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FREE BENCH SEE-SAW: SEVENOAKS WIDOWS IN THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

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O good Lord, how is it that widows have a
greater reward than married folk? How much
better and more comfortable an estate we
widows have than we had in marriage!¹

It was a fourteenth-century gentleman who had quoted those remarks of his grandmother, and no doubt in the medieval period and for certain orders in society those remarks contained some truth. For widows customarily had been the most carefully protected members of the family, and with good reason. If her husband died young, it was likely that the widow would have the responsibility of bringing up young children. The customary laws of inheritance recognized this by allowing the widow to keep a portion of her husband's estate for the rest of her life, if she remained a widow. In much of England this portion was one-third of her husband's lands and tenements, but in those areas where partible inheritance was the rule, and in Kent in particular, the widow fared better.

In their *History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*, Pollock and Maitland have said,

The widow of the sokeman or the Kentish
gavelkinder is more liberally endowed than is the
countess or the baron's lady, but her 'free
bench' shows its ancient origin when she has to
abandon it on a second marriage.²

According to the custom of gavelkind, the Kentish widow was

¹ F.R.H. Du Boulay, *An Age of Ambition*, (1970), 108.

² F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*, (Cambridge, 1923), ii, 426.

entitled to hold and enjoy one-half of the lands and tenements of her late husband provided that she remained a widow and did not bear another's child. Also, the widow was entitled to one-half of the goods and chattels of the deceased, if there were no children of the marriage, and to one-third, if there were.³ The lands and tenements with which a wife became endowed at the time of her marriage were inalienable without her consent. They were her dower and they should not be confused with her dowry, which she might bring to the marriage, and which the husband might convert into a jointure, which she could enjoy after his death. The application of dower can be traced in the courts of custom, the courts baron of the manorial courts, or in the customals, such as that of the manor of Ashford of 1516 in which it is stated

15 ITEM that every wife shalbe endewed of
half of the Copyhold that her husband was of
Estate of inheritance according to the
Custome at any time in his life to have to her
for terme of widdowhold (*sic*)⁴

From an early date, actions at law were taken to test the widows' rights of dower, especially when the extent of gavelkind was being challenged. Also, there were collusive actions taken by husband and wife to bar dower. F.W. Jessup, in his introduction to the *Calendar of Kent Feet of Fines to the End of Henry III's Reign*, has noted that these increased considerably in the latter half of the thirteenth century.⁵ Even so, these cases are in a tiny minority when compared to the regular transactions of the manor courts, and it has been emphasised that custom was 'the "law" of every manor court in the country, and the only law which the majority of Englishmen made use of.'⁶ But when manorial courts fell into disuse except for the collection of fines and quit-rents, or met irregularly, or in the case of some of the smaller manors they disappeared completely, their customary protection of widows' rights was eroded. In Hertfordshire, there is evidence from the manorial courts that the widows' thirds were disliked because they meant a division of real estate, but in the

³ T. Robinson, *The Common Law of Kent; or the Custom of Gavelkind*, (Ashford, 1858), 95-113; C. Sandys, *A History of Gavelkind*, (1851), 200-10.

⁴ Kent Archives Office, U1045 M26.

⁵ Kent Records, *Calendar of Kent Feet of Fines to the End of Henry III's Reign*, (Ashford, 1956), lxxi-lxxix.

⁶ C. Howell, 'Peasant Inheritance Customs in the Midlands, 1280-1700', in (Eds.) J. Goody, J. Thirsk, and E.P. Thompson, *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in western Europe, 1200-1800*, (Cambridge, 1976), 119.

Sevenoaks' wills there are only two instances of grants instead of dower.⁷ Here, men made testamentary dispositions occasionally to protect their transactions against their widows' claims to dower, but more often to protect their widows and children and to devise and divide more specifically than the old custom of free bench.

