

# TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES

## THE INVENTORY

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After the riots of 1791, came the reckoning. When Priestley, Hutton and others took their compensation claims to court, they presented detailed lists and costings of all buildings, furnishings, books, clothes and household goods lost or damaged. Inventories were usually drawn up for legal purposes, to provide valuations of a person's possessions. This was most common as part of the probate proceedings after death, when an estate would have to be assessed for debts to be settled and bequests to be fulfilled. Inventories might also be made before the sale of a business, or as a stocktaking operation. They can provide a fascinating insight into the household and personal possessions of previous generations. We shall look here at some of the inventories to be found in the Archives Department, Birmingham Reference Library, starting with that of Joseph Priestley's 'Elaboratory'.<sup>1</sup>

Included in the destruction at Fair Hill, Priestley's house, were the optical, philosophical, mathematical and chemical instruments and the electrical apparatus of the famous scientist and experimenter, which were valued at £605 2s. The only things which survived were:

part of a solar microscope  
part of a planetarium or orrery  
part of a copper condensing Fountain

The appraisal was made by 'Messrs Nairne and Blunt, Mathematical Instrument Makers of Cornhill in the City of London, Persons of great Eminence Experience and Competent Judgement in all the several above Articles . . .' Priestley might have been expected to ask his friend James Watt for help, since he had once been an instrument maker himself, but Nairne had supplied Priestley with, among other things, 'an electrical machine on the largest construction . . . with various apparatus (£25 4s)', so his presence is not surprising. For anyone knowledgeable in the history of scientific instruments, this list must be a delight. Here are a few of the items mentioned:

A sett of large Horse shoe magnetts which would lift more than a hundred weight  
A twisted Glass Tube with Bulbs at each End set in a frame to shew the specific Gravity of differently coloured Liquors  
A pair of twelve inch Globes with the latest Discoveries  
An Orrery of Mr Martin's Plan shewing the Motion of all the primary Planets with a Double Set of Stems to support the Planets  
A Wooden Globe, one Foot in Diameter to represent the Sun, and wood or Ivory Balls in proportion to it to represent the Planets in order to be placed on Stands at proper Distances in a large Field  
Specimens of all Metals and Ores and Earths, one of Native Iron from Siberia, great varieties of Lava and Basaltes from different parts of the World, specimens of Coals, the different Strata in digging into a Well . . .  
Six or Seven hundred Substances liquid and solid of which no account can be given, many of them the result of Expensive processes  
Ferguson's magic Circle in Horn and box wood  
A large Magic Lantern  
A pair of Temple spectacles . . .

In addition to the laboratory, Priestley had lost his house with all its furnishings, (purple and white cotton curtains and bedspread in the front bedroom); its decorations (silver and Wedgwood medallions of Sir Isaac Newton); furniture, china, wines etc. Before looking in more detail at household inventories, let us turn to William Hutton's claim against the rioters.<sup>2</sup> Hutton lost the contents of both his business and warehouse in Birmingham and his house at Saltley, including the substantial library he shared with his daughter, the writer Catherine Hutton. From this inventory we gain a glimpse of an 18th-century stationer's and print shop. There were, for example, nearly 1,000 prints showing the costumes of the countries of the world and the different religions. There were also:

About 100 lines with hooks to dry paper on  
1 pair large steelyards

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- 2 pair large shears for cutting cards, with wrenches, boxes and frame
- Counting house case with chinese work
- 1 mahogany case for shop books
- 1 large oak bookcase with 4 glazed doors

Hutton also claimed for two months' loss of trade and for the expense of rescuing and protecting goods:

- To Mr Cockell for seven Men watching Night and Day the Paper left in the Warehouses by the Rioters
- To Mr Cockell for 329 Gallons of Ale extorted by the Rioters under pretence of saving the House [all in vain!]
- Extorted by one of the Mobs at the Door on their promise to prevent Destruction
- To Sarah Holyoak and Elizabeth Hawkins [his servants] for securing Plate, China and Cloaths
- To Mr Perrins for carriage of two Loads of Goods from Saltley to Birmingham
- For about a Cart Load of Furniture Books and Papers saved by the People in the Lion and Lamb Yard [a nearby public house]
- For returning a Set of Folio Maps of England

