

## CHAPTER I

# Introduction: Consumers, Commodities and Households in England, c.1300–1600

On 22 July 1418, at South Lynn in Norfolk, John Reynold (alias Backhous) committed homicide.<sup>1</sup> Following his subsequent indictment for this felony, Reynold's goods were listed and appraised on 8 September by an inquest of local men held before a royal official called the escheator, and subsequently seized and sold to two named individuals. The money generated went to the crown. John's goods consisted of six cushions (valued at 2s), three stools (7d), one ewer and basin (20d), six pewter dishes (8d), one candlestick (4d), two brass pots (3s 4d), one cauldron (2s), one iron plate (4s), 10 stones of wool (13s 4d), a mazer (a type of drinking vessel) (16s), 45s in cash, six silver spoons (6s), four cows (24s) and a silver adorned belt (6s 8d). Reynold is described in the record as a 'yeoman', which suggests he was a substantial farmer. Thus while he did not belong to society's poorest strata, neither can he be described as a member of the upper orders. This list of Reynold's possessions therefore raises intriguing questions and offers potential insights concerning consumption among non-elite households in later medieval England.

While we have a good understanding of the elaborate textiles, metalware and furniture found in great and noble households (Woolgar 1999), we know much less about the goods in the homes of those further down the social scale. New evidence presented in this book allows us to open up more fully a range of

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<sup>1</sup> E484. Throughout this book, references to forfeitures in our databases of escheators' and coroners' records are provided in the footnotes using an ID number, prefixed by 'E' for 'escheators', or 'C' for 'coroners'. Each ID number corresponds to a record of forfeiture in one of the project databases. The databases are available at: Alice Forward, Ben Jervis, Chris Briggs, Mathew Tompkins, Tomasz Gromelski (2021) *Living Standards and Material Culture in English Rural Households 1300–1600: Digital Archive* [data-set]. York: Archaeology Data Service [distributor] <https://doi.org/10.5284/1085022>. Except where specified, these databases constitute the source for all Tables and Figures in the book. See also Briggs, Forward and Jervis 2021.

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questions about such people. Were the cushions and items of plate in Reynold's household exceptional? When we observe such items here and in similar lists, how should we interpret them: as evidence of increased spending power, of a 'consumer revolution', of the emulation of elites such as gentry or the merchants of the large towns, or as a sign of the emergence of a distinctive material culture which comes, by the seventeenth century, to be associated with the 'middling sort' (see Hamling and Richardson 2017)? Can we infer anything about the means by which such possessions were acquired? This book seeks to address these problems by examining the range of goods present in non-elite households, and by exploring changing relationships between those households and the market between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The book's aim is to address two basic questions about consumption: what goods were consumed by non-elite rural and small-town households in late medieval and sixteenth-century England, and what factors influenced these consumption habits? We combine two main sources of evidence in undertaking this analysis: first, lists of the forfeited goods and chattels of felons (including suicide), fugitives and outlaws produced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by the royal escheator and in the sixteenth century by another royal official, the coroner; and second, objects found through the archaeological excavation of rural settlements. In Chapter 2, we introduce these sources of evidence more fully, along with the interdisciplinary approach taken in this study. In this first chapter, we set the scene, first by reviewing the debate on long-term changes in consumption, and then by providing overviews of the changing economies of later medieval and Tudor England, before introducing the household – our main unit of analysis – as a site of production and consumption.

### **Revolution or evolution? Medieval and modern consumption**

As the above list of John Reynold's possessions illustrates, medieval people inhabited a vibrant material world, in which they acquired and used a range of material goods. It is now acknowledged that by the fourteenth century the economy was more commercialised than once thought, and that the production of goods for the market was highly developed (e.g. Britnell 1996; Dyer 2005; Kowaleski 1995). Yet, the relationship between medieval and modern consumption remains contested. Were medieval people primitive consumers? Or is medieval consumption a nascent form of modern mass consumption? Increasingly, archaeologists and historians of the medieval period are challenging the break between the medieval and modern introduced by a historiography framed by an early modern 'consumer revolution', in order to make the case for complex forms of consumption in the medieval period, which must be understood on their own terms (e.g. Heng 2014; Immonen 2012; Jervis 2017a).

