

## CHAPTER 2

# Exploring Consumption: Methods and Datasets

This study sets out to address two basic questions: 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? In doing so, we draw together data derived from archival and archaeological research, in an attempt to develop a fuller understanding of household possessions than either source would permit in isolation. This chapter outlines the interdisciplinary approach which frames the study, and the datasets which underlie it.<sup>4</sup>

### Interdisciplinary perspectives on consumption

Inspired by early modern probate inventories from the United States, the historical archaeologist James Deetz (1977) famously referred to archaeological objects as ‘small things forgotten’. This phrase can be interpreted in two ways: first, it highlights the study of those objects which are missing from written inventories but are ubiquitous among assemblages of excavated objects; and secondly, it refers to the subtle patterns of variability apparent from the study of the objects themselves, but overlooked in written documentation. The integrated study of documentary and archaeological evidence in research on early

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<sup>4</sup> The project’s three databases, plus digital images of all the archival documents, are freely accessible via the Archaeology Data Service, at <https://doi.org/10.5284/1085022>. A discussion of this resource and its research potential can be found in the accompanying Data Paper (Briggs *et al.* 2021). In compiling the text of this book we have returned frequently to the original archival documents, and some errors in the relevant deposited databases have been identified, but not corrected in the deposited versions. Briggs *et al.* 2019 is based on a preliminary version of the escheators’ dataset which is smaller than that used here.

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modern (or post-medieval) consumption in the US and further afield is well established, and provides a model of how such interdisciplinary research methods might be applied to medieval material.

Comparative analyses of early modern probate inventories and archaeological objects have opened up a range of areas of enquiry which demonstrate the potential of interdisciplinary approaches to medieval consumption. Analysis of the terms used to describe objects, combined with details of their context of use, permit the development of approaches to the classification of archaeological objects in ways which are likely to have been meaningful to past communities (Beaudry 1988; Kent 2015). Comparative analyses of the occurrence of goods in archaeological contexts and in inventories highlights areas of overlap between these sources, and demonstrates both issues around the survival of archaeological objects (e.g. through recycling and the decay of organic materials) and the omission of common or low value objects from written inventories (Bedell 2000; Hodge 2012). Such studies may highlight the contextual character of systems of value, for example by illustrating the importance of cheap but fashionably decorated ceramics among wealthy early modern households compared to the significance of long-lasting and repairable metalware in lower status households (Smart Martin 1989). By comparing archaeological evidence and probate inventories from the estate of the Ximenez family, Portuguese immigrants in Flanders, Poulain *et al.* (2017) demonstrate how interdisciplinary analysis can help to reconstruct the context in which particular objects were used, suggesting that certain Portuguese ceramics were used in public performance whilst others were used in more intimate settings. From this perspective, it is important to be aware of the structures underlying inventorying practice; the purpose that inventories served has a direct impact on the items which were deemed worthy of listing and their relationship to the contexts in which the goods themselves were used.

In the case of medieval and early modern England studies of probate inventories, wills and references to objects in legal texts illustrate the range of influences which might impact the recording of particular types of goods or their qualities. For example, Richardson (2004a) highlights how the colour of gowns is recorded in court records only where they are in some way exceptional or pertinent to the case being discussed. Goods may be described in detail where they could be subject to dispute, for example where they were temporarily surrendered as security (Smail 2016) or where an item has been specifically bequeathed to an individual. For the medieval period, Wilson (2015) has highlighted the theatrical element of inventory production, as a communal process of valuation and judgement in which valuers, objects and the documents themselves all were actors. As Hamling and Richardson (2017, 16–17) illustrate, the patterns of variation between sources are as meaningful as the goods which they document, and only through contextualised and interdisciplinary analysis is it possible to piece together these systems of meaning and value and evaluate their significance.

Whilst interdisciplinary analysis of household possessions is commonplace for the early modern period, it is much less established for the medieval period. There are instances where the fortuitous survival of a will or inventory relating to an excavated settlement has been identified. At Foxcotte (Hampshire), several wills have been identified relating to the final stage of settlement prior to desertion in the sixteenth century (Russel 1985, 175–6). That of John Helliar, dating from 1587, includes a range of textiles, furniture, cooking equipment, animals and produce, similar to the types listed in the contemporary coroners' records examined here. The finds from contemporary dwellings are more limited, comprising ceramics, small metal items and structural fittings. Unusually, on the basis of the documentary evidence, it has been possible to propose that one of the excavated structures was Helliar's house, although few finds were associated with this structure. Similarly, Christopher Dyer (2012a) used the excavated evidence from Wharram Percy (Yorkshire) to create a material context for the inventory surviving for local man William Akclum. Increasingly archaeologists have sought to contextualise particular objects of study, for example through identifying analogies in contemporary depictions, while the growing interest in the material among historians has led some to relate those identified in documents to extant examples (e.g. Hamling and Richardson 2017; Standley 2013 on dress items; Willemsen 2012 on belt fittings). The present study is, however, the first systematic and large-scale interdisciplinary analysis of consumption among non-elite households in medieval England.

That such analysis has not been undertaken previously is due largely to the deficiencies of the source material. Probate inventories are the staple of early modern research, but they exist in small numbers only for the period before the 1530s. As the Foxcotte example demonstrates, wills are a valuable source where they survive. Yet although wills are available from the medieval period and sixteenth century in considerable numbers, they typically relate to wealthier rural households and particularly those living in towns. They often also omit reference to movable goods, or mention just one or two objects in their descriptions of bequests, which is a problem for any study (like the present one) which aspires to investigate the totality of a household's goods.

In spite of such source problems, with the emergence of the 'material turn' in historical study (e.g. Bennett and Joyce 2010; Hamling and Richardson 2017) there has, over the last decade or so, been a substantial increase in studies of the documentary evidence for medieval and early Tudor consumption (e.g. Burkholder 2005; Dyer 2013; French 2021; Gemmill 2020; Howell 2010; Kowaleski and Goldberg 2008; Wilson 2021). Such evidence as does exist tends to be better for towns; for the medieval countryside, documents which shed light on consumption among lower status households are rarer. Important exceptions are the lists of *principalia*, household equipment provided to tenants, for Worcestershire households examined by Field (1965) and the small yet intensively studied collection of early probate inventories from the diocese of York, dating from the later fifteenth century (Goldberg 2008; Dyer 2013). This

is not a situation unique to Britain. Increasing interest in the limited range of sources for medieval rural consumption can be demonstrated in other areas of Europe, including Scandinavia, where Poulsen (2004) has combined records relating to trade and legal practice with archaeological evidence to examine late medieval rural consumption; and Spain, where post-mortem inventories have been used to study household consumption in the Valencia region (Almenar Fernández 2017). The ‘Living Standards and Material Culture’ project set out to contribute to this growing body of scholarship through the collection of previously untapped sources of evidence which are subjected to an interdisciplinary analysis. The result is a study of objects from archaeological excavations and lists of the seized goods and chattels of felons (including suicides), fugitives and outlaws, which offer a particular window into the material setting of rural households in England between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.

### Seized goods as evidence for consumption

Throughout the medieval period and beyond, the crown exercised the right of felony forfeiture, which entitled its officials to seize the goods of felons, fugitives and outlaws. A felon was anyone who committed one of the large category of serious crimes classed as felonies, principally homicide and rape but also larceny, burglary, arson and suicide. Forfeiture was also applied in cases of treason; it was partly on these grounds that participants in the rebellions of 1381 and 1450–1 lost their goods to the crown. Fugitives were those who were suspected of felonies but fled before they could be brought to justice. Outlaws comprised criminals who had managed to evade trial and were stripped of legal rights *in absentia*; the same sanctions, at least in theory, were applied to defendants in civil lawsuits, often for debt, who had similarly failed to appear in court after repeated summonses. For reasons of brevity, throughout this book we use the term ‘felons’ as collective term for all those subject to forfeiture, making distinctions between e.g. outlaw and fugitives where necessary.

