

# The Floorcloth and Other Floor Coverings in the London Domestic Interior 1700–1800

Sophie Sarin

*This paper examines the arrival and spread of floor coverings in the London domestic interior amongst the emerging middle classes in the course of the eighteenth century. New evidence in the form of a quantitative survey using probate inventories places emphasis on change in consumption patterns as it pinpoints the beginning, middle and end of the eighteenth century. The survey investigates to what extent floor coverings formed part of the new luxuries and novelties which gradually became adopted in the eighteenth-century household; it attempts to find out whether the spread of floor coverings was related to social class and it places emphasis on the context of the domestic interior and the developing conventions of the use of domestic space. The main focus of the survey is the floorcloth, the painted canvas floor covering which enjoyed tremendous popularity not only in England but also in the New World from about 1720 onwards.*

**Keywords:** consumption—display—domestic space—eighteenth century—inventories—London

## Introduction

The eighteenth century brought profound changes to the domestic interior as the emerging middle classes, growing prosperous in a climate of mercantile and economic expansion, began to have the means to avail themselves of the ‘new luxuries’ which were becoming available through imports or domestic manufacture. British manufacturers competed with each other to imitate exotic new goods such as china and chintz to supply the demand from an increasingly wide consumer base. Maxine Berg<sup>1</sup> highlights this importance of imitation of Eastern goods as an impetus for the rapid manufacturing expansion which took place in the eighteenth century. Already from the sixteenth century onwards a taste for the exotic was spreading, and the ‘new luxuries’ which were adopted in British homes included implements for the fashionable new drinks, chocolate and coffee and that which is now regarded as the most English of drinks, tea. Similarly, window curtains, previously rare, began to appear in an increasing number of households. These were often made from painted or printed

Indian calico. Floral prints, like tea, now so synonymous with the English domestic setting, were once an exotic novelty. Beverly Lemire opines that such textiles were originally a ‘symbol of genteel repose ... and intimacy, evolving to become a constant component of Western material culture and thereby refashioning the domestic world’.<sup>2</sup> Floor coverings were an equally important new addition, which during the course of the century became established in the interiors of a significant proportion of people from all levels of society, except the very poorest. Imitation of Eastern carpets, or ‘Turkey carpets’, played a significant role in the development of the great British carpet industry, and the venerable names of Wilton, Axminster and Kidderminster—all places producing carpets in imitation of oriental models—became established and synonymous with carpets during the eighteenth century. The most important new arrival at floor-level, the painted canvas known as *floorcloth*, however, did not owe its existence to imitation of the exotic. Instead it imitated the traditional marble floors of the British elite [1].



Fig 1. Floorcloth painted for the Admiral's House, Greenwich Hospital, July 2004, by the author, from a design popular around 1750

This paper will follow the progress from 1700, when floors were normally left bare, to the largely covered floors of 1800. It will highlight the fundamental importance of change in this century, and, observing from the novel perspective of the floor-level, it will argue that our contemporary lay-out of the domestic interior became established during the eighteenth century. To chart these monumental changes, a sample of 225 probate inventories, 75 representing in turn 1700, 1750 and 1800, provides three 'snapshots' of the London interior. The sample is compiled from the probate inventories of the Prerogatory Court of Canterbury, kept in the National Archives at Kew.<sup>3</sup> These represent a broad cross-section of society and include the London residences of the lesser gentry; the professional classes; households of craftsmen such as blacksmiths, candle-makers and printers and many shopkeepers as well as several inn-keepers. These inventories provide a rare and, until this article, virtually untapped source of information on the latter half of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth century in the capital. This period has been considered difficult

for research, and surveys such as Lorna Weatherill's groundbreaking *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture 1660–1760*, (London and New York, 1988) have focused on an earlier period, and aimed to give a broader geographic coverage. The diocesan probate inventories used by Weatherill and others are in plentiful supply until the mid-eighteenth century, when a rapid decline is noticeable.

The inventory survey was undertaken as part of my M.Phil dissertation at the V&A/RCA History of Design Department. The methodology employed in the compilation of the sample, of such fundamental importance to the interpretation, cannot be fully expounded on here for reasons of space.<sup>4</sup> I have followed, largely, that adopted by Weatherill, whose survey on domestic consumption is still considered the model in its field.

While presenting evidence regarding the arrival and spread of floor coverings in general in the eighteenth century, the survey places particular emphasis on the floorcloth, a canvas floor covering, thickly coated with linseed oil and pigment. The floorcloth was the ancestor of linoleum, patented in 1860 by F. Walton. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the floorcloth was stencilled and hand-painted in patterns imitating marble and pavement [2]. It was easily available and many trade cards from 1730 onwards give evidence of its manufacture and sale in the workshops of many types of trades, the upholsterers and turners in particular. R. Campbell commented in *The London Tradesman* (1747): 'In the Turner's shop we generally meet with Floorcloths, painted in oil colours which is performed by a class of painters who do little else. It requires no great ingenuity, and the wages of journeymen is the same as in other branches of painting'.<sup>5</sup>

From the 1760s onwards the floorcloth began to be block-printed in large factories. The patterns continued to be imitative of marble and mosaic pavement but many trade cards also advertised 'carpet' as well as the popular 'matt' pattern.

Virtually no examples of floorcloths have survived, and they have therefore been allowed to slip into oblivion. This survey reassesses the importance of this object, providing evidence that it was the first, and the most important floor covering to be generally adopted in the London domestic interior, thereby establishing the floorcloth as an essential element of the eighteenth-century interior, of far greater significance than previously recognized.

