

JOHN COKET: MEDIIEVAL MERCHANT OF AMPTON

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THE SMALL VILLAGE of Ampton lies just over four miles north of Bury St Edmunds and to the east of the Thetford road. In the Middle Ages the taxable population of Ampton and Timworth fluctuated between fifty in 1327 and twenty-three in 1524.¹ Between these dates, owing to the ravages of plague, there might well have been even fewer residents. The abbots of Bury St Edmunds pursued a policy of stifling markets and fairs within their Liberty. Ampton had neither. So, although it appears to have escaped relatively untouched by the mid fifteenth-century recession known as the Great Slump, the village could make no claim to be either a populous centre or a commercial one.² Yet in the late 1400s it was home to John Coket, one of Suffolk's leading and most successful merchants.

Coket is not unknown to the county's historians. In the parish church his chantry chapel and monumental brass can still be seen (Figs 82 and 83). They have been discussed in papers by Page, Wickham, Girling, Badham and Blatchly, and most recently by Bettley in the new Pevsner guide.³ In 1988 Canon Richard Norburn, Clive Paine and Tony Redman led an SIAH excursion to see them, and Tony has kindly given the author a conducted tour. So, for many years we have known that Coket was a pious man. This paper looks at his story in rather more detail – his family and personal life, his estates and possessions, and his business career. In doing so, it seeks to put these aspects of his story in the context of the times.



FIG. 82 – John Coket's chantry chapel,
Ampton Church.



FIG. 83 – John Coket's monumental brass,
Ampton Church.

SOURCES

Needless to say, we have no diary or correspondence from such an early date. Nevertheless, the probate copy of Coket’s lengthy testament (TNA, PROB 11/7/118), as well as the inquisitions post mortem (IPMs) of Coket (TNA, C 141/5/2) and his son John (TNA, C 142/10/43), tell us much about his personal and family life, his estates and possessions.⁴ Probate copies of the wills of other members of his extended family shed further light. The plea rolls of the royal Court of Common Pleas (TNA, CP 40), particularly those that record debt actions, are an excellent source of information about his commercial activity. The court met four times a year in London to determine disputes between private individuals and exercised jurisdiction over thousands of cases. The plea rolls invariably give the name, place of residence and occupation of the defendant and, as well as the name of the claimant, they also often give his/her place of residence and occupation. Occasionally, they provide further details. It has been possible to identify fifty-three debt disputes to which Coket (or his executors) was party, almost always as claimant. Undoubtedly, he entered into many more transactions that did not become litigious and about which we can know nothing, but this paper assumes that the contentious ones represent a fair cross-section of them all. In addition to the plea rolls there survives a record of a Court of Chancery case concerning the sale by Coket of £300 worth of woollen cloth (TNA, C 1/87/61).

PRIVATE AND FAMILY LIFE

An attempted reconstruction of John Coket’s family tree is shown in Fig. 84. He may have been the son, or perhaps the nephew or even more remote relative of John Coket the Elder who died in 1445.⁵ John the Elder had been a woolmonger or woolman, a middleman who bought wool from the grower and sold it on to the cloth-maker.⁶ Coket married Alice, daughter of Richard and Margaret Bole, and their union was evidently a fruitful one. His testament refers to two surviving sons, John and William, and three surviving daughters,