Something of the panic and confusion of the events suggests itself here. Hutton also claimed for the destruction of his garden at Saltley but a detailed plant list is not included. Its replanting with trees, shrubs, vegetables and flowers was estimated at £43. Those interested in the history of costume and textiles will find much to notice in these lists. Priestley, for example, claimed for a 'Kidderminster carpet' and a bedstead of 'Manchester stripe'. Thomas Hutton included a claim for the clothes of his servant John Hemming.<sup>3</sup> These included hunting boots, clogs, bazel slippers, green Morocco slippers, buckskin breeches, and

- 1 superfine double milled broadcloth great coat
- 1 Bath beaver great coat
- 1 sett of Mourning shoe, knee and stock buckles

Hemming was obviously looking after the saddlery, for snaffles, bridles, a side saddle with silver buttons, and hunting whips with silver mounts are also listed. Catherine Hutton's clothes are included in this inventory (though valued at a small fraction of her library), and in Priestley's, the clothes lost by his female servants are listed.

Another claim for compensation after the riots, was made by George Humphreys of Sparkbrook House.<sup>4</sup> We are informed that in the 'Smoaking Room' were to be found

- 1 Black silk cloak
- 1 Mahogany Cellaret for Wine lined with Lead and drawers under
- 2 doz Bottles of Spirits in the Cellaret
- 1 Bust of Laughing Girl in plaister

In the 'Cupboards by the Fire' were kept mustard, caraway seeds, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, truffles and morels, dried artichoke bottoms, etc.

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Information about food can be found in inventories, even if only the store-cupboard items are listed. There is a schedule for Strensham Court in Worcestershire, prepared in 1852 after the death of John Taylor, and this includes a substantial list of bottled fruits and jams kept in the storeroom and housekeeper's room.<sup>5</sup> The jams include quantities of raspberry, strawberry, apricot, gooseberry; marmalade; damson cheese; jellies of apple, blackcurrant, redcurrant. There are jars of bottled damsons, cherries, pineapple, greengages, plums, and fruit in brandy. The sauces listed include soy and mushroom. The inventory of Strensham Court reminds us particularly how these great houses depended on servant labour: there are twice as many servants' rooms as any others, not including the kitchen, brew and bakehouse. The rest of the inventory lists all the furniture, china, plate, glassware, linen, paintings, ornaments, wines, ale and cider, library books, and also the plants in what was obviously a rich garden.

When houses are restored or become museums, inventories can be particularly useful as evidence of what was once to be found there. A fine schedule exists for Aston Hall, attached to a lease from Dame Anne Holte, widow, to Sir Robert Holte, dated 1654.<sup>6</sup> Had the furnishings been reconstructed exactly, the house

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would be full of beds and bolsters, chairs, fire irons and pewter plates! I doubt if one would now be tempted to make room for the assortment of items listed in the passage between great hall and chamber:

two coffers, two olde tramelles, one olde draught nett, two gutter netts, One longe auger for boareinge Alder poles and five auger bittes and one short Auger, two iron dogges, one frameinge sawe, one little bell in the drum hole . . .