If we accept that 'Initially a will is a written deviation from oral custom'⁸ one would expect that an increasing number of wills made in the seventeenth century would show a diversity of disposition from that enshrined in gavelkind and manorial usage. For the period 1660 to 1685 there are eighty-five wills extant. This may appear to be an insignificant number to be worth considering for a parish with a population of about 1500.⁹ There are large gaps in the burial registers between the years 1663 and 1671 when there was heavy mortality due to plague, but it can be estimated that there were 1200 to 1300 burials in Sevenoaks between 1660 and 1685. We may subtract from this number those who were too poor to leave an estate. The Hearth Tax returns of 1664 show that 40 per cent of those living in Sevenoaks town and 50 per cent of those living in Sevenoaks Weald were not chargeable for the tax, and Professor Everitt has suggested that this is a fair indication of poverty.¹⁰ If, then, we allow that about 45 per cent or, say, 600 of those who were buried were paupers, we are left with a figure of between 6 and 700. No more than one in four or five can have been the head of a household and a potential testator. So the eighty-five wills represent about half of those who might have made a will in these years. They can be divided into four or five main groups according to the occupations or callings of the testators. The largest group, about 25 per cent of the whole is made up of yeomen and husbandmen. The next largest, about 20 per cent, is of craftsmen and shopkeepers. Widows amount to almost 20 per cent. Innkeepers and victuallers, and gentlemen and members of the clergy, each made up about 10 per cent.

Thirty-nine of the sixty-seven males referred to wives in their wills. The remaining twenty-eight were either widowers (one was so described), bachelors or, and this seems unlikely, they totally ignored their wives. In two-thirds of the thirty-nine wills the widow was made

⁷ (Ed.) L. M. Munby, *Life and Death in King's Langley: Wills and Inventories, 1498-1659*, (King's Langley, 1981), xix.

⁸ J. Goody, 'Inheritance Property and Women: some comparative Considerations', Goody, Thirsk and Thompson, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁹ C.W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth Century Kent*, (1965), 36, quoting Gregory King's figures for Sevenoaks for 1695.

¹⁰ K.A.O., Q/RTL, A. Everitt, 'Farm Labourers', in (Ed.) J. Thirsk, *The agrarian History of England and Wales*, (Cambridge, 1967), iv, 397.

the sole executrix of her husband's estate. With few exceptions the widow was made the guardian of her children, and sometimes of her stepchildren, with the responsibility for their education and apprenticeship. Apart from one instance in a nun-cupative will the widow always received some share of the household goods and chattels and sometimes a share of her husband's other personal estate. In one quarter of the wills the husband specified what house or in what part of the house the widow should continue to live. Some wives did not have to surrender their 'free bench' even when they remarried.

One might expect that the yeomen group would have been most anxious to pass on the freehold or leasehold of their lands virtually intact to their sons. In fact, only one yeoman threatened his wife with disinheritance, if she attempted to claim her dower. Richard Everidge gave to his wife Susan, her bed, two chairs and a chest and a rent charge of £8 per annum during her natural life 'but if my said wife shall at any time after my decease goe about by suite either in Law or in Equitie to recover any Dower or other interest or estate whatsoever then and from thenceforth I will that the said annuities of eight pounds shall cease.'¹¹ He did not make his wife executrix of his will and he cut off his son's second wife and her daughter with the proverbial shilling 'to be paid on demand'. He left his farm and lands to three grand-sons, the children of his son's first marriage.

John Coggar treated his wife a little better, leaving her one-half of his household goods, but the annuity of £10 was 'in lieu and satisfaction of hir Right of Dower to my said lands'.¹² All his houses, lands and tenements, subject to the rent charge, were left to his son John. His estate was considerable, for when his son John married Elizabeth, one of the daughters of Francis Best, the landlord of the Crown Inn at Sevenoaks, she brought a dowry of £200 and John made her a marriage settlement which comprised seven houses, including the family farm of Dibden, two coppices, 17 acres of land and 5 acres of hops.¹³

Most of the yeomen whose wills were accompanied by inventories left goods chattels and stock worth between £100 and £200, probably about average for this part of Kent.¹⁴ The farm stock and tackle usually amounted to about two-thirds of the total value of the inventory. Of those for whom there are no inventories, John Becket left his widow an annuity of £8, Thomas Rigby left his widow an

¹¹ K.A.O., PRS. W.5.185.

¹² K.A.O., PRS. W.3.236.

¹³ Sevenoaks Library, Gordon Ward Notebooks, S.XIII,88.

