

CHAPTER 5

A Hint of Luxury? Furnishings, Comfort and Display

Following the consideration of tables and napery in Chapter 4, three main categories of furniture remain to be discussed. These are bedding, items for storage, and seating. Bedding is the most significant of the three. The medieval and early modern bed has recently become a focus for scholarship, drawing particularly on literary and historical sources (e.g. Flather 2011; French 2021; Gowing 2014; Handley 2016; Morgan 2017). Hamling and Richardson's (2017, 29–30) work highlights a proliferation of beds in the early modern period. They place this into the context of increasingly specialised subdivisions of domestic space. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and later in some areas, both excavated and standing houses show that most domestic activities took place within a single space (Gardiner 2014a), meaning that flexibility was required in furnishings (see Dyer 2013). In both the escheators' and coroners' lists, it is most common for bedding to be the only item of furniture listed (Table 5.1). However, the coroners' records feature more instances of lists with a wider range of furniture.

Archaeologically, the evidence for furniture is limited and difficult to interpret. For example, items of metalwork may be structural or a part of an item of furniture. There are 3,333 nails in the archaeological assemblage. In nearly all cases, these are of iron and due to corrosion or resource limitations are rarely identified by researchers to type. Goodall (2011, 163–4) highlights the various forms of medieval nail known from excavations, and Salzman (1967, 317) has summarised the various types of nail recorded in medieval documents. There is clearly value in further analysis of iron nails from archaeological sites for understanding both building construction and their use in furniture manufacture, which falls outside of the scope of the current survey. Most of the items which can be identified as being from furniture are mounts and strapping from chests, as well as locks and keys. These would have been for doors and windows as well as for securing chests and caskets.

How to cite this book chapter:

Jervis, B., et al. 2023. *The Material Culture of English Rural Households c.1250–1600*. Pp. 131–172. Cardiff: Cardiff University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/book10.e>. License: CC-BY-NC 4.0

Table 5.1: Occurrence of combinations of furniture in the escheators' and coroners' records.

Bedding (inc. beds)	Storage	Seating	Table	Hanging or Curtain	No. Escheators' Lists	% Total Escheators' Lists	No. Coroners' Lists	% Total Coroners' Lists
X	X	X	X	X	5	0.5%	10	5.7%
X	X	X	X		10	1.0%	20	11.4%
X	X	X		X	4	0.4%	1	0.6%
X	X	X			6	0.6%	2	1.1%
X	X		X	X	5	0.5%	0	
X	X		X		15	1.6%	0	
X	X			X	4	0.4%	1	0.6%
X	X				37	3.8%	15	8.5%
X		X	X	X	1	0.1%	0	
X		X	X		7	0.7%	2	1.1%
X		X			2	0.2%	0	
X			X		16	1.7%	0	
X				X	6	0.6%	0	

(Continued)

Table 5.1: Continued.

Bedding (inc. beds)	Storage	Seating	Table	Hanging or Curtain	No. Escheators' Lists	% Total Escheators' Lists	No. Coroners' Lists	% Total Coroners' Lists
X					170	17.7%	23	13.1%
X		X		X	3	0.3%	0	
	X	X	X		7	0.7%	0	
	X	X			1	0.1%	0	
	X		X		2	0.2%	0	
	X				57	5.9%	14	8.0%
	X			X	0		1	0.6%
	X	X		X	1	0.1%	0	
		X	X		4	0.4%	0	
		X		X	1	0.1%	0	
		X			1	0.1%	0	
				X	1	0.1%	1	0.6%
			X		2	0.2%	0	

Furniture circulated in a range of ways, which provides a challenge to interpretation. We know for instance that in some contexts, particular kinds of objects were appurtenant to the house or tenement, rather than the personal possessions of its inhabitants. For example, the lists of the *principalia* ('principal goods') of fifteenth-century Worcestershire manorial tenants comprise objects of this kind (Field 1965). These lists often include tables, seating and chests, which were recorded as items of furniture expected to pass with the holding from one tenant to the next. As Chapter 2 noted, the records of forfeiture produced by the escheator and coroner provide no positive evidence that items were exempted from forfeiture to the crown because they belonged not to the felon personally, but to the house or holding. However, the possibility that some such officials might have observed this practice should be kept in mind. This consideration particularly affects beds and bedding; where no bed appears in a list of forfeited goods, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that a bed was excluded because it was viewed not as a personal possession, but as an appurtenance of the house. It should be noted, however, that in his analysis of the Worcestershire manorial *principalia* lists, Field (1965) found very few references to beds; only a small number of lists mention a *tignum*, probably a form of basic wooden pallet bed. He concluded that tenants were expected to provide their own beds, which suggests that in this context at least, beds were regarded as personal possessions (and therefore liable to forfeiture) rather than as inalienable household furnishings.

The interpretation of the information on beds and bedding in the escheators' and coroners' chattels lists is also potentially affected by the issue of women's property rights. Morgan (2017, 176–80) highlights how women understood the bed as belonging to them and suggests that, in London at least, beds and bedding formed a part of the 'paraphernalia' which were passed to a wife on her husband's passing (Morgan 2017, 183). Bedding could be passed on through women in wills; for example, in 1548 Margaret Argram of Louth (Lincolnshire) bequeathed her featherbed and best bolster to her son. Prior to the Reformation, women often passed linens to the church as a pious bequest which could be converted into liturgical materials (Wilson 2019, 182, 185). The passing of personal items on through wills, as well as the acquisition of second-hand goods, is perhaps demonstrated through the number of 'old' or 'worn' items of furniture listed in the escheators' and coroners' records (Jervis 2022c).

An association of beds with female ownership may have had an impact on practices of forfeiture and confiscation. For example, when the possessions of John Browne were seized in 1549 by the bishop of Peterborough, his wife Alice complained of the loss of her best down bed, despite the return of a third of her husband's goods (Kesselring 2014). Our records provide no clear details of disputes over items of bedding specifically. Nonetheless, the sense of loss associated with their forfeiture must have been profound, given the associations between the bed, marriage, personal memory and devotion (see Morgan 2017). Some lists appear comprehensive in respect to household goods, except for bedding. This perhaps suggests that bedding remained in the hands of a wife or

daughter, whereas other household goods were confiscated. One such example is the list of the yeoman John Reynold of South Lynn (Norfolk). His list, dating to 1418, includes a wide range of household goods, including plate, six silver spoons, a mazer and furniture. It is reasonable to assume that a household such as this would have had a range of bedding; however (except for six cushions), this is absent.¹⁸⁷ In this case the bedding appears to have been deliberately omitted from the list. While this cannot be proven, nor a definitive reason for its omission be provided, one possibility is that it remained with the women of his household.

In discussing furniture, we begin with bedding, before proceeding to assess the occurrence of items associated with storage, seating and the fashioning of domestic spaces.

Beds and bedding

Bedding (including beds, mattresses and various soft furnishings) are the most common category of furnishings in both the escheators' and coroners' lists. The most frequently occurring objects are coverlets, sheets and blankets (Tables 5.2 and 5.3). Other possessions associated with further adornment of the bed,

Table 5.2: Occurrence of bedding in the escheators' records.

Object	No. Items	No. Lists	%ge Total Lists
Bed	78	61	6.3%
Bed with furnishings	14	10	1.0%
Canvas	16	14	1.5%
Mattress	48	36	3.7%
Sheets	477	177	18.4%
Blanket	179	77	8.0%
Coverlet	347	174	18.1%
Quilt	10	9	0.9%
Bolster	13	5	0.5%
Banker	20	15	1.6%
Cushion	103	22	2.3%
Pillow	41	13	1.3%
Canopy	6	6	0.6%
Curtain	6	2	0.2%
Tester	23	15	1.6%
Mixed (e.g. 'bedding')	15	11	1.1%

¹⁸⁷ E484.

Table 5.3: Occurrence of bedding in the coroners' records.

Object	Type	No. Items	No. Lists	%ge Total Lists
Bed	Bed	12	7	
	Bed with a frame	1	1	
	Bedstead	79	37	
	Bedstock	1	1	
	Corded truckle bed	1	1	
	Frame	1	1	
	Posted bedstead	3	1	
	Standing bedstead	4	2	
	Truckle bed	4	2	
	Truckle bedstead	4	3	
	Total		110	44
Mattress	Canvas bed	1	1	
	Canvas bed tick	1	1	
	Canvas chaff-bed	1	1	
	Chaff bed	2	1	
	Donge [viz. A mattress]	1	1	
	Dust bed	4	2	
	Featherbed	33	17	
	Flock bed	20	14	
	Hay' [in chamber]	1	1	
	Linen mattress	1	1	
	Mattress	23	12	
	Mattress [or featherbed]	1	1	
	Woollen mattress	3	1	
Total		92	39	22.2%
Misc. Bedding		22	16	
Blanket	Blanket	51	23	
	Cloth for blankets	1	1	
	Linen blanket	7	2	
	Linen blanket or sheet	2	1	
	Woollen blanket	9	5	
	Total		70	28

(Continued)

Table 5.3: Continued.

Object	Type	No. Items	No. Lists	%ge Total Lists
Coverlet	Bed cloth	1	1	
	Bed cover	1	1	
	Canvas-lined coverlet	1	1	
	Coverlet	76	35	
	Diaper coverlet	1	1	
	Tapestry coverlet	2	1	
	Woollen coverlet	3	2	
	Total	86	39	22.2%
Sheet	Canvas sheet	21	7	
	Flaxen sheet	4	2	
	Harden sheet	6	2	
	Head sheet	1	1	
	Hempen sheet	6	3	
	Linen sheet	37	13	
	Linsey-woolsey sheet	1	1	
	Lockram sheet	4	1	
	Noggen sheet	3	1	
	Painted linen sheet	2	2	
	Painted sheet	2	1	
	Sheet	80	23	
	Undercloth	2	2	
Total	169	44	25.0%	
Pillow	Feather pillow	3	1	
	Leather pillow	1	1	
	Pillow	31	19	
	Total	35	21	11.9%
Pillow case		27	4	
Quilt		1	1	
Tester	Canvas tester	1	1	
	Silk tester	1	1	
	Stained tester	1	1	
	Tester	12	9	
	Total	16	9	5.1%

(Continued)

Table 5.3: Continued.

Object	Type	No. Items	No. Lists	%ge Total Lists
Celure or Ceiling	Bed celure	1	1	
	Celure	1	1	
	Cloth bed celler	1	1	
	Ceiling	1	1	
	Painted ceiling	2	1	
	Total		6	4
Bedstead with painted ceiling		2	1	
Furnished bed with bed clothes		1	1	

in the form of cushions, pillows, bolsters and bankers, or those associated with the ‘ceiling’ (testers, curtains, canopy) are considerably rarer. The quantities of bedding-related items in the escheators’ lists vary considerably, from single items up to 18 items within a list.

