Jonson’s Penshurst Reveal’d?
A Penshurst Inventory of 1623

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Ben Jonson’s poem “To Penshurst” is only one, though certainly the most important one, of the eleven poems and two plays he dedicated to members of the extended Sidney family. The persons honoured were Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland, the daughter of Sir Philip Sidney (2 poems); William, Earl of Pembroke, Sir Philip’s nephew (two poems and the play *Catiline*); and three children of Sir Robert Sidney of Penshurst Place: Sir Robert’s daughter Lady Mary Wrotth (three poems and *The Alchemist*), Sir William Sidney, Robert’s short-lived heir, and Mistress Philip Sidney their sister. Two poems are to their estates: “To Sir Robert Wrotth,” which is really about the estate of Durrants at Enfield, owned by Lady Mary’s husband, and “To Penshurst” itself. These last two were published one after another as numbers 2 and 3 of *The Forrest*, in Jonson’s folio *Workes* (1616). The historical situation surrounding “To Sir Robert Wrotth” has already been studied by Martin Elsky, and certainly as a poem about a specific, identifiable house and the life lived there, it raises many of the same questions about the relationship between

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1 I am grateful to Viscount De L’Isle, MBE, for permission to work on the 1623 inventory of Penshurst Place. I owe a special debt to Dr. Susie West, who has collaborated with me on the study of the 1623 inventory; for her forthcoming essay, see n.15 below. Isobel, Lady De L’Isle, Clare Browne, Hilary Maddicott, and Abigail Young have given me invaluable assistance in interpreting the document, Robert Shephard and Joseph Black have provided helpful comments, Wes Prince assisted with research, audiences in Kalamazoo and Toronto helped me refine my ideas, and Ingrid Smith typed the difficult first draft of the transcription.

text and source that are raised by “To Penshurst.” But Jonson’s poem to the Sidney family home in Kent is far more famous—justly so, I think—and has set a kind of bench-mark for country house poetry ever since it appeared. Written, it is thought, some time between 1603 and 1612, and probably closer to the latter date, “To Penshurst” is the country house poem par excellence, and why this is so is a topic that never fails. Yet it comes hand in hand with another concern, marked by the persistent return of critics of almost every persuasion to the question of what Jonson left out. The formal perfection of the poem is so great, and so very visibly achieved, that consideration of it seems to topple inevitably over into its opposite. There seems to be little left to say of “To Penshurst” except to say what it is not.

My attention was first drawn to this situation by a student some years ago who insisted on the need for a Marxist analysis of “To Penshurst.” At the time, I had a slick answer for him, the standard one pointing out the roots of class analysis in the social conditions of the industrial revolution and its unsuitability for pre-industrial rural Kent. I was wrong of course; not about the Marxist analysis, which as it happens Raymond Williams had already attempted, but because I hadn’t recognized what my student had already sensed. No one familiar with that famous phrase in Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet (AS 106) can avoid the “absent presence” in the formal perfection of Jonson’s poem of what every reader of his time would have taken entirely for granted: chickens and muck and dirty serving cloths, pregnant maidservants, anxious stewards, chimneys that don’t draw, the lord’s vile temper and the heir’s uncertain promise, the year the rains came in floods, and the year they didn’t come at all. Things seen, and yet during the willing suspension of disbelief framed by the poem, not really seen at all. As Paul Cubeta has pointed out, it was precisely this kind of detail Jonson omitted in exploiting as one of his models Martial’s description of the villa of Faustinus at Baiae (Epigrams III, 58).4 All the crew of the dirty poultry yard wander around...The greedy pigs follow the apron of the bailiff’s wife....Strapping daughters of honest tenant farmers

present their mothers’ gifts in wicker baskets,” and so on. The classicizing reader of Jonson’s day would not have failed to notice the poet’s reworking of a familiar source.

More recently, the winds of criticism have blown coldly across many poems we thought we knew a lot about. Jonson’s poem has been relentlessly de-constructed, sociologized, new historicised, and subjected to gender study and Marxist analysis. For Richard Harp, “To Penshurst” is a kind of church, embodying “a moving contemplative vision, characteristic of Catholic spirituality at the time.” To Michael Schoenfeldt, Jonson appears to be attempting to render benign “the hypocrisy and latent brutality of the political social and natural order” that Penshurst represents. Behind these contrasted views, indeed behind most discussions of the poem since the early 1970s, lie two foundational, but sharply contrasting, statements about it, George Hibbard’s “The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century” (1956), which takes the poem almost as a guide to seventeenth-century Penshurst, and Williams’s Marxist reading in The Country and the City (1973).

Martin Butler puts the whole debate in perspective by reminding us that “a poet’s exchange with his patron would always have been a negotiation conducted in code.” Unlocking that code involves us in a negotiation of our own, between the formal purity of the poem, which has been the literary critic’s preserve, and the actualities of life at Penshurst, which are usually assigned to the historian. Ian Donaldson has written brilliantly about the play, in “To Penshurst,” “between tenor and vehicle, between the observed

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scene and its figurative meaning, between the operation of a seemingly ‘plain’ style realistically charting a known place and a style that works by indirection, association, and negative suggestion.”

Few poems, indeed, move us so swiftly from pastoral and domestic idealizations—the Sylvan taken with his flames, the waiter standing by—to questions about the place they actually inhabited. Some of this may be the result of a Kentish version of the “Bronte syndrome”; visitors to Penshurst Place today, for example, can take one of the “maintained walks” with ordnance map in hand, seeking Ashore and Sidney’s copse. Were the Sidneys as virtuous and benevolent as Jonson seeks to persuade us? What did the local maidens actually have to bring to the great house? Were the Penshurst tenants as resentful as Martin Elsby finds the villagers of Enfield in “To Sir Robert Wroth”?

