

Chapter 9. Going for a song? Country house sales in Georgian England

Rosie MacArthur and Jon Stobart

‘So, you would not go to the auction? Well, you had a prodigious loss, I assure you. ... I never saw such a collection of sweet things in my life.’¹

Introduction

The nascent consumerism of Georgian England was built on growing economic prosperity, the emergence of new social groups, and the availability of an expanding range of goods and services. In this context, much has been made of the role of novel goods in shaping consumption imperatives and practices, and in feeding the ambiguities that arose from the rise of new social groups.² However, there is a growing recognition that a considerable portion of middling sort consumption was of used goods, often acquired at auctions.³ These public sales were thus important mechanisms for the redistribution of goods: spreading the material markers of status down the social scale and further blurring social distinctions. As events, they facilitated social and cultural interchange, bringing new people and new money into contact with elites and more established cultures of consumption.

One particular form of auction that became increasingly common through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries involved the sale of goods from country houses. Whilst the ability to sell landed estates was limited by the tradition of strict settlement, money could be raised by selling the moveable contents of a house. Auctions arose because of family misfortune or neglect; failure to produce an heir, crippling financial difficulties, and the abandonment of a property in favour of another family seat. More positively, they could be used by heirs to monetarise unwanted belongings. Whatever the motive, they created a social and

geographical redistribution of high quality goods as buyers flocked to these great houses – motivated by the desire to pick up a bargain; to gain kudos by acquiring furniture once owned by the great and good, or simply to be part of the crowd gazing at the trappings of the wealthy, now laid bare for public inspection.⁴ Up-market auctions were an established part of fashionable London life by the 1770s, but these were a distinct category. Most country sales generally depended for their success upon consumers (who were often not part of fashionable society) being accustomed to buying used as well as new household goods at a wide variety of venues, including the showrooms of manufacturers and craftsmen, brokers' shops, and market stalls.⁵ They were thus part of a much broader second hand trade. Indeed, even a cursory examination reveals that advertisements for auctions of household goods were a staple of provincial newspapers by the mid eighteenth century. They appeared alongside those for freehold or leasehold property; shops, assemblies or horse-races; patent medicines or books, and items lost or stolen – a context which cemented their place in contemporary cultures of consumption. Yet there was another context: that of the country house itself. Clearing a great house of some or all of its contents might be cathartic: the act of an heir stamping their own taste and identity on the property or displaying their (new-found) wealth to neighbours. However, it could also form part of a narrative of family deaths and inconsistent occupancy, and the gradual decline of the physical, domestic and social composition of the country house that could ensue from the dispersal of its material culture.

In this chapter, we want to explore both the nature of country house sales as a mechanism for selling a wide range of second-hand goods, and the ways in which these sales impacted upon the space and fortunes of the country house. The former is achieved through analysis of a remarkable collection comprising eighty-one catalogues for sales occurring in Northamptonshire over the period 1761-1849.⁶ It is impossible to know how representative these catalogued sales are of the much larger number of auctions taking during this period.

They were undoubtedly drawn from the higher end of the market and thus provide a useful window onto the spread and organisation of country house sales, defined broadly to include both the mansions of the aristocracy and the more modest dwellings of wealthy tradesmen, professionals and clergymen. Here, we examine the type, arrangement and description of the goods being sold; focusing in particular on the language used on the title pages of the catalogues. We also highlight the ways in which the country house was transformed into a consumer space, and how the accoutrements once used and displayed in an entirely different context were now presented as, or reverted back to, consumer goods.⁷ To assess the impact of the sales, we focus on one particular house: Kirby Hall. This is done, not so much because Kirby is seen as representative of all country houses (indeed, it would be near impossible to identify such a property); but rather because it experienced three sales in fairly rapid succession, in 1772, 1824, 1831. The catalogues from these sales reveal much about the changing reasons for and organisation of country house sales. They also demonstrate how such sales could both mark and contribute to the decline of a country house. In the case of Kirby Hall, the trajectory was sharply downward: from being one of the grandest houses of sixteenth-century England (owned by Elizabeth I's Lord Chancellor, Sir Christopher Hatton) it was a ruined shell by the late nineteenth century, home to 'vagrants and peddlers' who made fires from the rotting wood.⁸

Goods and sellers

Our sample of catalogues reveals that house sales were widespread in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Northamptonshire. They took place across the county: in towns and villages as well as at country houses (Table 9.1). Whilst the social character of urban auctions is difficult to determine precisely, they were characterised more by tradesmen and professionals than the gentry. In villages, the clergy formed by far the largest body of men

whose goods were auctioned; whilst country house sales, of course, comprised only the gentry and aristocracy. Overall, the catalogues were dominated by the upper reaches of local and county society: gentry and professionals accounting for nearly two-thirds of those whose goods were being sold. This reflects the social character of (rural) Northamptonshire, but also the fact that it was these groups which owned better quality goods – worth selling at auction and advertising via a catalogue.