The concept of an early modern consumer revolution was first proposed by Neil McKendrick (1982), who posited that in the eighteenth century more people were able to accumulate a wider range of goods, as greater aggregate wealth created new opportunities for social mobility. In simple terms, this consumer revolution is characterised by an acceleration in the range of goods consumed, the quantities in which they were consumed and the number of people consuming them. Research has focussed on Britain and North America, but similar trends in consumption practices have been identified across other areas of Europe (Ryckbosch 2015, 68). Of more pertinence here, however, is increasing debate over the date of this proposed revolution in consumption. The sixteenth and, especially, seventeenth centuries have been proposed as critical phases in a longer-term process, which in some accounts is seen more in terms of evolution than revolution (Agnew 1993, 20; Pennell 2012). The link between consumption and the early modern period is strengthened by the utilisation of the idea of the consumer revolution to help explain the preconditions for the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and also by a desire to ‘push back’ the origins of modern consumption. Finally, critical to the picture is de Vries’s (1993; 1994) theory of the ‘industrious revolution’ in which the structure of work changed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the commoditisation of labour (see also Whittle and Hailwood 2020). This created opportunities for the acquisition of wealth and its disposal driven by the realisation of a desire to consume.

At the same time, some have questioned the extent to which these features were unique to the early modern period. Without necessarily aiming to re-date the start of *the* consumer revolution, several authors have drawn attention to a much longer chronology of commercialisation, and to a significant growth in the importance of consumption in the later middle ages (Dyer 2005, 3, 126–8; Kowaleski 2006). While modern ‘mass consumption’ is unprecedented in its scale, to see the alienation of production and choice in consumption as modern traits is to deny the evidence for standardisation and an acceleration in the production of textiles, metalwork and other objects in the later middle ages (Heng 2014, 239). Such an approach fails to acknowledge the different ways that those things moved in and out of processes of commoditisation, became enrolled in processes of identity formation and were constitutive of a dynamic society in which consumption offered a means for rigid social and economic structures to be confronted and challenged, as can be seen through steps taken to regulate consumption activity through sumptuary regulation (Appadurai 1988; Jervis 2017a; Kopytoff 1988; Miller 1987; Shaw 2005; see Chapter 6). A further difficulty with the consumer revolution concept is that it implies the rise of an idea of consumerism, a conscious behaviour or means of engaging with the material world, which focusses on consumption as an intentional act with an intended outcome, a notion of consumption which is overly simplistic and shifts focus away from understanding the ways in which people become able to consume

and, more importantly, the intended and unintended consequences of that action (Campbell 1993, 41; Graeber 2011, 501).

Among many others, Christopher Dyer (2005) and Maryanne Kowaleski (2006) have examined in detail how medieval consumers encountered and acquired commodities, and made choices about how, when and why to acquire particular goods within the context of a proposed rise in living standards after the Black Death, which served to stimulate consumption. James Davis (2012) shows that a moral economy emerged alongside this increasing engagement with the market, as both sellers and consumers developed expectations and practices which reveal shared values and anxieties about the desire and ability to consume. Matthew Johnson (1996) also focusses on the wider societal ethos of England between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, arguing for an increasing concern with commodities as the more varied material world of the later middle ages offered opportunities to utilise objects to construct identities within the context of emerging capitalist relations. Johnson's work, along with that of Martha Howell (2010), stresses the importance of a nuanced understanding of the material dimension of consumption, suggesting that, although objects might enter (and even return to) the market as commodities, they become other things too, defined by the wider social relations in which they are immersed. While it is simplistic to see objects as simply displaying identity, except in specific cases, we can perceive of them being put to work, to secure allegiance through inheritance or to build communities through hospitality, for example.

As evidence for important shifts in later medieval consumption accumulates, a consensus is emerging that we should not seek to push the consumer revolution ever further back in time, but instead direct our efforts to understanding commerce in a given context on its own terms. Seeing medieval commerce and consumption as a 'way station' on the route to modern consumption implies a continuous, linear and largely economic narrative, which masks the complexity and social implications of interactions with material things (Howell 2010, 300–1). For Sear and Sneath (2020), a long-term evolution of English consumption patterns across the medieval and early modern centuries affecting different economic groups over time fits the evidence better than the notion of a single 'consumer revolution' at a specific date. Colin Campbell (1993, 43–7) stresses the need to work from behaviour, to understand what it meant to consume in the past and not to seek a form of consumption directly related to our own. Indeed, there is a need to develop approaches which not only acknowledge differences over time, but also *within* medieval society; to understand, for example, whether urban and rural life afforded the emergence of different sets of values, ideas and practices surrounding the acquisition and use of material goods (e.g. Goldberg 2008). We are increasingly aware that there are multiple forms of consumption, which disrupt a simple linear developmental trajectory (Ryckbosch 2015, 84). Frank Trentmann (2009, 292) sums up this trend well,

commenting that ‘we should resist the temptation of claiming a revolution in a particular time and place’. He suggests that we should seek to understand and explain patterns of difference and similarity; there is not a single form of modern consumption, so we cannot seek a single root cause for it. Consumption can, perhaps, be reframed as a particular mode of interaction with the material world, in which meaning is not inscribed on or communicated through the things we acquire and use, but emerges from these interactions (Trentmann 2009, 307). Periodisation can be seen as creating false origins; seeking the ‘first’ and trying to seek linear origins masks the meandering ways in which societies develop and the variety of ways in which material goods are brought to bear on this development (see Shryock and Smail 2011), while also implying temporal homogeneity rather than permitting a focus on the dynamic changes within a period (Jervis 2017a, 1–2).