Of similar date is the inventory taken on 18 January 1659 of the goods and chattels of Dame Hester Bowyer, deceased, of Knypersley in Staffordshire.<sup>7</sup> Dame Hester was a wealthy woman, her goods being valued at over £600, over £100 of which was in her purse! As well as the furniture and linen, the list includes livestock and cut crops:

cattle 3 fatt beasts  
6 oxen  
6 cowes and a bull calfe  
1 oxe stirke one cow stirke  
5 yearlinge calves one Bull  
Two mares one yearlinge colt  
a foure yeare ould nag  
2 asses  
28 sheepe  
11 geese 3 Turkise 17 hens 2 cocks  
a fat swine a large sowe  
one leane hogge  
Corne in the Barne Hay

The contents of the dairy, bakehouse and brewery and the presence of spinning wheels, linen and woollen yarn in the house suggest a busy and self-sufficient household. Dame Hester could probably read and write. She possessed:

one standish for inke  
Two Bibles the one a large one, the other with an embroidered cover  
A psalme booke  
Culpeppers Dispensatorie  
a manuscript of receipts  
4 paper account books

There were also some sermon books. Her jewellery is also listed:

a pearle necklace	£15
a watch	£ 5
2 gold rings	£20

Another inventory in the Archives which lists gold jewellery is that of Robert Hotchkin, a plantation owner in St Catherine's, Jamaica, who died in 1710.<sup>8</sup> The appraisal drawn up after his death is found in a letter and account book, which includes lists of cargoes to be sent out to him, especially tools and machinery, and details of shipping to Jamaica. He left:

89 oz of Gold  
22 oz of Gold Dust  
5 Gold Locketts  
3 Gold Rings set with Emeralds  
1 Gold pair of Earings.  
2 pair of Gold Buttons sett with Mother of Pearl

He was a very wealthy man, as his possessions were valued at £16,924 14s 5d. At the end of his inventory, where the livestock is listed, we find the numbers of his slaves:

Working Negroe Men & Women	188	@	£30 per Head
Past Labour	39	@	£ 8 per Head
Lame	20	@	£20 per Head
Boys & Girls	47	@	£15 per Head

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Another sort of inventory is that of a company's premises. Possibly the most often inventoried for which records are found in the Archives is Soho Foundry, Smethwick\*, the workplace of the steam engine manufacturers of Boulton and Watt.<sup>9</sup> The existing records are an incomplete sequence of annual lists spanning the century 1797-1897, and are very detailed, listing everything down to the last spanner and box of screws, and indicating what a huge undertaking Soho Foundry was. Another firm for which a fascinating valuation schedule exists was the chemical works in Wheeleys Road belonging to Edmund Sturge, taken before its sale to Sturge and Clayton in 1869.<sup>10</sup> Lists for the potash room, the magnesia room, the chalk room, the salts room, the whitening shed, the phosphorus room, grinding and bottling rooms, as well as the laboratory, canal wharf and the offices, help to illuminate one of Birmingham's less-known industries. It is interesting to see in one of the store rooms a 'press for lime juice fruit', in view of the holdings of the Sturge family in the Monserrat Lime Company.<sup>11</sup>

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The church inventory is the last type to be considered here. This is the modern equivalent of the glebe terrier, but tends to give only church furnishings and plate, although occasionally the contents of the vicarage are listed. There seem to be very few surviving in the parish records for Birmingham, but, having begun with the effects of destruction, it seems fitting to end in a similar vein. The 1943 inventory for St Thomas and Immanuel includes the few items 'salvaged from St Thomas Church', [Bath Row] which was destroyed by bombing in 1940:<sup>12</sup>

Carved panel of Reredos 'The Last Supper' and three small carvings  
Brass memorial tablets Mr H R Birch and Rev W G S Whicker  
7 9" collecting plates EPBM (damaged)

Readers are very welcome to visit the Archives Department and to peruse documents such as those described above.

Let us end with the inventory as literature:

*Olivia* : O, sir, I will not be so hard-hearted; I will give out divers schedules of my beauty. It shall be inventoried; and every particle and utensil labelled to my will: as, item, two lips indifferent red; item, two gray eyes with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth.<sup>13</sup>

\* EDITOR'S NOTE: not to be confused with the Soho Manufactory, Handsworth, a short distance away from Soho House.

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### REFERENCES (all BRL)

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9. Boulton & Watt 429-442
10. 662095 IIR 12
11. see MS 1436
12. DRO 11A/60
13. *Twelfth Night* Act I, Scene V