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Geographies of supply: Stoneleigh Abbey and Arbury Hall in the eighteenth century

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SLIDE

London is often seen as having an overweening importance in the lives of the English elite. The location there of both parliament and court underlined its significance as a centre of supply, fashion and sociability, and made links to and presence in the capital essential for social, political and cultural purposes. Many members of the elite kept town houses, a trend that encouraged and fed off the residential development of aristocratic estates in Mayfair. Many more corresponded with family and friends in the capital, seeking updates on political life, news of the latest fashions or society gossip. Through these same conduits came goods, some from London tradesmen; others from further afield: Paris, Italy or the colonies. Conversely, country houses and elites are also seen as being deeply embedded in their locality. Food and other goods were drawn from the estate and the surrounding district, whilst the owners acted as employers, patrons and patriarchs in local communities.

Whilst clear enough as a general picture, our understanding of the supply systems that serviced country houses during the eighteenth century remains surprisingly vague. **SLIDE** In this paper, we examine the patterns of supply of two houses: Stoneleigh Abbey and Arbury Hall, situated in close proximity to one another in central Warwickshire. Our aim is to assess the relative importance and role of metropolitan and local suppliers in the construction and running of the country house. From this, we can gain a clearer understanding of the cultural and spatial context in which the country house operated during this period. To what extent was it local, regional or national?

Geographies of supply: local, regional and national

SLIDE

Stoneleigh was the home of the Leighs, a minor aristocratic family. Originally a Cistercian Monastery, Stoneleigh Abbey was purchased Thomas Leigh, a merchant, in 1571 and the estate gradually grew in size over the following two centuries. The Leighs conducted extensive alterations to the house during the eighteenth century, including an imposing new west wing and significant alterations to the interior. Arbury Hall, the home of the Newdigates, was also originally a monastic house. It stood at the centre of a more modest estate, although the discovery and exploitation of coal deposits on the estate brought greater wealth to the family in the late C18. It also underwent significant alterations as Sir Roger Newdigate gradually transformed the Elizabethan manor house into a Gothic mansion.

The basic geography of supply for Stoneleigh Abbey appears to be relatively straight-forward. London dominated both in terms of the number of suppliers and the overall amount spent there. Indeed, in monetary terms, the capital accounted for three-times as much spending as all other places put together. To an extent, this is a reflection of the relative ease of identifying London tradesmen amongst the records, but it also confirms the general impression of elite families either buying many of their goods in person whilst in town for the season or ordering them directly from London shops.¹ Of the other places to which the Leighs looked for supplies, the two which stand out are Coventry and Warwick. The former lies slightly closer to Stoneleigh and accounted for about one-fifth of the bills sampled, although many of these were for small amounts. All together, Coventry traders commanded less than 10 percent of the total spent by the Leighs. In contrast,

Warwick retailers appear to have been patronised less often, but for larger purchases – a pattern which links closely to Warwick’s position as a centre for high quality craftsmen and builders; a point to which we shall return later. Beyond these towns, spending was limited to a handful of purchases often made as part of leisure trips (Cheltenham) or by a younger member of the family resident elsewhere (Oxford).

Whilst the location of suppliers has been relatively straightforward to establish for the Leighs, due to our use of receipted bills that frequently included headings, the Newdigate accounts are more difficult to work with in this way since they rarely provide these details. We are in the process of tracing the location of suppliers from directories and trade listings. However, at this point a number of points can be made. In many ways the patterns of Newdigate supply conform to those of the Leighs. In terms of geography, the evidence so far collected suggests that London dominated, whilst Coventry and Warwick were the most important local towns.

One distinct difference between the Leighs and the Newdigates was the preference for Sir Roger to purchase in Bath rather than Cheltenham. He purchased from the milliners, Mr Walton and Anne, in the 1740s and 1750s, from a hosier, J Cary, in 1757 and from a shoemaker, Mr Hatwell, the same year. Newdigate was probably taking the cure at Bath since there are numerous and ongoing entries for physicians and apothecaries there from the 1750s through to the 1770s. Another difference is that Newdigate appears to have patronised shops in a wider variety of local towns. In 1755 he purchased 4 guineas worth of brassware from Banks, of Daventry. He also patronised the locksmith, Blochley, of Birmingham, in 1761. And he went further afield for some luxury goods, spending a total of £170 worth on five pipes of Port from the vintner M. Gauntlett, of Winchester. The Leighs, in contrast, generally bought wine in London.