In the chapters that follow, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of late medieval and sixteenth-century material life is presented, focussing on the possessions of agriculturalists, artisans and others outside the elite who lived in the countryside and small towns. The documentary sources we use commence in 1370 and extend to 1600. Covering more than two centuries, our archival data thus offers a means of tracking systematically and quantitatively long-term changes in the number and value of household possessions.<sup>2</sup> However, this evidence also allows us to examine similarities and variabilities in consumption behaviour across space and between social groups. As such, our aim in this book is not to advocate for a consumer revolution, or to seek the origins of modern consumption somewhere between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries; nor is it an attempt to evaluate the effects of the Black Death of 1348–9 on material culture, since our written evidence does not cover the period prior to 1348. Instead, we wish to understand how particular forms of consumer behaviour emerged out of, and went on to shape, the socio-economic contexts which constituted later medieval and sixteenth-century England. The century and a half following 1349 differed significantly in its demographic and economic characteristics from the decades after 1500 that followed. Following a chronological approach advocated by others (e.g. Brown 2015) we have therefore chosen to examine evidence on household consumption and ownership of movables from across these two broad periods partly in an effort to generate useful comparisons across the traditional medieval–early modern divide. The dating of our archaeological evidence is inevitably much fuzzier than that of the written sources, and our database of small finds covers items which were almost certainly produced or deposited earlier than the documents’ start date of 1370. Used carefully, the finds evidence can nonetheless contribute significantly to our understanding of changes and varying patterns across time and space.

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<sup>2</sup> A separate quantitative study by the present authors, which focuses on change over time in living standards, is in preparation.

## The economic contexts of rural and small-town consumption

1370–1500

In this section, and that which follows, we consider the economic environment in which the classes of people who are the main subject of this book made decisions around consumption. The aim is to sketch – in simplified strokes – the economic constraints and opportunities that affected such households, in order to provide an essential foundation for interpretation of the evidence on objects and possessions that we encounter in our sources. We must emphasize that the phrase ‘objects and possessions’ covers a very wide range: the items illustrated by our sources are not just household utensils and furnishings, but also many different possessions situated outside the dwelling such as crops, animals and a range of farming equipment. Moreover, many of the possessions we examine were not obviously an expression of consumption at all, in its *Oxford English Dictionary* sense of ‘the purchase and use of goods, services, materials, or energy’.<sup>3</sup> Instead, many items we can observe were used in production, or represent its outcomes, or were items with multiple uses. In fact, it quickly becomes impossible to think about the source materials used in this book in terms of ‘consumption’ alone, especially if one is inclined to associate the latter term with the acquisition of non-essentials, or ‘luxuries’. One prominent feature of this book is therefore its attempt to look at the full range of items in the possession of the household, and to interweave discussion of production and consumption.

In acquiring and managing all their material resources, however, households clearly responded to a diverse set of shifting economic influences. In this section, we look at the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a period which, in terms of archival evidence, we approach via the records of the royal escheator. In the subsequent section, we focus on the sixteenth century, a period for which our archival evidence comes from coroners’ reports. Our focus throughout both sections is naturally on the experiences of members of the groups that dominate our written records: the landholding peasants, including those more prosperous agriculturalists called yeomen and husbandmen in our sources, but also smallholders; the labourers who lived primarily by earning wages, but often held a small plot of land; and the artisans and tradesmen of lower and middling status who operated in villages and small towns, and who like the labourers also sometimes possessed some land and animals.

