

FOOD RETAILERS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES: CHESHIRE BUTCHERS IN THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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Introduction

Village blacksmiths, shopkeepers or tailors are often seen as mainstays of rural life, serving as a barometer of the vitality of rural society. Their decline in the early twentieth century signalled the changing nature of English villages as counter-urbanisation made many into commuter settlements, or heralded the urbanisation of the countryside and the death of rural culture and values. Such interpretations are based on a particular reading—an idealisation—of the history and historical geography of rural service provision. At its heart lies a romanticised image of a golden age of rural life, of independent and thriving village communities and of a set of services firmly embedded within those communities. Whilst it is easy to recognise these as clichés—part of a constructed rural idyll—it is more difficult to establish the reality of rural retailing in the early modern period. We know relatively little about the regional and local geographies of rural services. Retail historians have concentrated on the ‘bright lights and bow-windows’ of towns.¹ Rural historians have focused on agricultural change, proto-industrialisation, social conflict and, more recently, the village as community.² The neglect of rural retailing is particularly apparent in the case of food dealers, where the focus often falls on the broader marketing of agricultural produce or feeding urban populations, rather than the supply of rural consumers.³

Given this neglect, it is worth reviewing what we do know about rural food retailers in the long eighteenth century—roughly 1680–1820. First, we know something about their changing numbers and distribution. Mui and Mui argue that the small village shop was increasingly important in supplying the food needs of the rural poor, a point supported by both Shammass and Cox, who suggest that village shops were becoming more widespread in the eighteenth century.⁴ The evidence, though, is equivocal: whilst a proliferation of shops is evident, expansion in provision occurred in line with population growth, industrialisation and (gaps in) urban supply, while many of the settlements studied by Shammass were, in reality, small towns. Moreover, the economic vitality of small markets was often undermined by transport innovations and by the rise of middlemen or factors, who effectively by-passed local dealers

and linked rural supplies with increasingly distant urban demand.⁵ The dynamics of retail growth need fuller investigation, therefore, as do the factors which might have influenced the distribution and prosperity of food retailers.

Second, it is generally accepted that village retailers were essentially serving the needs of a local rural population which was becoming increasingly market oriented due to lengthening chains of supply and growing household specialisation. In this context, shops formed an important link to the world of goods, supplying a range of non-local wares to an ever more sophisticated set of consumers.⁶ While true of grocers, for example, who drew on distant supplies of exotic goods, this kind of relationship is less certain for retailers dealing in local produce, most notably butchers, whose product range and systems of supply remained largely stable during this period. Scola highlighted the importance of linking rural supply to urban demand, but the nature of the links that butchers and other food retailers had with local and non-local consumers remains unclear.⁷

Third, rural craftsmen and tradesmen were often engaged in agricultural activities, many of them owning land and/or livestock. As Holderness and Martin note, the additional income afforded by such by-employments was critical to the viability of many rural trades, and their loss through enclosure caused a notable contraction in the number and range of tradesmen in early nineteenth-century Warwickshire.⁸ More generally, the prevalence of livestock and landholding indicates the close ties which bound retailers and craftsmen to the agricultural economy of the village. Less apparent are the ways in which these economic links were mirrored in social bonds.

This paper seeks to address some of these gaps in our understanding through detailed analysis of the probate records of food retailers in rural Cheshire. The focus is principally on butchers, and on the years 1660–1760, although the initial survey also covers the period up to 1820. During this time rural Cheshire was experiencing a range of socio-economic changes, most notably the continued growth of commercialised livestock farming and the spread of rural manufacturing. From being a mixed agricultural economy in the early seventeenth century, livestock grew increasingly important so that, by the end of the century, Celia Fiennes could note that ‘this shire is remarkable for a great deal of great cheeses and dairies’.⁹ This process was most marked in the centre and west of the county. Further east, sheep farming was more important, initially supplying but later being overshadowed by domestic production of woollen, and then linen and cotton, textiles.¹⁰ These trends towards local specialisation had potentially profound impacts on rural retail activities.

The sources

Probate records have been used on many occasions in studies of retail or craft tradesmen and their shortcomings as an historical source are well known.¹¹ Those that affect the current analysis most directly are the reliability of occupational titles given and the coverage of the population afforded. The importance of multiple incomes in rural households is a commonplace.