¹⁴ Chalklin, *op. cit.*, 232, fn. 1.

annuity of £7, and Edward Lampard, who was clearly in a class of his own, left his widow rent charges of £23 per annum.¹⁵

Some yeomen who left no surviving sons left their widows in charge of their farms. John Everest left his lands in Pembury to his wife Ann for her natural life with no proviso about her remarriage. 'Also, my will is that she shall have the use of my farm wherein I live called Elses and all my stock thereon together with all my household goods during her natural life, she paying the rent for the farm and making no wilful waste or destruction.'¹⁶ After her death the lease, stock and household goods were to go to his nephew, Peter Everest. When Ann died five years later in 1677, she made no mention in her will of the farm, which she held in reversion, and her inventory showed that her furniture was worth less than £4.¹⁷ Neither will nor inventory gave a true indication of her previous life style – a cautionary tale for those of us who would attempt to deduce living standards from probate records.

The inventory of Joan Nicoll, widow, implies that she lived in a small hall-house comprising a hall with chamber over, kitchen, milk house and buttery. In the barn were ten cops of oats and three loads of hay and in the yard were two cows and two pigs.¹⁸ Hers was more of a smallholding than a farm but clearly she farmed it herself. Another Sevenoaks widow, Parnell Hunt, farmed on a much larger scale. Her will is unusual in that it is the only one that has no religious preamble, beginning simply 'Instructions given by Parnell Hunt for the making of her last will', and it was witnessed by Dame Margaret Boswell, the only member of the gentry to appear in these wills.¹⁹ Parnell made a kinswoman her executor and instructed her to dispose of her stock, goods and personal estate to discharge a bond, then after many small bequests, she left the remainder of her estate and the lease of her farm to her executrix. Her inventory totalled £234 of which only 2s. 6d. was in ready money. The farm stock amounted to £187 and included 115 sheep and lambs, 9 cows, 6 oxen and large crops of wheat, oats, hay and peas in the barns.²⁰

Yeomen did not appear to be too anxious to pass on their lands undivided to their eldest sons or to one favoured son. They were only too aware of their heirs' mortality and, in almost every will, one reads

¹⁵ Public Record Office, Prob. 11.303 f.18, K.A.O., PRS. W.14.69, P.R.O., Prob.11.343 f.162.

¹⁶ K.A.O., PRS. W.5.182.

¹⁷ K.A.O., PRS. I.5.26.

¹⁸ K.A.O., PRS. I. 14.15.

¹⁹ K.A.O., PRS. W. 8.108.

²⁰ K.A.O., PRS. I. 8.120.

words to the effect that, if one or more of the heirs should die before they came of age, then their share or shares were to be divided among the survivors. In gavelkind, the age of inheritance had been fifteen years, but in the wills the usual age was twenty-one years and in one case twenty-five years. John Becket in his will gave his lands called Great Stony Croft equally to his daughters, Mary and Jane. The remainder of his lands he divided equally between his sons Edward and John, when they reached the age of twenty-one. From that time they were to pay their mother an annuity of £8.²¹ Edward and Jane had been born (the register was still recording births, not baptisms) on 8 July, 1660. Their father was buried on 19 November, 1660, their mother was buried on 27 January, 1661, and Edward was buried on 22 April, 1662. The heirs of John Becket still held his property in 1665 according to the manorial rental.²² If the burial registers were complete for the 1660s, no doubt one would be able to offer many more examples of the advisability of partible inheritance.

The majority of yeomen made a life-long provision for their widows and showed some concern for their comfort. Most widows received their half of the household goods and chattels (Richard Everidge's allowance of furniture appears noticeably mean). If it was not specified, it appears to have been taken for granted that the widow should share part of the house, at least until the son had come of age or the term of the lease had expired. John Hayns, who described himself as a cordwainer but who had far more farm stock than he had leather goods, divided all his goods, chattels and stock equally between his wife and his son and made them joint executors of his will. His son had the lease of the farm 'wholly to himself' and 'My wife shall have her biding in the house during the time of the lease and the paller wholly to herself to log in.'²³ Thomas Beecher had virtually no farm stock or equipment, but a large sum of ready money and may have been a retired yeoman, gave that part of the house in which they lived to his wife Margaret for life. Margaret shared his personal estate with a niece but the firewood in the house Thomas reserved wholly for her use and the timber was to be kept for the repair of the house.²⁴

Of the group of twelve craftsmen and shopkeepers, one-third of them left estates of goods and stock which were comparable to those of the yeomen. The total values of the inventories of the four ranged from £135 to £196. Edward Berry (£139) was a tobacconist, the

²¹ P.R.O., Prob. 11.303 f.18.

