differences and the impact they had on the local availability of eastern and colonial goods? The 70 shops in the sample are spread across 36 different places ranging from substantial villages to hamlets. Unsurprisingly, most shops selling overseas goods were located in larger settlements, but this does not necessarily mean that these places were the best supplied. Quantifying stocks across all shops is almost impossible because the inventories sometimes give weights and values and sometimes only values, and they often group stock together with a collective value accorded to several distinct commodities. However, focusing on the variety of overseas goods available reveals some surprising patterns. Half of the shops selling overseas goods were found in just eight villages, but they stocked a notably smaller range of goods on average: 5.7 types per shop compared with 7.1 in the other villages. This might reflect local competition, with a greater number of small shops rather than one or two general suppliers in a particular village. The size and temporal dispersal of the sample makes it hard to be certain and the balance of larger and smaller shops varied from place to place. However, it is clear that a broad range of overseas goods could be made available in a particular place through a single well-supplied shop as well as a clustering of several shops. Thus, the eight shops in Tregony between them stocked 22 types of overseas product and the five shops in Newington stocked 21 types, whilst two shops in Wye in Kent stocked 20 types and a single shop in Tarporley had 15. Moreover, a comparatively large number of shops was no guarantee that a village was well-supplied with exotic goods: Milton and Minster, both in Kent, had three shops selling such things, but could only muster 9 and 10 distinct types respectively.

Some differences in the stock of village shops undoubtedly reflected business decisions made by individual shopkeepers, perhaps in response to competition from nearby towns and itinerant dealers. Their precise impact is difficult to gauge, but both supplied rural households with some imported goods, including calicos. Nicholas Blundell, for example, noted that he was visited in his south Lancashire home by a retailer from Liverpool selling ‘some Forraine goods’, another from Ormsirk with muslins, and an itinerant from whom he purchased some ‘India Chink Callico’.³⁰

A clear hierarchy of provision is elusive, but the best supplied villages appear to have had several things in common. First, as noted earlier, they were generally larger. Although precision with population totals is impossible over the whole study period, villages in the upper quintile were invariably larger settlements. Second, these well-supplied places were generally at the centre of larger parishes comprising several townships and/or were located on significant thoroughfares – the type of village which Stobart argues were more broadly well provided with shops.³¹ Tarporley is one such village, a parish centre and on the road from Chester to London; its one shop selling overseas goods (at least in this sample) was particularly well stocked in terms of the range of exotic items on offer. Newington is similar, being located on the London-Canterbury road and having five shops in the sample. Tregony’s eight shops probably reflect its location on the river Fal, which facilitated coastal trading amongst local shopkeepers. Third, there was a regional pattern to provision, although this was complicated to an extent by temporal imbalances in the sample. Overton et al have demonstrated that consumers in Kent were more progressive in their ownership of novel household goods than their counterparts in Cornwall, in part because of their proximity to London. Whilst some caution is needed in equating spatial proximity with accessibility it is unsurprising that Kent villages were the best supplied with exotic goods (6.7 types per shop on average), followed by Cheshire and then Cornwall, which, remote from London, had just 4.9 types of commodity per shop.³² Moreover, Cornwall was over-represented in the category of shops that carried the smallest variety of exotic goods, whereas Kent was similarly predominant amongst the best-supplied village shops (Figure 1).

³⁰ Blundell, ‘The Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell’, 7 December 1712, 1 November 1710, 23 March 1715.

³¹ Stobart, ‘Village shop’.

³² For fuller discussion of the different material culture of Kent and Cornwall, see Overton, Dean, Whittle, and Hann, *Production and Consumption*. Northamptonshire is omitted from this analysis because the sample is exclusively from the eighteenth century, skewing the results.

[Figure 1 near here]

Trade with the Atlantic colonies, and with India and China, grew rapidly in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, radically shifting the geography of Britain's global commercial interests.³³ We might expect, therefore, that the volume and range of overseas goods available in village shops would also increase. Yet, through the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there was little change in the range of goods stocked (about 6 types of overseas goods per shop); thereafter there was some fairly modest growth, to about 8 types of goods by the 1740s and 1750s. There was a regional dimension to this growth (Figure 2). Cornish shops generally stocked only a handful of imported goods before the early 1700s, whereas Cheshire and particularly Kent shops were more diverse throughout the study period: some shops were well stocked with imported goods and others more modestly supplied. Volumes are more difficult to assess, given the variable way in which goods were recorded by appraisers, but it is clear that some mid seventeenth-century village shopkeepers were stocking large quantities of sugar and tobacco in particular and conversely, there were mid eighteenth-century shops with only modest amounts of stock. In some ways, this suggests that rural shops were failing to respond to changing levels of supply of imported goods and to apparent growing demand for such goods amongst rural consumers.³⁴ However, it might be more pertinent to highlight early and widespread availability of overseas goods. Rural shops, even in remote parts of the country, were selling a variety of overseas goods well before the so-called commercial revolution.

