

Shopkeeping in Seventeenth-Century Oxfordshire: William Brock of Dorchester

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SUMMARY

This study takes as its starting point the 1685 inventory of William Brock, mercer, a document unusual amongst the probate records for Dorchester. Using a range of other evidence a picture of Brock, and of the economy and society of late 17th-century Dorchester, is presented. The scope is then broadened to consider the overall patterns of shopkeeping and traders in Oxfordshire, of which Brock was a part. Probate records for the county between 1516 and 1800 are analysed in terms of references to mercers and to related or overlapping occupational groups, including chapmen, grocers, shopkeepers and chandlers. The results are presented showing geographical and chronological distributions for the county. The 1697-9 returns of licensed hawkers, pedlars and petty chapmen for Oxfordshire are printed and discussed. Brief comparisons are made with the inventories of selected contemporaries of Brock. Marked differences in the distribution of shopkeepers and traders between areas of Oxfordshire emerge. Changes in nomenclature for shopkeepers over the period are suggested. An economic hierarchy of the county's towns and villages is described. Only in the later period, from the 1730s, does south Oxfordshire appear to have caught up with other parts of the county in terms of local shops and shopkeepers. These continuities and discontinuities are discussed with some reference to historical debates about the development of a consumer society in provincial England.

Amongst the probate records of the ecclesiastical peculiar of Dorchester survives an inventory of the goods of William Brock, mercer of Dorchester, who died in 1685.¹ This listing describes the house, shop and stock of a village shopkeeper in late 17th-century Oxfordshire. Beside the yeomen and husbandmen of a predominantly agricultural parish, Brock and his trade appear unusual, the pattern of supply and consumption which they display perhaps unexpected. This article sets out to discover more about William Brock and his place in Dorchester. It also suggests something of the wider context of shopkeeping and trading in early modern Oxfordshire within which Brock operated, and in doing so touches on debates amongst historians concerning the extent and timing of the growth of consumerism in rural England.²

This approach draws on the advice of an earlier historian of probate records and of provin-

¹ The burial registers for Dorchester are missing for 1678-1795. Some information may be gleaned from Bishop's Transcripts in which the return for Dorchester for 1684-5 (specifically 'since June 30, 1684') includes William Brock. See Oxfordshire Family History Society transcription of Dorchester registers by P.G. and M. Beak, 1992.

² Major contributions to this debate include J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (1978); N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society. The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-century England* (1983); M. Spufford, *The Great Reclothing of Rural England: Petty Chapmen and their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (1984); L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760* (1988); H. and L.H. Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in 18th century England* (1989).

cial shopkeepers, David Vaisey. He has pointed out the shortcomings of probate inventories, not least for what they leave out, and cautioned that 'any argument from silence based on probate inventories is extremely dangerous'. The particular traps of relying on a single case – 'of treating as abnormal what would be the norm if only we took the trouble to find enough examples' – are emphasised.³ Nor should attention be paid only to those documents with unusually full detail. This study does take a single inventory as its starting point but heeds the necessary notes of caution sounded by Vaisey and others.⁴ Brock is therefore considered at two levels, first in the setting of Dorchester, its particular location and social and economic circumstances, and second in relation to other mercers and traders in early modern Oxfordshire, particularly those for whom probate records survive.

I

First let us turn to the inventory of William Brock:

A True Inventorie taken the Twentie seventh day of June in the first year of the raign of our sovereign Lord James the second by the Grace of God of England Scotland France and Ireland King Defender of the faith etc Ann[o] Dom[jini] 1685 of all the Goods Chattles and Cattles of W[illia]m Brock Late of Dorchester in the Countie Oxon Mercer Deceased and praysed as followeth

£ s. d.

Imp[rimis] His Waring Apparrill and Money in his purse 05.10.0

Item In the Chamber over the shop on[e] featherbeed on feather bolster three feather pillows on flock pillow on Rugg on Coverlead on Blanecoat on Joyned Beedstead with Curtains and Vallians six Leather Chairs two Little Tables on box on pair of Andirons on pair of Little Doggiron with other small thing 05.04.6

Item In the Chamber over the Hall on feather beed on flock beed on rugg and Coverlead two feather bolsters on Beedstead w[i]th Curtains and Valians on Table and Cloath on Wainscoat Chair two Trunks on Chest Ten pair of Sheets six Table Cloaths three Dozen of Napkins with other Linen Three silver spoons and a Dish 08.06.8

Item In the Chamber over the Buttery on Beedstead and seaven sacks with other Lumber 00.13.4

Item In the Hall Two Tables seaven Joyned stooles three Chairs on jack Two spitts on pair of Andirons with fireshovel and Tongs two Pair of Hangers on pair of Dogirons on gridiron and Toasting Iron with other lumber 01.12.6

Item In the Kitching four kittles three brass potts four skilletts on Warming pan two brass skimmers on brass spoon two brass Candlesticks eighteen P[e]wter Platters Eleven

³ D.G. Vaisey, 'Probate Inventories and Provincial Retailers in the Seventeenth Century', in P. Riden (ed.), *Probate Records and the Local Community* (1985), 91–111.

⁴ See e.g. L. Weatherill, *op. cit.* who has made the single most extensive use of probate records in this connection.

Pewter plates two Pewer [sic] flaggons six Pewter Poringers on Joyned Cubbard on Iron Grate with other Lumber	01.01.4
Item In the Buttery Three Barrills two stands two Tubbs on Kiver on Hashbowle	00.10.6
Item In a Backhouse in Lumber	00.06.8
Item In the Shop on Dozen of ordinary Boys hose and Ten pair of first hose	00.10.0
Item on p[ar]cill of fine Threed	00.12.6
Item on p[ar]cill of Coullered Threed	00.13.4
Item on p[ar]cill of Whitebrown Threed	00.18.6
Item on p[ar]cill of yearn and Woosteed	00.05.6
Item on Dozen of ordinary Tapes and small remnants	00.18.0
Item Two Papers of Filliteing and a paper of Died Linen	00.07.6
Item Two Dozen and 1/2 of Red and White Tape half a Dozen of Twist and on p[ar]cill of open tapes	01.08.6
Item on p[ar]cill of Leather points and on p[ar]cill of Leather Laces and Thread Laces	00.04.6
Item on p[ar]cill of small books	00.12.6
Item four Dozen of pins and od remnants	01.01.6
Item More in the Shop on small p[ar]cill Ginger on p[ar]cill of Rice on small p[ar]cill of pepper with other spices	00.16.8
Item On small p[ar]cill of Writeing Paper	00.03.6
Item In Hott waters and Brandy	00.13.4
Item On p[ar]cill of Candles	00.04.6
Item On small p[ar]cill of Starch	00.06.8
Item In Treacle	00.02.4
Item On p[ar]cill of White salt	01.04.6
Item On p[ar]cill of Brown Sugar	1.06.4
Item On p[ar]cill of Allom on p[ar]cill of pitch and on p[ar]cill of Tarr	00.16.8
Item on p[ar]cill of Blewpotts on small P[ar]cill of speckled Cups and a p[ar]cill of Beerglasses	00.10.4
Item six Remnants of ferrett Ribbon four of Tafetty and three of Cotten	00.16.6
Item half a Dozen of Beehives	00.02.0
Item Two Remnants of Sacking	00.12.6
Item on p[ar]cill of Earthen Ware	01.01.6
Item on Oatmeal Mill	00.06.8
Item on Iron Beam with scales Weights and Measures	01.00.6
Item on small p[ar]cill of Balls and Netts	00.01.0
Item On p[ar]cill of Oatmeal	00.03.6
Item On Brass Morter and pestile	00.10.6
Item In Nayles of al sorts	00.13.4
Item on peece and a Remnant of brase	01.15.6

[Total £44 6s. 2d.]

