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Living Standards and Material Culture in English Rural Households 1300-1600. Data Paper

Chris Briggs, Alice Forward, and Ben Jervis

The data in the related [digital archive](#) was collected to examine the archaeological and historical evidence for material culture in English medieval rural households, with the aim of gaining a fuller picture than what might be attainable by looking only at objects or documents in isolation. The digital archive provides a starting point for anyone wishing to research aspects of medieval rural settlement.

1. Dataset Location

The dataset has been deposited with the Archaeology Data Service <https://doi.org/10.5284/1085022> (Forward *et al.* 2021)

2. Dataset Content

The dataset contains information pertaining to the possessions of medieval households in England from c.1300–1600. The data are derived from archaeological excavation reports and two sets of historical documents: the records of the escheator and coroner, who exercised the Crown's right to seize the goods and chattels of felons. The dataset contains three databases which contain information extracted from these archaeological and historical records. Each is [available for download](#) and a version with restricted search options is provided on the ADS project page. The photographic archive created as part of the data collection process from the historical documents provides access to the primary historical sources.

3. Background

The Living Standards and Material Culture in English Rural Households c.1300–1600 project (funded by the Leverhulme Trust) took place between 2016–2020. The [archaeological data](#) were generated by Alice Forward and Ben Jervis (2017 – 2020); the [historical datasets](#) were collated by Mathew Tompkins and Chris Briggs for the records of the escheator and Tomaz Gromelski for records of the coroners.

This project was preceded by a pilot study (Jervis *et al.* [2015](#)) which demonstrated the potential of written descriptions of goods and chattels forfeited to the English crown for medieval material culture studies. This dataset is the result of the expansion of this work. Two hypotheses were proposed: firstly, that the demographic losses following the Black Death of 1348-9 and subsequent epidemics led to a rise in living standards, as evident in the quantity and variety of goods possessed by households; and secondly, that the rural population of medieval England had a more sophisticated material culture than has been previously suggested. Using both archaeological and historical evidence, the project sought to interrogate and integrate both source types to enable a more representative analysis of material culture in medieval households.

4. Summary Description

The dataset comprises databases of archaeological and historical evidence, each designed around the specific character of the data. For example, the archaeological evidence often relates to elements of a larger object (e.g. lock, rather than chest) whilst the historical dataset includes objects such as a chest. Whilst the project initially sought to create interoperable datasets, it became obvious that the varied character of the data limited the potential of this approach (but see [re-usability](#) for suggested future re-organisation). There are key similarities between the two datasets including object names and categories but these are expressed differently within the tables, with the archaeological objects focused on material and form whilst monetary value is central to the historical data.

Both datasets relate to a group of 15 counties which correspond to nine 'escheatrics' (an escheatry was the county or pair of counties covered by each escheator). For all but three of these counties (Hampshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire), only rural and small town settlements were included within the dataset. 'Rural and small town' is defined as any place that did not appear in the 50 largest towns as measured by the numbers of persons who paid the 1377 poll tax (Dyer [2000](#)). The project focused on lower status households and therefore only people or archaeological sites which fitted into this category were recorded. This meant that individuals described using an 'elite' title or status, such as 'knight', 'esquire', or 'gentleman', were not included and archaeological sites which were larger manorial centres, religious institutions and castles were excluded.

The archaeological data

The [archaeological data](#) were primarily collected from 17 Historic Environment Record areas. Consistent search parameters were within the limitations of HER practices (e.g. some HERs recorded sites using numerical dates (AD1300-AD1600) whilst others did so by period name).

The search results were sifted to remove irrelevant sites (e.g. geophysical survey) with reports for relevant sites being accessed. The database comprises three tables. The first details each site with reference to either the HER Event number or, where this was lacking, the HER Monument number. Those sites without HER numbers were assigned temporary numbers. Information including the size of the area excavated (where

available), the location (county, parish and grid reference) and the HER description of the site are provided.

When a site had relevant finds, each one was recorded associated with the context (details provided in the second table). All information on each object provided in reports including small find number (when assigned) and the person who recorded the object was entered into the third table. Only small finds have been recorded for the project. Pottery, ceramic building material and animal bones (unless worked into a specific object) were excluded.