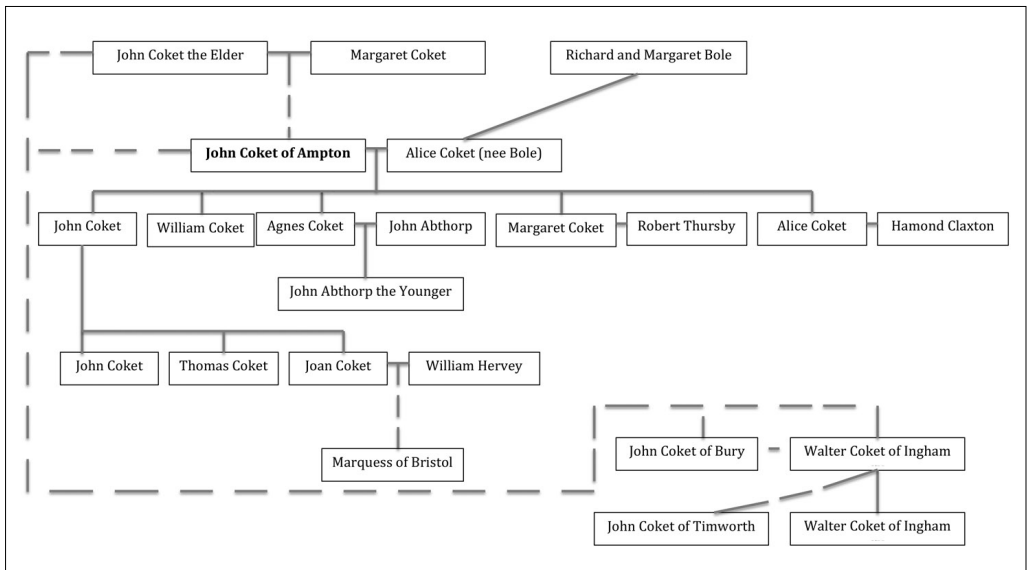


FIG. 84 – John Coket’s family tree.

Agnes, Margaret and Alice. He died in 1483. By that time the son John had been left a widower with at least two sons, John and Thomas, and at least one daughter, Joan, who married William Hervey and so became a progenitor of the marquesses of Bristol.⁷ Of Coket's daughters, Agnes was married to John Abthorp, Margaret to Robert Thursby, and Alice to Hamond Claxton. Agnes had provided Coket with another grandson in John Abthorp the Younger. Abthorp the Elder and Claxton both appear to have enjoyed Coket's confidence because they were granted, following his death and when a vacancy arose, the power to present a priest to his chantry.⁸ Claxton was also appointed as one of his executors. Abthorp was probably the man of that name who was an esquire of nearby Troston, while Claxton may have been a merchant of Norwich.⁹

John the Elder's appointment of John Coket of Bury St Edmunds and Walter Coket of Ingham as his executors, as well as Coket's own appointment of his 'godson' Walter Coket of Ingham as an executor, provide clues as to the identity of members of his extended family. In 1462 the earlier Walter Coket of Ingham had died leaving a son of the same name.¹⁰ It seems likely that the godson and the son were one and the same person. So, we can link Coket to the elder Walter, who was a woolman, and to two other John Cokets of Bury St Edmunds and Timworth respectively who both served as the elder Walter's executors. The Bury man was a prosperous woolman and broadcloth-maker with extensive property interests around the town, a tenter-yard in which to stretch his cloth, comfortable bedding in his chamber, and silver spoons on his table.¹¹ As we shall see, Coket had similar business interests. Wool and cloth clearly ran in the family.

All may not have been well within the wider family. Margaret Coket, widow of John the Elder, died in 1461. We cannot be sure whether she was Coket's mother, stepmother or even aunt, but her will makes no mention of him either as a beneficiary or as an executor.¹² Neither does the will of the elder Walter of Ingham, nor that of John of Bury St Edmunds. If Coket was a sharp operator then they may not have trusted him with their estates. His unusual direction to his executors to recompense those he had injured, wronged, extorted, oppressed or deceived hints at nefarious past conduct.

