Symposium Report

‘The Great Household, 1000-1500’ (2016)

I was extremely fortunate to receive a Dobson Scholarship that financially assisted my attendance at the 2016 Harlaxton Symposium. The event helped me to better define some of the key intellectual concepts in my current PhD thesis, learn about a wide range of relevant primary sources and network with an internationally-varied group of scholars. The rare combination of intellectually-serious papers with a convivial conference environment made for a stimulating week and has undoubtedly made a lasting impression on my outlook as a budding academic.

The conference was an opportunity to think through some of the much-debated issues that I engage with in my doctoral studies. The paper given by Chris Dyer on "aristocratic styles of life across the social spectrum", and its resultant discussion amongst the conference delegates, helped me to fully appreciate the complexity of issues, such as income, property and regional variation, when analysing the issue of medieval social class. Additionally, Chris Woolgar's discussion of family heirlooms and the mnemonic qualities of certain domestic objects inspired me to think more creatively about my own research into domestic armorial displays. The ideas explored in Woolgar's paper are relevant to my own analysis of the incremental additions made to armorial schemes by later generations in a family and their importance to the creation of dynastic memory. I found many of the papers useful for broadening my understanding of medieval domesticity and developing a greater appreciation of conceptual issues in my work. D. Vance Smith's paper, on the relationships between the voice, noise and the house in Chaucer's writings, was particularly useful for thinking about the multi-sensory nature of domestic authority and domestic space during this period. Numerous other discussions, such as Martha Carlin's paper on catering rituals, gave me a fuller understanding of the quotidian rituals in the household and helped me to think about the frameworks that might have assisted in structuring the experiences of its occupants.

Papers on more-specific aspects of the home such as Nicholas Orme's analysis of the house as an educational institution for medieval children provided a useful insight into the kinds of intellectual structures in which coats of arms might have participated. For instance, Orme's paper, which highlighted the recommendations in courtesy literature for young men to learn the colours of domestic animals, such as hunting dogs, has helped me to think about how boys learned to describe different armorial tinctures during their childhoods. I found Maria Hayward's paper on textiles equally stimulating, firstly for thinking about how aesthetic issues of colour were closely tied to the materials of clothing during the Tudor period and secondly for its discussion of rich primary sources regarding dress in sixteenth-century England.

The Conference's excursion to Gainsborough provided me with an opportunity to participate in dialogue with the other attendees. The germane setting of Gainsborough allowed for productive discussion about many issues that were of direct relevance to my thesis, with many delegates pointing out issues about medieval houses that had not yet occurred to me. I was provided with a great deal of references and research suggestions throughout the conference and benefited equally from the opportunity to socialise informally with academics between sessions and in the evenings.

Oliver Fearon

University of York