The material to explore such questions certainly exists. Among the De L’Isle papers in the Maidstone archives, the ripe daughters bearing “an emblem of themselves in plum, or pear” become entries in account books and parish registers, and we encounter their grandparents, parents, and descendants. In the neighborhood of Penshurst their names have not entirely perished, even after four centuries. Despite this pervading sense of the past still existing in the present, a document among the family papers on deposit in the Kent archives has never attracted any attention. “Inventory of a house of about 40 rooms, ca. 1700” passes unnoticed in that treasure-house, where in any case there are few scholars working on the later Sidneys. I passed it by myself until two years ago, when, hunting for evidence about the location of the family library (the catalogue of which I and my collaborators are editing), I stopped to ponder why an inventory described as circa “1700” should have been written in a Tudor secretary hand—why, indeed, it should bear a small correction in the hand of Sir Robert Sidney, who died in 1626 (see figure 1).

Closer investigation revealed that the “house of about forty rooms” is Penshurst Place itself, and that the inventory was not taken in 1700, but in 1623, perhaps a dozen years after Jonson’s poem was written. It was at this time, new research on the documents now enables us to say, that the widowed Robert Sidney,

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younger brother and heir of the more famous Sir Philip and since 1618 Earl of Leicester of the second creation, mortgaged his Welsh estates, and the furniture and books at Penshurst to his son Viscount Lisle, and in a gesture not unknown among his fellow peers, gave the house over to the heir and his young family. He moved to London, first to a lodging in Little Britain and then into Baynard’s Castle, where after a brief second marriage he would eventually expire.\textsuperscript{12} The full inventory, taken at the time the contents were mortgaged, is 43 pages long, most of them densely packed with details of the material objects—bedsteads, hangings, even curtain rods and chamber pots—which filled the house in 1623. A much shorter version of it, covering only the grandest rooms, is attached to the mortgage.

In Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History, Don Wayne worked towards understanding the vantage-point in the poem of a specific human observer, the poet Ben Jonson, who created the representation known as “To Penshurst.”\textsuperscript{13} In this essay I want to turn our gaze instead to the subjects of the poem—Robert Sidney, Barbara Gamage, and their children—and what the material

\textsuperscript{12} The De L’Isle papers remain the property of the current Viscount, Philip, Lord De L’Isle, though they are on deposit in the Centre for Kentish Studies (formerly Kent Archives Office) in Maidstone. The mortgage is CKS U1475 T 327/13, dated 28 May 1623. The schedule attached to it may have been copied a little later; its loose cover page, dated June 1623, is CKS U1500 C 292/79 and can be related to the schedule by its physical similarity and watermark. For Sidney’s London residence see his letter of 9 February 1622/3, written from his house in Little Britain to Sir Robert Cotton requesting the loan of “your written hand booke of matters of mony and mint” (BL Cotton Julius C III, f. 364). R. Malcolm Smuts argues that such a gentleman would probably find it cheaper to live in a town house in London with a few servants than surrounded by his household on his country estate; see Culture and Power in England 1585-1685 (New York: Macmillan, 1999), 89. For Sidney’s death in London see CKS U1475 A37/9, accounts for Thursday 13 July, 1626: “Lord of Leicester deceased this day.” The accounts record that his son Lisle had gone up to London the previous day, and on Sunday 16 July Leicester was buried at Penshurst; the accounts cover food for the approximately 27 men who “came with the corps from London.” My narrative of these events differs somewhat from that in Millicent Hay, The Life of Robert Sidney (Washington: Folger Books and London: Associated UP, 1984), 228-29; who does not cite the relevant account entries. I am grateful to Hilary Maddicott for drawing my attention to this evidence.

\textsuperscript{13} Don E. Wayne, Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1984), 138.
objects listed in the inventory reveal about their assembling of the representation known as "Penshurst Place"—about their fictions, if you like. I then examine these two versions of "Penshurst" in the light of twentieth-century questions about life in seventeenth-century Kent. A significant research opportunity awaits the economist or historian who will write a social and economic history—or a historical geography, perhaps—of Penshurst estate and its village in the early modern period. There are questions we simply cannot pose about the Sidneys, let alone answer, because no one has yet carried out that kind of foundational work. But some light can at least be cast on the nature of Jonson's text by using the 1623 inventory to take a look at the material culture of Penshurst about the time he was writing. From this we will gain a picture of two apparently conflicting but essentially linked sets of ideals—and perhaps also some new questions to ask about "To Penshurst" in its setting, past and present.

I encountered the 1623 inventory while trying to identify the room where the Sidney family kept its growing collection of books. Though there are documents that tell us about Sir Henry’s and Sir Robert’s eager refashioning of the essentially medieval house the family had been given in 1552, detailed knowledge of Penshurst’s layout in the sixteenth century has been obscured by later renovation, and none of the documents relating to the book collection say anything about how or where it was kept and used. Inventory in hand, I was directed to Dr. Susie West, 2001-2002 Munby Fellow at Cambridge University, whose specialty is the architecture and layout of gentry libraries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Together over the past two years we have studied the inventory and other documents concerning early Penshurst. Dr. West has been exploring the 1623 inventory in the context of contemporary and later documents concerning the architectural alterations to the house. Penshurst Place was much changed by Victorian remodelling, and it has been necessary to work backwards through layers of architectural intervention to reconstruct the floor-plan of the early seventeenth-century house. This information was embedded in the sequence of rooms described by the 1623 inventory takers, though their digressions across courtyards and up stairways hinder a direct mapping of the house from the paths they took around it.14 Nevertheless, Dr. West is now

14 CKS U1500 E122 (now also re-dated to 1623) gives the actual sizes of these rooms; it also bears a small correction in the hand of Robert Sidney.
able to speculate with some confidence about the site of the old library at Penshurst Place, and indeed has become closely familiar with the architectural history of the house itself. Her analysis of the evidence will shortly appear.\textsuperscript{15} Let us turn now to the inventory itself and—with Dr. West’s help as to locations—see what it can tell us.