Although the geography in supply to these households was quite similar, the evidence so far analysed suggests there was surprisingly little overlap between the suppliers of Stoneleigh and Arbury, given their close geographical proximity. Of the 1209 suppliers to Arbury (1747-1806) and the 2122 suppliers to Stoneleigh (1738-1806) a mere 31 have thus far been found to have supplied both households. There are some interesting overlaps that we have found and further possible matches that require further analysis but it seems that the two families inhabited very different worlds in terms of the supply of goods – a point to which we return later. First, though, we want to consider some of the explanations for the geographical patterns outlined above.

Hierarchies of goods and rational consumers

If we consider the kind of goods and services being bought in different places, some striking patterns begin to emerge. London was the chief source for luxury goods. Most silverware, art and books came from London shops, including £48 9s 1d for a silver ‘thread tea vase’ from Robert Makepeace on Terle Street and £105 for a 113 volume set of the publications of L’Academie de Sciences bound in morocco leather, bought from Thomas Payne of St Martin in the Fields **SLIDE**.ⁱⁱ Newdigate also patronised London suppliers for many of his high value purchases, sometimes using the same suppliers of the Leighs. In 1749 he purchased a writing table, a large oval mahogany table and 3 large marble slab tables from John Pardoe who also supplied mahogany and giltware for Stoneleigh Abbey. Newdigate also purchased books from two London booksellers, Paul Valient and Thomas Payne, who both supplied Edward Leigh in the 1760s. However, their spending patterns were rather different: Leigh purchased over £220 worth of antique books from Valient, whilst Newdigate spent just over £22. Payne was a major supplier to both men, but Leigh spent over £500 in just four

years whereas Newdigate spread his spending across 34 purchases between 1763 and 1789, amounting to £400.

This preference for buying high goods in London suggests a hierarchy of suppliers and a rational approach to consumption choices, with more mundane items, less important in shaping the identity and status of the consumer, being sourced locally.ⁱⁱⁱ Whilst this dichotomy works up to a point, the consumption practices of the Leighs reveal a far more nuanced system of supply. In addition to luxury items, London was the source of many everyday commodities – things like groceries and haberdashery – that were certainly available more locally. Here again, the rationale for buying from metropolitan suppliers was partly distinction: they offered a better choice and/or higher quality. So we might draw a contrast between the London draper Sarah Gunter, whose sales to the Leighs included Italian and Persian silks, and William Butler of Kenilworth whose transactions centred on supplying the servants' livery – a service that he also provided occasionally for Newdigate as well.^{iv} Yet this contrast between metropolitan and local quality is less discernable in the bills presented by London and more local grocers: tea, coffee and chocolate were, perhaps, more likely to be ordered from London, but local suppliers, especially in Coventry, were prominent in providing the Leighs with a wide range of foreign foods. In the 1730s, John Hollyer was supplying brandy, Madeira and other imported wines and Newdigate spent small amounts on grocery products in London. In 1755, for instance, he purchased 10 shillings worth of raisins from Blakiston, Myles & Co, again a supplier frequented by the Leighs and other provincial elites.

However, just as it would be a mistake to view London purely as a point of supply for luxury goods, so it would be wrong to dismiss local traders and towns as irrelevant to the construction and operation of the country house as a symbol of elite power and taste. Indeed, the design and construction of the west wing at Stoneleigh Abbey was the work of the Warwick architect, Francis Smith, operating with a group of local craftsmen, many of them Warwick based. **SLIDE** After his death, the interior decoration of the new range was entrusted to another Warwick-based architect, Timothy Lightoler, and much of the building work was carried out by William Hiorn, also of Warwick.^v Warwick craftsmen continued to play a role in fashioning the fabric of the Abbey: in 1763 Robert Moore was paid £75 13s 10d for plasterwork and in 1789 Richard Bevan presented a bill for painting, varnishing and gilding which amounted to £299 5s 10d.^{vi} William Hiorn also serviced the decorative tastes of Sir Roger Newdigate, although he spent far less than Edward Leigh had. In 1752 he paid Hiorn for a chimney piece (£12, a repair?), for some carving work (£10) and for fitting a dressing room (£71).