Whatever his shortcomings as an honest businessman may have been, there is no doubting his personal piety. Immortalised in his chantry chapel, it also shines through all four pages of the small and closely spaced text of his testament. Coket sent his executors scuttling off all over East Anglia to recruit enough priests to sing four thousand masses on his behalf within eight weeks of his death. As a good Catholic he believed that these would help speed his soul through purgatory and on to the joys of heaven – they were a form of afterlife insurance. No religious house for miles around – from King's (then Bishop's) Lynn in the north-east, to Thetford just eight miles up the road, to Hounslow in the south-west – escaped his benevolence.¹³ The unusually urgent tone in which he dictated his instructions is perhaps another sign of a heavy conscience:¹⁴

I will that myn executoris provide and gete me priests where they by their discrecion think convenient so that I faile not of the number of four thousand masses at the utmost within eight weke after my deth.

He would probably have been disappointed to learn that the prior of Thetford does not appear to have arranged for the singing of a weekly mass on Coket's behalf until 1498/9, but heartened by the knowledge that such masses then continued for another forty years.¹⁵

John Coket's piety showed itself in more practical ways and reflected the better angel of his nature. He directed his executors to acquire a coffer in which to deposit his book debts if and when collected. These proceeds were to be divided into four parts – one for the poor; a second for the clergy and also scholars at Cambridge University; a third for the repair of highways

and payment of marriage dowries; and a fourth for the beautification of under-funded churches and the relief of those in prison for debt but not for thieving. Gifts to the poor were to be made in cash and in kind, and were to include linen for shirts and smocks; woollen blankets, gowns and other garments; smoked herring and cheeses in Lent; and firewood in the winter.¹⁶ Those who could not afford to pay their tax bills could also look to the coffer for help. The attention to detail is breathtaking.

We have assumed that Coket's business dealings were not always straightforward, but perhaps we have been unkind. As a devout Catholic he would have been familiar with the verse in St Matthew's gospel:

Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

According to Davis, 'many medieval scholars viewed merchants as invariably sinful, who could not desist from dishonesty and greed and who also undertook an occupation lacking any transformative skill or extensive labour'.¹⁷ So, even at a time when both the king, Edward IV, and the region's leading magnate, John Howard, duke of Norfolk, dabbled in commerce, some merchants must have felt uncomfortable about their financial success. Rather than having had a guilty conscience, Coket may just have been oversensitive.

ESTATES AND POSSESSIONS

Coket's own IPM records no lands or other fixed assets held as tenant-in-chief of the king in Suffolk or Norfolk. However, such a nil return reflects his clever use of a property trust (then known as an *enfeoffment to use*) rather than his landlessness.¹⁸ His son John's IPM, just eleven years later, refers to that *enfeoffment* which included in Suffolk the manors of Timworth, Hopton and Knettishall, as well as eight messuages in Ampton, Little Livermere, Barnham, Ingham, Icklingham and Timworth; and in Norfolk the manors of Narford, Narborough, Great Palgrave, Sparham and Little Dunham. Coket also held leases of further manors including Barnham and possibly Ampton in Suffolk, as well as South Acre in Norfolk.¹⁹ Other documents allow us to track his acquisitions of estates. Jointly with other local notables, among them the Bury draper John Odiham, in 1461 he took a quitclaim of the manor of Suttones, south of Bury, which included land in the parishes of Cockfield, Bradfield Combust, Hartest and Bradfield St Clare. Twelve years later, again jointly with others, he added to his property portfolio the manor of Little Dunham in Norfolk.²⁰

As will be evident from the details given above, many of Coket's estates were situated on the relatively poor soils of Breckland that were best suited for sheep rearing.²¹ According to Bailey, Ampton itself lay within an 'uninterrupted maze of open-fields and pastures' over which the lord reserved rights of *foldcourse* to graze his sheep on both arable and grassland. An early seventeenth-century estate map of Ampton illustrates a landscape that Coket would probably have found familiar (Fig. 85).²² In 1463 he sought compensation from two yeomen of Fakenham Magna for taking forty of his sheep that had been grazing in their village and also in Honington.²³ Twenty years later, in his testament, he gave to his son William a right of first refusal to buy his sheep at South Acre in Norfolk; to his wife Alice all his sheep and lambs at Little Livermere; to each of his godson Walter of Ingham and his grandson John Abthorp the Younger two hundred wethers out of his flocks at Honington; and to another grandson Thomas Coket two hundred wethers out of his flocks at Icklingham. Wethers were castrated rams and generally regarded as the best wool growers. Coket must have been one of the most substantial lay graziers in Suffolk.