Given the deficiencies of the evidence provided by medieval probate inventories and wills, the lists of seized goods and chattels that were generated by the processes of felony forfeiture have an obvious value for understanding the everyday lives of lower status people in the middle ages. John Langdon (1986; 1995, 71–2) was perhaps the first to note the potential of materials preserved following crown seizure for understanding peasant agriculture. To date, however, they have not been exploited in a systematic manner for the study of consumption. The lists which form the basis of this study relate to goods seized for the crown by two officials: the escheator (for the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) and the coroner (for the sixteenth century). However, before introducing these records, it is necessary to comment further on the limitations on the crown’s right to exercise felony forfeiture.

Current understanding of felony forfeiture rests largely on the work of Kes-selring who has examined the broad development of the practice through the

medieval and early modern periods (Kesselring 2009; on the mechanics of suicide forfeiture see also Houston 2010a, 2010b). The default position identified by Kesselring is that a felon's goods would be forfeited to the crown, and his lands escheated to his lord after the king had taken their waste and profits for a year and a day. In practice, however, the situation was considerably more varied. Rights to forfeitures were also claimed by many lords (Gibbs 2018, 254–5). The question of rights to the forfeited goods of felons therefore often created disputes between landowners and the crown. Many major towns also exercised rights of felony forfeiture within their jurisdictions as part of their borough privileges. Altogether, this means that the coverage provided by the records of the royal officials who administered the process of seizure on behalf of the Crown is not complete; not all forfeitures appear there. There are also inevitably questions around whether in practice *all* of a felon's goods in fact were lost to the crown, which is a key issue for our interpretation of the lists. We return to this issue below, after describing in greater detail the process of forfeiture and the records it generated.

### **Records of seizure: the escheator and the coroner**

A number of different officials played roles in the operation of felony forfeiture across the five or more centuries in which it was a royal prerogative. Although in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the coroner and sheriff were involved to some extent in the process, the key figure at this time was the escheator. Hence it is the records of this official that we have used for this period. Although the main series of escheators' accounts starts in the 1340s, lists of felons' chattels only start to appear in these and related records from 1370. This explains the start date of the present study. Furthermore, in the latter half of the fifteenth century the involvement of the escheator in this area of royal administration waned, with the recording of lists of goods becoming patchier from c.1460, and ceasing altogether from 1480. The escheators' archive is therefore of relatively little use to historians of consumption and material culture after this date. In seeking sources for the succeeding period roughly equivalent to those of the later medieval escheator, we turned instead to the records of the coroner. The coroner's involvement in felony forfeiture grew in prominence across the Tudor period, and although material is comparatively scanty from the early sixteenth century, it grows quite rapidly from the 1540s in particular. The relevant archives of each official are discussed below.

Of course, for reasons of continuity and comparability the project would ideally have used forfeiture records produced by just one type of official for the entire study period. This proved impossible, however, owing to the aforementioned loss of relevant detail from the escheators' records in the later fifteenth century, and the relative paucity of such information in the coroners' records before c.1500. Two consequences flow from our reliance on distinct archives for the late medieval and Tudor evidence respectively: first, we must always

bear in mind that our evidence either side of 1500 was generated by two different officials (and their staffs) pursuing somewhat different processes; and second, that our data is thinnest on the ground for the period c.1480–c.1530. The well-known importance of those decades as an era of economic and social change makes this feature of our archival dataset especially unfortunate.

### *Escheators, coroners and felony forfeiture*

The escheator was a royal official who performed a wide range of duties. In general, his role was to take responsibility for the collection of royal revenues, primarily the profits and incomes from 'escheats' – lands taken into the king's hands temporarily (Waugh 2015). Many of the escheator's duties, however, remain inadequately researched, despite their importance (Deller 2012, 208). One of these underexplored roles was the administration of felony forfeiture. An aim of the 'Living Standards' project has been to boost understanding of this aspect of the escheator's work.<sup>5</sup>

Each escheator administered an escheatry, comprising a county or a pair of contiguous counties. With their origins in the early thirteenth century, from the middle of the fourteenth century, the escheators began to take on a widening range of duties, including collecting, appraising and liquidating the goods and chattels of felons, fugitives and outlaws. This role entailed the documentation of seized goods and their value. Although there was a great deal of variability in how this was undertaken in practice, the standard process was for the escheator to hold an inquest for each felon, at which a jury of local men listed the possessions and documented their value. Such lists purport to itemise the possessions of the felon on the day of the inquest. The time period between the event which triggered the forfeiture (felony, flight or outlawry) and the inquest could vary from just a few days to many months.

The following is a typical example of a escheator's inquest into a felon's chattels:

Inquest taken at Hooton Levitt in the county of York on 21 September in the fifth year of King Henry IV after the conquest [21 September 1404] before Nicholas Gower, escheator of the lord king in the same county, by virtue of his office, by the oath of Richard Cosyn [and 11 other named men] who say upon their oath that Henry Milner of the same vill who killed John Selby and afterwards fled had goods and chattels namely six quarters of wheat price 40d for each quarter, [total] 20s; eight quarters of barley, price 3s for each quarter, 24s; eight quarters of oats, price for each quarter 20d, 13s 4d; six quarters of peas, price for each quarter 2s, 12s; a parcel of hay in a stack, price 3s 4d, three horses price 8s each, 24s; six oxen price 9s each, 54s; one cow price 6s 8d; one heifer price 7s;

<sup>5</sup> A much fuller study of the escheator's work in felony forfeiture and its implications for use of the records is in preparation by the present authors.

one bullock price 6s 8d; 18 ewes price 15d each, 22s 6d; eight hoggets price 12d each, 8s; four pigs price 2s each, 8s; a worn cart price 2s, and another cart bound with iron, price 13s 4d; item, household utensils price 6s 8d. In testimony of which they have attached their seals, dated the place and day as above. Sum: £11 11s 6d.<sup>6</sup>

Following the inquest, the escheator normally answered to the exchequer for the value of the goods, realised through their sale. In some cases, the escheator's records indicate who acquired the goods and where. For example, the goods of outlaw John Ferrour of Sevenhampton (Wiltshire) were sold to a John Walsyngham of Fisherton (Wiltshire) in 1415. The escheator accounted at the exchequer for the 42s 4d raised from the proceeds.<sup>7</sup> It is probable that the valuations listed in the escheators' lists relate to the sale price of the goods. The use of descriptive terms such as *debilis* (worn) and *veteris* (old), as well as references to the colour or specific type of textiles, suggests that there was a need to account for unusually high or low valuations for specific goods. It is also apparent that goods were not necessarily always sold as functional objects. The description of metal cooking vessels by weight in some instances suggests that these were sold on for their scrap, rather than functional, value. For example, in 1434 the five brass pots belonging to Richard Penyng of Great Cheverell (Wiltshire) were noted as weighing 80lb, and valued at 2d per pound.<sup>8</sup>

Analysis of the records generated by the escheator demonstrates clear variability in the practice of forfeiture in relation to a range of variables. The key question of whether or not the lists of goods represent all the felon's possessions, or just a selection, is considered more closely below. Another area of obvious concern is the question of regional variation in escheators' practices. Throughout the period covered by the escheators' lists, those relating to the escheatry of Kent and Middlesex appear most detailed. In contrast, the Yorkshire lists typically itemise only animals, metalware, agricultural produce and, in some cases, bedding, with other goods valued together as 'household utensils', as in the case of Henry Milner above (see Briggs *et al.* 2019). This latter category of miscellaneous goods, the 'small things forgotten', occurs across England, but appears to have been particularly favoured as a means of valuing a group of lower value goods in Yorkshire. The reasons underlying this regional variability are unclear, but have implications which may limit the scope for detailed regional analysis of the acquisition of particular goods.

Thus the escheator's records provide a valuable insight into the possessions of non-elite households across medieval England, but are not without their interpretive challenges. In assessing the goods present, it is necessary to understand where, when and why the goods were seized. Regional comparison of specific

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<sup>6</sup> E37 (TNA, E 153/713 m. 2; this forfeiture also appears on E 357/15 rot. 14).

<sup>7</sup> E237 (TNA, E 357/24 rot. 36d, m. 1).

<sup>8</sup> E1538.

types of objects must also take into account variability in practices of appraisal and recording.

The medieval and early modern coroner has been more extensively studied than the escheator, with research on his duties has focussing on suicide, crime and accidental death (e.g. Gunn and Gromelski forthcoming; Hanawalt 1986; Kesselring 2019; Lockwood 2017; MacDonald and Murphy 1990; Sharpe and Dickinson 2016; Stevenson 1987a, 1987b).