Overton and his colleagues discuss in detail the by-employments that characterised households in Kent and Cornwall, particularly those which drew on female labour within the home.¹² One of the most common ways for craft or service-based households to supplement their income was through small-scale agricultural production—most often livestock but also arable farming. Indeed, a key aspect of early industrialisation was the combination of manufacturing and agricultural activity in so-called proto-industrial systems.¹³ The engagement of Cheshire butchers in such by-employments is discussed later. Here, we need to consider the extent to which individuals given different occupational titles in the probate records were involved in butchery. At one level, it is possible to argue that this was true of every household with a few chickens. However, killing and preparing such animals for consumption did not make the person a butcher. A systematic analysis of all the probate records for 20 Cheshire villages revealed no evidence of yeomen, husbandmen or others acting as butchers—knives, blocks and so on were the exclusive preserve of those labelled as ‘butchers’.

The social and temporal coverage of the probate records is more problematic. As probate was a legal requirement only for those worth more than £5, the *circa* 40 per cent of the adult population of Cheshire who left probate records in the first half of the eighteenth century represented the better-off sections of society. Labourers and those in proletarianised industries were particularly poorly represented, since their lack of household goods was compounded by an absence of stock-in-trade.¹⁴ While it is impossible to ascertain the exact proportion of butchers leaving probate records (there are no ‘full’ listings with which to make comparisons), the coverage is likely to have been good since they frequently owned both livestock and stock-in-trade. Moreover, there is little reason to believe that the proportion of butchers appearing in the probate records changed markedly over time, not least because their activities and holdings appear to have remained stable through the eighteenth century.¹⁵ Thus, while the coverage is thin, there is little reason to believe that the patterns or behaviour revealed should be misleading. Moreover, the comprehensive geographical coverage of the probate records allows county-wide analysis, rather than the localised studies possible from (some) parish registers. Indeed, probate records provide a unique insight into the number and location, and more especially the economic lives and social networks, of rural food sellers.

The number and location of rural retailers

Cheshire appears to have shared in the wider flowering of rural trades in the eighteenth century noted by Shamma, Martin and others.¹⁶ The number of food retailers leaving probate records grew steadily and then increasingly rapidly from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century (Table 1). There was also a slight growth in the range of occupations to include such specialisms as fishmongers and confectioners as well as the ubiquitous butchers and bakers. By the time the first trade directories were published for Cheshire in 1784, large villages (with populations of 400–500) contained an

Table 1 Rural food retailers in Cheshire leaving probate records, 1660–1820

	1660–1685	1705–1730	1750–1775	1795–1820
No. of tradesmen	13	30	40	70
No. of villages with food retailers	11	26	34	55
Range of occupations	4	4	6	6

Source: Cheshire and Chester Archives, probate records

impressive range of food retailers: Tarporley had two butchers, two bakers, one cheese factor, and six shopkeepers (most of whom probably sold groceries); and Neston six butchers, one baker, and six shopkeepers.¹⁷ Such concentrations were exceptional, however: in general, food dealers were spread across the county (Figure 1), the growing numbers reflecting the appearance of food retailers in more and more villages (Table 1). In the first half of the period, numbers were probably greatest in the centre and west of the county, but a subsequent evening out of provision meant that only the south west and the Wirral could be viewed as under-provided by the early nineteenth century. Indeed, what is most striking is the lack of clusters: the 153 food retailers listed in the probate records being spread across 99 villages.