Of course, any list of the contents of a dwelling and its outbuildings of the kind analysed in this book is not solely a reflection of economic influences, such as the price level, or market access. Many other factors shaped a household’s profile of possessions. One significant influence lies in the attempts by

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<sup>3</sup> ‘consumption, n.’ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2022. Web. 13 January 2023.

the state and other authorities to control the behaviour of different groups, especially through sumptuary laws. The lists of forfeited possessions generated by the escheators offer potential for insight into the relationship between such measures and household consumption patterns, and indeed their relationship to the attitudes of those responsible for appraising forfeited goods. We must also acknowledge that the things we see in the lists also, in part, reflect preferences, and that expenditure decisions could be related to shifts in fashion, or to changing trends in religious expression. Where we see a list that appears to be composed entirely of mundane ‘essentials’, we must consider the possibility that this is indicative of a cultural tendency of the medieval peasantry to prefer investment in livestock and farm production over items of domestic comfort or display, rather than a lack of purchasing power on the part of the household concerned (Goldberg 2008). Furthermore, many of the items that we see in our lists of possessions were almost certainly not newly acquired by that household during its own lifetime, nor did they come from an external source. Many objects, including those in daily use, were clearly old, having been transmitted from one generation to the next via inheritance, no doubt being repaired or recycled along the way. Other possessions in the lists, most obviously crops and animals, were generated on the holding, being grown, bred or produced by the household itself. Finally, we must remember that our archival evidence captures a household at a particular point in its life-cycle. What is included and what is missing may be indicative of a particular stage in that household’s longer-term growth and decline, rather than simply the outcome of a particular expenditure decision.

With these caveats in mind, we may now turn to the forces of demand and supply that had the potential to shape the patterns of ownership that we observe in the two main periods under consideration. As Chapter 2 explains more fully, the escheator’s records, which form the first of the two main bodies of precisely datable written evidence used in this study, commence in earnest only in 1370. Moreover, that archive is no longer especially useful for the study of material culture after c.1480, and it is at its best before 1450. Meanwhile, our sixteenth-century written material, which comes from the archive of the Tudor coroner, is fairly sparse before the second quarter of that century. The result is that we have relatively little written data for the period 1480–1520. This is regrettable, since this is a poorly understood but potentially important period of change for which fresh evidence of patterns of consumption would be especially valuable (for existing views of this topic, see Dyer 2012b, 18–19, 196–8; Wrightson 2000, 44, 54). These ‘missing decades’ are situated between two distinctive economic phases, one characterized, crudely speaking, by stagnation and stasis, the other by growth. It is the former of these that we examine first.

The later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England are known, above all, for a low population following the Black Death of 1348–9, with any growth remaining muted largely as a consequence of recurrent outbreaks of epidemic disease. Although high prices in the immediate post-plague decades were a

sign of significant economic opportunities for some producers, especially in the urban economy, these conditions were on the wane by c.1370. The real GDP per capita data produced by Broadberry *et al.* (2015) shows a post-plague surge to 1392; however, the figure for that year was not surpassed again until late in the sixteenth century. GDP per capita, and therefore household incomes, seems on this evidence to have been essentially flat in the fifteenth century. Such a picture of modest or little growth in population and output are matched by the generally accepted view concerning the level of urbanization, which sees this measure as largely unchanging in the period we are considering. The decades under review certainly cannot be considered as an undifferentiated whole, but the characteristics of perhaps the best known of the era's sub-periods – the so-called 'great slump' of the mid-fifteenth century – serve only to reinforce a generally pessimistic impression (Hatcher 1996). For many, a major factor in England's suppressed economic activity in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was the general crisis in the money supply, and a shortage of small denomination silver coinage in particular. Perhaps the only major economic indicator that does not quite fit with the picture presented above is the evidence of wage rates, which on the face of it point to a fifteenth-century growth in wage-earners' real incomes to a level not attained again until the nineteenth century. As we shall see, however, there are good reasons to doubt the extent to which the well-known data on wage rates can be treated as straightforward evidence showing a boost to the living standards of most ordinary households, of a kind that might leave evidence of increased consumption.

What did these conditions mean for the households at the centre of this study, and what does the evidence reviewed suggest we should expect to find when we turn to our evidence of non-elite material life? There is a growing awareness that different social groups were affected in different ways by the broad changes just described. One obvious general benefit of a period of abundance of land relative to labour was that a greater proportion of households than previously had access to land. Many peasants began to accumulate larger holdings in this era, and some boosted their acreages yet further by taking on the leases of lordly demesnes (Dyer 2007). In a period of high labour costs and low prices, however, challenges faced anyone engaged in large-scale commercial farming, especially arable farming; another broadly recognized feature of the era is a shift towards less labour-intensive pastoral agriculture. For those living partly or wholly by wages, the opportunities were similarly circumscribed. While the records of the time provide ample evidence of impressive daily wage rates, it is less clear how far work was available at these rates for more than very short periods, leading to the claim that the real wage series which fail to take into account the number of days worked represent 'unreal wages'. There is therefore now serious debate as to whether the fifteenth century can continue to be viewed as a 'golden age of the labourer', in the sense of an era of annual earnings that were exceptionally high in historical terms. Such doubts are compounded by the mismatch between the GDP per capita series and the real wage series (Dyer 2015; Hatcher 2011).