The office of the coroner was created in 1194. His diverse duties included responsibility for the forfeited chattels of felons in cases of homicide. During the fourteenth century, elements of the coroner's role, including the administration of felony forfeiture, were transferred to the escheator, as noted above. In this period the escheator began to take responsibility for appraising and taking possession of deodands, the lands and goods of felons, outlaws and abjurors of the realm, and for holding inquisitions into treasure trove and shipwreck, duties formerly belonging exclusively to the coroner. The role of the coroner became limited to the holding of inquests relating to sudden and suspicious death. It is to this role that the lists of seized goods appearing in the coroners' records relate. It seems that ensuring that goods forfeited by felons in cases of homicide and suicide, and that the deodands resulting from fatal accidents were properly inventoried, appraised and handed over to authorised persons, remained key aspects of coroners' work (Butler 2015, 3; Hunnisett 1961, 22). Virtually all the coroners' lists of forfeited chattels analysed in this book arose from inquests into the goods of murderers (in cases of homicide), including those who had fled, and suicides. The coroners' inquests and reports do not cover outlaws, whether criminal or civil.

Clear differences emerge from the comparison of the goods listed in the escheators' and coroners' records. It is striking that items of clothing are considerably better represented in the coroners' than escheators' records (see Chapter 6), and in general the level of detail provided on objects is less variable and of higher quality. This is not to say, however, that these records should not be approached with caution. Hunnisett (1971), who pioneered systematic research into coroners' material, and Havard (1960) argued that the fallibility and corruptibility of the coroner, coupled with a lack of financial incentive and deficiencies of the late medieval and early modern judicial system as a whole, must have had a negative impact on the quality of the documents produced by the coroner, and those supervised by him. More recent scholarship also points to the instances and 'possibilities for corruption, influence, and error' inherent in the inquest procedure (Kesselring 2019, 51–60).

While it is sensible to assume that some coroners were less thorough than others and that there must have been attempts to influence the coroner and the text of the final report (for example the part listing assets to be confiscated), it should be also borne in mind that the process of holding inquests and drafting reports was regulated by a raft of legislation and closely supervised, that coroners, juries and witnesses could be prosecuted even for minor defects in their reports, and that there is no evidence of widespread corruption among

coroners and juries (see especially Lockwood 2017, 197–237). Contemporaries and certainly the authorities had much trust in coroners since their reports played a central role in criminal trials; at assizes, charges of unlawful killing were normally brought based on the written record of an inquest, rather than on a freshly drawn indictment (Cockburn 1985, 74, 91–2; Loar, 1998, 102–4; Sharpe and Dickinson, 2016, 310). Not only that, mid-sixteenth century legislation increased coroners' responsibilities in this area by charging them with the duty to record examinations and prepare evidence for trial and by empowering them to commit murder suspects to prison and to bind witnesses to appear in court.

### *Data collection and sampling: escheators' records*

As already mentioned, where information on felony forfeiture is concerned, the records of the escheator are richest for the period c.1370–c.1480. In this project three connected categories of escheators' records were used: the files of inquests (The National Archives class E 153), the particulars of account (TNA class E 136) and the escheators' account rolls (E 357). Put simply and briefly, the files mostly collect together records of inquests held before the escheator, including inquests related to felony forfeiture, like that relating to Henry Milner, quoted above; 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. Digital images of the relevant forfeiture texts, drawn from all three document types, are available as part of the project's deposited datasets.

The escheators' files (E 153) typically contain collections of the original inquests submitted by the escheator each year. They contain collections of sealed indentures and informal memoranda recording the information gathered at the inquisitions presided over by him or his sub-escheators, along with the writs containing instructions from the central government which the escheator returned endorsed with a certificate of compliance. Many, frequently most, of the indentures, memoranda and writs which must have been produced are absent. Not all of the indentures and memoranda found in the files relate to felons' chattels, but those indentures that do appear sometimes contain extra details omitted from the E 136 particulars and E 357 accounts. Many were originally sewn to the particulars but they are now all bound into paperboard folders. The indentures vary in size, but are typically about eight inches by four or five inches. Being indentures, their upper edge is usually cut into a zigzag, and the lower edge sometimes retains the three or four thin strips cut from the base to which the jurors affixed their seals, but these have more often been cut off.

The particulars of account (E 136) contain the original accounts submitted by the escheators each year. These are written on one side of long, narrow parchment rolls comprising multiple membranes sewn head to foot. Generally about 10–12 inches wide, the longest – containing 100 or more membranes – can be 200, even 300 feet in length. As the felons' chattels always appear last in

every account, the entire roll must be unrolled in order to find them. The escheators' account rolls (E 357) are copies of the particulars of account. Each of these rolls contains all the accounts produced by all of the kingdom's 25–30 escheators during a period of two to ten years. They are large documents, generally comprising 50–170 rotulets sewn head to head, each rotulet consisting of two long, wide membranes sewn head to foot and covered on both sides in small, dense handwriting.

Every inquisition into the goods and chattels of a felon, fugitive or outlaw ought in theory to be recorded three times, once in each of the three record classes. This is perhaps true of about a quarter or third of the forfeitures examined, but inevitably each class has many gaps in the series. Inquisitions in the E 153 files tend to provide the fullest detail, but this series is also the least complete. The E 357 accounts have probably suffered the fewest losses, but being the result of two successive copying processes (from the original indentures and memoranda into the particulars, and thence into the accounts) are slightly more likely to contain summarised information, rather than the itemised lists and valuations of the goods and chattels that are of greatest evidential value.

For our purposes therefore, the escheators' accounts in E 357 were the most useful of the three classes, because they feature the fewest missing years and concentrate information in one document. We therefore proceeded by extracting from these accounts details of every forfeiture which generated a list of three or more items. We restricted our attention to the following nine escheatrics, covering 15 counties altogether, and chosen to provide a balanced geographical coverage: Cumberland and Westmorland, Northumberland, Yorkshire, Worcestershire, Norfolk and Suffolk, Northamptonshire and Rutland, Kent and Middlesex, Hampshire and Wiltshire, and Devon and Cornwall. Because we were interested in rural and small-town households, we ignored forfeitures relating to persons who resided in the 50 largest towns as measured by the numbers of persons paying the 1377 poll tax (Palliser 2000, Appendix 5). Where we encountered gaps in the E 357 series, we searched all the surviving records from the relevant years in classes E 136 and E 153 to identify any previously undetected forfeitures, as above. The data collection process therefore made exhaustive use of the E 357 accounts, and for this project we did not look at every surviving document from E 136 and E 153, although a great many items in those classes were consulted. Often we have found information on a particular forfeiture in two of the three record series, and sometimes in all three. Where this is the case, the information is consolidated in an individual record in the database.

Three counties – Hampshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire – were subjected to more intensive data collection. For these counties, in addition to collecting details of all lists of 3+ forfeited items used in this book, we also collected all forfeitures where just a total valuation for the forfeited goods is provided, rather than a breakdown of items. Such 'total valuations' are very common in the forfeiture records, and 344 of them were collected for these counties so

that they could be used in calculating long-term trends in the median value of forfeited possessions. Hampshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire we also handled differently in that for these counties we also extracted information on all settlements regardless of size, with a view to facilitating urban-rural comparisons. We found, however, that evidence on forfeitures from the largest towns such as Southampton, Winchester, Salisbury and Worcester was rare, doubtless because (as suggested above) such privileged boroughs successfully asserted their claims to felony forfeiture, and excluded royal officials.

Both the escheators' and coroners' records provide varying levels of detail about the occupations of felons and suicides. The focus of this research was the possessions of non-elite members of communities. Therefore, where individuals were identified as 'knight', 'esquire' or 'gentleman', they were excluded from the sample, as were higher clergy, though parish clergy were included (individuals described as rector, vicar, chaplain or clerk). Again, Hampshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire were the exceptions; here, the goods of all individuals, regardless of status, were recorded to facilitate comparative study of different social groups. In the event the data was of sufficient quality to permit such analysis for Wiltshire only (see Chapter 10).

