

POST-MEDIEVAL HOUSES IN SUFFOLK

Some evidence from Probate Inventories and Hearth Tax Returns

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IT IS RARELY possible to arrive at the complete analysis of an individual house through the satisfactory integration of documents and building. The written evidence may be lacking; or, if present, it may fail to answer the specific questions posed by the structure. But by placing documents in a wider context, and attempting to relate them to the general housing background from which they spring, the overall picture can be clarified considerably. For the later Middle Ages this can be achieved to a limited extent by extracting relevant references from such sources as manor court rolls and wills, but it is only from the later 16th century onwards that we find in probate inventories a mass of written material referring specifically to houses and their contents.

A probate inventory was made by a group of neighbours of a deceased person, and gives a list of his goods and chattels compiled in a room-by-room perambulation of his house. The information was required simply for the legal purpose of obtaining probate on a will, but it is through these invaluable and compelling documents that Elizabethan and Stuart houses may be re-furnished, and by inference, re-peopled. It is the purpose of this paper to consider the kind of information which probate inventories, and a complementary group of documents, the Hearth Tax returns, provide on houses and their occupants in post-medieval Suffolk.

There are certain distinctive characteristics of later 16th-century housing in the county which the buildings themselves suggest. It was a period in which there was an accelerating rate of new construction, but the high survival rate of late medieval houses in a wide range of quality also implies that many of the Elizabethan inhabitants of rural Suffolk were living in old houses which had either undergone, or were still awaiting, modernisation. This complex and fluid pattern is well brought out by the two groups of 16th-century probate inventories which survive for the county—a set of 122 inventories for the Archdeaconry of Sudbury in the 1570s, of which 107 relate to Suffolk, and the remainder to the adjoining parts of Cambridgeshire, and a corresponding set of 160 for the Archdeaconry of Suffolk in the 1580s.¹ Few of the houses which they describe have the compact layout of a new building; most, in their curious mixture of room names and their sprawl of service rooms indicate old houses of more than one build, with an overall layout which usually defies attempts to set it out logically on plan. Thus the house of Robert Baker of Polstead (1576: Bury 1/11) had a hall, buttery, milkhouse, backhouse, outhouse, bedchamber, maid's chamber, new chamber and milkhouse chamber; and that of another yeoman, William Walker the elder of Stowmarket (1576: Bury 1/7), a hall, buttery, chamber next the hall, old chamber over the entry, backhouse, a little outhouse and a dairy house.²

One notable difference between these two houses is that the former, with its 'new chamber', seems to have had its hall ceiled over, while the latter has not. It is not surprising to find that at this transitional stage a number of inventories still make no mention of a hall chamber; later inventories imply that right up to the mid-17th century the occasional house with an open hall could still be found.

These two inventories bring out another point of wide relevance: neither house had a parlour. Amidst their maze of rooms the hall was the only one used for day-to-day living and cooking. Sometimes, too, it was the only one with heating. Even if houses of this period contained a room called a parlour, it was much more likely to be a ground-floor bedroom than a second living-room. The adoption of the name parlour, doubtless in imitation of upper-class

practice, rarely implied a change of function. The habit of sleeping downstairs was widespread, related quite clearly to the social class of the occupants, and not to their degree of prosperity, or to the overall size of the building. One has to rise above yeoman level to find houses in which all the sleeping apartments were upstairs. Although it might be named a parlour, a bedroom on the ground floor was much more likely to be known as a chamber, bedchamber, or occasionally, lodging room, and its actual siting within the house was variable. The house of Alice Hayle, a Brockford widow (1576: Bury 1/5), contained a hall, 'beaddchamber', buttery, dairy, backhouse and upper chamber. It sounds like a three-cell open-hall building, with the backhouse in a lean-to, or even separate from the main building, and if that were the case, the bedchamber was most probably at the upper end of the hall, as is borne out by a number of other inventories. If the house had a cross wing at the upper end, this might contain a parlour and a chamber. Thomas Maryott, a Woodbridge tailor (1583: Ips. 62), had a 'little chamber next the parlour', and the large house of Edmund Borrett of Brundish (1583: Ips. 72) had a chamber by the parlour as well as a 'chamber next the hall door' and another 'behind the chimney'. Not all of these were being slept in at the time of his death, but the parlour itself contained a bed.