How might we go about understanding this growth and distribution? One set of explanations comes in terms of demand for the produce being sold by these tradesmen. Shamma emphasised population growth and competition from urban suppliers as important in stimulating or limiting rural and small town retail development. In terms of the former, the rural population of Cheshire grew between the hearth tax and the first census, from around 75,000 to over 130,000, mostly from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.¹⁸ These extra mouths to feed clearly represented significant expansion in the demand for basics such as food, but provision—as measured by the number of food retailers—easily outstripped population growth. Moreover, whereas demographic expansion was strongest in the industrialising parishes around Stockport and Macclesfield, these areas experienced significant, but not exceptional, growth in the number of village food retailers. An expanding industrial proletariat undoubtedly helped to stimulate the development of specialised retailing in the countryside as well as in towns, but strong growth elsewhere suggests that those engaged in agricultural as well as industrial pursuits were increasingly buying food rather than supplying their own needs. Indeed, it was in the wealthier agricultural areas in the west and centre of the county where provision of food retailers was greatest, indicating greater spending power in such areas.¹⁹

In reality, the situation was far more complex than simply matching supply to (growing) demand. At a fundamental level, de Vries argues that society was changing in ways that induced a greater demand for the foods sold by rural grocers, butchers and the like.²⁰ He has suggested that rural households were becoming more specialised and thus more dependent upon the market to supply even basics such as food. Furthermore, grocers in particular were

Figure 1 The distribution of rural food retailers in Cheshire leaving probate records, 1660–1820

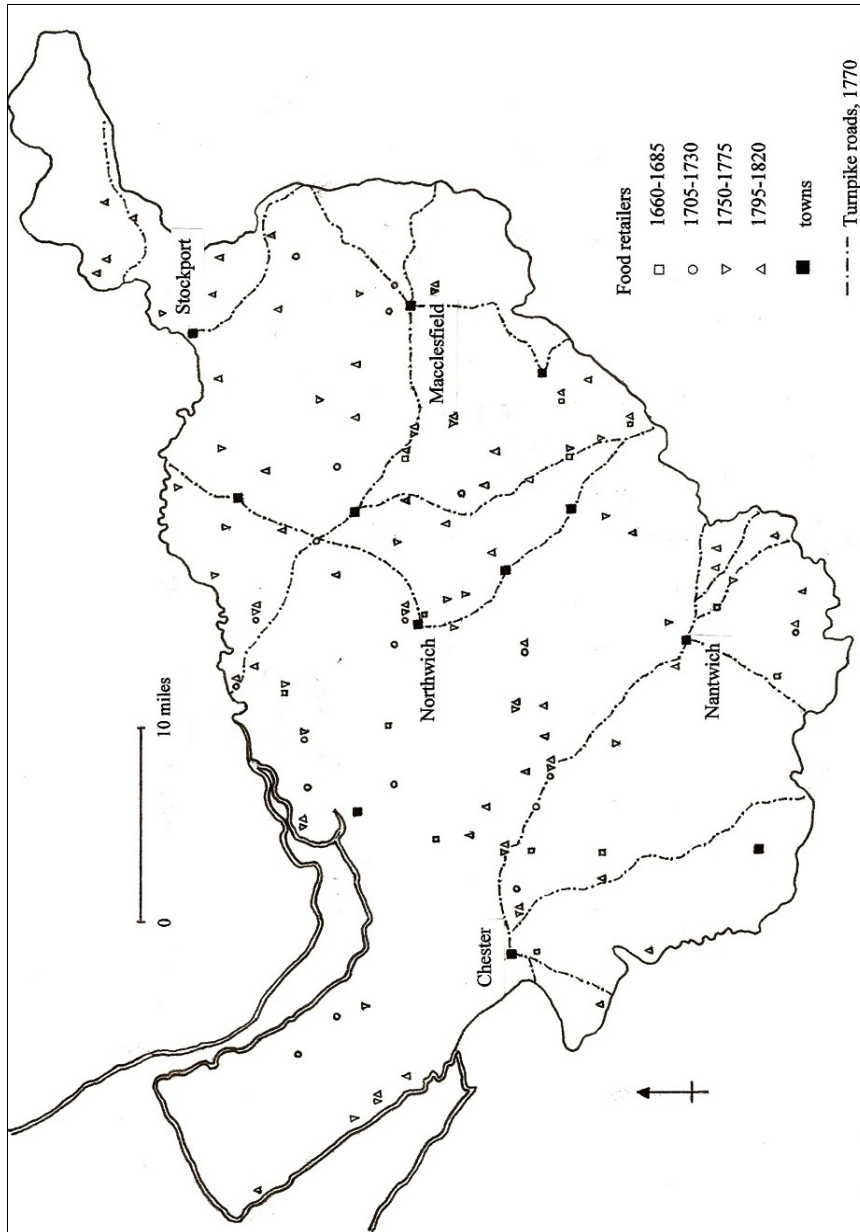


Table 2 Selected food retailers in rural Cheshire, 1660–1820

	1660–1685	1705–1730	1750–1775	1795–1820
Cheese factors	2	6	6	2
Grocers	1	3	5	13
Butchers	7	19	19	39