Most of what we know of medieval bedding relates to the furnishings of the elite or wealthy urban households, with literary sources and rare surviving examples providing some basis for reconstructing the ideal sleeping arrangements. These beds most typically take the form of a ‘hanging’ bed, with a canopy and tester covering the bedstead and mattress (Figure 5.1). Such an arrangement was a necessary part of the seigniorial home by the start of our period (Eames 1977, 74). The bed would be made up of several layers (Figure 5.2). A ‘litter’ of straw would be placed over the wooden bedstead and possibly covered with a canvas. The mattress would typically be the next layer, although this term does not have a consistent meaning in the period; increasingly it seems to have meant a stuffed base for lying on but could also be used to mean a bed covering. A featherbed was seemingly a separate piece which was paired with the mattress. This would then be covered with sheets, blankets and coverlets, with further bolsters and pillows (Morgan 2017, 20–39).

The escheators’ records, which deal on the whole with less exalted households, provide something of a problem in understanding the bed. This is due to the common use of the term ‘bed’ (*lectum/-us*) in isolation. In 46 cases, beds are the only item associated with bedding. This could be taken to mean the wooden bedstead (an element that is explicitly mentioned in many coroners’ records) but may refer to the soft furnishings, or the entire ‘bed set’ (Morgan 2017, 20–21). In some cases, the term ‘bed’ may mean just that, a bed (perhaps a wooden frame or mattress) with no associated bedding. In others, it could be a shorthand for a ‘bed and its furnishings’, the latter being a form that appears in 10 escheators’ lists. Alternatively, ‘bed’ could mean the combination of mattress and bedding. This ambiguity is further demonstrated by the values



Figure 5.1: Reconstruction of a hanging bed with a truckle bed beneath at the Weald and Downland Museum. Image: Ben Jervis.

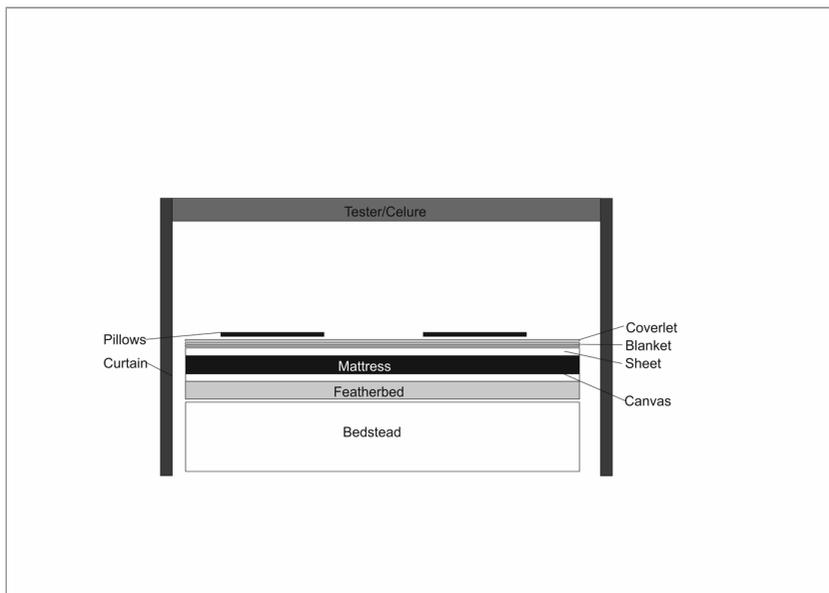


Figure 5.2: The ‘stratigraphy’ of the medieval bed. Redrawn from Morgan 2017 by Ben Jervis.

assigned to ‘beds’, which range from 6d to 60d. Beds ‘with their furnishings’ were appraised at considerably higher values, from 160d to 720d. Bedding was valued highly, and therefore the low valuation of ‘beds’ would suggest that these typically relate either to wooden bed frames or forms of stuffed mattress.

Dyer’s (2013, 22) analysis of Yorkshire probate inventories shows that in the fifteenth century, furniture and objects associated with sleeping were most commonly found in the hall. These frequently included bedding, but not bed frames. In these instances, a fixed wooden bed would have been impractical. Evidence of wooden beds is very rare within the escheators’ records; wording suggestive of a wooden bed frame is found in just two lists.¹⁸⁸ Thus although the term ‘bed’ is certainly ambiguous, it appears to be the case that in ordinary fourteenth- and fifteenth-century households, ‘beds’ in the sense of static wooden structures were not normally present. While bedding occurs commonly in wills (as discussed above), wooden beds are often omitted (Morgan 2017 36–7). This could be due to their low value, but may also be further evidence of their absence, with people sleeping on portable mattresses, featherbeds or more rudimentary surfaces such as bags stuffed with straw. The idea that the ‘bed’ was actually something that would be rolled up and put away after use is supported by one reference to a ‘chest with a bed and other necessities in it’, valued at 6s 8d in 1402.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ E304 (*bordebedde*); E642 (*ii lectorum lingnorum*).

¹⁸⁹ E1423.

With such an arrangement, it is worth reflecting that the non-elite experience of sleep would have differed considerably from that of wealthier households. In a wealthy urban household, the bed might be prepared by a servant, who would assist the master and his family in getting ready for bed and prayers would be said. Prior to this, the house would be secured and the fire extinguished. The chamber offered a distinctive space for sleeping, associated particularly with personal devotion and contemplation as well as intimacy, both in terms of sex and in conversation (Ekrich 2001; Hamling and Richardson 2017, 220–31; Handley 2016, 109; Morgan 2017). Rather, in the peasant household, we might imagine space being cleared in which a bed could be assembled, perhaps with trestles being dismantled and benches pushed to the side, as part of a daily rhythm of transforming domestic space.

The number of beds present may not relate to the number of people living under a roof. It was common throughout the middle ages and early modern period for people to share beds. Servants, visitors and children might share their bed with the man and woman of the house (Gowing 2014), and this might especially be the case within poorer households. Indeed, within medieval society the bed ‘became inseparably associated with prestige, honour, power, wealth and privilege’ (Eames 1977, 86). It was also the place in which the intimate relations between husband and wife played out, where married couples could speak equally and intimately as well as engage in sex, becoming a symbol for the very sanctity of marriage (Gowing 2014, 278; Morgan 2017, 146–56). Even within higher status households, there was a disjuncture between the idealised image of the bed and chamber and the reality of life, and this ideal, one might imagine, was increasingly removed from reality further down the socio-economic scale. The acquisition of bedding was a necessity, but we can question the extent to which its meaning was universally understood.

Figure 5.3 demonstrates that within the escheators’ lists, only one item of bedding is listed in 28% of those lists which contain bedding, in contrast to the coroners’ records where this is the case in only 8% of lists. Larger quantities of bedding occur more commonly in the coroners’ lists. In the escheators’ lists the single item is most commonly a coverlet (13 lists) or a sheet (five lists). The most commonly co-occurring items of bedding are sheets and coverlets, sometimes supplemented by blankets and mattresses. It was common for these to be possessed as pairs (Morgan 2017, 28–31) and for them to be passed on through inheritance. It is telling that in those lists that contain larger combinations and quantities of bedding, it is these same items – coverlets, blankets, sheets and mattresses – which form the majority of the bedding. An exception was Richard Fisser, a clerk from Attleborough (Norfolk), whose list dates to 1448.¹⁹⁰ This list includes none of these items, but it does include a canopy (a *seler*, or *celure*), three curtains and a tester, valued together at 13s 4d, which represent

¹⁹⁰ E409.

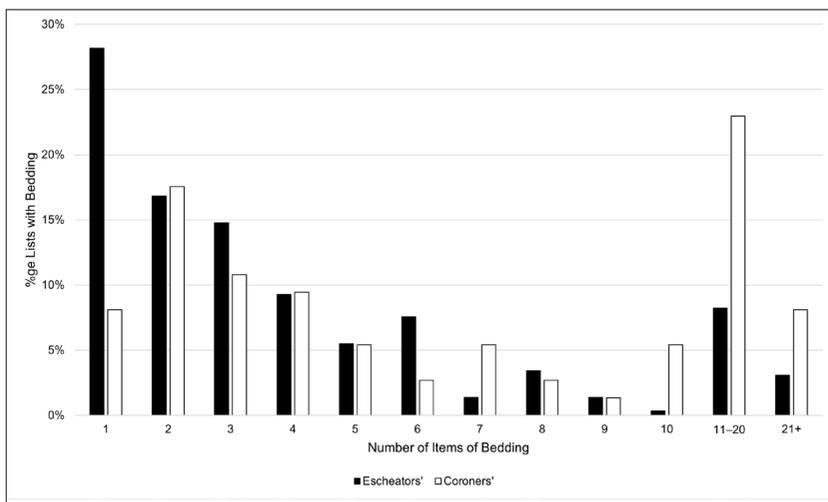


Figure 5.3: Numbers of items of bedding occurring in the escheators' and coroners' lists (as percentage of lists containing bedding).

the fittings of a hanging bed. The bed itself, along with any bedclothes, is oddly absent (the only other items listed are animals).

Overall, the evidence from the escheators' records suggests that most people slept on sheets covered by a coverlet and, perhaps, a blanket. Sometimes they had a mattress or featherbed, but in others may have simply laid on straw or stuffed bags, which were not seized. Sear and Sneath (2020, 133) suggest that featherbeds were not purchased as whole items, but that the various components were acquired separately and assembled in the home. Importantly, these items of bedding were quite valuable. Valuations for individual sheets and coverlets typically range from approximately 12d to 30d, and it was common for households to have multiple sets. This high value is one reason why bedding was curated and passed through wills. The values of mattresses and featherbeds vary considerably (possibly due to them being valued by weight although this is not explicitly stated in the escheators' and coroner's records; Sear and Sneath 2020, 133), but one reason for their absence from the home may be that these were considered unessential items, which were outside of the means of many households. While no information on the composition of mattresses is provided, a range of materials could be used for stuffing them in the early modern period, and we might expect this to also be the case in earlier centuries. Plaited mattresses, such as the surviving example from Titchfield, Hampshire, could be used to protect the bedstead and mattress, for example in childbirth. Chaff, feathers, leaves, hair and straw could all be used to stuff mattresses, and could be easily replaced when the mattress was cleaned (Handley 2016, 58–9).

The combinations of bedding occurring in the coroners' records are less consistent than in those of the escheators. Lists typically include at least one sheet,

blanket and coverlet, with items such as testers and celures being exceptional. As in the escheators' lists, the majority have a fairly simple range of bedding. A typical example might be Robert Crowne of North Elham (Kent), who in 1567 had three coverlets, three blankets, five sheets, two bedsteads, a bolster and a pillow.¹⁹¹ One explanation for having more bedding than beds could be the acquisition of heavier and lighter bedding which could be used at different times of year (French 2021, 67). All except the sheets and bedsteads (valued with clothing and table linen) were valued together at 8s. Items such as testers are rare in the coroners' records, but there are clear examples of households with 'hanging beds'. For example, in 1519 William Sparke, a yeoman of Lodon (Norfolk) had five featherbeds with bolsters (20s), three pairs of blankets (3s), six pairs of linen sheets (5s) and a celure and tester 'with the hanging for a chamber', valued at 6s 8d.¹⁹² The evidence is suggestive of a single hanging bed in the principal bed chamber, perhaps with additional beds in other rooms.