²² K.A.O., U.269. M 156.

²³ K.A.O., PRS. W. 8. 112.

²⁴ K.A.O., PRS. W. 2.25.

remainder were in the cloth trade. David Jeffery (£174) and John Jeffery (£135) were clothworkers and William Spilstead (£196) was a weaver. The Jefferys were a remarkable family. Although they modestly called themselves clothworkers, they owned the mills at Greatness, Sevenoaks. They were non-conformists both in the religious sense²⁵ and in the disposition of their estates, particularly in the responsibility that they expected from their widows. David Jeffery, who died in 1666, left all his goods, chattels and lands to his wife, with instructions to pay certain sums to three of his daughters. The payment of legacies to his other daughters he left to his wife's discretion.²⁶ His tools were valued at £5 15s., but his farming stock and grounds amounted to over £80 and included four and a half acres of hopgrounds and hop poles and five acres of grass on which were his tainters.²⁷ John Jeffery, who died in 1679, left £20 to each of his six children. After other small legacies had been paid, his wife and executrix, Bridget, was left the whole of his personal and real estate with instructions to sell the cornmill and its land immediately. The rents and profits of the dwelling house, fulling mill and its land were to be for the bringing up of the children. When the youngest was ten years old the widow was to sell the fulling mill and the land.²⁸ One might surmise that John Jeffery had foreseen that the decline of the cloth industry in Kent was irreversible. The mills at Greatness were later converted to silk spinning.²⁹ Spilstead made his wife sole executrix and left her the remainder of his goods, chattels and personal estate, after paying cash legacies amounting to £140 out of his estate valued at £196.³⁰

Some widows and sons must have found it increasingly difficult to pay the legacies which testators felt obliged to leave to their children. William Everest, senior, tailor, left his house to his widow for her life, and the remainder of his goods and personal estate and his share in the lease of a hop ground, the hop poles and a parcel of hops. A fair competence one might conclude. But Everest had nine children. His eldest son, William, was given £20, the tools of his father's trade and an acre of hop ground. From this he had to pay to his brother, John, £3 within one month and to his son, John, £5 when he reached the age of 21. His sister Ann was to be paid £15 within three months and his brothers, Peter, Francis and Daniel £15 each when they

²⁵ British Library, Egerton 2985, Heath & Verney Papers, viii, 249.

²⁶ K.A.O., PRS W. 9. 178.

²⁷ K.A.O., PRS I. 10.9.

²⁸ P.R.O., Prob. 11. 362 f.23.

²⁹ E. Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, i, 353.

³⁰ K.A.O., PRS. W. 15.143, PRS I. 19.107.

reached their ages of 21. The widow was given the responsibility of bringing up and educating the three younger children, Dorothy, Margaret and Percival, and of paying each one of them £15 when they came of age.³¹ The father's inventory totalled £86, but did not include the contents of his shop, probably because it had already passed to his son.³² When William, the eldest son, died twelve years later in 1683 in much reduced circumstances, he left a silver cup and three silver spoons to his only daughter and the remainder of his goods and chattels valued at £15 to his wife.³³

Apart from Henry Hills, mealman, all the other members of this group appeared to have been of modest means. Hills gave his wife the interest on a bond of £160 for the rest of her natural life and £2 a year on a loan of £40 which his son Thomas held. If, as seems likely, the interest on the larger bond was also at 5 per cent this would have given his widow an annuity of £10 for life.³⁴ John French, carpenter,³⁵ and John Rowett, linenweaver,³⁶ gave the tools of their trades to their sons. French shared the rest of his goods between his wife and daughter. Rowett gave his wife the use of his bed while she lived, which implies that he expected her to go on living in his house. Simon Payne, butcher, made his wife his executrix and left legacies to his sons and daughters, but specified that if his widow remarried his eldest son should become executor and his widow should have £20, a bed and all the linen, brass and pewter.³⁷ Thomas Buckminster, tanner, and John Copland, wheeler, left their widows the residues of their estates after making specific bequests to their children.³⁸ Without exception, the widows of the craftsmen and shopkeepers were made the executrices of their late husbands' estates, but they were saddled with much responsibility for bringing up and educating the children and for finding capital sums for daughters and sons when they married or came of age.