Source: Cheshire and Chester Archives, probate records

supplying a growing range of novel or exotic goods (such as tea, coffee, sugar, and spices) which formed part of the consumption practices for a growing number of rural as well as urban households.²¹ As these tastes spread, the number of rural grocers grew, especially in the late eighteenth century (see Table 2). In more pragmatic terms, only some rural traders were engaged in supplying the needs of village people. Grocers, bakers and perhaps butchers were locally oriented in terms of their customer base, but, as Scola has made clear, others were involved in the supply of urban or regional markets, most notably corn and flour merchants and, arguably, butchers.²² This has important implications for the location and operation of rural retailing. First, against Shammass, urban growth could be a stimulus to, as well as a limit on, the growth of rural retailing. Second, the distribution of rural tradesmen would reflect supplies of, as well as demand for, foodstuffs. As Scola has amply demonstrated, the supply area of Manchester increased through time, so that the town's markets drew in meat, dairy products and vegetables from across southern Lancashire and northern Cheshire. This stimulated local production and drew many rural suppliers into the orbit of Manchester.²³ It is impossible to reproduce these supply chains for smaller towns, but most fresh food was undoubtedly sourced locally.

Given the mixed nature of agriculture over much of Cheshire, foods were produced locally and were therefore available locally across the county. Even a cursory glance at the inventories of Cheshire farmers makes it clear that most grew a range of crops, kept a variety of livestock and manufactured cheese on a commercial basis. For example, William Allen of Rostherne (d. 1713) had cattle, horses, pigs, corn, wheat, hay and apples, and £5 worth of cheese. Similarly, Arthur Ickin of Cholmondeley (d. 1707) had 25 cattle, 5 horses and an unspecified number of pigs and poultry, together with corn, hay, peas and beans, and £47 worth of 'old cheese' (probably about 2 tons in weight).²⁴ There were, of course, some specialisms that involved longer supply chains. Sheep were rarely kept on the Cheshire plain, but were far more numerous in the uplands of east Cheshire where flocks could be extensive, as with John Demerley of Woodhead (d. 1750) who had 97 ewes and lambs, and 133 wethers.²⁵ More famously, Cheshire cheese was produced in great quantities for the London market and later for the industrial towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire.²⁶ As Chartres has argued, middlemen were increasingly important in linking these primary producers to end consumers.²⁷ The London trade in Cheshire cheese was dominated by a handful of metropolitan cheesemongers,

who organised shipments from Liverpool or Chester. Details for the eighteenth century remain hazy, but they operated via a network of local cheese factors.²⁸ Some of these were rural tradesmen—men such as Thomas Bolton of Stapeley (d. 1667), John Bate of Appleton (d. 1728) and Charles Meredith of Willaston (d. 1752). These were often substantial farmers as well as merchants: John Bate, for example, had about 250 acres of land, and a watermill, windmill and malt kiln. This gave them the financial strength and social standing to organise long-distance trade and cope with the lengthy credit lines that was integral to such dealings. However, the lack of sustained growth in the number of rural cheese factors shown in Table 2 (a trend which is apparent despite the small numbers involved), reflects a decline in their importance relative to urban cheese factors and later to agents from London companies.²⁹