Goldberg (2008) suggests that, along with silver spoons, cushions (including bankers and bolsters) were an item indicative of urban 'bourgeois' consumption. In addition to providing comfort and colour, these also 'encompass intimacy and the holy' (Goldberg 2008, 133). As such, like the investment in plate (Chapter 4), investment in soft furnishings was an investment in fashioning the home as a site of piety and devotion. This was of particular pertinence in the context of the chamber where prayers were said and sleep, a time in which people were both vulnerable and closer to God, took place (see discussions in Handley 2016; Morgan 2017). Investment in bedding is considered in greater detail in Chapter 9, but here we provide some illustrative examples of individuals with elaborately adorned chambers to highlight the variability in bedding which could be found in both urban and rural homes.

In 1417 John Mone from the town of Rochester (Kent) had a 'pallet' (perhaps a layer to go between the bed, which is not listed, and the featherbed with which it is valued at 20d), three worn sheets and a coverlet (valued together at 5s). Additional items consist of four cushions and a banker (valued together at 12d).¹⁹³ Featherbeds are rare in the escheators' records, occurring in only 12 lists. They are marginally more prevalent in the coroners' records, occurring in 17 lists, with some households having multiple examples, suggesting an increased prevalence of this type of bedding.

In 1431 Robert Neuton of Oakham (Rutland), another small town, had two mattresses, valued with six pairs of sheets and six blankets at 26s 8d; plus a dosser (possibly a hanging) (3s 4d), three bankers (3s 4d) and six cushions (3s 4d). He also had 20 coverlets 'of diverse colours, for lying on a bed', valued at 40s, at least some of which are likely to have been merchandise.¹⁹⁴ A further example is that of John Wryde of Ospringe (Kent) who committed suicide in

¹⁹¹ C194.

¹⁹² C133.

¹⁹³ E489.

¹⁹⁴ E953.

1393.¹⁹⁵ He had a mattress, two blankets, four cushions and two feather pillows. Although his mattress was ‘old and worn’, it was nonetheless valued, together with the blankets and pillows, at 6s 8d.

Where the occupation of those with these elaborate assemblages of bedding is stated, the range is limited and the overall status comparatively elevated. The individuals concerned include a merchant, several clergy and clerks, and a goldsmith, but also the yeomen William Wodeward and John Reynold,¹⁹⁶ the franklin William Leder and the husbandman John Ferrour.¹⁹⁷ Testers appear particularly common in Norfolk, occurring in four of the six lists from the county which contain bedding, generally without any cushions. The escheators’ records provide useful insights into the nature and character of the items of bedding found in rural homes. The bedding belonging to William Mandevile of Colnbrook (Middlesex) (coverlets, mattresses, blankets and sheets) as well as the testers and sheets belonging to John Ferrour of Sevenhampton (Wiltshire), are listed as ‘worn’ (*debilis*), suggesting perhaps that these were inherited or second-hand items (see Jervis 2022c).¹⁹⁸

The coroners’ records provide further examples, a particularly interesting case being that of John Oke, a carpenter of Britford (Wiltshire).¹⁹⁹ He had elaborate bedding, possibly including hanging beds, as he had testers along with a single ceiling. He also had a range of other bedding including pillows and bolsters. His list includes a further bed listed separately, probably an item that he was making or repairing. When we look at the occupations of those who possessed items of bedding such as bolsters, cushions, pillows, testers and celures, there is a striking difference between the coroners’ and escheators’ records. Whereas in the escheators’ lists it was largely yeomen and clergy who possessed these items, the coroners’ lists include five husbandmen and five labourers who had at least one of these items, most typically a bolster. In the latter records the most diverse ranges of bedding can be found in the possession of those of ‘middling’ households, like that of craftsmen such as John Oke, as well as those of yeomen and clergy.

Those more elaborate assemblages, however, are very much the exception, and typical bedding as it appears in the escheators’ records may be exemplified by a list such as that of John Vynche, a labourer from Yalding (Kent). He had a coverlet, two sheets and two worn blankets, valued together at 20d in 1428.²⁰⁰ Lists with varying combinations are the most common among the escheators’ lists containing bedding, suggesting an emphasis on warmth over comfort, with the bed itself most probably being improvised. In lists where coverlets, blankets and sheets are the only items of bedding, there are an average of 1.8

¹⁹⁵ E901.

¹⁹⁶ E348; E484.

¹⁹⁷ E28; E237.

¹⁹⁸ E712.

¹⁹⁹ C226.

²⁰⁰ E101.

blankets, 1.6 coverlets and 2.4 sheets. If we assume that all bedding was seized, this means that most households possessed only one or two of each of these items, implying sufficient bedding for one or two beds. This emphasises that beds were likely to be shared and that in many households, there may have been scarcely enough bedding to keep everybody warm.

In contrast, lists including other items, particularly those associated with further comfort (such as pillows) or privacy (such as testers and curtains) are particularly rare. An interesting example, dated 1433, concerns the civil outlaw Thomas Payn, formerly vicar of Shillingstone (Dorset) and apparently deceased at this point, but with goods at Headcorn.²⁰¹ His possessions included a bed with three curtains (6s), a quilt (18d) and two pairs of sheets (5s), as well as two blankets (2s). Similarly, in 1419, Robert Tyuerton, a 'leech' (or healer) of Woodnewton (Northamptonshire) possessed multiple coverlets and sheets, a mattress (valued with old blankets and a canvas at 2s) and curtains, some of which are noted as being old and torn and are valued with two coverlets at 40d.²⁰²

Bedding appears to have been the first area of furnishings in which people invested, the minimum being a sheet and coverlet, sometimes supplemented by blankets and more rarely quilts and pillows. It is notable that where only a small number of items are listed, as in John Vynche's list, beds or mattresses are not documented, suggesting very simple sleeping arrangements or the presence of a bed which was not the possession of the individual concerned.

As noted above, the escheators' records include only two clear references to wooden beds. Within the coroners' records, more varied terminology is used to describe the beds themselves (Table 5.3). While 'bed' is a widely used term, 'bedstead' is more common, making for a clear distinction between the structure of the bed and the mattress. Assessing the worth of these bedsteads is difficult as they are typically valued with other items. One bedstead belonging to the Wiltshire clergyman John James was valued at 12d, while another, a 'plain bedstead with a tester and a bolster', was valued at 2s 6d.²⁰³ Another new feature in the coroner's records is the truckle bed, that is, a bed that can be wheeled under another bed or piece of furniture (see Figure 5.1). These demonstrate a demand, in some cases, for some flexibility in sleeping arrangements. Truckle beds may have been used for servants or children and are suggestive of cohabitation of sleeping spaces. These emphasise how the bed chamber could become an arena in which the social life of the household played out, for example through the emphasising of power relations (Flather 2011, 180; Gowing 2014; Handley 2016). Again, the value of these is difficult to ascertain, but the one example belonging to John James that is valued on its own is appraised at 3s.²⁰⁴ As in the escheators' lists, coverlets, sheets and blankets are the most common items of bedding,

²⁰¹ E1531.

²⁰² E307.

²⁰³ E382.

²⁰⁴ E382.

while testers, celures and curtains are rare. Bolsters do appear more frequently than in the escheators' lists. Cushions clearly associated with bedding (i.e. found in a room containing a bed) are rarer, occurring in just two lists, the majority in the coroners' lists being associated with chairs. The material of soft furnishings is occasionally mentioned (Table 5.3); however, such references are too sparse for meaningful analysis.

While we might expect beds to be located in the chamber, they also occur in other spaces, such as the parlour. In such instances they were as much display pieces as functional objects for sleeping, providing an opportunity to display wealth and the virtues associated with the bed, for example through decorative bedding (Gowing 2014, 279). In 1545 Thomas Ramsden had two bedsteads, with two mattresses, a featherbed, two pillows and various sheets in his parlour at Oundle (Northamptonshire).²⁰⁵ The yeoman, William Payne of Chilham (Kent), had a bed in his parlour, with a featherbed in his chamber.²⁰⁶

In several cases multiple beds were made up, and the ordering of items within lists, perhaps associated with specific rooms, allows us to gain some insight into a households' sleeping arrangements. A particularly interesting example is William Bridge, a husbandman of Stelling (Kent), who committed suicide in 1586.²⁰⁷ One bedstead is listed with a pair of canvas sheets, a chaff bed (a type of mattress), a coverlet, blanket and bolster. A more elaborate range of bedding is to be found 'in the widow's bedchamber', comprising a bedstead, chaff bed, bolster, blanket, pair of sheets and, importantly, an 'old' tester, suggestive of a hanging bed. Given the links between bedding and femininity (see Flather 2011), and particularly the way in which widows were potentially able to claim bedding as 'paraphernalia' on the death of their husbands, this list provides an interesting insight into the gendered role of bedding. It perhaps illustrates how ideas of ownership surrounding bedding played out, in that here the widow had, perhaps, been able to take ownership of bedding, only to have it seized by the coroner.

Another example, from an urban setting, demonstrates the complex sleeping arrangements to be found in the early modern home. In 1565 Thomas Chylrey of Marlborough (Wiltshire) had bedding in two rooms.²⁰⁸ In the chamber he had a standing bedstead and a truckle bed, perhaps for a servant. The chamber also housed a featherbed and two flock beds, as well as three coverlets, a bolster and two pillows. A bedstead and flock bed were also to be found in 'another chamber'. In 1570, Reynold Carter of Chiddingstone (Kent) seemingly had a master bedchamber 'over the south end of the house'.²⁰⁹ In here were a single bedstead with a featherbed, bolster, blankets and a woollen coverlet. The varied contents of a 'chamber over the hall' included a cradle, suggesting that Carter's

²⁰⁵ C76.

²⁰⁶ C472.

²⁰⁷ C309.

²⁰⁸ C171.

²⁰⁹ C208.

child may have slept in this chamber. A third chamber contained a bedstead, an 'old bed of canvas', blankets and a bolster. This distinction between spaces can also be seen in a labourer's home. In 1585, Anthony Curlynge had a bed and a truckle bed, as well as six pairs of 'very coarse' sheets and 'bed furniture' in his bed chamber, and two further beds with their furniture in another chamber.²¹⁰ These examples illustrate how beds could come to be used as a means of social differentiation within the household, with, perhaps, a single hanging bed for the householders, with more simple or inferior beds, or even low truckle beds, for servants and children.