FIG. 85 – Part of an early seventeenth-century estate map of Ampton (SROB, M 503/1) (reproduced from SROB, M 501/1 by kind permission of the owner and Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds).

The last third of the fifteenth century was a period when the wills of the well-to-do, and even some of their more humble contemporaries, often included long lists of prized personal possessions – bedding, clothes, pewter and even silver and jewellery.²⁴ No such list is to be found in Coket's testament. There is a single reference to a silver salt-cellar and twelve silver spoons, no more. This may reflect the well-attested distinction between urban and rural homes, with the latter tending to be less richly furnished than the former.²⁵ But Coket was a very wealthy man who might have been expected to live in luxury. At some point frugality becomes parsimony and one is tempted to see him as something of a miser.

The value of Coket's book debts would almost certainly have exceeded the value of the remainder of his personal estate.²⁶ After his death his executors made various claims in the Court of Common Pleas with an aggregate value of over £261. Add to these the value of their claim in Chancery for £100 and also of all debts that were collected without the need for litigation. The coffer that he had instructed them to acquire must have been a big one.

BUSINESS CAREER

Coket always described himself simply as a 'merchant'. Whatever his descendants may have achieved, he does not appear to have aspired to gentility. Making money was what he did best. And just to remind future generations of this he set his merchant's mark over the entrance to his chantry chapel (Fig. 86).²⁷ He enjoyed a long and successful commercial career. We first spot him in the records in 1445, and his executors were still seeking to recover his book debts in 1492, nine years after he had died. His battles in the Court of Common Pleas tell us something about the value of his business, its geographical extent, and the identity of those with whom he was in dispute. They allow comparison with his contemporaries such as



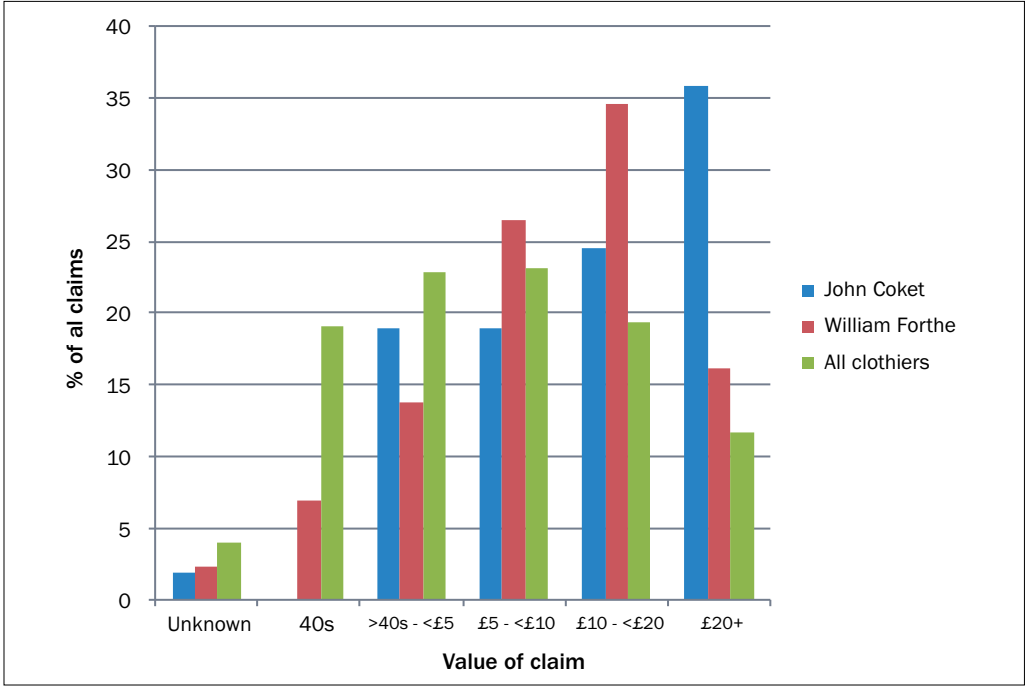
FIG. 86 – John Coket's merchant mark, Ampton Church.