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The opening entries in the 1623 inventory\textsuperscript{16} have been available to scholars since 1966, when another, much shorter version of it (duplicating the one attached to the mortgage) was published in the Historical Manuscripts Commission’s calendar of the De L’Isle and Dudley papers.\textsuperscript{17} The much fuller inventory we now have begins (as in the shorter version) with “The Kings Lodginge” (see figure 3). As an elite set of rooms, this suite would have been close to the formal entry of the house, which then as now is through the King’s Tower on the north facade (though if you visit as a tourist today you enter on the south or village side). In the inventory, the King’s Lodging is described as comprising a bedchamber, an inner chamber on the east and an outer chamber on the west, as well as a “Withdrawing Chamber.” The next suite on the list is “Leicesters Lodginge”—the private rooms of Robert Sidney (however they organized their personal relationship, his wife, as a woman of high


\textsuperscript{16} The full 1623 inventory is CKS U1500 E120; it entered the archives only in the late 1980s, as part of a deposit that the late William, Lord De L’Isle, made over several years, comprising papers that had remained at Penshurst when the first great body of documents was given over to the care of the Historical Manuscripts Commission after World War I. That earlier accession, U1475, was calendared in Report on the Manuscripts of Lord De L’Isle & Dudley Preserved at Penshurst Place (London: HMSO, 1925-66), hereafter HMC. The early part of the newer U1500 deposit is listed in the three-volume hand list known as De L’Isle Mss., published by the then Kent Archives Office in 1974, but the latter part, to which U 1500 E 120 belongs, is known only through a typed list available at the Archives issue desk.

\textsuperscript{17} U1475 E49, numbered 643 and dated 1627 in HMC VI, 547-54. In the 1974 hand list (ii, 352) it is incorrectly dated ca. 1650. This is one of at least two briefer descendants spawned by U 1500 E120; the other is the schedule attached to the 1623 mortgage, which for those rooms it covers repeats the contents of 1623.
status, would have had her own suite). This is on the ground floor: a bedchamber, an inner chamber, and a great chamber nearby, with a number of pictures. On the floor above, "Glocesters Lodginge" followed the same layout. We can see how the inventory-taker worked: into a suite, upstairs, then downstairs, main rooms to minor rooms, and so on. "Sidneys Lodginge" has a similar, if smaller, ensemble of rooms. In the President's Tower at the north-west corner of the house William Bowen, Joseph Black and I worked on the present-day library in 1992. In 1623 it held a richly furnished bath chamber and five other rooms, including a high-status bedchamber. Public rooms distinct from the bedchamber suites included the Parlour with its many pictures; nearby were the two long galleries built one over the other by Robert Sidney. The upper "greate Matted Gallerye" was then a picture gallery, as it still is today.

The naming of the suites tells us that the house was organized feudally, and not, like a Victorian great house, designed with large reception rooms and extensive private bedrooms. In the sixteenth century, bedrooms were also used as public reception rooms for privileged visitors. That is, we find the rooms grouped around the names of persons of status: first the king, then Lord Leicester, and then other subordinate groupings: "Glocesters Lodginge" recalls Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester, who held Penshurst in the 1430s. "Sidneys Lodginge" may refer to Sir William or Sir Henry Sidney; it was the latter who began the extensive building works which made the medieval Great Hall the centre of a series of buildings all reaching out towards the towers in the walls which then encircled the estate (see figure 2).18 As Susie West informs me, the inventory of 1623 "is a particularly clear exposition of the main body of the house." The seventeenth-century house plan was imposed on the imperfect reality presented by more ancient buildings, but the processional entrance route under the King's Tower, across the courtyard to the Great Hall gave the entrance court a significance which was lost in nineteenth-century renovations. The result nevertheless produced "the Jacobean ideal of the great hall, upper

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18 There is no adequate architectural history of Penshurst Place; one was planned by the late Jill Allibone, but never completed owing to her illness. Most discussions of the house cite the series of four articles by Marcus Binney; these are informative but occasionally erroneous on details. See Marcus Binney, "Penshurst Place, Kent: The Seat of Viscount De L'Isle, V.C., K.G.," *Country Life* 151 (9 and 16 March, 27 April, 4 May 1972), 554-58, 618-21, 994-98, 1090-93.
great chamber, upper best bedchamber, with lower great parlour, and galleries of state.”¹⁹

Most of the rooms mentioned so far also appear in the schedule attached to the 1623 mortgage; this is because they are the grandest, and the mortgage states that it was his best furniture, along with his books, that Robert Sidney mortgaged to his son. The inventory now turns to much humbler rooms around the gatehouse: the Porter’s Lodge and “the Newe Wardropp,” which as a place of storage contains a massive amount of rich bedding, hangings, and wooden furniture (nearly five full pages in the inventory, a study in itself). We then meet with a series of about eight smaller chambers where the presence of “livery” bedsteads tells us they were servants’ rooms, and following that move on to the scullery and brewhouse. Turning away from the kitchen wing, we come to “Lord Lisley’s study,” where Lord Lisle (later the second earl) worked on the books his father had mortgaged to him, and then to the stone gallery, Robert Sidney’s Italianate loggia, later glassed-in and today serving as a private sitting room. Dr. West believes Lisle’s study, which was carefully decorated as befitted a scholarly aristocrat, was situated above the loggia, and that it was in this large room that the library was kept. His later catalogue lists 5,869 entries representing about 4,500 titles; counting sets, we estimate that by the 1650s the library contained about 5,000 actual volumes.²⁰

We then arrive at the Great Hall where Jonson may have sat down to his meal. This description is very brief, though the “lower longe tables with lower longe forms” may indicate one or two of the ancient tables and benches still in the hall today. There is an armoury full of corselets, muskets and the like,²¹ and then the real attic of the place, “the ould wardropp,” with its discarded bedsteads, close stools and chamber pots, map cases and—curiously


²¹ No comparison has yet been done—an expert one is needed—of the armour listed in the inventory and that currently on display at Penshurst, but of all the items in the inventory these seem to be the most likely to have been retained over the years.
for the musical Sidneys—the last entry in the inventory and the only one of its kind, “Item one pair of virginalls.”