John Buckland } Prayers
 William Keen }

Brock's inventory is an imperfect source. The total value has to be provided. Compared with other published examples⁵ and some of the manuscript inventories referred to for Oxfordshire, the descriptions of stock lack detail. No will or probate account survives to complement the evidence here. No information on debts and credits owed and owing to Brock is available. However, the historian's lot is to work with imperfect data and, having acknowledged these gaps, there remains much valuable information, both within the inventory and in sources which can be linked to it.

Brock lived over the shop. His house had six rooms, hall, kitchen, buttery and three upstairs chambers, plus a shop and a 'backhouse' for storage. This places him amongst the 'households of middle rank' identified by Lorna Weatherill from her sample of some 3,300 inventories as having houses with between three and six rooms.⁶ The presence of fireirons indicates fireplaces in the chamber over the shop (this and the value and extent of the furnishings suggest this was the best bedroom), and in the hall (where the fireplace for cooking seems to be located). Brock's household belongings suggest a degree of comfort but the only hint of luxury goods is the three silver spoons. Other indicators of sophisticated consumption,⁷ such as clocks, pictures, looking glasses and other silverware, are absent. Unlike some tradesmen Brock does not seem to have kept a horse, nor did he, like other of his neighbours in Dorchester,⁸ farm as well as running another business.

The stock listed in the Dorchester shop is varied but sparse. This variety bears out Vaisey's conclusion that, in Oxfordshire, the 'mercers were the least specialised of all the shopkeepers', their stock containing many kinds of cloth, haberdashery such as thread or ribbons used in making-up or decorating garments, a few ready-made clothes, some hardware and household goods, grocery items, and some simple medicines.⁹ In certain respects Brock's stock mirrors this general picture. A striking exception is the almost total absence of the rich array of different fabrics found in most mercers' inventories. By contrast many haberdashery items appear, if not of an exotic or expensive kind, together with ready-made hose (an item needing frequent replacement), foodstuffs and spirits. There are blue pots, speckled cups, beer glasses and earthenware. As well as writing paper there is a parcel of 'small books', those 'cheap little paperbacks' ranging from 'small godly books' to 'small merry books', ballads and stories which, thanks to the work of Margaret Spufford,¹⁰ we now know to have been widely available in 17th-century England. Finally there are the less predictable items, the beehives and the balls and nets.

If the goods stocked have the variety of a general shopkeeper then their quantities are small. Although the measures (notably the 'parcills') are vague the individual and total values confirm this. At £44 6s. 2d. Brock's inventory is worth strikingly less than those of contemporary rural mercers like Timothy Bignall of Deddington (1684) with £431 2s. 3½d., William Rose of Ken-cott (1680) with £487 8s. 7d., or Thomas Woodroufe of Lambourn, Berkshire (1695) with

⁵ See e.g. D.G. Vaisey, 'A Charlbury Mercer's Shop', *Oxoniensia*, xxxi (1966), 107-16; chapmen's inventories printed in M. Spufford, op. cit. 149-235.

⁶ Weatherill, op. cit. 6. Her sample of inventories is drawn from Kent, Hampshire, Cambridgeshire, the north-east, the north-west, Staffordshire, Cumbria, and London (almost 3,000 inventories), with a further 300 from the Court of Orphans in the City of London.

⁷ Ibid. 203-7.

⁸ See e.g. John Andrews, innholder of Dorchester, who in 1640 had arable holdings producing wheat, oats, pease and barley, hemp grounds and a tanhouse as well as his inn (Oxfordshire Archives, MS. Wills Pec. 65/1/11-12).

⁹ Vaisey, 'Probate Inventories and Provincial Retailers', 105-7.

¹⁰ M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories. Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-century England* (1981).

£244 5s. 0d.¹¹ Of his inventory value, 12.4% is accounted for by Brock's clothes and cash in his purse, 40.1% by household belongings, and 47.5% by shop goods. The high proportions of inventory value tied up in the business of economically active testators is a consistent feature of this period. Here again Brock's 47.5% seems low compared with near contemporaries like William Rose, 69.3% of whose wealth was in shop goods and 'the shoppe booke'. William Brock's inventory tells us a good deal about his house and shop suggesting a wide-ranging general provision of items for which demand would be of a local and day-to-day kind. It also leaves us with questions, not least about the modest levels of stock, to which Brock's family circumstances and setting in Dorchester may help provide answers.

The Brocks were not a long-established Dorchester family. William was neither baptised nor married there. The surname appears in the parish registers from 1644, with entries concentrated in the following fifty years and relating principally to the christenings of children of John Brock and of William Brock.¹² It is likely that the family was centred on the nearby villages of Toot and Marsh Baldon and were of yeoman status.¹³ A bond, surviving amongst William Brock's probate papers, gives his wife's name as Ann.¹⁴ On 15 September 1663 a William Brock married Ann Cawket at Toot Baldon, and on 3 July 1664 John, son of William Brock, was baptised in Dorchester. John was buried there on 8 July 1664, with the baptisms of another son, Hermes, and a daughter, Dorothy, following in 1666 and 1671 respectively. This may have been a re-marriage for William as the Dorchester baptismal register refers to three earlier offspring of William Brock, sons William (1652) and Roger (1658) and daughter Mary (1653).¹⁵ The absence of a baptismal date and the possibility of more than one marriage make any estimate of William's age at death difficult, but it is likely that his inventory reflects the state of his business in his old age. From the absence of references to younger Brocks or to other mercers in Dorchester in the years immediately following his death it seems the business was not handed on. The relatively transitory nature of the Brock mercer's business was not unusual in early modern Oxfordshire. Eighty-two mercers in 29 places outside Oxford left probate records during the period 1516–1800.¹⁶ Whilst some places had several mercers during this time, very few shopkeeping dynasties, such as the Johnsons of Woodstock, emerge.

