



The Housewife in Early Modern Rural England: gender, markets and consumption

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Consumption in seventeenth-century England was a complex process. For those who could afford it, a wide range of choices was available. Wealthy households combined a range of strategies to supply their needs and wants: some items were home-produced, some were commissioned from specialists, while others were purchased ready-made. This project has analysed the household accounts of Alice Le Strange, a member of the Norfolk gentry, for the years 1606–1653. Research shows that production and consumption were much more closely related than in today's developed modern economies. Women's management of the domestic sphere involved overseeing the production of food and clothing as well as everyday consumption. Consumption typically involved direct personal relationships between consumers, producers and traders.

KEY FINDINGS

- Consumption and production were much more intimately linked than in the modern economy.
- Consumption was embedded in direct social relationships: consumption choices were not simply about what to buy, but about who to employ or favour with custom.
- Consumption both emphasised and mediated social difference.

- There was a clear gender division of labour in household management and consumption practices. This differed from modern gendered roles with men doing the shopping and Alice Le Strange managing agricultural production.
- Household accounts provide an opportunity to examine consumption as a process, following both seasonal changes and the patterns of consumption over a family's life-cycle.

Dame Alice Le Strange

Source: reproduced with the kind permission of the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk



HIGHLIGHTS

Consumption in a seventeenth-century gentry household was a complex process which involved a combination of home production for direct use, for instance of basic foodstuffs such as bread and beer; commissioned production from specialist craftsmen such as weavers, tailors and shoemakers, and the purchase of ready-made items. While some food such as fish and poultry was purchased locally, groceries required a trip to the nearest town. The variety of methods of acquiring goods and services allowed a great deal of choice to those who could afford it. A large variety of textiles and foodstuffs was consumed.

Consumption and production were much more directly linked than in developed societies today. Some items were produced at home, and others were purchased directly from their producers, or commissioned from the producer by the buyer. This had a number of implications:

- Consumption was embedded in direct social relationships. Gentry families such as the Le Stranges employed ten to fifteen servants who lived in their household, to provide services such as cooking, cleaning, transport and

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Figure 1: Food and status

	Fine white bread	Medium quality bread	Wholemeal bread	Beer	Cheese	Butter	Sheep	Pigs	Geese
1620	32.7	22.7	5.6	2.8	3.6	0.6	0.9	0.4	1.1
1621	0	14.3	4.1	1.8	3.4	0	0	0.6	0.7
	Turkeys	Hens and ducks	Rabbits	Beef (in shillings)	Eggs (in shillings)	Currants and raisins (shillings)	Fresh fish (in shillings)	Ordinary saltfish	Best saltfish
1620	1.2	8.2	2.1	18.0s.	2.4s.	2.4s.	1.6s.	5.7	0.6
1621	0	0	0	0.7s	0.1s	0	0	5.6	0

Notes: This table compares average weekly consumption patterns in a nine week period from January to March in the household of the Le Strange family in Hunstanton, Norfolk. In 1620 the family were at home,

while in 1621 only the servants were present in the household. In the absence of the gentry family the consumption patterns reverted to the normal English diet of bread, beer, cheese, bacon and saltfish, with

small quantities of geese, beef and eggs. Food items such as fine white bread, butter, poultry, rabbits, dried fruit and fresh fish were predominantly the preserve of the wealthy in this period.

The account books of Alice Le Strange



agricultural work. Their work was supplemented by others who were employed by the day or task. Employees and tenants, present and prospective, presented gifts to gentry households to gain or retain favour. Trusted craftsmen, such as elite tailors, not only made clothes, but provided information about fashion and operated as money lenders.

- Consumption was used to emphasise social difference: the gentry’s clothing, leisure activities, and diet delineated them from other social groups (see figure 1). For instance one suit of clothing for a gentlewoman might cost three times what an agricultural labourer earned in a year (see figure 2). But consumption was also used to mediate difference: the local community and favoured craftsmen benefited greatly from the gentry’s patronage. Both the gentry and those they patronised, recognised consumption as a strategic act which could be used to redistribute wealth.

- The gender division of labour was different from that of later centuries: instead of the wife taking the main responsibility for consumption, and the husband for production or income generation; roles were defined in

terms of space and routine. The wife took responsibilities for the internal running of the household, including organising agricultural production to provide food. She took responsibility for everyday consumption. The husband provided the outside face of the household and took responsibility for the majority of elite consumption activities which determined the household’s status. Male servants were responsible for shopping and cooking.