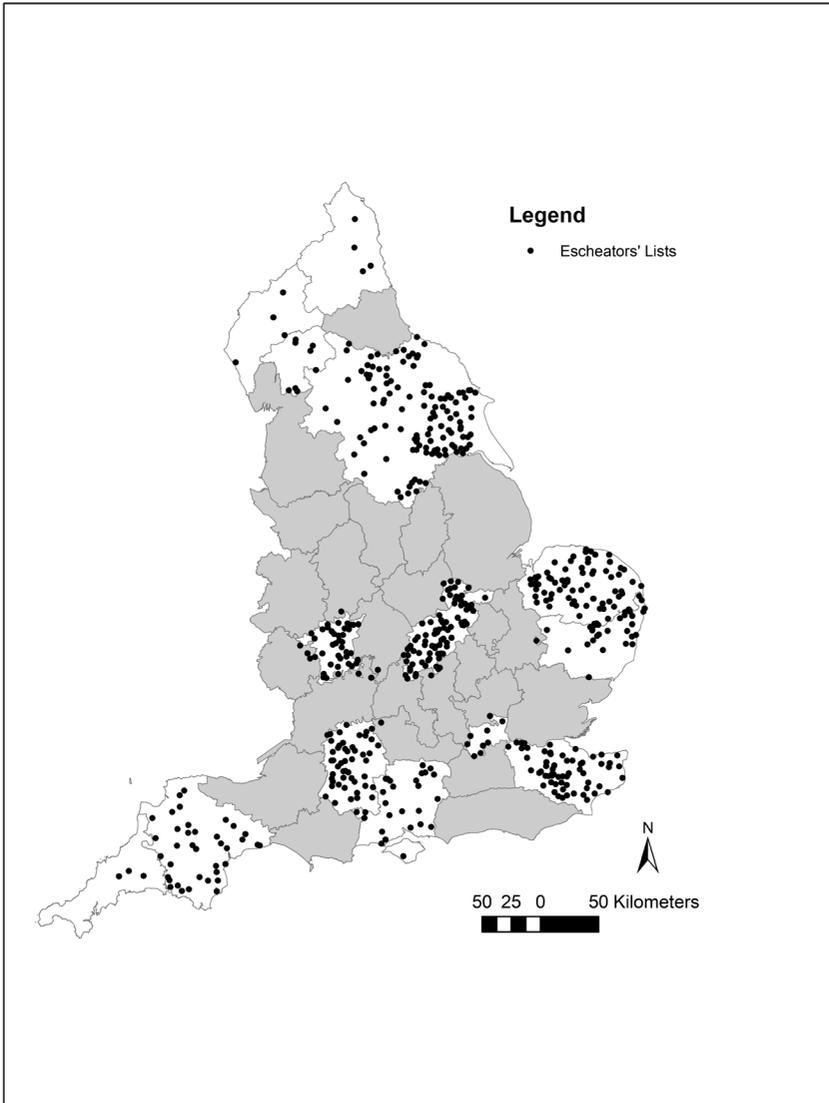
In total, the resulting escheators' dataset used in this book comprises 997 lists of chattels for the period 1370–1479, detailing some 7,569 possessions or groups of possessions (Figure 2.1), most of which – though not all – are identifiable. Legible information on occupation is available for 326 of the 997 lists (32.7%).

### *Data collection and sampling: coroners' records*

The vast majority of extant fifteenth-century and early modern coroners' reports are preserved among the records of the court of King's Bench, one of the two principal common law courts, in TNA classes KB 8 to KB 14 (Gibson and Rogers 2009). Statutes of 1487 and 1510 required coroners to investigate all sudden deaths and to produce all their records of inquests regularly at gaol deliveries, normally held twice yearly, under the penalty of £5. The gaol delivery justices, and later assize judges, would then forward them to the King's Bench, except those relating to homicide trials in progress. This practice continued until about 1752 when coroners' inquisitions began to be collected by clerks of the peace.

The longest and largest King's Bench record class containing coroners' material for the sixteenth century is KB 9 (described by the TNA catalogue as 'Court of King's Bench: Crown Side: Indictments Files, Oyer and Terminer Files and Informations Files'). A few inquests from our period were removed from KB 9 at various points and are now in KB 8.

Coroners' inquests or reports can be roughly divided into four major categories based on the verdict: homicide (includes most instances of one person



**Figure 2.1:** The distribution of escheators' lists in the project database. The map shows a single dot for each place from which lists with 3 or more objects occur.

killing another without differentiating between murder and manslaughter), suicide, accidental death and divine visitation (includes deaths from illnesses and diseases, exposure, natural death and deaths in gaol). Until the 1530s there is a preponderance of homicides over other deaths, particularly in the early years, but from that point an average yearly yield for KB 9 material is around 100 inquests from each category. In the case of murders and suicides, the felon's

goods would become forfeit to the crown, so the coroner's duty was to take an inventory and appraise them or to supervise this process and make sure that goods were taken possession of by those who had the right to do so. It is mostly murder and suicide inquisitions that were of primary interest to the project. The coroners' reports, written in Latin in cursive hand on rectangular strips of parchment or paper usually not larger than A4, vary in length and the amount of detail provided. Reports often include lists and/or valuation of goods and chattels of the deceased or felon, though in some cases inventories containing this information would be often drafted on a separate membrane annexed to the report.

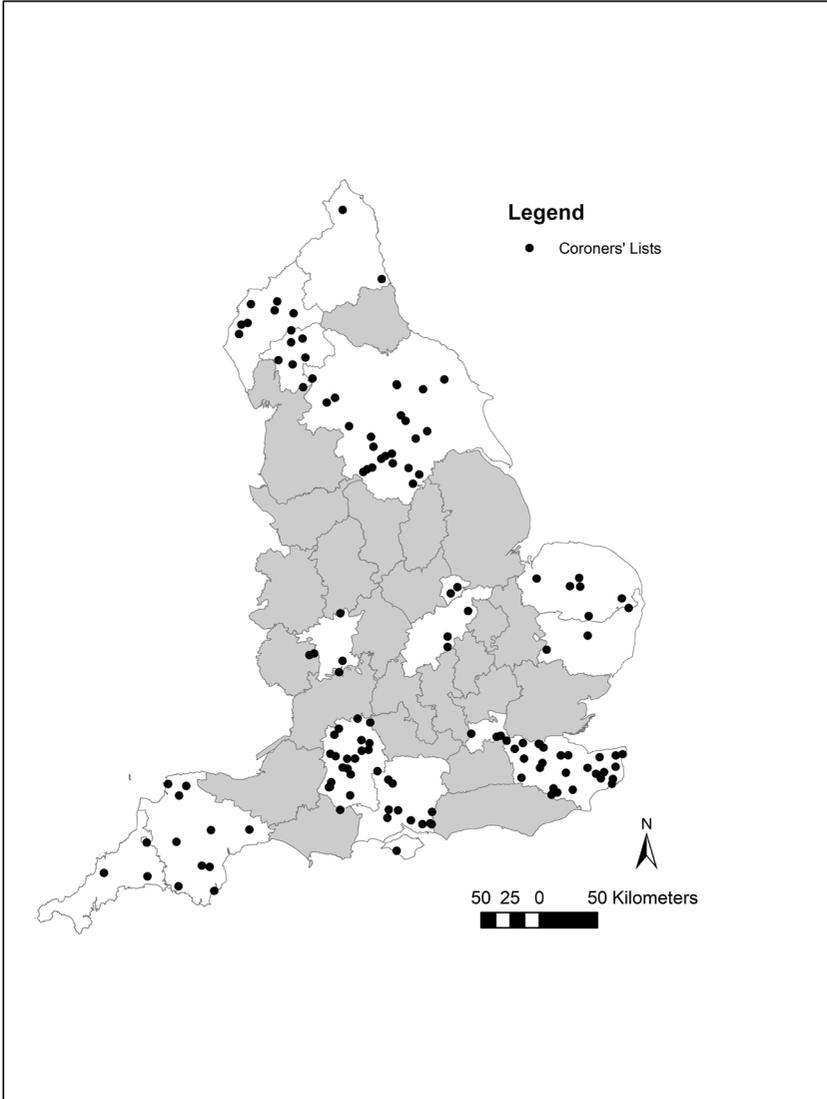
In view of the vast quantity of material in the coroner's archive, the project focussed on inquests and reports among classes KB 8 and KB 9, supplemented by class ASSI 35, which contains some coroners' inquests with the verdict of homicide.<sup>9</sup> The data collection on the coroners' inquests focussed on the same counties as the work on the escheators' material. As in the case of the escheators, we gathered details of all lists of goods containing three or more items from all 15 counties. For the coroners' reports we focussed on six-year periods, one from each decade from the 1490s to 1590s, and extracted all surviving lists in reports from those periods, ignoring only those reports missing place of residence. We also collected all 'total valuations' (where the total value of the forfeited chattels is known, but no breakdown of items is given), in the following cases: (i) from Hampshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire, irrespective of whether there is information on occupation/status and place of residence; (ii) all other counties, where the occupation/status and place of residence of the owner/handler of the goods is known. The purpose of collecting these 'total valuations' was, as with the escheators, to facilitate a separate investigation of temporal change in living standards. As in the work on the escheators, we included parish clergy throughout but ignored reports relating to persons of 'elite' status, and those from large towns, except in the case of Hampshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire. Altogether this research on the coroners' reports generated a dataset of 170 chattels lists of the period 1490–1600, containing some 3,129 items or groups of items, plus 268 'total valuations' (Figure 2.2). Occupational information on the forfeiting individual is available for 108 of the chattels lists (63.5%).