Historians of small towns in the early modern period have commented on the influential role played by mercers in their communities. For example, in Retford (Notts.) mercers invested heavily in property in and out of the town and dominated civic government through the corporation.¹⁷ In Dorchester there were no corporate or guild structures to deter enterprising incomers or to provide a focus for local élites. It is interesting to find William Brock as a

¹¹ Timothy Bignall: Oxfordshire Archives, MS. Wills Oxon. 77/2/25; William Rose: Oxfordshire Archives, MS. Wills Oxon. 85/3/28; Thomas Woodroufe: Berkshire Record Office, D/A1/139/24a. (I owe this last reference to the kindness of Julie Shuttleworth.)

¹² Dorchester parish registers (see note 1 above) contain 15 baptismal entries for Brocks between 1644–71, 13 of which relate to John and William. There are 7 burials between 1653 and 1708/9 and 2 marriages in 1693 and 1774.

¹³ A Dorchester baptismal entry of 1653 refers to William Brock of Baldon. The parish registers for Toot and Marsh Baldon (see transcripts in Oxfordshire Archives) contain 33 and 15 Brock entries respectively for the 17th century. Records for the manor of Marsh Baldon include leases to members of the Brock family, described as yeomen, in the period 1605–79 (Oxfordshire Archives, Wi.I/xxi/2–4, Wi.II/i/47,52).

¹⁴ Oxfordshire Archives, MS. Wills Pec. 65/5/3.

¹⁵ Dorchester parish registers (see note 1 above).

¹⁶ Based on occupational indexes to probate records of Oxfordshire peculiars 1536–1837 and to MS. Wills Oxon. 1733–1800, at Oxfordshire Archives, and on E. Cheyne and D.M. Barratt, *Probate Records of the Courts of the Bishop and Archdeacon of Oxford 1516–1732*, vols. i and ii (Brit. Rec. Soc. 1981, 1985).

¹⁷ D. Marcombe, *English Small Town Life. Retford 1520–1642* (1993), 105, 125.

churchwarden in 1674,¹⁸ a mark of his status but in a setting different from the bases in large towns of many mercers.

Dorchester in the late 17th century has been described as 'rather larger than the average village and appears to have been a market town'.¹⁹ The notion that Dorchester was a market town is a persistent one. However, despite some topographical hints of a market place,²⁰ mention of a guildhall,²¹ and references in secondary histories to former markets (e.g. in 1847, 'The market has long been discontinued, but there is still an annual pleasure-fair on Easter Tuesday'²²), no firm evidence of an active market emerges. It is not mentioned by Leland or successive antiquarian visitors, who concentrate on Dorchester's peaks of importance in the prehistoric, Roman and Saxon periods and before the removal of the episcopal see from Dorchester to Lincoln in the 1070s. Richard Blome (1673) characterised Dorchester as '... a Town formerly of more note ... yet as being seated on the Road (although it hath no Market) is well frequented, having several Inns and Houses of Entertainment ...'.²³ Jurisdictionally 17th-century Dorchester was run by its parish vestry and by manor courts, with no reference to a market charter, mayor or corporation. Economically it was seen, in 1728, as 'a poor town without any manner of trade nor likely much to improve'.²⁴ Rather Dorchester functioned as a predominantly agricultural parish with the special factor of a major road from London superimposed. This was the economic context within which William Brock ran his shop and which spelt some prosperity, if not urban status, for Dorchester in the 17th century.

The village was a large one. Population estimates for 1662 (based on Hearth Tax returns) and 1676 (based on the Compton Census) produce totals of 395 and 465 respectively. By comparison, in 1676 Marsh Baldon's estimated population was 162 and Toot Baldon's 102.²⁵ Surviving domestic buildings show that Dorchester in the 17th century was both prosperous enough and sufficiently aware of new house plans and fittings to build or rebuild extensively. There is clear 'evidence of new house types appearing to meet the changing domestic requirements of the time and suggestive of accumulated capital being available for investment in building in the early 17th century'.²⁶ Interestingly both rural and urban styles occur.

This use of a rural building type is seen in the adoption of the lobby entry house, using a detached site. Such buildings made their appearance on Dorchester High Street, where they served as farmhouses to holdings in the fields surrounding the village. This landscape included large open fields and commons to the north, some open fields and meadows to the south and south-east and areas of enclosure nearest to Dorchester itself. Farming was mixed, with extensive arable. Inventories regularly contain references to hemp-growing. Land ownership was dominated by two manorial estates, belonging to the Berties, earls of Abingdon and the Fetti-

¹⁸ S.A. Peyton (ed.), *Churchwardens' Presentments in the Oxfordshire Peculiars of Dorchester, Thame and Banbury* (O.R.S. x), 126.

¹⁹ *V.C.H. Oxon.* vii, 48.

²⁰ K. Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire* (1975), 103, says of the street pattern, 'It may have originated in the early medieval period in an attempt to found a borough and the remains of a small triangular market place, now partly built over, can still be discerned west of the abbey gates.'

²¹ *V.C.H. Oxon.* vii, 41: the earl of Abingdon's estate accounts for 1761 refer to the leasing of the Guildhall, Dorchester, which was ruinous and to be rebuilt (Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon. b 185-6). I owe this reference to the kindness of Mavis Cherill.

²² *Post Office Directory of Oxfordshire* (1847), 2171.

²³ Richard Blome, *Britannia: or a Geographical Description of the Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1673), 189.

²⁴ Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon. c 381, f. 48.

²⁵ P.R.O., E 179/164/504, quoted in *V.C.H. Oxon.* vii, 48; A. Whiteman (ed.), *The Compton Census of 1676: A Critical Edition* (Brit. Academy Records of Soc. and Econ. Hist., n.s. x, 1986), 426. The methods of estimation used are those described in M. Drake, *Historical Demography: Problems and Projects* (Open University course D301, Unit 6, 1974), 82.

