

# Rethinking inventories in the digital age: the case of the Old Bailey

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## Introduction

In late July 1751 John Fling was living in rented accommodation in Stonecutter Street, just off Fleet Market in central London. It was a poor street, and he was a poor man.<sup>1</sup> But his fellow lodger, Daniel O'Larry, was not so poor. Among O'Larry's possessions he could count:

one gold watch with a shagreen case, val. 5 l. one pair of womens stays, two caps, one pair of silver buckles, one silver tea spoon, one chints sack, one table cloth, one shift, one gawse handkerchief embroidered, one piece of silk damask, one pillow-beer, two linen Aprons...<sup>2</sup>

We know this because John Fling stole these items from O'Larry and they were subsequently listed in the indictment read out at the beginning of Fling's trial for theft at the Old Bailey. The details were transcribed and published as part of one of some 35,540 trial accounts included in the *Old Bailey Proceedings* covering the years 1740 to 1800. The vast majority of these trials (approximately 30,000, or over 90% of the total) were for theft. The indictment that begins each trial lists the tens of thousands of individual objects London's criminal community pilfered, burglarized, or robbed. Both because of the number of individual objects involved, and the systematic manner in which they were recorded (in terms of chronology as well as owners and thieves), the Old Bailey indictments represent a unique form of evidence about the material world of late eighteenth-century London. They provide a counterpoint to our current understanding of the material history of the period, overwhelmingly dominated by evidence drawn from probate inventories and sale catalogues. While probate inventories document an owner's possessions as an intact collection prior to dispersal, the Old Bailey indictments point to which objects circulated without, presumably, the knowledge or cooperation of the owners. The

<sup>1</sup> Stonecutter Street would become synonymous with urban poverty twelve years later when the bodies of three women, starved to death, were found on the ground floor of an abandoned house. Tim Hitchcock, *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London*, London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2004, 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 7.0, 13 January 2014), October 1752, trial of John Fling (t17521026-28).

Old Bailey indictments thus represent an inventory of the material world of London as seen through a thief's eyes.

This article builds on the digitized version of the Old Bailey Proceedings ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)) by first extracting the indictments from the surrounding text and then subjecting the words they include, and objects they describe, to analysis. This entails working with a corpus of over a million words. At this scale, close reading no longer serves the historian well. It would require far more time than is reasonable or feasible; and a strategy of 'distant reading' is adopted here to allow analysis to focus on larger units of text.<sup>3</sup> Computational analysis has proven to be a great aid to distant reading and here we will demonstrate how mathematically- and digitally-based strategies can assist analyses of inventories in particular. Like other scholars in the digital humanities before us, we have come to see computational analysis as an important means by which we can learn more about the nature of the archive by exploring the patterns and gaps that might otherwise be occluded. As importantly distant reading of this sort provokes questions that direct our attention back to the primary and secondary literature to find answers, often through a return to close reading.

Additionally, this analysis aims to rebalance an understanding of this place (London) and period (1740-1800) currently based largely on the administrative records of the wealthy and the well-heeled— the inventories of privilege— with something closer to the demotic and quotidian world experienced by the majority population, whose possessions might otherwise have escaped list-making processes and historical recording.

We also seek to bring together two fields of study in provocative ways: studies of inventories and the history of consumption. Both these fields are concerned with material culture, but the study of inventories directs our gaze to that point when a collection of objects is fixed on paper through naming and categorization; whereas the study of consumption tends to point us towards a dynamic process of production, circulation, reception, use, and re-use.

The latter half of the eighteenth century witnessed the first industrial revolution, and has been the focus of considerable attention within both fields. In the early 1980s, beginning with the publication of *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (1982), much economic history shifted from a traditional supply-side model concerned to map the development of production to a new emphasis on demand side factors—on consumption. In the process, consumption studies came to take a

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to distant reading as configured by the work of Franco Moretti, see, *Distant Reading*, London: Verso, 2013. For debates within the field, reviews of Moretti's work are informative; see, for example, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Alexander R. Galloway, and James F. English, 'Franco Moretti's 'Distant Reading': A Symposium', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 27 June 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/franco-morettis-distant-reading-a-symposium>.

central role in explanations for the evolution of 'modernity'.<sup>4</sup> Drawing initially upon theories of conspicuous consumption as articulated by Thorstein Veblen, and of a trickle-down culture of desire as found in George Simmel's work, the history of consumption was fleshed out in a series of substantial works published over the last three decades by historians including John Brewer, Grant McCracken, Roy Porter, Ann Bermingham, Frank Trentmann, and John Styles that concomitantly developed new dynamic models for understanding consumption and its processes. Grant McCracken, for example, in his study of *Culture and Consumption* (1988), argued that the symbolic properties of goods were instrumental in the fashioning of both the concept of self and a broader culture.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s John Brewer, Roy Porter, and Ann Bermingham assembled a series of substantial co-edited volumes that collectively describe a more nuanced and interdisciplinary story of material culture and consumption that reveals how objects and processes play critical roles in the formation of gender and class identities as well as the development of the private and public spheres.<sup>6</sup> This essay explicitly addresses the latter issue as the most frequently occurring types of thefts describe a liminal space in which the private intersected with the public.

Our article also responds to Frank Trentmann's recent challenge to chart both networks of exchange and the 'practises' of material consumption—in his words: 'the result of doings and sayings that are linked together through a series of understandings, rules, tasks and emotions.'<sup>7</sup> The indictments that form the basis for this article were created through the formal legal system, and are precisely the sort of script created in the process of enacting the networks and practices pointed to by Trentmann. As Trentmann reminds us, 'Practices thus look beyond possessions... research on practices focuses on how users, things, tools, competence, and desires are coordinated'.<sup>8</sup> A vital site of that coordination was the law courts which make explicit a form of public negotiation. Indeed, notions of property and the systems formed to enact those notions were at the heart of the criminal justice system and vital to constructions of selfhood in the early modern period.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See footnote 11 for full citations.

<sup>5</sup> Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption, New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990; first published 1988, 57, 70.

<sup>6</sup> See, in particular, Ann Bermingham's introduction, 'The consumption of culture: image, object, text', to Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds, *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800, Image, Object, Text*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, 1-20.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Trentmann, 'Materiality in the future of history: Things, practices, and politics', *Journal of British Studies*, 48, April 2009, 296.

<sup>8</sup> Trentmann, 'Materiality in the future of history', 297.

<sup>9</sup> See, John Brewer and Susan Staves, 'Introduction', in John Brewer and Susan Staves, eds, *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, especially pages 6-8.

At the same time as this essay addresses this literature on consumption, it also seeks to extend long-established scholarship based on surviving inventories. Since the groundbreaking work of Lorna Weatherill, first published in 1985, computational analysis in conjunction with large-scale collections of 'inventories' have formed an area of study in their own right. Using a database methodology, Weatherill and several historians who have adapted her methodologies have deployed probate inventories as the primary evidential basis for both a cultural history of ownership and a wider exploration of the impact of economic change and industrialization on the wealth or poverty of the British population.<sup>10</sup> Most recently Craig Muldrew has used probate inventories, among a host of other sources, to create a strongly optimistic model of the expanding early modern and industrial economies.<sup>11</sup> Not all historians accept the historical meta-narratives that have been created on the basis of this work—in either the guise of a 'consumer revolution', or an 'industrious' one.<sup>12</sup> Gregory Clark, in particular, has been at pains to point up the evidentiary fragility of inventory evidence, and the illusory nature of both

<sup>10</sup> Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760*, 2nd ed., London and New York: Routledge, 1996; and Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture, and Commerce: the English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, Houndmills Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997. For the use of inventories to support a more cultural approach see Peter Earle, *A City Full of People: The Men and Women of London, 1650-1750*, London: Methuen, 1994; and John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, London: Routledge, 1993. For work building on Weatherill's computational approach, see Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and North America*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990; Mark Overton and Bas van Leeuwen, 'British Economic Growth, 1270-1870: An Output-based Approach', University of Warwick working paper, August 2010. <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/academic/broadberry/wp/britishgdplongrun8a.pdf> 21 January 2014; Mark Overton, *Production and Consumption in English Households 1600-1750*, New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004; and Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy 1500-1850*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996. For a notable use of 'pauper inventories' to extend the analysis of probate inventories to include the poor, see Peter King, 'Pauper inventories and the material lives of the poor in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', in Tim Hitchcock, Peter King and Pamela Sharpe, eds, *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640-1840*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997, 155-91. For an introduction to British probate inventories, see, Mark Overton, *A Bibliography of British Probate Inventories*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Department of Geography, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Craig Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness: Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550-1780*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Neil McKendrick, 'The consumer revolution of eighteenth-Century England', in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, eds, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, 9-33; and Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

‘revolutions’.<sup>13</sup> By employing a computational approach, in relation to an alternative type of source, this article seeks to bring a different perspective to the issues involved, and to obviate many of the criticisms associated with probate inventories as a measure of ownership.