The innholders and victuallers, although of the same calling, were of such varying fortunes that they hardly constitute a group. Sevenoaks, it has been noted, owed its prosperity to its position at the junction of the roads from London and Dartford.³⁹ Its market

³¹ K.A.O., PRS. W. 5.170.

³² K.A.O., PRS. I. 5.21.

³³ K.A.O., PRS. W. 5.199, PRS. I. 5.28.

³⁴ K.A.O., PRS. W. 8.16.

³⁵ K.A.O., PRS. W. 6.58.

³⁶ K.A.O., PRS. W. 14.70.

³⁷ K.A.O., PRS. W. 13.4.

³⁸ K.A.O., PRS. W.2.31, PRS. W. 3.250.

³⁹ A.E. Everitt, 'The Marketing of agricultural Produce,' in (Ed.) J. Thirsk, *The agricultural History of England and Wales, 1500-1640*, (Cambridge), 465.

prospered and its inns provided accommodation to travellers on the road to Rye and from thence, as John Ogilby pointed out in his *Britannia*, to the shortest route to Paris.⁴⁰ There were around a dozen inns in Sevenoaks in the 1660s⁴¹ and of these undoubtedly the grandest was the Crown, which had eleven chambers containing beds and included a barber's shop.⁴² The landlord was Francis Best, whose inventory when he died in January 1670 totalled a staggering £510. Of this total, £200 was accounted owing to him on bills and bonds.⁴³ Obviously, he expected trade to continue to be pretty brisk for he set his two sons, his executors, the unenviable task of finding dowries for his four daughters totalling £700 and of paying them 5 per cent interest on these portions until they became due. His widow was given her choice of £20-worth of his goods and household stuff, a large joined chest marked E.B. with all the linen therein, 'And my will is my said wife shall peaceably hold and enjoy my house and outhouses yards and gardens and orchards according to her joynture'.⁴⁴

No other innkeeper can be compared with Best. Edward Baker, Thomas Stileman and Christopher Stevens left the residue of their small estates to their widows. Stevens had married a widow and he left her and her three daughters £40 'according to the security I gave her therefore upon our contract in marriage'.⁴⁵ Thomas Wood, victualler, made a nun-cupative will, i.e. it was a death-bed declaration reported by witnesses. It has been tiresomely repeated but no doubt it is true, imminent death concentrates a man's mind wonderfully, and Wood's declaration is worth quoting in full because it illustrates some of the priorities, obligations and regrets facing a man with short notice.

'He said he would give his daughter Joane halfe a skore lambes and to his sonne John he gave one great chist which was his grandfathers and the part of a tenement and land lying below Baylies Hill which was his mothers and to his sonne Thomas he gave a cow and a yong bud or heyfor which he willed to be sold and putt out for his use, and being asked what he would give to his daughter Anne he said that he would give hir nothing for that shee had allredy more than hir share. All the rest and residue of his estate he gave to Elizabeth his wyfe and hir daughter Susan'.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ John Ogilby, *Britannia*, (1675), 61.

⁴¹ K.A.O., Q/RLV. 1.15.

⁴² K.A.O., PRS. I. 2.84.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ K.A.O., PRS. W.1.289.

⁴⁵ K.A.O., PRS. W.15.88.

⁴⁶ K.A.O., PRS. W. 18.3.

It is tempting to write a scenario. Wood had married twice, and he gave his elder son, John, the land which was part of his first wife's dowry. Thomas, the younger son, gets stock which can be converted to cash or perhaps an apprenticeship. His unmarried daughter, Joan, receives her dowry of 10 lambs. Anne's dowry reflected a time when Wood's fortunes stood higher. His second wife, Elizabeth, who also had been married before, and her daughter, receive as is customary the remainder of his estate. We do not know what Elizabeth brought to him with her widowhood, but it must have been more than the financial liability of Susan.