[Figure 2 near here]

Placing overseas goods in context: the shop

The image of the general village store is both pervasive and persuasive, but it masks considerable diversity. Just like their urban counterparts, village shops were remarkably

³³ See, for example, Eacott, *Selling Empire*.

³⁴ Estabrook, *Urbane and Rustic England*; North, 'Galloons, incles and points'; Royle, 'Peter Walkden'.

varied in their physical form, range of stock and business organisation.³⁵ The position and importance of overseas goods was part of this variability. As Figure 1 makes clear, there was a large group of shops where stocks of overseas goods were limited in variety. This was sometimes because the shops themselves were small and marginal enterprises, and sometimes because the real focus of the shop lay in other kinds of merchandise, overseas goods being just a small part of much larger array of stock. Conversely, there was another set of village shops where the range and quantity of overseas goods made them a core part of the stock and an important element of the shopkeeper's business. Exploring both ends of this spectrum and placing overseas goods in their proper context – on the shelves and in the drawers, jars and boxes of the shop – helps to uncover their true significance to rural shopkeepers. There are, of course, problems in judging the flow of goods (in terms of sales) from the stocks held at the time of the shopkeeper's death: some goods undoubtedly had a faster turnover than others. Nonetheless, a detailed reading of probate inventories provides a useful insight into the balance of different types of shop goods and their relative importance. It also allows the construction of a broad typology of village shops.

The first type is exemplified by Thomas Sackett of Minster in Kent (d.1689) and John Questead of Milton in Kent (d.1704).³⁶ Sackett's inventory includes a shop equipped with scales and weights and a mortar and pestle, but with stock that comprised little more than rice, sugar and dried fruit with a collective value of just £1 10s. This cannot have provided much of an income. Whilst it is possible that stock levels had run down as Sackett approached death, it appears more likely that his shop was a side line because he also owned 17 runts and heifers, 3 cows, 2 hogs, 20 sheep and a gelding which were together worth £82 – almost two-thirds of the total value of the estate. With an estate worth £74 11s 10d Questead was less wealthy, but his household possessions included small luxuries and novel goods such as seven silver teaspoons and a silver mug, window curtains, a looking glass and some earthenware. His shop contained a range of fitments that mark it out as a genuine retail environment: a counter, nest of drawers, shelves, boxes, pots, weights and scales, and measures. Yet the combined value of these and his stock was only £5 10s (about 7 per cent of the total), with sugar – the only overseas product that he sold – listed alongside unspecified quantities of cheese, soap, candles, tape, worsted, plums and thread. The shop was again a side line to another trade, this time as a fisherman, Questead's boat and tackle being

³⁵ See Cox, 'Retailing tradesmen in north Shropshire'; Bailey, 'The Village Shop'; Stobart, 'Village shop'.

³⁶ KAS, 11.53.192, Thomas Sackett (1689); 11.65.113, John Questead (1704).

collectively valued at £35 6s. For both these men, shopkeeping and overseas goods were marginal to their household economy, perhaps run by their wives whilst they were away in the fields or at sea. Their mix of trades reminds us that rural shops could be very modest and even ephemeral in nature.

The situation was rather different for Edmond Hinckes of Kenwyn in Cornwall (d.1681), who exemplifies a second type of rural shop.³⁷ Hinckes's estate was valued at a more modest £52 19s, his house being rather sparsely furnished. The shop was his only apparent form of income and so was presumably more important to him than was the case for Sackett and Questead; but his income cannot have been great as his stock was valued at just £8 5s, mostly in smallwares (£5) and sugar and soap (£3). No fitments are mentioned, so this may have been the kind of informal shop that Thomas Turner ran from his parlour in rural Sussex two generations later.³⁸ More important in the context of this discussion, the sale of sugar was probably crucial to the survival of his business by ensuring regular custom – much as Shammass outlines.³⁹ The amount of stock was small, but turnover could have been brisk enough to provide Hinckes with a steady if very modest income.