Writing in 1577, William Harrison in a famous passage in his *Description of Britain* commented on the 'great amendment of lodging', noting how contemporary sleeping arrangements surpassed those of his predecessors:

'...our fathers, yea and we ourselves also, have lain full oft upon straw pallets, on rough mats covered only with a sheet, under coverlets made of dagswain or hopharlots (I use their own terms), and a good round log under their heads instead of a bolster or pillow. If it were so that our fathers or the goodman of the house had within seven years after his marriage purchased a mattress or flock-bed, and thereto a stack of chaff to rest his head upon, he thought himself to be as well lodged as the lord of the town, that peradventure lay seldom in a bed of down or whole feathers, so well were they contented and with such base kind of furniture, which also is not very much amended as yet in some parts of Bedfordshire and elsewhere further off from our southern parts. Pillows (said they) were thought meet only for women in childbed. As for servants, if they had any sheet above them, it was well, for seldom had they any under their bodies to keep them from the pricking straws that ran oft through the canvas of the pallet and rased their hardened hides' (Harrison 1577, 119).

Overall, this is a picture borne out in the escheators' and coroners' records. These demonstrate that an increasing quantity of bedding was to be found in homes over the course of our period (Figure 5.4), provide some insight into the wide variety of sleeping arrangements and suggest an increasing investment in a diversity of bedding. Even so, in most cases sleeping arrangements in rural households appear to have been fairly simple throughout the study period. The investment by Tudor husbandmen and labourers in bedding is, perhaps, indicative of the increasing prevalence of waged labour, changes in relative prices of food and manufactured goods, and an enhanced ability to invest in the fashioning of interiors, with bedding seeming to be the preferred target of such investment.

Storage

Chests are among the most common items of furniture both in our datasets and also in later medieval inventories and wills (e.g. Hinds 2022; Wilson 2021).

²¹⁰ C289.

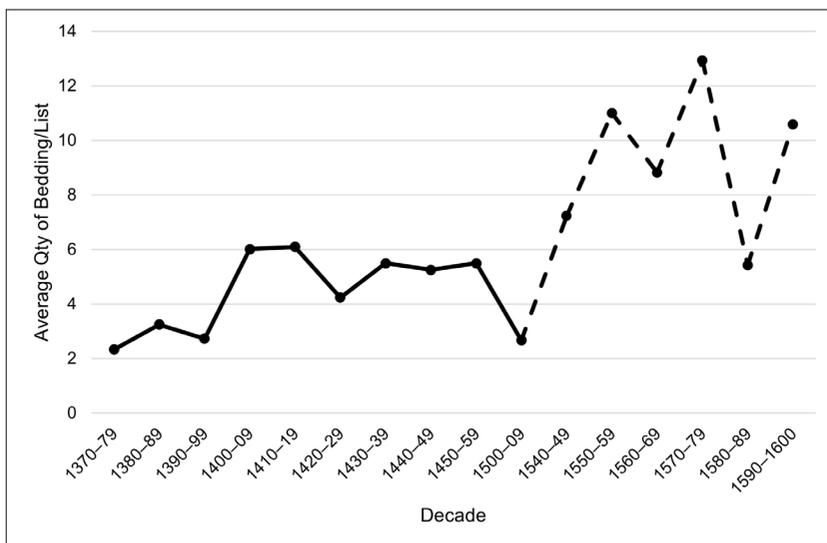


Figure 5.4: Mean number of items of bedding per list by decade. The solid line relates to escheators' records and dashed line to coroners' records.

Items associated with storage are generally portable pieces of furniture, most typically chests (Table 5.4). Chests are wooden items, whereas caskets are generally smaller objects made of leather (Brennan 2010, 65). Chests were probably the most widely used item of furnishing in the middle ages (Eames 1977, 108). These are inherently mobile items, which might be associated not only with storage but with the movement of people between households, for example through marriage or service. As such, they provide a physical container for the goods of an individual, particularly where spaces were shared (French 2021, 111–12; Hinds 2022).

Considering the occurrence of chests in illuminated manuscripts, Sarah Hinds (2018) has proposed a change in the perception and use of chests around the fifteenth century. Prior to this period, they were typically depicted as open and were associated with storage, hoarding and commerce. From the fifteenth century they were more commonly depicted as closed items, which Hinds suggests is symbolic of the anxieties around the distribution of wealth and the moral implications of commercialisation. In this regard it is interesting to note that in some cases, the sixteenth-century coroners' records make specific references to locks. In 1528 the widow Jane Vause of Beccles (Suffolk) had a coffer with a lock (12d), as did John Knolles of North Stoneham (Hampshire) in 1578 (valued with a little kettle at 12d).²¹¹ In 1576 John May of North Luffenham (Rutland) had a chest with lock and key (8d), as did Mary Wyn of Armthorpe

²¹¹ C146; C256.

Table 5.4: Occurrence of furniture associated with storage in the escheators' and coroners' records.

Object	Escheators'		Coroners'	
	No. Items	No. Lists	No. Items	No. Lists
Chest	165	101	62	33
Chest (old)	7	3	7	2
Chest (worn)	34	21	0	0
Chest (old and worn)	2	1	0	0
Chest (with lock and key)	0	0	1	1
Chest (little with lock and key)	0	0	1	1
Chest (old, bad)	0	0	1	1
Great chest	0	0	1	1
Little chest (old)	0	0	3	1
Ship chest (old)	0	0	1	1
Joined chest	0	0	1	1
Coffer	4	3	37	21
Coffer (old)	1	1	2	2
Coffer (with lock)	0	0	2	2
Coffer (with 2 locks)	0	0	1	1
Ark	3	2	1	1
Ironbound chest	1	1	0	0
Flanders chest	1	1	0	0
Forcer (worn)	1	1	0	0
Whitch (wooden)	0	0	3	2
Forcet	0	0	2	2
Hutch	0	0	1	1
Repository	0	0	1	1
Casket	5	5	0	0
Total Chests	224	130	128	58
Aumbry	7	6	3	3
Cupboard	2	2	35	29
Cupboard (old)	0	0	5	5
Shelf board	0	0	16	2
Sideboard	0	0	3	1
Basket	7	5	1	1

(Yorkshire) in 1590 (a little chest worth 8d).²¹² Finally, in 1577 the Wiltshire clergyman John James had a coffer with two locks, worth 5s.²¹³ A similar link between chests, morality and commercialisation is proposed by Katherine Wilson (2021), who highlights the role of chests as secure containers for cash, but also as items of trade, which become more varied in relation to the increasing commercialisation of the economy. The examples of chests discussed by both scholars are predominantly urban, and relate specifically to the merchant or burgess class, or are associated with elite contexts such as the royal court. From a different perspective, French (2021, 113) argues that the increasing prevalence of chests can be associated with the growing number of household possessions which needed to be sorted and stored, making them fundamental to the negotiation of the tensions brought about between rhythms of domestic life and the growing range of goods available to households. The data presented here offer an opportunity to address three questions in relation to this recent scholarship. Firstly, how widespread was the ownership of chests? Secondly, did chests become more common over time? Finally, can we see evidence for the diversification of chests in association with the increasing circulation of commodities which comes with commercialisation?

Archaeological evidence for chests takes the form of metal fittings, best represented by the metal fragments excavated at Chapel Meadow, Membury (Wiltshire; Figure 5.5). These comprise two lock plates, a strap hinge and several iron fittings, all of which are evocative of a typical medieval chest; and a locked box, strengthened (or apparently strengthened) by iron strips (Figure 5.6). Other archaeological items potentially associated with chests are keys and padlocks, although these could have had other uses too, for example securing doors. Chests, referred to in various ways, are common in both the escheators' and the coroners' datasets.

The best archaeological evidence for chests within our sample comes from sites of somewhat elevated status or from excavations in towns (Table 5.5). The site at Chapel Meadow, Membury is probably a manorial complex, and a similar interpretation can be advanced for the site at Huish (Wiltshire), from which iron fittings from at least one box and one casket were recovered (Thompson 1972). Excavations at Grange Farm, Gillingham (Kent; probably a manorial grange) and Wimbotsham (Norfolk; the site of a rectory) recovered items associated with caskets: a small copper key from Grange Farm, Gillingham and two copper alloy strips and a handle from Wimbotsham (Seddon 2007; Shelley 2003). Urban examples include two possible hinge straps from Ripon (Yorkshire; Finlayson 1999), a box corner and decorative ironwork from Bawtry (Yorkshire; Cumberpatch and Dunkley 1996), a locking mechanism from Creedy's Yard, Greenwich (Kent; Laidlaw and Mephram 2002), a lock plate from Staines (Middlesex; Jones 2010), and iron strips or decorative copper

²¹² C228; C353.

²¹³ C382.

Table 5.5: Occurrence of box or chest fittings in the archaeological dataset.

County	Site Name	Handle	Hasp	Hinge	Lock	Mount	Rivet/ Stud	Strapping	Structural
Cumbria	Land at Shaw's Wiend, Appleby-in-Westmorland							X	
	Low Road, Keswick					X			
Devon	London Hotel, Chapel Street, Exmouth							X	
	Island Farm, Ottery St Mary							X	
Hampshire	Popham					X			
	Land at Friars School, Great Chart, Ashford							X	
Kent	Star Lane, Westwood, Thanet							X	
	Manston Road, Ramsgate								X
	Queen's Farm, Shorne							X	
	28 Spital Street, Dartford	X			X			X	
	Borwick Street, Deptford						X		
	Eastney Street (Creedy's Yard) Greenwich				X		X		
Middlesex	High Street, Uxbridge					X		X	
	County Sports, Staines				X				

(Continued)

Table 5.5: Continued.

County	Site Name	Handle	Hasp	Hinge	Lock	Mount	Rivet/ Stud	Strapping	Structural
Norfolk	Site of Capel Hall, Barton Bendish	X							
	Multi-period finds and features on Bacton to King's Lynn Transco Pipeline					X			
	West Street, Gargrave					X	X		
	Thuxton	X				X			
	Priory Grove, Great Cressingham							X	
	Park Farm, Mileham			X					
	Abbey Road, Old Buckenham			X					
	Land near Church Close, Shipdham						X		
	Grange Farm, Snetterton					X			
	Wymer's Lane, Pilson Green, South Walsham	X							
	Wimbotsham	X						X	
	Redcastle Furze, Thetford					X			
	Wythemal							X	
Northamptonshire	West Cotton			X	X			X	
	Deene End, Weldon			X					

(Continued)

Table 5.5: Continued.

County	Site Name	Handle	Hasp	Hinge	Lock	Mount	Rivet/ Stud	Strapping	Structural
Northumberland	Main Street, Cornhill-on-Tweed				X				
	West Whelpington				X		X	X	
	Shotton						X		
	Berwick-upon-Tweed	X				X			
	4-8 Woolmarket, Berwick-upon-Tweed						X	X	
Suffolk	Land to the north of The Street, Erwarton								
	Late medieval to early post medieval dyeing workshop at The Swan Hotel, Lavenham	X				X		X	
	Land East of Days Road, Chapel St.Mary				X	X	X		
	Church Lane, Hepworth					X			
	Cedars Park, Stowmarket			X				X	
Wiltshire	Huish			X		X		X	
	Gomeldon	X			X			X	
	Chapel Meadow, Membury			X	X				X
	Pennings Road and St. Andrews Road, Tidworth					X			
	Dukes Brake to Cricklade Gas Pipeline							X	

(Continued)

Table 5.5: Continued.