The historical datasets

The [historical data](#) are collated in separate databases (for the records of the escheator and coroner) of identical structure. The databases contain evidence relating to the forfeiture of movable property to the English crown by felons, fugitives and outlaws. In this context, 'felons' refers to those who had committed serious crime, a group which at this period included suicides; 'fugitives' denotes those who had run away to avoid the machinery of royal justice, including people who had been accused of crime but had not been convicted; and 'outlaws' were persons who had been placed beyond the protection of the law owing to their failure to answer in court for a crime or a civil offence, such as debt or trespass. From the high middle ages to the nineteenth century, the crown exercised the right to seize and sell for its benefit the forfeited property of these individuals. The proceedings arising from this right are contained in a number of different document series in the surviving royal archives.

Each database consists of two Tables: 'Inventories and valuations', and 'Items'. In 'Inventories and valuations', each record represents a single forfeiture by a named individual. Each record has a unique number ('Inv/val number'). Details are provided on the individual's name, the date or dates of the forfeiture, the reason for forfeiture, the value of the items forfeited, and a number of other related matters. Where a forfeiture is accompanied by a list of the various items forfeited, these are entered separately for each forfeiture in the linked 'Items' table. In compiling the 'Escheators' database, for most counties we extracted only those forfeitures that featured lists of three or more forfeited items. The exceptions are Hampshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire, where this database contains details on all forfeitures. In some such instances, the record of a forfeiture notes only the total value of the forfeited goods. Here the total value is noted in 'Inventories and valuations', and there is no linked 'Items' record.

The 'Escheators' database contains information relating to late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century forfeitures from the unpublished records of the escheator, deposited in [the National Archives](#) (TNA). The 'Coroners' database contains similar material, mostly from the sixteenth century, from the unpublished records of the coroner, also in TNA. The forfeitures that 'Coroners' covers are narrower in scope, concerning only felons (primarily murderers and suicides), including those who had fled, but not outlaws. The majority of the evidence in the two databases was the product of information provided by juries which were assembled by the escheator or coroner and gave evidence on the felon, as well as providing a description and valuation of their forfeited goods.

Three connected categories of escheators' records were used: the files (TNA class E 153), the particulars of account (class E 136), and the escheators' account rolls (E 357). The files contain records of inquests held before the escheator, including inquests related to felony forfeiture; the particulars of account record the revenues of individual escheators, usually for a single year; and the escheators' accounts bring together in large rolls the details of the revenues of every escheator over a period of several years. A fuller description of the escheators' records used in the project is available on the project website: [Escheators' accounts / E 357, E 136 and E 153: the three classes of escheators' returns](#)

Coroners' records primarily relate to inquests / reports in classes KB 8 and KB in the TNA. Class ASSI 35, which contains some coroners' inquests with the verdict of homicide, were also used. In addition to the 15 counties used throughout the project, the database includes some records relating to Nottinghamshire and Sussex. This reflects the fact that we decided to make use of (i) the published Nottinghamshire and Sussex coroners' inquests from the years 1485-1603, and (ii) Sussex and Kent indictments from the years 1558-1603 (the records in ASSI 35 mentioned above, the originals of which were also checked). Details of the published material used appear in the relevant records in the field 'RelatedDocs'. More detail on the [coroners' reports](#) used in the project is also available.

The 'Coroners' database, in contrast to 'Escheators', represents a sample of the available evidence. Sample periods of six years from each of the twelve decades from the 1480s to the 1590s were taken, giving a total of 72 years. For each six-year sample period we collected i) all lists from the relevant counties containing 3 or more items, ii) all total valuations, in cases where the occupation/status and place of residence of good's owner/handler is known and iii) all total valuations and all lists of 3+ items from Hampshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire, irrespective of whether there was information on occupation/status and place of residence.

We are grateful to [The National Archives](#) for permission to take and deposit the thousands of archival photographs collected. The photographs of escheators' inquests and accounts come in two groups: (i) those that capture documents used to compile entries in the database (the filenames of these appear in the field 'PhotoNo'), and (ii) other photographs taken during the project but which capture documents or portions of documents not used in the database. The [deposited collection of images](#) of coroners' material is slightly different to that for the escheators, in that it is largely restricted images of documents used in compiling the database. The files of coroners' records do not include archival references in their filenames, but once opened, the image clearly indicates the archival reference of the document that features in the photograph.