### *Social status of those who forfeited*

As noted above, given the project's primary interest in the lower-status residents of villages, hamlets and small towns, archival data collection concentrated on groups outside the lay and clerical elites and the residents of the 50 biggest towns. While the social pyramid represented by the resulting datasets

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<sup>9</sup> These inquests were among those retained by Elizabethan and seventeenth-century assize judges to be used at trials and are still found among files of their respective assize courts.



**Figure 2.2:** The distribution of coroners' lists in the project database. The map shows a single dot for each place from which lists with 3 or more objects occur.

is quite broad at the base, it is at the same time worth noting that our analysis covers people from a range of status levels. Precision is difficult owing to the exclusion of occupational descriptors in many cases. It is clear that at one end of the spectrum, the individuals and households captured by our record sources were often poor and apparently desperate people for whom it seems reasonable to assume that their involvement in crime, or their suicides, may have been

driven at least partly by their economic circumstances. Furthermore, taking the escheators' and coroners' databases together, a clear majority of those who forfeited their goods were labourers, artisans and peasants who belonged to the lower or middling portions of rural society. Such individuals can also be found among the participants in the revolts of 1381 and 1450–51 who feature quite prominently in the escheators' database. At the same time, felony forfeiture affected all ranks, and the criteria we have used in data collection has allowed for the inclusion of a number of individuals whose economic and social status was evidently rather higher than that of the typical forfeiting felon, even though they did not carry a descriptor such as 'gentleman'. Some of these people have relatively extensive or detailed lists, and therefore feature quite frequently in the chapters that follow, often as a point of comparison with other more modest lists. Two examples worth noting here are John Moigne, a traitor of Warmington (Northamptonshire), who forfeited goods worth £75 in 1405, and John James, a clergyman who hanged himself at West Dean (Wiltshire) in 1577, and whose extensive possessions were valued at over £300.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere we included in our data a small number of other individuals, such as small-town merchants John Maister of Havant (Hampshire) and John Hawkyn of Barnstaple (Devon), who are clearly distinct from the peasants and artisans who make up the bulk of records in our databases, but meet the criteria of 'non-elite' as we have defined them.<sup>11</sup> Our archival datasets are in no sense entirely representative of late medieval and sixteenth-century society as a whole, but they do contain plenty of poorer people, while offering the advantage of allowing us to observe the material circumstances of a broad variety of households.

### *Forfeiture by men and by women*

The vast majority of the felons who forfeited and left lists of chattels were male. This feature was especially marked in the case of the escheators' dataset, in which just 13 of the 997 lists (1.3%) relate to females. The proportion was higher for the coroners' dataset, where there are 26 lists for forfeiting females (15.3%). Overall, however, our evidence is dominated by men. The primary explanation for the small numbers of women appears to lie with the rules of coverture, which meant that on marriage all household goods became the possession of the husband. Since married women technically had no possessions of their own, they could not forfeit movables to the crown. This assumption is supported by the information on the marital status of those women who did forfeit. Among the 13 in the escheators' data, there is explicit indication of marital status for five women, of whom two were described as servants (presumably unmarried), and three as widows. Of the 26 women in the coroners' data, 20 are described as either widows or spinsters, while in six instances no information

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<sup>10</sup> E45; C382.

<sup>11</sup> E122; E518.

on marital status is given. None of the 39 women are described as married. A further factor in the low numbers of females in the evidence on forfeiture is presumably the overwhelming predominance of men among those indicted for and convicted of felony, especially homicide (Brown 2022). Indeed, most of the women who do appear in our evidence forfeited due to suicide. Five of the 13 women in the escheators' dataset had committed suicide, while in the coroners' material 25 of the 26 women fell into that category, with one death being ascribed to misadventure.

This striking male bias raises important questions about our evidence. First, it forces us to question our access to direct written evidence on gender and consumption, a subject that French, for instance, is able to explore more fully using evidence from wills (French 2021). To be sure, we do have lists for women which, although typically quite short, are apparently complete and comparable in character in detail and content to similar lists relating to men. These can provide insights into material and familial circumstances when read alongside the contextual detail of the forfeiture. For example, in 1447 Agnes Wacy of Tilney All Saints (Norfolk) committed suicide. Her goods are listed as four brass pans (valued at 7s), two cows (12s), two coverlets (6s 8d), four sheets (60d), six pewter pieces (15d) and two candlesticks (6d).<sup>12</sup> This is fairly typical of a short list of the most common basic household goods. A similar example from the coroners' data is the list of the widow Jane Mortimer, who hanged herself in in her house in West Street, Gravesend (Kent) in 1598. She was described as 'very poor' and living with her six children on alms from the parish.<sup>13</sup> Her goods, worth 40s, are characterised rather vaguely, as a bedstead, featherbed and other furnishings and domestic utensils, but the description of her tragic circumstances would suggest that this was the extent of her goods. Other lists relating to female suicides provide useful, albeit relatively brief, information about clothing in particular, used in Chapter 6. Overall, however, the number of lists for women is sadly too small to permit a sustained analysis of gendered aspects of material culture.

Consideration of male and female forfeitures also draws attention to the issue of whether lists should be treated as describing the possessions of entire households, or just those of individuals. As we have seen, the vast majority of lists pertain to men, many of whom (though not all) were married household heads. Should we regard men's lists as representing the entirety of the goods of their households? Or, when a male household head was executed, fled or was outlawed, were some items excepted from those forfeited from the crown on the grounds that they belonged or pertained to the wife and family he left behind? Clearly, any formal exclusion of goods on these grounds is important to establish at the outset.

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<sup>12</sup> E120.

<sup>13</sup> C456.

Kesselring investigated this general issue, and found that while some contemporaries thought the law surrounding forfeiture unduly harsh in its tendency to deprive a felons' innocent dependents of material possessions, especially where suicide was the reason for forfeiture, in principle it was indeed the case that a family could be stripped of most if not all of its movable goods as a result of the crown's exercise of its rights. No formal provision was made for the reservation of movable goods to the felon's family, and a widow of a forfeiting felon lost her normal rights of inheritance of such goods (Kesselring 2009, 2014). Similarly, the present study has found no explicit evidence that escheators or coroners formally excepted movable goods from consideration when ordering inquests and appraisals.