Table 9.1 about here

The frequency and wide geographical spread of these sales underlines their importance in the redistribution of goods via the second-hand market, and in the cultures of consumption and household economies of provincial England.⁹ The mainstay of most auctions was furniture and household goods, but over half the catalogues also included significant numbers of books; about one-third listed paintings and/or silver plate, and a minority contained carriages, musical instruments, scientific equipment or even stuffed animals (Figure 9.1). The precise mix varied between social groups. Although the gentry and nobility were most likely to include luxury items such as paintings, the traditional markers of gentility – mahogany, silver, porcelain and silk¹⁰ – were also regular features in catalogues of the middling sorts. It was the quality rather than the type of goods that made sales at country houses stand out. At the first sale at Kirby Hall, for example, there were paintings by Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Ruysdael and Brughel; tapestries, gilt leather wall hangings, and the ‘India paper hangings of the bow’; and ‘A beautiful small oblong tureen, cover and dish, of the *Chelsea* porcelain’. But there were also everyday items, including two chicken coops and a bottle crate in the chicken

house; a variety of wainscot (oak) furniture, and various pieces of blue and white earthenware.¹¹ Thus, a broad swathe of society could find goods suiting its taste and pocket.

Figure 9.1 about here

As well as detailing a world of goods, the sales catalogues were also assiduous in giving the reasons why the goods were being sold off. Unsurprisingly, most sales took place because of the death of the householder. Only ten offered a different rationale: a change of residence, bankruptcy or, more enigmatically, ‘by order’ of the owner.¹² This careful noting of the underlying circumstances has two important implications. The first is that household goods were seen as retaining economic value as well as holding utilitarian, sentimental or hedonistic attractions. They could be sold to pay debts, provide cash legacies or generate capital for investment elsewhere. Most famously, the first Fonthill sale in 1801 was intended to raise money for the building of the gothic abbey just two miles away; whilst George Finch Hatton’s move to sell off the contents of Kirby Hall might be seen as part of his broader plan to rebuild Eastwell Park, by then the family’s principal house.¹³ Clearly, any shift away from goods as stores of wealth to symbols of status or discernment was relative. The continued importance of goods as a realisable form of wealth was true for landowners selling their silver plate, paintings and mahogany furniture as well as the urban poor who visited the pawnbroker with an old watch or greatcoat. The second implication is that bringing second-hand goods onto the market in this way required some justification. The auctioneers who produced the catalogues clearly felt the need to account for why Sir Thomas Cave was selling a large collection of china and glassware, or why Lord Hatton’s paintings were available to the highest bidder.¹⁴ In explaining that these auctions arose, for example, from a family death or a change of address,

they were seeking to legitimise their sales: these were the genuine goods of respectable householders.

Auctioneers were key to the nature and operation of house sales. In the provinces, many had their background in the furniture trade or as appraisers, but were cementing their position as respectable professionals by the early nineteenth century. Together with their wide distribution,¹⁵ this made them the obvious choice for the middling sorts when it came to selling off household contents; auctioneers from Northamptonshire or the neighbouring counties being used in all but eight of the sample sales. But the gentry and nobility often looked to London. William Beckford employed Harry Phillips to organise the 1801 sale at Fonthill.¹⁶ In Northamptonshire, Sir Thomas Cave, Lord Douglass and a number of esquires all employed London auctioneers, who duly advertised both in the provincial and metropolitan press. Langford and Son, who arranged the first sale at Kirby Hall, placed near identical notices in the *Northampton Mercury* and the *Daily Advertiser*, announcing the sale of ‘The Furniture and Exoticks, and other Effects of Kirby Hall’. Their catalogue was available from inns in local towns and at the auctioneer’s London offices.¹⁷

Figure 9.2 about here

Unsurprisingly, the auctioneer’s name was always prominent on the catalogue, increasingly being set in the largest or boldest type (see Figures 9.1 and 9.2). However, it was usually accompanied by the name (and often the status) of the person whose belongings were being auctioned. This reinforced the authenticity of the goods and signalled their quality, thus appealing to the desire on the part of discerning consumers to secure a bargain.¹⁸ This ‘clever’ consumption underpinned many purchases at auctions; consumers acquiring useful household

goods at low prices.¹⁹ Assuring the public of the provenance and quality of the goods was thus paramount. Whilst the owner remained anonymous, one catalogue reassured buyers that this was the ‘Genuine and Elegant Household Furniture of a Gentleman’. Another underlined the quality of the goods by noting that ‘the Furniture is of the very best description, principally supplied by Messers Gillows’.²⁰ Naming the seller also played on the desire to ‘capture difference’. If the individual had local or national renown, there was kudos to be gained in buying at the auction. This worked in at least two ways. First, auctions represented an opportunity to acquire special pieces or to bask in the reflected glory of owning a painting, bed or carriage that once belonged to a member of the aristocracy. At Fonthill, the crowds were drawn by the opportunity to buy furniture designed by Soane and Wyatt, and paintings by old masters, as well as by the celebrity of William Beckford. Much the same was true – at a smaller scale – with the Northamptonshire sales at Kirby Hall, Brixworth Hall, Stanwick, and Stamford Baron. These were the best places to capture value and distinction by buying a ‘handsome mahogany billiard table’, ‘a pair of elegant treble-light girandoles’, or a Sevres dessert service that had once belonged to a baronet.²¹ As Stewart argues, this fits with a wider eighteenth-century desire for ‘authentic experience’ and ‘the search for the authentic object’ which conferred human interest.²² Such motivations were apparent at Fonthill, where the buyers included a theatre proprietor who later advertised a production of Othello, noting that ‘Desdemona would be exhibited on the very sumptuous state bed, which was sold at M Beckford’s sale’.²³ Most people incorporated acquisitions into their domestic décor, adding lustre to rooms, enjoying a ‘share in another’s “genuine” world’ or, in theory at least, recreating ‘whole’ interiors for themselves.²⁴ A previous owner of high status could add value to the most mundane items, a point noted by Walpole of a sale at Holland House: ‘I hear the most common furniture has sold as dear as relics.’²⁵ Second, because the sales themselves almost invariably took place at the premises of the current owner, they gave people the

opportunity to gaze on the belongings of the wealthy and perhaps take on some of the splendour of the surroundings – a point to which we return later.²⁶

Selling goods: a language of persuasion?