The contents of the rooms, as well as what we can discover of how they were acquired, yield a remarkable picture of how the accumulations of the Sidneys produced the Penshurst they wanted to live in. Within each suite of rooms the decoration was very carefully co-ordinated. Thus, for example, in the withdrawing chamber provided for him King James would find:

Item 6: peece of newe Tapestrye hanginge / of imagery worke beinge bordered and stripte / downe with Canvas [4?] stickes and a halfe depe / Item one gitte Bedsteede with a Testerne of / uncut Russet velvet garnished with gould / and Russet lace with single Valence / suitalbe to the same and a deepe ffringe with gould / and Russet and 5 Russet damaske Curtaines / stript with gould and Russet Lace with / Curtaine rodds .8. gitte Cupps with .8. feathers / Russet and yellowe to the same bed / the Testren Valence and postes being Covered / with yellowe Cotten one Counterpoynte of Russet damask / late and stript with russet and gould lace linde with russet bayse. [f. 1r]

And he could repose on a

Couch with a fframe gitte and powdred / with flowers covered with black velvet imbroaded / with divers kindes of birdes and flowers of silke / and gould ffrenged about with black silke and / gould two short Cushions of black velvet for / the said couch imbroaded with birdes and flowers / of gould and silver and fower Tassells of black / silke with Caules of gould to each Cushion, the / Couch and cushions beinge backed with black and / ash couler damaske.[f. 3r]

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22 The old Wardrobe is probably the room behind the dais of the Great Hall (but in the private quarters) which in a subsequent plan of ca. 1795-1800 (U1500 E164) is marked “not used”; today it is still called “the unfinished room,” and it was out of it that the last deposit of papers in the U1500 series (see n. 16) emerged in the late 1980s, papers which included the 1623 inventory.

23 Some helpful terminology: “imagery work” is tapestry with pictures of people; “forest” or “boscage” work is tapestry with designs of trees and plants; and a “stick” is a unit for measuring Flemish tapestry.
In Leicester's Lodging, the color scheme was crimson and silver: there were eight pieces of tapestry of "forest work with pillars," a great square bedstead with silver and red head-board and posts, and a crimson velvet tester embroidered with cloth of silver "with the armes of Sussex and Sidney within a wreath in the midst of the same." The bed had a double valance of crimson velvet also embroidered with silver, five curtains of crimson damask with broad silver lace, and "fflower white and Crimson ffeathers spangled with silver standinge in fower Cuppes silvered and covered with red in a wainscot baes." [f. 5r]. (As will emerge, Barbara Sidney liked having feathers to decorate her bed.) In Gloucester's Lodging the colour scheme was crimson and gold, green dominated the "bath" room in the President's Tower, russet the furnishings of the great matted gallery.

All of this suggests some very careful thinking behind the face Penshurst presented to its owners and guests, and indeed, a sumptuousness in no way reflected in Jonson's poem. I think we are not deceived, for there is corroborating evidence in a contemporary account of Robert Sidney's personal and ceremonial wardrobe which provides a striking parallel to the inventory. This forms part of the long and anxious Memorial of Sidney's revenues and expenditures which Thomas Nevitt prepared for his master in 1623. Among other expenses, Nevitt recorded that Sidney's suit for a Christmas masque at Hampton Court in 1603 had cost £220, and that the total


25 "The Christmas after the King and Queene came in your honor made you a suite of Russett cloth of gould and lyned a cloke with the same which cloth of gould being 17 yards cost 3li 10s a yard which comes vnto 59li 10s the panes of the hose were ymbrothered which cost 30li, the ymbrotherer also had for ymbrothering two broad gards vppon euer seame of the doubliett 20li. The outside of the cloke was of vncut velvett which cost being 80 yards 1/2 12li 15s the cloke was laced with a gould lace to the very cappe euer two yards of it wayed an oz: att vis the oz: and there was 36 dozen of lace vppon it, which with 20tie oz: of silke to seton the lace came to 72li your honor had also to this suite a hatt ymbrothered with gould girdle and hangers ritch stockings garters roses pointes and shoees which with the making vpp of the suit came to so much as that the whole charge of this suite came to att the least 220 [pounds]. (In margin: This suite was made against the mask att Hampton Court when the King and Queene came in from Wilton
cost of his and his attendants’ clothes during the 34 years Nevitt
cared for his wardrobe totalled £13,102. Nevitt’s Memorial may
itself be a representation, of course, but if so, its close detail makes
it a piece of proto-realist writing.

Nevitt goes on to relate, “Your honor hath bought within 20
yeares diuers ritch beddes as one of russett cloth of siluer another
of white cloth of siluer one of crimson velvett for my Lord Lisle and
many carsey beddes and cannopies, and turkey carpettes and
hangings and other furniture which hath cost your honor att the
least...2000 [pounds].” As the jumble of such articles in the New
Wardrobe suggests, rooms must have been made and remade
constantly. The inventory lists, among much else, five pieces of new
tapestry hangings of “boscage” work, seven of “imagery work”, six
of “forest work”, five more of “imagery work,” a silver and gold
“high Bedstead” with its rich hangings and bedding, several great
chairs of cloth of silver, more great beds, “nine great newe
sheatherbeds with nine new boulsters to them,” five Irish rugs, all
new, and carpets, chairs and stools in as yet uncounted numbers [ff.
16r-18r]. None of this is in the shorter inventory attached to the
mortgage; perhaps it was thought not fine enough to mortgage, or
perhaps Robert Sidney intended to take some of it with him to
London.