This is not the first attempt to use the *Old Bailey Proceedings* to comment on these debates and this period. Hans-Joachim Voth used the pre-digital *Proceedings* to test the labour patterns of Londoners, as a way of, in turn, testing the existence of an ‘industrious revolution’ (largely supporting the idea).<sup>14</sup> And John Styles has used the digitized edition of the *Old Bailey* indictments, in combination with a key-word search methodology, to interrogate both the distribution of furnishings stolen from rented lodgings, and the roles of cotton and linen cloth in the lives of eighteenth-century Londoners.<sup>15</sup> Most recently, Sarah Horrell, Jane Humphries, and Ken Sneath have used a database methodology applied to a sample of 780 trials for burglary, to create an alternative listing of household items for the period 1750 to 1821. They conclude that the character of the items listed in the *Proceedings* substantially reflect changing patterns of consumption.<sup>16</sup> This article seeks to extend the current literature by subjecting a comprehensive collection of eighteenth-century indictments to text mining and computational exploration as a way of testing the questions traditionally posed by both historians of consumption and scholars of inventories. It seeks to both avoid the issues associated with sampling historical sources, and to create a new kind of ‘inventory’.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Clark, ‘The consumer revolution: turning point in human history, or statistical artefact?’, Munich Personal RePEc Archive (MPRA), Paper No.25467, 28 September 2010 (<http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/25467/>).

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Joachim Voth, *Time and Work in England 1750-1830*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See John Styles, ‘Lodging at the Old Bailey: Lodgings and their furnishing in eighteenth-Century London’ in John Styles and Amanda Vickery, eds, *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006, 61-80; and John Styles, ‘What were cottons for in the early industrial revolution’, in Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi, eds, *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 307-26. See also John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007, ch.2, ‘What people wore’.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Horrell, Jane Humphries, and Ken Sneath, ‘Cupidity and crime: Consumption as revealed by insights from the Old Bailey records of thefts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ in Mark Casson and Nigar Hashimzade, eds, *Large Databases in Economic History: Research Methods and Case Studies*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013, 246-67.

## The Source

Probate inventories are partial and profoundly selective representations of the material world. They record what an individual owned at death, and were created as a component of the bureaucracy of inheritance. The 'inventory' created by aggregating the Old Bailey indictments is equally partial and specific. It is restricted to the items people stole, and to the items victims of theft valued highly enough to pursue through the courts. As such it gives us a different, complementary, view of the material world. Like probate inventories, the Old Bailey indictments are a product of a particular conjuncture of events. They result from a complex process in which each step created a new form of selection. Eighteenth-century London was policed via a rag-tag collection of local watchmen and constables, and relied heavily on the victims of crime to pursue a prosecution. We have no way of assessing 'the dark figure of unrecorded crime', but it is likely to encompass the vast majority of criminal acts. As a result, the very fact that a stolen object is listed in the *Proceedings* makes it unusual. An object's journey from a pocket, front room, or shop window to a listing in an indictment was a long one. Many thefts were 'made up' or resolved between the thief and their victim – with the stolen goods returned, a cuff round the ear, and perhaps financial recompense offered. But even when the victim determined to prosecute, this did not ensure that the trial would come to court, or that the indictment would accurately reflect the items stolen. Having caught a thief and brought them to the attention of a constable or watchman, the victim and defendant were obliged to appear before a Justice of the Peace, either in the JP's parlour, or at one of the more regular forms of petty sessions.<sup>17</sup> But, the initial interrogation and judgment that followed was as likely to result in the case being dismissed as pursued. In the surviving records reflecting the decisions of the City's Guildhall Justice Room between 1752 and 1781, for instance, only 67 cases brought before the justices resulted in a prosecution at the Old Bailey from among approximately 3000 actions recorded.<sup>18</sup> Petty crimes were unlikely to be taken

<sup>17</sup> J.M. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London, 1660-1750: Urban Crime and the Limits of Terror*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001; J. M Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986; Drew D. Gray, *Crime, Prosecution and Social Relations: The Summary Courts of the City of London in the Late Eighteenth Century*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; J. M. Beattie, *The First English Detectives: The Bow Street Runners and the Policing of London, 1750-1840*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; J. M Beattie, 'Sir John Fielding and public justice: The Bow Street Magistrates' Court, 1754-1780', *Law and History Review*, 25: 1, 2007, 61–100; and Andrew T. Harris, *Policing the City: Crime and Legal Authority in London, 1780-1840*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Greg T. Smith, ed, *Summary Justice in the City: A Selection of Cases Heard at the Guildhall Justice Room, 1752-1781*, London Record Society, vol.48, 2013, xix. It should be noted that

forward, but other factors were also at play. Whether the victim knew the defendant (or simply disliked them); whether the theft occurred in an embarrassing context, such as prostitution; and whether the defendant was new to the city, with few ties or character witnesses, could all influence the decision to prosecute.<sup>19</sup>

It is also clear that indictments reflect only a partial account of what was stolen. The list of goods eventually read out in court began as a manuscript drafted by the justice's clerk in consultation with the victim and presented to the Grand Jury prior to their decision on whether to allow the trial to proceed. It was more likely to include items that had been recovered (frequently from a pawnbroker), rather than the full collection of materials stolen. Multiple similar items, after the first few instances, and items of very small value were also frequently eliminated from the lists; though, as theft of anything worth more than twelve pence could result in the death penalty, many apparently low-value items were included in indictments, and were treated with due seriousness. Complicating the historical record constituted by the published *Proceedings* is that while the initial manuscript indictment passed on from the Grand Jury was probably read out in full in court, it is much less certain that the details were fully transcribed by the shorthand reporter for inclusion in the final publication.<sup>20</sup> Besides the inevitable errors introduced both in reading out the text and recording it, there was also a complex system of partial censorship in place throughout the eighteenth-century. Trial reporting included more or less text and detail depending on popular demand, concern about crime, and the character of that year's Lord Mayor.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the indictments are selective because thieves choose what to steal. Moreover, the thieves in question are marked by incompetence and failure (they were caught). Nonetheless, they can be characterized as a group because of their propensity to actively select small, portable items that were easy to pawn or re-sell. Furniture, pieces of little resale value, and luxury objects that were

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much of the court's work comprised minor assaults and charges of vagrancy that would not normally be dealt with by the Old Bailey.

<sup>19</sup> For the multiple strategies used by single repeat offender, see Mary Clayton, 'The life and crimes of Charlotte Walker, prostitute and pickpocket', *London Journal*, 33: 1, March 2008, 3-19.

<sup>20</sup> The best treatment reflecting the nature of the transcriptions published as the *Proceedings* is Magnus Huber, 'The Old Bailey Proceedings, 1674-1834. Evaluating and annotating a corpus of 18th- and 19th-century spoken English' in Anneli Meurman-Solin and Arja Nurmi, eds, *Annotating Variation and Change* (Studies in Variation, Contacts and Change in English 1) (<http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/journal/volumes/01/huber/>, 14 January 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Robert B. Shoemaker, 'The Old Bailey Proceedings and the representation of crime and criminal justice in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of British Studies*, 47: 3, 2008, 559-580; Simon Devereaux, 'The City and the Sessions Paper: 'Public Justice' in London, 1770-1800', *The Journal of British Studies*, 35: 4, 1996, 466-503; and John H. Langbein, *The Origins of Adversary Criminal Trial*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

easy to identify and difficult to pass on are all relatively rare in the historical record constituted by the published *Proceedings*.<sup>22</sup>

For all these reasons, the Old Bailey indictments represent a different kind of inventory—an inventory of opportunity. The objects included comprise the material world that ‘came to hand’; objects that could fit in a pocket (or indeed might be a pocket in its eighteenth-century form) and were hard to identify, but easy to sell. If probate inventories and sales catalogues are biased towards large-ticket items, domestic in character, secured behind locked doors when not actually screwed down, and recorded by proud and concerned owners and legatees; this inventory of thievery privileges the exact opposite: the ephemeral objects found out of doors, unlocked, and on the person. As such, it represents a mirror image, substantially and differently skewed, to that reflected in most ‘inventories’.