Whether a wife was actually deprived of all the household's goods in practice is another matter. Significant scope existed for the removal of goods from the attention of the escheator or the coroner so that they could remain in the household for the benefit of a departed felon's family, and there may have been strong social pressures inducing juries to disregard some items on these grounds. Concern for the material welfare of the families of suicides can certainly be documented from the coroners' records.<sup>14</sup> Although in principle the doctrine of coverture deprived a wife of property rights in all household movables, in practice the process of forfeiture may have recognized the wife's special interest in her own clothing, or even in a wider range of household utensils. These would represent items that in the rather different context of probate were known as the *paraphernalia* of a married woman (Beattie 2019). Some support for this idea is provided, for instance, by the fact that women's clothing is very rarely mentioned in lists concerning the forfeiture of males. The very detailed 1418 list of Worcestershire yeoman William Wodeward is unusual in including his wife's gown (*toga*).<sup>15</sup> In other cases, we may assume, the absence of references to clothing perhaps reflects recognition of a wife's informal property rights, and a similar tendency may lie behind the under-recording of other household possessions in ways that are not easily detectable. In both the escheators' and coroners' documents there are cases where specified forfeited goods are said to be in the possession of the wife of the felon, fugitive or outlaw, but the form of these entries probably reflects a refusal to render up the goods on the part of the wife, rather than an arrangement whereby she might continue to enjoy them against the letter of the rules of forfeiture.<sup>16</sup> A somewhat enigmatic entry containing the lengthy list of forfeited goods of attainted Barnstaple merchant John Hawkyn concludes by noting that the goods had been valued and sold to four men 'to the use of Matilda, formerly wife of the said John Hawkyn', but if these goods were returned into Matilda's possession, the mechanism through

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<sup>14</sup> For examples, see a blog post by Tomasz Gromleski: <https://medievalobjects.wordpress.com/2018/01/29/deducted-for-the-coroners-ffee-13s-4d-or-what-happened-to-forfeited-goods/>.

<sup>15</sup> E348.

<sup>16</sup> e.g. E105, C9.

which they did so is unclear.<sup>17</sup> Overall, we may conclude that while on the face of it the chattels lists represent a household's goods rather than those of a (usually male) individual, some lists almost certainly silently omit items which were reserved to family members left behind, and we keep this possibility in mind in the analysis in later chapters.

*How 'complete' are the escheators' and coroners' records of forfeiture?*

Even if we accept that the chattels lists represent, in principle, all the household's movable possessions, rather than just those that belonged to the forfeiting individual, there remain other reasons to doubt the completeness of the lists. As we have seen, throughout the period studied the escheators and coroners were in principle permitted to seize all of a felon's movables for the crown, without exception (Kesselring 2009, 208). Little evidence has been found of exceptions to this. Indeed, it is striking how often the escheators' records in particular note explicitly that the forfeiting felon 'had no other goods' in the area under the jurisdiction of the escheator. Taken at face value, this suggests that even lists which appear implausibly short and comprise just a few goods should be treated as representing 'everything' that a felon owned.

Of course, it would be naïve to do so. Informally there was huge scope for the omission, removal or overlooking of chattels. Unstated practices of omission could vary over time and space in ways that are hard to reconstruct.<sup>18</sup> Equally, it is dangerous to argue that just because an expected item does not appear in a chattels list, then this must be because it was deliberately excluded from the process of appraisal. Nonetheless, analysis of the content of lists does provide indication of omission on the basis of value or ubiquity. This is best evidenced by the near total absence of ceramic vessels, the most common object recovered from medieval archaeological sites, from the lists of goods seized by the escheator and coroner. One purpose of the interdisciplinary approach taken in this study is to allow a more complete understanding of possessions to emerge, as it enables us to begin to make judgements about the perceived value and importance of particular goods through the process of seizure.

It is possible that the propensity for a selective approach on the part of juries about which goods to identify for seizure could be related to the reason for forfeiture. As noted, goods could be seized in relation to a range of felonies or in association with a civil suit, typically pertaining to debt. One hypothesis is that the more serious the reason for forfeiture, the more exhaustive would be the process of appraisal. It is certainly possible to point to instances of the most heinous crimes, such as murder or treason, where lists are extremely detailed and would appear to represent, more or less, the seizure of all of the possessions

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<sup>17</sup> E518.

<sup>18</sup> A fuller attempt to do so will be made in the study in n. 5 above.

of a household. In the case of civil outlawries, which appear to have been rather routine events by the fifteenth century, lists often appear less 'complete' and an obvious hierarchy of value can be discerned, with animals, crops and metal vessels (all of which could be easily liquidated) seemingly being seized preferentially, with items such as bedding seemingly less favoured. That said, there are always exceptions to this pattern, in the shape of several very full and detailed lists of civil outlaws. The statement that a forfeiting individual held no other goods in the county can be found in connection with civil outlaws as well as criminals, as is the case for the chaplain Simon Hull of Blatherwick (Northamptonshire) who was outlawed by civil suit in 1410.<sup>19</sup>

It is clear that the archival materials produced by felony forfeiture cannot be treated simplistically as complete and comprehensive listings. Nor can we always regard the contents of such lists straightforwardly as belonging to the household. For instance, some of the people who forfeited did so because they had stolen goods. Because the stolen items were also forfeit to the crown, we must take care to distinguish any stolen property for the felon's 'own' goods. Fortunately, the records themselves often make the distinction obvious, as in the 1433 list relating to Elena, servant of Nicholas Welsh, of Morpeth (Northumberland). This clearly differentiates Elena's own goods (a coverlet, two blankets and a worn hood, valued together at 26d) from those which she stole from her employer (three pairs of shoes, a worn dorser and banker).<sup>20</sup> We must also be on the lookout for lists which include an artisan's stock in trade among his own household items, and for occasional instances which seem to represent a felon apprehended in flight with a limited range of goods, rather than the more typical appraisal carried out at the felon's residence. These and other special circumstances inform the discussion of forfeiture evidence later in the book.

All told, the lists of forfeited chattels display huge variety. At one extreme lie short and stereotyped documents which it is entirely unrealistic to treat as complete or accurate listings. At the other extreme, we have detailed and apparently painstaking descriptions of goods which are striking in their verisimilitude. In the chapters that follow, we seek to read lists of both kinds as critically as we can, taking account wherever possible of the processes of appraisal and valuation, and the ways in which they may have shaped the evidence available to us.

### Archaeological evidence for consumption

The objects recovered from archaeological excavations provide a valuable counterpoint to those documented in lists of forfeited goods. The potential of archaeological data has been greatly expanded by the explosion of archaeological excavations undertaken in advance of development since the introduction

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<sup>19</sup> E299.

<sup>20</sup> E1526. Another good example of an attempt to distinguish the felon's own goods from the stolen goods is the case of Thomas Kyrkeby chaplain (E1349).

of Planning Policy Guidance 16 in England in 1990 and its subsequent development into requirements for archaeological work enshrined in later planning policies PPS5 and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). In interpreting archaeological evidence, it is necessary to understand some of the factors influencing recovery of archaeological objects, as these can account for apparent variability in artefact patterning.

### *The excavation of medieval rural settlements in England*

Prior to the introduction of development-led archaeology in the 1990s, archaeological investigation of rural settlements was dominated by investigations of deserted medieval settlements. Typically, these set out to address questions relating to village formation and desertion, as well as the reconstruction of rural houses and settlement economy (see Beresford and Hurst 1971; Gardiner *et al.* 2012 for overviews). These excavations were often large in scale and are best exemplified by the groundbreaking research projects at settlements such as Wharram Percy (Wrathmell 2012) and West Whelpington (Northumberland; Evans and Jarrett 1987; Jarrett 1970). Projects such as those at West Whelpington and Raunds (Northamptonshire; Auduoy and Chapman 2010; Chapman 2010) had a strong research focus, but were also stimulated by development pressure, in both cases the expansion of quarrying. These early projects generated a vast quantity of data about rural life, used to develop regional chronological sequences for the development of vernacular architecture, settlement expansion and decline and artefact types. In many cases, excavation demonstrated clear evidence for continued occupation beyond historically attested abandonment around the time of the Black Death. Excavation in small towns prior to 1990 was extremely variable, often relying on the presence of a local archaeological trust or local authority archaeological unit. Dyer (2003) highlighted the underutilised potential of archaeological data from small towns for understanding the character of urban centres across medieval England.