William Forthe I of Hadleigh who was, in the second half of the fifteenth century, the county's foremost clothier. They do not tell us explicitly what those disputes were about, although we can sometimes deduce this indirectly from other information they do provide. We also have a record of a Court of Chancery dispute over the recovery of the sum of £100, which represented the balance of proceeds of the sale of £300-worth of woollen cloth by Coket to the London grocer Symond (alias Simon) Smyth.²⁸ The purchase price would have bought about a hundred broadcloths.

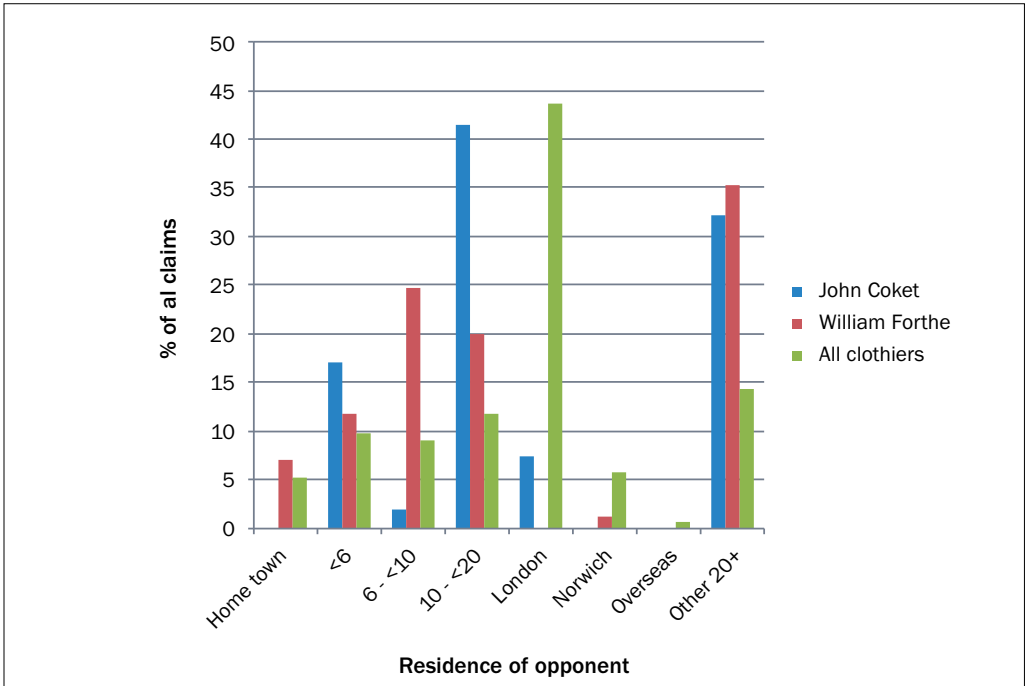
Coket's disputes were of a relatively high value compared with both those of Suffolk clothiers generally and of William Forthe in particular (Graph 1). Over 60 per cent were for £10 or more, and 35 per cent for £20 or more. To put these numbers in context, at that time an experienced cloth-worker would consider himself lucky to earn 6d per day, about 0.02 per cent of current median pay rates.²⁹ The value of his disputes broadly correlates to the distance from Ampton of the person he sued. The mean value of litigation with parties resident more than twenty miles away (but outside London)

was, at £19 2s, nearly double that with parties who lived closer. A similar ratio characterized Forthe's disputes.³⁰ Coket's claims against Londoners had an even higher mean value of £23 12s 8d, two and a half times the mean value of Suffolk clothiers' disputes with them.³¹ Carriage and storage costs, tolls and transit risks such as robbery and storm meant that, in longer distance trade, only high-value transactions would generate sufficient profit.