Coventry and Birmingham tradesmen were missing from this structural and decorative work, but the city's retailers were still important in supplying a range of luxury items. **SLIDE** Lilley Smith, of Coventry, supplied a range of teas and coffees to the Leighs.^{vii} The fine quality teas available from Smith could rival many London shops and her status in the local area is perhaps confirmed by the long relationship with Newdigate. His accounts name Smith in 33 entries from 1747 through to 1780, in this case mainly for hops and barley. Much the same could be said of certain drapers: Robert Hughes, for example, supplied a wide variety of luxury textiles, including 'rich black velvet', 'fine holland', 'rich white favours' and 'fine grey sagathy'.^{viii}

Accounting for taste: personal preferences

Country house owners were rational in some of their choices, but personal preference also played a role. **SLIDE** Oxford was more significant for Newdigate purchases than for the Leighs. Sir Roger was closely involved in the university since his time as a student at University College. He served as

MP for Oxford University, 1751-80, and later founded the Newdigate prize for poetry (1805). As a result he made regular trips to Oxford and often purchased books there as part of his long term project to construct a gentleman's library. Edward Leigh, too, had close connections with Oxford. He had matriculated at Oriel College and, unusually, exhibited great interest in academic work during his time there. His impressive library was bequeathed to the college, leaving a lasting legacy, but his short life and mental condition (he was declared a lunatic in 1774, aged just 32 and died twelve years later) probably explains the lower level of interaction with Oxford suppliers. Certainly his sister, Mary, was more focussed on London society and his Father, Thomas, seems to have shown little interest in collecting books.

The importance of London in the personal lives of country house owners was also significant. It would be a mistake to assume that *all* gentry landowners had an intimate connection with London in residential terms. Edward Leigh took his seat in the Lords on a regular basis during the 1760s. However, it is quite clear that Mary Leigh was far more inclined to London society than her brother, Edward and her father, Thomas. **SLIDE** She rented two houses there, eventually settling on Grove House, in Kensington from the 1780s onwards and she divided her time between Stoneleigh and London. Sir Roger Newdigate also rented a house, in Spring Gardens (near St Martins in the Field). The closer connection of the Leighs with London from the 1780s onwards probably explains the more pronounced congruence of London suppliers of certain items for the two families during this period. For example, both Mary and Sir Roger purchased groceries on a regular basis from North, Hoare & Co in the 1790s. Mary made regular high value purchases of tea and groceries to a total of £370 and Newdigate spent a similar amount of £340, again on high value purchases. Similar patterns can be observed in their use of Wilson, Thornhill & Co. The reasons for these residential patterns differed. For Newdigate residence in London was a necessary adjunct of his role as MP. For Mary London sociability was the key factor. Whatever the motivation, we would argue that for consumers such as Mary and Sir Roger, these types of suppliers were considered local, rather than distant metropolitan tradesmen.

Conclusions

In this brief analysis of the patterns of supply of two Midland families, we have placed the country house more clearly into its layered geographical context. The straightforward concept of the country house as a sponge for expensive goods from London, and as a magnet for more everyday purchases from the local area, rings true to some extent. However, we have shown that there were hidden nuances in these patterns. London did, indeed, form the most important centre for purchases of luxury goods; but it could also form a *local* market for elite consumers resident there for long periods of the year who required more mundane items. Equally, suppliers in the local area, though they were vital in terms of everyday goods and services, could also attract the tastes of wealthy landowners hunting for high value and high status goods. This research has shown that the meanings of the locale and the Metropolis were changeable in the minds of elite consumers and served a range of different demands. Further research will, we hope, deepen our knowledge of this little studied area.

i Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter*, pp.164-183; Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*, pp.54-5; Peck, *Consuming Splendor*, pp.25-72.

ii SBT, DR18/5/5858, DR18/5/4515, DR18/5/4383, DR18/5/4482.

iii For a summary of these ideas, see Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*, pp.38-49.

iv SBT, DR18/5/1858, DR18/5/2105, DR18/5/5657, DR18/5/5867

v SBT, DR18/5/4192. See also Beard, *Decorative Plasterwork*, pp.57-8.

vi SBT, DR18/5/4070, DR18/5/5864.

vii SBT, DR18/5/4171, DR18/5/4140, DR18/5/4177.

viii SBT, DR18/5/2129, DR18/5/2210.