

FURNITURE IN STEYNING, A SUSSEX PARISH, 1587–1706: A STUDY OF DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

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The parish of Steyning, a late Saxon town, lies at the foot of the South Downs where the river Adur cuts through the chalk. At one time the town was a port; the Adur was navigable as far as Steyning from Shoreham on the coast five miles to the south-east, although the course of the river has now altered. Given Borough status by Edward I, Steyning developed into a prosperous market town. Trades represented in the Poll Book of 1790 ranged from cordwainers, bricklayers, carpenters and brewers, to sadlers, staymakers, coopers, gloves, weavers and flax dressers. There was a surgeon, several innkeepers, millers, turners, a hat maker, patten maker, watch maker, collar maker, chair maker and innumerable labourers and shopkeepers.¹

THE INVENTORIES AND WILLS

In 1983, with the assistance of an award from the Margary Fund of the Sussex Archaeological Society, a start was made on the transcription and evaluation of the 229 probate inventories which exist for the town, covering the period 1587–1787, together with their wills and associated documents.²

The investigation has now reached the half-way mark and already it is proving possible to construct families, and to link some inventories with existing houses. A portrait gallery of Stuart Steyning is beginning to emerge and one of the most interesting aspects of the inventories themselves is the careful listing of furniture.

Probate inventories provide unique evidence of the furniture and contents of what could be termed 'ordinary people's homes'. The documents themselves were required by ecclesiastical courts in order to establish that wills were genuine. Once this was agreed, the property could be distributed.

First, however, the 'chattels' of the dead person had to be listed and 'appraised' in order to estimate the amount of tax to be paid. The task was completed in most cases soon after the death, usually by two or three neighbours or close friends who made a room by room survey and evaluation of contents, including furnishings, household goods, clothing, money, jewellery, tools and stock-in-trade. Farm equipment, animals, crops, both 'on the ground' and 'in the barn' were listed, as were leases, bonds and debts. There has been some debate amongst researchers as to the possible undervaluation of items, but the general opinion seems to be that the current market prices were usually recorded.³ In the Steyning collection, certain townsmen regularly acted in the capacity of appraisers, having become reliable and expert at the job.

The first Steyning inventory is that of Richard Tournier, a husbandman, taken in October 1587, and appraised at £4 4s. 2d. The last is that of Henry Penfold in March 1787, whose

possessions were valued at £264 but whose occupation remains to be discovered. For the 200 years between, there is a representative collection of yeoman farmers, craftsmen, innkeepers, widows, husbandmen and gentlemen, with one or two of the professional classes, such as schoolmasters and parish clerks.

Although much of the fascination of this research lies in discovering the houses of the humbler members of society, the Steyning inventories mostly represent the households of farmers, craftsmen, tradesmen and shopkeepers and their widows.

Some contrasts in the Steyning inventories are striking. Two members of the same trade may have very different lifestyles. The earliest, Richard Tournier, husbandman, 1587, had no furniture whatsoever listed. He had his clothes, three pewter plates and a pewter dish, an old brass pan and a little brass pot and two old saucers. The appraisers found a few yards of narrow coarse woollen cloth and canvas, his husbandry tools and £2 in ready money, but that was all, apart from two old coverlets, an old blanket and three sheets.

By contrast, Roger Easted, another husbandman in 1612, was considerably better off. Although he had only 1s. in his purse when he died, his wealth was in his animals, a mare, sheep, pigs, cows, geese and hens, and his three acres of wheat; although all his furniture was described by the appraisers as 'old', nevertheless he had two bedsteadles, eight chests, forms, tables and shelves. With honey from his bees, bacon from his pigs, and plenty of feathers for beds and cushions, life at the Easteds was comfortable.