With all three of these men, the small quantities of overseas goods reflected the small size of their retail businesses. In this sense, they were typical of many rural shopkeepers in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century England: small-scale businesses that catered for the basic needs of their immediate neighbours who would come to the shop on a regular, perhaps even daily basis – much as William Wood's customers did in late eighteenth-century Didsbury.⁴⁰

The shop of the mercers, John Tanner (d.1724) of St Columb Major and Thomas Willby of Illogen (d.1709), both in Cornwall, were very different and demonstrate a third type of rural retailer.⁴¹ Tanner's inventory lists a huge array of textiles, from silks and crapes to fine broad cloths and bombazines, as well as large quantities of haberdashery, including buttons, stays and silver lace. Something of the choice that he was able to offer his customers can be seen in the range of broad cloths available: black, grey, dove, drab, lead, liver, blue and yellow – a

³⁷ CRO, H2030, Edmond Hinckes (1681).

³⁸ Vaisey (ed.), *The Diary of Thomas Turner*.

³⁹ Shammass, *Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 259.

⁴⁰ See the analysis of William Wood of Didsbury, Cheshire, in Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 212-16 and Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 154-7, 202-06.

⁴¹ CRO, T2075, John Tanner (1724); 3399, Thomas Willby (1709).

range that was by no means exceptional amongst rural mercers and drapers.⁴² Amongst this variety of English and European cloth were two pieces of muslin. Valued at £5 7s 6d (just under 3s per yard), this was more expensive than his serges and stuffs (c.1s per yard) and on a par with some of his flowered silks, but some way behind his best broad cloth, which sold at anything from 8s to 13s per yard. It was clearly a desirable cloth commanding a premium price, but his stock was limited by the ban imposed in 1721 and may have comprised remnants of larger pieces acquired before the prohibition came into force. For whatever reason, by 1724 his mainstays were traditional English broadcloths or Italian silks, together with some newer cloths like checks, crapes and poplins. Much the same was true of Thomas Willby whose shop contained a large range of textiles and haberdashery: serge, drugget, coarse cloth, stuffs, linen, dowlas, ticking, fustian, cambric, checks, stripes, hollands, napkins, buttons, thread and mohair. Amongst these was a single 12-yard length of muslin. Valued at £1 16s (or 3s per yard), this was the most expensive cloth in his shop, checks being 1s 6d per yard and serges 1s per yard. Yet it was just one piece out of nearly 40 different lengths of cloth – and this was well before the total ban came into place. As was typical of both rural and urban drapers at this time, Willby also sold a modest array of groceries, 28 pounds of sugar (8s) and 56 pounds of treacle (9s) appearing alongside over 850 candles, 7 gallons of brandy and 12 pounds of hops (together worth £2 9s).⁴³ These colonial groceries were thus a significant proportion of the total stock of groceries, but again were unimportant in the overall stock of the shop, at least in terms of value.

Tanner and Willby were substantial shopkeepers and were typical of the upper end of village retailing; their stock ran into tens or, in the case of Tanner, hundreds of pounds sterling and their estates were appraised by people who styled themselves as gentlemen. We do not know the precise geography of their customer base, but the book debts of similar retailers in Cheshire show that they were drawing customers from a range of neighbouring villages, including places up to three or four miles away.⁴⁴ They sold overseas goods from their shops, but these things were marginal to their overall stock and to the viability of their businesses, which were dominated instead by English and European goods – a reminder of the continued importance of locally produced goods to village shops and rural people. Equally, it seems unlikely that they played a major role in servicing the desire of local consumers for colonial

⁴² See Stobart, 'Taste and textiles'.

⁴³ For discussion of such mixed stock in urban shops, see Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, 58-65.

⁴⁴ Stobart, 'Village shop'.

groceries or Indian textiles. For this, we need to look to a fourth type of village shopkeeper: those that stocked a greater variety and larger quantities of overseas goods. Four examples serve to illustrate the variety of ways in which overseas goods were embedded in the stock of large village shops (Table 2).