A chamber could equally well be at the lower end of the house, occupying one or more of the small rooms we tend to think of so rigidly as 'service rooms'. Thomas Reynolds of Stoke by Clare (1576: Bury 1/43) had a chamber at the upper end of the hall, but also one 'at the nether end', while in the substantial medieval house of Richard Rastall, a miller of Fornham St Genevieve (1575: Bury 1/115), still with its open hall, there was a parlour with chambers over at the upper end of the hall, and at the lower end a chamber on the ground floor 'adioyninge to the hall' and 'the chamber next adioyninge to that', with 'the sollar over the same'. Other positions for a ground-floor chamber are less easy to identify—the chamber 'within the hall door' (1576: Bury 1/28) for example, or 'the other chamber next unto the barn' (1576: Bury 1/88). Altogether, the names and functions of the rooms in many of these houses display a greater flexibility in adapting to individual circumstances than our interpretations of them always allow for; one wonders how much significance the idea of upper and lower ends to the house had for these people, and how wide our own assessment of the possible uses of some of the rooms in such buildings should be.

The absence of a hall chamber has already been mentioned as evidence that many of these houses were older buildings undergoing sporadic modernisation. In some houses, the hall chamber is specifically stated to be new, and in the same way, other rooms may be described as old—a building in Woodbridge (1583: Ips. 62) contained 'an old house next the parlour', and a Stowmarket house (1576: Bury 1/7) an old chamber over the entry, and a little old outhouse. Another indication of age is in the continued use of 'solar' as the name for an upper room of unspecified function. It emerges fairly clearly that all the upper rooms in a new house of this period were called chambers, and that in the same way, when a hall was ceiled over, the new room above it was called a hall chamber, not a solar. The name solar attached specifically to an old upper room, and so it is quite usual to find that a house contained, like that of Richard Rastall mentioned above, some upper rooms called chambers and one or more called a solar. William Goslyn of Creeting St Mary (1583: Ips. 82) had two 'backhouse sollers', and James Wilsonne of 'Naylande next Stooke' (1576: Bury 1/4) had an upper chamber and a 'corne sollar'. Upper chambers generally took their names from their position or from their function within the house—the hall chamber over the hall, the parlour chamber over the parlour, even occasionally, 'the chamber over the bedchamber' (1576: Bury 1/88); but equally, the cheese chamber over the dairy or the malt chamber over the brewhouse. As well as the ground-floor chambers, all those on the upper floor could contain

beds; whether they did so or not depended on the overall size of the household. In many houses, upper rooms were given up exclusively to storage functions, and those who slept upstairs were in any case likely to be in rooms which contained some household stores or utensils.

It is difficult for us, in our more compact houses, to imagine that a substantial part of the upper storey of a house might be given up to storage rather than forming part of the living area of the building, but it is still possible, in old houses which are not fully modernised, to find upper rooms like this. It has been suggested that the new chamber, inserted over the hall, often became simply a storage area, and while neither the documents nor the buildings themselves confirm this as invariably true, it was certainly often the case. It may be only very recent restoration of a house which has turned such an apartment into an elegant modern bedroom. Within the last few years this has been the case at No. 12 Water Street, Lavenham, a single-ended Wealden house, where the inserted hall chamber, jettied out over the hall, was a totally unimproved and unceiled room which had been used as a store, with an upper door in the front wall by which goods could be hoisted. At Cosford Hall, on the outskirts of the parish of Hadleigh (grid ref. TM/014446), the writer remembers the hall chamber as an unlighted area around the inserted chimney stack, whose only function was as a lumber room and passageway from one end of the house to the other. It now has a dormer window and contains a bathroom. It is because the hall chamber, where it was low and squeezed mainly into the roof space, could be put to such imprecise and secondary uses, that the presence of the low tie-beam of the open truss, perhaps no more than two feet from the upper floor level, which now presents such problems to the would-be resident, did not really worry people very much.