Suffolk clothiers generally regarded the capital city as their major market, not so Coket and Forthe (Graph 2). Both had interests and connections in London. Indeed, Coket lent a helping hand to the city draper John Lokesden who found himself in financial distress.³² Nevertheless, only four of Coket's recorded disputes, and none of Forthe's were with Londoners. They both concentrated their energies on East Anglia, albeit in different ways. Forthe's commercial network spread out to encompass many small towns and villages, from Lincolnshire in the north to Essex in the south-west, and his customers came from a wide cross-section of society. Coket focused on larger urban centres, and the balance of his trade probably tipped more towards wholesale and less towards retail than Forthe's. This might explain why Coket's disputes were smaller in number, but generally higher in value than Forthe's. He engaged Robert Poule as his receiver in Norwich. Five of his disputes were with east coast merchants, including three from King's Lynn, one from Great Yarmouth, and one from Kingston upon Hull about whom more later. Nearer to home he transacted much of his trade in the Suffolk cloth-making centres of Bury St Edmunds, Hadleigh, Lavenham, Long Melford and Sudbury. Indeed, the residents of these five towns were party to nearly a half of all his disputes, and included among their number clothiers, dyers and weavers. The mean value of his disputes



GRAPH 1 – Value of claim.



GRAPH 2 – Residence of opponent.

with the five merchants was £20; of those with the cloth men only £7 8s 2d. Coket must, nonetheless, have valued the latter's business because, when he died, he bequeathed £40 for the repair of the highways leading from Bury St Edmunds to Lavenham and Long Melford.

Both Coket and Forthe identified an important customer market among the ranks of husbandmen and yeoman. Over 40 per cent of Forthe's disputes, and over 30 per cent of Coket's were with such men. The mean value of Forthe's disputes was nearly £11, and of Coket's £8 8s. The demographic collapse of the late Middle Ages had realigned the economic forces of supply and demand that dictated prices and wages in a way that benefited such agriculturalists. Economic recovery in the final third of the fifteenth century put more money in their pockets to buy cloth and other consumer goods.

Forthe produced cloth on a grand scale and, although earlier in his career had called himself 'merchant', came to regard himself as a clothier. So we can be fairly confident that the bulk of his trade was in cloth. We cannot be so sure with Coket. His contract with Smyth tells us that he sold cloth. His four disputes with other London merchants, two of them drapers and two grocers, were probably over cloth too. However, unlike his Bury namesake, in the late 1460s he did not present any cloth to the alnager for a seal of approval;³³ nor did he live in a cloth-producing area; nor did he mention any stocks of cloth or dyes, or any textile equipment in his testament; nor did he remember any outworkers, or even any servants. It is, therefore, difficult to conceive that he had his own cloth-making operation. Perhaps he acted as a middleman buying cloth from local clothiers and using his contacts to sell it on.

We have seen that Coket owned many flocks, so undoubtedly he dealt in wool. The final thirty years of the fifteenth century witnessed a modest recovery in wool prices and a revival in both domestic wool growing and in wool exports from Ipswich.³⁴ Bury St Edmunds was the focal point of the Suffolk wool trade and only four miles from Ampton, so Coket had a ready outlet for his clip.³⁵ Wool almost certainly explains his close connection with the county's cloth-making centres, and also perhaps with east coast merchants. William Brompton of Kingston upon Hull, whom his executors sued for 40 marks (£26 13s 4d), was almost certainly a merchant of the Staple and so engaged in the export of wool.³⁶ The fleeces of Suffolk sheep were generally of poor quality and not suitable for the export-grade broadcloth that the county's clothiers sold to London merchants.³⁷ Such broadcloth was not, however, their only product, nor was it the only cloth in demand overseas.³⁸ Some English clothiers still made inferior and cheaper fabrics such as vesses. In Lavenham Henry Galyot called himself a 'wesser' (ie maker of vesses) and Nicholas Gosselyn mentioned vesses in his will.³⁹ In the Low Countries too, those cloth-makers who catered for their own domestic market produced an inferior-quality fabric.⁴⁰ Wool grown in Fakenham Magna, Honington, Icklingham or Little Livermere would have suited them all well.