One matter that is in little doubt, however, is that increased access to land meant it was much rarer for households to go hungry in normal years in this period than in the pre-plague era. The later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are generally seen as a time of marked ‘self-sufficiency’, and of ample and diverse diets for many agrarian households. We might expect this relative abundance to be reflected in our evidence in various ways, most notably in evidence on cooking and dining utensils (Sear and Sneath 2020, 71, 74; Woolgar 2016, 39–41). Furthermore, although we have raised some doubts about the capacity of peasant and labouring households to generate significant disposable incomes given the sluggish economic conditions, the evidence nonetheless suggests that some increases in per capita consumption of marketed goods and services did take place in the era 1370–1480 of a kind that affected the ordinary rural population. One instance of this is the spate of construction of new dwellings, evidenced by dated surviving buildings, which took place in the middle and later decades of the fifteenth century (Dyer 1998, 302–3). Another important example is textiles. Although the late medieval development of the domestic textile industry is well known, Oldland’s recent revised estimates on cloth output (and, by implication, consumption) represent a significant challenge to existing views, given his argument that ‘textile production, rather than following the general reduction in demand for most of the fifteenth century, was in fact a stimulus to the economy until the mid-century depression and then a catalyst for economic recovery at the end of the century’ (Oldland 2016, 251). He calculates production of pounds of cloth per capita at 1.33 pounds in 1311–15, 3.14 in 1391–5 and 4.64 in 1441–5, figures which show a striking increase across our period (Oldland 2014; 2019, 5).

Such evidence raises the possibility that non-elite households spent significantly on improved housing and on textiles (used largely but not solely for clothing) in this period. How far such developments can be traced in the evidence underpinning this book is an important question. Most commentators agree that any improvements in the material well-being of ordinary households in this period are likely to have affected diet, clothing and housing first of all. Another equally rational response to the conditions of this era is the preference for leisure once a certain level of income had been achieved (Hatcher 1998). Some of these responses are more visible in our evidence than others. A central question for this book is whether the economic conditions of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also encouraged consumption of the manufactured household goods, including ‘non-essentials,’ which our evidence is best suited to capturing: items like featherbeds, chests, basins and ewers, tables and chairs.

It is difficult to increase expenditure on manufactured goods such as these, as opposed to food, housing and clothing, if the range of such goods available to buy conveniently is limited, or their prices are prohibitively high. Supply was as important as demand, and for this reason, in this book we give close attention to the issue of access to goods, as an important variable affecting their prevalence and distribution. Some of the goods that late medieval households wished

to consume, such as certain types of chest, were not produced domestically but were imported, which may have limited their circulation (see Chapter 5). Data on the prices of manufactured articles is hard to come by, and indeed one of the purposes of the present study is to discuss some new information of this kind. Yet it is a reasonable starting assumption that the high labour costs involved in their production must have made the prices of manufactured goods prohibitively high for many consumers, especially relative to food (Hatcher 2011, 21).

Access to goods was shaped not just by their cost but also by their availability in the marketplace. We should not consider formal markets in town and countryside as the sole or even primary route through which movable possessions found their way into households. The importance of a range of channels, including second-hand sales, informal sales in locations such as inns, and regional fairs, has been stressed in a number of studies (e.g. Davis 2010; Dyer 1989; 1992; Hare 2013; Staples 2015). The dynamics of the marketing network certainly changed in this era. While London increasingly dominated the national economy, larger towns and cities played an important role as redistributive hubs. In some cases, such towns came to dominate the regional economy at the expense of the smaller markets that had proliferated in the commercial expansion of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but fell out of use in significant numbers in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (see Dyer 1991).

We might anticipate that these evolving marketing arrangements had implications for the range of goods that were available to non-elite households. Archaeology provides insights in this regard, particularly through analyses of pottery, a mundane and cheap commodity, that was produced locally, and, due to variations in geological composition, can be easily provenanced by archaeologists. While most pottery was acquired locally, the relative quantities of wares from different areas, as well as the range of regions represented, might usefully demonstrate the hierarchy and character of different markets and their consumers. Comparing three sites from southern England, for example, Duncan Brown (1997) shows how a wealthy Southampton mercantile household utilised a mix of locally produced and imported wares, while a burgess household from Winchester had more limited access to these imports but possessed pottery from a number of regional centres, as is to be expected in one of the principal cities of the region. In contrast, a smaller rural household possessed only pottery from the local market. Documentary evidence demonstrates how cartloads of pots were taken to fairs and markets, with smaller quantities of wares being hawked between villages (Moorhouse 1981, 108). In Kent, the limited reach of local market hinterlands is demonstrated by the presence of ceramic zones within the county (Streeten 1982). These reflect the character of the local geology, a pattern seen in many other counties, with waterways offering opportunities for the longer-distance transportation of wares which could not be economically transported long distances over land (Jervis 2011; Mellor 1994; Mephram 2018; Spoerry 2016; Vince 1977; also Chapter 9 below). Diverse assemblages of imported pottery attest to the wide trading contacts

