

<b>Institution: University of Northampton</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 30 - History</b>
<b>Title of case study: Consumption and the eighteenth-century country house</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Country houses form a key part of our national heritage. As accumulations of goods and windows onto past lives, they are popular visitor attractions. Yet only recently have they begun to be seen as sites of consumption as well as artistic treasure houses. Research by Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery into the consumption practices and material culture in a number of country houses in the English midlands has: (a) heightened awareness amongst curators and the public of the country house as a site of consumption; (b) enhanced the role of academic research in the interpretation of the study houses, and has thus (c) enriched public understanding of historic owners and their houses.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The research for this project was undertaken primarily through an AHRC-funded project, 'Consumption and the Country House, c.1730-1800' (2010-11), supplemented by the doctoral research of two AHRC CDA students: MacArthur (2006-09) and Waugh (2010-13). Leading this research, Stobart (Professor of History, 2005-present) has challenged traditional histories of the country house by recasting it as a site of consumption. In doing so, elites and their material culture have been drawn into wider debates over consumption in a more thorough and nuanced way. At the same time, by placing them into a context of local and national supply systems, they have been integrated into the historiography of retail change, and social and economic networks.</p> <p>Based on detailed studies of a small number of houses in the English midlands, Stobart has argued that elite material culture involved a complex and often personal mixing of old and new goods – a reflection of the importance of family and heritage to elite identity. He further argued that the systems of supply that serviced elite demand were geographically complex and often highly specialised (1). Building on this, Rothery (research associate, then lecturer, 2010-present) and Stobart demonstrated that spending by several of the case-study families was carefully managed, thus challenging and revising earlier analyses that have emphasised the spendthrift nature of elites and the overweening importance of income to the long-term viability of the estate. They stress the role in this process of often-neglected parties, including guardians and senior servants (2). They also showed the importance of individual preference and character in determining the rhythm and nature of consumption. Stobart has utilised this research to present new insights into the spending of elite consumers on household goods and consumables, such as groceries, and the ways in which these goods were deployed within everyday processes of consumption (3).</p> <p>The research has produced key insights that feed directly into understanding and interpreting consumption practices and material culture in the study houses. In terms of sources and methods, it has shown how the mundane items recorded in bills and room inventories can reveal much about the day-to-day lives of country house owners. Such sources can thus be used to open up new aspects of country houses to visitors; for example, the persistence over the <i>longue durée</i> of particular room furnishings. In terms of findings, the research has highlighted the importance of the everyday and also of characters previously seen as marginal to the history of the houses. Two notable examples are Mary Leigh, who has been brought out of the shadows to take a more prominent place in narratives of Stoneleigh Abbey (Warwickshire), and Sir John Turner Dryden, whose lavish lifestyle forms an important backdrop to understanding the character and consumption of his grandson, Sir Henry Dryden, the focus of the current interpretation of Canons Ashby (a National Trust property in Northamptonshire).</p> <p>Overall, the research has revealed more of the everyday aspects of country house life, often</p>

hidden from the public's view in guided tours / media that emphasise the great wealth and the lavish lifestyles of the aristocracy and the gentry. The material on suppliers is especially important since it places landowning families into local and national socio-economic milieus. At houses open to the public and in the media we are often given the impression that country house owners were somehow separate from the locale, isolated in large landscaped parks. In reality, they were firmly embedded into the local economy.

### 3. References to the research

#### Research Outputs:

1. Stobart, J. 'Gentlemen and shopkeepers: supplying the country house in eighteenth-century England', *Economic History Review* 64:3 (2011)
2. Rothery, M. and Stobart, J. 'Inheritance events and spending patterns in the English country house: the Leigh family of Stoneleigh Abbey, 1738-1806' *Continuity and Change*, 27:4 (2012)
3. Stobart, J. *Sugar and Spice. The Grocery Trade in England, c.1650-1850* (Oxford University Press, 2013)

All these publications are part of REF2. *Economic History Review* and *Continuity & Change* are both A-rated journals; Oxford University Press is one of the foremost academic publishers with a rigorous peer review process.

#### Research Grant:

Jon Stobart, 'Consumption and the Country House, c.1730-1800', AHRC (AH/H008365/1), April 2010-December 2011, £165,000.

### 4. Details of the impact

The AHRC project incorporated at its heart public engagement through the country house. This has continued since the official completion of the project to generate three key areas of impact:

#### 1. Heightened awareness of the country house as a site of consumption.

Attention is refocused away from the country house as a collection of treasured artefacts and towards greater awareness of it as a product of the flow of goods and services. Emphasis is also placed on the ways in which mundane consumption practices defined the country house as a site for everyday life. This has been achieved via articles in the *BBC History* magazine (July 2011 – **S1**) and local history journals (**S2**), the extensive readership of which adds reach to these connections with non-academic audiences. More direct engagement with curators and visitor managers was created through a dedicated website (*Consumption and the Country House*, October 2011 to date – **S3**) and a major international conference organised by Stobart in conjunction with English Heritage (*Consuming the Country House*, April 2012 – **S4**). The website provides a forum for a broad range of people interested in the country house and the study of consumption to exchange ideas, information and opinions. It has created an international network with over 70 members from eleven countries across four continents, including representatives from many different historic house organisations (e.g. the National Trust, English Heritage and Attingham Trust). The conference attracted 73 delegates, over half being drawn from historic house organisations. Feedback was extremely positive, many delegates commenting at the time on its importance in creating links between academics and curators. Correspondence with delegates since the conference has highlighted the continuation of such dialogue and connections, and their spread to people unable to attend – an indication that its impact has been lasting (**S4**).