Much of the pleasure of the project lies in reconstructing the individual homes, households and family ties, and the virtual opening up of a small Sussex market town of the 17th century from behind its street doors. Most households had beds, forms, tables, chests and stools. In the case of the chests, where most inventories list at least one, and some as many as ten, there is a variety of description: 'great', 'small', 'old', 'old ship', 'joined', 'boarded', 'iron', 'corn', 'without lock'. There is a wider variety of description in the listing of the chairs: 'joined', 'little', 'childs', 'great', 'small', 'wicker' or 'wicket', 'cloth', 'green rush-bottomed', 'red leather', 'bulrush-bottomed', and others. One or more chairs are common in the inventories from 1612 onwards. Richard Constable, the cooper, had six in 1614, John Cowlstocke, the innkeeper, had nine on his premises in 1634. A late innkeeper, William Burnett, had a total of thirty-six in 1690, and the vicar, Leonard Stalman, had fifteen in 1644. It is not uncommon to find up to a dozen chairs in Steyning homes. The butcher, Thomas Lidgitter, had twenty-eight altogether, while a gentleman's widow, Elizabeth Eversfield, had forty-two, thirty-one of them leather. Many cupboards were listed: 'cort', 'little hanging', 'little drawer', 'side' and others, but so far there is only one cabinet and a 'little one' at that, in 1692. Many people owned boxes, one was described as 'carved' and one mysteriously as 'virr' in 1673. If this is a Sussex rendering of 'fir', then it is the first mention of a particular wood being used in the construction of furniture, apart from the schoolmaster's eight elm boards in 1632.

There are many listings of stools of various sizes, some three-legged, some leather, some cloth. The joined stools are always distinguished from the others. Tables are also numerous and of different shapes and construction: 'square', 'side', 'drawing', 'falling', 'round', 'with trestles', 'with frames', etc. In an inventory of 1622 a pair of playing tables are mentioned. Five livery cupboards are listed between 1614 and 1661 and two inventories had livery tables. There are eight desks in the inventories up to 1690, and a few nests, pairs and boxes of drawers, and four chests of drawers up to 1706.

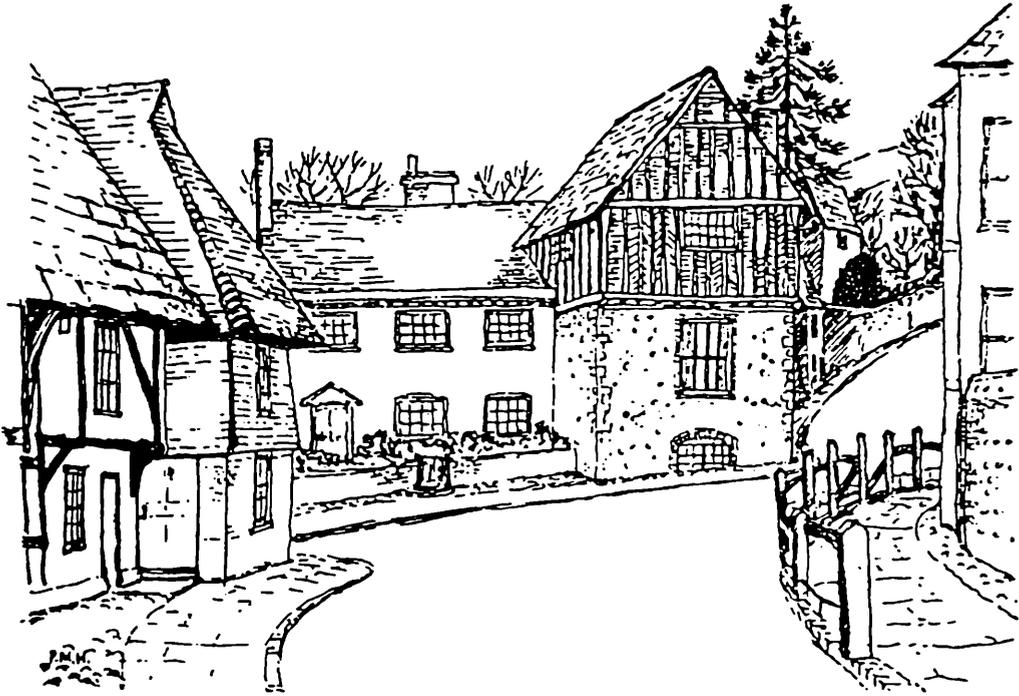
As for the dressers, there are eleven so far, one with shelves and one with drawers. Benches occur in several inventories before 1650, one with a joined back in 1613, but thereafter they are less frequent. There are other items which only appear once or twice; for example an aumbry (1629), a hat case (1668), two little linen presses (1629), five cushion stools (1632) and a washing block (1640). From 1633 onwards many people had sideboards and presses, the latter sometimes specifically mentioned 'to hang clothes in', and from the same date glass cases, or cages (wooden shelves or cupboards for glasses) begin to appear frequently. One, in 1698, had 'whiteware' in it, an indication of the coming change in tableware away from the pewter and wooden trenchers of earlier generations.