of ports such as Hull (Evans 2019), London (Blackmore 1994), Bristol (Good 1987), Norwich (Jennings 1982) and Southampton (Brown 2002), but these wares rarely found their way to inland markets. These wares were, however, utilised by coastal communities, some of whom likely had direct contact with mariners or even foreign markets through fishing, raising the question of the extent to which the commercial relationships of these coastal communities were distinctive (Allan 1994; Jervis 2017b). The analysis of pottery from excavations also reveals how different members of urban populations engaged with the market, with the composition of assemblages from wealthier and poorer areas of towns varying in terms of function, decoration and point of origin (e.g. Allan 1984, 101–3; Brown 2002; Jervis 2009).

For a variety of reasons, explained in detail in Chapter 2, pottery does not form a part of the dataset discussed here. However, we highlight the potential of other goods, such as whetstones and quernstones, for informing our understanding of medieval exchange networks. With the exception of some textiles, the escheators' and coroners' records provide no detail on the source of goods; however, by considering the distribution of types of goods in relation to markets and communications networks, it is possible to consider the role of marketing networks in shaping patterns of consumption (see Chapters 9 and 10).

### *The sixteenth century*

By 1600, the consumption decisions of labourers, artisans, husbandmen and yeomen took place in circumstances that were dramatically different from those that had prevailed over two centuries earlier, when the archival sources used in this study first become available. This is in part because entirely new forms or varieties of consumption goods, whether household articles or items of clothing, had now become available; some relatively common items in our sixteenth-century lists are absent or very rare in their pre-1480 equivalents, such as bedsteads, trundle beds and kettles. But the contrast was also a consequence of the altered economic forces shaping consumption that can be observed when comparing the later sixteenth century with the later fourteenth. These forces affected the various social and occupational groups under investigation very differently in the two periods.

The decades either side of 1500 represent an especially intriguing period, but as we have seen, for this era the documentary evidence used in this book is comparatively weak. The following brief discussion therefore focuses on the great changes that accelerated especially rapidly from the middle decades of the sixteenth century. In this era, the population recovery that had been so conspicuously absent from the long fifteenth century entered full swing. The total English population increased from an estimated 2.83 million in 1541 to 4.11 million in 1600 (Broadberry *et al.* 2015, 12). Prices of all kinds increased dramatically, with grain prices at the end of the sixteenth century lying at roughly

six times their level of one hundred years previously, while prices of industrial products grew rather less than two and a half times across the same period (Clay 1984a, 43–4). Although sixteenth-century GDP per capita was broadly ‘resilient’, there were a number of short-term downward movements in the latter half of the century (Broadberry *et al.* 2015, 210). The real wage series display a dramatic fall in the later sixteenth century as the cost of living rose rapidly and subsistence pressures mounted (Humphries and Weisdorf 2019, 2877). The tendency towards self-sufficiency that had marked the lot of many fifteenth-century households waned markedly, as dependence on the market for the supply of basic necessities became the norm for large swathes of the population.

In the face of such forces, rural and small-town society below the gentry was characterized by growing differentiation, or indeed polarization. Many yeomen and wealthier husbandmen expanded operations to meet growing demand for agricultural commodities, including that generated by a growing urban sector. This opened up new opportunities for consumption to these ‘proto-capitalist’ farmers, as is well attested in the literature, especially work based on probate inventories. These studies draw attention to the proliferation of goods owned by many yeomen and some husbandmen, and the evidence of comfortable and well-furnished domestic interiors in the later sixteenth century (Muldrew 1998; Shepard and Spicksley 2011). The material worlds of such later sixteenth-century rural elites have been contrasted with the experiences of their counterparts earlier in the century, many of whom, like the Leicestershire yeomen studied by Hoskins (1950), still lived in comparatively simple, bare homes (Clay 1984b, 5; Wrightson 2000, 44, 54, 139–41).

