Introduction

Property, Possession and the Importance of Loss

Writing to her sister Susanna (1755–1800) in March 1777, a year before the publication of her first novel, the writer Frances Burney (1752–1840) sought to entertain with tales of troublesome shoes. Burney had purchased, or rather 'rescued', a pair of shoes from a 'dark & dusty' warehouse and in possessing the shoes, Burney gave them purpose. Yet when walking, they proved fickle. They were 'false & worthless', more wedded to the mud than their owner. Burney complained of how they 'threaten me perpetually with desertion', as they were more attached 'to the mire' than to her feet and might have left at any time.[1] Burney would not have been surprised if 'some Day' they gave her 'the slip' for good. Here, in her letter, Burney constructed a philosophy of possession. She laid out the difficulty of achieving consistency and gaining compliance from the object itself. As such, Burney positioned possession as a relationship in need of ongoing enactment. Her writing up of a walk and the unsuitability of her shoes in dealing with the abundant mud introduces us to a broader problem within eighteenth-century society: the relationship of possession and what it was understood to be. As a writer who dwelt on questions of property in her work, and whose financial independence relied on her ability to lay claim to newly established copyrights, it is perhaps unsurprising that Burney looked to more whimsical questions of possession in her letters. Burney's joke, carefully constructed for her beloved Susanna, works because it is not the shoes that will up and leave, but rather the mud that will pull them away. Although anthropomorphised here, the shoes cannot (of course) act of their own volition, and thus the relationship of possession in this instance should be simple to sustain. In framing her story in this way, however, Burney touches upon a concern with which eighteenth-century Britons were familiar, namely what did it mean to possess? Examining this question is the purpose of this book.

What it might mean to be a proper possessor of things was pressing in the eighteenth century because greater numbers of people came to own more

[1] Frances Burney, *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, Vol. II (1774–1777), ed. Lars E. Troide (Oxford, 1988), 221.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

things. We have long known that between 1675 and 1725, people owned more goods. Over this half century, a higher percentage of probate inventories came to include tables, cooking pots, saucepans, pewter dishes, pewter plates, earthenware, books, clocks, pictures, looking glasses, window curtains, knives and forks and china and utensils for hot drinks.[2] We also know that people worked harder and rearranged resources to privilege consumption and obtain these goods.[3] Since the 1990s, historians have largely approached the phenomenon of more people owning more goods as a question of consumption and material culture.[4] They have uncovered the systems and processes that created these goods and have asked why and how people consumed them and what these objects meant. As a result of this work, we better understand the global systems of racial capitalism that supplied new goods, such as sugar from the Caribbean.[5] At the same time we have learned that Britain's interventions in, and violent control of, global trade routes supplied South and East Asian goods, such as cotton textiles from the Indian subcontinent and porcelain wares from China.[6] Alongside knowledge of global connections, we have also gained a better understanding of how British manufacturers and makers produced innovative goods.[7] These new and novel products encouraged Britons into the marketplace and the sophisticated design of shops and print culture further consolidated the centrality of materialism and consumption within British society.[8] Once purchased, these possessions signified taste and

[2] Lorna Weatherill's analysis was based on a sample of 2,902 inventories. See Lorna Weatherill, 'The Meaning of Consumer Behaviour in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England', in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993), 220. See also Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760* (London, 1996).

[3] Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2012), 10; Hans-Joachim Voth, 'Work and the Sirens of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century London', in Marina Bianchi (ed.), *The Active Consumer: Novelty and Surprise in Consumer Culture* (London, 1998), 161–166.

[4] See, for example, Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*.

[5] Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, NY, 1986); James Walvin, *Sugar: The World Corrupted, From Slavery to Obesity* (London, 2017); Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2023).

[6] On cotton see Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (Cambridge, 2013); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (London, 2014). On porcelain, see Maxine Berg, 'Cargoes: The Trade in Luxuries from Asia to Europe', in David Cannadine (ed.), *Empire, The Sea and Global History: Britain's Maritime World, c.1763–c.1840* (Hampshire, 2007), 60–82; Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley, CA and London, 2010).

[7] Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005).