County	Site Name	Handle	Hasp	Hinge	Lock	Mount	Rivet/ Stud	Strapping	Structural
Worcestershire	The Old Joinery, Vale's Lane, Devezes							X	
	Mannington, North-east of Toothill Farm							X	
	The Paddock, Swindon				X	X		X	
	Excavations on the Transco Honeybourne to Newbold Pacey Gas Pipeline, Goldicote					X	X	X	
	Upton, Blockley	X	X		X	X			
	Barnburgh Hall, Barnburgh					X			
	Rectory Farm, Laughton-en-le Morthen					X	X		
	Hillam Burchard, Parlington				X			X	
	Sherburn					X			
	Land to Rear of Town Hall, High Street, Skipton							X	
Yorkshire	Wharram Percy	X		X			X	X	
	16–20 Church Street, Bawtry				X		X	X	X
	Church Walk (a.k.a. Askews Print Shop), Doncaster					X			
	Low Fisher Gate, Doncaster		X			X		X	
	8–9 Market Place, 'The Arcade', Ripon			X					

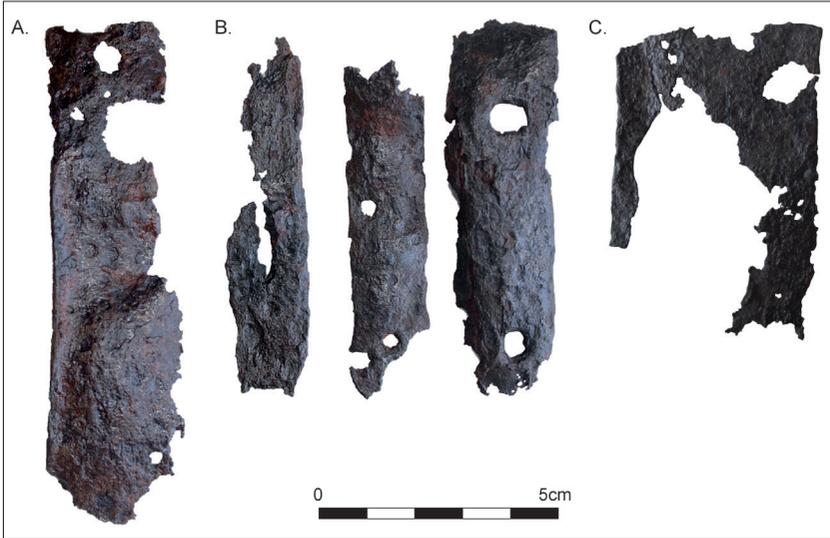


Figure 5.5: Examples of box fittings from excavations at Chapel Farm, Membury, Wiltshire (Image: Alice Forward and Kirsty Harding).

alloy mounts from towns including Dartford (Kent), Doncaster (Yorkshire) and Berwick-upon-Tweed (Northumberland).

However, all three datasets provide clear evidence of the consumption of chests in non-elite rural households. Among the escheators' records, of the 130 lists which include chests, 69 relate to rural households and 32 to urban (small-town) households (in the remaining cases no place is associated with the record). Rural households with at least one chest include craftsmen such as the fuller Clement Vynche of Yalding (Kent; one chest worth 6d), the barker John Mogerhangre of Little Stratford (Northamptonshire; one coffer and one forcer, a type of chest), as well as the husbandmen [?] Bassyngham (forename unknown) of Faxton (Northamptonshire; 'chests' valued with other items), William atte Well of Byfield (Northamptonshire; one chest, 12d) and John Spark of Martin (Wiltshire; two chests, 12d). These husbandmen all invested in a range of other domestic goods including unusually elaborate bedding or tableware. Others are of more elevated status, including five clergymen and a yeoman. Similarly, of the 60 coroners' chattels lists including at least one chest or similar, 45 are from rural households. These include four labourers; Thomas Johnson of Kirkby Kendal (Westmorland; one chest), David Poynter of Uffcott (Wiltshire; one chest; 8d), John Wyvenden of Hawkhurst (Kent; four chests) and Anthony Curlynge of St Lawrence (Kent; six chests).²¹⁴ It is notable that both Wyvenden and Curlynge possessed chests described as old or 'bad', suggesting that they may have been inherited or acquired second-hand.

²¹⁴ C11; C219; C230; C289.



Figure 5.6: Late fifteenth-century woodcut of *Der Rych Man* by Hans Holbein the Younger, showing three types of chest in the foreground. Image: National Gallery of Art Washington DC (Accession Number 1948.11.128; Image in public domain).

The husbandmen Elisha Gregory of Brixton (Devon; two chests) and Walter Barnard of Erlestoke (Wiltshire; three chests) also possessed multiple chests.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ C467; C173.

Table 5.6: The number of chests possessed by households in the escheators' and coroners' records.

No. Chests	No. Escheators' Lists	No. Coroners' Lists
1	68	24
2	41	18
3	14	6
4	3	7
5	3	0
6	1	3
Total Lists	130	58

Others whose professions are listed are primarily craftsmen, but also include a clergyman, a yeoman and a spinster. This occupational diversity can also be traced in the urban sample. The escheators' lists include an urban clergyman and husbandman, and the coroners' records note labourers, craftsmen, a mariner and a spinster as chest owners. Chests could clearly be found in both rural and small-town homes across the social spectrum.

As will be clear from Tables 5.4 and 5.6, it is quite common for multiple chests – typically two or three – to occur within a single escheators' or coroners' list. Although this is rare, the coroners' records do sometimes provide indication of where these items might have been housed. Typically, chests could be found in the parlour or chamber, and these rooms could house multiple chests. For example, Thomas Chylrey had three coffers in his chamber and another ('old') in a second chamber, while the six chests of labourer Anthony Curlynge were located in his chambers (two each in two of his three chambers), and in the hall (two).²¹⁶ The records rarely provide any indication of what was stored in these chests, though one unusual reference from the escheators' lists to a bed stored in a chest has been noted. Also unusual is one of the chests of John Wyvenden of Hawkhurst in 1576, which is said to have contained 'six cheeses'.²¹⁷

Tracing bequests of chests in London wills, French (2021, 117–19) shows a general increase in their prevalence through the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. To assess whether a similar trend can be traced for rural households, we can consider both the proportion of lists per decade containing chests, and the mean number of chests per list in each decade. Figure 5.7 demonstrates that throughout the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (represented by the escheators' records), a fairly low proportion of lists contain chests. Although the dip towards the latter end of the period covered by the escheators' dataset is likely due to recording practices, it is clear that there is no evidence of a sustained increase in the acquisition and use of chests through this period. The coroners' records present a different picture, with a marked

²¹⁶ C171; C289.

²¹⁷ C230.

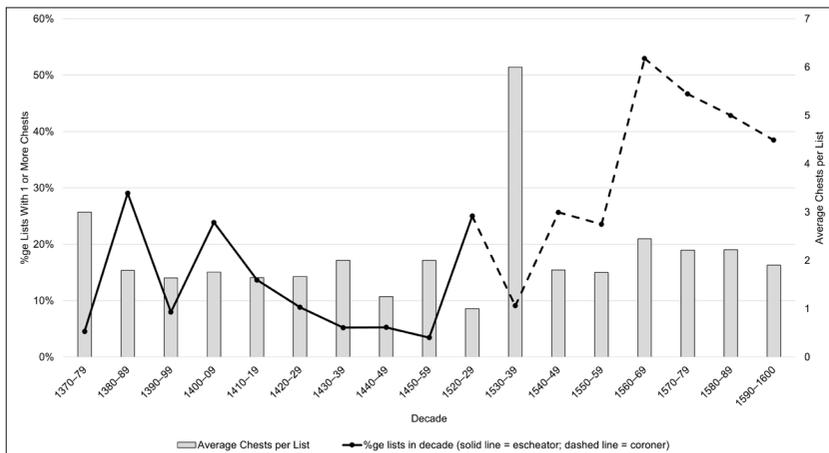


Figure 5.7: Occurrence of chests in the escheators' and coroners' records by decade. The line graph represents the proportion of the total lists from each decade containing at least one chest. The bar chart represents the average number of chests per list. The solid line relates to the escheators' records and the dashed line to the coroners' records.

increase in the middle third of the sixteenth century, with over half of the lists from the 1560s including at least one chest. In contrast, the average number of chests per list is fairly stable across the whole period, generally ranging from 1 to 2.4 (the figure of six for the 1530s relates to a single list). Although variations are slight, the average number of chests per list does fluctuate approximately in line with the proportion of lists with chests – with households, on average, having the highest average number of chests in the mid-sixteenth century, also the time at which the proportion of households possessing these items was at its highest.

Finally, we can consider the diversity of these items. The archaeological dataset is particularly valuable here as it demonstrates the possible acquisition of decorative chests by non-elite rural households. Surviving examples of medieval chests, as well as contemporary illustrations (Figure 5.6), show that chests and caskets could be elaborately decorated with studs and metal strips, but equally could be of plainer form with the lock plate being the only metal element. While examples from archaeological excavations cannot be conclusively identified as relating to chests, it is likely that many of these metal objects were chest furniture. The most common items are fragments of iron strapping. These could be from a range of different objects including doors or other iron-bound wooden objects such as buckets. They are common finds from urban and rural excavations. Perhaps of more significance are the copper alloy strips which may have been from smaller boxes or caskets. Like the iron strips, these are typically perforated but do not have any further decoration. If these are from

caskets, they show that these smaller boxes, used typically for storing valuable items, were used in a range of settings, not just higher status residences such as those at Grange Farm, Gillingham and Wimbotsham. Examples come from West Whelpington (Northumberland; Evans and Jarrett 1987), from Westwood (Kent; Powell 2012) and from a building at Goldicotte (Worcestershire; Palmer 2010). Items which can be more certainly associated with boxes or chests are the corner brackets, such as a copper alloy example from 16–20 Church Street, Bawtry (Cumberpatch and Dunkley 1996) and an iron example from Manston Road, Ramsgate (Kent; Archaeology South East 2009), and hinges. There are 10 hinges in the archaeological dataset, all made of iron. These come from a range of sites including the rural settlement at Cedars Park (Suffolk; Woolhouse 2016). Rivets and studs had many uses in carpentry and furniture making but could be used to secure strapping or mounts to chests. Both copper alloy and iron examples occur in the archaeological dataset, typically with a domed head. Further variability in the appearance of chests, caskets and boxes is provided by the evidence of furniture mounts. An oval piece from Huish (Thompson 1972) is of iron, but the remainder are made of copper alloy. These generally take the form of cut copper alloy sheet, but examples from Thuxton (Norfolk; Butler and Wade-Martins 1989), Upton (Worcestershire; Rahtz 1969) and Hepworth (Suffolk; Muldowney 2009) are incised, and a possible mount from Popham (Hampshire) is gold plated (Fasham 1987).