## Methodology

Trial records in the *Old Bailey Online* have been coded with XML tags to indicate both the span of various parts of the trial texts, and a variety of features of each trial. XML (extensible markup language) is a standard for encoding metadata within text, using human- and machine-readable tags defined in the process of creating a digital edition. In the case of the trials in the Old Bailey, for example, the full trial transcript is enclosed in tags that look like this: <trial> ... </trial>; while nested tags are used to mark the defendant, offence, victim, and so on:

```
<trial> ... <defend> ... </defend> ... <off> ... </off> ... <victim> ... </victim>
... </trial>.
```

XML tags can also have attributes providing more information. The defendant tag, for example, uses an attribute to specify the person’s gender: <defend gender =“m”> ... </defend>; allowing the trial text to be related to standardized data.

The indictment forms a short description of the crime found in the first paragraph of the trial, and has been tagged and given a separate attribute in the form: “offenceDescription”. For example, a theft that was tried in January 1770 begins:

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74. (L.) John Martin was indicted for stealing a linen handkerchief, value 1 s.
the property of David Griffin, Nov. 12. +
```

With the XML tags displayed and edited to highlight the most relevant structures, the beginning of the same trial looks like this:

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the biases in the original source see John Styles, ‘Lodging at the Old Bailey’, 67-9.

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John Martin	<pre> &lt;person deprecated="true"&gt;   &lt;defend gender="m" deprecated="true"&gt;     &lt;persName id="t17700117-6-defend113" gender="m" type="defend"&gt;       &lt;given&gt;John&lt;/given&gt;       &lt;surname&gt; Martin&lt;/surname&gt;     &lt;/persName&gt;   &lt;/defend&gt; &lt;/person&gt; </pre>
was indicted for	
stealing a linen handkerchief, value 1 s.	<pre> &lt;off id="t17700117-6-off46"&gt;   &lt;theft type="grand lar"&gt;stealing a linen handkerchief, value 1 s.&lt;/theft&gt; &lt;/off&gt; </pre>
the property of	
David Griffin	<pre> &lt;person deprecated="true"&gt;   &lt;victim gender="m" deprecated="true"&gt;     &lt;persName id="t17700117-6-victim115" gender="m" type="victim"&gt;       &lt;given&gt;David&lt;/given&gt;       &lt;surname&gt; Griffin&lt;/surname&gt;     &lt;/persName&gt;   &lt;/victim&gt; &lt;/person&gt; </pre>
Nov. 12	<pre> &lt;cd id="t17700117-6-cd47"&gt;Nov. 12&lt;/cd&gt; </pre>

In each theft, the span of text marked up with “off” tags (meaning “offence”), and given the attribute ‘type=“offenceDescription”’ typically contains a list of the items stolen, often with a value for each. By extracting this information from each theft, we have built up a useable and comprehensive composite of items described at the Old Bailey as having been stolen.

Starting with the XML versions of all of the trials held between 1740 and 1800, the indictments (material enclosed in offence tags) were extracted and then filtered to select “Thefts” or “Thefts with Violence”. Having removed the tags, the resulting text for each year was concatenated into a single text file, with line breaks between each trial. The text for all years was also aggregated to allow overall term frequencies to be calculated.

There are a growing variety of ways to approach the problem of characterizing text at scale—of performing a version of ‘distant reading’.<sup>23</sup> In this case we were working with 30,087 theft indictments from trials held between 1740 and 1800 inclusive, and adopted a straightforward term-frequency approach.<sup>24</sup> In order to focus our attention on terms relevant to our questions pertaining to material culture and the types of objects most frequently stolen, we stripped out what are referred to as ‘stop words’ from the aggregated text file. These are words like ‘the’, ‘on’, ‘at’ and so on. They are necessary to convey precise meaning, but they usually do not encode much of what is distinctive about a particular text. We also removed proper names, which referred to both individuals and places. We were then left with terms highly likely to refer to stolen objects. The most frequent of these was linen (including the spelling variant ‘linnen’) which appeared over six thousand times, followed by silver, with over five thousand occurrences, then, in descending order of frequency, handkerchief/handkerchieves, silk, watch/watches, cotton, gown/gowns, shirt/shirts, apron/aprons, stocking/stockings, sheet/sheets, coat/coats, spoon/spoons, tea, waistcoat/waistcoats, leather, iron, and buckle/buckles, the latter terms occurring slightly over 1500 times.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting a linguistic difficulty that arises from the extraction of these terms from the fuller text in which they originally appeared. In several cases, i.e. linen, silver, silk, cotton, the term can connote either an object, e.g. a piece of silver, or can be used as an adjective, e.g. a silver spoon. So, in counting the appearance of such terms, it is important to distinguish between nominal and adjectival uses since the words do not map precisely onto the number of objects. At the same time, this linguistic nuance is revealing as it demonstrates how important it was in the various trials to denote materiality, whether in the sense of an adjective or a noun.

<sup>23</sup> For overviews of several different approaches, see Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, London and New York: Verso, 2007, <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1844671852>; and Stephen Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism*, Topics in the Digital Humanities, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> The use of term frequencies to establish the importance of a particular word or phrase in a corpus has a long history stretching back to the late 1960s. See Gerald Salton, *The SMART Retrieval System: Experiments in Automatic Document Processing*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971. This straightforward methodology has been adopted in preference to both topic modelling (a ‘bag of words’ approach), and the adoption of a structured vocabulary of material goods such as the Getty Vocabularies. Although we experimented with using both these methodologies, the results were unhelpful—topic modelling did not seem to illuminate ‘collections’ of material goods in the way that it does semantically richer vocabularies; while applying the Getty Vocabularies led to an unhelpful emphasis on issues of raw material and production process, rather than on categories of use.