Viewing and engaging with the goods *in situ*, meant that catalogue descriptions of individual lots were largely concerned with identifying, and promoting interest in, the specific items for sale. The catalogues operated as an advertisement for the auction as an event and for the goods as objects of desire; but they were also a convenient guide to locating individual lots spatially, within the house, and temporally, in the sequence of the auction itself. The ways in which goods were described thus mixed persuasion with practicality, and there was a fine line to be trod between promotion and puffery. As one catalogue acidly observed: ‘Bombast Puffing of Pictures, as well as of other Articles, is always ridiculous; as not furnishing any just or clear Ideas by which the unskilled may form any judgment of their Merits, but at the same time never fails to excite the Laughter and Contempt of the Connoisseur [*sic.*]’.²⁷ Sometimes auctioneers were very restrained. In their catalogue for Kirby Hall, Langford and Son confined themselves to simple descriptions of each item; only occasionally asserting that particular pieces were ‘very elegant’ or ‘beautiful’. Other auctioneers waxed lyrical. Skinner and Dyke’s catalogue for the sale at Rugby assembly rooms included: ‘an elegant full-sized four-post bed with ... mahogany feet, the furniture a beautiful striped and flowered chints pattern cotton lined through with fine calico and fringed, made up in the immediate taste, and ornamented with a neat sweep japanned cornice’.²⁸

Table 9.2 about here

Despite such variations, there was remarkable consistency in the adjectives deployed by auctioneers in their catalogues. The use of language is very instructive, both in terms of the messages projected about second-hand goods and the ways in which prospective buyers might see themselves and their putative purchases. Like newspaper advertisements, the title pages of sale catalogues sought to attract trade by creating a ‘positive impression on the minds of the consuming public’, but they also helped to shape the broader parameters of consumption by communicating the norms and ideals of domestic material culture.²⁹ It is significant, therefore, that considerable importance was attached to utility, the goods being described as ‘useful’ or ‘valuable’ (Table 9.2). The latter underlines the continued role of goods as stores of economic wealth, whilst the former links closely with Gregson and Crewe’s notion that the often very practical purchases made by the middling sorts when buying second-hand could also be a means of capturing value. It also reminds us of the importance of what Vickery terms ‘prudent economy’ in the domestic arrangements of the gentry and middling sorts.³⁰ These descriptors were generally paired with others that spoke of taste, fashion and discernment – also important considerations for the self image of those buying and selling at auctions. ‘Elegant’ and ‘neat’ were terms that appeared in nearly a quarter of the catalogues; far more often than did ideas of fashionability. At one level this is unsurprising, as it would be difficult for auctioneers to claim that second-hand goods were the height of fashion. However, it also played to a polite culture of consumption which was distinguished from both the vulgar and the ultra-fashionable. When linked to the solid mahogany furniture that predominated in these sales, neatness and elegance ‘embodied the social distinctions of provincial gentility’.³¹ It is therefore significant that the most common descriptor was ‘genteel’, since it was gentility that marked out the occupants of country houses and, more arguably, the substantial town and village properties that were the site of these sales. Describing goods in such terms echoed the

status of their previous owners and offered the chance for this to rub off onto those who might attend the auction and purchase lots.

And yet these socio-cultural markers were far from being fixed. 'Genteel' declined both in its appearance in the catalogues and as a normative and aspirational category in cultures of consumption.³² It was replaced in the catalogues by notions of modernity, which grew to pre-eminence in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In describing goods as 'modern', auctioneers were trying to reassure consumers that second-hand did not necessarily mean outmoded. But it was more than simply a sales pitch: it also placed the goods and their prospective buyers within a culture of consumption that emphasised change and progress. This challenges the contra-distinction between modernity and second-hand: goods were presented as both, allowing consumers to buy second-hand yet remain 'modern'. Moreover, the sales themselves, whilst being a traditional form of exchange, formed an integral part of modern consumerism. This was particularly true in the way that they fed off and into the growing interest in antiques. No eighteenth-century catalogue included 'antique' on its title page. At this time antiques were the preserve of a select group of collectors who were primarily concerned with assembling sets of objects rather than furnishing their homes with deliberately chosen old pieces.³³ However, 'antique' was used in the descriptions of individual items of china in the catalogues of Kirby Hall and Stanford Hall, amongst others. This association is quite striking: china is often seen as one of the touchstones of a new material culture, and yet it was the first to be described and valued as 'antique'.³⁴ Not until the 1840s did any catalogue specifically identify furniture as antique. Although this was some time after the appearance of antique dealers in London, it pre-dated by several decades the emergence of specialist dealers in smaller provincial towns. As such, house sales formed an important venue through which this emerging form of consumption could be serviced. In

doing so, they opened up the country house to a very different kind of public scrutiny and rendered it a commercial space.