[8] Claire Walsh, 'Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of Design History*, 8:3 (1995), 157–176; Nancy Cox, *The Complete Tradesman: A Study of Retailing, 1550–1820* (Aldershot, 2000); Helen Berry, 'Polite Consumption: Shopping in Eighteenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), 375–394; Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, 'Selling Consumption in the Eighteenth

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

knowledge, constructing status, gender, belonging and exclusion.[9] More recently, we have learned that these were feeling things that bound and negotiated relationships.[10] They were also material things, which shaped how people and their bodies moved through the world.[11] Such scholarship has produced a deep understanding of how eighteenth-century society constructed, experienced and made meaningful their material world. Within such varied and fruitful enquiries, however, the question of ownership – the relationship of possession, rather than the possession itself – has been little explored. While this question has not been granted historiographical significance, this book finds that it was historically important. As more people came to possess more things, ownership increasingly shaped people's connection to themselves and others. The question of who could own, and who could own what, provided a means of deciphering legal personhood and impacted understandings of the self.[12] As such, possession uncovers and explains a wide range of 'social' relationships.[13] Given its importance, we must shift our attention from possessions to the relationship of possession to examine how eighteenth-century society and culture reckoned with it. *Keeping Hold* uncovers how understandings of self-worth came to be bound up with possessing things at the dawn of the modern age.

On Caring and Character

In the eighteenth century, land ownership was out of reach for most and was arguably becoming more so.[14] *Keeping Hold* turns away from real property, to

Century: Advertising and the Trade Card in Britain and France', *Cultural and Social History*, 4:2 (2007), 145–170; Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann and Victoria Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c. 1680–1830* (London, 2007).

[9] John Styles and Amanda Vickery (eds), *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America 1700–1800* (London and New Haven, CT, 2006).

[10] Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles (eds), *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions Through History* (Oxford, 2018).

[11] Karen Harvey, 'Men of Parts: Masculine Embodiment and the Male Leg in Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of British Studies*, 54:4 (2015), 797–821.

[12] Susan Staves, 'Chattel Property Rules and the Construction of Englishness, 1660–1800', *Law and History Review*, 12:1 (1994), 123; Lynn Festa, 'Personal Effects: Wigs and Possessive Individualism in the Long Eighteenth Century', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 29:2 (2005), 48.

[13] I am using 'social' in its widest sense here to include human actors and non-human actants. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford, 2005), 71.

[14] On the changing role of landownership, see J. V. Beckett, 'The Pattern of Landownership in England and Wales, 1660–1880', *The Economic History Review*, 37:1 (1984), 21–22. Also see, J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Rights, Enclosure and Social Change in England 1700–1820* (Cambridge, 1993); Carl Griffin, 'Becoming Private Property: Custom, Law, and the Geographies of "Ownership" in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England', *Environment and Planning A*, 42:3 (2010), 747–762; Briony McDonagh, *Elite Women and the Agricultural Landscape, 1700–1830* (Woodbridge, 2017). For the importance of moveable

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

instead examine everyday forms of property relations that were engaged in by many. Focusing on other forms of property relations, such as moveable property, is pertinent not only because more people came to own moveable property in the period, but also because the role of such property in people's lives and social relationships changed as urban spaces became more important.

To consider moveable goods, we might think back to all those cooking pots, dishes, plates, clocks and books recorded in probate inventories: we might look to the household. In doing so, we would be reminded of the importance placed on economy and more particularly of care and caring. In the early modern period, households needed to be well ordered and well managed to make the most of the resources they had.[15] A neat house reflected a good character, which remained crucial to social relations and obtaining credit.[16] Key to household order was the care of possessions. Manuals on domestic management suggest there were high expectations of what constituted care. Furniture needed to be 'washed clean' and 'rubbed daily' if it was 'to carry a gloss and look well'.[17] These standards were mirrored in diaries and day books, which reveal that pewter was regularly 'scowered', and 'old shifts, shirts and sheets' were frequently mended.[18] To clean, to care, or more particularly, to put 'a little fragrant wax' on a table with 'the woolen [sic] cloth that lends warmth to everything' was a key means of cherishing possessions.[19] Such care was given by mistresses and masters, but more usually their capacity to labour, to care, was exercised by servants. Trial reports show the fraught importance of such work: the never-ending demand for clean clouts sometimes became too much for the servants involved.[20] Care was also enacted by people with specialist skills. For instance, when ceramic objects were broken, they were taken to menders and dirty hats were sent off to be

property rather than land see, Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2015), 1.

15 Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT and London, 2009), 296–299; Simon Werrett, *Thrifty Science: Making the Most of Materials in the History of Experiment* (Chicago, IL and London, 2019), 6.