The myriad of other rooms testifies to the omnipresence of
servants, as in all great houses, and Jonson may have been right—
they seem to have been decently treated. Thus we find on f.8v:

In a Servantes lodginge / Item one liverye Bedsteed one matic
one / sheatherbed and boulster one downe pillowe / two spanish
blanketes one coveringe of / Course Tapestrye one window
Curtain of damnes with a rod two high stooles

thither. /)” Nevitt, Memorial, f. 4r.

26 In 2001 figures, the most recent available, the purchasing power of this sum
is £1,359,735; see John J. McCusker, “Comparing the Purchasing Power of
Money in Great Britain from 1264 to Any Other Year Including the Present”
Economic History Services, 2001, URL http://www.eh.net/hmit/ppowerbp

27 Nevitt, Memorial, f. 6r. Kersey is “A kind of coarse narrow cloth, woven
from long wool and usually ribbed” (OED).

28 Darnes [dornickes], a Flemish cloth from Tournai, wool or part wool, used
for hangings (OED).
Provision of almost the same sort is repeated over and over again, right up to the serving-women’s rooms in the attics: a livery bed, a featherbed, pillows, two Spanish blankets, perhaps an Irish rug. Judging from the number of beds, the proportion of servants to family and retainers was about three or four to one: at a rough count, there were eight great beds plus others in the storage areas, eleven “field” (that is, folding) bedsteads, seven trundle beds, and thirty-six livery or servants’ bedsteads (people slept two or more to a bed in those days). None of these latter items would have been very new or very splendid, but there they are, on the record. However, what does the record mean? That the Sidneys lived well is beyond question, that they lived far beyond their means is certainly the case, as Robert Sidney’s anxious letters throughout his marriage give evidence. To what sort of taste were they attempting to give expression?

Some of the family letters suggest that decorating their dwellings was a subject of absorbing interest to the Sidneys and their friends, and that they were, like many of their contemporaries, eager to accumulate possessions. Consider Rowland Whyte’s letter of 16 November, 1595 to Robert Sidney:

My Lord, I send you your Lordship, by Will of the Scullery, the Piece of Hanging. My Lord Rich saies that the border is too deep, and that it is not so deep as he desires by the note Bloq hath of his; my Lady Lester sayth, that if it be above 10s. the Sticke, it is too deere. I answered, that it seemed Hangings were good Cheap, when she bought any. Sure I was that your Lordship wold buy them as good Cheape for my Lady Ritch as for yourselfe, and so was my Lady Ritch assured, who liked the Hangings very well. I shewed the Piece to Mr. Mainard, he sent for an Arras Man, who truly did esteeme the Goodnes of it as it is, and thinkes it well worth 16 or 18s. the sticke.

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29 For Sidney’s perilous financial situation throughout this period, see the letters calendared in HMC III and IV, and the account given by J.C.A. Rathmell, in “Jonson, Lord Lisle, and Penshurst” (see note 3).


From time to time in the letters Sidney sent his wife we catch glimpses of how the furnishings of Penshurst were assembled. In 1609 he brings £300 worth of plate from London instead of the hangings from Flushing his wife was expecting; “I rather chose to have the plate presently than to stay for the hangings.”32 In September he writes “As soon as I have any more mony I will by those things for you of which you gave a note to Th. Novet, and you shall have three feathers more for your bed.”33

Four decades later Robert’s son, now His Majesty’s ambassador extraordinary in that great mart of fashion, Paris, would receive in his turn a note from his wife listing the decorative items she desired, though possibly in this case for their elegant new mansion in Leicester Fields, London. On the back of it the second earl wrote “15. Feb. 1636. Note of things to be bought”:

1. Order bed eather of damaske or velvett, and for the fringe I leave it to the chusers discretion, [word crossed out] if the fringe be silke then I desier that the bed maie not be crimson, but if it be with glode [sic] or silver then I shall like that couler as well as any other, one pice of good wrought velvett with a satine ground eather crimson or wachet such as our Queene had from France for a bed, on sute of slight hangings if thae be founde better then we have hear, on dousen of little pictures about halfe an ell longe of all the fairest ladies.34

The idea of bringing together an ensemble of pictures—one thinks of Marvell’s poem “The Gallery”—was new and fashionable at this time according to Hilary Maddicott,35 so in attempting to collect a little gallery of beauties the second Lady Leicester was very au courant. However, the Poleys and Parrots of the 1630s—government spies earlier scorned by Jonson in “Inviting a Friend to Supper” (Epigrams CI)—must have been innocent of the passions of interior decorating, because on the back of the poor ambassador’s

32 CKS U1475 C81/170, Viscount Lisle to Lady Lisle, 1 July 1609, HMC IV, 134.
33 CKS U1475 C81/174, Viscount Lisle to Lady Lisle, [15 September?] 1609, HMC IV, 158.
34 CKS U1475 O89/10. “Watchet” is a blue fabric; an English ell is about 45 inches.
35 Personal communication, 12 December, 2000.
list, in another contemporary hand, is written the puzzled comment “examined but Cypher to be explain’d.”

