FIVE SCOER YOUSSES & IJ OLD BOTTLES

17 November 2025

Barry McKay

Returning to Upper Eden History Society, Barry began by explaining that his talk was "a modest attempt to gain an insight" into the lives and labours of Appleby people in the second half of the sixteenth century – based exclusively on information from probate inventories in the Cumbria Record Office at Carlisle.

Over 400 inventories survive in the Record Office for this area covering the period from 1564 to 1835. Of those that have come down to us, the richest period in terms of numbers available for analysis covers the years between 1564 and 1599. This period includes 211 inventories: just over half of the surviving examples. They present evidence of household goods, livestock, and work, of a representative range of both males and females encompassing a broad cross-section of society.

Quite understandably, the major problem in transcribing the inventories is reading the handwriting of the period. There are many variations in spelling and terminology; something as simple as "cow" for instance, could be spelled upwards of a dozen different ways.

Barry wondered, what was the town of Appleby like in the period these inventories were taken? The answer? It may well have been a drear and sad place. In 1610, William Camden stated that the town was "sorely abused ruinous or destroyed and that since the time of the Scottish sack has never been rebuilt or repaired, because the greater part of the said town was devastated in ruin and decay".

The houses may have been similar to the longhouse of the mediaeval period: a single storey building with a central cross passage. Sometimes farm animals were kept on one side of the passage, whilst on the other side of this was the living area with an open fire for cooking purposes and a bedroom above, accessed by a ladder.

Bovine animals are recorded in detail with numbers per household varying from one to thirteen. Oxen were used for food and leather but they were also used as draught animals to pull either the plough or carts. As well as cattle and sheep, we find that 25 people kept a pig and 7 had poultry. 8 people had beehives, providing not only wax but also of course, a sweetener in the form of honey.



Above: 18th-century houses in Boroughgate on medieval plots.

Like livestock, crops feature in many of the inventories; 163 people had crops either in store or in the field. Oats feature most often as well as hardy types of barley and corn,

mainly only grown in Northern England and Scotland. Other less common crops were wheat, rye, peas and beans.

A table is often described as a board, and occasionally a meat board. This description also included chairs. Mattresses appear to outnumber the beds on which to put them and, while some people could boast a feather bed, no one lays claim to a “second best bed” to leave to his wife. A wide variety of vessels for cooking, eating and drinking also feature. These are largely made of pewter or wood although brass can also be found. Pottery is mentioned infrequently.

It is likely that some spinning was done by the women in most households; two of the women included in these inventories had spinning wheels along with hanks of yarn. The earliest evidence of ownership of a wheel in this area is 1581.

There were remarkably few mentions of cash in these inventories, and even less of jewellery, with just the occasional mention of the contents of “his purse” or similar phrases. But there is one pronounced exception in the inventory of Robert Morland of Appleby St Lawrence in 1596. He not only had “Fower silver stones two gold rinyg and two silver rinyg” valued at one pound, but also “gold in his chest” to the value of £1 6s 8d – a fascinating reference to contemporary coinage.

Tricia Jagger