Beds range from the curtained, vallanced bedsteadle, to the truckle, or trundle. Some are 'board', 'joined', 'high', 'low', 'half-headed', or 'with a tester'. Most had mats and cords specifically mentioned, or else 'with all belonging', while the beds, or mattresses, themselves, were stuffed with chaff or 'mill puff', straw, flock or feathers. Appropriately enough the clothier had eight flock beds in his house, whereas the butcher had five feather beds!

Eleven bequeathed bedsteadles, together with feather or other beds, and coverings; in three more wills it is not clear whether the steadle is left, although the feather beds and coverings are. Nine willed trunks, chests and boxes, some of these containing linen. Yeoman Richard Patching of Greenfield Farm, Steyning, detailed all his property with great care, but he left his cousin Elizabeth two gold rings and 'a printed Taminy Gowne' that had belonged to his late wife. In a codicil of 1667, dictated as he lay sick and weak, he 'desired to give his sister-in-law Mrs. Blackwell his great looking glass which is wrought with needlework'. In this way, more intimate glimpses are given of family life, favoured belongings and relations. Another yeoman left his wife a wicker chair that stood in their bedchamber. Initialled trunks and chests were handed down the families. The tallow chandler left a joined bedsteadle to his wife, especially mentioning its striped curtains. Other husbands made sure their wives received back belongings they had brought with them as part of the marriage dowry. Some of the wills provide the added information of just whereabouts in the house the furniture was positioned, such as in the 'outer', 'best', or 'middle' chamber. Sometimes 'my chamber' indicates the room the deceased had slept in.

SOME STEYNING HOUSEHOLDS

John Farley's 1641 inventory describes him as a yeoman, and the £130 worth of stock, crops and 'Instrumentes belonging to husbandry' comprise nearly half his valuation; he also owned a barge and a boat worth £19 and four horses. He had an eight-roomed house with adjoining milkhouse, malthouse and millhouse. Of the four bedsteadles in the house, two were joined and he had ten joined stools in the kitchen chamber, which seems to be the most heavily furnished room, with the highest valued bedsteadles — £8 for the joined steadle plus a truckle and all coverings. This was probably his and his wife's own sleeping chamber. It also contained a sideboard, table and 'Weickett Chayer', all of which were left to his wife. There were four chests upstairs, containing sixteen pairs of sheets, four table cloths, sixteen napkins and other items of linen. There were three cupboards, one of which is described as 'hanging' and was in the hall, which also housed a joined table, two forms and three chairs. The only heating seems to have been in the kitchen where there was a well-furnished hearth with an iron fireback. John Farley left 20s. per annum to his 'Cussen John Gratwick',



1. The Stone house, Steyning, by Patricia Hall

together with 'the use of the little chamber behind the Chimney during his lifetime, and to have free eggesse . . . to goe and cume too it when he pleaseth'. He also bequeathed his wife a beadsteadle and all its furnishings, plus a desk box, a square box and one trunk.