16 'Neat' was an important term in eighteenth-century society and culture. It denoted styles that lacked ostentation and pretension but also indicated order: things being in place. See Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT and London, 1998), 147; Amanda Vickery, '"Neat and Not Too Showey": Words and Wallpaper in Regency England', in Styles and Vickery, *Gender, Taste and Material Culture*, 201–224.

17 Anon., *Domestic Management, Or the Art of Conducting a Family; with Instructions to Servants in General* (London, 1800), 42.

18 Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, 149 and 151. See also Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 298–299.

19 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston, MA, 1994), 67–68.

20 See the case of Ann Mead in Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge, 2009), 228–254.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

cleaned.[21] To care meant to clean and mend, but it was also about order and security. Mistresses and masters regularly inventoried the goods within their households to ensure everything was still where it should be. Valuable items such as silks and lace were locked away and securing the house each night was an important task.[22] To care was to keep things in good order.

Caring for possessions was important to achieving a good character, but it was also understood in moral and religious terms in eighteenth-century British culture. Yourself, your loved ones, your possessions and your estate were believed to have been given to you by the grace of God: they were on loan from God.[23] As such, these gifts should be valued and cared for. It was, of course, easier to be of good character if you could employ someone to exercise your labour (and do all that caring) on your behalf. In the later eighteenth century, children were taught the importance of looking after things from an early age. More particularly, they were reminded of the sheer labour involved in maintaining things and were also subtly alerted to the fact that someone might do it for them. In Dorothy Kilner's (1755–1836) *The Life and Perambulations of a Mouse* (1790), we see the child Miss Nancy behaving rudely to her Nurse. Nancy's mother Mrs Artless uses the incident as an opportunity to teach her about Nurse's value and the importance of taking care of things, including children and babies. She asks Nancy how capable she would be of enacting the skills and labour needed to take care: 'Could you buy, or dress your own victuals? Could you light your own fire? Could you clean your own house, or open and shut the doors and windows? Could you make your own cloaths [sic], or even put them on without some assistance, when made?'[24] The aptly named Mrs Artless hammers home Nancy's incapacities and reminds the reader of all that needs to be done for children. A large part of caring for children was looking after their things. Mrs Artless constructs caring as an adult act, requiring maturity and skill. In seemingly defending Nurse,

[21] Sara Pennell, '"For a Crack or Flaw Despis'd": Thinking about Ceramic Durability and the "Everyday" in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England,' in Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (eds), *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and Its Meaning* (Abingdon, 2010), 37; Sara Pennell, 'Invisible Mending: Ceramic Repair in Eighteenth-Century England', in Ariane Fennetaux, Amélie Junqua and Sophie Vasset (eds), *The Afterlife of Used Things: Recycling in the Long Eighteenth Century* (New York, NY, 2014), 107–121. For hats being sent to be cleaned see Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 1114, 'The Diary of an Anonymous Man', 16 March 1710.

[22] On locking up silk gowns, see *Domestic Management*, 54. On the importance of locking up the house, see Steedman, *Labours Lost*, 85; Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 31.

[23] John Mason, *Self-Knowledge. A Treatise, Shewing the Nature and Benefit of the Important Science, and the Way to Attain It* [1745] (5th edn, London, 1755), 157.

[24] Dorothy Kilner, *The Life and Perambulations of a Mouse, Vol. I* (London, 1790), 27.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

Mrs Artless also underscored who it was that most often laboured away, cleaning and making things. In this instance, it was certainly not Mrs Artless.[25]

As children grew older, they were encouraged to learn the importance of looking after their things themselves. In the it-narrative *Cato, or Interesting Adventures of a Dog of Sentiment* (1816), the dog Cato recounts an early experience in which a child in his household was inconsiderate of her gloves and hat. One day, the child Ellen is taken with the brightness of the morning and boldly removes her hat and gloves to dash outside. As soon as she has run away, the dog Cato and his sister Flora pick up her gloves and disperse them around the garden. A moment later, they get hold of her bonnet and in playfulness rip it apart. On seeing the destroyed bonnet and unable to find her gloves, Ellen realises the error of her ways: 'I am really so vexed and ashamed, I think I shall never be disobedient again; one feels so comfortable when acting properly.'[26] Ellen is clear about the lesson she has learned: to act properly, to be responsible and respectable, is to look after your things.