Although a number of inventories make no mention of rooms, and it is clear that for a variety of reasons some people were living in one room, there is no convincing evidence of one-roomed houses. What does emerge very clearly is that many people were living in two-roomed and three-roomed houses which can best be interpreted as single-storeyed. This is an aspect of 16th-century vernacular which is not much in evidence today, except in those parts of the county abutting on Cambridgeshire, and one where the documents help to give us a broader picture than the houses themselves do. Certainly, on the western side of the county the single-storey tradition seems to have continued for a long time, but it is interesting to find that in High Suffolk, where the overall picture suggested by buildings and documents alike is richer, with larger houses and more outbuildings, the 16th-century evidence for a good deal of single-storey accommodation is also strong. The close examination of some smaller 15th-century houses, such as Baker's Farmhouse, Stanningfield (TL/875565), provides the evidence that they were initially single-storey throughout, and that we are dealing with a long-established medieval tradition. But other buildings prove that the practice continued into the post-medieval period, so that not all the single-storey houses described in probate inventories were necessarily old. A house like The Old Farmhouse, Assington (TL/9438), appears to have been built in the later 16th century with two rooms open to the roof, one of which was heated by an internal chimney stack. Its subsequent alterations, including the addition of a third unit, an upper floor throughout, and a second hearth backing on to the original one, are characteristic of what generally happened to these buildings at a later stage. A rare example of a house which, in spite of extensions, has remained single-storey is Thatch Cottage, Chilton by Sudbury (TL/902430), basically a 16th-century building, and another is No. 6 Church Street, Moulton, an end-chimney structure of apparently mid-17th-century date.

The inventories imply that two-roomed houses were almost invariably occupied by

people who were very poor indeed, with total goods and chattels worth under £10, and frequently under £5. Robert Garrold of Mildenhall (£3) had a hall and a chamber (1575: Bury 1/103), and Robert Metcalfe of Lawshall (£10.17.2) a chamber and a kitchen (1576: Bury 1/12); James Turner of Woolpit (£3.2.0) had a hall and a kitchen (NRO: INV/10:63)³, and Anthony Danyell, an impecunious Dunwich shoemaker (£8.6.2) a hall in which the family slept, and a shop containing 'iii dozen of shoes newe made' (1583: Ips. 16). It is amongst urban craftsmen like this, with little possibility of augmenting their incomes by cultivating a plot of land, that some of the poorest inventories and the smallest houses are to be found. An even poorer shoemaker was John Milksoppe of Sudbury whose whole possessions were worth only £2.13.8 (1576: Bury 1/66). But while the occupants of two-roomed houses were indisputably poverty-stricken, those living in three-roomed houses were a much more varied group, some not lacking in considerable prosperity. Those with goods worth around £10 or less include John Lee of Lackford (£5.18.2) with a hall, chamber and milkhouse (1576: Bury 1/9), Jacob Perse of Ipswich (£9.9.4) with a parlour, buttery and hall (1583: Ips. 41), and Lawrence Death of Shimpling, with a hall, chamber and kitchen (1576: Bury 1/49). But John Edwardes, a Brandon shoemaker, with the same amount of accommodation, was worth over £27, and he was by no means exceptional, especially in his own part of the county (1576: Bury 1/90).