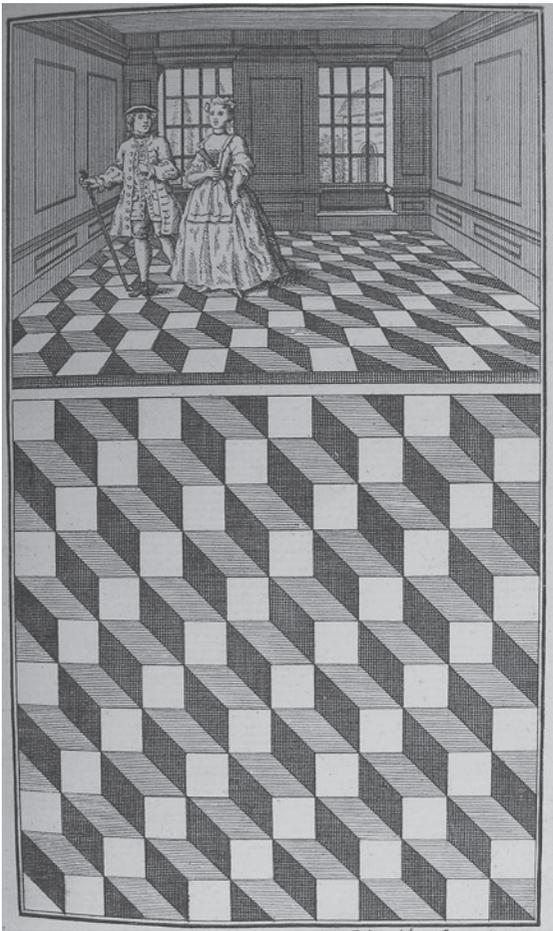


Fig 2. Plate no. 6 from John Carwitham's *Various Kinds of Floor Decorations represented both in Plano and Perspectivo, Being useful Designs for Ornamenting the floors of Halls, Rooms, Summer Houses, etc., Whither in Pavements of Stone, or Marble, or with Painted Floor Cloths*, London, 1739.

Carwitham's engravings were used as patterns in the floorcloth workshops (Reproduced with permission of V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum)

Space has prevented a more thorough engagement in the ongoing debate regarding quantitative versus qualitative research. This survey has attempted to tread a middle road between these two approaches, recognizing the merits of both. Margaret Ponsonby has argued in this journal that 'whereas in quantitative analysis everything is reduced to averages and means and no individual household emerges, in the qualitative approach analysis applies to the individual'.<sup>6</sup> But in order to present more than a series of anecdotal vignettes, the historian must surely also recognize the

truth in Richard Grassby's argument that 'quantitative methods provide an index to measure change and are essential to correct or confirm inspired guesswork. A norm has to be established before the unique can be recognized. An aggregate of particular examples, however thick the description, is no substitute for comprehensive and continuous statistics'.<sup>7</sup> Charts and statistics, on the other hand, are necessary tools, but no substitute for a continuous and sensitive focusing in on a reality inhabited by a myriad of individuals as different from each other as their fingerprints.

Let us now turn to our eighteenth-century Londoners and establish, first of all, the general increase of floor coverings of any description during the eighteenth century.

### Analysis of survey: the establishment of floor coverings in the interior

The first half of the eighteenth century saw the interior textile emphasis literally slipping from the walls and onto the floors. The walls of almost every room in 1700 were covered with what was mostly described as 'the Hangings of the Roome', but by 1750 hardly any were encountered. Instead, floor coverings were appearing, and today's layout and arrangement of interior furnishings had already been formed, if in embryo still. Therefore, the most dramatic change, in qualitative terms, took place in the first half of the century. The change between 1750 to 1800 was largely quantitative: i.e. the floor covering was no

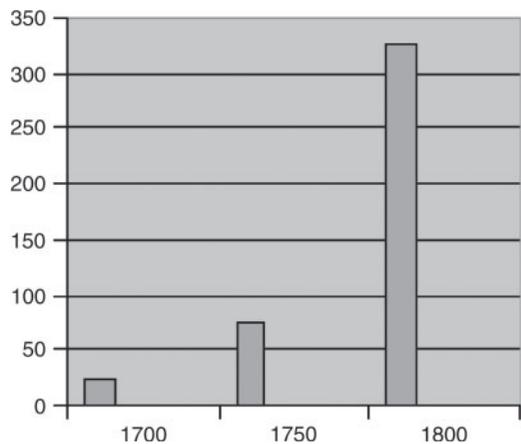


Fig 3. Number of floor coverings listed, 1700–1800. Source: whole sample. Vertical axis: number of floor coverings listed; 24 in 1700, 74 in 1750 and 325 in 1800

longer a new item introduced into the interior, its use simply increased.

In 1700 the word ‘carpitt’ referred mostly to a table covering and it was often listed as ‘a table and carpitt’ or quite simply ‘a table carpitt’. Already in 1566 William Harrison had observed that such practices had spread down the social scale, since even artificers and farmers furnished their tables with ‘carpets and fine napery’.<sup>8</sup>

The 1700 sample shows only 24 floor coverings, and even this is a tentative figure, because some of these may have been meant for a table. By 1750 this figure has more than tripled to 74, found in more than half the households, and it went on to increase more than thirteen-fold to 325 in 1800, when a large majority (80%) of London households had their floors covered, at least in some areas. The increase in floor coverings is of course mirrored in other household items and the one telling physical manifestation of this fact is the sheer comparative weight of the average 1800 inventory when held in one hand, while holding an average inventory from 1700 in the other. What sort of floor-coverings were available at the dawn of the century for the few who wanted them? How did the fashions develop during the century? When do we begin to see the established names of the British carpet industry appearing in our inventories?

## 1700

In 1700 the most commonly mentioned floor covering—apart from the unspecified ‘carpet’—was ‘Matt for the Floore’, or ‘Matting’ followed by ‘Turkey’ or ‘Turkey Work’ carpets [4]. In the first quarter of the eighteenth century most ‘Turkey Carpets’ were imported. English carpets did not become readily available until the latter half of the eighteenth century, although manufacture had been under way since early in the century, and in 1701 William III had granted a protective charter to the weavers of Wilton, many of them Huguenot refugees who arrived from France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Matting had been used since Elizabethan times, mostly in aristocratic settings, sometimes in plain form, woven of rushes, and often a finer weave, in strong colours, imported from Spain, Portugal or North Africa, indeed called ‘Africa Matt’ or ‘Tangier Matt’. The floor coverings in the 1700 sample show two such exotic mats, the ‘Portugal Matting’, found

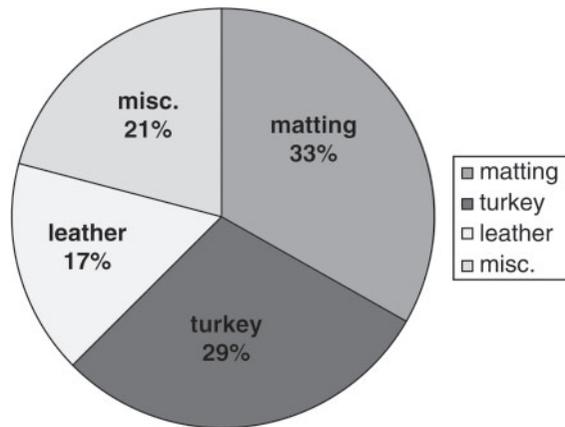


Fig 4. Comparative share of various floor coverings in 1700. Source: 1700 sample. Numbers of floor coverings: Matting 8, Turkey 7, Leather 4, Misc 5

in the closets of Sir Miles Cooke of Westminster and of Dame Barbara Alibon of Holborn.