While caring continued to be important across the eighteenth century, the changing role of possessions in peoples' social lives prompted questions about what it was to care and why caring was important. In the early modern period, possessions acted as stores of wealth. In the 'culture of appraisal', household possessions were the basis upon which people calculated another's worth and offered credit.[27] In the eighteenth century, such calculations began to change. As historian Alexandra Shepard has shown, establishing trust relied on reputation and, in the eighteenth century, this was no longer dependent on 'a household's stock of assets' but rather on the 'selective representation of social and cultural capital'. In this period of increasing mobility and urbanisation, shopkeepers were no longer able to establish the value of a household's assets. Instead, they became 'more *heavily reliant* on judgements about reputation and character'.[28] And, as we know from Margot Finn's research on the continued relationship between character and credit, by the nineteenth century, 'the idea of character pervaded English society and culture'.[29] In urban environments, people secured the 'personal and social identities' crucial to character by utilising the 'partial and selective processes of display'.[30] Possessions accompanied people into urban spaces and reputations were built through their presence. The shifting ground upon which reputations and identities were forged – from household stock to the selective display of mobile things –

[25] On the difficulty of knowing who did the labour, see Kate Smith, 'In Her Hands: Materializing Distinction in Georgian Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 11:4 (2014), 493.
[26] Anon., *Cato, or Interesting Adventures of a Dog of Sentiment* (London, 1816), 19.
[27] Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, 2. [28] Ibid., 302.
[29] Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740–1914* (Cambridge, 2003), 20.
[30] Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, 311.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

did not diminish the importance of caring for things. Mobile items still needed to be cleaned, maintained and mended. However, *Keeping Hold* argues that in the eighteenth century an increasingly critical part of caring for your things, of having a good character, was the ability to *maintain* possession over time. It became more important, this book will show, because in a world of increasingly mobile people and things, keeping hold proved difficult and required new forms of action. In the eighteenth century, as the basis for evaluating character switched from the household to 'selective representation', we begin to see how the relationship of possession came to exist as a 'thing' that itself required maintenance and care.

On Possessions

The question of what it meant to own was pressing in the eighteenth century, not only because more people came to own more things and the role of such things in the social life of Britons was substantially changing, but also because the question of *what* could be owned loomed large, particularly in terms of personal property. Historian Susan Staves asserts that after largely focusing on real property, the rapidly expanding commercial world of the eighteenth century prompted the law 'to develop (or, less sympathetically, to complicate) the law of chattels'.[31] In this period, new attention was paid to moveable goods and how the law should deal with them. In Book II of his *Commentaries*, Blackstone noted two categories of chattels. First, 'chattels real' were 'interests issuing out of, or annexed to, real estate'.[32] These things were immobile, but of an indeterminate duration and thus existed as chattels, rather than real property. The other category of chattels, and it is this form which this book largely focuses upon, was 'chattels personal' (sometimes referred to as 'chattels moveable').[33] These were distinctly mobile things: those 'which may be annexed to or attendant on the person of the owner, and carried about with him from one part of the world to another.'[34] Blackstone included a list to clearly articulate what such things might be. He named chattels personal as 'animals, household-stuff, money, jewels, corn, garments', but tellingly he also

[31] Staves, 'Chattel Property Rules and the Construction of Englishness, 1660–1800', 124.
[32] William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: Book II Of the Rights of Things,* ed. Simon Stern (Oxford, 2016), 261.
[33] On 'chattels moveable' see Samuel Clapham, *A Collection of the Several Points of Sessions' Law*, *Vol. 1* (London, 1818), 204.
[34] Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: Book II Of the Rights of Things*, 262. Blackstone's definition proved influential and was, in part, used by Samuel Clapham in his guide for magistrates. See Clapham, *A Collection of the Several Points of Sessions' Law, Vol. 1*, 204.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

included 'every thing else that can properly be put in motion, and transferred from place to place'.[35] That he included 'everything else' was reflective of an age in which there was a steady supply of new things which could be 'put in motion, and transferred from place to place'. The list was ever-changing and one of the reasons the law sought to increasingly focus on the law of chattels was due to the increasingly commercial nature of the British economy and society.[36] However, Blackstone's use of 'every thing else' also points towards the uncertainty of the category: its distinct fluidity in this period. Not only were the boundaries of ownership under development, so too were understandings of what should be subject to certain forms of possession.