Handles are rarer finds and are typically of iron. Their distribution reflects that of other components of chests or boxes, being found at rural sites at Upton (Rahtz 1969), Gomeldon (Wiltshire; Musty and Algar 1986) and Thuxton (Butler and Wade-Martins 1989) (all iron, although one example from Upton may have been plated with a non-ferrous metal), with copper alloy examples from South Walsham (Norfolk; Brennand 1999) and Wharram Percy (Yorkshire; Harding *et al.* 2010). Iron hasps come from Upton (Rahtz 1969) and Low Fisher Gate, Doncaster (McComish *et al.* 2010). The final items associated with chests and boxes are elements of the locks and locking mechanisms. Parts of locking mechanisms have been recovered at Bawtry (Cumberpatch and Dunkley 1996) (iron with copper plating), Creedy's Yard, Greenwich (Laidlaw and Mephram 2002) (iron and copper alloy), West Whelpington (Evans and Jarrett 1987) (iron) and West Cotton (Northamptonshire; Hylton 2010) (an iron tumbler). In relation to the appearance of these objects, finds of lock or bash plates are perhaps more instructive. These include copper alloy examples from Staines (Jones 2010), Dartford (TVAS 2014) and Capel-St-Mary (Suffolk; Tabor 2010) and decorated copper alloy examples from Upton (Rahtz 1969) (incised and possibly gilded) and Parlington (Yorkshire; WYAS 2010) (incised). Iron keyhole surrounds also come from Gomeldon (Musty and Algar 1986) and Swindon (Wiltshire). Together, these archaeological examples demonstrate two things. Firstly, we can identify a high degree of variability in the appearance of chests and caskets. Iron and copper alloy were used in a variety of ways both in the construction and decoration of these items, and they might be embellished

through plating or further decoration. Secondly, boxes and chests were used in a wide range of households, corresponding with the evidence offered by the escheators' and coroners' records.

Further evidence of variation in the form and appearance of chests is provided by the descriptive language used in the escheators' and coroners' records. Across the escheators' dataset, a range of terms are used to describe chests. While the majority are referred to simply as chest (*cista*), more specific types include iron-bound chests and Flemish chests, while others are described as 'old' or 'worn'. As such, they may not represent investment by a household, but rather the curation of an heirloom. These old or worn examples range in value from 3d to 18d. The mean value of chests in the escheators' records is 17d, but values range from 2d to 480d/£2, with a modal value of 12d, and the majority being valued at less than 20d. The importation of chests, both as containers and as objects for sale (*cista vacua*) is well attested in the London customs accounts (e.g. Jenks 2019; see also Hinds 2022). Scientific analysis is adding to this picture. Research into a particular form of iron-bound domed chest (Pickvance 2012) suggests, on the basis of dendro-provenancing of wood and stylistic elements of the ironwork, that these items were imported into England (primarily eastern England). Eames (1977) suggests a Flemish connection and it is possible that the term 'Flemish chests' relates specifically to objects imported from Flanders.

A wider range of terms are used to describe these items in the coroners' records, perhaps pointing to an increasing level of diversity in form. Terms such as ark, coffer and whitch appear. These may be regional variations in some cases, but in others may indicate a greater degree of specificity in describing containers. We can also see variability in size, with chests referred to as 'little' or 'great' in some cases. Old chests also occur, a particularly interesting example being the 'old ship chest' belonging to William Bridge of Stelling (Kent) in 1586.²¹⁸ The increasing prevalence of chests in rural households suggested by their occurrence in the coroners' records could be due to changes in their production. Dendro-provenancing shows that through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, surviving chests were often made of wood imported from the Baltic, but in the sixteenth century there is a shift to British sources (Bridge and Miles 2011). This shift may relate to a number of factors, including the regeneration of English woodland and changes in international patterns of trade reducing access to high quality imported wood. A rise in domestic production may have made more chests available on the market in response to an increasing demand for these objects, perhaps particularly from rural households which had not used them as heavily as their urban counterparts in previous decades.

In order to explore the supply of chests further, we can consider the spatial distribution of these objects and associated archaeological finds. A study of finds of furniture mounts and locks and keys reported to the Portable

²¹⁸ C309.

Antiquities Scheme by Lewis (2016) shows them to have a largely easterly distribution. This is particularly the case for the copper alloy padlocks most commonly associated with chests and caskets, and most likely to be identified by metal detectorists. Our archaeological data for items associated with chests shows a similarly focussed distribution, although with further findspots in (particularly northern) Wiltshire (Figure 5.8). These items appear most common in northern Kent, East Anglia and eastern Northamptonshire. The majority of padlocks in our archaeological sample are iron, although two examples from West Cotton are plated with copper alloy. These padlocks had a range of functions, but some may be related to the securing of chests, and in 14 out of 24 cases padlocks or padlock keys (a type of annular key, which could have been used in the locking mechanism of a chest itself; Egan 2010, 88–90) were recovered from sites which also had items which were potentially the metal elements of a chest or box. A similar pattern can be seen in the escheators' records, with chests being most prevalent among lists from Kent, Northamptonshire and, to a lesser extent, East Anglia, north Wiltshire and south Yorkshire. It is noticeable that the earliest lists with chests are largely to be found in eastern England, with examples from Wiltshire, Worcestershire and Devon principally being later in date (Figure 5.9). This may support the idea that earlier chests were imported, or made of imported wood, whereas by the fifteenth century chests made from English wood were more prevalent. The earliest examples come primarily from Norfolk, Kent and eastern Yorkshire, all of which were tied into North Sea trading networks. This is also reflected in the coroners' records, in which chests primarily appear in lists from Kent and Wiltshire, but also appear more prevalent in Devon and southern Wiltshire than in the escheators' dataset.

The coroners' records suggest an increase in the number of items of furniture associated with display or open storage in the sixteenth century, especially in the form of cupboards, shelves and sideboards (Table 5.4). Such items could be fixed or moveable (Eames 1977, 2). Their presence in coroners' lists is perhaps suggestive of an increasing adoption of the moveable type. A further addition is the wainscot press, occurring in the list of John James (valued at 26s 8d).²¹⁹ The value of these items of furniture is difficult to determine as they are typically appraised with other objects.²²⁰ However, sixteenth-century cupboards are valued individually at sums ranging from 2s to 10s, suggesting that at the higher end at least, to obtain such an item would have represented a significant investment. The coroners' records also provide some information regarding the location of these items in the home. Most typically they are to be found in the hall or chamber, with occasional occurrences in the parlour or kitchen. Fixed items of furniture, in the form of cupboards or aumbries, are considerably rarer in both the coroners' and escheators' records. An example is John Rotherham of Elvington (Yorkshire), who committed murder in 1417 and possessed two chests

²¹⁹ C382.

²²⁰ C11.

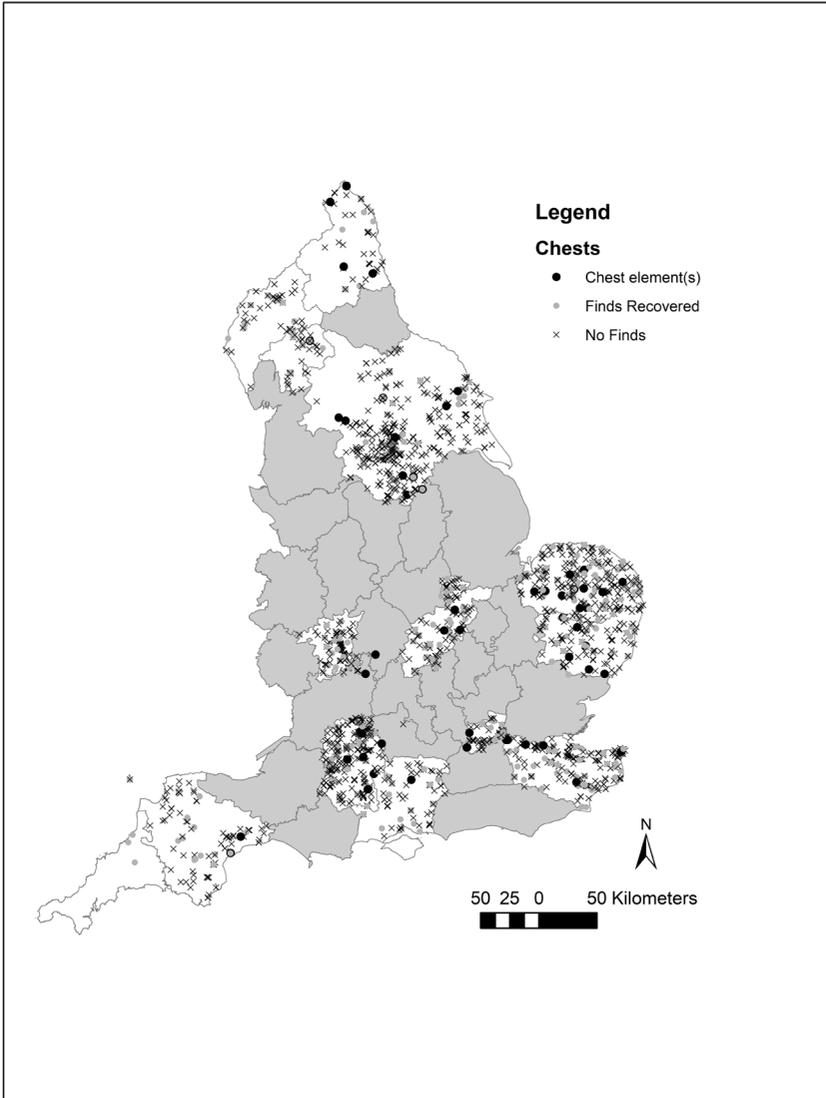


Figure 5.8: Distribution of objects associated with chests in the archaeological dataset

and an aumbry, although apparently no books or items of value to store in the latter.²²¹ The chests may have been used to store some of his soft furnishings, as he possessed 14 sets of bedding consisting of sheets, blankets and coverlets.

Overall, our data supports the notion of an increasing prevalence of chests as households engaged more intensively in commercial activity in the fifteenth

²²¹ E586.