The inventories of 1700 present a continuity with the interiors of the previous century. On the rare occasions we encounter carpets these are in a mainly aristocratic context, and do not yet reflect any new consumption patterns of the middle classes. However, there are exceptions: the average valuation in the 1700 sample was £111. Elizabeth Erle of Hackney would have had a modest household, valued at £27. She nevertheless possessed a ‘turkey worked Carpitt’. Similarly, the household of Elizabeth Scott of Shacklewell, valued at a relatively modest £45, lists a ‘leather Carpitt’ in the kitchen. In this case ‘kitchen’ was a fluid concept, since it contained a bedstead and also boasted ‘four Turkey Chairs’. The music loving Dr Nicholas Staggs’ Chelsea lodgings are not inordinately sumptuous with a £57 valuation, but nevertheless two leather carpets are displayed alongside his harpsichord and violin case. As a means of comparison, an artisan earned about £50 a year in eighteenth century London, and a member of the bourgeoisie such as, perhaps, Dr Staggs, could earn up to £100 a year. A newly-built two-up two-down cottage such as many of those which form the context of our inventories, would cost about £150.<sup>9</sup>

## 1700–1718: the arrival of the floorcloth

Before moving on to look at the 1750 sample, let us dwell for a moment on the intervening years.

Although they are outside the scope of my sample, I have searched for the first appearance of the floorcloth in the London interior. There is nothing listed in the 1700 inventories indicating anything similar to a floorcloth. But we know that by 1710 Nicholas Hawksmoor authorised payment for a painted cloth imitating black and white marble for Captain Hoskin's apartments at Greenwich.<sup>10</sup> Surely this was not an isolated occurrence. Its use in such a prominent new development would indicate that the floorcloth was already a fashionable item. What signs of them are there in the inventories? The first entry of great interest is found in the 1708 inventory of Sir Thomas Dickens of Westminster<sup>11</sup> where we find 'some canvas Floor and Stair Cloaths'. It seems likely that these are the earliest floorcloths documented so far. It is interesting that they appear already in the position they were so frequently to occupy much later: the staircase and landing.

The floorcloth entered the domestic arena under several different names, just as it indeed continued to be described in many ways throughout its existence. One previously unknown title for the floorcloth may have been 'tarpaulin'. The 1713 inventory of John Cambell's<sup>12</sup> home in St Martin's in the Fields, valued at £70, lists 'A check't Tar Paulen for a Floor in the Dineing Roome Beaufet and Closett one pair of Stairs backwards'. There can be little doubt that this is an early checker board floorcloth, in the style popular in the early part of the century, and indeed a continuing favourite for floor patterns even today. Two years later, in 1715, we find the first clear mention of the term Floorcloth in the household of the draper Edward Simpson,<sup>13</sup> St Martin's in the Fields, valued at £76. The floorcloth is found in the parlour which is furnished with other fashionable items: a 'Tea Table, Tea Kettle, a Clock and Case 19 Prints and 4 Pictures, a Chimney Glass, a Parcell of China Glassware'. This floorcloth was his only floor covering. It is noteworthy that we find this first unambiguous mention of a floorcloth in the home of a shopkeeper, whose household valuation is below the average: a good representative of the new emerging middle class, suggesting that this group may have led, rather than followed fashions.

Having traced the arrival of the floorcloth, let us return to the main sample and analyse the position it held in the interior by 1750.

## 1750

The architect John D. Wood in his *Description of Bath* (London, 1749), described the changes in the interior decoration which took place over the first part of the century.

'As the new Buildings advanced, Carpets were introduced to cover the Floors, though Laid with fine clean Deals, or Dutch Oak boards' [5]. The result of the survey indicates that such 'carpets' were certainly mostly floorcloths in the period until the middle of the century, since the consumption of carpets shows virtually no increase between 1700 and 1750. There were as many 'Turkey' carpets found (7) and 'Matting' or 'Matt' (8) in 1700 as there were in 1750. It is very important to note that the arrival of the floorcloth was the single most significant change in the consumption of floor coverings in the first half of the century and it is the single most commonly mentioned floor covering in 1750. Thirty-five floorcloths are listed among the 74 assorted floor coverings. Among the 39 households with floor coverings, 25 households had floor cloths. The intervening fifty years since the beginning of the century had brought no change in the prevalence of the other floor coverings. Our sample shows only three Kidderminster carpets, suggesting that this form of carpet, so popular later in the century, had yet to make its mark. The first factory at Kidderminster was set up in 1735, although manufacture had been taking place through out workers much earlier, and the town had also manufactured wall-hangings which were probably not much different to the new

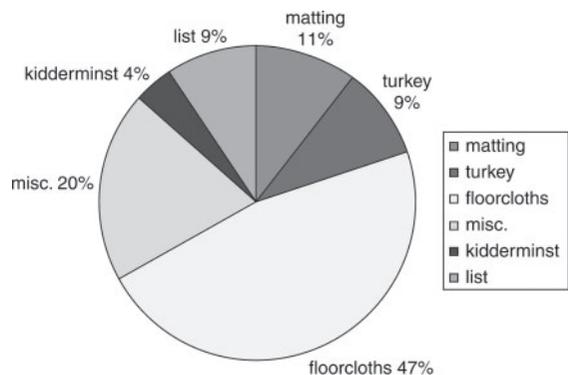


Fig 5. Comparative share of various floor coverings. 1750. Source: 1750 sample. Numbers of floor coverings: Matting 8, Turkey 7, Floorcloth 35, Misc 15, Kidderminster 3, List 7

carpets.<sup>14</sup> There are not yet any Scotch, Brussels or even Wilton.