Possibly due to a reliance on certain sources, such as inventories, or because of the dominance of material culture approaches, recent historical scholarship on personal possessions has largely focused on clothes and household goods.[37] However, as Blackstone reminds us, a much broader set of 'things' existed as property in the eighteenth century. We must remember that in this period, alongside clothes and household goods, it was possible for Britons to own money, animals and even people. Examining what people understood ownership to be – what the relationship of possession was and what it meant – requires that we reckon with a broader range of possessions. Doing so is important not only in answering the question central to this book, but also in challenging our current assumptions about what counted as possessions in the past.

In its analysis, *Keeping Hold* focuses on the relationships at stake in four different possessions: watches, financial instruments (a category that here includes money – coins and bank notes – but also instruments such as bills of exchange, and Exchequer bills), dogs and people (including enslaved people, but also servants, apprentices and spouses). As we will explore, this choice of 'things' is largely guided by the relevant primary sources. Dogs, financial instruments, people and watches appeared most regularly in the 'lost' notices of the age. However, focusing on these 'things' is also driven by the need to engage with an eighteenth-century worldview, which held the capacity to understand people as property. Watches, financial instruments and dogs

[35] Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: Book II Of the Rights of Things*, 262.

[36] David Lieberman, 'Property, Commerce, and the Common Law: Attitudes to Legal Change in the Eighteenth Century', in John Brewer and Susan Staves (eds), *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London and New York, NY, 1995), 147.

[37] See for example Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760*; Maxine Berg, 'Women's Consumption and the Industrial Classes of Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of Social History*, 30:2 (1996), 415–434; Berg, *Luxury & Pleasure*; Styles and Vickery, *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America 1700–1800;* John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT and London, 2007); Serena Dyer, *Material Lives: Women Makers and Consumer Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2021).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

would largely have been understood as chattels personal in the period. So too, as we will see in Chapter 1, could people in the form of enslavement. Beyond enslavement, people such as wives, servants, apprentices, the poor and children could also be considered possessions. Engaging with these different forms of property illuminates how they each shaped what the relationship of possession was understood to be and mean.

Studying dogs, financial instruments, people and watches forces us to reckon with eighteenth-century culture and the elisions it countenanced between objects, non-human animals and humans. In this period, the large-scale invasion, encroachment and exploitation of lands and peoples by European nations produced new questions about the category of the human.[38] The parameters governing what it meant to be human 'needed to be flexible enough to incorporate the world's variety within it'.[39] The construction of the category of the human took place across a range of sites, from epistemological questions about 'man' to taxonomical renderings within natural history, and from political questions of human rights to philosophical questions on human understanding, and then to literary conceptions of sensibility and sympathy.[40] Prior to the final quarter of the eighteenth century, the question of who and what counted as human loomed large. For example, in the early eighteenth century, rather than a question of political rights, discussions on the rights of mankind were more fundamental, referring 'to what distinguished humans from the divine on one end of the scale and from animals on the other'.[41] Writers, artists and philosophers were deeply uncertain as to 'what and who counted as human' and sought to produce means by which humanity could be elicited and produced.[42] Alongside interiority and sympathy, Lynn Festa has argued that literature produced the category of the human thematically, formally and performatively.[43] Festa argues that artwork and literature often did so with recourse to non-human animals and objects. As such, 'humanity arrived in a "field of conflict" flanked by animals, machines, and all manner of things'.[44] Writers and artists created innovations in non-human perspective, characterisation and voice, which constructed boundaries between animal,

[38] Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Cambridge, 2009), 4.
[39] Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2003), 2.
[40] Lynn Festa, *Fiction without Humanity: Person, Animal, Thing in Early Enlightenment Literature and Culture* (Philadelphia, PA, 2019), 5.
[41] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, NY, 2007), 23.
[42] Festa, *Fiction without Humanity*, 1 and 8. See also Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore, MD, 2006), 3.
[43] Festa, *Fiction without Humanity,* 2. [44] Ibid., 6.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

human and thing. Art and literature elicited the reactions needed to perform humanity and created practices central to being human such as reading and reasoning.[45]