The situation was very different for those who lived largely or wholly by wages, as they struggled to cope with the rising cost of living. Among the key questions are how far sixteenth-century labourers’ capacity for consumption extended once basic needs of food, clothing, housing and fuel had been met, and whether this capacity shifted across the century. This has proved hard to answer to date, since the probate inventories which are central to understanding consumption do not exist in any great quantity before 1550, and those labourers’ inventories that are available are biased towards the wealthier members of the group. Indeed, partly for such evidential reasons, much of the literature on early modern consumption and living standards takes 1550 as its starting point. Muldrew (2011), however, assembled a sample of labourers’ probate inventories which produced the surprising finding that the real value of household goods actually increased between 1550–99 and 1600–49. Whittle summarized Muldrew’s findings (which also extended forward to the eighteenth century) as follows: ‘it seems that labourers, like those of middling wealth, participated in the increased acquisition of new consumer goods for the home’ (Whittle 2013a, 316). Others are less optimistic than Muldrew. Sear and Sneath (2020, 294, 305), for instance, argue that the trickle down of ‘luxury’ household goods (non-essentials) to labourers and poorer husbandmen only happened in the eighteenth century. Wrightson, meanwhile, tends to emphasize the growing poverty of wage-earners in the period c.1520–c.1580.

Consideration of the supply of commodities, as well as demand for them, is also important for understanding consumption and material life in the sixteenth century. Given the trends discussed above, the general importance of markets and marketplaces as sites of exchange most likely increased. Most commentators also point to a growth in industrial output in this period, which boosted the supply of manufactured goods. As noted above, the prices of industrial products grew more slowly than food prices. Broadberry et al. (2015, 195–6) comment on the rationality of switching spending from food to manufactured goods in periods when food became relatively dearer, such as c.1510–c.1630. The sixteenth century also saw the beginnings of the establishment of domestic industries that increased the supply of inexpensive commodities such as metalwares and stockings: ‘by the end of the sixteenth century goods that had been deemed rich men’s luxuries in 1540 were being made in so many different qualities and at such varied prices that they came within the reach of everyman’ (Thirsk 1978, 179).

To summarize this discussion of broad economic context between 1370 and 1600, we note first that the literature does not lead us to expect support for a simple narrative of general ‘rising consumption’ to emerge from our sources. While many historians have seen the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as an important phase in the history of consumption, and have emphasized ways in which the material lives of non-elites improved in this period, others have pointed to countervailing forces created by the weaknesses of demand and the withdrawal of markets. Commentators on the sixteenth century have stressed the rising wealth of village elites in the period after 1550 in particular, but equally existing research leaves room for uncertainty concerning the consumption practices of poor husbandmen and labourers in an era of rising living costs. Our sources feature individuals and households from all these different social groups, and have the capacity to shed fresh light on their experiences. As Chapter 2 shows more fully, we have also selected evidence from a range of different localities from across the country in order to be able to explore the regional and urban-rural differences that undoubtedly existed in household economies and the world of goods.

### Defining the medieval household

Before progressing to consider the evidence for non-elite consumption in the medieval household, it is necessary to reflect briefly on the term ‘household’. This is important because the household forms the book’s key unit of analysis. Throughout the middle ages, a variety of terms were used to define the household (e.g. *familia*, *hospitium*, familie, meine(e), hous(e)hold), each with their own particular connotations and meanings. However, from these terms, four key traits can be identified; co-residence, residential space, sociability and authority (Riddy *et al.* 2007, 117). The household is a term which relates to the organisation of living, is intimately related to the physical environment of

dwelling (the house) and is necessarily comprised of people dwelling and acting together. Yet the medieval household is not easily reducible to a common definition. The composition of the household varied across space, time and society. Sarah Rees Jones (2003, 12) usefully describes it as a liminal space between the individual and wider society. The household is, in some way, a component of society, being both constitutive of it, but also reflective of it (Hamling and Richardson 2017, 8). It is the site of socialisation (Riddy 2008); it is therefore a site in which social and cultural norms are both reproduced but also, potentially, adapted and altered, and might be understood as the ‘foundational place of social, economic, religious and political life’ and therefore essential to the maintenance of social order (Hamling and Richardson 2017, 7).

In order to define the household, it is necessary to overcome our modern associations between household and house, and household and family. While at the lower end of the social spectrum the household may have consisted solely of a nuclear family (Dyer 2005, 46), it was common for the household to include members of the extended family and also servants in both the medieval and early modern periods. Similarly, while we might see the house as the physical ‘site’ for the composition of the household, the people constituting the household might be dispersed, for example through moving away to a town, where they may live in shared accommodation but still contributing economically to their household, while simultaneously being a part of another (Grenville 2008). Home, as Goldberg and Kowaleski (2008, 1) remark, is more than a place, but an association with familiarity, friendship, nurturing and intimacy, as well as faith and micropolitics; the household might be seen as being performed across space, exceeding the bounds of the dwelling and the bonds of the family.