²⁶ M. Airs, 'Domestic Buildings in the Village', in J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *Dorchester Through the Ages* (1985), 65.

places. Both were absentee landlords and Dorchester was characterised by large numbers of small and medium-sized tenanted holdings.²⁷ Michael Havinden has concluded that the rural economy of Oxfordshire enjoyed a time of general prosperity between 1580 and 1640, with the wealth of the average husbandman rising by around two thirds, but that life was less prosperous in the following years, 1640–1730. The exception to this trend was the area in which Dorchester lay, south Oxfordshire, the Vale of Oxford and the Chilterns, where access to the London market by water routes cushioned any recession, sustaining arable production and producing a shift to wheat and pulses away from barley.²⁸

As well as being in a relatively well-to-do agricultural area, Dorchester had another source of wealth, the main road from London to Oxford, Worcester, Gloucester and South Wales, carried into the village over the river Thames by the bridge at the southern end of the village. Again local buildings reflect the resulting wealth and influences. Many along the High Street are urban in character, notably the inns, which were thriving in Brock's time. An innholder's inventory of 1641 was worth no less than £718 4s. 2d. and refers to an extension to the inn, 'the hither new lodging'.²⁹ The George, White Hart and Bull Inns all show evidence of 17th-century building or refurbishment. As Malcolm Airs comments, Dorchester's buildings demonstrate 'that good quality timber-framed buildings with ostentatious fenestration and prominent chimneystacks were being built for fashionable citizens in the early 17th century. It also indicates a level of prosperity that was able to afford both intricate carved decoration and lavish quantities of window glass'.³⁰ Despite the overlay of fashionable brick and rendering which was applied to many timber-framed Dorchester buildings in 'the boom years of the 18th century'³¹ it is apparent that the village had experienced a relatively broad-based prosperity in the preceding century. The road played a major role in this, bringing goods, post, ideas, news, travellers and their business. People from the neighbouring area must also have been drawn there for a variety of reasons as, for example, in a later diary, the Reverend James Newton of Nuneham Courtenay recorded, on 12 March 1760, '... rode to Dorchester & left a Letter there for Polly & bespoke Nails for my Landau'.³²

Thus Brock's business could draw, for customers, supplies of goods and outside contacts likely to foster notions of fashion and consumption, on both Dorchester's local agrarian economy and the village's role as a thoroughfare place. It is to the wider picture of shopkeeping and trading in Oxfordshire, of which Brock was also a part, that we now turn.

II

One hundred and thirteen mercers are recorded in the probate courts of the archdeaconery, consistory and peculiars of Oxfordshire between 1516 and 1800.³³ Thirty-one of these, the

²⁷ *V.C.H. Oxon.* vii, 44–51.

²⁸ M.A. Havinden, 'The Rural Economy of Oxfordshire 1580–1730' (Oxford Univ. unpubl. D.Phil. thesis, 1961): Bodl. MS. B.Litt. d. 869.

²⁹ Oxfordshire Archives, MS. Wills Pec. 65/1/11–12. The probate papers of John Andrews the elder, innholder of Dorchester, include a will referring to four sons and five daughters, and two inventories, the first valued at £533 14s. 8d., the second at £718 4s. 2d.

³⁰ M. Airs, op. cit. 65.

³¹ *Ibid.* 69.

³² G. Hannah (ed.), *The Deserted Village. The Diary of an Oxfordshire Rector, James Newton of Nuneham Courtenay 1736–86* (1992), 91.

³³ See note 16 above. It should be noted that, whilst many historians commonly refer to periods beginning and ending in the mid 17th century or the second quarter of the 18th century, a pattern reinforced in this instance by the arrangement of the probate records, the resulting spans vary both in number of years and the rate of survival of probate records.

TABLE 1. MERCERS IN OXFORDSHIRE 1516-1800 (BASED ON PROBATE RECORDS)

	1516-1640	1641-1732	1733-1800	Total
Adderbury	1		1	
Bampton	1	1		2
Banbury	6	6		12
Bicester	2			2
Brize Norton		1		1
Burford	4	2	1	7
Charlbury	2		3	5
Chipping Norton	3		2	5
Cropley	1			1
Deddington	3	1		4
Dorchester		1		1
(Church) Enstone		1		1
Eynsham	1			1
Henley-on-Thames		1	1	2
Hook Norton	1			1
Ibstone	1			1
Kencott		1		1
Kidlington	1			1
Kidlington & Kirtlington	1			1
Milton-under-Wychwood	1			1
Oxford (parish unspecified)*	4	10	3	17
Oxford, St Mary Magdalen*	1			1
Oxford, All Saints*	3		1	4
Oxford, St Michael*	1	1	1	3
Oxford, St Martin*	1		1	2
Oxford, St Peter East*	2	1		3
Oxford, St Peter Bailey*	1			1
(Upper) Tadmorton		1		1
(New) Thame	3			3
Shutford			3	3
Standlake	2			2
Stanton Harcourt (Sutton)		1		1
Steeple Aston			1	1
Watlington	3		1	4
Witney	3	3		6
Woodstock (New)	2	6	1	9
Woodstock (Old)			1	1
Total	55	38	20	113

* Oxford: total 31

largest single concentration, were in Oxford. The remainder were spread throughout the county.

Only Banbury, outside Oxford, reached double figures with 12. Woodstock, Burford, Witney, Charlbury and Chipping Norton, all in the north and west of the county and all market towns, had 5 or more mercers. Market towns in the south of the county, Watlington, Thame and Henley, had relatively few. Smaller numbers of mercers were also found in declined towns, like Deddington, and in some villages, like Dorchester. Only in Oxford, Burford and Woodstock are mercers found in each period between 1516 and 1800. During the earlier period 55 mercers are recorded in 21 places, from 1641 to 1732 38 appear in 14 places, and between 1733-1800 there are 20 mercers in 9 places. The geographical distribution of mercers is shown in Fig.1.

