

Progenitors and Descendants: Sociability Across Time Through Objects, c.1570-1700

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This illustrated paper is based on both archival documents and the surviving material possessions of four families in the county of Norfolk: the Bacons, Pastons, Blundevilles and Knyvetts. As the number of gentry proliferated and the intensity of social and political intercourse amongst them increased from the late 16th century, so too did the appetite for cultural markers of distinction that would help to distinguish the character of individual lineages. It is well recognised that in part this was expressed through the building of 'great houses' and the updating of inherited properties—something in which these families indulged. Less well recognised is the extent to which there was an attempt to define families as lineages by associating objects with houses through the designation of 'heirlooms'. The educational revolution amongst the gentry combined with the increased availability of 'cultural objects' in a manner that facilitated the differentiation of lineages through the varied types of cultural objects associated with individual families across time. Moreover, in some instances patterns in the gifting of objects can be analysed in order to measure degrees of emotional intimacy within families. All this occurred in the context of the elaborated symbolic universe of the late northern renaissance. As a consequence the objects designated as heirlooms were themselves inherently laden with symbolic resonances. Therefore, the objects that were passed on were eloquent messengers across time. Those objects included various forms of jewellery; emblem books; scientific instruments; musical scores and instruments; portraits; and exotica. Much of this is epitomised by the 'visual inventory' in the form of the painting known as the 'Oxnead Treasure'. Looked at more broadly, the phenomena examined here identify what may be defined as an intermediate stage in the development of consumption. There is an accommodation of new types of material culture to pre-existent cultural norms and aspirations. At the same time the new availability of objects made possible the further elaboration of the symbolic repertoire.