Of the gentlemen, the most successful family to emerge in Sevenoaks from the Civil War were the Blomes. William Blome established his position in Sevenoaks and, with some shoving and pushing, at Knole by serving as steward to Richard, 5th Earl of Dorset, who wrote, 'Bloome I doe very much wonder at your continual murmuring and disputing my agreements and conditions with you.'⁴⁷ The other foundations of the family fortune came from property; hops, the elder Blome in addition to an annuity of £20 left his wife 20 nobles per annum 'out of my hopgarden every year as soon as the first three bags are sold';⁴⁸ from a judicious marriage; and from hustling the less fortunate, such as the widow Goody Merriam who complained to the 5th Earl that Blome had doubled her rent and distrained her goods.⁴⁹

John Blome, 'not doubting . . . to have a joyful resurrection with the righteous' and not the man to be caught out with a nun-cupative will, carefully made his last will and testament two years and six months before he died. Carefully and uniquely in that he got his wife to countersign his will to show that she was in agreement with its contents.⁵⁰ After bequests to the poor, kinsmen and servants, he left to his wife a life enjoyment of the property and lands in the Isle of Oxney and at Higham and Cliffe 'which came unto me in her right'. After her death these lands were apportioned between two of his sons, John and Charles. His third and fourth sons shared another farm and William, the fifth son was given Blome's part of the manor of Otford. The eldest daughter was to have a dowry of £800 and three other daughters £500 each. His widow was to use the interest on this money for their education and maintenance until they married or reached the age of 21. Also, Blome's widow was given two houses at the church-gate at Sevenoaks to enable her to execute the will and the remainder of his personal estate to support herself. It is most

⁴⁷ K.A.O., Sackville Mss., U.269 C.61.

⁴⁸ P.R.O., Prob. 11.307 f.33.

⁴⁹ K.A.O., U.269 C 95/5.61, C.95/4.61.

⁵⁰ P.R.O., Prob. 11.377 f.122.

unfortunate that the inventory which might have given some indication of the size of that personal estate cannot be found.

John Hooper, who described himself as 'servant of almighty God' and whose appraisers entitled him gentleman, ran a boarding school. Potentially, it was a profitable business, for in his inventory, which totalled £747, was included £440 for desperate debts.⁵¹ Hooper urged his wife to help his executor to collect some small debts of his scholars and 'to take some paines in the gathering in thereof.' Indeed, his wife may have been somewhat careless with money for he desired 'that my said loving wife shall at no time in her life nor at the time of her death will or give away above 20 marks worth of her estate.'⁵² She was to have the use of £30-worth of household stuff to furnish a little house and the rents of his lands in Tonbridge to enable her to educate his son, George. At her death the lands and furniture were to be divided equally among his three sons.

The third gentleman, John Smith, made his wife his executrix and gave her a life interest in his lands at Sundridge and Chevening. She retained the remainder of his estate after paying numerous legacies.⁵³

Two Richard Bosses, father and son, were vicars of Sevenoaks during this period. Both made their wives their sole executrices. The elder Bosse left large dowries to his daughters which necessitated felling the timber and wood on his land.⁵⁴ The younger Bosse thought it prudent to charge his wife 'to take care as she by law and nature is bound of all my children and to take care with the profits of my said personal and also my real estate . . . for their education.'⁵⁵ His real estate of 40 acres was to go to his eldest son when he reached the age of 25, but if he died before that time it was to be divided equally between his three younger sons. This was an unusual mixture of primogeniture and partible inheritance, but which might be explained as an inducement to his eldest son who he hoped would enter the ministry.

Widows' wills like widows' weeds, hide more than they reveal: but they are intriguing and are distinguished by certain features. Widows were circumscribed by estates that were entailed or held in reversion and therefore they could devise less than they had enjoyed. Because their sons and grand-sons had usually inherited under their husbands' wills the majority of their bequests tend to be to women relatives and friends. As they invariably have had a share of the family's goods and

⁵¹ P.R.O., Prob. 4.6806.

⁵² P.R.O., Prob. 11.307. f.6.

⁵³ P.R.O., Prob. 11.356 f.18.

⁵⁴ K.A.O., PRS. W. 1.270.

⁵⁵ K.A.O., PRS. W. 2.32.

chattels and often the first choice, widows tend to accumulate the best furniture, the silver plate and the family heirlooms. If there are frictions in a family, they are more likely to surface in a widow's will than in her husband's.