In a similar vein, Jane Spencer has demonstrated the centrality of human–animal representation in political discussions of rights and personhood. Those advocating for the extension of human rights did so within a context where human–animal relations were undergoing changes. Animals came to be understood as 'fellow creatures', which needed to be cared for and sympathised with by humans.[46] At the same time, however, any claim to humanity was always dependent on a distinction between human animals and non-human animals.[47] Like Festa, Spencer underscores the need to understand the construction of humanity within literary and political forms that grappled with non-human things, and more particularly in this case, non-human animals. Of course, such forms were not only producing conceptions of humanity and the human, here we see that they also manifested understandings of non-human animals and objects, which were themselves undergoing processes of creation.[48]

More broadly, we see that other spheres also reflected elisions between humans, non-human animals and objects in the eighteenth century, creating the possibility of regarding humans as 'things'. For example, the marketplace existed as an important space that produced these understandings. As Margot Finn has argued, when 'seizing men's bodies for their debts, the civil law substituted persons for things in market exchange, allowing the human body to serve as collateral for goods obtained not through productive labour and the cash nexus but rather through the operation of consumer credit.'[49] Similarly, Tawny Paul has underscored how the practices of debt repayment and punishment enacted the 'commodification of the debtor's body', because if someone failed to repay 'their body was taken to stand in for the debt, much like the object submitted to the pawnshop'.[50] Another means by which people came to be understood as 'things' was through pricing and monetary relations. Deborah Valenze has demonstrated that enlisting 'money as a vehicle for comprehending and regulating social relations' made it 'possible to conceive of certain

[45] Ibid., 254.
[46] As cited in Jane Spencer, *Writing about Animals in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford, 2020), 4.
[47] Spencer, *Writing about Animals*, 8.
[48] See for example, Laura Brown on the 'production' of animals in Laura Brown, *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes: Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Imagination* (Ithaca, NY, 2010). See particularly the work of Mark Blackwell and Liz Bellamy on the construction of the objects and animals and their relationship to humanity in Mark Blackwell (ed.), *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2007).
[49] Finn, *The Character of Credit*, 10.
[50] Tawny Paul, *The Poverty of Disaster: Debt and Insecurity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2019), 20.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

categories of persons as private possessions over whom certain individuals (usually property-owning men) claimed authority'. Valenze argues that enslaved people, women, children, servants and apprentices were 'subject to such status'.[51] Similarly, Christopher L. Brown has argued that we can see 'domestic analogues' with chattel slavery when we look to the restrained autonomy and mobility of day labourers, the poor, impressed soldiers and sailors, and of dependents such as wives, children and servants.[52] While such 'analogues' existed and will be further explored in this book, as Valenze acknowledges, enslavement was the 'most extreme form' of the 'tendency to enlist money as a vehicle for comprehending and regulating social relations'.[53] In the eighteenth century, enslavement not only took place within the Caribbean, Americas and South Asia. We know that enslavers brought enslaved people from these sites to Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that people were bought and sold on British soil at this time.[54] Although it was legally ambiguous as to whether people could own the body and person of another, or their capacity to labour, Britons were often invested in such ambiguity and the possibilities it opened up for conceiving of people as chattel property, as 'things', within Britain.[55] The construction of race, and the forms of dehumanisation and commodification that accompanied it, became increasingly central to understanding enslavement and its enactment in later eighteenth-century Britain.[56]

To examine what British culture and society understood the relationship of possession to be, it is crucial to connect with this eighteenth-century world-view in which humans, non-human animals and objects could all be considered property and possessions. In other words, *Keeping Hold* adds new

[51] Deborah Valenze, *The Social Life of Money in the English Past* (Cambridge, 2006), 224–225.

[52] Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), 44. Brown describes 'domestic analogues' because he asserts that in 'the British Isles, there was nothing remotely like chattel slavery'. More recent work has shown that enslaved people were brought to Britain, were bought and sold in Britain and were regarded as property, although it remained legally ambiguous. See Chapter 1 and see Simon P. Newman, 'Freedom-Seeking Slaves in England and Scotland, 1700–1780', *English Historical Review*, 134:570 (2019), 1143 and 1148.

[53] Valenze, *The Social Life of Money*, 225.

[54] Newman, 'Freedom-Seeking Slaves', 1137 and 1148.

[55] On the 'contemporary investment in keeping it [the status of Black people in Britain] unclear', see Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2012), 11. On the distinctions drawn between enslavement and marriage see Katherine Paugh, 'The Curious Case of Mary Hylas: Wives, Slaves and the Limits of British Abolitionism', *Slavery & Abolition*, 35:4 (2014), 629–651.