One interesting point about these very small houses is the interchangeability of their room names, which means that some have a hall and a kitchen, while others have a kitchen and no hall. It is very unusual at this date, though it becomes commoner during the 17th century, to find larger houses with no room called a hall; but in these little buildings there is a remarkable flexibility. Where there is no hall, it is clear that the kitchen performed the same functions; but where there are both, it sometimes seems that the kitchen was used for cooking, and in that case such a building must have had two heated rooms. It cannot be invariably or even generally assumed that a kitchen at this period was heated and that cooking went on there; many so-called kitchens, judging by their contents, were simply unheated butteries or dairies by another name, used for the storage of utensils and perhaps for the preparation of food, but not necessarily where it was cooked (cf. Eden, 1968, 78). Thus the house of William Frost of Mildenhall (1576: Bury 1/32) had a bed chamber, hall and kitchen, but cooking appears to have been done in the hall, so that in effect his home was really no different from that of Edmund Anmers of Rattlesden (1576: Bury 1/38), with a hall, milkhouse and bedchamber, or that of William Baker of Bildeston (1576: Bury 1/39), with a hall, chamber and buttery. That the same confusion of name and function continued into the 17th century is shown by an inventory like that of John Wetherby of Haughley (1647: Bury 2/13), with its 'dairye kitchen', or the house of Alice Everett, a Lidgate widow (1662: Bury 7/248), with its 'kitchen or brewhouse'. To some extent, the curious names given to the rooms of very small houses may reflect the appraisers' perplexity when faced with their composite contents, and may account for such atypical descriptions as 'In the Rome weyr he dide' for what was most probably the hall or kitchen of a two-roomed house.

Dealing with Cambridgeshire vernacular buildings, Peter Eden (1968, 78) writes: 'documentary evidence makes it clear that many 17th-century houses were originally single-storey and open . . .' and the same can be said of Suffolk. While a decline in the number of houses which can be interpreted as single-storey is one of the noticeable changes to be found in contrasting 16th- with 17th-century inventories, there is no doubt that, especially on the western side of the county, they still continued to be a significant element. One has the impression of people whose life-style had been little changed by increasing prosperity, and is reminded of Robert Ryece's comments on ' . . . our yeomanry, whose continuall under living,

saving, and the immunities from the costly charge of these unfaithfull times, do make them so to grow with the wealth of this world . . .' (Ryce, 1902, 58). Henry Pammant snr., a Wickhambrook yeoman (1647: Bury 2/29) had only a hall, parlour and dairy: a total of £149 was largely represented by 'Bondes Billes and Good Dettes' and the value of his cows and bullocks. Similarly, Andrew Gurny snr., of Bury St Edmunds (1647: Bury 2/17), with a kitchen, hall and 'lowe rome next the yard' was not poverty-stricken with a total of over £63. The occupants of two-roomed houses in the 17th century were, by contrast with those in three-roomed buildings, generally as poor, if not poorer, than ever; like John Rowland of Bildeston (Bury 8/210) whose 'fore room' and 'back room', when he died in 1664, contained items worth only £2.

A comparison of later 16th- with mid-17th-century inventories shows both continuity and contrasts, from which it may be concluded that, while the main trends continued, the emphases changed. Single-storey building, as we have seen, was still in evidence, but there was proportionally less of it; the number of houses with an open hall fell sharply: few buildings still had upper rooms called solars. Although many houses still had ground-floor chambers, the name 'parlour' came into far more widespread use, and the room so named, while still likely to be a bedroom, took on for many households the dual function of a sitting and sleeping apartment. This is true even at a distinctly indigent level: the parlour of Oliver Leate, a poor say-weaver of Clare (1661: Bury 6/77), sounds positively crowded, for in addition to a curtained bedstead it contained 'on Cheste one hangine Cubburd one Teable 6 Joyneed Stoolles on Glase Keepe 4 Chayres on Warmingspan on Looking Glase 2 Chafinges an ould Sworde on settell by the Beadstede'. A far richer man of the late 16th century would have been content for his parlour to contain a bed and a chest only. Indeed, a rise in the standard of living for all but the very poorest, and an increase in the number of material possessions, are trends which come out very clearly—a continuation of that 'great amendement of lodging' which William Harrison already noted as striking in the 1570s.

