

Furnishings of medieval English peasant houses: investment, consumption and life style

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Medieval peasant houses have been much studied in England in the last 60 years, and gradually the questions that have been asked have changed. Initially research was dominated by problems of construction – materials, joints, and methods of walling and roofing. These varied from region to region, and evolved over time, which required explanation. (1) There was also some concern with the identification of the precise social status of the builders and inhabitants of the houses. Vernacular building was typical of a peasant society, in its use of local materials and traditional methods of construction, but for a long time there was a reluctance to identify standing buildings as peasant houses. It was believed that because peasant houses were too insubstantial to survive, only archaeological excavation provided evidence for structures at that low level of society.(2) The economic history of houses was concerned with the chronology of construction – the ‘great rebuilding’ it was argued resulted from the prosperity of better-off farmers in the 16th and 17th centuries, after a period of low quality buildings.(3)

Now we know that peasant housing was not universally badly built and incapable of surviving for a long time.(4) The earliest dated house which is still inhabited and likely to have belonged to a peasant was built of timbers felled in 1262.(5) With the full impact of dendrochronology a wave of building in both town and country can be identified which coincided with the ‘great depression’ of the 15th century.(6) As well as telling us about the resources that peasants could afford to devote to building, houses can be compared with other types of expenditure – peasants could give priority to investment in production, or in spending on communal projects such as the parish church, or could choose to concentrate on food, drink and clothing. For a long time it was believed that peasants had a largely self-sufficient economy and would have built their houses themselves, using materials from local woods and quarries, with earth, turf and reeds from the village commons. Since the acceptance of the ‘commercialisation’ model, it is now possible to conceive that

peasants employed artisans (carpenters, masons and roofers) and labourers, and bought building materials, even from a long distance. (7)

1

More recently we have become concerned with the social and cultural history of houses. How were rural houses different from those in towns? Did rural houses influence the form of urban buildings? Or did peasants emulate the new styles that they saw in towns? (8) Were houses intended to convey messages about the wealth and status of those living in them, or did their relative uniformity express the egalitarian character of the village? What were the meanings of the public buildings of the village such as the guild hall or church house: did they make a statement about the character of the community? Were peasant houses influenced by models provided by the aristocracy, or did they plan their buildings to suit their own needs? To what extent did the inhabitants wish to make their lives private, both in separating their houses from those of their neighbours, and in reserving domestic space for individuals within the household? Were spaces occupied by the different genders? (9) What can be learned about different regional economies and cultures from the design of houses and the relationship between them and the various landscapes? (10)

To help us to provide answers to these questions we need to know more about the interior of the houses: the division of the spaces, the function of the rooms, and the nature, quality and value of the furnishings.

Sources of information about peasant furnishings are few and all have to be combined together to provide a full picture.

Physical evidence

Standing buildings may contain evidence for fixed furnishings. A line of holes bored into a horizontal beam could mark the site a wooden bench attached to the wall.(11) When houses are excavated there are sometimes hints in the floor of the remains of fixed furnishings, such as seating.(12) The best evidence comes from the excavation of houses in regions where stone was abundant, where stone benches might have been built against the wall.(13) Pieces of furniture have survived, especially in churches, but they rarely if ever originated in peasant houses.(14) Nonetheless they belong to types of furniture which written sources tell us belonged to peasants, such as the chest and *armoire* (in English almary). Though wooden peasant furniture has not survived, metal fittings such as locks and keys and hinges, and applied decoration from chests, are found on village excavations.(15)

Written evidence

Illustrations in manuscripts or wall paintings occasionally depict a peasant interior, but as with the surviving furniture, the main value of such representations is to show objects which were used in aristocratic houses, such as trestle tables, which we presume resemble those owned by the lower ranks of society.(16) The main written sources are inventories and wills, and here I will be focussing on those surviving from Yorkshire in the 15th century, and for many parts of southern England in the period 1480-1500.(17) These can be supplemented with lists of *principalia* of the period 1350-1440, which were goods belonging to customary peasant holdings (and deemed to be the lord's property) which were listed on transfers of land, and many other occasional references in court records such as heriots (death duties) and stolen property. (18)

This evidence will be used to investigate the three themes of my title : investment, consumption and culture.