Dame Margaret Boswell's heir in land was her cousin, William Bosville, but in her will she gave the largest legacies to six women and left the remainder of her personal estate to Elizabeth and Ann Worsley.⁵⁶ Mary Beardsworth 'being desirous to make provision for my three daughters' gave 2s. 6d. to each of her five sons and the rest of her goods and chattels to her daughters, whom she made her executrices.⁵⁷ Alice Gill left small legacies to fellow widows (including Goody Merriam), a ring to Miss Bosse senior and her wearing apparel to her nurse, Goodwife Murchin.⁵⁸ Parnell Hunt left the remainder of her estate to a kinswoman. Ann Colvin, after bequests to sons and daughters, divided her linen and woollen between her daughters. Elizabeth Everest left all her goods, plate and money for the use of her daughter Margaret.⁵⁹ Joan Fremling left her house and land at Knockholt to her daughter, Mary, and the rest of her real and personal estate to her daughters, Mary and Ann.⁶⁰ Ann Swaine gave the lease of her property in Broad Street, London, to her daughter, Anne.⁶¹

Family treasures rarely remain long in the house of the deceased, even today, and many items which are mentioned in the wills are not recorded in the accompanying inventories. Margery Burgess in her will left to her daughter a bed with green curtains, a green rug of worsted, two green cloth chairs and stools, one great yellow satin chair, one pair of grey curtains, a table carpet and a cupboard cloth. To her grand-daughter she gave a silver tankard. The appraisers of her inventory recorded just two items: £1 in her purse and her clothing valued at £10. But the inventory was made thirty-three weeks after her burial.⁶² Dorothy Everidge gave to her daughter-in-law, Mary, a silver bowl and two pairs of her best hempen sheets, and to her other daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, she gave her wedding ring and two more pairs of hempen sheets. To Anne Jessup she gave her wedding gown and petticoat, and to Mary Jessup her biggest piece of gold. The silver bowl, ring and sheets were noted in the inventory

⁵⁶ P.R.O., Prob. 11.370 f.94.

⁵⁷ K.A.O., PRS. W. 1.277.

⁵⁸ K.A.O., PRS. W. 7.60.

⁵⁹ K.A.O., PRS. W. 5.202.

⁶⁰ K.A.O., PRS. W. 6.78.

⁶¹ P.R.O., Prob. 11.339 f.104.

⁶² K.A.O., PRS.W.2.6, PRS. I. 2.159.

which was made eight days after her burial, but not the wedding dress and gold.⁶³

Widows tended to be far more careful than men in the descriptions of the goods they bequeathed and the furnishing of Mary Pierrepont's house could be reconstructed largely from the details in her will. She gave to her son 'two feather beds, the hangings in the hall chamber and the hangings in the next chamber to it, and the hanging in his own chamber where he now lieth and the table in the hall and the two tables in the two parlours and the tables and dressers in the kitchen and the carpet in the parlour . . . and I give him more all the Turkeyworke chaires and stooles which formerly did belong to the little parlour and the red leather chaires in the hall.'⁶⁴ Wives, who spend more time in the home than their husbands, have a better memory for such things. One can only marvel at the retentive memories of the female witnesses of the nun-cupative will of Francis Jermine. It is the longest of the nun-cupative wills and records the largest amount of plate of all the Sevenoaks wills. To four of the seven grand-children mentioned in her will she gave a silver basin and all her linen, one silver gilt bowl and cover and all her silver spoons, one silver drinking pot with cover, her wedding ring and forty shillings in gold.⁶⁵

However, not many of Sevenoaks widows were riding as high as Francis Jermine and one might close with the will of Elizabeth Clifford down at the other end of the see-saw. It is a model of brevity and a beautiful and faithful rendering by the scrivener of the west Kent vernacular dialect.⁶⁶

Item I give to my datter Ales a payr of sheets and a gret iorn poote and the gret coped

Item I give to my datter Francis my buckintoub and a cheest and a drink vesel and a oiarn cettell

Item I give to my son Willam a smale toub

Item I give to my son After the beger toub

Item I give to my son Robard the poodering toub and celler

Item I give to my son Qumfree my houes and the rest of my goods

Item I make my sonn Qumfree fully Axcaker of all I have and so I rest haveing nothing more to give Seled the tenneth day of September onn thouthan sex haundred sixty nine 1669

X the mark of Elibeth Clifaf

⁶³ K.A.O., PRS. W. 5.194.

⁶⁴ P.R.O., Prob. 11.374. f.129.

⁶⁵ P.R.O., Prob. 11. 305 f.112.

⁶⁶ K.A.O., PRS.W. 3.249.