One of the most noticeable trends was the increasing use of the roof space of a house for sleeping or storage purposes. Although the earliest known reference to this occurs in the inventory of Robert Betts of Fressingfield, made in 1589,⁴ it is very much a development of the 17th century. The distinctive term 'vance roof', used for this part of the house, and variously spelt, is specific to East Anglia, but no fully satisfactory explanation of its derivation has yet been found. Although widely used, it never completely ousted the alternative of 'garret', and a comparison of inventories in which either name occurs does not bring out any implied distinction between them in terms of contents or use. A garret or a vance roof could equally contain farm stores, or beds, or both. The presence of usable roof-space, however, does indicate the ceiling-over of the upper rooms, and is evidence for the end of the long tradition of open timber roofs, which persisted well into the period of fully storeyed buildings.

The larger houses of 17th-century inventories are in general complex, and as inexplicable in layout as their predecessors of the 16th century had been. Many of them must have been older buildings basically, altered, modernised, and extended by a succession of occupants. In rural areas, a proliferation of service rooms is one of their newer characteristics. There is, however, in the same period, a significant increase in the number of smaller houses with a compact layout which implies newness, or at least the alteration of an older structure with the conscious intention of achieving the same effect. These are the homes of small yeomen and craftsmen, with goods and chattels worth something in the range of £20 to £60 as a general rule. Their houses are often based on a two-storey block consisting of a hall and a parlour with chambers above, flanked by one or more service rooms which may have rooms above them. It is not always possible to decide how many rooms in such a house were heated,

though the presence of tongs and fire-irons in hall and parlour may sometimes indicate the familiar internal stack with back-to-back hearths, but if two ground-floor rooms were heated, the parlour was not necessarily one of them.

The house of Edward Wade, a yeoman of Great Bradley (1662: Bury 7/252) illustrates some of these points. He was worth just over £31, and his house consisted of a hall and parlour with chambers above, and a dairy as the only service room. In the dairy were not only cheese and the utensils for storing flour and making bread but also the pewter and some odd lumber and, rather surprisingly, 'one payer of cobjorns a fire shovel & tongs a payer of Trammells & a Spitt'—in other words, it appears to have been a heated room, used for cooking: a 'dairy kitchen', in fact. The house then must have had an internal stack, heating the dairy and the hall, with an unheated parlour at the upper end. Life within the house was mainly centred on the ground-floor rooms, with the hall chamber full of lumber, cheese, bullmpong and barley, though the parlour chamber did contain a bed. From the uses being made of the rooms it is quite impossible to say whether it was a medieval house which had been modernised, or a new house in which the second heated room was open to the roof, and from the surviving buildings themselves either is equally possible.

The limited amount of interpretation of the layout of the buildings themselves which inventories enable us to make is a reminder that, as David Dymond has said (1974, 149): 'It is important to realise that the records do not in the main describe buildings as structures . . . Instead, they enable us to place buildings against a human background, and to relate them to the social and economic history of which they form a part'. In Suffolk, the buildings survive in considerable quantity and a great variety of quality. If we attempt to relate inventories to them in terms of the functions and furnishings of their rooms and the resources of their occupants, we get a very complex picture indeed. But what does emerge quite clearly is that between the extremes of wealth and poverty there was a wide middle range of people who at the worst were able to live in, or build, simple but durable homes, and at the best could afford to embellish them considerably. There are people whose changes of family circumstances have made their houses too large for them, so that they are living in only one or two of the rooms; or too small, so that all the available rooms contain beds. For some, a sudden acquisition of wealth appears to have made little difference to their life-style. There are people who own little that is not old or worn out, and others whose rooms are filled with what sound like new and elegant possessions. While wealth may be expressed in a large and well-furnished house, this is by no means always the case, and a much clearer indication is in the extent of a farmer's stock, or the lists of a merchant's goods. People who have amassed some money, often in quite small amounts, are generally found to be lending it out to their neighbours in 'billes and bondes'. Much of this may have been in short-term loans to tide over the unfortunate or improvident until the next harvest; but in the absence of other banking or credit facilities it was also an important source of small-scale capital for local industry and commerce.