Organisation: the country house as showroom

There were very practical reasons for holding sales at owners' premises. It saved on removal and storage costs, and few auctioneers had rooms large enough to accommodate the belongings of a substantial town house or country mansion.³⁵ The vendor's house was therefore opened up to the public during the sales and in the preceding days to allow viewing of the various lots. In total, this could amount to a week or more. From the catalogues analysed, the average length of sales was about 3.5 days, but over 17 percent were spread over five or more days. These longer sales were sometimes occasioned by the specialised nature of the goods – a large library or a long list of stock-in-trade³⁶ – but more often they resulted from the sheer number of items. The arrangement of goods was remarkably consistent across all sales in the sample, with lots usually organised by room.³⁷ Sometimes this spatial sequencing was interrupted by batches of particular types of goods, so that linen, books, paintings or china were often presented together. On occasions, this reflected their placement in the house; more often it was done to create an orderly dispersment of goods or to conduct a sale within a sale, perhaps appealing to a rather different clientèle. Books were often dealt with in this manner, as with the sale of Henry Fryer's belongings, where they were auctioned separately in the week preceding the sale of furniture and household goods.³⁸ At some auctions, the arrangement of goods room by room was adhered to very rigidly; as at the first sale at Kirby Hall, where pictures were listed in the catalogue as they appeared in the rooms. Thus we have three paintings (including two by Brughel) appearing as lots 15 and 16 in the 'Dressing Room next the Cotton Bed Chamber', whilst others were bundled into lots with surrounding goods, for example in Mr. Field's Room where one lot comprised 'a nest of

draws, fixt in the window, a picture of a lady, and a piece of still life'.³⁹ Even when sales took place away from the vendor's house, the room-by-room configuration was often reproduced. When the possessions of the late Sir Thomas Cave were auctioned at the Rugby assembly rooms and theatre in 1792, they were laid out in a series of 25 'rooms' with names presumably reflecting those at Stanford Hall.⁴⁰

In this careful reconstruction of the lived space of the house, sale catalogues strongly resemble probate inventories. Braummuller writes that 'people of quite modest means would know about this [post-mortem] system ... and therefore lots of auction audiences would have the sense of death-and-transition from the very printed catalogue they read or held.'⁴¹ This would have heightened the awareness for the consumer that the goods for sale were, until recently, objects of everyday life. In the catalogue and at the sale, these objects were situated in a liminal space between personal belongings and consumer objects. In some cases the lots grouped items together as they would have been used. For example, in the catalogue for the 1772 sale at Kirby Hall, in the Dressing Room, lot 2 comprised: 'A deal toilet table, with needlework petticoat, silk veil, and white cover, a dressing glass in a japan'd frame, 4 japan'd dressing boxes, 5 trays, 2 pincushions, and a brush'.⁴² Elsewhere, as with the listing of china and glassware, they were organised more systematically. Whether grouped together or separated for sale individually, it was the act of segmentation which broke the goods away from a 'pattern of living meaning' and into a purchasable lot.⁴³ Thus, the country house stopped being a space for living and was rendered a space for selling and buying.

Those attending the auctions did so for a variety of reasons, of which the desire to purchase second-hand goods was just one. Some simply wanted to see how the other half lived. Others responded to the social stir and speculation on the reasons for the sale that accompanied auctions at the great houses – as was the case at Fonthill, where the state of the owner's finances was centre stage.⁴⁴ However, a major attraction of these auctions was that they

allowed unprecedented access to the homes of the wealthy. In Burney's *Cecilia*, Miss Larolles plans to go to Lord Belgrade's sale:

‘All the world will be there; and we shall go in with tickets, and you have no notion how it will be crowded.’

‘What is to be sold there?’ asked Cecilia.

‘O every thing you can conceive; house, stables, china, laces, horses, caps, every thing in the world.’

‘And do you intend to buy anything?’

‘Lord, no; but one likes to see the people's things.’⁴⁵

The culture of hospitality and the rise in tourism meant that country houses the size of Kirby Hall were rarely completely private,⁴⁶ but in any other circumstances it would have been unheard of to admit all classes of the general public to wander at their leisure around bedrooms, service areas and attics. At the first Kirby sale, access was even given to the family chapel and the royal suite, and the catalogues helped to guide the visitor around these private spaces. Fabricant notes that, ‘within the traditional framework of country house visiting, the ideal tourist remained at a respectful distance’ and ‘identifie[d] with the values of the landowner without actually coveting his possessions’.⁴⁷ Such understandings were abandoned at the auction, where the house was made public in very different ways and goods were inspected with a view to purchase, rather than from polite admiration.

Such access made for a novel kind of space of consumption – one that was at odds with traditional notions of the country house and the social order which it embodied. A writer from the *Literary Chronicle*, after visiting the second Fonthill auction of 1822 complained that ‘from beginning to end, the Fonthill business has seemed to me to have been carried on, as far as the public has been concerned, with too much of the tradesman, or rather, perhaps, showman-like spirit; it has been made too much of a shop’.⁴⁸ The auction of artworks was

particularly problematic:⁴⁹ stately homes were for displaying works of art, not for selling them. Furthermore, selling paintings alongside everyday objects denied them status as ‘aesthetic and morally elevated’.⁵⁰ Whereas the paintings for sale at Kirby in 1772 would no doubt have attracted serious and wealthy collectors, these prospective purchasers would have viewed the paintings room by room alongside everyone else. The result was that works of art could be sold for less than their market value, Walpole lamenting of a 1751 sale that ‘the large pictures were thrown away; the whole length Vandykes went for a song!’⁵¹

Decline and fall

There is a story behind each individual catalogue in our sample. In some cases, where more than one sale was held, this story can be followed over time, allowing us to explore the ways in which sales of contents impacted upon the long term fortunes of the house. At Kirby Hall, the architectural shell remains to this day, but the furnishings and contents are long gone: a process facilitated and accelerated by three sales held within 60 years between 1772 and 1831. These sales, when looked at in the context of the broader narrative of the hall, demonstrate the significance and consequences of the dissection and dispersal of the moveable material culture of the country house. Examining the history of Kirby reveals that the factors leading to these sales echoed circumstances seen in many other country houses: financial difficulties, indirect descent, a desire to modernise, and the position of Kirby often as a second or even third family seat.⁵²