In contrast, rural butchers became increasingly numerous, especially in the late eighteenth century, when their numbers more than doubled (Table 2). This growth, like that of rural food dealers as a whole, easily outstripped population growth. Butchers, then, occupy a particularly interesting position in village retailing. They were the most numerous group of rural food retailers, yet were closely linked with supplying urban demand. They were in the countryside, yet, as Mui and Mui argue, the ‘king-pin of the weekly market was the butcher’.³⁰ Most analysis has focused on the role of butchers in servicing urban demand for fresh meat. Westerfield’s well-known work on London, and Scola’s on Manchester, is echoed by Mitchell’s research on retailing in urban Cheshire.³¹ He highlights the presence at Stockport and Macclesfield markets of butchers and other vendors of fresh food, including fruit and vegetables, cheese, honey, nuts and poultry. For major centres, trade directories in the mid-nineteenth century list not only resident butchers but also those ‘attending the market’, reflecting the continuation of long-established practices.³² Rural based butchers rented stalls and shambles at the market. These were not simply venues for selling meat, but were also frequently the place where animals were slaughtered, carcasses butchered and meat dressed for sale—at least before the urban middling sorts and civic authorities grew more squeamish in the late eighteenth century.³³

Economic lives

If we turn from the institution of the market to look at the rural butchers themselves, their lives and lifestyles seem to be firmly rural. In contrast, grocers appear to have led very different economic lives, linked more closely to urban markets and tastes. That many butchers held land and owned livestock is perhaps unremarkable, notwithstanding the suggestion by Trinder and Cox (based on a sample of just five inventories) that Shropshire butchers rarely engaged in farming.³⁴ Land would be needed for grazing livestock before they were taken to market to be slaughtered and sold. That said, the number and range of animals was impressive, even in this relatively small sample (Table 3): almost three quarters of butchers had cattle, more than half owned pigs and nearly one third had sheep. This suggests an engagement in animal husbandry rather than simply a fattening of stock for the market. More striking, though, is

Table 3 Possession of various forms of livestock and crops by Cheshire rural butchers and other shopkeepers, 1660–1760

	Butchers (n=27)		Shopkeepers (n=16)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Cattle	20	74.1	7	43.8
Sheep	8	29.6	0	0.0
Pigs	14	51.9	2	12.5
Poultry	5	18.5	1	6.3
Unspecified livestock	2	7.4	0	0.0
Corn, hay, etc.	16	59.3	6	37.5
Husbandry ware	8	29.6	2	12.5
Meat	3	11.1	0	0.0
Cheese	10	37.0	2	12.5
Stock in trade	5	18.5	9	100.0

Source: Cheshire and Chester Archives, probate records

the fact that so many had husbandry ware and were growing crops. For example, William Hinton of Clutton owned 16 cows, 1 bull and 2 heifers, 5 horses and some pigs, whilst Thomas Booth of Smallwood had cattle, horses, sheep, pigs and a quantity of wheat and barley valued at over £42. At a rather grander scale, John Oldfield of Golborne Bellow owned 36 cows, 5 heifers and 12 calves, 8 horses, a pig with 14 piglets, barley and oats, peas and beans, and hay, worth a total of £151 18s. 8d., or 52.8 per cent of his estate. Butchers were also producing cheese in marketable quantities: John Vickers of Alpraham had cheese to the value of £12 whilst John Oldfield had £70 worth.³⁵ Such a range of goods and practices mean that there is often little to distinguish butchers from yeomen and husbandmen: they were primary producers as well as retailers. Certainly, they were far more deeply involved in farming than were other rural shopkeepers, less than half of whom owned cattle (Table 3). Ralph Edge, the Tarporley ironmonger, was exceptional: he owned cattle, horses, poultry, corn and hay, along with carts and other husbandry ware worth a total of £51 6s. 8d. Far more typical were Henry Faulkner and Ralph Ampson (both shopkeepers) who, respectively, had £8 10s. in corn and hay, and £4 in hay and peas. Neither had livestock or husbandry ware listed in their inventories.³⁶

The importance of land-holding clearly varied between different individuals and, to some extent at least, between different groups of rural retailers. As Martin suggests, land and livestock were essential to the economic viability of some tradesmen, effectively constituting a dual occupation.³⁷ For others, though, it appears to have been marginal to their trading activities. In truth, the relative importance of the two income streams is often difficult to assess, since the *stocks* of wealth held in livestock, husbandry ware and crops would inevitably outweigh the *flows* of income generated through trade—at least in these post-mortem lists of credits. The occupational titles accorded to individuals thus take on extra significance. That people saw themselves or