[Table 2 near here]

Stephen Lawrence (d.1721) kept shop in Tregony in Cornwall. He had a huge quantity and variety of stock, valued at about £350 and spread across a series of rooms.⁴⁵ These included a counting house containing hats, locks, combs, bellows and shears; a shop in which we find a huge range of ironware, from scissors and knives to padlocks and spurs, as well as cloth and haberdashery; a warehouse within the shop with nails, paper and a variety of groceries; a ‘new chamber under the shop’ in which was stored more groceries; and a closet filled with more cloth and haberdashery. There is even a note of things ‘in the shop window’, which included handkerchiefs, lace, cloth and thread. This was a large and sophisticated retail business, in step with the spatial organisation and stock range of many urban shops.⁴⁶ Despite the variety of cotton and linen cloth stocked by Lawrence (dowlas, checks, poldavy, hollands, swanskin and fustian), there is no mention of Indian textiles. More generally, overseas goods formed only a small proportion of his stock: just 6 per cent of the total. Much of this was accounted for by the substantial quantities of sugar, mostly found in the storeroom under the shop where he stored 1268 lbs of sugar and 224 lbs of treacle with a collective value of about £17 6s (see Table 2). The variety is as notable as the quantity: Lawrence stocked five different grades, from double refined to coarse brown, and was thus able to supply a range of different social groups and culinary uses. His stocks of tobacco and spices were less varied and relatively small; if the villagers in the surrounding area wanted spices other than pepper, nutmeg and cloves, they apparently had to go elsewhere. Conversely, there is evidence that Lawrence was an early participant in the culture of caffeine drinks, even if they failed to appear on the shelves of his shop: he had 5 lbs of chocolate in his kitchen and there were tea

⁴⁵ CRO, L1249, Stephen Lawrence (1721).

⁴⁶ For comparisons, see Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, 76-115; Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*, 123-32; Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 37-60.

tables and china in his best chamber and his parlour.⁴⁷ Moreover, his stock included six teapots and basins, with a collective value of £1 5s. This was a small drop in an ocean of bridles, locks, hinges and the like, but is suggestive of an ability to feed a nascent demand for tea drinking amongst his customers – at least those from wealthier households.

The overall impression from Lawrence's list of stock is that overseas goods were a small part of a business that was largely focused on ironware and European textiles. His sales of sugar may have generated regular visits to the shop, but they were a supplement to his core business. In some respects, the same was true of Ralph Edge of Tarporley in Cheshire (d.1683).⁴⁸ He was identified in his inventory as an ironmonger and his stock included a small amount of ironware such as thimbles, nails and buckles; but the most notable feature of his shop is the range and quantity of cloth and haberdashery. There were linen cloths (canvas, hollands, dowlas); woollen cloths (shags, bays, serges, kerseys, shalloons, paragon, buckram); smallwares (tapes, lace, thread) and clothing (stockings, caps). Amongst these were four lengths of calico (three small pieces of white and a 70 yard length of coloured) with a combined value of £4 3s 11d. This was a small proportion of his overall stock of textiles, but the coloured calico was the longest single piece in his shop and an indication both of the local demand for such goods and the ability of village shops to supply them in quantities sufficient for significant amounts of clothing or furnishing. More important to Edge's business was his stock of sugars and especially tobacco, the latter comprising four different types and amounting to a total of 374 lbs; it was complemented by his stock of 600 tobacco pipes and nine copper tobacco boxes (Table 2). It seems likely that these were high turnover commodities and probably helped to support his sale of other things, much as Shammass argues. However, two things cast doubt on this. First, the sheer variety of stock available at his shop would have made it the source of supply for a wide range of goods. Second, and within this, he could supply customers with an impressive array of spices and seeds, including some high value commodities such as cinnamon at 6s per lb. The quantities were not huge, but when most customers would have bought only an ounce or two at a time, 2-3 lbs of cloves, Jamaica pepper or cinnamon constituted a decent level of stock.

⁴⁷ Listing domestic groceries in inventories is unusual (see Cox and Cox, 'Probate, 1500-1800'), but it is unclear why would stock would be found in this kitchen, especially as this is the only such item to appear there. For discussion of the growing consumption of these commodities, see Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture*, 61-3; Overton, Dean, Whittle and Hann, *Production and Consumption*, 106-07, 158-62.

⁴⁸ CALS, WS1683, Ralph Edge.