The valuations for John Farley's furniture are all lumped together room by room and it is not possible to work out prices for individual items. His appraisers valued the stock and crops carefully, but it seems that they may not have been sure of the furniture. However, when appraisers do know something about the furniture, it shows up readily in the inventories. For example, the widow Joan Bodle, who died in 1668, had a tailor and a carpenter as appraisers. Her nine and a half pairs of sheets were valued pair by pair, at between 3s. and 9s. a pair, and the rest of her linen was valued just as carefully. Likewise the furniture, surely valued by the carpenter and joiner, Jacob Knowles, was exactly priced. A carved box was worth 4s., a joined bedsteadle 10s., two joined stools 1s. 4d. One chest without a lock was worth 1s. and two other chests 4s. 6d. In 1685 John Nye's truckle bed was, according to William Caplen, the carpenter, worth only 2s. compared to the trundle at 4s. in Joan Bodle's house.

Richard Clark, a weaver with five looms in his workhouse, who died in 1684, evidently lived in a well-furnished house with twelve joined stools, a joined chest and chair. He had six bedsteadles and a cradle, and the presence of six little rush chairs, five little chairs, a little stool, and two little tables may indicate the existence of several children, or young apprentices. Two trunks, three boxes and ten chests (one joined) provided ample storage for

linen and cloth. A great cupboard in the kitchen, a little cupboard in the room above and a little drawer cupboard in the parlour chamber added even more space. Most of this furniture is priced separately.

One of Steyning's expert appraisers was Samuel Lucke, a prosperous shopkeeper. He was a mercer, and at his death in 1706 his stock-in-trade, which included over eighty different types of cloth, was meticulously listed and valued by fellow mercers from nearby parishes. His house, now the premises of Steyning Post Office, contained, in addition to the shop, a kitchen, parlour, cellar and brewhouse, with five chambers above. The kitchen chamber seems to have been the best bedroom and all the household linen was stored there in the linen chest. There was a curtained bedstead, a chest of drawers, a table and stands, a looking-glass and seven chairs. The room had a fireplace with pans, tongs, and irons and bellows. There was a further chestful of household linen and a bed in the warehouse chamber. The two shop chambers contained three beds and a chest of drawers, and the passage chamber had a bed, press, chest of drawers, table and another looking glass. Downstairs the kitchen was well equipped with two tables, some chairs and stools and a dresser. The parlour also had two tables in addition to ten chairs, and some window curtains. Although Samuel Lucke was a mercer by trade, that did not prevent him from selling such items as white earthenware, glasses, cruets, vinegar, soap, gold rings, crocks and scythes.

The house of the schoolmaster John Whithell in Church Street can probably be identified as part of the buildings of Steyning Grammar School, premises that have been in almost continuous use as a school since the beginning of the 17th century. John Whithell was second to hold the position of schoolmaster and to occupy the schoolhouse according to the ordinances of the founder. His inventory, taken in 1632, refers to the schoolhouse, the chamber next to it, a hall, buttery and kitchen, and a chamber over the hall. There is a final item of £2 for 'the bookes in his studdie'.

There were two tables, one chair and eight elm boards in the schoolhouse. These were probably trestle tables for the pupils to work at, and not floor boards, which were often valuable and 'moveable'. The one chair was probably the master's chair. This room is probably the schoolroom on the first floor, known today as 'Big School'. The room referred to as 'next to the schoolhouse' had two bedsteads with beds, bolsters, coverlets and one blanket between them. In addition the room contained a chest, a wicker cradle and Mr Whithell's cloak bag. This could have been a room for boarding pupils, possibly the one known today as 'Long Dorm'. Under the ordinances the master was forbidden to board above six scholars in his house at one time.⁴ In addition to his bedstead with its valance and curtains, bolsters, pillows, rug and blanket, there was another bed, and livery cupboard, a little round table, two joined chests, two small boxes, some chairs, eight stools and four small joined stools. Downstairs in the hall he had two chairs and a 'littell chaire for a child to sit in', a table and form. There were six cushions too. The kitchen contained a cupboard, a dresser, a table, a 'coope', a cradle, two little chairs and a 'stanninge stoole', as well as the usual cooking equipment and linen wheel. The inventory is full of charm, with seven beehives, beans in the garden and two apple roasters in the hearth. He left everything to be sold and divided between his children and his wife Mary.