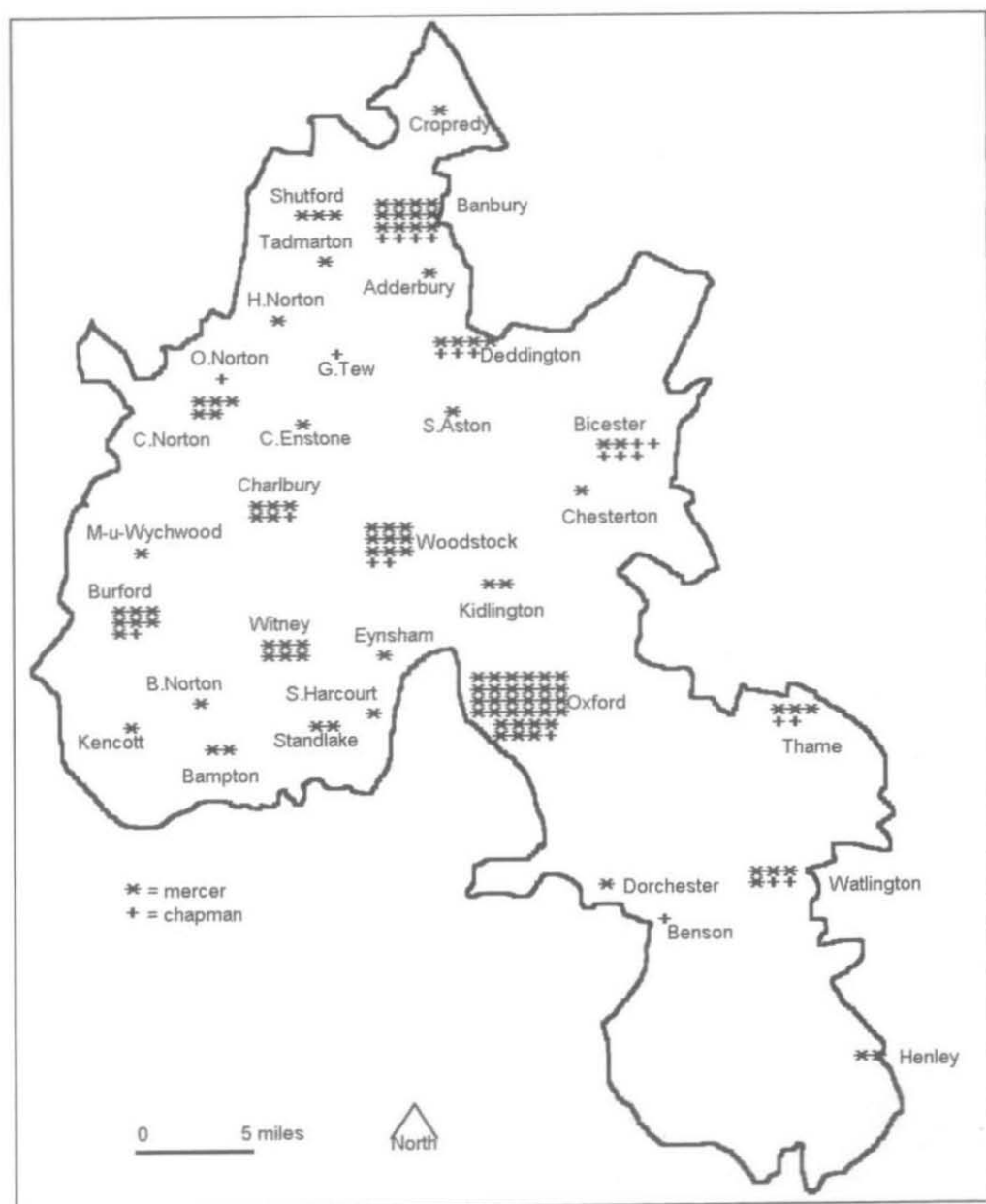


Fig. 1. Mercers and chapmen in Oxfordshire 1516–1800 (based on probate records).

From this mass of general information particular attention has been paid to other mercers, who like Brock, were operating outside the large towns of Oxfordshire in the 1680s. Within the confines of this article one such mercer, Timothy Bignall of Deddington, has been chosen for more detailed comparison with Brock.

Bignall's inventory was exhibited at the probate court in 1684, the year before that of Brock, and totalled £431 2s. 3½d.³⁴ This places him in the range of inventory values, three to four hundred pounds, characteristic of his peers, although not, as we have seen, of Brock.³⁵ Bignall operated in north Oxfordshire in a declined market town, lying at the crossroads of important roads (from Oxford to Banbury and Buckingham to Chipping Norton), with an economy in which open field farming, absentee landowners, prosperous local freehold and tenant farmers, traders and innkeeping all featured. Local government was conducted through manor courts and parish vestry. Deddington was larger than Dorchester, with a population probably exceeding 1,000 in the late 17th century.³⁶ Unlike Dorchester, but like other towns and villages in north and west Oxfordshire, religious dissent was strong in Deddington. Timothy Bignall has been identified³⁷ as appearing before the archdeacon's court for nonconformity in 1684 and his house was licensed as a Presbyterian meeting place in 1672.

His inventory was appraised by two gentlemen from Chipping Norton and a Deddington cordwainer. They listed 46% of the inventory value (£199) as debts owed to Bignall. His house had four rooms plus a cellar, a little room and his shop but his household goods represented only 5% of the value. Corn in the barn suggests some farming but the inventory shows resources concentrated above all on the shop business. Bignall's stock runs to 64 entries, dominated by a wide variety of cloth in large quantities, e.g. 186 yards of narrow woollen cloth, 238 yards of serge, 22 yards of crepe, 4 yards of 'bengall', 77 yards of flannel. As in Brock's shop there were haberdashery items, e.g. buttons, hooks and eyes, cards and pins, and of ready-made items only hose. Finally there were assorted items like horn combs, candles, brandy, plums, currants, soap, spice and books to the value of £2. Bignall's shop had a counter, shelves and two chairs. Like Brock, Bignall had three silver spoons, but also a silver cup and a bridle and a saddle for a horse. The big differences between Brock's business and that of his Deddington contemporary are the absence of a full stock of fabrics and of the debts and credits that went with a currently active mercer's enterprise. Beyond this there is much to indicate the similar range of commodities offered to their customers and the role of mercers as general shopkeepers.

However, going to William Brock's shop was only one of the ways in which his potential customers could buy goods. Permanent shops took their place alongside markets, fairs and a range of itinerant traders – chapmen, hawkers and pedlars – as sources of purchases. Information on the 25 chapmen also found in Oxfordshire probate records has therefore been added to Fig. 1. Margaret Spufford has called chapmen the 'mercers of the poor' with stocks chiefly of textiles, haberdashery and ready-made clothing accessories. They were a key part of the distribution network, travelling on foot or horseback 'in the manner of a peripatetic village shop'³⁸ and often setting up a stall on market or other days, 'financed and furnished with goods by bigger tradesmen from Oxford or a nearby large town.'³⁹ Some became shopkeeping

³⁴ Oxfordshire Archives, MS. Wills Oxon. 77/2/25.

³⁵ See note 11 above. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 208–14, reaches a similar conclusion based on her study of inventory values from other areas.

³⁶ *V.C.H. Oxon.* xi, 81–120.

³⁷ M. Clapinson (ed.), *Bishop Fell and Nonconformity* (O.R.S. lii), 55, 72.

³⁸ Spufford, *Great Reclothing*, 58; Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*, 120.

³⁹ Vaisey, 'Probate Inventories and Provincial Retailers', 105.

chapmen, with a permanent base allowing them to add less portable goods, like grocery and alcohol, to their offerings. Spufford emphasises that travelling chapmen of the 17th century were 'a very highly mobile group'. Just how mobile she illustrates by a case involving an Oxfordshire chapwoman which is worth quoting in full:

In 1630, Mary Prosser of Adderbury, Oxfordshire, was examined before Sir James Ashley, J.P., Recorder for Dorset. Mary was a chapwoman married to a shipwright, and mother of a son old enough to take charge of a horse. She had probably originally come from Wellford, in Berkshire, and had a sister from Wellford living in Adderbury, learning to make bone-lace from a sister-in-law. She, with her husband, her son, and her lace-making sister, set off from Adderbury in the autumn with a horse and a 'hamper of small wares' for Woodbury Hill Fair in Dorset. They travelled *via* Deddington, Oxford, Faringdon, Marlborough and Andover. There Mary remained three days, while her husband and son travelled round the countryside selling small wares. Then they moved on to Wilford, where they spent two days, Newton near Newbury, Salisbury, and Wilton, where they spent three days. Then, for some reason, the family split up; the son remained with the horse, while Mary, her husband, and her sister travelled to Woodbury Hill, on a cartload of hops. There her husband left Mary, in order to rejoin their son. When Mary, who was possibly financially distressed without horse, or hamper, or husband, appeared before the recorder, she was accused of stealing garments, cloth and cutlery from the booths of Dorchester merchants.⁴⁰