The results of the identification of the 1623 inventory have been immediate. First, it is now possible to assess the rate and character of change at seventeenth-century Penshurst by comparing that list with the great 1677 inventory prepared when Robert, the second earl died five decades later, and fully printed in volume 5 of the Historical Manuscripts Commission calendar of the De L’Isle papers (HMC VI, 634-47). Even a quick comparison shows that in 1677 the feudal organization was disintegrating, and there was a much greater attempt to allocate private space to specific individuals. Second, by unravelling the story of the mortgage it has become possible to hypothesise the kind of materials on which the great 1652-65 library catalogue might have been based; the books were mortgaged too, and legally speaking, there must have been a list of them as well. Did it later serve as the Ur-manuscript from which the existing library catalogue was copied? In the edition, we will have space to explain why we think this is—so far, at least—the most reasonable hypothesis. Finally, Susie West and I have been conferring with Clare Browne of the Victoria and Albert Museum about the furniture and hangings. Was Barbara Gamage as modish as her daughter-in-law thirty years later? Don Wayne argued that at least in Sir Henry Sidney’s day, the family’s fiction of itself was expressed in the “Gothic” representational forms appropriate both to their English nationalism and their Calvinism. What will we learn from their hangings, chairs, bedding and carpets about the politics of Robert and Barbara Sidney’s style?

This returns us to the Sidneys’ representation of themselves, and to a fittingly Jonsonian topic: the tension between material accumulation and virtue. Nevitt’s Memorial of 1623, describing Robert Sidney’s wardrobe, was composed because about 1619 Sidney had requested Nevitt (as the latter described it), to “make a declaracion of the estate left you, and which hath accrewed any way vnto you since your father’s death, and of your expences, whereby the world might see that you have not only brought honor vnto your

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36 The De L’Isle papers, like many collections of seventeenth-century documents, contain a number of letters in cipher, usually employing numbers to signify the names to be disguised. Sometimes, conveniently for the modern researcher, the master cipher itself is also included.

37 Wayne, Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place, ch. 4.
house and posteritie, but also enlarged your reunewnes." 38 Sidney's motives may be guessed from the fact that Queen Anne died in that year and he would have lost his position as her chamberlain, with its lucrative unofficial revenues. 39 What Sidney thought of the resulting *Memorial* of 1623, which presents a typical catalogue of Jacobean sumptuary excess and financial mismanagement, cannot be known. But it was about then that the widower turned the house over to his son and moved to London.

Sidney visited Penshurst from time to time, and in early 1625, just as Queen Henrietta Maria was about to arrive in England, he wrote to his son from court as follows: "such a time of expence falls now in regard of the Qn. coming, as I cannot tell which way to tourn myself. To appear as I should do I ame not able: and if I bee not seen I feare I shall offend. Wherefore I think to withdraw myself, which I cannot do well and stay in London: and, therfore, it may bee I will come to you after the maner I have heartefore had ...." 40 The description of an earl in William Segar's *Honor, Military and Civill* suggests the reason for his anxiety; I quote from a copy known to have been at Penshurst: "And as Earles for their vertues and heroicall qualities, are reputed Princes, or companions unto Princes: so ought they (according to their calling) to be richly appareled, honourably followed, and serued, and with badge of honour, titles and princely ceremonies to be euuer dignified." 41 Clearly, in advancing age Robert Sidney had been thoroughly bested in the struggle between honour and revenue. Just before he died, however, he managed to marry Sara Smythe, widow and co-heir of his prosperous friend Sir Thomas Smythe, 42 though, to add to his son's financial woes, he would die intestate two months later. The

38 BL Add. 12066, f. 2r.
39 I am indebted to Robert Shephard for reminding me of the importance of this date for Sidney.
40 CKS U1475 C80A/4, Earl of Leicester to his son, 14 March 1625, from London (HMC V, 438-39, where it is misdated 14 May instead of March).
42 The marriage took place on 25 April 1626, according to an annotation in Sidney's hand in a copy of Augustine Vincent, *A Discoverie of Errors*, 1622 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Gough Gen.top.214). Sidney died on 13 July. For the Smythes, their Kentish connections, and their several intermarriages with the Sidneys, see J.F. Wadmore, "Sir Thomas Smythe, Knt. (A.D. 1558-1625)," *Archaeologia Cantiana* 20 (1893), 82-103, with pedigree on 76-81.
post mortem inventory of his goods at Barnard’s Castle valued them at £317.07.0.43

The devil of property continued to torment the next generation, and beyond. The acquisitive habits of the second Lady Leicester may not have been confined to fashionable pictures; about 1650 her husband – the son to whom the mortgaged house had been left – penned nine pages of complaint about her extravagance and her arrogance of his rents to her own use.44 To be fair, when she died she left a library of seventy-seven books of irreproachable piety,45 and the second Lord Leicester was a haughty man of very uncertain temper. Yet clearly, the close and supportive image which has always characterized accounts of Sir Henry and his family, and the picture of aristocratic responsibility which Jonson presents in complimenting Sir Robert and his, disintegrates completely in the squabbles of the seventeenth-century Sidneys over property. Besides quarrelling with his wife, the second earl tried as hard as he could within the law to restrict his eldest son’s inheritance.46 And between 1677 and 1683 his sons—Philip the third earl, Algernon Sidney the republican, and Henry Sidney, the handsome earl of Romney—fought a fiercely contested chancery case over parts of that inheritance.47

What then of the coding of Jonson’s “To Penshurst,” in the light of the letters of many years, the inventory, the mortgage, the Memorial? Jonson, according to J.C.A. Rathmell, must have known Penshurst very well.48 Little that I have reported would have been lost on him, at least up to about 1611. Thus, in presenting us with what Jonathan Goldberg calls “an image of absolute totality, an

43 CKS U1500 E97. In addition, he is credited with the goods at a house in nearby St. Antholin’s parish; did this come to him through Sara Smythe? (CKS U1500 E98).