Working from this compilation of most frequently occurring terms, we focused our subsequent analysis on questions of materiality, isolating two frequently stolen cloth items, handkerchiefs and sheets, and two frequently stolen metal items, watches and spoons. Once selected, we recognized that these entities share a critical characteristic: they straddle the gap between personal and domestic objects, that is, between the private and the public, a characteristic shared by many of the terms that appear with high frequency.

The yearly aggregate files of most frequently occurring terms were used to extract bigrams—two-term phrases—that featured our selected items (handkerchief, sheet, watch, and spoon, including plural usages and common alternate spellings) in the second position. Such bigrams help considerably to mitigate linguistic ambiguity by focusing attention on pairs typically constituted of an adjective and a noun, such as ‘linen handkerchief’.<sup>25</sup> So, for example, in the discussion that follows, a bigram contains all mentions of handkerchief, handkerchiefs, and handkerchieves in a single year. Here is a sample from 1740:

56 linen handkerchief  
24 silk handkerchief  
12 linen handkerchiefs  
8 silk handkerchiefs  
3 cotton handkerchief  
3 cotton handkerchiefs  
3 lawn handkerchief  
2 cambrick handkerchiefs  
2 muslin handkerchief  
1 bordered handkerchiefs  
1 callico handkerchiefs  
1 cambrick handkerchief  
1 check handkerchief  
1 check handkerchiefs  
1 d handkerchiefs  
1 for handkerchiefs  
1 linnen handkerchief  
1 muslin handkerchiefs  
1 one handkerchief  
1 two handkerchiefs<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Variant spellings for terms associated with cloth include—linen: linen, linnen, flaxen, harden, hempen, cambric, holland, lawn; cotton: cotton, calico, calicoe, calico, callicoe, muslin, chintz, chints, chince; and silk: silk, silken, satin, sattin. These variants reproduce those used by Styles, *Dress of the People*, 331.

<sup>26</sup> All programming was done in *Mathematica* or with Bash scripting; Open Refine and Excel were used for analysis and graphing.

## Results and Analysis

Returning to the most commonly occurring terms, the data reflects powerfully on the dominance of personal artefacts in the inventories of theft. Perhaps the most obvious pattern is that handkerchiefs and watches dominate these inventories of thievery. By comparison, words associated with domestic items such as spoons and sheets, while still relatively frequent, are much less common. This suggests that the inventory of thievery is very much a personal and public one.

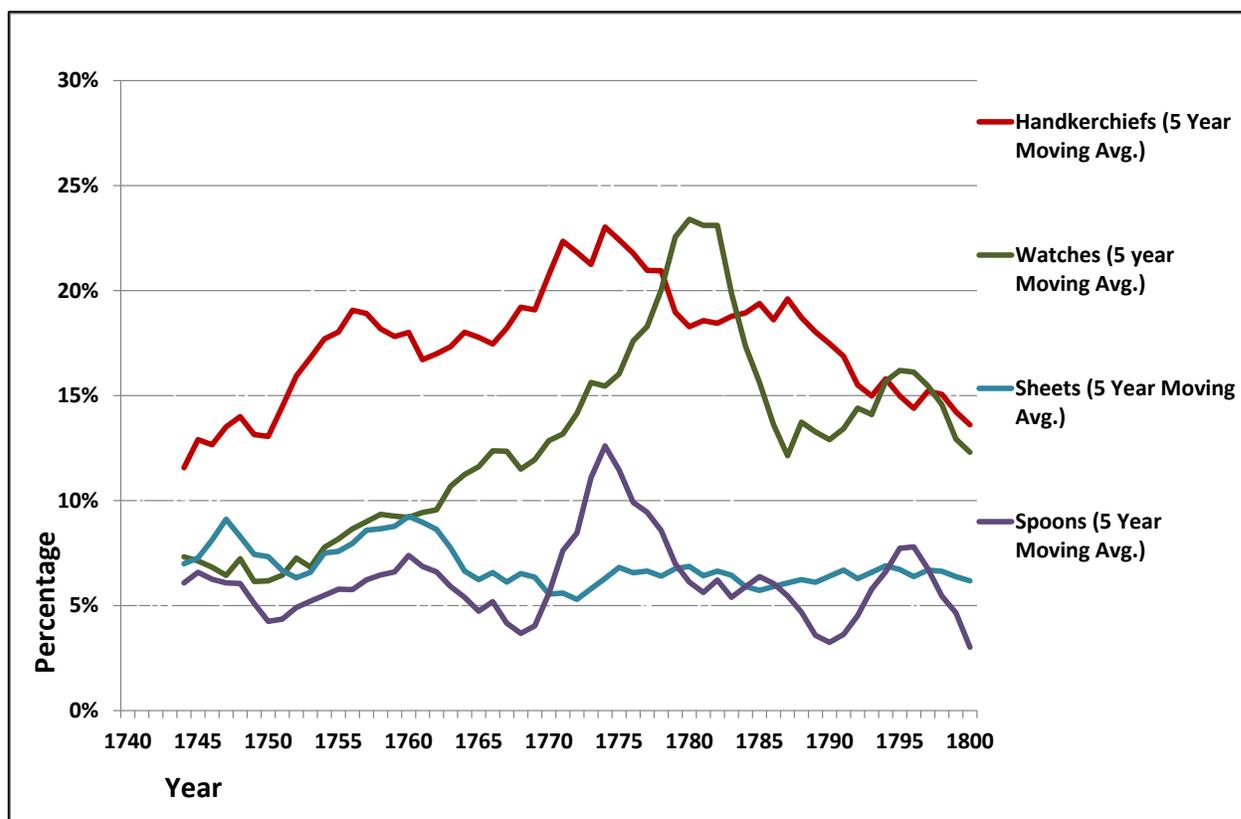


Figure 1 Indictment word frequencies as a percentage of trials for 'Theft' and 'Violent Theft' per year, 1740 to 1800 (Handkerchiefs: 5,221, Watches: 3,921, Sheets: 1,990, Spoons: 1,812). Plurals and alternate spellings have been combined. Source: The Old Bailey Proceedings ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)). Total trials: 30,087; total bigrams: 13,135.

Handkerchiefs serve as a case in point. The term handkerchief could denote either a pocket handkerchief or a neckerchief, but in either case the eighteenth-century variety was substantially larger than its modern equivalent. They could either be used for the everyday activities of blowing one's nose or taking snuff, or could be worn as an accessory by both men and women. Men normally rolled a neckerchief and tied it around their neck—knot to the fore; while women wore

theirs more commonly in the form of a shawl, covering an otherwise exposed breast. Pocket handkerchiefs were also carried by both men and women.<sup>27</sup> Handkerchiefs also served a series of important cultural roles. They formed the only specialized equipment, besides youthful ardour, needed to play the popular late eighteenth-century courting game, 'Drop the Handkerchief'. And a knotted handkerchief 'wagged about' served as a courting gesture among London's male homosexual community.<sup>28</sup> While victims of theft in the *Proceedings* were approximately 88% male, and 12% female, crimes involving the theft of a handkerchief were perpetrated on women more frequently than this. The extent to which both men and women carried handkerchiefs with them as a matter of course is reflected by the fact that 19% of all handkerchief thefts were committed against women.

The quality of handkerchiefs and hence their value also varied widely from as little as 1d. for an unfinished cotton or linen handkerchief, and upwards—implying that people of all classes might possess a handkerchief.<sup>29</sup> At the upper end of the scale of values, a finely worked handkerchief could be very costly indeed. Perhaps fancifully, in James Fenimore Cooper's *Autobiography of a Pocket Handkerchief* the eponymous hero of the piece (a French linen handkerchief, expertly embroidered by the volume's love interest) is described as the first \$100 handkerchief in North America.<sup>30</sup> More typically, silk handkerchiefs are valued in the *Proceedings* at between 2 and 4 shillings each—a full day's wages for a skilled artisan.

The extent to which stealing a handkerchief has become a literary trope should not blind us to the very real phenomenon of handkerchief theft. Over 17% of all theft trials heard at the Old Bailey between 1740 and 1800 involved the theft of a handkerchief, with a peak of 25% of all theft cases in 1770 (124 out of 496 trials), and an absolute peak of over 180 trials involving handkerchiefs in 1784. The annual pattern revealed is in large measure a reflection of prosecution waves associated with military demobilization and social unrest during which minor crimes that would otherwise have been dealt with on an informal basis resulted in a full blown trial. But the commonality of these trials also reflects the extent to which these material objects—handkerchiefs—were common, easily stolen, and easily resold.

<sup>27</sup> Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 43-4.

<sup>28</sup> Francis Place and Marty Thale, eds, *The Autobiography of Francis Place (1771-1854)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, 55; and George Parker, *A View of Society and Manners in High and Low Life: Being the Adventures ... of Mr. G. Parker ... the Stage Itinerant*, vol. 2, London: printed for the author, 1781, 85-8.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance, *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), version 7.0, 18 December 2013), June 1796, trial of Agnes Davison (t17960622-30). For an analysis of handkerchief ownership based on a unique fire inventory, see John Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 31-2.

<sup>30</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Autobiography of a Pocket Handkerchief*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn, 1843, Hesperus Classics Edn, 2006, see Chapter 11.

The experience of men such as Thomas Limpus—convicted on three occasions for stealing handkerchiefs in the late 1770s and early 1780s, and serially transported to West Africa, Maryland and finally Australia—is an extreme example of a relatively common phenomenon.<sup>31</sup>