#### 2. Enhanced role for academic research and approaches in the interpretation of two houses.

At Stoneleigh Abbey attention has focused on Mary Leigh, who owned the property for thirty years from 1774, but whose position in the history of the house has been largely neglected. An exhibition mounted at Stoneleigh Abbey by Stobart (August 2012 to date) outlines her changing consumption practices and has placed her more fully into the narrative of the house (**S5**). It has inspired the

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house guides to create a new themed tour, 'Her-story', which explores the lives of various women of the house (**S5**). This has enhanced the significance of the initial impact of the research. In addition, and linking sources used in the research directly to the visiting public, Stobart has produced annotated copies of bills and inventories for key rooms in the house. These highlight the impact on the house of Mary and her brother Edward, and have been used by the guides as a basis for telling different stories about Stoneleigh Abbey (**S5**).

At Canons Ashby, detailed research on Sir John Turner Dryden has highlighted his significance for the development of the estate. This has allowed him to be written into the story of the house for the first time (**S6**), most particularly through a programme of story-telling (see below). Research on room inventories, undertaken as part of Stobart's AHRC-funded research project, has provided a wealth of detailed information on the provenance of goods in the house and on continuities in material culture from one generation to the next. This forms the foundation of a highly innovative smartphone app., developed with Tom Murray of N-Vision at the University of Northampton. Launched in June 2013, and modified in response to initial feedback, this forms an e-guidebook allowing visitors to draw down additional information on key objects (**S7**). As the Visitor Manager notes (**S6**), the impact of the app lies in the way it changes how and to whom the house is presented: allowing interactive access to historical information without recourse to room guides and connecting particular younger visitors who are often hard to engage with historical narratives.

### 3. Enriched public understanding of land owners and their houses.

At Stoneleigh Abbey, new interpretative leaflets (July 2011) and the exhibition on Mary Leigh produced by Stobart (July 2012) built on interest generated by his article in *BBC History* magazine. Initial feedback from visitors and house guides welcomed the provision of more detailed historical information, but suggested the need for more information directed at children. As a result an 'I-Spy' leaflet was produced (March 2013). In all, over 1400 leaflets have been distributed. Visitor feedback, collected via informal interviews, has highlighted the significance of the research in shaping visitors' understanding of the country house (**S8**). Together, the exhibition and leaflets have: [1] made visitors more aware of the lives of neglected figures from the history of the house, especially women; [2] prompted a real interest in how country house owners acquired and used goods, and [3] given an insight into and appreciation of the historical research that lies behind the stories told by guides.

At Canons Ashby, a professional storyteller (Fiona Collins) drew heavily on research by Stobart and Rothery in a programme of storytelling based on the life of Sir John Turner Dryden and his wife Lady Elizabeth (July and August 2012). This proved highly successful in engaging visitors, especially children, by providing historical information in an accessible form. Over 170 visitors joined the storytelling and commented on the way that it enhanced their experience of the house (**S9**). In written comments, they highlighted how the storytelling: [1] made history 'come to life' – communicating detailed research in a really effective manner ; [2] engaged strongly with children and got them interested in what they were seeing at the house, and [3] linked historical figures and narratives to artefacts in the house. The downloadable smartphone app was utilised by over 200 visitors in just 4 weeks (July 2013). Its ability to extend and enrich the visitor experience (especially for children) is evident from visitor feedback, collected via informal face-to-face interviews (**S10**) and has fed into enhanced visitor satisfaction (**S6**). Visitors reported that it impacted significantly on their behaviour by: [1] making their visit more of an exploration (navigating virtually encouraged active engagement with the house); [2] making them look more carefully at objects and think about their connection to people, and [3] encouraging repeat visits and visits to other properties, especially by younger people – as one commented: "Where else is there one like this?" (**S10**)

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1. 'Through the Georgian keyhole', *BBC History Magazine*, July 2011 (circulation: 69,394 – see <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/node/47723>)

S2. Stobart, J. and Rothery, M. 'Merger and Crisis: Sir John Turner Dryden and Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire, in the late Eighteenth Century', *Northamptonshire Past and Present* (2012)

S3. Website URL: <http://consumptionandthecountryhouse.ning.com/>

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S4. Conference programme, delegate list and feedback

S5. Supporting statements from former and current Visitor Manager/Head Conservator at Stoneleigh Abbey

S6. Supporting statement from Visitor Operations Manger at Canons Ashby

S7. Link to e-guidebook app. for Canons Ashby:

[https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.Nvision.CanonsAshby&hl=en\\_GB](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.Nvision.CanonsAshby&hl=en_GB)

S8. Summary of visitor feedback on Mary Leigh exhibition and visitor leaflets at Stoneleigh Abbey (c. 20 informal face-to-face interviews)

S9. Visitor feedback on storytelling at Canons Ashby (c. 80 entries in comments book)

S10. Summary of visitor feedback on the e-guidebook app. for Canons Ashby (c. 40 informal face-to-face interviews)