were viewed by others as butchers, rather than husbandmen for example, signals that they were engaged in activities that were significantly different from those of their more exclusively farming neighbours. Probate records seldom seem to have left a tangible trace of this difference: only 5 out of 32 wills made any mention of a shop (whether these were workshops or retail outlets is unclear) and just 5 out of 27 inventories included any stock-in-trade. This was invariably of low value: Joshua Walker of Capesthorpe had £2 3s. 6d. of fat and £5 19s. 9d. of hides and skin, but only 10s of unspecified goods in his 'shop place'. Similarly, the appraisers of John Grice of Handbridge valued 'his working tools' at just 3s., whilst John Leigh of Lyme Handley had 10s. worth of 'goods in ye shop', compared with £128 12s. of livestock and £50 of unspecified book debts.³⁸ These shop goods were almost certainly knives and blocks rather than meat to be sold. Indeed, only one butcher was recorded as holding fresh meat on his death, and just two had bacon. Given the highly perishable nature of meat and the extent of self-provision of meat amongst rural-dwellers, this is perhaps unsurprising. It certainly accords with the wider impression, drawn most explicitly by Roger Scola, that rural butchers were largely engaged with meeting urban rather than rural demand: they generally sold from markets stalls in town rather than their homes in the surrounding villages.

Direct evidence of the business practices of eighteenth-century rural butchers is very rare. The scale of their operation appears to have changed little, at least through the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: the mean value of their movable property remained broadly steady during this period. That some butchers (perhaps all) sold on credit is apparent from the presence of book debts in a number of butchers' inventories. These often ran into tens of pounds sterling, but none gave details of the status or location of debtors, making analysis of customer numbers and distribution, or the organisation of businesses, impossible. Fortunately, a rare insight into such customer networks is afforded by the accounts of Ralph Williams of Wybunbury.³⁹ These cover the period 1764–1803, although systematic records only start in the 1780s. They show sales of a variety of different meats and animal products—including beef, mutton, pork, veal, offal and tallow—and how these varied seasonally. Of more immediate interest here is the customer network that is revealed. In a four month period from July to October 1786, a total of 67 people bought meat from Williams on account. Probably there were others (perhaps many more) who paid cash. Some were regular customers: 13 are recorded at least twice a month and some appear at least weekly. The majority, though, bought meat far less frequently, with 36 being recorded just once over the entire period. This suggests a core of established customers and a greater number of others who either patronised a number of different butchers or could afford to buy meat only infrequently.

Sadly, Williams did not record where his customers were from. This implies that most were local: but local to where? Was Williams trading from a shop in Wybunbury or from a market stall in nearby Nantwich? Of the 16 customers that could be traced with certainty, 11 were from Wybunbury or the neighbouring village of Walgherton, and four were from Nantwich. How do we read this pattern? The majority of customers being near neighbours might

suggest that Williams was selling from a shop in the village, but why would residents of Nantwich travel out of town to buy meat? Given that these two places are barely three miles apart, it is quite possible that Williams sold from Nantwich market, but was also favoured by the custom of his neighbours at home. This picture of rural dwellers travelling into town to purchase meat (and other goods) from the local market accords well with how we imagine retailing (especially retailing of fresh food) to have developed in the early modern period. However, it is disrupted if we look at the pattern of opening of Williams' 'shop'. Over the four months sampled, he records selling meat on a total of 62 days, 40 of which fell on the same day of the week. This was not Saturday, the day of Nantwich market, but Sunday—a pattern which strongly suggests sales from a shop in the village rather than a market stall in the more heavily regulated town: while Sunday markets were anathema, many shops opened every day, including Sundays. Moreover, this was the day when Williams had most customers purchasing on account, with up to 20 being recorded on certain Sundays. On other days, he recorded just one or two sales. It may be that Williams sold meat to those attending the church in Wybunbury. There is evidence that early-modern shops were sometimes located close to churches to take advantage of such trade.⁴⁰

It is impossible to know exactly how or where Williams was trading, but it seems most likely that he was combining sales from the urban market (perhaps mostly for cash and hence not appearing in his account book) with sales from a 'shop' at his home in the country. If this is the case, then it places butchers such as Williams in a key position in the supply of meat to both urban and rural consumers. It also makes them important links between urban and rural worlds. To what extent is this intermediate position reflected in the social networks of butchers?