The simple ubiquity of handkerchief theft (and prosecution) reflects strongly the ‘public sphere’ character of everyday life. A large proportion of the goods of life were made up of clothing and personal objects that accompanied their owners on to the streets, where they could be pickpocketed. In contrast to the literature on probate inventories, this evidence suggests that personal possessions carried about the body were of greater significance than they would become following the domestication of life in the nineteenth century. This type of theft also reflects the nature of social-class interaction. The jostle and crowding in the metropolis that facilitated pickpocketing entailed extreme social mixing, suggesting that below the highest level of society it was difficult to avoid near physical contact with all classes. The constant warnings found in didactic literature for pedestrians to be wary of crowds and commotion appears to have been warranted.

Watches, like handkerchiefs, form an important instance of an insecure object carried on the body into the public sphere. They move with individuals between the private and the public and, like the handkerchief, are recorded in the indictments most typically at the point of loss in public space, stolen directly from the body. Watches are the second most frequently occurring term in the indictments (3921 instances), bettered only by handkerchiefs (5221). The two items were often stolen together and hence appear in the same indictment on almost two hundred occasions. Indeed, when describing the notorious area around Field Lane and Saffron Hill (the location of Fagin’s den in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*), John Thomas Smith, author of *The Cries of London* (1839), recalled that it was formerly

so dangerous to go through, that it was scarcely possible for a person to possess his watch or his handkerchief by the time he passed this ordeal of infamy; and it is a fact, that a man after losing his pocket-handkerchief, might, on his immediate return through the Lane, see it exposed for sale, and purchase it at half the price it originally cost him, of the mother of the young gentleman who had so dexterously deprived him of it. Watches were, as they are now in many places in London, immediately put into the crucible to evade detection.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Emma Christopher, *A Merciless Place: The Lost Story of Britain’s Convict Disaster in Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 226-7.

<sup>32</sup> John Thomas Smith, *The Cries of London: Exhibiting Several of the Itinerant Traders of Antient and Modern Times*, London: John Bower Nichols and Son, 1839, 46.

Watches were valuable, and worth the risk involved in stealing them. Edward Thompson estimated that at mid-century a watch cost between £3 and £5, or the equivalent of a month's wages for a skilled labourer.<sup>33</sup> When Richard Hutton, Keeper of the Quaker Workhouse at Clerkenwell, bought a watch in 1718, he paid precisely £5 for it—two shillings more than for the clock he purchased at the same time.<sup>34</sup> But they could be much more valuable than this implies. In a treatise dedicated to wills published in 1809, William Roberts cites the example of a will in which the testate specified that his grandson should receive his 'gold watch, or in case my said watch shall be worn out, lost, or destroyed, 30*l.* in lieu thereof'.<sup>35</sup> Of the approximately 2,300 watches in the indictments that can be associated with a value, the average comes to £4.1*s.*, with values as low as 5 shillings and as high as 52 pounds. Unlike handkerchiefs, watches were not owned by most people. Their possession was largely restricted to skilled artisans and above, and their ownership was more fully gendered than was the case with handkerchiefs, with only 11% of victims of watch theft being female. They were also easier to identify and more difficult to sell on the secondary market than were pocket handkerchiefs (as the allusion to melting down a watch in Smith's account makes clear). When Mrs. Mary W—net went to pawn a gold watch for ten guineas on behalf of her highwayman lover at mid-century, he advised her that, 'if I should be questioned, to say I found it in the Street, and not tell where I lodged, nor come directly home'.<sup>36</sup> Pawning a watch was dangerous. Nevertheless, watches are one of the most frequently occurring objects in the indictments, appearing in 13% of all trials for theft in this period.

<sup>33</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism', *Past & Present*, no. 38, 1 December 1967, 67.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Hutton and Timothy V. Hitchcock, eds, *Richard Hutton's Complaint Book: The Notebook of the Steward of the Quaker Workhouse at Clerkenwell, 1711-1737*, London Record Society, 24, London: London Record Society, 1987, no. 63.

<sup>35</sup> William Roberts, *Wills and Codicils, with an Appendix of the Statutes and a Copious Collection of Useful Precedents*, London: J. Butterworth and J. Cooke, 1809, 599. By way of comparison from another source, George Fettes's pawnshop in York took in some 196 watches in 1777 and 1778, at an average pledge of £1 1*s.* Pledges normally ran at approximately 50% of the resale value of the item pawned, and the provincial character of the shop probably had the effect of bringing down the average value of the watches involved. See Alison Backhouse, *The Worm-Eaten Waistcoat*, York: A.R. Backhouse, 2003. These figures are derived from the database of the Fettes's accounts available through the York City Archive.

<sup>36</sup> Dudley Bradstreet and G. S. Taylor, eds, *The Life and Uncommon Adventures of Captain Dudley Bradstreet*, London: John Hamilton, n.d., 89.



Figure 2 *The Honest Pickpocket*, Anon., published by William Holland, 1797 (hand-coloured etching). The print depicts William Pitt relieving John Bull of his watch. M. Dorothy George explains: 'The tax on clocks and watches (37 George III, c. 108, 19 July 1797) came into force on 1 Aug. The tax was '10s.' on a gold watch, '2s. 6d.' on one of silver or metal, with certain exemptions for the poorest classes. It proved disastrous to the clock and watch-makers and was repealed in Apr. 1798'.<sup>37</sup> ©Trustees of the British Museum.

The compilation of descriptive bigrams for handkerchiefs and watches also allows us to break down these objects into their variety of types, and to trace the evolution of manufacturing techniques and consumption over time. In the case of handkerchiefs the bigrams allow us to trace the relative importance and gender distribution of the main cloth types involved. The main categories that emerge from this exercise are LINEN, SILK and COTTON. Here we use capital letters to refer to the categories so that they are not confused with the specific terms used in our