INVESTMENT

This part of the inquiry is simply concerned with placing furnishings in a broader economic context, and to see how expenditure on the furniture of a house compared with the other calls on a peasant's income: peasants had some choice in relation to their acquisition of furniture. This discussion will establish the main types of furnishings owned by peasants, and the values that were assigned to them.

If we look at the very full inventories of two contrasting peasants, both preserved among manorial court records, we find that in the case of a village craftsman of Elmley Castle (Worcs.) without much land, in 1457, Richard Sc latter had furnishings : chests, a table, a chair, a bench (form), a wooden bedstead and bed clothes – a mattress, sheet, pillows and coverlets worth 7s. 10d. - out of total of 15s.5d. He did not need to invest much in his craft, as his tools were very cheap – 1s.9d., including a spade and shovel to dig his garden, and a spinning wheel for his wife's work. More prosperous peasants had larger holdings of land and consequently more agricultural equipment and livestock. Robert Oldman of Cuxham (Oxfordshire) who died in 1349 had his goods valued at £9 14s. 6d., of which furniture accounted

for about 14s. (7 per cent) , while his agricultural implements (cart, plough etc.) and animals came to £3 2s.0d., or 32 per cent of the total.(19) Most peasant inventories

3

record very low values for furnishings, with farm equipment and livestock making more than a half of the total inventory. Thomas Hall of Holgate near York in 1468 was rather unusual in having furnishings worth 19s. 5d. (11 per cent of the total of £8 15s. 10d.) but still his agricultural stock came to £6 6s.6d. (73 per cent).(20)

In the hall, the space in the peasant house for eating, sitting and receiving guests, wooden furniture, notably tables, stools, forms (benches without backs), and chairs were often valued at a few pence each. The table simply consisted of boards standing on trestles, which could be easily dismantled and moved after a meal. All of these items were commonly assigned a low value. Forms and chairs were often said to be worth 4d. or an even lower figure. Tables again were said to be worth sums in the region of 4d.

In the chamber, sometimes the parlour, a more private room where people slept and goods were stored, wooden bedsteads were not very valuable – ‘boards for a bed’ in one case were priced at 4d. More costly were the chests used to store clothing and other possessions, and peasants’ chests, while they could be worth as little as 6d., were often assigned a value of 2s. -3s. Even peasants with modest resources would own two or three of these useful containers. The most expensive item of all, though it was not found in every household, was the almary, which we would now call a cupboard (indeed in 1506 at Shipston on Stour in Worcestershire there is a reference to an almary alias a cupboard) , at 1s.6d. to 3s. 0d.(21) This large piece could be located either in the hall or the chamber.

The generally low prices of wooden furniture reflects their relatively clumsy construction, and lack of decorative features or ornament. This robustness, lacking much delicacy of carving and finish, is found in some of the examples that have survived, mostly we presume from aristocratic households. Peasant furniture is not likely to have been more delicate or ornate. In the case of tables, when on public display they were partly hidden by table cloths. Chests required more skill to make, and were more likely to be decorated. They were sometimes made from imported wood, such as spruce from the Baltic, which is reflected in their price.

A pair of linen sheets in a peasant inventory could cost more than 1s. 0d., but those made of hemp rather than flax, which were worth only 7d. at most. Coverlets usually cost between 1s. 0d. and 4s. 0d.

4

To provide a standard of comparison in the late 15th century when most of the documents from which these prices were compiled, a cow could be bought for 8s.0d., and a cart or wain, the most expensive piece of farming equipment, was worth at least 10s. and sometimes as much as 16s. or 23s.4d. It is not difficult to see how a peasant inventory of tables, forms, chests and a range of textiles accounting for a total of only 10s.-20s, was easily outstripped by a farmyard full of cattle, horses and other animals, and the contents of a cart shed with implements for cultivation. The same generalisation must be true even if domestic equipment and utensils for serving food and drink were included in the calculations.