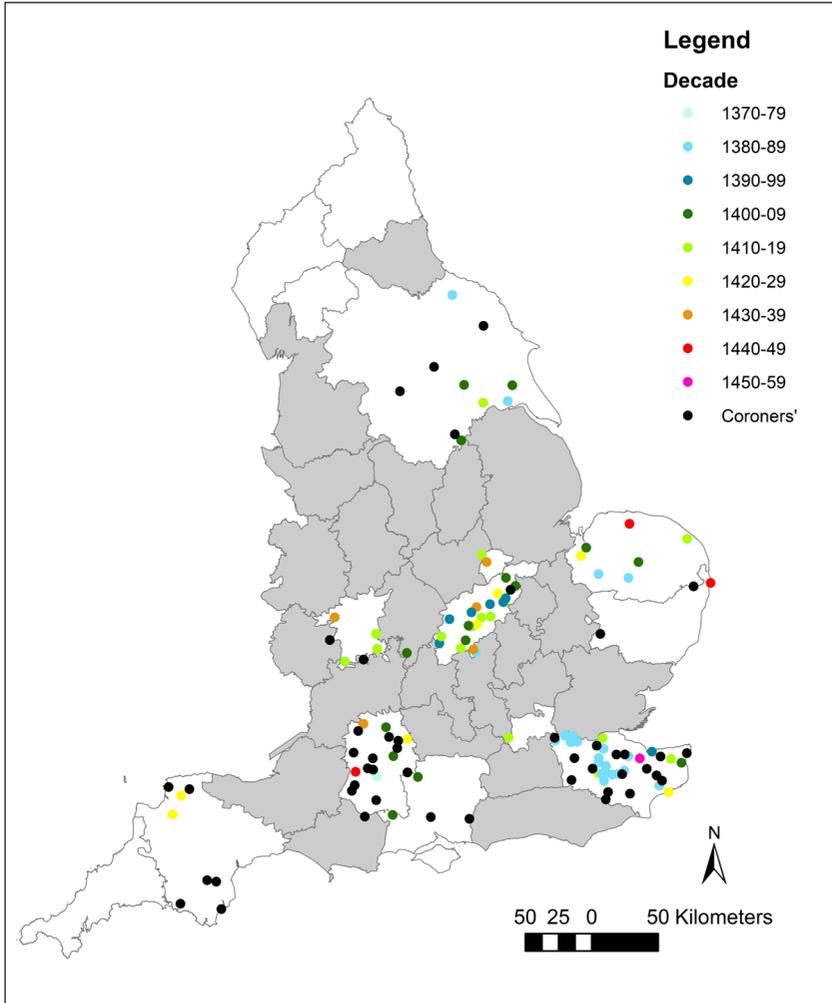


Figure 5.9: Distribution of chests in the escheators' and coroners' records by date.

and sixteenth centuries. Even so, chests were used in non-elite rural households in the later fourteenth century. We can infer an increasing diversity in the character of these items from the language used to describe them, supported by the range of embellishments attested to by archaeological finds. They occur in an increasing proportion of lists over time, and the areas in which they are found and the average number of chests per list also grew. The archaeological and historical datasets point strongly to an eastern bias in the use of chests in the fourteenth century, expanding westwards through the fifteenth century. This may be related to a change in the source of the wood, and perhaps

therefore the chests, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as suggested by dendro-provenancing, and by changes in the perception of chests at the same time, as revealed in manuscript illuminations. As chests became more prevalent in lower status homes, so they increasingly came to stand for social ambiguity as they might conceal, or create an illusion, of wealth in a social order that was being renegotiated through the long-term changes to the labour and property markets following the Black Death.

Seating

The final major category of furniture comprises items associated with seating: chairs, stools and benches (Table 5.7). In the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, cushions were typically associated with the bed, so where the escheators' records are concerned have been discussed as bedding (see above). In contrast, within the coroners' records a small number of cushions, typically found in the hall, are clearly associated with chairs or benches, rather than beds. Whereas items associated with storage and bedding are exceptionally common, seating occurs as the only category of furniture in just two escheators' lists (one of which also includes tables). In all, seating items occur in 44 lists. In two cases only a single type of item is present. In 1422 Nicholas Webster of Howden (Yorkshire) possessed a chair (valued at 8d) and table, and in 1420 John Hullediewe, a husbandman of Highway (Wiltshire) had a stool (valued at 1d) and two tables; it is notable that these appear in the midst of a list of farming equipment.²²²

Benches are the most common items occurring in the escheators' lists, followed by chairs and stools (Table 5.7). It is noticeable that multiple stools occur in a small number of lists, while typically households with chairs only had one or two. As Table 5.8 illustrates, in most cases the households with seating listed in the escheators' records had a bench, in a small number of cases with a chair, or chair and stools. These different types of seating fulfilled different practical and social functions. The chair was a symbol of authority, linked with the head of the household and, potentially, having some symbolic power in relation to the status or aspirations of a household (Buxton 2015, 139; Eames 1977, 181; Sear and Sneath 2020, 139). Chairs were typically valued at 4d or 6d. Benches, like tables, were typically moveable to allow for flexibility in the use of space (Eames 1977, 203). Where listed, benches quite often occur in multiples of three, and these groups are given values from 4d to 36d, suggesting some variety in material, size or condition. As in the elite household, seating on benches might reflect the social order, based on distance from the head of the household (Flather 2011, 178).

The coroners' lists suggest an increase in the quantity of seating, particularly in the number of chairs and stools in relation to the quantity of benches. This

²²² E565; E558.

Table 5.7: Occurrence of seating in the escheators' and coroners' records.

Object	Escheators'		Coroners'	
	No. Items	No. Lists	No. items	No. Lists
Chair	26	19	27	16
Chair (joined)			1	1
Chair (board)			1	1
Chair (worn/old)	2	2	6	3
Bench/form	52	24	41	24
Bench/form (old)			1	1
Stool	20	7	28	13
Three-legged stool			3	1
Stool (plain and old)			1	1
Seat/bench			4	1
Cushions	103	22	42	6

gives support to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century evidence presented by Sear and Sneath (2020, 140), and by Buxton (2015) who highlights a distinction between the use of chairs in wealthier households and a preponderance of shared seating in lower status homes in the town of Thame. Chairs are typically valued with other items of furniture, so it is impossible to determine how they were appraised. We can also identify soft furnishings in the form of cushions in six lists (note that one list, that of an innkeeper, includes 24 cushions, in part accounting for the high number of cushions per list)²²³ which are unambiguously associated with seating rather than bedding. Cushions were valued modestly, for example in 1588 George Bowre of Kingthorpe (Yorkshire), had five valued at 12d.²²⁴ Consideration of the co-occurrence of these items of seating also suggests that in the sixteenth century it was more common for households to possess a chair or stool as well as a bench than in the preceding centuries, with benches occurring as the only item of seating in only four lists (Table 5.8).

Other furnishings: heating, lighting and hangings

Objects for lighting and heating occur in a small number of escheators' and coroners' lists (Table 5.9). These include andirons and occasional scuttles and pokers for tending the fire. References to bellows occur in five coroners'

²²³ C548.

²²⁴ C346.

Table 5.8: Combinations of seating occurring in the escheators' and coroners' records (excluding lists with soft furnishings but no furniture associated with seating).

Bench	Chair/ Seat	Stool	Seat	Banker	Bolster	Cushion	No. Escheators' Lists	No. Coroners' Lists
X	X						2	7
X							16	4
X	X	X					3	4
X				X		X	3	0
X						X	1	1
	X			X	X	X	1	0
	X			X		X	4	0
	X					X	3	0
	X					X	2	0
	X						8	3
		X					3	1
		X				X	1	1
X	X					X	0	1
	X	X					0	2
X		X					0	4
X	X	X				X	0	3

lists, typically in association with other equipment for tending the fire. These references are suggestive of the presence of fireplaces rather than open hearths. For example, Jane Vause of Beccles (Suffolk) had a pair of bellows and a firepan in 1528, and Thomas Chylrey of Marlborough had a pair of bellows in his chamber.²²⁵ In 1576 John Oke of Britford had a pair of iron fire dogs, tongs and a fire shovel as well as a pair of bellows.²²⁶ Bellows also occur in the escheators' records, but only example – that of William Mandevile of Colnbrook (Middlesex), whose list dates to 1419 – relates clearly to a domestic context, as opposed to smithing.²²⁷ Such items must have been more widespread than is apparent from these lists.

²²⁵ C146; C171.

²²⁶ C226.

²²⁷ E667.

Table 5.9: Occurrence of objects associated with lighting in the escheators' and coroners' records.

Object	Escheators'		Coroners'	
	No. Items	No. Lists	No. Items	No. Lists
Latten candlestick	14	7	19	7
Candlestick	29	14	62	28
Brass candlestick	0	0	8	4
Wooden (?) candlestick	0	0	8	2
'White' candlestick	0	0	2	1
Iron candlestick	0	0	1	1
Lantern	1	1	2	2
Tin candlestick	2	1	0	0
Candle	55	2	66	2
Candlewick	0	0	4	1

Like items of plate and bedding, candlesticks had a value beyond the utilitarian. In forthcoming work, Louisa Foroughi notes how candles, in addition to providing light, offered a further link to ecclesiastical practice. This imbued metal candlesticks, which feature regularly in wills, with a significance beyond the economic. As inherited items they developed a mnemonic capacity, which in turn might be considered as statements of piety. Latten (a copper and zinc alloy) candlesticks are not common in the escheators' records, but typically occur in multiples (Table 5.9). John Poughole, a hosteller of Basingstoke (Hampshire) had three (2s), as did John Moigne of Warmington (Northamptonshire) (12d) and John Peke of Hampton (Middlesex) three (9d), for example.²²⁸ They may also have been available in cheaper materials, John Crane's two 'tin' candlesticks were worth only 2d.²²⁹ Archaeological examples are primarily of iron, for example those from Wimbotsham (Shelley 2003), Whittington (Worcestershire; Hurst 1998) and West Whelpington (Evans and Jarrett 1987). The widespread use of candles from around 1300 is also reflected in the presence of other types of candleholder. Prickets such as those from Wimbotsham (Shelley 2003), Popham (Fasham 1987), West Whelpington (Evans and Jarrett 1987), Doncaster (McComish *et al.* 2010) and Lydd (Kent; Barber and Priestly-Bell 2008) are all made from iron. Lewis (2016) shows that candleholders had a wide distribution across England. Numbers are low, however, and Egan (2005, 203) suggests that this could be due to the use of rush lights rather than candles

²²⁸ E20; E45; E403.

²²⁹ E614.

in rural homes. The PAS evidence in particular shows a great deal of variation in the form and decoration of candleholders and candlesticks, and it might be the case that it was those more elaborate examples, and particularly those of pewter or other valuable metals, which caught the appraisers' eye (Figure 5.10).

The coroners' lists provide further information. They show that items for lighting were most commonly in the hall, chamber and parlour, but may also have been kept in butteries. These are nearly all candlesticks, typically described as latten, with eight in brass, and a single iron example (Table 5.9). An unusual find is a wooden lantern from Exmouth (Devon; Allan 1999). A copper alloy strip from Staines has also been interpreted as part of a lantern (Jones 2010). This may be paralleled in the lantern worth 1d belonging to the sawyer John Haselwode of Boughton in 1438 (Kent) and those belonging to the labourer William Mursshall of Greenwich (Kent) and Edward Purkheme of Denbury (Devon).²³⁰

Hangings and coverings, including window curtains, are rare in the escheators' lists, occurring most commonly in lists with a wide range of other furnishings. It was common practice for fabrics to be hung in medieval houses to cover wooden furniture and to add colour and warmth to the interior. While it is highly likely that items associated with heating and lighting are under-represented in the lists, the extent of this is unclear. Taken at face value, however, it appears that only the wealthiest of households were able to invest in such items. Like other textiles, these were relatively valuable. In 1382 Richard Bocher of Rochester had two old hangings (*tapete*) valued at 2s.²³¹ Another example is the striped hanging belonging to Simon Deryng of Whinburgh (Norfolk) in 1406, valued at 12d.²³² It is probable that some items termed as testers, costers or dossers were in fact wall hangings. Further detail on these items is provided in the coroners' lists. For example, in 1586 Edward Purkheme of Denbury possessed a 'shred halling,' or a tapestry made up of shreds of fabric.²³³ A curtain was to be found in the chamber of Thomas Chylrey of Marlborough in 1565 and also in the parlour of Thomas Ramsden, the Oundle shoemaker, in 1545.²³⁴ Hints at the use of hangings are also provided by the archaeological dataset in the form of rings such as the copper alloy examples from Wharram Percy (Harding, Marlow-Mann and Wrathmell 2010), West Whelpington (Evans and Jarrett 1987), Popham (Fasham 1987) and Dartford (TVAS 2014) and an iron example from excavations on the Bacton to King's Lynn pipeline (Norfolk; Wilson *et al.* 2012), although these items could have had a variety of functions and need not have been used for hanging decorative textiles.