Probate inventories were not usually made for those with estates worth less than £5 and it is difficult to obtain an insight into the contents of a poor home from other sources. At one

time, however, there existed in the Steyning parish chest two lists of household goods and furniture seized by the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor in lieu of non-payment of Poor Rates. In 1707 a warrant was issued by the Justices of the Peace, requiring the Overseers to take the goods and chattels of George Hatcher, a 'Poor Labourer' and sell them to settle the amount due, which was only 2s. 9³/₄d., anything left over to be paid back to the Hatchers. The distraint was made and an inventory of the goods they seized was drawn up as follows:

An Account of The house hold goods of George Hatcher being seized by us Michael Longmer and Thomas Swain for the use of The parish According to the Laws for that Case provided March the 15 1706 (old dating) — 2 p/ai/r of tongs, 1 slipe, 1 pot hook, 1 grid iron, 1 flock bed and Things belonging to it, 1 chest, 2 boxes, a woollen wheell, 1 brass kete and warming pan, 1 skillet, 1 nine gallon vessel and a ronlet (18 gallon vessel) 1 lared tub, 1 round tub, 1 tray, 2 poridg pots, 2 pails, 4 chaires, a table and form, 1 cubbord and a wooden cradle, 5 peuter dishes, 1 flagon, 3 peuter poringers, 1 pie plate, 1 tin pudding pan, 1 dozen of dishes and spoons, a wooden plater and a bowle, 1 brass frying pan. Sum husbandry Toolls not All at home.

In the second case, that of Nicholas Killick, the distraint was made in similar circumstances at the same time, but the list of items seized was shorter: '2 beer vessels, 2 keelers, 1 fry pan, 1 bed, 1 cradle, 1 box, 1 table, 1 poridg pot, 1 skilet, 1 grid iron, 1 pot hook, 1 fire pan, 3 dishes, 3 spoons, 1 bowle.'⁵

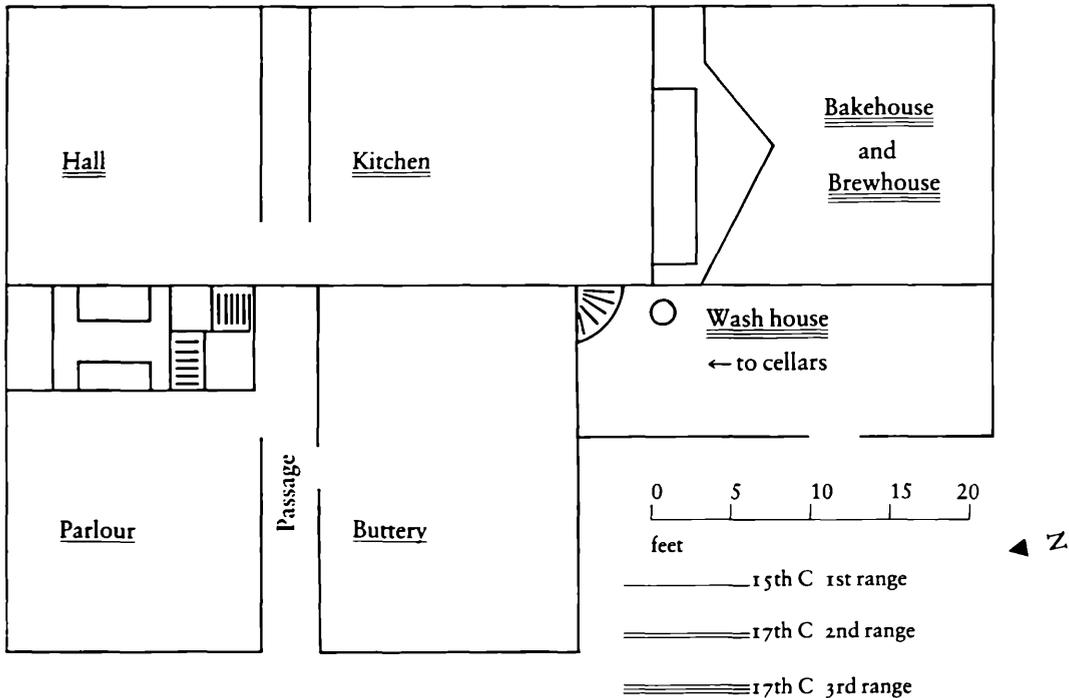
In contrast, Thomas Lidgetter, butcher of Steyning, who died in 1683, had no such problems, his inventory being valued at £357 5s. 4d. Some £243 of good and £23 'desperate' debts contributed to his large total. Approximately £45 covered the value of his house contents, excluding his wearing apparel and money in his purse, and from these contents it can be seen that he lived very comfortably. He had four chambers on the first floor, and downstairs a kitchen, 'sinke' (probably a sort of scullery), parlour, buttery, shop and brewhouse. In the shop was a settle, where perhaps his customers sat and waited, and two blocks, scales and weights, four cleavers and two ranges of butchers' hooks. The blocks would probably have been rounded sections of elm, set on three small feet; 'old Shopp linnen' listed amongs the sheets and table cloths completes his trade items. The parlour sounds delightful with its eight red leather chairs, a well-furnished hearth, curtains at the windows, four flower pots, four old pictures on the walls and a case of knives. The sleeping chamber above seems to be the best bedroom, with a good bed worth £8. There were more window curtains, a fireplace with bellows and brass and irons, a looking glass, seven cloth chairs, seven cloth stools, a little table, a sideboard with two cloths, a 'box of drawers', a 'glass cage' and two brass kettles and a bed pan (warming pan).