By calling himself 'merchant', rather than 'woolman' or 'clothier', Coket may have been signalling his interest in a wider range of commodities, perhaps linen and other mercery and haberdashery. If so, then sadly no trace of such trade has survived.

CONCLUSION

A fortuitous combination of sources, both documentary and architectural, allows us not only to study Coket's life in unusual detail, but also to catch a rare glimpse of the mindset of a medieval merchant. Whether or not he did so with a guilty conscience, he became an extremely successful man. He sired a large family and built a substantial fortune. He took the opportunities presented to him by Suffolk's flourishing textile industry and made money out of both wool and cloth. However, Coket knew all along that he could not take his wealth with him when he died. He made such arrangements as he could to procure forgiveness for any misdeeds and so speed his soul into heaven.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 Hervey 1906, 171–72; Hervey 1910, 337 and 422. These taxable populations would have equated to actual populations of about 750 and 115: Bailey 2007, 67 and 183. In 1327 Ampton was not taxed separately. In 1524 its taxable population was just seven with Edward Coket esquire contributing £5 to the total tax payable of £5 15s 1d.
- 2 In 1449 the villages of Thedwastre Hundred were granted a mean rebate of 20.8 per cent from the subsidy that had been first set in 1334, but of these the rebate granted to Timworth and Ampton was the lowest of all at 9.12 per cent: Dymond and Virgoe 1986, 89.
- 3 Page 1853, 190–92; Wickham 1923, 132; Girling 1961, 111; and Badham and Blatchly 1988, 291; Bettley and Pevsner 2015, 78–79.
- 4 Wills and testaments were originally separate documents, the former containing directions for the disposal of land and other real property; and the latter concerned with personal property such as goods and chattels, book debts and cash. By the fifteenth century, more often than not, the two were combined, but in Coker's case they were not. His testament refers to a separate will that has not survived. In any event, as discussed, his land was passed to his son by virtue of an enfeoffment to use. IPMs were summaries and valuations, made at the instigation of the Crown on the death of tenants-in-chief of the king, of the deceased's lands and other fixed assets, such as markets and mills, within each manor.
- 5 A John Coket of Ampton was named as an executor of the will of John the Elder, but was not described as a son: NRO, NCC 69 Wylbey. John the Elder expressed in his will the same piety as Coket would do nearly thirty years later, even directing that an honest priest should go on pilgrimage on his behalf to Rome.
- 6 TNA, CP 40/705, m. 224v (AALT IMG 1379).
- 7 Tighe 1985, 12.
- 8 Page 1853, 192.
- 9 TNA, CP 40/911, m. 17r (AALT IMG 36f); CP 40/871, m. 247r (AALT IMG 457).
- 10 SROB, 294v Baldwyne.
- 11 TNA, E 101/343/4-5; SROB, 77 Hawlee.
- 12 SROB, 286 Baldwyne.
- 13 The religious houses, or their priests and novices, that benefited from his will were Bury Abbey, Babwell Friary, Thetford Priors (Cluniac and Augustinian), Thetford Friaries (Austin and Dominican), Thetford Nunnery, Ixworth Priory, Bromehill Priory, West Acre Priory, Norwich Friaries, King's Lynn Friaries, Ipswich Friaries, Sudbury Friary, Clare Friary, Chelmsford Friary, Charterhouses of London, Shene and Syon, and Hounslow Priory. The parish priests of many local churches, as well as those of Lavenham and Long Melford, were also remembered.
- 14 After examining all the wills copied in the Register Baldwyne, Duffy found that every one of them made provision for post-mortem intercession, but that only 2 per cent of them expressed any 'hint of haste': Duffy 2015, 54–56.
- 15 Dymond 1994, 28.
- 16 The intercessory prayers of the needy, in thanks for gifts, were considered particularly efficacious in speeding a soul through purgatory.
- 17 Davis 2012, 52.
- 18 The enfeoffment to use enabled landowners, during their lifetime, to pass legal title to land to their feoffees, often the same persons as their executors, while retaining beneficial ownership. Landowners could then direct their feoffees in their wills to transfer the land to their chosen heirs. In this way they controlled the descent of the land to future generations and avoided the incidents of feudal ownership such as wardship.
- 19 Copinger 6, 1910, 245–46.