The 1750 sample presents the domestic interior on the eve of a fundamental change, which was to have a profound effect on the consumption of floor coverings. It was in the 1750s that the Royal Society of Arts began to give English carpet manufacture a powerful boost by its patronage. In 1757 a premium was awarded to Thomas Moore's newly established factory at Moorfields. Two years later another premium was awarded to Thomas Whitty, who had established a factory at Axminster in 1757, on the grounds that his carpets were 'made in the manner of turkey Carpets, and superior to them in Beauty and Goodness'.<sup>15</sup> Both these factories provided English imitations of Turkish carpets, knotted and tufted in the oriental manner.

In 1750, however, English carpet manufacture was still in its infancy. It seems that the floorcloth fulfilled a need to cover the floors before the carpet manufacture had got off the ground. Simply produced and easily available, it was a product more or less invented by demand. It was quite literally possible to go and buy one around the corner, often at the local turner's shop, of which there were many throughout the century. The turners also made and sold the *list carpet*, a form of coarsely woven rag-rug, of which we find seven examples in the 1750 sample. It was not only the turners who stocked and made such goods. Many mid-century trade cards give evidence that the floorcloth in particular was often made in the small combined workshops/retail outlets run by the master of a trade, such as a glazier, a coach painter or a hatter,<sup>16</sup> who all diversified into the lucrative production of floorcloths [6].

## 1800

The end of the century shows a virtual explosion in the variety of floor coverings [7]. All the major types of British carpets, eponymous with their place of manufacture, were represented, with the exception of Axminster. However, many 'Turkey' carpets listed were probably Axminsters. Indeed, so successful was the British imitation that towards the latter half of the century the Royal Society of Arts boasted: 'manufacture of Turkey carpets is now established in different parts of the kingdom and brought to a degree of elegance and beauty which Turkey carpets never



Fig 6. Mid-eighteenth century tradecard of Abraham North, 'Hatter, Turner and Floorcloth Manufacturer'. Note the checked floorcloth in top right hand corner. Guildhall Library Trade Card Collection

attained'.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, even in the face of such excellent alternatives, the floorcloth still held its own against the increasing competition in 1800. The floorcloth was still overwhelmingly the single most used floor covering at the turn of the century.

The 1800 sample is distinguished not only by the large variety of floor coverings, but also by showing a new awareness of the separate positions within the interior, as the floor coverings have begun to acquire site-specific names. In the case of the 'bedside carpet' and the 'hearth rug' these have been listed in separate categories. Although such carpets could be of different manufacture, their specific position seemed worthy of note, since no such entries were made in the previous samples. This new and precise description for the positioning of the carpet illustrates the fact that by 1800 floor coverings had become an integral part of the interior, with specific and recognized uses. The interior space had also become firmly divided into the various functions we still recognize and employ today. The 'bedside carpet' came in two

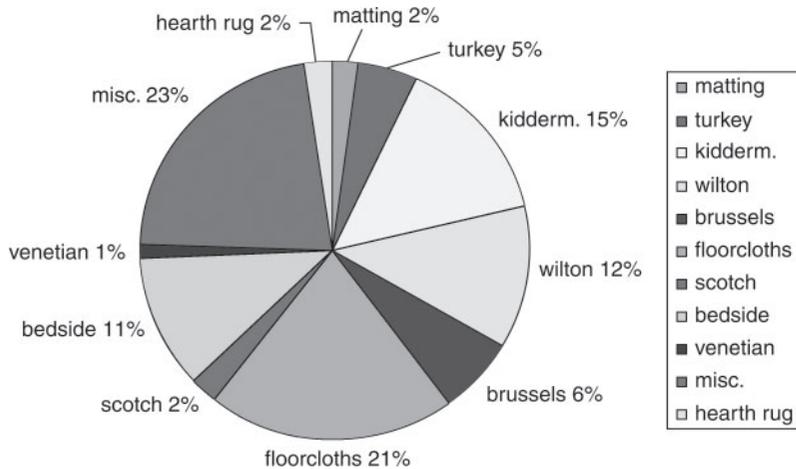


Fig 7. Comparative share of various floor coverings, 1800. Source: 1800 sample. Matting 7, Turkey 15, Kidderminster 47, Wilton 40, Brussels 20, Floorcloths 67, Scotch 7, Bedside 37, Venetian 4, Misc 71, Hearth rug 8

different varieties: either as a pair to be placed either side of the bedstead, or the ‘Bed Round Carpet’, which had three narrow strips of carpet surrounding the bed in a ‘u’-shape. We find this type in the home of the rather vain Joseph Buckmaster of Lambeth, who had pictures of himself everywhere in gilt frames, including his bedroom where we find the ‘Wilton Carpet round the Bed’.

As a representative example of the variety and use of floorcoverings at this date, let us look at Francis Janson, who chose ‘Brussels Bed Round Carpet’ for three of the bedrooms in his well-furnished Battersea home. Meanwhile, the Drawing Room had a ‘Carpet planned to the Floor’ (a wall-to-wall carpet), a fashionable choice in 1800. His choice for the Dining Room was a Turkey Carpet, while the rarely encountered descriptive mention of ‘the octagon pattern Oil-Cloth to the Passage’ shows that the popularity of the pavement imitation for floorcloths had remained constant since the early part of the century.

### The ‘spheres of interior space’

Scholars have used various methods of describing the use of domestic space. One useful analogy is that of the ‘front stage’ and the ‘back stage’, which dictates certain public and private behaviour and consumption patterns.<sup>18</sup> I felt that a further category was necessary which related to well-being and comfort on a very personal level. The subject of floor-coverings is closely related to the complex concept of ‘luxury’, which preoccupied social commentators in both the seven-

teenth and the eighteenth centuries. The consumption of luxury products had long been seen as the prerogative of the elite and considered inappropriate for those of lower ranks. It was regarded as a ‘private vice’, as a sensual pleasure. David Hume recognized the controversial aspect of the word ‘luxury’ as late as 1767: ‘Luxury is a word of very uncertain signification, and may be taken in a good as well as a bad sense. In general, it means great refinement in the gratification of the senses’.<sup>19</sup> Hume, aided by Adam Smith and others, elevated the consumption of luxury into a respectable and even commendable quality by connecting it to refinement, thereby allowing it to enter properly on the ‘front stage’. Is there any evidence in the inventories for the changing attitudes to luxury? Would it be possible to notice an earlier appearance of floor coverings in the more private areas of the household, where it would not have been seen and perhaps disapproved of? I decided to find out whether the changes in the moral attitude to luxury products such as floor coverings could be quantified. The household was therefore separated into three, rather than two categories of consumption, refining the concept of ‘front and back’.