From other inventories it seems that the rooms facing on to the High Street and Church Street, the two main Steyning streets, nearly always had window curtains. Rooms at the back were uncurtained. The Lidgetter's shop chamber is also curtained. There were two bedsteads there with curtains, but 'window curtains' are always described as such so there is no confusion. There was a 'presse to hang Clothes in', two chests, four old chairs and a close stool for added comfort. There was a green rug on the bed in the kitchen chamber and a joined chair in the buttery chamber. Three chests and two boxes were used for storage. The value of £1 7s. put on the table and frame, seven joined stools, a small draw table, eight chairs, four cushions, a cupboard and 'a nest of Drawes' in the kitchen is likely to be accurate, since one of the appraisers was a carpenter. Brass and pewter candlesticks, pewter

plates, flacons and dishes, with other cooking implements, toasting irons, three spits and 'one jack to roaste meate', indicate that the butcher and his family lived and ate well.

Thomas Lidgetter's will shows that he kept some of his sheep 'at Mr. Eversfeilds' and that he had five acres of land adjoining those of Charlton Court farm. This farm is in the western part of Steyning parish. The present farmhouse contains two bays of an early house, possibly dating from 15th century, and there is a five-bay 17th-century range. The early part of the building (some northern bays have gone) shows that it had been a substantial house, presumably large enough to accommodate the court leet.⁶ The third range of bakehouse, brewhouse, etc., may have been reconstructed using older timber-framing, but a 17th-century date can probably be given to it. Later Victorian additions have been left out of the plan for simplification (Fig. 2).

In August 1688, the widowed Elizabeth Eversfield died. Her husband, Nicholas, a gentleman, had died four years earlier. The Eversfields were well connected by marriage with other Sussex gentry families.⁷ Elizabeth Eversfield's inventory lists eight chambers upstairs, and a garret, which has only recently been demolished. Today a narrow timber newelled stair off the parlour leads to what was until recently known as the servant's sleeping quarters. The 1688 inventory lists three bedsteadles in 'the Servants two Chambers'. Their position in the inventory listing suggests that they are the same rooms. On the ground floor, the inventory lists a kitchen, hall, parlour and study, served by a buttry,



2. Charlton Court Farmhouse, Steyning, after Gordon Lawrie

bakehouse, brewhouse, wash house, bottle room, small beer cellar, mild beer cellar and March beer cellar. There was a barn for wood storage outside and in fact a particularly fine medieval barn remains today. The cellars are still there, with a very deep well where the wash house would have been and a large range of ovens served by a fifteen-foot fireplace in the kitchen.