Since 1990, the obligation to undertake archaeological assessment ahead of development has vastly expanded the quantity of archaeological work undertaken. Large databases of archaeological information, specifically information on known archaeological sites and associated interventions (e.g. excavation, survey) are held by unitary authorities and national parks. These Historic Environment Records (HERs) are maintained and added to when archaeological work is reported, with development-led work forming the bulk of these entries. The archaeological work is typically undertaken by commercial archaeological companies and the process is managed by local authority archaeologists. As determined by local and national planning policy, it is rare that development-led work results in total excavation, with projects typically adopting sampling approaches to examine areas deemed to be of highest archaeological potential, most at risk from development or in order to develop a general understanding

of a site. This has resulted in a large number of small-scale archaeological interventions, mostly recovering small quantities of archaeological material which are of most interpretive value when combined to create a large dataset such as that gathered for this project. A further benefit of development-led excavation for the study of medieval settlement has been the increased level of excavation within currently occupied rural settlements rather than deserted sites, furthering our understanding of places which persisted, albeit in some cases in a shrunken state. Thanks to development-led excavation, we now have a much larger excavated sample covering a large proportion of the country, although there is some bias with particular intensities of work in areas which have experienced the most concentrated archaeological excavation. Reviewing recent work on rural settlement, Rippon and Morton (2020) highlight key themes examined over the preceding decade including settlement growth and agriculture, settlement contraction, the evidence for vernacular architecture and designed landscapes.

### *Factors impacting archaeological recovery*

Material recovered from archaeological excavations can be characterised as the residue of everyday life in the past, typically waste from domestic or industrial activity. Most material excavated from archaeological contexts has been subject to some form of transformation; it is exceptionally rare to recover ‘primary’ material; that is objects which were deposited in their area of use. Exceptions might be objects recovered from undisturbed housefire deposits, such as that recently excavated at Island Farm, Ottery St Mary (Devon; Mudd, Cobain and Haines 2018). Rather, archaeological deposits typically contain ‘secondary’ (that is material deliberately deposited into an archaeological feature such as a pit) or ‘tertiary’ (that is material re-deposited from its original place of deposition, for example through the spreading of midden waste as manure) material (see Schiffer 1987). Through processes of production, use and discard, objects undergo a variety of transformations: they may break or be worn down, elements may be recycled or salvaged and some materials may decay over time (LaMotta and Schiffer 2002; Needham and Spence 1997). For this reason, the archaeological record is always a partial representation of the materials produced or used at a given archaeological site.

In order to capitalise on the potential of archaeological evidence, it is essential to relate finds to the deposits from which they were excavated. Housefloor deposits are likely to incorporate ‘primary’ material, for example the small objects such as spindle whorls found on the floor of the excavated house at Upton (Worcestershire; Rahtz 1969), which we might imagine having been dropped and trodden into an earth floor. Also falling within this category might be the metal fittings from doors which were left in place when a building was abandoned, either to fall into decay or after a housefire, a good example being

those fittings from Foxcote (Russel 1985). Waste could be deposited into convenient locations around settlements, for example abandoned quarry pits. For example at Parlington (Yorkshire; WYAS 2010) finds from an infilled quarry include a copper alloy stud and an iron buckle pin. Whilst these finds cannot be associated with a specific household, they can be related to the inhabitants of the settlement, as it is likely that convenient waste was used to infill these excavations. Tertiary waste, for example that spread across surrounding fields, is more difficult to interpret as it likely incorporates material from multiple households, potentially including the manorial household. At Parlington, finds from the plough soil include a range of domestic objects, including an ornamental binding, buckles, a strap end and bag hook, a file, awl and shears, iron vessel fragments, a padlock and three broken knives. A rake prong may be an accidental loss, perhaps a tool that broke in the fields.

The material signature of a medieval community is necessarily visible at varying scales of resolution depending upon whether finds are associated with a specific building or yard, or were recovered from communal areas of a settlement or from the surrounding landscape. The excavation of a farmstead at Capel St Mary (Suffolk; Tabor 2010) provided the opportunity to explore buildings within the context of their wider landscape, with the use of a metal detector assisting with the recovery of metal finds. Several finds were recovered from a Roman posthole situated within a Roman enclosure. These comprise a later medieval copper alloy buckle, two lead weights, copper alloy slag, lead sheet and a copper alloy escutcheon plate of probable fifteenth–sixteenth century date. The presence of this mixed range of finds, representing craft, personal adornment and furniture, likely relates to the dispersal of domestic waste across the surrounding fields. Finds from the occupation area are more limited. A book or casket mount was recovered from a ditch and another copper alloy book or furniture fitting from a hollow adjacent to the principal structure, a buckle plate and stud came from a pit. A dome-shaped furniture mount was recovered from the large ditch enclosing the farmstead. The only finds from the metalled surfaces of the yard area were a strap end and copper alloy split pin. Fragments of quern and whetstone were recovered from enclosure ditches and quarry pits. Like the small finds, the pottery was chiefly recovered from quarry pits, ditches and other pits, with only a small and fragmented assemblage coming from the metalled surfaces. Overall, houses and working areas appear to have been kept fairly clean, but by associating finds with their context of deposition we can reconstruct how communities disposed of their waste and utilise this material to better understand the possessions of a community or household.

In order to reconstruct these waste streams, it is also necessary to be aware of factors impacting materials after deposition and during the process of excavation. The survival of archaeological objects in the ground is determined in part by the underlying soil conditions. Organic materials such as wood and leather survive only in anaerobic conditions, typically waterlogged deposits, which are considerably more common in urban than rural settlements. Acidic

soils can accelerate the decay of materials such as bone and metal, meaning that underlying geology must be taken into account when considering the regional distribution of artefacts. Modern archaeological methods are also an important determinant of the composition of archaeological assemblages. Small scale excavations can be expected to produce lower volumes of material than larger excavations. Interpretation of these small samples can be further complicated by the relative lack of information on the specific archaeological deposits, which could not be fully excavated or recorded. This project draws on inventories of finds published in archaeological reports and this information is of varying quality. An important review by Cattermole (2017) highlighted substantial variability in the extent to which professional best practice standards are adhered to by archaeologists, meaning that the standard of reporting is inconsistent across the country.