5. Scope

The [archaeological data](#) predominantly comprises objects which form a part of a larger thing – nails are the biggest category within the dataset. This is in contrast to the [historical data](#) which refer to the objects that the archaeological material is a part of – furniture being a good case in point, with handles, nails and fittings recorded in the archaeological dataset and chests, beds and tables in the historical datasets. Many of the objects in the historical dataset are absent from the archaeological dataset, and vice

versa. This is mostly due to the survival of organics within burial conditions, therefore objects such as bedding, clothing, and wooden furniture are not a feature of the archaeological data.

There are difficult issues concerning dating for both the archaeological and historical datasets. One of the aims of the project was to look at changing patterns of consumption over the 300-year period. This can be difficult archaeologically, as objects are rarely closely dateable and understanding when an object was thrown away or lost does not reflect its period of use. Recognising the significance of deposition and site formation through the inclusion of the context details has been embedded within the data collection but this is a complex issue and one that must be considered when analysing and interpreting the dataset.

The issues surrounding the dates associated with a forfeiture are surprisingly complicated, especially in the case of the 'escheators' database. Where dates are concerned, there are various different 'events' that need to be considered. These include the date of the felony leading to forfeiture; the date of a fugitive's flight; the date of outlawry; the date of execution of a convicted felon; the date of the forfeiture itself; the date of the inquest that relates to the forfeiture; and (in the case of the escheators' material) the date of creation of a financial account that records an earlier forfeiture. The surviving documentation varies as to which of these events it mentions for any forfeiture, and furthermore it varies as to whether it provides a date for some or all of the events. Very often multiple dates are available for an individual forfeiture. Users of the databases should therefore bear these issues in mind and be aware of these inconsistencies. Dates are recorded in more than one database field, but the date in the 'Date (modern)' field is usually the one that the researchers considered most important. The researchers' ideal was to be able to identify a date at which a certain individual or household can be said to have possessed certain goods. The 'Date (modern)' field contains the date that comes closest to that, given the available evidence. It should be noted that some such dates are approximate. In particular, the dates of the E 357 accounts lack precision as these often cover a number of years and may record a forfeiture that took place months or even years previously, at an unknown date.

6. Future work and re-use potential

The datasets form an important body of data quantifying information about the range of objects used and valued by people in the late medieval and early modern period. This is the first project of its kind. There is potential for closer integration of the datasets, for example by combining them into a single database using shared language for categories of objects. The purpose of each database was to extract all the available information on the objects within the data survey areas. Using data manipulation and changing the format within which the data is currently held would start to change the way in which the data can be used.

The [archaeological dataset](#) provides a starting point for anyone wishing to research into medieval rural settlement (for example following the template of the [Rural Settlement of](#)

[Roman Britain](#) project). Whilst not comprehensive, the database details information pertaining to rural settlements in 15 counties up to 2018.

A large body of data on non-demesne agriculture can be found within the [escheators and coroners datasets](#). This is extremely valuable, given that most surviving records pertain to demesne agriculture (see Campbell [2000](#)). Many of the records provide details on crops and animals, as well as on farming equipment such as carts, ploughs and tools. Some forfeitures also detail the amount of land held by the household, and this information has been included in the database. There is potential for using this data to reconstruct cropping patterns, agricultural output and husbandry regimes regionally and diachronically.

The datasets also offer potential for further research into specific issues around the objects themselves, including long-term trends in monetary valuation (escheators' and coroners' databases) and the understanding of the value, distribution and use of particular objects. The evidence lends itself to qualitative analysis of some particularly detailed examples, as well as consideration of aggregated information.

7. Associated collections and datasets

Where possible, the dataset is linked to the resources accessed in the data gathering process. The photographic archive provides the original transcripts used in the extraction of the historical evidence presented in the databases.

The archaeological evidence is associated with HER numbers which link, in turn, to [OASIS](#) or [ADS](#) identifiers where these exist. Where museum collections were accessed, the accession number is provided.

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