The inventory values of chapmen⁴¹ place them below the mercer/shopkeeper in the hierarchy of trading and supply. To take just one south Oxfordshire example, John Reed, chapman of Watlington, had goods worth £33 11s. 10d. in 1662.⁴² His house had a chamber, hall, buttery and backside. His stock was:

	£ s. d.
Item 2 peeces of Lockeram	7.00.0
Item 65 els of course lockeram	2.10.0
Item a remnant of canvis & four remnants of course cloth	0.16.0
Item for 5 remnants of blew linnen	0.10.0
Item for 4 peeces of Scotch cloth	1.08.0
Item 8 remnants of shazey(?) Hallon one remnant of Diminitie one remnant of callicoe	0.14.0
It[e]m 10 ells of Holland att 2s 1d p[er] ell	1.00.10
It[e]m for Lace and ribnid	4.00.0
Item for a little box of cotten ribbond & remnants of other ribbnid	1.08.0
Item a p[ar]cell of stockings & gloves	1.10.0

Reed's lifestyle and range of goods is modest but the overlap with the role of shopkeepers like Brock is significant. This is particularly clear where a chapman set up a permanent shop in addition to any itinerant selling. Such was Ellis Edwards, chapman of Bicester, whose inventory value in 1714 was £136 5s. 1d. G.H. Dannatt writes of him, 'Thus did one man play his many parts of wood-merchant, rag and bone man, scrap metal dealer, supplier of dainty trimmings for the use of ladies, and general merchant, all concealed under the word 'chapman'.⁴³

⁴⁰ B.L. Harleian MS. 6715, 'Examinations before Sir James Ashley, J.P. (Recorder for Dorset), 1614-34', ff. 87 and v., quoted in Spufford, *Great Reckoning*, 23.

⁴¹ Spufford, *op. cit.*, Documentary Appendix, 149-235.

⁴² Oxfordshire Archives, MS. Wills Oxon. 56/2/16 (I owe this reference to the kindness of Adrienne Rosen).

⁴³ G.H. Dannatt, 'Bicester in the 17th and 18th centuries', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi/xxvii (1961/2), 252-4.

Another source potentially helpful in tracking down Oxfordshire chapmen is the lists of itinerant traders licensed in 1697-9. These arise from an Act of 1696-7 to license all hawkers, pedlars and petty chapmen working on foot or with a pack animal at the rate of £4 per person or beast. Just over 2,500 such traders were licensed in England and Wales in 1697-8⁴⁴ and their name, place of abode and county, and amount paid was recorded. The returns for 1697-9 for Oxfordshire⁴⁵ were:

1697-8		
Thomas Joy	Henley upon Thames	£8
Merry Merry	Charlbury	£4
Joseph Merry	Finstock	£4
Nehemiah Male	Burford	£4
John Bryan	Burford	£4
William Evans	City of Oxford	£4
John Steward	Watlington	£4
1698-9		
Robert Carruthers	Thame	£4
William Carruthers	Thame	£4
Mary Charlewood	Hooking Norton	£4
George Carruthers	Thame	£4
Thomas Nicholson	Thame	£4
John Haslop	Bocksome ⁴⁶	£4

These thirteen names are spread throughout the county and none occur in both years. Since Dorchester lies by the Thames, then the county boundary with Berkshire, and its two closest market towns, Wallingford and Abingdon, were in Berkshire, the returns for that county⁴⁷ were also examined. Some of the traders based in Berkshire would surely have reached south Oxfordshire. This search exposed a striking dearth of licensed traders in Oxfordshire whilst Berkshire had no fewer than 99 hawkers, pedlars and chapmen in 1697-8. They were overwhelmingly based in Reading, named by 87 traders as their place of abode. The town must have been the focus for a formidable network of selling and supply. One trader, Charles Smith, lived in Abingdon, but none in Wallingford. Other neighbouring counties too had much larger numbers of traders than Oxfordshire, with notable concentrations in particular towns, such as Alton in Hampshire, Tetbury in Gloucestershire and Olney in Buckinghamshire. Although the incidence of mercers as opposed to chapmen in Oxfordshire probate records (113:25) had suggested fewer such traders the degree of difference with surrounding counties in the 1697-9 returns is so great as to indicate some additional factor at work, whether a gross inconsistency in licensing or a real difference in trading patterns has not so far become clear.

It was not only chapmen who would have impinged on William Brock's business world. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the period for which the majority of Oxfordshire probate records

⁴⁴ Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*, 116-21.

⁴⁵ P.R.O., AO 3/370 (licences granted for a year from 24 June 1697) and AO 3/371 (licences granted from Midsummer 1698 to Midsummer 1699).

⁴⁶ Probably Bloxham.

⁴⁷ P.R.O., AO 3/370. (Names are not grouped by county in a register of licences which runs to 85 pages.)

TABLE 2. CHANDLERS (C), GROCERS (G), SHOPKEEPERS (S), AND TALLOW CHANDLERS (T) IN OXFORDSHIRE 1516-1800 (BASED ON PROBATE RECORDS)

	1516-1640	1641-1732	1733-1800	Total
Adderbury		2C	S,T	4
Ascott under Wychwood		T		1
Bampton		C,T	C,2S	5
Banbury	2C,T	2C,2S,3T	6G,S	17
Barford St. Michael			T	1
Bicester		T	4G,6S	11
Bloxham			G,2S	3
Brize Norton			G,S	2
Burford	2C,T	C,T	C,3T	9
Caversham			S	1
Charlton-on-Otmoor			S	1
Chinnor			2S	2
Chipping Norton		2C,G	4G,S	8
Churchill			S	1
Clanfield		C	T	2
Clifton Hampden			S	1
Cogges		C		1
Coombe			S	1
Cropredy		T	G	2
Cuddesdon			S	1
Deddington	C	T	T	3
Dorchester		C,T	C,2G,S	6
Enstone			2S	2
Eynsham		C,2T	C	4
Filkins			S	1
Garsington		C		1
Goring			G	1
Great Milton			2S	2
Hailey		T		1
Hanborough			S	1
Henley-on-Thames	C	3G,3T	S	8
Hook Norton		T	G,S	3
Islip		T	4G	5
Kidlington		C		1
Kirtlington		G,S	S	3
Nettlebed			G	1
Oddington			S	1
Oxford	7C	35C, 4T	2C, 12G	60
Ramsden			T	1
Rotherfield Greys		G	S	2
Shipton-under-Wychwood		T		1
Shutford			S	1
South Newington		C		1
Steeple Aston			T	1
Swalcliffe			S	1
Swerford		T		1
Swyncombe			S	1
Tetsworth			S	1
Thame	C	3C,S,3T	4G	12
Towersey			G	1
Watlington		G,T	3G,S	6
Wheatley		2G		2
Witney	C,G,T	6C,2T	2C,2G,T	16
Woodstock	C	2C	2G,T	6