The first sale took place a year and a half after the death in 1771 of Edward Finch-Hatton, who had inherited the hall through his mother, the daughter of Sir Christopher Hatton (1632-1706). Edward had also inherited Eastwell Park, the seat of his paternal family the Earls of Winchilsea, where he had chosen to spend most of his time. Edward’s son George employed

auctioneers from London to clear the hall of the possessions of his predecessors in a sale lasting three days. It is telling that the catalogue of 1772 advertised Kirby as ‘The Seat of the late Right Hon. Lord Viscount Hatton’; not the absentee Edward, but his grandfather Sir Christopher, who had been well known as resident there.⁵³ The 342 lots were spread evenly across the three days and largely organised by room.⁵⁴ In all, the catalogue lists the goods and furnishings in over thirty rooms in the main house, as well as the service areas, courtyards and gardens, with the long gallery in the west range being the only notable omission. Apart from the ‘Four family pictures’ listed in The Chapel Room, the sale included few identifiable heirlooms; family silver was not for sale, most likely being retained at a more frequently occupied property.⁵⁵ With these few exceptions, the clear-out appears thorough. Valuable but old-fashioned items such as tapestries were sold, including ‘the historical tapestry hangings’ (which may be the Hercules series of the 1619 inventory).⁵⁶ Even some of the fixtures were to go, from a ‘piece of curious shellwork, fitted to the chimney’ in the Tapestry Room, to a ‘turret clock (fixt at the top of the house)’.⁵⁷ The process of clearing a second seat such as Kirby Hall may not have been a great loss to the family and could have produced significant financial gain. It would also have been an essential move in order to modernise: Walpole noted in 1786 that George Finch Hatton planned ‘to refit Kirby and inhabit it’ and English Heritage surveys have revealed a period of considerable renovation around this time.⁵⁸

George Finch-Hatton died on 17th February 1823; the property passed to his son and on 23rd August 1824 the second contents sale was held.⁵⁹ This auction appears lower key: organised by a local auctioneer, Samuel Deacon of Benefield in Northamptonshire, and lasting just two days. The property was noted as belonging to ‘G.W.F. Hatton Esq’ (George was not to inherit the Earldoms of Winchilsea and Nottingham until 1826), but no reason was given for the sale or mention made of his recently deceased father.⁶⁰ Whilst comprising 245 lots, its relative size is exaggerated somewhat by the fact that the majority of items were listed in single lots.

Indeed, only thirteen rooms appear in the catalogue, most of them bedrooms or attics. Perhaps these were the only rooms that had been refitted for habitation or perhaps contents had remained from an earlier period. That said, it appears that some rooms might have been emptied into others for the sale itself. The ‘Bow Window Dressing Room’, for example, contained three bedsteads with hangings and mattresses, a feather bed, two child’s cribs, two chests of drawers, seven chairs and a ‘Japan foot bath’.⁶¹ Despite the sale being relatively small, there were still opportunities to secure high quality pieces. Unsurprisingly the goods were lauded in the catalogue, described on the title page as ‘Valuable and Elegant Household Furniture, Implements in Husbandry &c.’ There are no paintings or books, and again no plate, but the furniture was good quality and mostly mahogany. It included a ‘Very excellent mahogany dressing table, fitted up with draws, bidet, night table &c complete’ in the little white room and a ‘Large mahogany book case with folding doors, new,’ in the Green Bed Room. Missing from the first sale, but present here, was a range of husbandry-ware, including ‘a very excellent spike roll (new)’, hay making and chaff cutting machines, and a ‘turnip and potatoe washer’.⁶² The sale clearly appealed to motives of utility as well as discernment and distinction.

Kirby was still the property of George William Finch-Hatton in 1831 when the final sale took place; however the title page for the catalogue states that the goods for sales were ‘the property of Mr Webster who is changing his residence’. Daniel Webster is listed in the 1841 *Pigot’s Directory* as ‘brewer and agent to Lord Winchelsea’ living in Weldon, a nearby village. It seems that Webster had previously lived at Kirby to manage the family’s interests in their absence, but moved out, perhaps as the hall became uninhabitable.⁶³ This sale was again conducted by Samuel Deacon and just one day was allocated. Despite this, there were 277 lots to get through and the auction began at half past nine ‘In account of the great number of lots’. Attempting to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, the catalogue highlighted

the: 'Genteel and Useful Household Furniture, Grand Piano-forte, organ, books and pictures, Kitchen and dairy utensils, cows, draught horses, potatoes, and other Effects'.⁶⁴ Unlike the majority of sales in the sample, this one was not organised by room. In fact there appears to be no logical pattern to the order in which the goods appear. They may have been seen *in situ*, but were more likely laid out in the hall or courtyard to save viewing time. If so, it appears that they were informally grouped into rooms, as at the sale in Rugby Assembly Rooms. Thus we have lots 130-132: 'Four-post bedstead, with dimity hangings, gilt ornaments, &c. complete,' 'Hair mattress,' and a 'Pair of window curtains, with ornaments, &c. to match the bed'.⁶⁵ Most items were in single lots with the occasional groupings of chairs, pictures or hen pens, although lot 276 comprised 'six hundred sawed rails.' Other useful items include two ferrets, a 'milch cow in full profit', and 'two very superior plough horses'.⁶⁶ There were also some high quality items, such as 'Twelve Wedgwood Custard Cups with covers', a set of 'real nankeen china', and many 'handsome' and 'excellent' mahogany items including a 'handsome carved four post mahogany bedstead elegantly trimmed'.⁶⁷ We also find books: 33 volumes of the racing calendar, copies of the London Magazine 1776-1781, the Farmers' journal 'for about twenty years', 11 volumes of Sporting magazine, and Chamber's Dictionary.⁶⁸ These may have remained at the house throughout the previous sales, but their mostly low-brow nature makes it more likely that they were brought there by Mr Webster. The agent was living very comfortably at Kirby, and yet the auction appears to have been a hurried affair, with so many items to sell in one day – everything, it seems, that Webster could not take to his new property.