45 The inventory of the Countess’s books is CKS U1500 E110.

46 The conflict between the second earl and his son Philip, Lord Lisle has been documented for its effect on the Sidney holdings in Leicester Fields, London; see The Survey of London (London County Council, etc., 1900–), 34 (1966), 418-20; and Scott (see next note).


inclusive fantasy of containment,” he would have had to omit everything I have been describing—not just the country labourers bemoaned by Raymond Williams, but the arras-man, the feather-dyers, the tailors, and of course the lawyers. If there is nothing of them in the poem “To Penshurst,” it is also the case that there is almost nothing of “To Penshurst” in the Penshurst inventory of 1623.

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Whatever else it is, Jonson’s poem is thus no authentic portrait of Penshurst. Rather, as Michael McCanles has observed, the poem asserts a theme prevalent everywhere in Jonson’s plays and poems, that “vera nobilitas” is the foundation of true gentility. In the words of the poet’s epigram to Sir William Jephson (Epigrams 116), “to live great, was better than great borne.” However advanced its aesthetic, the genre of “To Penshurst” is that of the court artifact, its purpose to assert the status of the Sidneys within the framework of a system of social order based on honour, on the exchange of obligations by means of which those higher and lower estates negotiated their relationships. At Penshurst, as the 1623 inventory suggests and Nevitt’s Memorial shows, the self-display required by this system was under severe strain.

Indeed, in Kent as a whole the framework of an honour culture was also beginning to crumble. Penshurst is in the Kentish Weald, south and west of the long sandstone ridge that stretches across the county south of the Downs. The soil of the Weald is not very good—it has the lowest proportion of arable land among the areas studied by C.W. Chalklin in the mid-1960s, about 29.5%—and in the Penshurst area, the population in the seventeenth century would have been about 30 people over 16 years of age to the square mile (a low average figure). The population was denser in the south part


50 Williams, The Country and the City, 32.

51 Michael McCanles, Jonsonian Discriminations: The Humanist Poet and the Praise of True Nobility (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992), 47.

52 C.W. Chalklin, Seventeenth-Century Kent: A Social and Economic History (London: Longmans, 1965), 76 (arable land) and 29 (population). Chalklin’s pioneering work has been followed by the researches of other scholars in The
of the Weald around Cranbrook, where the traditional Kentish industries, cloth and iron, were located, but both industries were in decline in the seventeenth century, so it is safe to say that Penshurst, beautiful as it was then and is today, has never been in a prime economic situation. The historical-economic study of the estate I have called for would tell us if the bounty praised by Jonson was as hard-won as I suspect.\textsuperscript{53}

Second, feudal relationships, which seem so apparent in the poem, presumably would have been threatened by a disadvantaged population. But Kent was not feudal; its land was organized on the medieval open-field system only in one or two small pockets. Furthermore, from earliest times it was freehold land, with rent tenancy in those places where the occupier was not the landholder. Kentish folk were traditionally both conservative—change was very slow—and independent, as befitted freeholders. In comparison with other areas of England, and despite the problems of life in the Weald, Kent in general was fairly prosperous. Labourers and servants were better-off there than in many other places. Manorial authority was weak; the Sidneys could not order people around very much, and would have had to negotiate change very carefully. Eighty years later, in 1688 (the first date for which there exist useable statistics), nobles and gentlemen in England formed only 1.4\% of the population, and possessed 16.2\% of the total national income, a large proportion for their numbers. Yet at the same time the 16.4\% of the population engaged in agriculture was generating 22.4\% of the total national income.\textsuperscript{54} In such a situation it was less economic capital that mattered than the symbolic capital represented by relative status in an honour culture—and, as Craig Muldrew shows in \textit{The Economy of Obligation}, his study of the period before

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\textsuperscript{53} In her preface to the Kent Hearth Tax returns for 1664, Sarah Pearson observes that though Kent was generally not a county of aristocratic landholders, Penshurst's total of 21 hearths was modest in comparison with that of Lord Sackville at Knole (85) and Viscount Strangford (60); see \textit{Kent Hearth Tax Assessment Lady Day 1664}, ed. Duncan Harrington, intro. Sarah Pearson, computing editor, Susan Rose (London. British Record Society in association with the Kent Archaeological Society, 2000), xxxvii.

commodity economics took hold, trust in the power of a man’s good name. How good was the Sidney family name? A study of the second earl’s fierce quarrel in the 1650s with the Puritan vicar John Maudit, who during the Civil War had been intruded into the Penshurst living, might tell us more. The reclusive earl bested the earnest proselytizer by sheer power of aristocratic will, but he encountered serious resistance from most of his neighbours. Some re-balancing, then, may be necessary in our analysis of the relationships between master and man at Penshurst.

The exchanges that cemented relationships based on honour thus remained important, but early modern Kent was not a gift economy of the sort described elsewhere by Marcel Mauss and Natalie Zemon Davis. Even at the humblest level it was becoming a money economy, as the Penshurst accounts amply testify. For example, late in the week of 20 August, 1624, Goody Beecher sent her daughter to the kitchen with “presents” of chickens and damsons; presents or not, she was paid two shillings for them, as we can see from the Penshurst kitchen accounts for that week. In other words, the Kentish economy had early begin to move from being a culture of exchange, where “credit” meant one’s good name, to one of commodification, where “credit” would eventually come to signify the size of one’s bank balance. We are moving out of the world of symbols of honour into the world of hard cash, though interestingly the terminology of both was being used at one and the same time.