The relatively high proportion of an inventory's value which came from agricultural livestock and deadstock, compared with items of domestic consumption, was not confined to peasants, and inventories of the gentry confirm the tendency for about a half of the value of people's possessions to derive from agricultural produce and farm equipment.

The inescapable conclusion was that peasants spent a great deal on the productive resources of the holding. If peasants were tempted to buy luxuries, these were most likely to be clothing, foodstuffs or metal utensils, such as basins and ewers, pewter plates, metal candlesticks, silver spoons, and brass cooking pots, or the expenditure was concentrated on the construction of the house rather than its contents.

CONSUMPTION

Among the furnishings the purchase of household textiles would require some outlay of cash, and one can see evidence here of consumer items being bought for prestige as well as for their usefulness. Coverlets were often identified by their colour – red, green, blue etc. and occasionally valued highly, such as those worth 6s.8d. each in the household of the rich farmer, Roger Heritage in 1495.(22) Some care and discrimination had evidently been taken over the purchase of the most visible of the bedclothes. One notes how households kept a 'special' pair of quite expensive linen sheets, and the much cheaper everyday 'harden' or hemp sheets. John Hall of Holgate (Yorks.) who died in 1468 had a pair of linen sheets valued at 1s.8d., and three pairs

of harden sheets at 7d. per pair.(23) Most households owned more than one table cloth and also towels. Among the items of wooden furniture chests of spruce or a 'Flemish' chest point to some pretension and the acquisition of prestige items. Chests came in many forms, which are called arks, coffers and forcers as well as simply

5

chests. They were chosen presumably for specific purposes, but also because their owners appreciated their varied designs and shapes. From the excavations of the village of Upton in Gloucestershire which was deserted in the 14th century came a copper ornament, gilded, in the shape of a fleur de lys, apparently designed to be nailed to a chest as part of its decoration.(24)

In the hall, the main public room where display was most appropriate, the cushions and bankers (long cushions covering a bench) provided an element of comfort and colour. The wall of the main public room, the hall was often covered with a painted or stained cloth which could be worth between 2s. and 5s. A number of Yorkshire peasants kept weapons in the hall – John Jakson of Grimston (1464) had a sallet (helmet), bow and arrows, a Carlisle axe and a pike.(25) The various references to 'boards' and cupboards suggest that prestigious items such as pewter plates and saucers could be put on display.

The chamber normally contained bedding, usually including a mattress, sheets, blankets and coverlets. William Atkynson of Helperby near York who was not especially rich owned a featherbed.(26) His less fortunate contemporaries slept on mattresses stuffed with straw or hair.. The really superior households, those of farmers with more than 100 acres of land, could aspire to fit a bed with a dorser, curtain and canopy, like Thomas Vicars of Strensall (1450) who had a green bed with a tapet (carpet) and a blue bed with curtains.(27)

We can surely see here signs of that spirit of emulation which has been identified among the middle ranking consumers of the 18th century. Peasants had visited the halls of the manor house to attend a court, discuss a legal problem, or even as a guest at an annual Christmas dinner for tenants. They presumably noted and admired these impressive aristocratic rooms, and arranged their halls as much as possible to resemble them, with meal tables covered with table cloths, a special seat – a chair - for the head of the household - and forms and stools for women, children and servants. A reference to a 'turned' chair hints at its superior craftsmanship – the legs were presumably finished with some form of decoration on a lathe.(28) Yorkshire

houses in the late 15th century had two chairs. Was the second for the peasant's wife or perhaps his elder son ?