Social networks

The everyday social networks of ordinary people in the eighteenth century are very difficult to capture: by their very nature, they tend to leave few material or archival traces. Diaries and correspondence are invaluable sources in this respect, but few exist for those below the gentry and the middling sorts.⁴¹ Involvement in parish or vestry gives one insight into social engagement and community cohesion; another insight is provided by the executorial links outlined in wills and administration bonds.⁴² As economic, social and cultural as well as legal documents, probate records reflect many aspects of an individual's life. Being an executor or administrator brought an individual into intimate contact with the financial and social workings of the deceased's household. Conversely, it made the choice of executor very important to the successful management of the estate and to the social standing both of the deceased and his or her executor or administrator.⁴³ In identifying some of the closest personal relationships, probate records represent only part of the testator's social network. Even so, they provide 'sensitive indicators of family awareness' and a reliable register of significant life relations, incorporating both friends and family.⁴⁴ What do these records tell us of the social networks of Cheshire's rural butchers?

Table 4 Executorial relationships of rural Cheshire butchers, 1660–1760

	Kin		Other	
	No.	% of total	No.	% of total
Same village	38	41.8	14	15.4
Neighbouring village	4	4.4	14	15.4
Distant village	0	0.0	0	0.0
Local town	1	1.1	4	4.4
Distant town	1	1.1	3	3.3
Unknown	4	4.4	8	8.8
Total	48	52.7	43	47.3

Notes: n=50; 'local' is defined as less than 5 miles from home village

Source: Cheshire and Chester Archives, probate records

The most obvious point is that the largest proportion of executorial links recorded was with family members, the majority of which were with the deceased's widow, hence the importance of links to kin in the same village (Table 4). This behaviour closely reflects that of rural craftsmen and suggests that, despite the growing impact of inter-rural migration, kinship relationships remained strong as a foundation for social interaction within villages. As Keith Wrightson argues, family ties comprised a dense and local network of linkages, binding individuals to one another and to the spatial community within which they lived.⁴⁵ Indeed, the localism of these family-based social bonds and affinities is remarkable: only a handful of links were identified with kin outside the immediate locality. At the same time, however, a considerable number of non-kin relationships are identified in the probate records, a proportion of which were with individuals some distance from the deceased's home village. Given the over-arching importance of family to rural communal life, these are particularly revealing of the broader social world of rural butchers.

The underlying reasons for these non-kin relationships were rarely specified. There are occasional glimpses, as when Samuel Baxter of Cranage appointed his 'trusty and well beloved friends' William Faulkner and Randle Leadbetter as executors, or when William Hinton of Clutton named his 'loving friend' Benjamin Dutton.⁴⁶ Yet these examples are as beguiling as they are revealing: why were these people favoured over others? Proximity was certainly important (see Table 4) with two thirds coming from the same or the neighbouring villages, and only 3 per cent being drawn from places more than five miles distant from the residence of the deceased. Propinquity certainly allowed regular interaction, perhaps through local institutions such as the alehouse, chapel or church or through socialising in village shops.⁴⁷ This localism was also apparent from *post-mortem* gifts. Inheritance strategies were focused very much on to the nuclear family as the unit of social reproduction, but small gifts were also given to a range of other individuals and institutions. Edward Davenport of Over Alderley was fairly typical. He left the majority of

his estate to his wife and sons, but also 20s. to one of his neighbours, John Barber, and clothing to another, John Bilson. Such attachment to the local community is still more evident in the case of George Dutton of Tarporley who, in addition to personal gifts to family and friends in Tarporley and neighbouring villages, also left £5 to the poor of the parish.⁴⁸

Reinforcing incentives of convenience and familiarity were those based on common social and economic experiences. This can be readily, if somewhat superficially, assessed by comparing the occupation of the deceased with that of his executors. This reveals that the most trusted friends of rural butchers were others like themselves: village butchers (who comprised 17 per cent of those executors for whom occupations are known), and yeomen (45 per cent of executors). In part this relates to the fact that the latter was the most numerous occupational group in villages, but it also reflects the economic lives of butchers which, as we saw earlier, closely mirrored that of farmers. Shared economic concerns brought individuals closer in social and emotional terms.⁴⁹ Conversely, the comparative lack of close social contact with individuals engaged in trading activities suggests a social distancing from (urban) commercial life. Fewer than 10 per cent of contacts were with towns, and the majority of these were with other butchers, yeomen or maltsters. While they may have visited urban markets to sell their produce, then, the life-worlds of butchers were primarily rural and their most trusted friends were their neighbours.