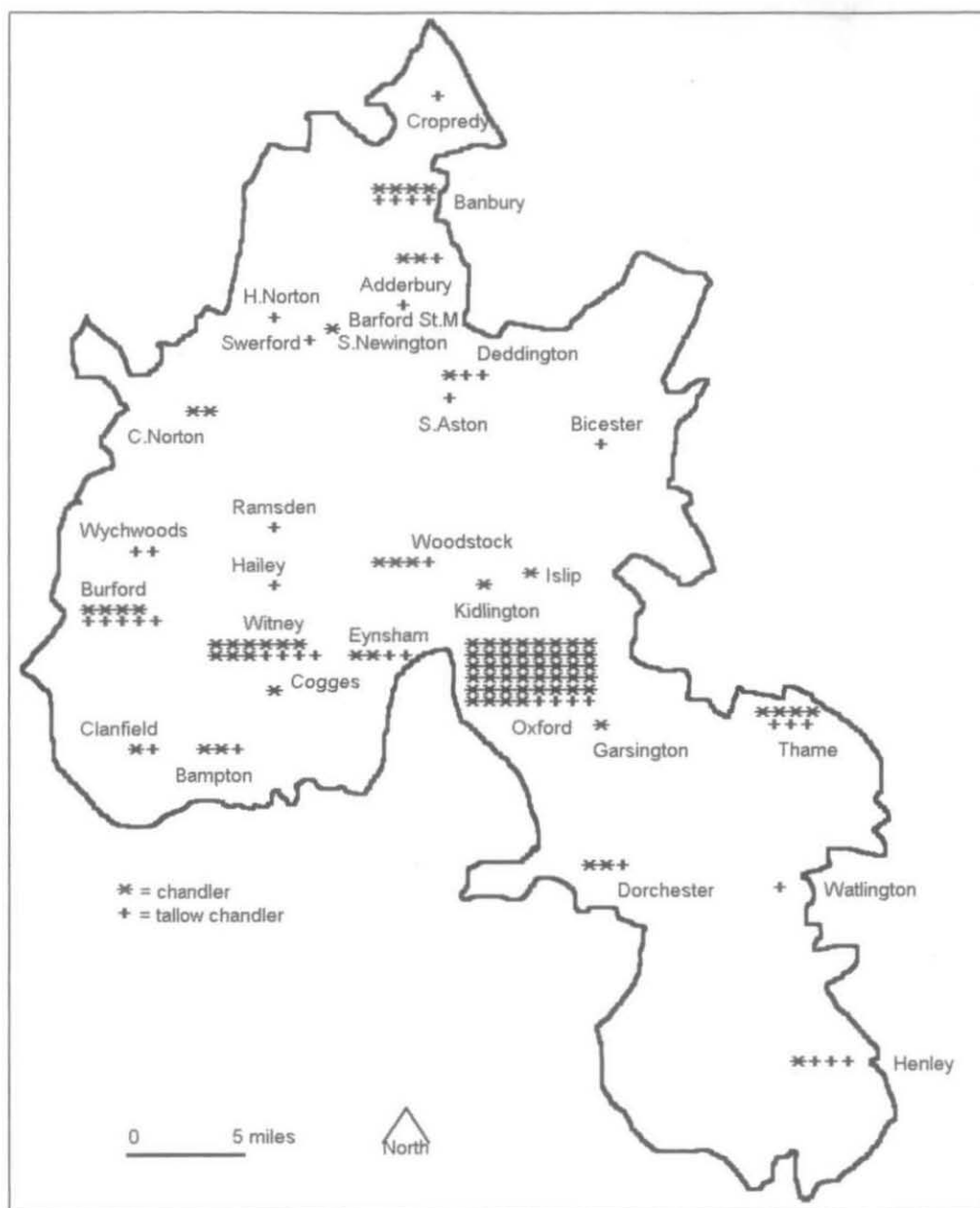


Fig. 2. Chandlers and tallow chandlers in Oxfordshire 1516–1800 (based on probate records).



Fig. 3. Shopkeepers and grocers in Oxfordshire 1516-1800 (based on probate records).

survive, the terms mercer, draper and grocer were often interchangeable.⁴⁸ In the Oxford area Vaisey has found that 'both mercers and chandlers were general dealers in all kinds of hardware and foods but each was firmly based on its own specialities.'⁴⁹ Clearly the numbers, location and designation of such traders may provide important additional elements of the picture. Were there other shopkeepers in Dorchester? Did the terms used vary over time or by area within the county? Does the distribution pattern of other traders confirm the marked concentrations in north and west Oxfordshire demonstrated by mercers and chapmen (see Fig. 1)? In order to provide a comparative base upon which to consider such questions in Brock's case and, it is hoped, in the case of other individual shopkeepers who may be studied by Oxfordshire historians, references in the probate records of the archdeaconery, consistory and peculiar courts covering Oxfordshire between 1516 and 1800 have been extracted for chandlers and tallow chandlers (see Fig. 2 and Table 2), shopkeepers and grocers (see Fig. 3 and Table 2), and drapers and haberdashers.

From Table 2 it emerges that there are probate records for 86 chandlers, 44 tallow chandlers, 62 grocers and 40 shopkeepers, as compared with 113 for mercers. Drapers (including woollen and linen drapers) and haberdashers are relatively few in number (47 and 12 respectively) and confined to the towns.

The common titles for retailers seem to change over the period. Chandlers and tallow chandlers appear most numerous in the earlier periods, notably between 1641 and 1732, when they account for 91 of 104 traders (see Table 3), with a high concentration (39) in Oxford. By contrast grocers are rare before 1733 and are the largest of the four groups thereafter. It is also between 1733 and 1800 that the term 'shopkeeper' is widely adopted, whilst the use of 'chandler' dwindles.

TABLE 3. CHANDLERS, TALLOW CHANDLERS, GROCERS AND SHOPKEEPERS IN OXFORDSHIRE 1516-1800 (BASED ON PROBATE RECORDS)

Period	Total No.	Total No. in Oxford	Chandlers	Tallow chandlers	Grocers	Shopkeepers
1516-1640	20	7	16	3	1	0
1641-1732	104	39	61	30	9	4
1733-1800	108	14	9	11	52	36

Fig. 2 confirms the concentration of chandlers in the north and west of the county, although less heavily focused on the market towns than in the case of the mercers. By contrast Fig. 3 shows many more retailers in south Oxfordshire. This is clearly associated with the presence of shopkeepers and grocers, a phenomenon of the period 1733-1800, when the number and proportion of retailers outside Oxford was increasing markedly. Both geographical distribution and chronology indicate a growth in the number of shops in the south of the county in the later 18th century rather than merely a change in nomenclature for businesses that had been there in earlier periods.