As is apparent, the grandeur and range of wares available, and therefore the importance of the auction, could decline markedly if a house experienced a series of sales in rapid succession. At Kirby Hall the sales of 1824 and 1831 were lower key events, organised by local auctioneers and devoid of expensive fittings or important paintings. Whereas the first sale in

1772 was a clearout after generations of acquisition, the subsequent sales demonstrate the difficulty of refurnishing and living in such a large property. The changed circumstances meant that there were no goods of ‘antique’ or historical value in the later sales; the focus shifting instead to the ‘newness’ and quality of the goods, and to their use-value. As the status of the sellers declined, the catalogues ceased to focus on Kirby as an aristocratic estate, neglecting to mention in 1831 that the hall was the property of the 10th Earl of Winchilsea.

What remained of the country house in the wake of a sale or a succession of sales? Kirby Hall was certainly unable to recover, although the sales were only one element of a much longer narrative of abandonment and decline. It is clear that George Finch-Hatton had maintained an active interest in Kirby and his son George William was born at the house in 1791. However by 1809, *Beauties of England and Wales* described the house as ‘unoccupied, the Paintings, furniture and garden statues having been sold’ and the gardens as ‘neglected, and fast going to ruin and decay.’⁶⁹ And yet in 1812 George William held parties for his 21st birthday in the Great Chamber. After one of these, a guest wrote that he remembered paintings of the Earl’s family and of Sir Christopher (the Chancellor) hanging on the walls, and scarlet curtains in the Great Chamber. John Bridges also saw a full length portrait of the Chancellor, a picture of his coach returning to the house, and a portrait of ‘Sir Christopher the exile’.⁷⁰ These descriptions depict a semi-furnished house and, significantly, include items which had obviously not been sold in the 1772 auction, despite it being a seemingly thorough clearance.

Four years after the second auction, Nichols wrote that ‘the house is now dismantled and going fast into decay’.⁷¹ A party guest from 1812 returned in 1834 and found the dilapidated house only partly furnished. There were handsome cabinets in the south-west wing; an unplayable organ in library (perhaps unsold from 1831 sale); a bed in one of the rooms above, and scarlet curtains still hanging in the great chamber.⁷² The Rev. Canon James saw ‘the very action of decomposition going on, the crumbling stucco of the ceiling feeding the vampire

ivy, the tattered tapestry yet hanging on the wall, the picture flapping in its broken frame.’⁷³ In 1844 farm servants were sleeping in the empty rooms ‘surrounded by exquisite carvings’ and a labourer was living in the library.⁷⁴ Once the domestic and social functions of the house had ceased and the contents dispersed, the architecture itself started to collapse. By 1857 the clock works had fallen through the ceiling of the chapel and the roof was stripped to pay the gambling debts of 11th Earl. By the late nineteenth century the entrance gates hung on broken hinges and the staircase to the minstrels’ gallery in the hall was taken down.⁷⁵ When the 12th Earl Murray Edward Gordon Finch Hatton inherited in 1887 it was reported that he intended to ‘at least preserve the ruins’, but the kitchen quarters fell in 1896. The ruins were finally preserved and secured by the Office of Works in 1930.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The country house auction provided an important opportunity for consumers to secure high quality goods (increasingly advertised as ‘modern’ or ‘antique’) at bargain prices and to acquire a share in another’s world. Both as conduits of material objects and socio-cultural events, these sales blurred social distinctions and helped to create new cultures of consumption. In this way, they formed an important part of the broader marketing of second-hand goods in Georgian England; continuing to prosper at least into the second quarter of the nineteenth century, despite the emergence of more ‘modern’ retail formats and in contradiction to the decline suggested by Nenadic. Indeed, it is possible to see country house sales as crucial in the development of increasingly specialist forms of retailing and consumption: advertising and supplying antiques well before antique dealers were found in provincial towns. They also destroyed the mysticism of the elite lifestyle and ‘laid bare the financial transactions that underlay the collections of fine art and furniture contained in the grand estates’. The private house was no place for the practices and rituals of the marketplace

and when the accepted norms of behaviour ‘were not observed ... the country house system itself was at stake’.⁷⁷ This reveals a real tension between the country house as a site of consumption and as a lived space and symbol of elite power. Auctions involved the removal of (some of) the contents, but threatened to puncture the aura surrounding the country house and, indeed, its very fabric. Whilst not all auctions at country houses held such bleak prospects as those at Kirby Hall, its fate highlights the financial and demographic difficulties of continuing the family ownership of a country house and its collections. Richter argues that the press responses to the Fonthill sale of 1822 ‘exposed the fault lines between older economic models, represented by the paternalistic and land based world of the country house, and newer ones based on international trade and the open markets’.⁷⁸ And Walpole seemed all too aware of the significance of the growing number of auctions of the contents of England’s country houses. In 1793 he asked, ‘What is permanent? And what does not present morality and mortality to my old memory! and what a string vibrates on a *Houghton* demolished... who knows how soon my playthings may fall under Mr Christie’s Hammer.’⁷⁹ Yet such calamity would also afford opportunities for the recirculation of these playthings, releasing them onto an eager market and reaffirming the auction as a key part of modern consumerism.