6

Some inventories make no mention of a chair, and the seating arrangement is indicated by the presence of a 'banker', which was a long cushion placed on a 'dais bench' that formed part of the structure of the house. This built-in bench is well known from standing buildings, notably in Kent (29), and as it was attached to the wall it would not be mentioned in an inventory which was concerned exclusively with moveable items. It was in use in many parts of the country, as it appears as a stone feature, facing the hearth, in a house excavated on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall (Garrow Tor).(30) In timber buildings the dais bench might have a carved frieze above it, or a dorsi of coloured cloth was fixed behind the privileged seat, which drew attention to the superiority of the head of the household, even if he was only a husbandman with 15 acres of land.. Meals in better-off peasant households were preceded by hand washing using a basin and ewer and towels.(31) The walls were decorated with the peasant's equivalent of the aristocratic hangings or tapestries, a painted cloth, and presumably the weapons were also hung on the walls to symbolise that the peasants had a military role, and to demonstrate readiness to protect themselves and to serve their lord or their king in emergency. The arms had a practical function also, as they are notably prominent in the north, towards the Scottish border. Nonetheless, even in the more peaceful midlands and south, peasants had obligations to maintain order and to serve in their local contingent of soldiers when required, so they commonly owned at least one weapon. All of these aspects of the hall emphasize the common ground between the peasant and aristocratic household. Peasants strove for dignity in their domestic life, and sought to represent through the organisation of space and its furnishing the hierarchy and discipline of their households. This was directed at the members of the family and the servants who lived with them. The hall also saw gatherings of visitors, such as those attending meals, or groups of neighbours brought together to make a marriage contract or to witness a legal document. They would observe the special seat, and the weapons, and come away impressed by the authority of the head of the household, both in the domestic setting and in the wider world.

The hall's use by the whole household, and as a public room, emphasizes the collective use of space, which makes it seem inappropriate to compare medieval

peasants to the 'consumer society' of the 18th century, with its emphasis on private enjoyment of possessions and individual property. Late medieval peasant houses,

7

however, always contained private rooms, even if only the single chamber of the most basic type of house. In the 14th and 15th centuries these private rooms tended to increase in number, especially as houses acquired upper storeys, leading to larger rural houses in the south-east which contained four or five smaller rooms, mostly called chambers.(32) Recent work on 18th-century urban households has shown that even low status and transient lodgers and servants gained some privacy in their possessions because they kept in their small share of the household's space or in their basic rented rooms a locked chest.(33) In the middle ages chests with locks were used in a similar way. In 1277 near Marlborough in Wiltshire 3 people were accused of taking from Alice la Coyfere a forcer containing 5s.0d. in cash and a dozen coifs (head coverings, which judging from her name, she had made). In the same year in the same district the abductors of Maud le Flemeng took with her a forcer containing jewels, robes and clothes. Money and clothing were most commonly kept in these chests, but some also were used to store valuables and jewellery. Criminals with few possessions could still own one of these pieces of furniture, such as Richard Pykston of Southbroom (Wiltshire), hanged for felony in 1280, whose goods (which were confiscated by the state) consisted of a hood (valued at 3d.) and a chest worth 9d.(34)

Features of the 18th-century 'consumer revolution' included the innovations and rapid changes in commodities and fashions over time. Our sources are concentrated in a relatively short period, which makes it difficult to identify changes. We know that in the 16th and 17th centuries the quality of 'joined' wooden furniture was improved, and it may well be that in the period 1350-1520 there were new types of household textiles, such as the varieties of imported linen of superior quality, and developments in seating in peasant halls, with more fixed benches and bankers, or superior chairs.

LIFE STYLE

Emulation suggest that lords and peasants shared a common culture, and makes us wonder if peasants had their own way of life, or were merely pale imitations of their superiors. It is clear that peasants were different, and the interior of their households had special features appropriate for their economy and social position.