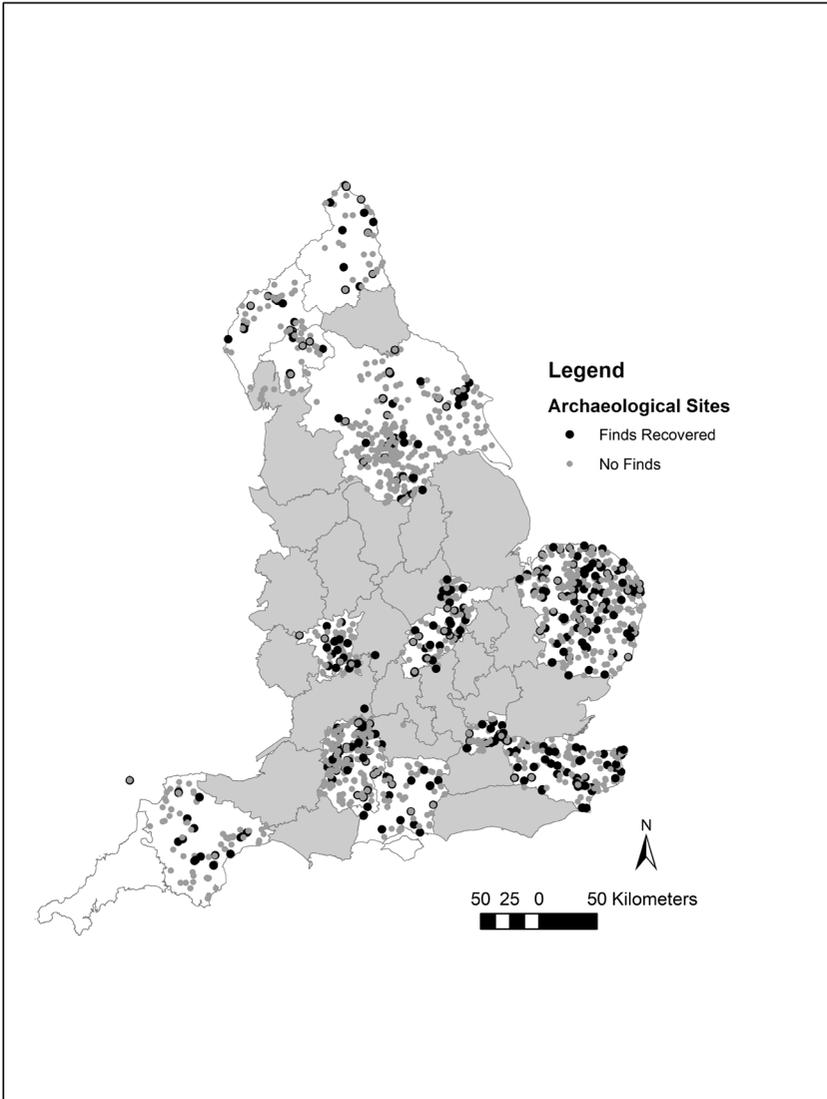
### *The archaeological dataset*

The archaeological dataset includes finds from 2,757 investigations from the case study counties (Figure 2.3).<sup>21</sup> In order to identify appropriate archaeological assemblages, searches of HERs within the case study counties were requested. Reports were returned containing details of all excavations from which evidence relating to the period c.1300–1600 was identified. These datasets were then sifted to identify sites for inclusion in the study. The project database contains a record of all sites meeting the criteria of a non-elite rural site regardless of whether finds were recovered, in order to map patterns of presence and absence. Key pieces of data were extracted from archaeological reports (including both published and unpublished ‘grey literature’ reports) in order to record the occurrence of artefacts in relation to specific dated medieval deposits. Recording at the level of the deposit, rather than the site, allows for understanding of the depositional processes: whether the material is likely to be an element of a primary, secondary or tertiary deposit. Key information about the object itself was also recorded including the object type (as it appears in the report and normalised to the Forum for Information Standards in Heritage (FISH) terminology to facilitate comparison), material, evidence for decoration, likely function, date range and quantity.

Establishing the chronology of sites is complex, and understanding the basic principles through which dates are derived for archaeological deposits is fundamental to the interpretation of the archaeological dataset. Archaeological dating works on the basis of stratigraphy, whereby deposits are excavated in reverse chronological order, giving a *relative* sequence for the dates at which those deposits form. Artefacts are a key element for providing a dating framework. Ceramics and small finds such as items of dress, which change style relatively frequently, provide measures against which the *absolute* date of a deposit

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<sup>21</sup> This figure excludes excavations from within the cities of Salisbury and Worcester.



**Figure 2.3:** The distribution of archaeological sites in the project database.

can be assessed, they in turn being firmly dated by their association with objects such as coins or dates derived through scientific methods such as radiocarbon dating or dendrochronology (for the medieval period the London sequence, ascertained through the relationship between objects and surviving timber revetments associated with the building up of the Thames foreshore and dated by dendrochronology, is particularly important; Egan 2010; Vince 1985). Dates

for deposits can be ascertained by identifying the earliest and latest possible dates of deposition on the basis of the artefacts present and, where possible, considering that within the broader context of the stratigraphic sequence. Where excavations reveal long occupation sequences, it can be possible to identify chronological sequences which can be dated on the basis of artefacts associated with each phase of activity. In the majority of cases, however, dating is vague due to the lack of intercutting or well stratified deposits, or due to the absence of closely datable artefacts. Therefore, it is not possible to discuss the archaeological data with the same chronological precision as the lists of seized goods, although it is still possible to identify trends such as the introduction of new forms of dress fitting (see Chapter 6) on the basis of parallels with well dated sequences from urban excavations.

The majority of the material in the archaeological dataset comprises metal finds, mostly of iron and copper alloy. These items are typically elements of other objects. The most common are nails, which could have formed a part of house structures or items of furniture. Other common items are stone objects such as whetstones and querns. Items of wood, leather and textile occur in low quantities, due to issues of preservation. The project methodology excludes the most common type of artefact from rural excavations: pottery. Ceramics provide a wealth of information as they are closely datable due to styles changing relatively quickly, whilst they can act as proxies for trading networks where types can be associated with particular production centres and for domestic activities (see Brown 1988; Jervis 2014; McCarthy and Brooks 1988). However, for the purposes of this project a decision was taken to exclude ceramics from analysis. Several reasons underlie this. Firstly, although ceramics are ubiquitous, styles are extremely regional. Undertaking a national-scale analysis would require detailed consideration of this regional variability which falls outside of the scope of the project. Secondly, there is a lack of consistency in the extent to which ceramic vessel forms, which provide important information on household activities, are recorded and quantified, meaning that it is not possible to create a uniform dataset. Thirdly, there is a substantial existing literature on ceramics which can inform the analysis presented here. This includes their use in establishing site chronologies.

As with the escheators' and coroners' records, the archaeological dataset excludes excavations from within urban centres in the top 50 largest places in 1377 as defined above (with the exception of Worcester and Salisbury, the latter of which forms the basis of the regional case study in Chapter 10), elite sites such as castles and religious houses, and sites for which the dating evidence was unsubstantiated. There are a small number of sites within the sample which could be arguably considered high status. These include moated sites such as the rectory at Wimbotsham (Norfolk). However, it was considered that the inclusion of such sites was consistent with our decision to incorporate parish clergy such as rectors and clerks into the escheators' and coroners' sample.

### *The Portable Antiquities Scheme*

The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) was established in 1997 to record finds made by members of the public, typically metal detectorists. Its freely accessible online database is a valuable resource for artefact research and has underpinned numerous studies of particular medieval artefact types, as well as investigations of settlement and economy (e.g. Lewis 2016; Oksanen and Lewis 2020; Standley 2015). The use of the PAS dataset is, however, extremely problematic. A range of factors impact patterns of recovery, including land use, accessibility, legal restrictions on metal detecting and environmental factors (Robbins 2013). Furthermore, although the evidence exists within a landscape context, its specific archaeological context cannot be reconstructed without further detailed investigation. It is therefore impossible to determine whether material is waste from an elite or non-elite household, whether it is primary, secondary or tertiary in character, which settlement it may relate to or whether it is the result of an accidental loss. For this reason, PAS data does not form a central element of the research presented here. However, it does provide valuable information on the distribution of metal finds such as metal vessels and dress accessories, and therefore occasional reference is made to PAS data in order to further contextualise the objects listed in the escheators' and coroners' records or recovered from archaeological excavations.

### **Investigating medieval and sixteenth-century consumption: an interdisciplinary framework**

The archival and archaeological datasets provide different, but complementary, evidence for consumption. Certain types of objects, such as metal cooking vessels, appear in both datasets. Others, such as chests, occur only in the archival dataset but can be inferred through the occurrence of elements such as hinges, locks and mounts in the archaeological dataset. Finally, certain objects, such as textiles, appear exclusively in the documents. Therefore, through the combination of the archival and archaeological data it is possible to build up a more complete understanding of the objects present in the home. By considering those objects which occur exclusively in the archaeological dataset, one may assess the ways in which ubiquitous or low-value items such as knives and belts were valued (or not) by medieval and Tudor communities, whilst the monetary valuations provided by the escheator and coroner provide a basis on which to assess the relative prestige of goods recovered archaeologically. Change over time can also be ascertained, both through the occurrence of archaeological objects in dated deposits and by tracking references in dated lists of seized goods. The distribution of elements such as furniture mounts can be used to supplement the archival sources to understand the distribution of certain types of object in our period.

In order to maximise the potential of this interdisciplinary approach, object function has been used as a means of linking these datasets. For this reason, this book is laid out firstly in relation to key areas of domestic life: cooking and food preparation, eating and drinking, furniture, dress and personal objects. The relationship between archaeological and archival data varies between these themes. In the discussion of food preparation, for example, archaeological and archival sources are drawn together to consider the distribution of quernstones associated with domestic milling. The discussion of furniture is heavily reliant on the archival sources, whilst changes in dress can be tracked in both the archival and archaeological datasets. The comparative absence of metal cooking vessels in the archaeological dataset and their ubiquity in the archival materials demonstrates how the value of items changed through their usable life, emphasising the importance of recycling as broken objects were melted down, rather than being dumped in archaeological deposits.

The datasets are also combined to consider the basis of the household economy and factors affecting the variability apparent in consumption practices between urban and rural households and households of differing levels of wealth. Whilst the archival sources provide quantitative data relating to household wealth, the archaeology provides valuable insights into household investment in architectural modifications. The ability to provenance some archaeological objects allows for the reconstruction of trading networks which can be further explored through the occurrence of objects in the escheators' and coroners' datasets. The approach taken here is therefore not to offer a straightforward comparison of the archival and archaeological data, but to explore the relative strengths of each dataset to develop a nuanced and integrated understanding of household production and consumption.