<sup>37</sup> M. Dorothy George, 'Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum', VII, 1942, cited by British Museum, Collection Online, Museum Number 1868, 0808.6605. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1466457&partId=1&searchText=pickpocket&images=true&from=ad&fromDate=1700&to=ad&toDate=1799&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1466457&partId=1&searchText=pickpocket&images=true&from=ad&fromDate=1700&to=ad&toDate=1799&page=1) (18 January 2014).

sources. Our category LINEN, for example, includes bigrams that contain 'linen' and 'linnen', but also those containing 'flax', 'flaxen', 'harden', and so on. See the caption for Figure 3.

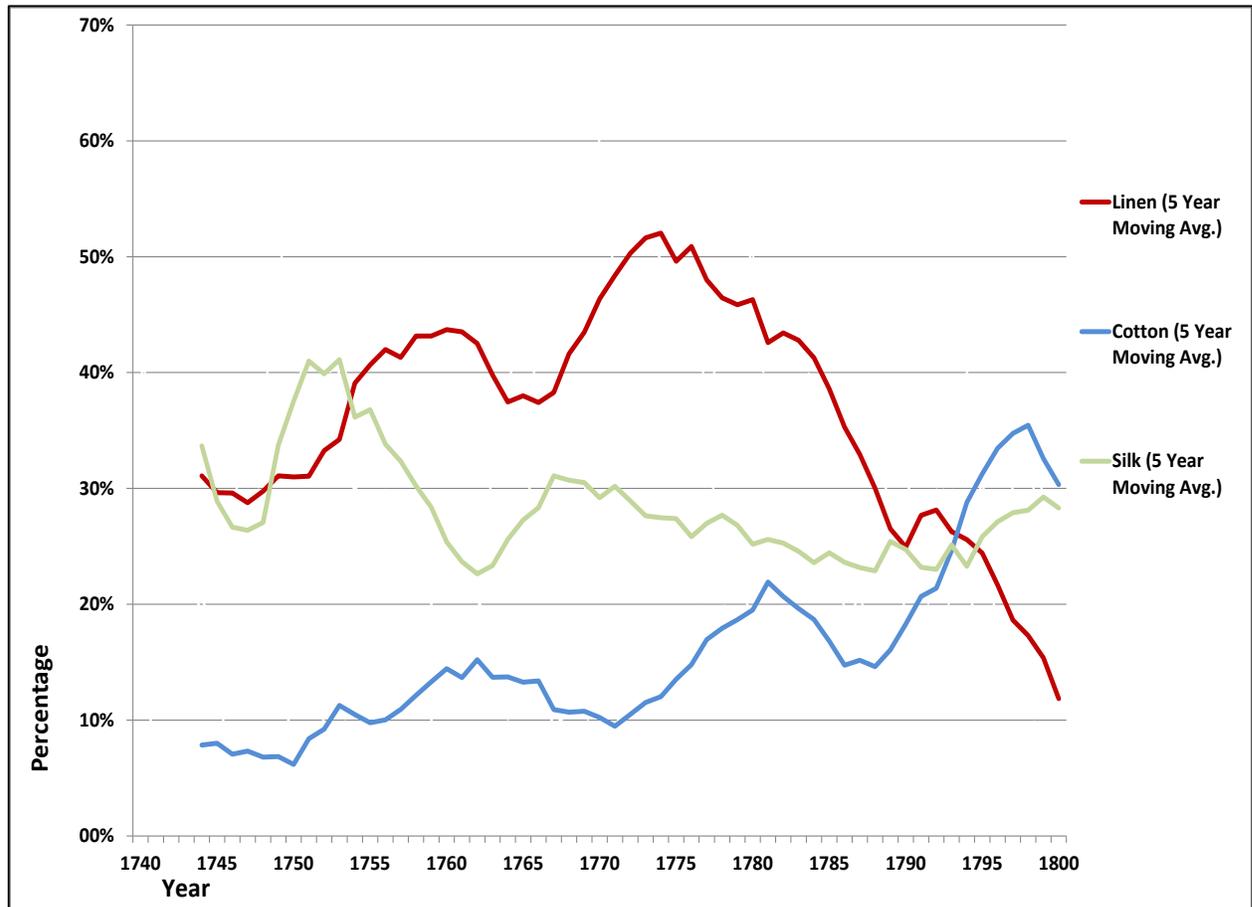


Figure 3 Categories of Handkerchief (LINEN: 1,883, COTTON: 851, SILK: 1,464). Cloth categories combine the following terms—LINEN: linen, linnen, flaxen, harden, hempen, cambric, holland, lawn; SILK: silk, silken, satin, sattin; COTTON: cotton, calico, calicoe, calico, callicoe, muslin, chintz, chints, chince. These variants reproduce those used by Styles, *Dress of the People*, 331. Source: The Old Bailey Proceedings ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)). Total bigrams including handkerchief and its plurals and variant spellings: 4,198.

The pattern that emerges aligns in part with that described in the secondary literature which emphasizes the increasing popularity and fashionableness of cotton, and the relative decline of linen.<sup>38</sup> Giorgio Riello has demonstrated, for example, that in the British Isles 'Cotton [cloth] production increased tenfold between 1770 and 1790'.<sup>39</sup> Riello and others have also pointed up the significance of

<sup>38</sup> Most significantly, Styles, *The Dress of the People*; Lemire, *Dress, Culture, and Commerce*; and Riello and Parthasarathi, *The Spinning World*.

<sup>39</sup> Riello, *Cotton*, 212.

the removal of import controls on cotton in 1774.<sup>40</sup> Although the bigram evidence does illustrate a pattern of change that supports this observation, it also suggests that the impact of this increase in production and importation was neither rapid nor dramatic. Cotton handkerchiefs only gradually came to the attention of London's thieves; while the decline in the attractiveness of linen handkerchiefs was both more sustained and relatively dramatic than was the increase in cotton. Silk remained stable overall. The relatively slow pattern of change evidenced in the distribution of cotton, linen, and silk reflect the extent to which a thief's inventory was likely to mirror a full catalogue of material possessions, including the unfashionable, the old, and the worn, in addition to the newest or most recently imported goods.

It is also possible to divide these figures by the gender of the victim (owner) of the handkerchiefs. This suggests that Robert DuPlessis's observation, based on colonial North American evidence, that cotton was becoming significantly gendered female in this period could be extended to Great Britain.<sup>41</sup> The Old Bailey indictments suggest that cotton handkerchiefs were increasingly favoured by women; while linen remained relatively ungendered by comparison. Silk was and remained more popular with men than with women; probably reflecting the greater spending power men had to deploy on clothing and personal items.

The considerable attention paid to clothing and cloth types in consumption studies has no equivalent with respect to other objects which appear with high frequency in the indictments. While watches have been of interest to historians concerned to chart the experience of time, much of the scholarship associated with watches has been authored by antiquarians, collectors, curators, and auction houses concerned to identify makers and types.<sup>42</sup> Watches were more difficult to fabricate than handkerchiefs, which could be assembled at home, and thus are better indices of the rise of commodity production over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century. London was an important centre for watch manufacturing and trade. Over the course of the eighteenth century the area north of Clerkenwell, in particular, became associated with watch and jewelry fabrication and the small workshops and light industries that supported such work.<sup>43</sup> Robert Campbell, in *The London Tradesman* (1747), proclaimed 'The Watch-Maker's Business is but of modern

<sup>40</sup> Styles, *Dress of the People*, 307.

<sup>41</sup> Robert S. DuPlessis, 'Cottons consumption in the seventeenth- and eighteenth- century North Atlantic', in Riello and Parthasarathi, *The Spinning World*, 234.

<sup>42</sup> On the history of the experience of time, the classic article is E. P. Thompson, 'Time, work-discipline and Industrial Capitalism'. See also Hans-Joachim Voth, *Time and Work in England 1750-1830*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2000; and Bruno Blondé and Gerrit Verhoeven, 'Against the clock: Time awareness in early modern Antwerp (1589-1789)', *Continuity and Change*, 28:2, August 2013, 213-244.

<sup>43</sup> David Thompson, *The History of Watches*, New York and London: Abbeville Press Publishers, 11; and John Culme, *Nineteenth-Century Silver*, London: Country Life Books, 1977, 22.

Invention, and of late improved in *England* to the highest Perfection; we beat all *Europe* in Clocks and Watches of all sorts, and export those useful Engines to all Parts of the known world'.<sup>44</sup>

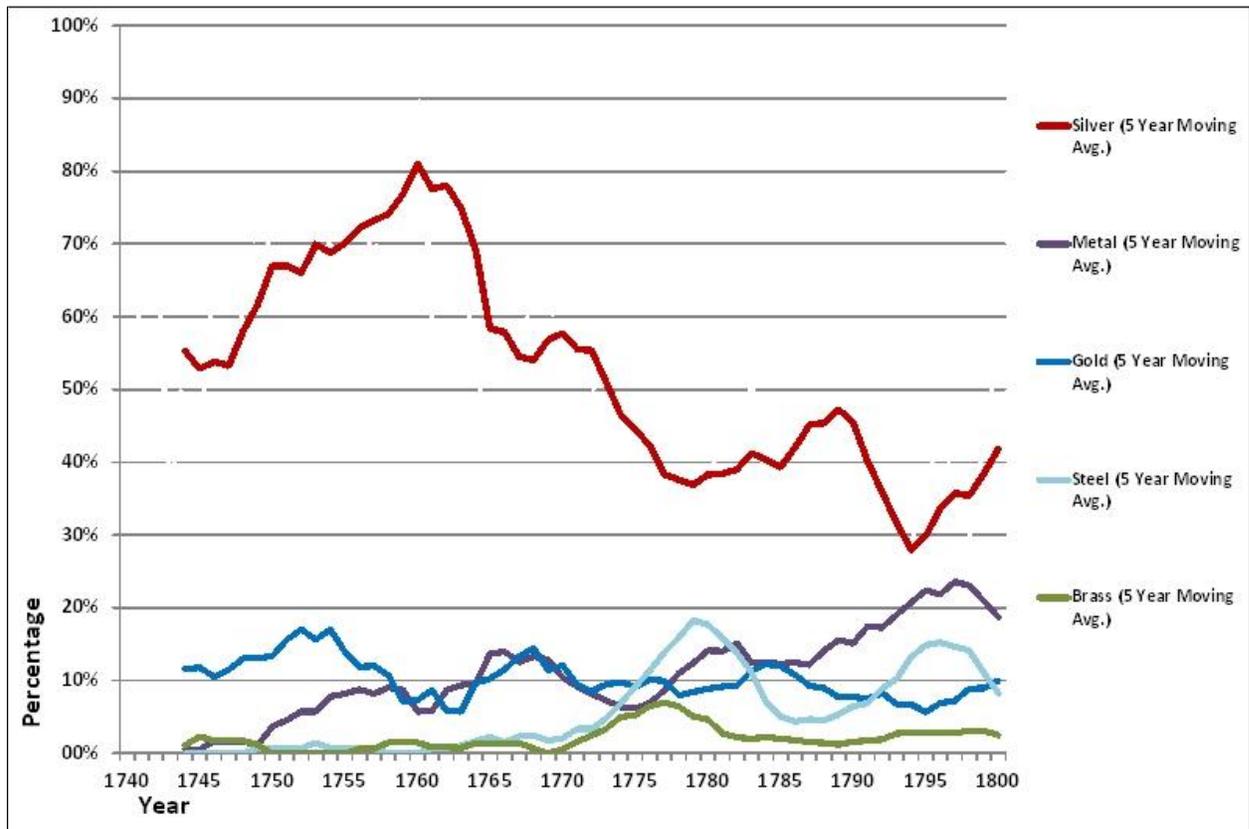


Figure 4 Watch categories by material (Silver: 1,814, Metal: 496, Gold: 387, Steel: 308, Brass: 103). Source: The Old Bailey Proceedings ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)). Total bigrams including watch/watches: 3,921.

The bigrams for watches add more nuance to this story about production and consumption. In the *Proceedings* watches are most frequently described in terms of their materiality, that is, metal or some form of metal, such as silver, gold, brass or steel, or, more infrequently, the decoration of the watch case (e.g. enamel), which is reflected in the bigrams.<sup>45</sup> Very much more rarely are watches described by their

<sup>44</sup> R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman: Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, Both Liberal and Mechanic, Now Practised in the Cities of London and Westminster, Calculated for the Information of Parents, and Instruction of Youth in their Choice of Business*, London: T. Gardner, 1747, 250.

<sup>45</sup> R. Campbell notes that 'There are Workmen who make nothing else but the Caps and Studs of Watches, and Silver-Smiths who only make Cases, and Workmen who cut the Dial-Plates, or enamel them, which is of late become much the Fashion'. *The London Tradesman*, 251.

functionality, for example, a 'repeating watch', meaning a watch that was fashioned to chime on the hour, quarter hour or even the minute. Repeating watches were difficult to produce because of the complexities of the internal movements and very much a luxury item in this period. The appearance of such items in the indictments invite speculation that, on occasion, theft of luxury goods could have been sparked by a desire to obtain innovative technology.<sup>46</sup>