INTIMATE: the bedrooms and closets, where the consumption of floor coverings is governed by personal comfort or the ‘luxuries of the body’.

DISPLAY: the parlours and withdrawing rooms, where their usage is often governed by a wish to create a fashionable environment for a more public approval.

UTILITARIAN: the areas used for domestic work and accommodation; the kitchen, pantry and passages. In this section are also found the hall and the stairs, although this position presents a transitional space between the functional and display uses, since the hall is clearly an important area as an indicator of personal taste and status. It is also one of the areas where the floorcloth was frequently found throughout its existence.

It became clear that the functions of rooms as we know them, and even as they had begun to be known in 1750 were not yet fixed in 1700 [8]. Bedsteads were found everywhere in 1700, including the dining rooms, parlours and kitchens. The bedstead was the most important and highly valued item of furniture in the home. It was therefore often used for ‘display’ purposes, and guests were frequently entertained by the bedstead. The ‘Bedroom’ was a term not yet invented, and the terms ‘chamber’ and ‘roome’ were used most often to describe the rooms which later in the century would take on this unique function. Therefore, analysis of social behaviour along the lines of ‘front and back’, although attempted by Weatherill and others, is an exercise which is premature in 1700, at least for the non-elite interior. In our case there is the additional problem of the very low number of floor coverings indicated, which makes the result doubly problematic for analysis.

Fifty years later, as we shall see, the domestic interior had become more of an arena for the display of taste and refinement, and already in the early parts of the century monumental changes were underway. Indeed, Weatherill notices the most dramatic changes

on all levels taking place in her London inventories between the years of 1705 and 1715.

An inventory taken at random in 1750 shows a very different interior picture to that of 1700 [9, 10]. On floor-level this change makes itself known in that the most important increase by far is in the ‘display’ areas of the household, i.e. mostly the parlour and dining room. This increase in floor coverings is almost entirely accounted for by the arrival of the floorcloth. Before turning our attention to this very important fact, it is noteworthy that there is no increase in the use of floor coverings in the functional areas of the house. Still considered a too precious object to be employed in a purely practical manner in this period, a floor covering was either an item of personal comfort—their presence in the ‘intimate’ areas of the house had doubled since 1700—or an item to be displayed.

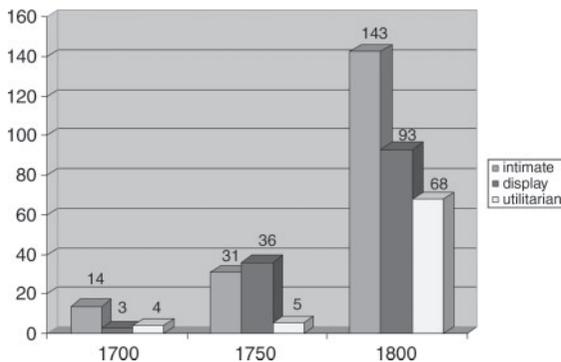


Fig 8. Position of floor coverings within the interior 1700–1800. Source: whole sample

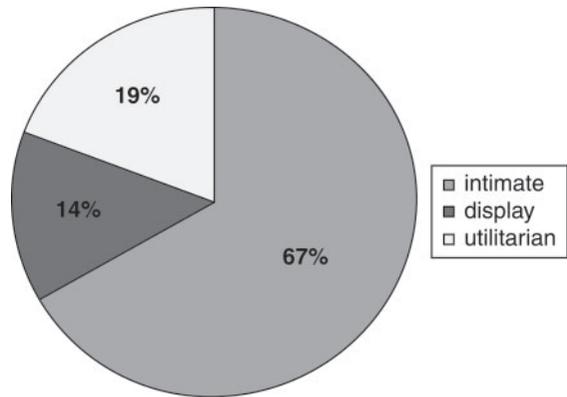


Fig 9. Position of floor coverings within the interior 1700. Source: 1700 sample

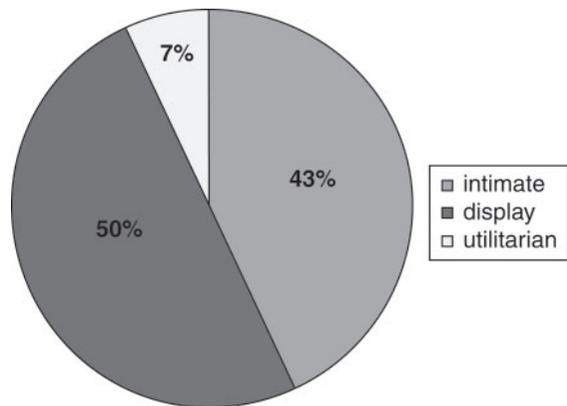


Fig 10. Position of floor coverings within the interior 1750. Source: 1750 sample

The picture presented by the 1800 graph is initially a little baffling [11]. Has the use of floor coverings in the ‘display’ areas decreased since 1750? The answer is the exact opposite: the consumption of floor coverings in the ‘display’ areas had nearly tripled by 1800. The increase in the ‘intimate’ section had more than quadrupled, however. Floor coverings, once regarded as a luxury encountered in the master bedroom if at all, had finally become, if not quite yet a ‘necessity for life’, certainly a ‘decency’ in the bedrooms, at least in the more well-to-do homes. Even the rooms of servants were provided with floor coverings, such as the cook’s chamber and the gardener’s room in the well-furnished home of George Granville of St Pancras.

Meanwhile, the floors in the more mundane areas of the house were also finally covered, and while there were only five listings in 1750, we find 68 in 1800, making this the most significant increase proportionally. Floor coverings, having originated in the master bedrooms, went on to establish themselves in the parlours, eventually returning to the less important bedrooms, and finally the carpets and the floorcloths were unfurled along the corridors, down the stairways and into the kitchens too. So, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, the pattern had been set for today’s interior in terms of floor coverings. Although fashions have changed, the

positioning and function of floor coverings have remained remarkably stable throughout the following century and indeed the next. The quantity of floor coverings encountered in the nineteenth century would of course increase. The material make-up of the floor coverings may have changed in many cases, wool sometimes giving way to synthetics, floorcloth to linoleum or eventually to vinyl, but the layout of the scene has not greatly changed even today.