Table 9.1. Location and nature of house sales in Northamptonshire, 1761-1849

	1761-1800 (n=23)		1801-1849 (n=58)		Total (n=81)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Town	9	39.1	21	36.2	30	37.0
<i>gentry</i>	0	0.0	2	3.4	2	2.5
<i>professionals</i>	3	13.0	5	8.6	8	9.9
<i>tradesmen</i>	2	8.7	4	6.9	4	4.9
<i>others / unknown</i>	4	17.4	10	17.2	16	19.8
Village	8	34.8	23	39.7	31	38.3
<i>gentry</i>	1	4.3	3	5.2	4	4.9
<i>professionals</i>	5	21.7	16	27.6	21	25.9
<i>others / unknown</i>	2	8.7	4	6.9	6	7.4
Country House	6	26.1	14	24.1	20	24.7
<i>gentry</i>	6	26.1	14	24.1	20	24.7

Source: Sales catalogues at the Northamptonshire Central Library

Table 9.2. Descriptors appearing on the title pages of Northamptonshire sales catalogues, 1761-1849

	1761-1800		1801-1820		1821-1849		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Useful	4	20.0	5	14.3	1	2.0	10	9.5
Valuable	1	5.0	5	14.3	11	22.0	17	16.2
Elegant/Neat	6	30.0	7	20.0	11	22.0	24	22.9
Fashionable	1	5.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	2	1.9
Genteel	8	40.0	11	31.4	12	24.0	31	29.3
Modern	0	0.0	7	20.0	14	28.0	21	20.0
Antique	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	10.0	5	4.8
	20		35		50		105	

Source: Sales catalogues at the Northamptonshire Central Library

Note: the title pages of catalogues could contain more than one descriptor, hence the total number of descriptors (105) is greater than the number of catalogues (81)

Notes

¹ F. Burney (1986) *Cecilia. Memoirs of an Heiress* (first published 1782; London: Virago), p. 44.

² See, for example: N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. Plumb (1982) *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (London: Hutchinson); W. D. Smith (2002) *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (London: Routledge); M. Berg (2005) *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

³ C. Wall (1997) 'The English auction: narratives of dismantlings', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 31:1, pp. 1-25; S. Nenadic (1994) 'Middle-rank consumers and domestic culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow 1720-1840', *Past and Present*, 145, pp. 122-56.

⁴ Wall, 'English auction'; R. Gemmett (2008) "'The tinsel of fashion and the gewgaws of luxury": the Fonthill sale of 1801', *The Burlington Magazine*, CL, pp. 381-8.

⁵ Wall, 'English auction', p. 2; J. Stobart (2006) 'Clothes, cabinets and carriages: second-hand dealing in eighteenth-century England', in B. Blondé, P. Stabel, J. Stobart and I. Van Damme (eds.) (2006) *Buyers and Sellers. Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols), pp. 225-244; Nenadic, 'Middle-rank consumers'; S. Pryke (1989) 'A study of the Edinburgh furnishing trade taken from contemporary press notices, 1708-1790', *Regional Furniture*, 3, pp. 52-67.

⁶ Northamptonshire Central Library, Sale Catalogues.

⁷ C. Wall (2006) *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 167-70.

⁸ A.M. Purser (1988) *Kirby Hall. The House in the Hollow* (Kettering: Auvis), p. 61.

⁹ Nenadic, 'Middle-rank consumers'. See also the chapter by Sara Pennell in this volume.

¹⁰ A. Vickery (1998) *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian England* (Newhaven: Yale University Press), p.161.

¹¹ Sale Catalogues (SC): Kirby Hall, 4 November 1772, pp. 5, 7, 6, 11, 19.

¹² SC: Barton Hall, 20 December 1784, p. 1.

-
- ¹³ A. N. Richter (2008) 'Spectacle, exoticism, and display in the gentleman's house: The Fonthill auction of 1822,' *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 41:4, p. 544 and Gemmett, 'Tinsel of fashion', p. 882; G. H. Chettle (1984) *Kirby Hall, Northamptonshire* (London: H.M.S.O.), p. 28.
- ¹⁴ SC: Stanford Hall, 1 October 1792, p. 1; Kirby Hall, 4 November 1772, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ In 1841, only a handful of towns in the Midlands and north-west England were without auctioneers: Stobart, 'Clothes, cabinets and carriages', p. 229.
- ¹⁶ Gemmett, 'Tinsel of fashion', p. 381.
- ¹⁷ *Northampton Mercury*, 19 October 1772; *Daily Advertiser*, 28 October 1772.
- ¹⁸ N. Gregson and L. Crewe (2003) *Second-Hand Cultures* (London: Berg), p. 11; Wall, 'English auction', p.14.
- ¹⁹ Nenadic, 'Middle-rank consumers', p. 128
- ²⁰ SC: Braunston, 14 September 1779, p. 1; Geddington House, 2 April 1823, p. 1.
- ²¹ SC: Stanford Hall, 1 October 1792, pp. 10, 12.
- ²² S. Stewart (1984) *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press), p. 133.
- ²³ *The Times*, 23 October 1801: quoted in Gemmett, 'The tinsel of fashion', p. 387.
- ²⁴ Wall, 'English auction', pp. 14-15, 20.
- ²⁵ Walpole, *Correspondence* W. S Lewis (ed) (New Haven, 1937-83) 32:279-80 (4 December 1775).
- ²⁶ Gemmett, 'Tinsel of fashion', p. 383.
- ²⁷ SC: Islip Mills, 19 December 1787.
- ²⁸ SC: Kirby Hall, 4 November 1772, pp. 6, 7; Stanford Hall, 1 October 1792, pp. 4.
- ²⁹ See J. Stobart (2008) 'Selling (through) politeness: advertising provincial shops in eighteenth-century England', *Cultural and Social History*, 5, pp. 309-328.
- ³⁰ Gregson and Crewe, *Second-hand Culture*, p. 11; Nenadic, 'Middle-rank consumers'; Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter*, pp. 127-60.
- ³¹ Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 161.