The background to the inventories is a predominantly rural society with a marked degree of agricultural specialisation, varying from one part of the county to another, just as Robert Ryece described it. The importance of cattle in the wide belt of north-east Suffolk, which Arthur Young (1813, 199) later delimited so carefully, the sheep/corn husbandry of the north-west, and the mixed farming of the central and southern areas, all emerge in the details of yeomen and husbandmen, for the value of their farm stock and crops represent by far the largest items in the lists of their possessions. In all cases, however, specialisation represented a commercial element which overlaid the basic subsistence farming of an essentially

peasant economy; the land provided in the first instance for the cultivators' own maintenance, and for many of the poorer husbandmen it is clear that it did little more than that.

Closely linked with this background of peasant farming was another notable feature—the combination of a craft or trade with agriculture, whereby a rural craftsman or small trader was rarely simply a wage-earner. A man might call himself, and be thought of by his neighbours as, a carpenter, or a cooper or a linen-weaver, but yet have farm stocks and animals of equal or greater value than his tools and stock-in-trade. Even in the practice of his craft he was still likely to be firmly associated with the land, for the crafts themselves depended upon agriculture, either as a source of raw materials or as an outlet for their finished products; sometimes for both. Only in the larger towns was the poor craftsman or tradesman unlikely to have agricultural ties, and to be all the poorer for this lack of a 'second string'.

The town tradesman or merchant, operating on a larger scale, was more likely to have innkeeping as a subsidiary occupation than farming, while innkeepers without mercantile connections were often brewers and bakers also; but in all the smaller centres a more extensive scale of production did not necessarily break the near-ubiquitous agrarian connections. A wealthy tanner like John Howchin snr. of Rickinghall Inferior (1663: Bury 8/189), strategically placed for his supplies of hides on the northernmost limits of the main cattle-rearing area, was engaged in farming also; and although Jonathan Weeting of Hinderclay (1662: Bury 6/263) was described as a yeoman, the £60 worth of yarn and cloth in his house, and the '3 paire of Lummes and Slayes' indicate that he was a weaver also. Most towns were in any case so small and compact that they were in close contact with the activities of the surrounding countryside. The intermingling of rural and urban elements in the little market towns is emphasised by the number of farming inventories associated with them. In Clare, for example, generally thought of as a centre of cloth production, the mid-17th-century farmers were often richer than the clothiers who were their contemporaries.⁵