²³⁰ E293; C308; C487.

²³¹ E667.

²³² E1309.

²³³ C308.

²³⁴ C171; C76.

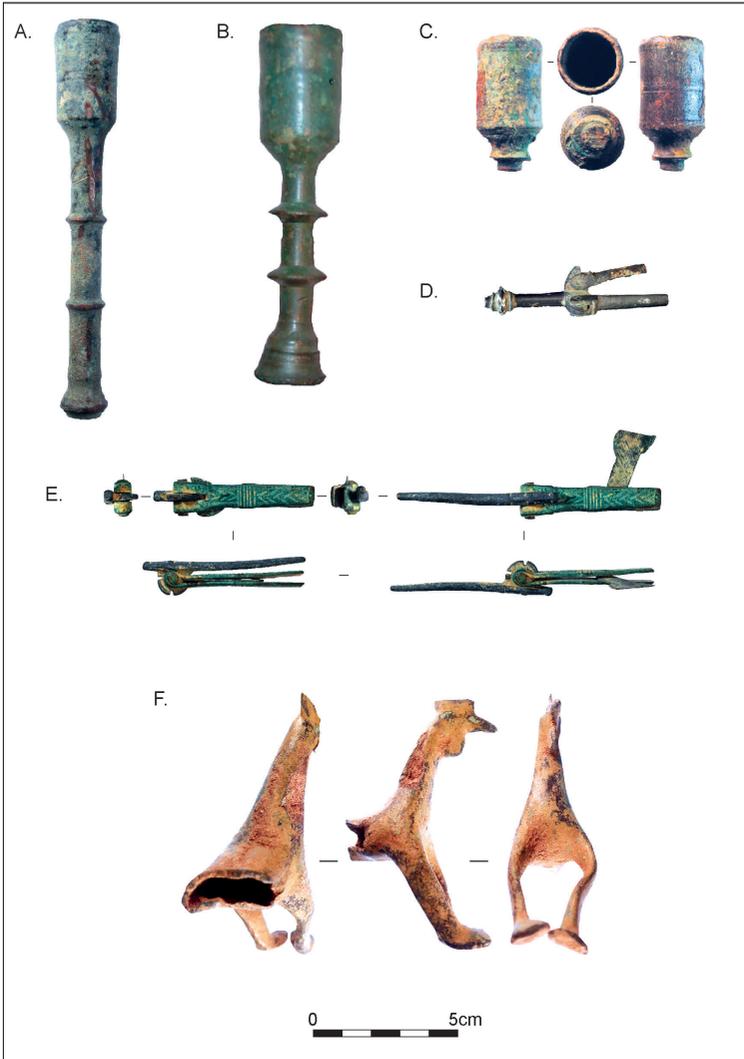


Figure 5.10: Examples of candlesticks and holders from the Portable Antiquities Scheme database. A: 15th–16th century copper alloy socketed candlestick from Long Sutton, Lincolnshire (PAS Reference NMS-8ED0A7); B: 15th–17th century cast copper alloy candlestick found at Ogwell, Devon (DEV-002F46) C: Socket from cast copper alloy candlestick found at Stone, Kent; D: Copper alloy tripod candle holder from Repps, Norfolk (NMS-6FEA68); E: Copper alloy candle holder from Wakefield, West Yorkshire; F: Zoomorphic animal holder in the shape of a cockerel, dating from the 12th–14th centuries from Barston, Solihull. CC By Attribution Licence. Images: Norfolk County Council (A; D) Portable Antiquities Scheme (B; C); West Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service (E); Birmingham Museums Trust (F).

Conclusion: furnishing the home

Some interiors were clearly well furnished. In 1419, William Mandevile of Colnbrook had a wider range of bedding than is typical: three coverlets (4s 4d) and five blankets (20d); a further coverlet, two blankets, mattress and a pair of sheets (valued together at 5s 4d); four cushions (18d) and three pillows (4s); and an additional coverlet, blanket and sheet (valued at 20d with one stone of wool) (see discussion in Jervis 2022c). A final two coverlets, blanket, mattress, quilt and two curtains were valued at 2s 4d. Although many of these items are described as ‘worn’, here we can see investment in a degree of comfort, and the occurrence of multiple groups of bedding in his list are suggestive of Mandevile’s home having a chamber or chambers. He also had bellows, suggesting a fireplace. However, as Table 5.1 illustrates, such a wide range of furnishings was not typical for the households within our sample. It is apparent that investment in bedding took priority when furnishing the home, with storage items perhaps being new acquisitions but also likely, in some cases at least, to have been passed down familial lines. Bedding represented a substantial investment; along with metal cooking ware, it was generally the most valuable set of items within the home. Objects associated with seating in comfort do not seem to have been the foremost concern of medieval households. It is instructive to summarise the furnishings of some of those households that had more complex assemblages of furniture.

It is in those households that had furniture for sleeping, seating and storage that we find the strongest evidence for investment in objects associated with privacy and comfort. For example, in 1384 Thomas Isenden of Sutton Valence (Kent) possessed two bankers with accompanying cushions (12d), one chest valued at 3s 4d plus ‘two other worn chests’ valued at 20d, two coverlets, a tester, a hanging and two bolsters (valued altogether at 13s 4d), and two pairs of sheets (6s) (all these appear in the section of his list that concerns domestic items, as opposed to his goods ‘in the shop’).²³⁵ We can also, in some cases, see investment perhaps in a ‘master’ bed chamber. In 1405 John Moigne, an exceptionally wealthy individual within the sample, had six pairs of sheets (14s 3d), three pillows (12d) and a bed ‘of white wool’ (5s), plus a further ‘worsted’ bed with canopy and three curtains (20s), two coverlets with worn *tapete* (that word here probably meaning a bed covering, rather than a wall hanging, 10s), and four sheets (3s 4d). This entry is suggestive of the presence of at least one hanging bed, and implies a chamber.²³⁶ In addition, he had a white and red coster and six old ‘tapestry’ cushions (*vi quishon’ de Tapicer veter’*, 5s), and curtains (*i wyndocloth’*, valued at 12d). He also possessed five chests, three tables and three benches (notably, his coster and cushions are clearly listed with the

²³⁵ E768; the more valuable chest is described using an illegible adjective, possibly meaning ‘Flemish’.

²³⁶ E45.

benches rather than the bedding). Similarly, Simon Deryng, a parker of Whinborough (Norfolk) convicted of treason in 1406, had a canopy, curtain and tester (3s 4d); here the 'bed' is only implied, not specifically mentioned. He also possessed one coverlet with three *shalons* (blankets or coverlets), two blankets, one mattress and one canvas (6s); five sheets (3s); a dosser with two costers (16d); and a striped hanging (12d).²³⁷ While we might expect furniture to be acquired by wealthier households due to their higher levels of disposable income, lists such as those of Moigne and Isenden also show that it was households such as these, with their more complex domestic arrangements, which in turn afforded the use of fixed or specialised forms of furniture, as the function of particular rooms became more defined.

We might expect increasing complexity in domestic arrangements over time, both in terms of the spaces themselves and the range of goods which filled them. Drawing on the evidence of wills, Salter (2006, 67) highlights how, in wills, terms such as 'chamber' refer not to the room but to the furniture and objects within them, suggesting that it was the practices which these things afforded, rather than the spaces in which they were placed, which was of key concern. Our dataset is too small to assess whether the increasing range of furniture was driven by architectural modification, or was a response to it. However, we can infer that changing domestic practice and values relates to these changes. For example, an increasing need for privacy and comfort might be understood as driving the emergence of the parlour and chambers. We might question whether it was the presence of these spaces which created an opportunity for the acquisition of wooden bedsteads, seating and soft furnishings, or whether desire for such goods necessitated modification. Whichever, if either, change came first, we suggest that architectural modification and a diversifying world of goods worked in tandem to create new forms of domestic space and experience. The presence of goods such as cushions in the escheators' and coroners' lists does suggest more complex architectural arrangements, as their occurrence implies the presence of permanent beds or seating, as they would otherwise be cumbersome to store. These items need not be associated with the wealthy only because they were 'luxury' goods, but also because particular architectural organisation was required for them to become usable possessions.

Similarly, in the coroners' records complex sets of furniture are rare. It is the list of John James which provides the most vivid and complex picture of such an interior.²³⁸ James had carpets in his parlour, bed chamber and study, and also had several hangings and canvas curtains in his bed chamber. He had a bedstead, featherbed, coverlets and blanket 'in the mayden's chamber'; a truckle bed and standing bedstead plus extensive bedding in the bedchamber; a further bedstead and bedding 'in the bushoppes (bishop's) chamber'; a bedstead and a truckle bed plus bedding in the inner chamber; and a bedstead 'in

²³⁷ E1309.

²³⁸ C382.

the chamber over the halle entry'. He had additional beds in a second property at Newton Tony.

It is striking that furniture is absent from the majority of escheators' and coroners' records. While some lists show investment in elaborate bedding and larger items of furniture, in most cases the evidence suggests sparsely furnished homes. These spaces could be easily transformed over the course of the day through the use of objects such as mattresses, benches and trestle tables. As might be expected, the most common types of household with more elaborate furnishings are those of the highest socio-economic status within our dataset: the clergy and yeomen. It is apparent, however, that husbandmen and, particularly, labourers developed some capacity and desire to invest in furnishings, particularly by the end of our period. Regional differences in bedding and seating are difficult to assess due to the low quantities present, but there does seem to be a focus in the use of chests in the eastern counties, perhaps revealing the impact of Hanseatic trading networks on everyday life in this part of England.

Overall, we can see an increasing level of comfort in late medieval and Tudor homes by the end of our period, and a proliferation of furniture. This is most apparent in the changes to bedding, but also in the increasing quantity and diversity of chests and seating. In furniture we can, perhaps, see the intersection between function, architectural developments and commercialisation; as a wider range of goods became available, space became increasingly specialised, and levels of disposable income rose for many groups. This created a shift in both the use and perception of furniture within the home between c.1370 and c.1600.