In 1688 the kitchen contained two tables, a form and one chair. Six spits indicate this large hearth but only 'other old goods' are mentioned, the whole valued at £3 17s. There was a settle, table and box in the buttery. Twelve tubs, eleven barrels, a mash vat, two hogsheds, two churns, a kneading trough and a beef tub reflect the importance of the cooper in the local economy; all these items furnished the bakehouse, cellars and brewing rooms, together with a furnace in the brewhouse. The parlour of the house in the older section contained two tables, twenty-one leather chairs and other goods, worth £4. This room is likely to have been used when the house functioned as the manor court. There were another ten leather chairs in the hall (still reached today through a passage by the side of the fireplace dividing the two rooms) as well as one wooden chair, two tables and some fireirons, all worth £11 10s. Ten more chairs are listed in other rooms, but only the one in the hall is listed as 'wooden'. No stools are noted anywhere in the house. The study contained a table and desk, a trunk and a parcel of books and old boxes. Three more trunks are listed, all with linen and two with initials (R. B. & S. B.) on them, probably these latter passed down from previous generations. The uninitialled chest stood in the passage chamber. A side table is listed in the wash house chamber, together with a chest of drawers, the earliest to be noted in the Steyning inventories. No cupboards are mentioned at all.

A 'new chamber', possibly reconstructed at the same time as the third range, contained a good curtained bedsteadle with a feather bed. There are no beds downstairs at this time, in contrast to earlier inventories; five bedchambers contain curtained bedsteadles, presumably four-posters. Most are feather beds at Charlton Court, but one flock and one chaff bed are listed. There were four other bedsteadles and one trundle, which would fit underneath the higher beds.

Altogether the house does not seem to be very richly furnished. Two hundred pounds' weight of pewter, a silver tankard, a silver pepper box and other plate, two gold rings and a cornelian ring indicate a woman of some substance, yet the furniture does not appear to be either ornate or highly valued. Compared with the inventory of James Colley, gentleman, in 1622, with his joined furniture, pair of playing tables, cushions, carpets for his ten tables and even a pair of 'old viginalls', the Eversfields do not stand out as exceptionally well furnished. Richard Patching, yeoman of Greenfields Farm, in 1667 left a clock, five pictures, green rush-bottomed chairs, turkey worked cushions and a falling (gateleg) table, with a 'payer of harpsicalls' to his family, and one suspects that life at the Eversfields may have been rather more luxurious than that portrayed by Elizabeth's inventory which totals only £137 0s. 6d., the linen, pewter and silver accounting for nearly half.

This inventory is remarkable therefore for two reasons, for its description of a particularly good house with an apparently sparse array of furniture, and also for the fact that the steps of the appraisers can be traced today, through the very same house, room by room. A 1982 sale catalogue of Charlton Court Farmhouse lists the rooms in almost the same order as Elizabeth Eversfield's 1688 inventory.

The surviving timber-framed houses of Steyning date from 14th–18th centuries.⁸ The task of linking inventory to property is never easy, but the Wiston Estate archive has already made it possible to identify several houses with a degree of confidence.⁹ With the help of parish registers, inventories, wills, deeds, indentures and maps, the homes of a mercer, a schoolmaster, two yeomen, an innkeeper and two gentlefolk have so far been located. The imposing Stone House (Fig. 1) which stands in the centre of the town belonged to James Colley in 1622. He was a man of property with a house full of furniture, including playing tables and a pair of old virginals. As the appraisers went from room to room listing his four-poster bedsteads, livery tables, old wicker cradle, joined stools, the striped carpet on the drawing table and the fruit dishes on the dresser, they opened the doors of history to later generations.

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