Because of the vast mass of material, both in standing structures and in documents, it is particularly valuable to be able to link up a probate inventory with a surviving building. By so doing, we can get a clearer idea not only of the life-style, but also of the setting of the individual concerned, and indirectly of others of the same status. Links of this kind are most easily established where detailed investigation on a limited scale within one parish, or a small group of parishes, brings together a number of documents relevant to people and their houses. There are, too, the occasional houses which are named in inventories, and which still retain the same name. Ford Hall, in the hamlet of Bridge Street, Long Melford, is one of these. Robert Sparke, a wealthy yeoman, died there in 1663 (Bury 8/59), leaving a well furnished home and an impressive list of farm stock and crops to the total of £537. Since the house at that time contained no kitchen, the hall was used for cooking and as a servants' hall, for there must have been several maids living in, and sleeping in the two beds in the 'ffolks chamber'. The parlour was the family's living room, and, as befitted Robert Sparke's position, contained no beds; but there was a 'little parlour' at the back of the house which was heated, and well furnished as a combined bedroom and sitting room. The house itself is substantially built, with a heavy moulded ceiling in the hall, and in the two chambers over the parlours, which were used as the other principal bedrooms. Most of the main structure is of the mid- to late-16th century, and antedates Robert Sparke's occupation, though it seems likely that he made some of the minor window improvements, and perhaps added some of the many service rooms listed: malt chamber, cheese chamber, butteries, brewhouse, dairy, corn chamber and malthouse. These have now completely disappeared, to be replaced during the 19th century by a large brick-built kitchen with storage loft over. In the same way, all the farm buildings look like replacements of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The disappearance of all Robert Sparke's outbuildings and about a third of his house brings out an important point which is often overlooked: a probate inventory pinpoints a house at a particular moment of time—a moment, moreover, when because of a change of occupants alteration to the structure was most likely to take place. It is not necessarily realistic, therefore, to assume that the inventory will fit the whole of the house as it is today. A similar situation emerges from a comparison of another mid-17th-century inventory and the building to which it relates: the Swan Inn at Clare. When the landlord, John Rippengale (Bury 10/129), died there suddenly of plague in 1666,⁶ it had a long straggle of storage rooms which have now all gone, leaving a compact three-cell internal chimney building. The room names of inns, especially if the chambers were named after colours or flowers, make it in any case particularly difficult to decide which rooms were which, even if all of them seem to have survived. Two rambling Ixworth inns, the Crown (1668: Bury 13/71) and the Pickerel (1666: Bury 11/35), for which inventories exist, confirm this. But even with a remarkably unaltered house, a certain confusion over rooms can arise. The well-documented, and already published, house of John Salkeld at Walsham-le-Willows (Dymond, 1974, 151-3), described in an inventory of 1699, contains the same number of rooms now, allowing for some obvious modern partitioning, as it did when he died. Through associated documents, it can be established that the house in its present form goes back at least to the beginning of the 1660s. But it is nevertheless impossible to say today which of the butteries was for 'best beer' and which for 'small beer' (though it does not matter very much!), which was the maids' chamber and which the men's. The functions of some of the rooms are certain to have changed since the time of an inventory; but earlier additions and alterations to the structure may well mean that even at the time when the inventory was made some rooms were not being used for their original purpose. John Salkeld's dairy, for instance, seems to have started life as an unheated parlour. The implication of all this is that, valuable as an inventory can be in explaining a standing house at a given date in terms of contents, room functions and occupants, it does not explain the development of the structure itself, and in no way obviates the need to analyse it archaeologically.

The other group of documents which helped to establish that John Salkeld's house had been the same as far back as 1662 were the Hearth Tax returns. These list the names of all the householders in a parish, with the number of hearths in their houses, and, if liable to tax, the amount they paid. The Hearth Tax was first levied in 1662, and continued in force until 1689, when it was replaced by the Window Tax. In Suffolk, the returns for the 34 parishes in the Hundred of Blackbourne (which includes Walsham-le-Willows where John Salkeld lived) survive for the first year of the tax (Colman, 1971); those for the whole county for 1674 were published many years ago (Hervey, 1905). After that date, assessments do not give the taxpayers' names. The association of an inventory with an entry in the Hearth Tax returns provides useful corroborative evidence, and above all underlines the astonishing variation in the amount of heated accommodation which houses of this period could contain. Such variation often appears to have borne little relation to the overall size of a house or the financial status of its occupants, so that poorer men were frequently expected to pay as much as, or more than, their richer neighbours: an explosive situation in a small community, and doubtless one of the main reasons for the vast unpopularity of the tax as a whole. Thus Edward Lock the elder of Hinderclay (1663: Bury 8/155), and William Rice, a substantial farmer from Elmswell (1662: Bury 7/177), both paid tax on three hearths in 1662; but the former had a four-roomed house, and the latter, who was worth some four times as much, had ten rooms.

One of the main reasons for such contrasts was that wealthier men, whether farmers or

merchants, tended to have a considerable amount of their house given up to unheated storage or service rooms. But where an entry in the Hearth Tax returns can be linked with a probate inventory, these differences may also provide a clue as to whether a house was new at the time of assessment or old: for whereas a medieval building might have had a stack inserted with only one hearth, providing simply a more efficient way of heating the hall, the internal chimney plans of the Great Rebuilding period provided for at least two back-to-back hearths, and if the upper rooms were heatable, as many as four, in a house of no more than four or five rooms. Thus it can be argued that a high proportion of hearths to rooms may well indicate a new house, and that the tax was likely to fall particularly heavily on those less wealthy people whose homes had been built during the later stages of the housing revolution; houses of a lower structural quality in the main than what had gone before, and in which one suspects that, like the minuscule fireplaces in Victorian bedrooms, some of the hearths were rarely, if ever, used.