The frequency of silver in the descriptions of watches reflects changes in technology in the eighteenth century when the introduction of flattening mills made it possible to mass manufacture sheet metal (as opposed to hammering it by hand) and thus increase the production of watches. The patent of the stamping machine in 1769 allowed repeated forms to be more easily produced. As Helen Clifford explains, these technologies transformed how silver objects were valued with a shift from weight to workmanship.<sup>47</sup> Clifford's close study of a London silversmith firm, Parker and Wakelin (1760-1776), provides insight into how a single enterprise managed this change, moving not, as the literature of the antiquities trade would suggest, into more finely wrought and magnificent objects but instead into 'a combination of supply standardized wrought goods and offering mending and maintenance services'.<sup>48</sup> While brass was reportedly a popular material for watches—the material likewise underwent a transformation in the eighteenth century as rolling mills and stamping were introduced and the direct fusion of zinc and copper technique was patented in 1781—the indictments tell a different story.<sup>49</sup> As recorded by thefts, brass was far less frequently associated with watches than silver, which was overwhelmingly the most significant material. Returning to the argument that technology can help to explain patterns of theft, note the gradual increase in the appearance of stolen steel watches over the second half of the eighteenth century which aligns with the introduction and spread of crucible steel

<sup>46</sup> Barbara Furlotti, in her essay 'Unexpected shifts: Thieves as mobilizers of art and luxury goods in early-modern Italy', concludes with respect to such luxury items as silver, antiquities, and artists' drawings that 'the theft of luxury goods and art works could be regarded as an effective means for circulating ideas, knowledge and innovation in early modern Europe' (675) in G. Ulrich Großmann and Petra Krutisch, *The Challenge of the Object / Die Herausforderung des Objekts*, conference proceedings, Nuremberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2013. As a source the Old Bailey indictments form a substantially different sort of 'inventory' than that of stolen luxury and artistic goods explored in the work of Barbara Furlotti, who draws upon trial records, agents' reports, artists' letters, public bans, correspondence with city officials, accounts of theft, and early art histories to support her case-study approach.

<sup>47</sup> Helen Clifford, *Silver in London, The Parker and Wakelin Partnership 1760-1776*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Clifford, *Silver in London*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Rupert Gentle and Rachael Feild, *English Domestic Brass, 1680-1810 and the History of its Origins*, London: Paul Elek, 1975, 57.

production. The resulting ingots could then be heated and rendered in rolling and flattening mills.

Both handkerchiefs and watches draw attention to how personal items became a public inventory. A similar pattern, albeit with less frequency, emerges with household items that could be relatively easily mobilized and quickly absorbed into the secondary market, such as spoons and sheets. The theft of these items was frequently associated with furnished rented accommodation or pilfering by servants.

Like a watch or a handkerchief, a spoon could easily fit into a pocket or purse and be surreptitiously removed. Indeed, art historian Barbara Furlotti has noted that in the early modern period even court officials complained about the disappearance of spoons from aristocratic palaces during events.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the rise of production in spoons in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made it increasingly difficult for owners to claim their original property given the greater number of goods in circulation. While the rise of Birmingham and Sheffield as production centers for cutlery is well known, London continued to be a significant location. *The Book of the English Trades* (1818) lists London among the principal places for the manufacture of cutlery and adds that 'In London, the same goods bear a much higher price than those manufactured in the country'.<sup>51</sup> And, like watches, spoons could be easily melted down.

To identify their property, owners, and the court increasingly turned to the function of the stolen spoons as indicated in Figure 5 which reveals a clear shift from material to function around the 1760s. Unlike the case of watches, in which materiality trumped functionality throughout the period, value for spoons came to reside less and less in the physical material of the object (mostly silver and pewter) and more and more in the craftsmanship—the working of the material. Thus, the indictments leave to us an archive of the variety of functional needs and corresponding forms in which a spoon could be fashioned, such as marrow spoon, salt spoon, pap spoon, desert spoon, tea spoon, and gravy spoon. Such distinctions reflect the ways in which tableware, like clothing, could register fashionability and refinement, and this proliferation of typologies continued apace well into the nineteenth century, arguably culminating in the table service associated with Edwardian country house. The prices of such items could vary widely, depending on the treatment of the handle (which could be rendered in such materials as

<sup>50</sup> Furlotti, 'Unexpected shifts', 673.

<sup>51</sup> *Book of English Trades and Library of the Useful Arts*, new edition, London: J. Souter, 1818, 136. Archives are extant for several London metalworkers, such as silversmiths Edward Barnard & Sons, Ltd., (c. 1828-1961) held by the Archive of Art and Design at the Victoria & Albert Museum, and pewterers Brown and Englefield (c. 1848-1940), held with the firm. See, The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *Records of British Business and Industry 1760-1914, Metal Processing and Engineering*, London: HMSO, 1994, 5, 13.

porcelain or ivory) and the level of workmanship as well as decorative detail.<sup>52</sup> Clifford's study of mid-eighteenth-century silversmith account books indicates that tablespoons could range in price from around 18s. to 21s. per dozen.<sup>53</sup>

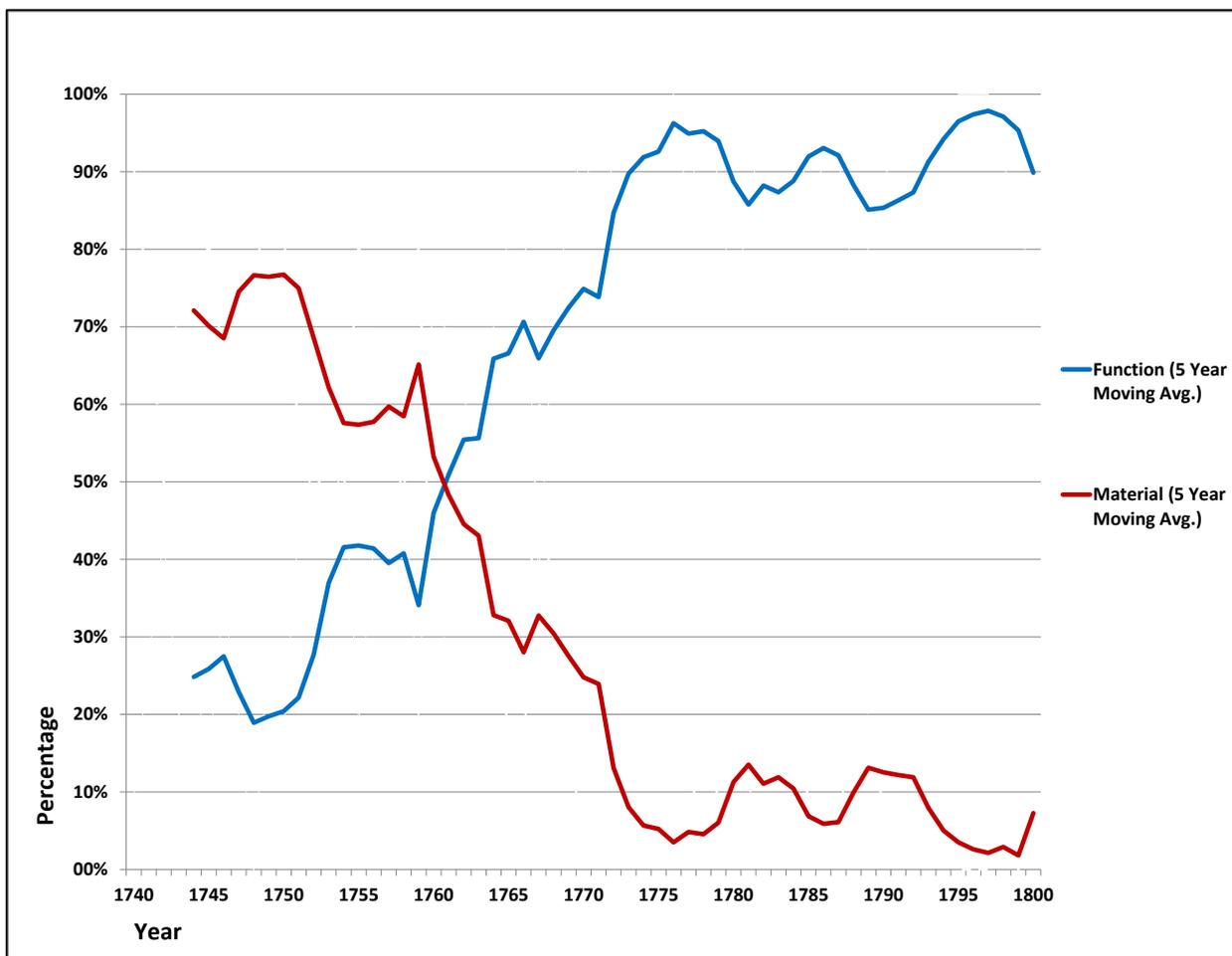


Figure 5 Spoon categories by MATERIAL (401) and FUNCTION (1383). Source: The Old Bailey Proceedings ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)). Total spoon bigram: 1,794. The MATERIAL category includes bigrams containing the terms 'china', 'gold', 'horn', 'iron', 'mahogany', 'metal', 'pewter', 'plated', 'silver' and variant spellings. The FUNCTION category includes 'castor', 'coffee', 'cruet', 'desert', 'gravy', 'marrow', 'meat', 'milk', 'mustard', 'pap', 'pepper', 'ragout', 'salt', 'sauce', 'soup', 'strainer', 'sugar', 'table', 'tea' and variants.