³² Smith, *Consumption*, pp. 189-222.

³³ See the chapter by Edwards and Ponsonby in this volume.

³⁴ SC: Stanford Hall, 1 October 1792, p. 12. The term 'old' was also used, suggesting that 'antique' carried particular connotations of desirability or collectability.

³⁵ Nenadic, 'Middle-rank consumers', p. 130.

³⁶ SC: Peterborough, 4 January 1796.

³⁷ This spatial organisation is noted in the London catalogues by Wall, 'English auction', pp. 12-13.

³⁸ SC: Stamford Baron, 11 August 1823.

³⁹ SC: Kirby Hall, 4 November 1772, p. 11.

⁴⁰ SC: Stanford Hall, 1 October 1792.

⁴¹ Quoted in Wall, *Prose of Things*, p. 170.

⁴² SC: Kirby Hall, 4 November 1772, p. 11.

⁴³ Wall, *Prose of Things*, p. 11; Wall, 'English auction', p. 150.

⁴⁴ Gemmett, 'Tinsel of fashion', p. 381.

⁴⁵ Burney, *Cecilia*, pp. 27-8.

⁴⁶ C. Fabricant (1987) 'The Literature of domestic tourism and the public consumption of private property,' in F. Nussbaum and L. Brown (eds.) *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature* (London: Methuen), p. 270.

⁴⁷ Fabricant 'Domestic tourism' p. 255.

⁴⁸ Richter, 'Spectacle' p. 551.

⁴⁹ Wall, 'English Auction', p.17; Richter, 'Spectacle', p. 544.

⁵⁰ Richter, 'Spectacle', p. 553.

⁵¹ Walpole, *Correspondence*, 20:268 (18 June 1751).

⁵² For details of the rise and fall of the house, see: Chettle, *Kirby Hall*, pp. 26-8; L. Worsley (2006) *Kirby Hall, Northamptonshire* (London: English Heritage), pp. 26-30.

- ⁵³ Worsley, *Kirby Hall* p.32, Kirby Hall, 4 November 1772 p. 1.
- ⁵⁴ SC: Kirby Hall, 4 November 1772, p. 1.
- ⁵⁵ SC: Kirby Hall, 4 November 1772, p. 5.
- ⁵⁶ Northampton Record Office, Inventory 1619; SC: Kirby Hall, 4 November 1772, p. 14.
- ⁵⁷ SC: Kirby Hall 4 November 1772, pp. 7,11,18,19.
- ⁵⁸ N. Hill (2005) 'Kirby Hall: The Inside Story', *ASCHB Transactions*, p. 39-40.
- ⁵⁹ Worsley, *Kirby Hall* p. 32.
- ⁶⁰ SC: Kirby Hall, 23 August 1824, p. 1.
- ⁶¹ SC: Kirby Hall, 23 August 1824, p. 4.
- ⁶² SC: Kirby Hall, 23 August 1824, pp. 6, 5,9,10,11.
- ⁶³ Pigot and Co.'s Directory of Northamptonshire, 1841. Worsley, *Kirby Hall* p. 33
- ⁶⁴ SC: Kirby Hall, 23 April 1831.
- ⁶⁵ SC: Kirby Hall, 23 April 1831. pp. 5-6.
- ⁶⁶ SC: Kirby Hall, 23 April 1831 p. 8.
- ⁶⁷ SC: Kirby Hall, 23 April 1831, pp. 3, 6, 5.
- ⁶⁸ SC: Kirby Hall, 23 April 1831, pp. 6-7.
- ⁶⁹ Chettle, *Kirby Hall* p. 28.
- ⁷⁰ Purser *Kirby Hall*, p. 59.
- ⁷¹ Hill, 'Kirby Hall', p. 31.
- ⁷² Purser *Kirby Hall*, pp. 59-61. SC: Kirby Hall 23 April 1831 p. 5: 'Very excellent hand organ (to play ten tunes) with stand, &c.'
- ⁷³ Worsley, *Kirby Hall* p. 33
- ⁷⁴ Worsley, *Kirby Hall* p. 35.
- ⁷⁵ Chettle, *Kirby Hall* p. 28; Purser, *Kirby Hall*, p. 61.

⁷⁶ English Heritage *NMR Complete Monument Report* (2007) p. 5.

⁷⁷ Richter, 'Spectacle', pp. 556, 555.

⁷⁸ Richter, 'Spectacle', p. 544.

⁷⁹ Walpole, *Correspondence*, 34:184 (16 July 1793).