Conclusions

Given the relatively small size of the data set, some caution is required in drawing broader conclusions. That said, from the evidence contained in the probate records, it is clear that rural food retailers, and especially butchers, grew in number across Cheshire during the long eighteenth century—more than matching general population growth during this period. They were spread fairly evenly across the county, particularly in the second half of the eighteenth century, their location being relatively unaffected by urban centres. Growth in the east of the county suggests that an expanding industrial proletariat helped to stimulate the development of specialised food retailing in the countryside as well as in towns, but strong growth elsewhere suggests that those engaged in agricultural pursuits were also more inclined to buy in at least some of their food. Moreover, the distribution of butchers in particular reflected local supplies as well as local demand. The mixed agricultural economy, which characterised much of Cheshire, offered opportunities for rural meat and dairy producers, rural production being linked to growing urban demand. Thus, cheesemongers and corn dealers linked local supply to distant markets, whilst butchers brought rural supplies of fresh meat to urban markets. We should be wary, though, of overplaying the importance of urban demand: the activities of Ralph Williams remind us that rural consumers formed an important element of the customer base for many rural butchers. They also indicate that the growing demand from rural consumers was met, not just by the urban retailers that dominate our analyses of retail and consumer change, but also by those operating in villages.

If we are looking for evidence of tradesmen playing a key role in producing and sustaining rural communities—in shaping our idealised English village—then we should, perhaps, focus not simply on shopkeepers and craftsmen, but also on butchers. When we delve into the wider economic and social worlds of rural butchers, we find them to have been thoroughly integrated into rural economy and society. They owned land and livestock, and were *de facto* farmers as well as meat dealers. We can view these practices, in line with Martin, as providing security from the vagaries of the market which was, for butchers at least, subject to some seasonal variation. This does not mean that butcher-farmers were a relic: non-specialisation was perfectly compatible with economic dynamism. This is particularly apparent from their growing number through the early decades of the nineteenth century, when improved transport brought a more thorough integration into the local and regional economy, encouraging the urbanisation of supply. That rural butchers retained (and indeed improved) their economic viability suggests that their business practices remained competitive. At the same time, butchers appear to have remained essentially rural in their orientation. In contrast with grocers and mercers, who brought urban products and fashions into the countryside, butchers dealt in essentially rural products. Moreover, they counted their farming neighbours, rather than their urban trading contacts, amongst their closest friends, underlining their rootedness in village society.

NOTES

1. D. Davis, *A history of shopping* (London, 1966), 181. See also H-C. Mui and L. Mui, *Shops and shop-keeping in eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1989); N. Cox, *The complete tradesman: a study of retailing, 1550–1850* (Aldershot, 2000).
2. Amongst the best examples of this last group are: D. Levine and K. Wrightson, *The making of an industrial society: Whickham, 1560–1765* (Oxford, 1991); K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and piety in an English village: Terling 1525–1700* (Oxford, 1995), and C. Dyer ed., *The self-contained village? The social history of rural communities, 1250–1900* (Hatfield, 2006).
3. J. Chartres, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', in J. Thirsk ed., *The agrarian history of England and Wales, vol. V, 1640–1750* (Cambridge, 1985), 406–502.
4. Mui and Mui, *Shops and shop-keeping*, 148–59; C. Shammas, *The pre-industrial consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990), 225–65.
5. Chartres, 'Marketing of agricultural produce', 465–95.
6. J. de Vries, 'Between purchasing power and the world of goods', in J. Brewer and R. Porter eds, *Consumption and the world of goods* (London, 1993), 85–132; Cox, *Complete tradesman*, especially 38–75.
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25. CCA, WS 1750 John Demerley of Woodhead. A wether is a castrated ram.
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