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AN OVERLOOKED INVENTORY FOR BLICKING HALL, NORFOLK

BY SUSIE WEST

Archival sources for the seventeenth-century library of the Hobarts at Blickling are brought into focus through the use of an overlooked post-mortem inventory.

Following the recent special issue of *Library History* devoted to National Trust libraries, a brief note on a hitherto overlooked source for one of the National Trust's houses seems timely. Blickling Hall, Norfolk, is well known for the long gallery library filled with Sir Richard Ellys's books, which came to the Hobart family at Blickling after 1742. However, it is now possible to say rather more about the indigenous book collection at Blickling, assembled since the Hobart family bought the estate in 1616, than has previously been published.¹ This note focuses on the book room, rather than the collection, using a post-mortem inventory deposited at the PRO.²

Blickling Hall was built by Sir Henry Hobart, 1st Bt, a lawyer who became Chief Justice of Common Pleas and who was wealthy enough to build one of the biggest Jacobean houses in the county. His heirs were able to attract wealthy wives, and the family maintained their position as one of the leading Norfolk Whig families during the eighteenth century, elevated to the peerage as Earls of Buckingham. The evidence presented here allows a reconstruction of the book collection, non-book contents and location of the study formed by this upwardly mobile gentry family by 1700.

The great house was built between 1619-29, to a double courtyard plan, with the state rooms on the south entrance front, the great hall marking the division between the courts, and the long gallery running along the east side. Although much of the interior remains intact, the north and west ranges were rebuilt in the eighteenth century and functions of the surviving rooms have changed over time. The archival evidence for Blickling Hall is held at the Norfolk Record Office; building accounts and estimates have been used to reconstruct the plan and room names of the Jacobean house although the original plan of the west side of the house remains undetermined.³

The earliest household inventory known until recently is dated 1699.⁴ This inventory is problematic for book historians keen to identify any evidence for a family library, as it is silent on the subject of studies or books. Moreover, for one of the largest houses of the time in Norfolk, taxed for 53 hearths in 1664, the inventory is too short and important rooms lack obvious furniture: the withdrawing room lists nothing beyond what was hanging on the walls, for instance. There are no valuations. The reason becomes clear in a note at the end dated 13 March 1699, which states that this inventory is 'an account of the goods reserved to her Lady[yshi]p. at Blickling hall.' Her Ladyship was Lady Elizabeth Hobart, widow of Sir Henry, 4th Bt, and mother of the six year old heir, Sir John.

The full post-mortem inventory survives in the PRO as PROB 4/19641 Hobart 1700.⁵ Taken on vellum rolls, the first sheet is damaged through being used as the outer leaf for the bundle. It appears to begin in the great hall, and describes at least fifty rooms, with valuations. Just when it appears that the inventory takers were working their way through the service wings, after the carpenter's room comes Sir Henry's 'study of books', totalling 1,100 volumes and valued at £115 and then the non-book contents valued at £36 6s., one of the highest valuations in the house (sheet 4). It was a luxurious room, hung with gilt leather, furnished with a suite upholstered

in damask, a bureau and a cabinet on a stand and specialist book furniture in walnut: two stands and a reading desk. Amongst the curiosities (a fine flint bottle, a piece of crystal tipped with silver) were items of interest to a natural philosopher wishing to make their own observations: a brass mathematical globe, a brass handsliding dial, a brass mathematical sundial, another globe, a telescope, iron tools small enough to be kept in a shagreen case, and 'a pair of small stillyardes [steelyards or weighing scales] with other small instruments and toys.' None of these items appear in later inventories.

There is no catalogue for the 1,100 volumes. Sheet 5 of the inventory lists further items 'In Lady Hobart's custody at London' and names books, which may be her reading choices: 'Virgil's Aneid by Mr Dryden; Shakespears Comedys & Tragedys. Beaumonts last remains, five playes by Sir Robert Howard, The Bible in quarto, Justinian against the Vandalls in French, Ben Johnson's play with several loose songs, plays & pamphlets.'