By contrast, sheets were, on the one hand, more difficult to steal because of their size, but, on the other hand, easier to transform into unidentifiable property that would retain some value on the secondary market. Sheets figured in approximately 80% of all trials for theft from furnished lodgings in the 1750s and

<sup>52</sup> Clifford, *Silver in London*, 84-85.

<sup>53</sup> Clifford, *Silver in London*, 86.

the 1790s, according to John Styles, underscoring their significance for criminal activity.<sup>54</sup> Bigram data reinforces this impression, with sheets appearing in 6.6% of all theft trials between 1740 and 1800 (1990 instances).

As importantly, the bigram evidence suggests that of all the major items in this inventory of theft, sheets were associated with the smallest number of descriptors. When sheet bigrams include meaningful descriptors, the vast majority begin with the single word 'linen'. This paucity of description reflects two important aspects of sheets as objects of theft. First, it implies that sheets were essentially anonymous, and difficult to differentiate by type. This, in turn, means they could be sold on through one of London's many used clothing markets in the secure knowledge that their original owner would be hard pressed to identify them. They could also be readily cut up and turned in to something else – a handkerchief for example. As a result, while perhaps bulky and awkward to secret about one's person, the frequency of the theft of sheets suggests that they stood out precisely because of their value as stolen items. Secondly, this paucity of types of 'sheet' reflects again the extent to which plebeian consumption does not seem to have responded rapidly to changes in fashion or patterns of production and importation. Linen remained the overwhelming material used for sheets throughout the period, and there is no evidence that the rise of cotton (although some cotton sheets can be identified) made any significant inroads here.

## Conclusion

When William Matthews went out for a gentle ride in Hyde Park late in the afternoon on Friday the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 1770 he was dressed in several layers of clothing. He was wearing breeches and a 'pair of boots', as well as a 'surcoat and a horseman's coat; 1 close bodyd coat and 2 waistcosts, a hatt & wig'. In his pockets he had:

1 Silver Watch seal and Key  
A Linnen Hancerchief  
In Left hand Breeches Pocket Eight Shillings  
In a Yellow Bag some Memorandums & a Key  
In the Right hand Coat pocket a Blue & White Hankerchief  
1 Pair of Leather Gloves a Clasp Knife and a Pencil  
two pence and a Pocket Book with Bills memorandum Etc  
1 Pair of Silver stone studs a Snuff Bose...  
In the Right hand pocket 1 Guiney  
1 five shilling and 3 pence in a yellow Bag<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> For sheets stolen from lodgings see Styles, 'Lodging at the Old Bailey', 72-3.

Matthews suffered a fit, fell from his horse and died. This inventory of clothing and the contents of his pockets was like a probate inventory, drawn up as part of the bureaucracy of death for the coroner's inquest that followed. But, like the indictments explored in this essay, the inventory of Matthews's personal effects also exposes a different world of material goods to most probates. It lists the items that went out of doors, on the person, and thus accompanied men and women into the public sphere of London's streets. Inventories like that of Matthews's personal effects are extraordinarily rare. In aggregate the Old Bailey indictments provide a robust and large-scale alternative measure and inventory of public goods and personal effects. Moreover, the significance of Matthews's inventory becomes easier to recover and analyze when placed in the context of a broader pool of data.

This article has sought to expose the public, out-of-doors world of material goods in a new way. Most significantly, by treating the Old Bailey indictments as an inventory, it has shifted attention away from ownership at death, the common perspective derived from probate records, to theft and dispossession involving the living, and shifted attention away from the selective recording of high-value domestic items found in probate inventories to every-day items that could be easily melted down, pawned, or sold. In the process, it has sought to shift our gaze from the wealthy elite, whose experience dominate probate records, to the middling and lower classes, whose material losses are more fully reflected in the Old Bailey indictments; and from the household to the streets and liminal spaces that constituted the negotiated public sphere of eighteenth-century London. What has been exposed is an economy of desire and value constituted not by rarity but by the quotidian and the stealable.

This material world has been exposed through the application of computational techniques to a digitized archive. One of the challenges of dealing with the commonplace is that it is commonplace—littered throughout the archive but seldom collected in one location. To capture the significance of everyday objects, we need to aggregate, parse, and apply pattern recognition and comparative analysis to the archives of the material world on a new and different scale. This changes the nature of scholarship—both the questions that can be asked, and the character of the evidence used to answer them; it complements rather than replaces more traditional forms of analysis based on different types of 'inventories'. For the material world of London in the latter half of the eighteenth century, these new methodologies expose a world of circulating and re-circulating handkerchiefs, watches, spoons, and sheets mobilized by networks of exchange encompassing different social classes. What remains is a partial vision, refracted through a legal

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<sup>55</sup> City of Westminster Coroners, Coroners' Inquests into Suspicious Deaths, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1770-26<sup>th</sup> December 1770, London Lives, 1690-1800, WACWIC652100283 ([www.londonlives.org](http://www.londonlives.org), version 1.1. 16 January 2014), Westminster Abbey Muniment Room.

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the case of the Old Bailey

system that many could not afford to access, and which was largely deployed in defense of the property rights of the few. But, it is a vision that brings into sharp focus the instability of value and the ambiguity of material description. It exposes a world too often described through sideboards and bedsteads, through objects that define a 'household', and instead, describes this world from the perspective of the street, and the objects that went out of doors and into the public sphere.

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