56 I am at work on an account of the pathetic Maudit’s story; for some details, see Alan Everitt, The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion 1640-60 (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1966), 226, Maudit’s own pamphlets, Antiprobabil-e, or A defence of the minister of Pensherst (London: T.R. for the author, 1660; Wing M1327) and The practises of the Earl of Leycester against the minister of Pensherst (London: T.R. for the author, 1660; Wing M1330), the latter roughly duplicated in his manuscript account of the debacle in Oxford Bod. Ms. Rawl. A58, ff. 83r-87r.
58 CKS U1475 A27/7, Craig Muldrew (The Economy of Obligation, 33) states that in rural Suffolk in 1606 chickens were 3d a piece. At about the same time, the cost of a printed folio volume was about two shillings. By 1624 the purchasing power of the two shillings would have been £11.23 in 2001 values (McCusker, Economic History Services, 2001 as previously cited), so Goody Beecher was well paid.
Finally, in his poem Jonson speaks of the "lower land, that to the river bends / Thy sheep thy bullocks, kine and calves do feed" (ll. 22-3). As the siting of the house shows, the "lower lands" are simply the fields within a few hundred yards of the Penshurst gate, stretching down to the nearby Medway. Since the land of the Weald at that time was chiefly pasturage, the tenants of the estate as a whole would not likely have been farming at all—they probably would have been running cattle, and doing it for the beef, I suspect, as at that time large-scale dairying was chiefly carried on not in Kent but in the Midlands. What in fact were the Penshurst villagers and tenants occupied with? They still await their chronicler.

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It would be facile to conclude this comparison of Jonson's poem and the 1623 inventory by pointing to their sharp and seemingly insuperable differences. Instead what emerges is a sense of their likeness, of the extent to which both belong to a hierarchical system of ordering responsibility within society which was—in economic terms at least—gasping its last. It is not the war of master and man that we witness in the contrast, but something deeply ironic within the system of honour itself: it could not survive without display, and the emerging forms of display would be fatal to it. If there is a contrast between Jonson's poem and the 1623 inventory, it is not one between sober truth and painted falsehood, but between different but allied truths. Jonson's classicising poem may express an advanced aesthetic, one only just coming into vogue among the architects, pageant-makers and art collectors of the Jacobean era. But it is also deeply nostalgic for an imagined past, one in which patriarchal noblemen lived hospitably on their estates, emblems of moral rectitude as eloquent as the fecundity of the nobleman's dependent villagers. The result is a poem of elegant simplicity whose form is the perfected expression of its ideals. The testimony of the inventory, however—to which we may add that of Nevitt's Memorial—is to a different aspect of that ideal, the almost tribal concept of honour that requires the nobleman to display the rich garb, great estate and train of followers that testify to his status.

59 See Ordnance Survey Atlas of Great Britain (Ordnance Survey and Country Life, 1982), map 168, showing medium to poor agricultural land, and 169, showing the considerable extent of dairying on the same land today.
However, the Sidneys to whom Jonson (in a classic example of gift-exchange between poet and patron) praised in his poem, were facing the near-impossibility of living honourably in a Jacobean court where honour had become fiercely commodified. As Robert Sidney’s sad letter to his son indicates, the first earl believed so earnestly in the concept of honour that his whole occupation was taken from him when he could not afford the garments that would display—and maintain—his status. A generation later the second earl would face the same situation. As Charles I’s ambassador extraordinary to Paris in the late 1630s he was so preoccupied with status that he could quarrel fiercely with another ambassador over which of their coaches should precede the other.60 We must take him seriously, for precedence was no trivial matter in seventeenth century European courts; difficult though he was as an individual, the second earl’s commitment to an honour culture was as deeply felt as his father’s. Thus to Robert’s letter of 1625 should be added one from the second Robert, writing in 1642 to his brother-in-law the Earl of Northumberland of the need for fidelity to his position, “your lordship knowes I am a servant, and I could not run away if I would.”61 In the end he was forced to leave the field of honour, retiring from the conflicts of the Civil War to Penshurst in angry solitude and taking refuge among his books, one of which was a copy of Jonson’s Workes, in the edition of 1640.62 There he would have been able to read Jonson’s verdict on the times in the dedication to his play The Alchemist:

If what I offer beare an acceptable odour, & hold the first strength, it is your value of it, which remembers, where, when, and to whom it was kindled. Otherwise, as the times are, there comes rarely forth that thing, so full of authoritie, or example, but by assiduitie and custome, growes lesse, and looses. This, yet, safe in your judgement (which is a SIDNEYS) is forbidden to speake more; lest it talke or looke

60 See for example Collins, Letters and Memorials of State, II, 380 and 633-34; for the king’s specific instructions on protocol see II, 375.
62 CKS U1475 Z45/2; item 87r09 (that is, the 9th item on folio 87r). For the library and its history, see Germaine Warkentin, “The World and the Book at Penshurst: the Second Earl of Leicester (1595-1677) and His Library,” The Library, sixth series, 20:4 (December, 1998), 325-46.
like one of the ambitious Faces of the time: who, the more they paint, are the lesse themselves. Your ladyship's true honorer, BEN JONSON.\footnote{Ben Jonson, ed. C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1954), 5:289-90.}

The dedicatee of \textit{The Alchemist} was the second earl's sister, Lady Mary Wroth, a Sidney indeed, and, like the earl himself, one of the children referred to in the closing lines of the great poem dedicated to their parents' house.
Figure 1: CKS U1500 E120, folio 7r. The hand of Robert Sidney in the 1623 inventory. Reproduced with the permission of Viscount De L’Isle.

Figure 2: A modern reconstruction of the layout of Penshurst Place, ca.1573-85. The heavier lines indicate buildings still standing, the lighter ones those thought to have been in place at the time. Robert Sidney’s loggia, with the rooms above it, can be seen in the upper left-hand corner. Reproduced with the permission of Viscount De L’Isle.
Figure 3: CKS U1500 E120, folio 1r, beginning with "The Kinges Lodginge." Reproduced with the permission of Viscount De L'Isle.