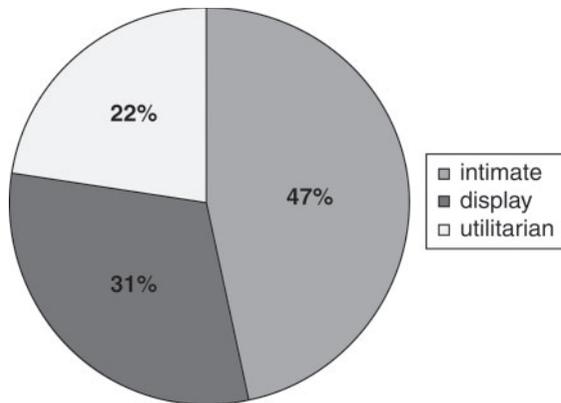
### The floorcloth and the ‘spheres of interior space’

As we have seen, the floorcloth was the single most mentioned floor covering in 1750, and it still was in 1800, although competition from carpets had been making inroads since the middle of the century. The Kidderminster, in particular, was often chosen in preference to the floorcloth. Choice and availability of fashionable alternatives increased many-fold. Was the floorcloth still as popular in all areas of the house? How had it fared when compared with the undoubtedly more comfortable and softer pile or in-grain alternatives? Was it still considered an item of status to be admired in the parlour or the dining room? The largest proportional increase in floor coverings between 1750 and 1800 was, as we have seen, in the ‘utilitarian’ areas of the house, where they were hardly to be encountered at all previously. These are the areas modern scholarship traditionally associates with the floorcloth. Would the evidence presented by the inventories confirm this?

### 1750

The floorcloth enjoyed the height of its fashionable appeal in 1750, just before the arrival of easily obtained domestically produced carpets [12]. Let us recall that Thomas Moore’s factory at Moorfields was not yet established, nor Thomas Whitty’s Axminster factory, founded in 1757. The floorcloth was chosen instead of carpets, even to adorn the most prestigious parts of the interior in the homes of both the elite and those of more modest means.

Towards the end of the 1750s the competition from carpets became more pronounced. Even then, this competition was not necessarily price related. The price of plain floorcloth for a large part of the eighteenth



**Fig 11.** Position of floor coverings within the interior 1800. Source: 1800 sample. Charts based on 24 listings in 1700, 74 in 1740 and 325 in 1800. Classification in all three periods: Intimate—Room, Closet, Garrett, Chamber, Nursery, Bedroom (1800 only) etc. Display—Parlour (back, front, best, etc.), Dining Room, Club Room, Billiard Room, Library, Withdrawing Room. Utilitarian—Stairs, Landing, Hall, Space Way, Kitchen, Laundry, Counting House

century was around 2s a square yard, while painted floorcloth cost between 4 and 5s a square yard.<sup>20</sup> Therefore ornamented floorcloths were found in the same price range as some domestically produced carpets. Lady Shelburne noted the price of Kidderminster carpets in a diary entry of 13th July 1769: ‘Their best carpets come to 5s&6d a Yard’.<sup>21</sup> Very exclusive carpets, such as the ‘Persia Patt Carpet’ produced by Thomas Whitty for Robert Adam’s remodelling of Audley End in 1771 cost 13s a square yard.<sup>22</sup>

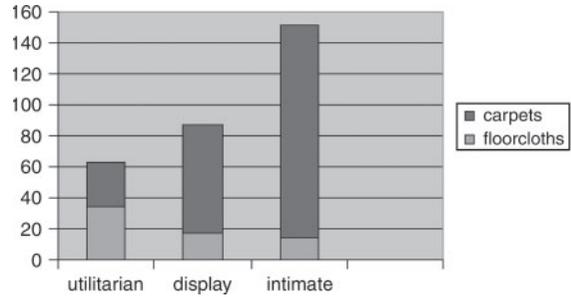


Fig 14. The floorcloth versus the alternatives in 1800. Source: 1800 sample

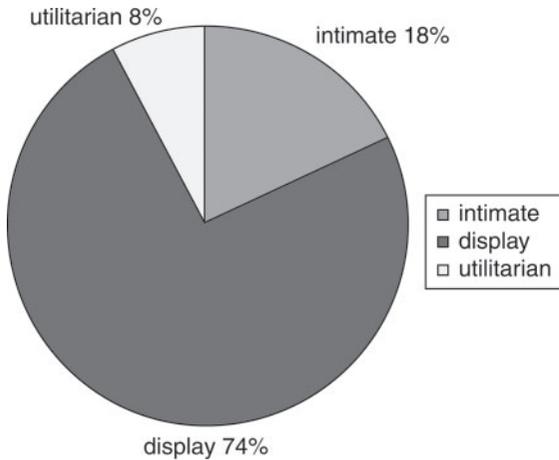


Fig 12. The position of the floorcloth in the 1750 interior. Source: 1750 sample.  
 Intimate—Chamber or Room, Garrett: 9.  
 Display—Dining Room, Parlour, Bar (1): 38.  
 Utilitarian—Staircase, Hall, Kitchen: 3

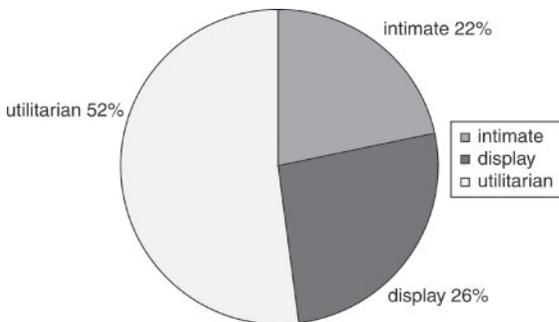


Fig 13. The position of the floorcloth in the 1800 interior. Source: 1800 sample.  
 Intimate—Bedroom, Room, Closett, Attick, Garrett: Total 14.  
 Display—Parlour, Dining Room, Dining Parlour: 17.  
 Utilitarian—Hall, Entrance, Passage, Landing, Staircase, Laundry, Kitchen, Counting House: 34

## 1800

The floorcloth has had to cede its place to carpets in the ‘display’ areas of the house, since the number of entries has decreased by more than half since 1750. While the number of those located within the ‘intimate’ spaces has increased marginally, this can be accounted for by the probability of the attic and garrett rooms being used for servants’ quarters, and a floorcloth being provided. The new areas of the house to be covered were the functional areas, and here the floorcloth was the preferred choice. So, by 1800 the floorcloth had attained the position it retained throughout the nineteenth century: The floorcloth became the choice par excellence in the utilitarian sections of the house [13]. This position often involved placement in the hall, which had achieved an important position in the interior by 1800. Hence the status of the floorcloth remained high at the turn of the century, and many bills and other archival evidence bear witness to the popularity of the floorcloth in this position well into the latter half of the nineteenth century. The floorcloth, although the preferred choice in the new areas to be covered, also had competition from other floor coverings. What other alternatives were used in the stairs, passages, halls and on the landings of the London house in 1800?