Ranked in terms of the total number of probate references to mercers, chandlers, tallow chandlers, shopkeepers and grocers between 1516 and 1800 the towns and villages of Oxfordshire demonstrate a clear hierarchy. Oxford dominated with 91, outstripping Banbury (29)

⁴⁸ D.G. Vaisey (ed.), *The Diary of Thomas Turner 1745-1765* (1984), p. xvii.

⁴⁹ Vaisey, 'Probate Inventories and Provincial Retailers', 104.

and Witney (22). A group of smaller towns, Bicester, Burford, Chipping Norton, Deddington, Thame and Woodstock followed (13–16 references). Then came Henley and Watlington (10). It is here that Dorchester finds its place, like Bampton, with 7 references. Eynsham and Islip each yielded 5.

Probate records alone cannot establish with certainty the number of businesses in a community. Used both individually and cumulatively, and related to other evidence, they do however reveal patterns and possible changes over time. For example, they confirm Dorchester's relative importance in an area of the county with comparatively few shopkeepers. They also point to a multiplication of retailing outlets during the 18th century. In recent years historians have increasingly considered local shopkeepers, their stock and customers as possible evidence of the coming of a 'consumer revolution' to provincial, rural England. An essential feature of the growth of such a consumer society was that 'goods that had been deemed rich men's luxuries . . . were being made in so many different qualities and at such varied prices that they came within the reach of everyman'.⁵⁰ Thus luxuries became decencies and decencies became necessities. Material goods were acquired more by purchase than inheritance. Notions of fashion and social emulation were powerful catalysts in the process. Not only did ordinary people own more everyday things but they wished to acquire more decorative and expressive belongings. The development of a consumer society implies both the availability and effective distribution of goods and the presence of effective demand, based on sufficient wealth to make purchases, the taste or wish to do so, and an acceptance of consumption in the home market as economically beneficial.

Historians have disagreed as to when such circumstances occurred in English society and to what degree they permeated down the social scale. Neil McKendrick argues that consumerism reached 'revolutionary proportions' only in the third quarter of the 18th century and that before this there had been 'a long period of gestation' showing only 'embryonic signs' of the change to come.⁵¹ Joan Thirsk, Margaret Spufford and Lorna Weatherill⁵² have detected a greater spread of spending on manufactures and innovations in the design and production of goods from the late 17th century or earlier. Examples invoked include stockings, caps, cheap earthenware, nails, tobacco pipes, lace, ribbon, and processed food and drink, most of which figure in the stocks of Oxfordshire shopkeepers like Brock and Bignall. Clothing is seen as a particular barometer of consumer demand and fashion sense. However Weatherill,⁵³ employing her sample of some 3,300 inventories from varying areas of the country, doubts Spufford's claim that chapmen's goods were being bought by 'the wage labourers and the poor husbandmen . . . from at least the 1680s'. Rather it was the middling ranks whose consumer behaviour changed, whilst the world of the wage labourers and poorer farmers remained one of necessities. She concludes that middling people in agriculture were less likely to own new kinds of domestic goods and that lesser gentry were less likely to own most kinds of goods, than those in trade, commerce and the professions, who depended more on purchase than inheritance. Regional differences were also discernible with certain goods, including clocks, books and earthenware, most likely to be found in areas with good links to London.⁵⁴

Reflecting on the Oxfordshire evidence in the light of these debates and findings, several points occur. A wide variety of goods was available in shops in towns and villages in the late

⁵⁰ J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects*, 179, referring to the difference between the situation in 1540 and 1600.

⁵¹ N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *Birth of a Consumer Society*, 5 and chapter 1 *passim*.

⁵² See note 2 above.

⁵³ Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 191–200.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 51.

17th century. However a very similar mix and range of wares is listed in local mercers' inventories for the late 16th and early 17th centuries.⁵⁵ In this context William Brock appears as the successor to an established pattern of shopkeeping rather than as the harbinger of a new consumerism. In Dorchester he operated in a community with a broad-based social structure with many households of the middling sort, headed by tenant landholders or those earning a living from the London road or, to a lesser extent, the river. His stock offered necessities and some decencies to these people and he was able to maintain a comfortable home on this basis. He held office as a churchwarden but was not a long-established member of the community, nor did his family become so. Others, notably itinerant traders, must have played a part in supplying Dorchester's consumers but the sources thus far leave them as a shadowy part of the picture.

Dorchester was to have other shopkeepers. Probate records refer to butchers in 1703 and 1753, an apothecary in 1716, a grocer in 1708, a grocer and mercer in 1725, chandlers in 1719 and 1740, a tallow chandler in 1728 and shopkeepers in 1746 and 1788. In 1847 there were 17 shopkeepers, including butchers, bakers, grocers, tailors, a dressmaker, a straw hat maker, and a linen draper. By 1915 Dorchester had a Co-op shop.⁵⁶ In the light of these later developments Brock can be seen as one of those general shopkeepers who had been found in Oxfordshire for some time before the 1680s and whose stocks already exceeded the bare necessities of life. If consumer revolution is characterised by fashionable emulation and a widespread access to decencies and even luxuries for the many then it has to be sought in south Oxfordshire at a later date. Perhaps it had arrived by 1782 when the German traveller, Carl Philip Moritz, walking from London to Oxford, came to Dorchester but was deterred from seeking lodgings by its fashionable air; 'the village seemed too grand for me; the ladies stood in front of their houses with their hair trimmed'.⁵⁷ Certainly the evidence in this study suggests that in south Oxfordshire it was only after the 1730s that retail outlets began to multiply.

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⁵⁵ E.g. Vaisey, 'A Charlbury Mercer's Shop'; will and inventory of Richard Haynes, mercer of Watlington, 1640: Oxfordshire Archives, MS. Wills Oxon. 32/1/42; inventory of William Luckins, mercer of Abingdon, 1585: Berkshire Record Office, D/A1/92/60; inventory of Jeffery White, mercer of Maidenhead, 1587: Berkshire Record Office, D/A1/220/126. (I owe these three references to the kindness of Adrienne Rosen, Christine Jackson and Joan Dils.)

⁵⁶ Indexes to probate records of Oxfordshire peculiars, 1536-1837, in Oxfordshire Archives; *Post Office Directory of Oxfordshire* (1847), 2171; *Kelly's Directory of Oxfordshire* (1915), 91.

⁵⁷ R. Nettel (ed.), *Carl Philip Moritz: Journeys of a German in England in 1782* (1965), 130.