Lawrence and Edge were, in essence, retailers of cloth and hardware who sold groceries as a side-line to their main business. Almost inevitably, then, overseas goods formed a small proportion of their overall stock, even if they were more important in bringing people into the shop on a regular basis. Although occupational titles are far from being a straightforward indication of the stock carried, Stobart has shown that grocers were increasingly likely to carry more varied and larger quantities of groceries, both domestic and imported.⁴⁹ William Rumfield of Wye in Kent (d.1694) was identified as a grocer in his inventory, which goes on to itemise a large range of groceries worth a total of about £172 – nearly two-thirds of his stock by value.⁵⁰ He had huge amounts of tallow and candles (worth over £77), as well as hops, salt, vinegars, soap and oils (valued at £33 7s), but there were also significant quantities of colonial groceries. Most prominent was tobacco, £16 13 4d of which was stored in his cellar. He also had a tobacco cutting engine in a workshop behind his house, along with quantities of old Spanish and cut tobacco worth a further £6 2s. This reminds us of the importance of the shopkeeper as a processor as well as a retailer of goods, but also underlines the relatively high levels of capitalisation that some village shops achieved. As well as the tobacco engine, Rumfield also had £7 4s 10d of equipment for making tallow candles and £7 3s 6d of counters, shelves, nests of drawers, scales and weights, mills, grates and racks. There was sugar and a range of spices, although neither was kept in the variety seen in with Lawrence and Edge respectively. Indeed, the overall impression of Rumfield's shop is that quantity was more evident than variety. That said, he also carried a range of dry goods, including a variety of haberdashery and earthenware, amongst which was muslin, itemised alongside hollands and between looking glasses and silk tippetts. Yet this time, it is these dry goods that were side-lines in a business predominantly concerned with supplying the everyday needs of the villagers of Wye and its environs. Importantly, for some at least, these needs included sugar, spices and especially tobacco.

Two generations later, grocers in villages as well as towns were still catering for these same basic needs. Thomas Wright of Burton Latimer in Northamptonshire (d.1756) had by far the smallest shop of the four men considered here, but it was also the one most focused on the sale of groceries and in which overseas goods were most prominent, accounting for nearly one-quarter of the stock by value.⁵¹ Again, sugar and tobacco were the most important

⁴⁹ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 50-55.

⁵⁰ KAS, 11.58.121, William Rumfield (1694).

⁵¹ NRO, Thomas Wright (1756).

commodities, Wright offering his customers choice in both commodities. The poorer probably made do with treacle (at 2d per pound) and Spanish tobacco (7d per pound), whilst the wealthier customers might buy loaf sugar (8d per pound) and would perhaps even treat themselves to snuff – a craze which had tricked down from the urban elite.⁵² Perhaps more striking, however, are two changes from earlier periods: spices (once the mainstay of the grocers' trade) were found in negligible quantities, whilst tea, coffee and chocolate were all available, even in a tiny village in rural Northamptonshire. We cannot know who bought these commodities, but it is apparent that some villagers not only had a taste for drinking the full range of caffeine drinks in their own homes and were able to acquire these locally.⁵³

To put these four shopkeepers into context, it is worth comparing their stock with that held by contemporary urban retailers. It might be assumed that the latter would be more specialised: focusing on a particular range of goods whilst their rural counterparts sold a little of everything to make their businesses viable. We have already seen that village shops were more varied than a simple model of a 'general store' would suggest. Equally, it is apparent from even a cursory examination of stock lists that urban shopkeepers also sold a wide range of goods. For instance, Zachariah Shelley (d.1728) was a mercer, yet his Congleton shop contained large quantities of tobacco, sugar and spices; conversely, the Liverpool grocer, Robert Rowson (d.1709) had a wider variety of haberdashery than groceries.⁵⁴ In terms of overseas goods, the difference between the larger village shops and their urban counterparts was often one of degree rather than type. Two examples serve to illustrate this point. The grocer, Alexander Chorley (d.1723), kept shop in Manchester, selling sugars, tobacco, spices and caffeine drinks as well as an array of other groceries. In this, he was no different from men like Ralph Edge and Thomas Wright. What made his stock distinctive was the choice within each category and the size of stock holdings: ten types of sugar (from fine powder to coarse bastard) valued at over £113; five types of tobacco valued at over £46, and twelve types of imported spice, including £13 8s 1d of black pepper and three kinds of ginger.⁵⁵ Chorley could therefore offer his customers a level of choice that went beyond that available in village shops. Much the same was true of James Rathbone of Macclesfield (d.1702).⁵⁶ He

⁵² See Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise*, 131-2; Fennetaux, 'Toying with novelty', 17-28.