- 20 CCR 1461–68, 85–86; CCR 1468–76, 285.
- 21 The soils are freely draining, slightly acidic, sandy soils of low fertility: <http://www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes/> The lake, now known as Ampton Water, was largely an eighteenth-century creation: Bettley and Pevsner 2015, 263.
- 22 Bailey 1989, 44; Copinger 1910, 246–47; SROB, M 503/1.
- 23 TNA, CP 40/807, m. 82v (AALT IMG 82v).
- 24 Amor 2011, 34.
- 25 After examining medieval probate inventories, Goldberg found that a much higher proportion of urban than rural ones included a reference to beds and bedding, cushions and silver: Goldberg 2008, 126–28.
- 26 The book debts of the Nayland clothier John Reynham, as recorded in his probate inventory, amounted to £260 and represented two-thirds of the total value of his personal estate: TNA, PROB 2/87.
- 27 Girling 1961, 111.
- 28 Smyth was ‘one of the few grocers ... who continued to export cloth’: Nightingale, 1995, 525.
- 29 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours>
- 30 Amor 2016, 206–207.
- 31 Amor 2016, 202.
- 32 In 1475 Coket and a London shearman, John Blackbourne, took a notional gift of all Lokesden’s goods, chattels and book debts probably in order to keep them out of the hands of his creditors: CCR 1468–76, 422. Coket’s executors alleged that Alice Smyth had deployed a similar device to avoid paying the balance of £100 due from her late husband Symond Smyth to Coket for the purchase of cloth.
- 33 Application of the alnager’s seal to cloth was necessary before it could be lawfully sold.
- 34 Lloyd 1973, 44; Bailey 1989, 293; Carus-Wilson and Coleman 1963, 135; Amor 2011, 180.
- 35 Amor 2016, 104.
- 36 TNA, CP 40/888, m. 54v (AALT IMG 742); TNA, SC 1/57/111; Kermode 1998, 310n. The final revocation in 1473 of the Calais Bullion Ordinances made trade in lesser quality wool commercially feasible.
- 37 In 1454 a parliamentary schedule of wool prices gave Suffolk wool a value of only 52s, compared with £13 for that of Hereford: Rot. Parl., v, 275.
- 38 Most late medieval draperies produced a range of broadcloth, usually from cheap and light, to heavy and expensive: Oldland 2014, 32. Cheap worsted cloth was exported from the headport of Ipswich in the early 1490s: TNA, E/122/53/9.
- 39 TNA, CP 40/756, m. 244v (AALT IMG 1399); PROB 11/8/360.
- 40 Munro 2005, 451.

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Abbreviations

CCR	<i>Calendars of Close Rolls</i>
IPM	Inquisition Post Mortem
<i>Rot. Parl.</i>	<i>Rotuli Parliamentorum ut et Petiones et Placita in Parlamento</i>
SROB	Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds
TNA	The National Archives