Firstly the aristocracy usually kept agricultural buildings and farming separate from their domestic accommodation. The peasants also owned barns, byres, cart

8

sheds and other structures apart from their dwelling house, but they were much more intimately connected, and were often grouped in close proximity around a yard. Agricultural implements and produce are found in living and sleeping rooms. Even a very prosperous farmer, John Bond of Alvescot in Oxfordshire, in 1499 had a 'first chamber' with the usual beds and chests, and a 'second chamber' containing reaping hooks and a scythe as well as bedding. John Gaythird of Acomb in 1494 kept a pick, a spade, sacks and a kiln hair (for malting barley) in his chamber.(35)

Preserved food stuffs could be kept either in the chamber or the hall. These were not just fitches of bacon hanging in the roof of the hall, like those listed for John Jakson, which are also known from contemporary illustrations, but sacks of grain and barrels of salt meat (e.g William Atkynson of Helperby). (36)

Some peasants used their hall mainly as a room for meals and as the only part of the house that was heated. When a room in or near the main house was assigned to a widow when she surrendered the holding in exchange for maintenance, she was sometimes given access to the hall to warm herself at the fire.(37) The furnishings in the halls for which we have inventories consisted of table, chair(s), stools and forms, and occasionally equipment for the hearth, such as andirons and a screen. There were pieces of wooden furniture for storage and display, such as an almery, shelves and a sideboard or small table. The use of the hall extended into the evenings, judging from the references to its candlesticks. But sometimes the hall was also used for cooking, and its contents included (e.g. John Gaythird) spits and pots and pans. Similarly a shepherd of Soham (Cambs.) in 1417 had a spit, pots and a ladle in his hall.(38) More often these activities were conducted entirely in a separate kitchen, which was apparently completely devoid of wooden furniture, but was equipped only with pots, pans and other utensils. In some houses the kitchen was used also for brewing – it contained leads, mashing vats and other vessels. These were more often kept in a dedicated brewhouse, which the documents often confusingly call a bakehouse (*pistrinum*).

The peasant house also sometimes contained the equipment necessary for craft activities, which we associate with the work of women, but which may not have been

specific to them. These are usually implements for the early stages of textile manufacture, such as wool combs, heckles (in linen preparation), and spinning wheels. A smallholder from Stoke Prior in Worcestershire in 1409 owned a spinning

9

wheel, comb and heckle, in a district known for its flax production.(39) These processes would have been carried out in the home, but passed on to a specialist weaver for the next stage of manufacture. In town houses halls could be used for business transactions, and the commercially active farmer Thomas Vicars of Strensall apparently did the same, as his hall contained a ‘counter’, which could have been used in compiling and storing written accounts.(40)

Peasants were often involved in small-scale retail trade, but this is rarely directly represented in their possessions. Excavation of a village verging on a small town at Dassett Southend in Warwickshire revealed a 15th-century house of fairly standard plan, but a concentration of fragments of ceramic drinking cups suggests that the hall had served as an ale house.(41) Richard Barber’s hall (in Allertonshire, Yorkshire) seems over provided with furniture, with its 3 tables, 2 chairs and 3 stools.(42) There were also plates and dishes in the same room. Cups would not be mentioned in an inventory because their value was so slight, but the furnishings would be appropriate for accommodating customers who sat and drank in the public room, the hall. These suggestive pieces of evidence remind us that alehouses were not purpose built, but represented a specialised use of a dwelling house.

Sometimes we are unable to provide an adequate explanation of the contents of houses and rooms – why did John Jakson, for example, keep a ladder in his house ? (43) And why were so many houses apparently inadequately supplied with beds, unless the two or three beds were sufficient for the average household of five people, often with an additional servant, because they were shared ?

We have to conclude that peasants were flexible in the use of their space – they tended to use the hall for meals and social activity, and the chamber as a sleeping room, but they departed from these conventions. This reflected their poverty – they only had two rooms, so had to fit their possessions and activities into them. It also developed from the close relationship between production and consumption that was an important part of the peasant way of life.

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In general conclusion, I have shown that peasant furnishings are quite well documented. We can envisage the interior of houses and this reveals much about the peasants' use of space, the internal hierarchy of the household, and their attitudes

10

towards their social superiors. Peasants spent any surplus cash on their farm and buildings, and did not give a very high priority to furniture. Nonetheless they were discriminating purchasers, and the items which they used in their houses tell us a good deal about their mentality and way of life.

Footnotes

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