Happily, the Blickling archive has three items that gesture towards how this collection was formed. While we might assume that the builder of the house, a lawyer, maintained at least a small legal collection, it is not until the late Sir Henry's father's time that a stationer's bill of 1661 survives, from Mr Henry Heningham, for twenty three books covering natural philosophy (Boyle's essays), literature (Dryden's verses, *Don Quixote* in English, Herbert's *Henry the VIII*), history (Howell's *Institution of History*) and divinity (Bishop Usher, 'Urnes on the Sacrament', a presbyterian prayer book).⁶ The total cost of the bill of May 10th, 1661, was for £5.12.2. The first indication of how these books were housed is in 'A catalogue of books in the Green Roome'.⁷ The *t.p.q* is suggested by the presence of several texts dated in the 1670s but none later than 1676. The catalogue was made within the 3rd Baronet's lifetime, Sir John (d.1683). Nineteen pages of text list around 380 titles, in eight divisions (probably shelf lengths). His son Sir Henry, the subject of the post-mortem inventory, wished to catalogue and value Sir John's library in 1683.⁸ He may not have sold them, since he himself left 1,100 volumes only sixteen years later. The question of how many volumes are encompassed by a list of titles is problematic; Sir Henry may only have added a couple of hundred volumes to his inherited collection. If the c.1676 Green Room catalogue represents books at Blickling (and not a London house), then it is a substantial portion of the collection found in the 1699 study.

The remaining problem is to position this gorgeously appointed room in the house plan. The PRO inventory is of some help, not because the study appears after the carpenter's room, but because in a sequence of family chambers it includes Sir Henry's chamber and his wife's closet, but never identifies a closet for Sir Henry. This seems to be a pertinent omission: contemporary household inventories, architectural plans and commentators make it clear that the owner's closet is a standard component of the bedchamber apartment. If the itemised study fulfils the role of the closet in Blickling Hall, it belongs in the family chamber sequence. Drawing on Stanley-Millson and Newman's work on the Jacobean house, the west range of the front court seems to be the best candidate for these chambers, close to the state rooms.

Sir Henry's son, John 1st Earl of Buckinghamshire, began a process of reorganising the house that would continue throughout the eighteenth century. He housed the Ellys collection in the long gallery, but at the time of his death in 1756 there was still a separate family library. However, this was now on the ground floor beneath the long gallery, between a common parlour and an elaborate bedchamber.⁹ It seems that the owner's bedchamber has migrated from the south-west to the north-

east, the new orientation of further state rooms looking out onto the remodelled garden. The seventeenth-century study closet's spatial relationship with the bedchamber is still apparent, and this remains the case in other country houses before 1750. The 1,100 books from 1700 must have survived in order to justify the room name. How many remain overlooked within the Ellys collection will be revealed by ongoing cataloguing.¹⁰ Using the PRO inventory, we now have a sense of their travels around the house in earlier libraries.

¹ John Fuggles, 'The Books' in *Blickling Hall* (London: National Trust, 1995)pp. 50-55

² Discussed in S. West, *The Development of Libraries in Norfolk Country Houses, 1660-1830*, (University of East Anglia, PhD thesis, 2000)

³ Caroline Stanley-Millson and John Newman, 'Blickling Hall, the building of a Jacobean mansion', *Architectural History* 29 (1986), pp. 1-42

⁴ *Inventory of Abstract of goods left at Blickling Hall, 11 March 1699*; owned and currently retained by the National Trust

⁵ Dr Sara Pennell kindly supplied her superior palaeographical skills

⁶ *Stationer's Bill May 10th 1661*, Norfolk Record Office NRS 16001 31 F9

⁷ *A catalogue of books in the Green Roome*, NRO NRS 14586 29 C4

⁸ Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on the Mss of the Marquess of Lothian preserved at Blickling Hall, Norfolk*, (London 1905) p. 131

⁹ *A particular and valuation...by Thos. Browne 1756*, NRO MC3/252, 468x4. This range was a lower status series of 'lodgings' or bedchambers in the seventeenth century.

¹⁰ Cataloguing and further research is being undertaken by Yvonne Lewis, Libraries Assistant to the National Trust, to whom I owe thanks for her time, support and interest in research at and beyond Blickling