Linked to the household are changes to dwelling spaces and the emergence of concepts of domesticity, which Riddy (2008) links to the specific modes of living which characterised the burgess class of later medieval towns and cities. The earlier part of our period is characterised by houses with a simple plan, comprising a multifunction hall space, possibly with ancillary service rooms (Gardiner 2000; 2014a). Regional variation can be seen in the adoption of long-houses, with byres for the stabling of animals, in areas of western and northern England, while building technology also varied regionally, as can be seen in the varied distribution of cruck- and timber-framed houses (Alcock 2015; Gardiner 2014b). In both town and country, our period is characterised by a process of modification and rebuilding, with the insertion of upper storeys to houses and the creation of new types of enclosed space such as parlours and chambers, spatially separating activities (Alcock 2010; Johnson 1993; Martin and Martin 1999; Roberts 2003). While the chronology of these changes varied regionally, the occupation of multi-roomed dwellings created spaces through which behaviour and social relations could be ordered. Whether the adoption of similar spaces in the countryside from the fifteenth, and particularly through the sixteenth, century can be understood as the adoption of this burgess domesticity or something particular and unique to rural society (see for example Johnson

1997) is open to debate. In both cases though, we can see that the freedom to acquire capital and to dispose of it on architecture and moveable goods had the potential to alter modes of living and the ways in which households were constituted and operated. In the early modern period, as in the middle ages, the house was a site of work, both work which might be understood as ‘economic’ (e.g. production for the market or retailing) but also hidden, domestic labour, typically the role of female members of the household, in cooking, cleaning and childcare (Goldberg 2011; Hamling and Richardson 2017, 7–9; Whittle 2011). The division of space within the dwelling might be understood as ordering the separation of work and domesticity, but, as Jane Whittle (2011, 138) points out, what constitutes work ‘in the house’ is open to interpretation.

We can therefore see the fundamental element of the household being a relationship of co-reliance with a presumption of co-residence, which might not necessarily be constant. The changes to patterns of landholding and seigniorial obligations in the countryside potentially increased the importance of the household as a unit linked to a dwelling, undermining the communal relationships which had been fostered through service. While families were a component of the household, it was also composed of others, perhaps only for short periods of time, and it was in the performance of the household that distinctions and convergences between ‘domestic’ and ‘economic’ behaviour emerged. The medieval household is a slippery concept, difficult to define beyond the broadest of terms, a reflection of society as a whole but also a component of it and therefore potentially a driver of change and highly variable in its size, composition and character. But the household can also be understood in another sense, as referring to the goods brought together for the use of those people constituting the household, their furniture and utensils – in reflecting on the medieval household, it is necessary therefore to understand it not as a solely human composition, but as a set of relations between people, spaces and things.

## Conclusion

In this book we do not undertake a fresh quest for the ‘consumer revolution’. Instead, at one level our purpose is simply to present as fully as possible some important new evidence on the consumption behaviour of ordinary medieval and Tudor people. Despite some excellent and important work, this is a subject that has hitherto remained surprisingly mysterious, mainly because the evidence that has been used to date is fragmentary, or sheds light on only selected objects or kinds of households. We aim to show the great variety in the possessions of households of modest and middling wealth, and to try to understand the variations that we see by relating them to differences in chronology, geographical location and social status. Our evidence cannot answer all our questions fully, because, as we shall see, like wills, inventories and other sources, it too is incomplete and biased. Yet at the same time, our written evidence in

particular has some distinctive strengths. Most notably, we can be confident that we are often looking at relatively poor, low-status people – that is, at those who often escape the historical record – not least because many of our records concern those accused or convicted of crime, and therefore shed light on the desperate and marginal. Furthermore, although some of the lists of chattels are often ‘incomplete’, we can still use them effectively by treating them not as objective inventories of household contents, but partly as reflections of what those doing the appraising considered worthy of note and of value, in its various senses.

In what follows we first introduce the key sources of evidence used in the book, namely the lists of forfeited goods created by the escheator and coroner, and the database of objects from archaeological excavations (Chapter 2). We reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and on ways in which the two major source types can be most fruitfully combined. The central chapters of the book are built around the categorisation of the objects themselves, according to their functions and uses. Thus, we move through sections relating to food processing and cooking (Chapter 3), to food and drink consumption (Chapter 4), furniture (Chapter 5) and the person (Chapters 6 and 7). Chapter 8 considers the evidence for household craft production. In the subsequent two chapters, we consider patterns of consumption, firstly in relation to household economy, wealth and market access at the national scale (Chapter 9), and then through a regional case study focussed on Wiltshire (Chapter 10). Finally (Chapter 11), we resume the broader perspective of this introduction, and draw together evidence on the consumption habits of non-elite households and their implications.