Gender roles within households have previously been studied largely via advice literature, such as Gervase Markham’s *The English Housewife* (1615). Some commentators have questioned how representative these works are. The household accounts of Alice Le Strange of Hunstanton, the basis of this research project, reveal that her management roles conformed surprisingly closely to those described by Markham. Markham described an ideal, but it seems to have been an ideal that Alice Le Strange aspired to. She actively constructed her identity as an ideal housewife, in a similar way that her husband constructed his identity as a cultured renaissance man with interests in literature, music, sport, religion and politics. Both created their identities

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Figure 2:
The components and costs of a gentle woman's dress, 1630

	£	s.	d.
For 16 yards of black tufted grosgrain at 6s 6d	5	4	
For 2 yards of black Florence satin at 15s	1	10	
For a yard of black taffeta	1	1	
For 9 dozen of black lace at 3s	1	7	
For 12 yards of lemon coloured satin at 16s	9	16	
For 22 ounces quarter of silver bone lace at 5s	5	12	
For one ounce of white silk thread		4	
For one ounce of russet silk thread		3	6
For 3 dozen silver buttons		3	
For half a yard of yellow perpetuana to border the satin petticoat		1	4
To the tailor as appeareth by his bill for making the black gown and the lemon coloured waistcoat and for an ell and a half of taffeta 19s 6d and a roll and bents pair 22s in all	5	15	
To Rodney for binding the Satin petticoat and for straightening the waistcoat		3	
(Total cost)	30	19	10

Note: This dress was made for sixteen year old Elizabeth Le Strange of Hunstanton, Norfolk to wear on the occasion of her eldest brother's marriage. The materials and tailoring were purchased in London. To put the cost into context, an agricultural labourer earned around £10 a year in 1630.

Woman carrying fowls for sale (1598)

Source: British Library, Egerton Manuscripts, Eg. 1222 fo.73



Poultry were raised by ordinary women but only consumed in wealthy households, see figure 1

partly through their consumption practices.

Household accounts have been used surprisingly little in existing studies of consumption in early modern England. They provide a rich source which reveals the multiple facets of consumption. While previous studies have focused on the consumption of things, household accounts reveal the central importance of social relationships in the process of consumption.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The study of consumption patterns in the early seventeenth century allows a reassessment of what is modern about modern consumption associated with affluent societies. Wide choices in consumption are not a modern phenomenon. In the seventeenth century consumers may not have had access to Kenyan mange tout in December, but they did consume a much wider variety of fish, wild birds, poultry and garden herbs than modern consumers. Few items of clothing were available ready-made, but a wide variety of textiles and the use of tailors made the possibilities in constructing clothing almost infinite. Despite the difficulties of travel and

communication and the absence of advertising, rural gentry families kept up with fashion and acquired elite goods from London. The main categories of expenditure: food, clothing, housing, transport and leisure, have strong similarities to those in modern society.

There were of course significant differences as well. Inequalities of wealth were greater in the seventeenth century than they are today, and the majority of the population had their consumption choices restricted by poverty. Purchasing goods directly from producers, and employing producers directly, made seventeenth-century consumption a much more direct and intimate process than consumption in modern society, and this in turn encouraged consumers to consider the economic consequences of their consumption practices. People in the seventeenth century were much more likely to consume items produced at home. This should be seen as a choice to ensure steady supply, quality and value for money, rather than as a backward 'subsistence' economy. Home production was not necessary, but it was often preferable. The study of early modern consumption reminds us how far the distance has grown between

producers and consumers in the modern economy, despite calls to 'buy local'. Social inequalities in England may have lessened over time, but the global nature of the modern economy allows consumers to hide from the true extent of inequality, avoiding direct contact with impoverished producers elsewhere in the world.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This study which ran from October 2003 to June 2007 examined domestic consumption practices in early seventeenth-century England. It was based on a case study of the household accounts of a gentry family, the Le Stranges of Hunstanton, Norfolk, which was unusually written by a woman, Lady Alice Le Strange. *The Housewife in Early Modern Rural England: gender, markets and consumption* (RES-143-25-0014) was undertaken by Dr Jane Whittle and Dr Elizabeth Griffiths of Exeter University, funded as part of the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme. The household accounts record income, expenditure, and weekly food production and consumption, and run from 1606 to 1653. Samples of the accounts were entered onto a database for analysis. This detailed case study based on an unusually rich documentary source provides a

window into wider trends in consumption practices and domestic life in a period before the industrial revolution.

PUBLICATIONS

The findings of this project will be published as a book: Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth-Century Household: The World of Alice Le Strange* (Oxford University Press, 2009). The database of the household accounts will be deposited with the ESRC data archive.

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

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