⁵³ Ellis, Coulton and Mauger, *Empire of Tea*, 179-201.

⁵⁴ CALS, WS1728, Zachariah Shelley; Lancashire Record Office (LRO), WCW1709, Robert Rowson.

⁵⁵ LRO, WCW1723, Alexander Chorley.

⁵⁶ CALS, WS1702, James Rathbone.

had an array of haberdashery and linens, but what stands out from his inventory is the quantity and variety of Indian textiles. In total, seventeen pieces are itemised and appraised at a collective value of £34 14s 5d; they included printed, plain and painted calico, and striped, sprigged and plain muslin. It is impossible to know for certain how rural householders behaved, but it is clear that they could access many overseas from local village shops, but perhaps went into town if greater choice was required.

Conclusions

Standing back from the detail of particular shops, three things are clear about the rural retailing of overseas goods. First and foremost is the deep penetration of rural societies and economies by a range of exotic goods. This was already apparent in the early decades of the seventeenth century and grew stronger over the following hundred years or so. Sugar and tobacco were the most widely available overseas goods and were stocked in the largest quantities, but many village shopkeepers also sold spices, usually a core set of commonly used culinary ingredients, but occasionally including newer commodities such as Jamaica pepper. Whilst calicos and muslins were available from the mid seventeenth century, their supply was disrupted by bans and perhaps also import substitutes such as cotton-mix checks and stripes. Inventories tell us nothing about who consumed these things, but it seems likely that greater supply reflected a growth in rural householders' engagement with the new world of goods opened up by eastern and later colonial trade. In this, they resembled their urban counterparts – a finding that challenges some of Estabrook's arguments about the distinctive nature of rural material culture.⁵⁷

This conclusion is tempered, however, by the second key point: that the availability of overseas goods was highly variable. There was a regional geography to this, with village shops in Kent being better supplied than those in Cornwall; but the more profound variations were between individual shops. Unsurprisingly, those in bigger villages tended to be the best stocked, making these larger settlements key points of supply for the surrounding areas, despite competition from urban retailers and itinerants.⁵⁸

Examining these individual variations in more detail reveals the complexity and contingency of supply, particularly in terms of the relationship between overseas goods and other shop

⁵⁷ Estabrook, *Urbane and Rustic England*.

⁵⁸ See Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 62-70.

goods. This links to the third key point: that overseas goods were rarely the mainstay of the shopkeeper's business, throwing doubt on assertions of their centrality to the spread of country shops. To be sure, selling sugar, tobacco and later tea and coffee had the benefit of encouraging regular footfall in the shop as customers came to buy half an ounce of bohea or a half pound of treacle – a practice which became more important through the second half of the eighteenth century when such goods spread into the homes of poorer rural householders.⁵⁹ And yet these things generally formed a small proportion of the overall stock, especially if the shopkeeper mostly sold cloth and hardware. This reflects the fact that as late as 1750 cotton textiles, both imported and domestically produced, probably accounted for no more than 5 per cent of all textiles in England.⁶⁰ In villages, the figure was undoubtedly lower, compounding the effects of the early eighteenth century bans in limiting opportunities for selling such exotic items. Where the focus was on groceries, overseas goods were more prominent. That said, the nine purchases that made up a 'typical basket' of goods bought from William Wood in the 1780s contained three overseas goods (sugar, tea and treacle) as well as bread, candles, cheese, flour, meal and soap.⁶¹ In many ways, this summarises neatly the position of colonial groceries in the village shop: they formed a taste of luxury alongside the necessities of everyday life. In this they were not so very different from their urban counterparts: exotic goods imported from the Atlantic colonies, India, China and the Spice Islands found their way onto the shelves of shops in small villages as well as the warehouses of fashionable London grocers and mercers. This draws the village shop into the overall retail system that serviced the needs and desires of rural and urban consumers. In evaluating both processes of supply and consumer and retail transformations, the village shop must be part of the picture; especially at a time when the vast majority of England's population lived outside towns, they formed an important window onto the expanding world of goods.

⁵⁹ See King, 'Pauper inventories'.

⁶⁰ Riello, 'Globalisation of cotton textiles', 269.

⁶¹ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 202.

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