The question of medieval houses with a single heated room clearly has a bearing on the one-hearth homes of the Hearth Tax returns. On a national scale, the most striking single point which emerges from a study of the returns is the overwhelming proportion of people who had only one hearth. Many of these, by virtue of their exemption from payment, can safely be taken as aged and impotent, or poverty-stricken from some other cause: in the Suffolk returns, a scatter of people with two hearths, and even occasionally someone with three, was exempted for the same reasons. But what is equally striking is the number of people who actually paid tax on a single hearth: in the 1662 returns they amounted to about a third of the total taxpayers in parishes like Hinderclay and Elmswell. It would be unwise to interpret all these one-hearth taxpayers as living on a very restricted scale, or at a level only marginally better than those exempted. Some were not poverty-stricken. One of the Elmswell inhabitants with one hearth in 1662 was William Bennett, who died in the following year; his house, almost certainly medieval, contained seven rooms—a hall, parlour, buttery and dairy with chambers above—and may well have been a substantial structure. Another type of well-built house which could come into the one-hearth category is the post-medieval end-chimney type, where a chimney in a large and ornate brick gable may have been intended to heat only the hall.

Probate inventories and, to a lesser extent, Hearth Tax returns add a new dimension to the study of the complex housing pattern of the late 16th and the 17th centuries. Their most valuable contribution in this context is the way in which they make us think of rooms in terms of function and contents, and of the house as a home, not simply as a technical achievement. But they do not provide a short cut, or a ready-made solution to all the problems. There is a great deal we cannot learn from them. The external and internal appearance of a house, the quality of its structure, the style of its windows and doorways, even the materials of its construction, remain unknown quantities, because they were not part of the information these documents were required to provide. The deficiencies can only be supplied by detailed investigation of the surviving houses themselves, with all the accompanying problems involved in linking together written evidence, which is tied to a particular period in time, with physical evidence which has been subjected to up to 400 years of subsequent change. During that time, parts of the original structure of the house may have vanished or been radically altered and other parts almost certainly added, while a rising standard of living and the changing dictates of fashion will have led to the concealment or destruction of many features. But where we can succeed in deducing the 16th- or 17th-century form of a standing house the documents will help us to determine with some confidence the probable uses of its rooms, and to visualise the furnishings, fittings and accumulated oddments they might have contained.

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NOTES

- ¹ The inventories for the Archdeaconry of Sudbury are in the Bury St Edmunds branch of the Suffolk Record Office (ref. IC 500/3). Those for the Archdeaconry of Suffolk are in the Ipswich branch of the Suffolk Record Office (ref. FE1/1).
- ² Although it does not generally help to clarify the layout, there is always the possibility that some of the specific activities of the household were carried on in separate free-standing structures away from the main house. A backhouse, in particular, could be an independent building. But the tendency, which has survived to this day, of calling an individual service room a 'house', as in bakehouse or wash-house, should lead us to treat this idea with considerable caution. Very often such a 'house' had a chamber above it, as here with Robert Baker's milkhouse and milkhouse chamber, and seems quite definitely to have been part of the main building. Even an outhouse could adjoin the house, though perhaps with only external access.
- ³ I am grateful to Mr Peter Northeast for this reference.
- ⁴ Norwich Consistory Court inventory. This reference is from Barley, M. W., *The English farmhouse and cottage* (1961), 72.
- ⁵ This statement is based on a perusal of all the 16th- and 17th-century probate inventories for Clare in the Suffolk Record Office.
- ⁶ As appears from his brief nuncupative will: Suffolk Record Office (Bury), Heron 329.

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Unpublished MSS.: Abbreviations

- Bury Suffolk Record Office (Bury St Edmunds), ref. IC 500/3 (followed by the number indicated).
- Ipswich Suffolk Record Office (Ipswich), ref. FE1/1 (followed by the number indicated).
- NRO Norfolk Record Office.