A visitor noted the care with which the English interior, including the stairs, was furnished towards the end of the eighteenth century: ‘No part of Europe exhibits such luxury and magnificence as the English display within the walls of their dwelling houses. The staircase, which is covered with the richest carpets . . .’ [14].<sup>23</sup>

We find examples of most of the British carpets used in these positions by the turn of the century. One frequently chosen alternative to the floorcloth

in the stairway, hall and passage was the Venetian. An upgraded version of the list carpet, it was manufactured at Kidderminster as the most basic carpet available. It remained a popular alternative to the floorcloth well into the nineteenth century, its production employing 45 weavers at Kidderminster in 1838.<sup>24</sup>

## Wealth, London and floor coverings

The average valuations of the households in the three periods were as follows:

1700–05: £111  
 1750–53: £124  
 1800–02: £200.

If we recall that the yearly income of someone in the petty bourgeoisie would be between £50–£100, the average valuation of household goods appears to be, very roughly, around twice that of the average yearly income of our households. Naturally, like any other item not regarded as a necessity for life, in 1700 floor coverings were most frequently found in the households of higher valuations: the 23 households valued at over £100 were found to contain more than 50 per cent of the floor coverings, while only six instances of floor coverings were found in the large majority of households valued under £100 (52).

Amongst the inventories of 1750 we find that the fifteen lowest inventory values (£4–£25) lack floor coverings. This again tallies with the fact that the poorer people had fewer possessions, including floor coverings, which were still not regarded as a necessity but a luxury in 1750. Some people clearly could have afforded to cover their floors, but chose not to. The City coach painter Joseph Winkles' valuation is higher than the average at £130 but the floors of his home are bare. He does, however, have other items that were very popular throughout the eighteenth century: two bird cages and an 'eight day clock', as well as 'family pictures in gilt frames'. The top thirteen valuations between £150 and £1500 all show floor coverings, with the outstanding exception of the rich Bloomsbury spinster Mary Geneu whose household, valued at £1500 comprising two rooms only is elegantly furnished with a harpsichord and paintings in carved gold frames. By 1800 we find only four households amongst the 47 that are valued over £100 which still have bare floors, as do those with the five lowest valuations (£7–£27).

Although the 1700 sample suggests that the rare floor coverings were mostly found in the traditional aristocratic setting, the survey shows no evidence that the increase in floor coverings which took place in the first part of the century was linked to aristocratic consumption. Previous articles on the subject of the floorcloth have drawn largely on evidence from great country houses,<sup>25</sup> giving rise to the assumption that it originated in the houses of the elite, and that it filtered down the social scale in the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Instead, we find that floor coverings entered the London interior on all levels of the new middle classes, and that they were mostly in the form of the floorcloth. The floorcloth imitated the marble pavements of great houses, and was therefore an item of emulation of a superior class, but it was immediately adopted by a broad consumer base, and established itself as a fashionable item, adopted eventually by the elite whose floors it had originally imitated, as shown by many examples from great country houses. As late as 1818 Lord Berwick chose to cover the flagstones of his hall with 'A handsome square piece of stone and slate colour octagon panelled roset-pattern Floor-cloth' [15].<sup>27</sup>

Floor coverings in general do not appear to have 'trickled down' from the elite, who rarely used floor coverings anyway. Carpets for the floor were not one of the commodities chosen for the traditional aristocratic display of wealth. As an example, the 1718 inventory of Margaret, Dowager Duchess of Newcastle<sup>28</sup> shows her Dover Street residence sumptuously furnished in a style which harks back to the previous century: walls covered with gilt leather hangings, brocade, 'coloured and flower'd velvete hangings', etc. in all 35 rooms while floor coverings are represented by very few examples, including a Persian carpet, in what appears to be the duchess' bedroom. Even as late as 1747 it seems that the elite were if anything lagging behind. When the contents of the Earl of Orford's house in Chelsea were auctioned not one single carpet was included, although there were several references to mats.<sup>30</sup> Although the above examples are not incontestable—the duchess may have been both old and old-fashioned, and the earl may well have removed his carpets before the sale—it is interesting that Weatherill's survey noted that the consumption of luxury goods were not led by the aristocracy, but the class she termed as merchants, indeed the new middle classes, and my survey also indicates this to be true.



Fig 15. 'A handsome square piece of stone and slate colour octagon panell'd roset-pattern Floor-cloth.' Floorcloth recreated for Attingham Hall by the author in 2002, after a description in a sales catalogue of 1827

The households of 1750 were better furnished than those of 1700, and those of 1800 even more so. The average household valuation doubled between 1700 and 1800, but household goods multiplied to a much greater extent. This can only mean that goods were getting cheaper, leaving enough cash available for ordinary people to buy new fashionable items such as floor coverings, and the floorcloth in particular. Roy Porter notes that 'patterns of consumption were changing, most notably among people faring well, from craftsmen up to professionals and farmers ... growing purchasing power was being laid out on greater ranges of goods, beyond mere necessities, which could be afforded partly because they were getting cheaper'.<sup>30</sup>

The floorcloth appeared with equal frequency in the households of lower valuations as those of higher. The 1750 sample shows that in the 25 households with floorcloths, thirteen were below, while twelve were

above, the average valuation. There is no evidence that the floorcloth was chosen as a cheaper alternative to carpet, however. Amongst the middle to higher valuations in the 1750 sample we find three households in succession where a floorcloth was the only listed floor covering, suggesting that its fashionable appeal may have surpassed that of the carpet. John Taber in Bloomsbury (valuation £160) had one in the 'fore parlour with an eight day clock, a marble table and three bird cages,' while Frederick Volckmar of St Bennet's Sherehog London (valuation £394) placed his floorcloth in his chamber, by the bedstead with its 'blew serge furniture'. John Lefebvre of Tottenham, Middx, whose household is valued at £499, chose to place his only floor covering, a floorcloth, in the hall, in the company of 'a chimney glass a picture eight chairs and a map'.

## Conclusion

The evidence of the survey has ratified certain well-known facts about the eighteenth-century domestic interior, such as the shifting of textile emphasis away from wall-hangings. Thus the 1700 sample provided a view of interiors still largely representative of the earlier century, particularly in the use of textiles, which were either concentrated on the walls in the form of tapestries or else in elaborate 'furniture' for the bed. In contrast, the last sample from 1800 showed the domestic interior having largely attained today's conventions of spatial usage, as well as textile furnishings. Textiles were found on the floor in the form of carpets and floorcloths, and most rooms were furnished with window-curtains. The eighteenth century, therefore, seen through the evidence of the inventory survey, revealed itself as the arena in which today's domestic interior was formed and nowhere more noticeably so than in the use of floor coverings, items to all extents and purposes born in the eighteenth century.

The use of the inventories of the Prerogatory Court of Canterbury, and in particular its PROB 31 series, a hitherto untapped source of invaluable information covering the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, has enabled the survey to offer a unique overview of the century as a chronological unit: a triptych of distinct snapshots of the eighteenth-century London interior fifty years apart. It is hoped that this article may point the way to a more ambitious survey of the eighteenth-century London domestic interior using this rich source material.

This article has provided information on a relatively neglected area in the history of the domestic interior. The floor, occupying such a comparatively large area of interior space, has been curiously under-represented in the compendia devoted to the study of design history. As a result the findings of the survey are particularly interesting, focusing as they do on this more or less uncharted territory of the interior landscape. The most dramatic new evidence regards the floorcloth. This more or less forgotten item is shown to have played a fundamental rather than peripheral role in the domestic interior of the eighteenth century. The floorcloth has been proved to be the single most used floor covering on all social levels throughout the eighteenth century since its first arrival around the first decade of that century.

The implications of these results are such that our received ideas of the eighteenth-century interior will have to be modified to include and reinstate this essential item to the position of importance it undoubtedly held.

Sophie Sarin  
V&A/RCA History of Design Department

## Notes

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- 1 Maxine Berg, 'From imitation to invention: creating commodities in eighteenth-century Britain', *Economic History Review*, LV, 1, 2002, pp. 1–30.
- 2 Beverly Lemire, 'Domesticating the exotic: floral culture and the East India calico trade with England c. 1600–1800' *Textile*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2003, p. 82.
- 3 The inventories used are from PROB 3, PROB 31 and PROB 32. The sample from 1800, taken from PROB 31 presents a rare source for this date. The PROB 31 is less accessible than the other two and covers documents between 1722–c.1845.
- 4 The full details of the criteria used for the compilation of the sample are discussed in my thesis, 'Olicloth, Wachstum und Toile Ciree: the Floorcloth, its Origins, Continental Connections and Place in the Eighteenth Century London Interior' housed at the National Arts Library, V&A, and the library of the RCA.
- 5 R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman 1747*, p. 245.
- 6 Margaret Ponsonby 2003, 'Ideals, reality and meaning, home-making in the first half of the nineteenth century', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 16 no. 3, 2003, pp. 201–214.
- 7 Richard Grassby, *The Business Community of Seventeenth Century England*, C.U.P., Cambridge, 1995, p. 7.
- 8 Quoted in Sara Pennell, 'Textiles for the home', in Snodin and Styles (eds.) *Design and the Decorative Arts Britain 1500–1900*, V&A Publications, London, 2001, p. 108.
- 9 Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, revised edn. Penguin Books, London, 1989, p. xv.
- 10 National Archives, PRO, ADM. 68/685, quoted by Bristow, Ian, 'They will look very well', SPAB. News, Vol II, no. 2, 1990, p. 12.
- 11 PROB 32/51/63.
- 12 PROB 32/57/17.
- 13 PROB 32/60/84.
- 14 L.D. Smith, *Carpet Weavers and Carpet Masters, The Hand Loom Carpet Weavers of Kidderminster, 1780–1850*, Kidderminster, 1986.
- 15 The Minutes of the Society, April 7, 1757.
- 16 The hatters also often made straw mats—a natural partner for straw hat production. In the same way, oil-cloth was used for waterproof hats as well as floorcloths.
- 17 Transactions of the Society 1783.
- 18 E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Every-Day Life* (1959); Alice W. Portnoy, 'A micro-archaeological view of human settlement and functions', in R. A. Gould and M. B. Schiffer, (eds.), *Modern Material Culture: The Archaeology of Us* (London and New York, 1981) mentioned in Weatherill, Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture, London and New York, 1988, p. 8. Weatherill also makes use of this model in her study.
- 19 David Hume, 'Of refinement in the arts', *Essays and Treatises*, London, 1767.
- 20 In 1765, the London floorcloth manufacturers Crompton and Spinnage invoiced Sir John Griffin Griffin of Appuldurcombe Park 1sh9d per yd for plain floorcloth. In 1781 the prominent floorcloth manufacturer Nathan Smith invoiced the same client for a green and white floorcloth at 4sh. 6d per square yd. Quoted in Christopher Gilbert, James, Lomax, Anthony Wells-Cole, *Country House Floors 1660–1850*, Leeds: Temple Newsam Country House Studies No. 3, 1987, p. 101.
- 21 *Country House Floors* p. 56.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 W. de Archenholz, *A Picture of England containing a description of the laws, customs, and manners of England*, London 1791, pp. 82–3.
- 24 L. D. Smith, *Carpet Weavers and Carpet Masters, The Hand Loom Carpet Weavers of Kidderminster, 1780–1850*, Kidderminster 1986, Table 7, p. 46.
- 25 Two examples are John Fowler and John Cornforth, *English Decoration in the Eighteenth Century*, Barrie & Jenkins, London, 1974, pp. 215–219; and *Country House Floors* 1987, pp. 101–105.
- 26 Articles which survey the latter stages of floorcloth manufacture include Clive D. Edwards, 'Floorcloth and linoleum: aspects of the history of oil-coated materials for floors', *Textile History*, 27 (2), 1996, p. 148, and Bonnie Wehle Parks, 'The history and technology of floorcloths', *A. P. T. Bulletin*, vol. XXI, no. 3/4, 1989, p. 54.
- 27 Shrewsbury Record Office RO 43.114. and Attingham sales catalogue of 1827.
- 28 PROB 3/17/22.
- 29 James Ayres, *The Home in Britain*, Faber and Faber, London, 1981, p. 118.
- 30 Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 217.