[56] Newman, 'Freedom-Seeking Slaves', 1150; Catherine Hall, *Lucky Valley: Edward Long and the History of Racial Capitalism* (Cambridge, 2024), 25; D. Rabin, '"In a Country of Liberty?": Slavery, Villeinage and the Making of Whiteness in the Somerset Case (1772)', *History Workshop Journal*, 72 (2011), 5; Dana Y. Rabin, *Britain and Its Internal Others, 1750–1800: Under Rule of Law* (Manchester, 2017), 89.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

knowledge by showing that to understand what it meant to own, including what it meant to own people, we need to see how such meanings were highly interdependent in this period. However, although there are important reasons for considering humans, watches, financial instruments and dogs within my analysis, it is a problematic move. In fact, it is a devastating position to take. It is so because it risks perpetuating a logic that objectified and dehumanised people, seeing them as 'things', as possessions, as forms of display. Such a move risks perpetuating a historical violence and a legal fiction in which people were transformed into what they are not: things.[57] Yet, we must engage with the fact that people *were* subjected to the relationship of possession and the moral flatness this suggests at. Placing humans-as-property within the same analytical frame as other forms of property makes visible this eighteenth-century possibility and requires that we grapple with it more fully.

On Loss and Losing

Historians' ability to uncover what people understood the relationship of possession to be and mean has been limited by historical records that tend to name ownership rather than describe what people thought it to be. Again, if we return to probate inventories, or similarly to wills, we learn what people owned, but not how they understood such ownership (as opposed to loaning it, for instance). To probe the meanings and understandings at stake within such relationships, *Keeping Hold* breaks new ground by looking to loss. In the eighteenth century, historical actors defined loss and losing in different ways. Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) had much to say about loss and losing in his highly anticipated *A Dictionary of English Language* (1755). A loss was to forfeit something, to miss it, be deprived of it or to witness its destruction. To lose something was to 'have any thing gone so as that it cannot be found, or had again'. It was to 'be deprived of it' or 'To possess no longer'. To lose was 'contrary to keep'.[58] By 1773, William Kenrick (1725–1779) was more concise. His dictionary asserted that when something was lost, it was 'No longer possessed or perceptible'.[59] In looking to experiences of loss, the book looks to moments when things fell out of possession, when they were no longer readily available or when their location was entirely unknown, and examines what people thought, felt and did in such instances. *Keeping Hold* argues that Britons enunciated their understandings of property most clearly in such moments, particularly through what they *did* in the face of such absence.

[57] Holly Brewer, 'Creating a Common Law of Slavery for England and its New World Empire', *Law and History Review*, 39:3 (2021), 796.
[58] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language, Vol. 2* (London, 1755), n.p.
[59] William Kenrick, *A New Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1773), n.p.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

It considers their responses to the loss of their possessions (all those doings) as articulations of what it meant to own. By focusing on what people did, we begin to learn what it was to possess.

Recent work in anthropology and sociology has shown the importance of loss and absence in our relations with possessions. Early on in such debates, sociologist Kevin Hetherington argued that consumption needed to be considered in broader terms. Rather than the point of purchase, he studied the range of social activities linked with consuming. He focused on the importance of disposal and understood it not as an end point but rather as a form of 'placing'.[60] Possessions could be placed in spaces to enact disposal, but they might also be removed from those spaces to be consumed further at a later point. We might consider here the glassware placed in a box to take to a charity shop before being swiftly taken out again one evening when extra guests unexpectedly arrive. Understanding disposal in this way allows it to be comprehended not as closure but rather as part of a larger array of performative activities important to consuming. Hetherington asserted that while in such positions of disposal, of absence, possessions continue to have impacts. He argued that the 'absent can have just as much of an effect upon relations as recognisable forms of presence can have'.[61] The letters boxed up in the attic, or the shoes given to a friend, still resonate. Although the possession is no longer seen, the 'translating effects' of the object are still present.[62]

More recently, anthropologists Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr Sørensen have built on Hetherington's insights but have moved beyond consumption. Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen have argued that 'absences are important social, political and cultural phenomena that impinge on people's lives'.[63] As with Hetherington, they see absent things as having important impacts upon the world and in need of study. For Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen, 'absence – even if absence is only perceived absence – may have just as much effect as material presence.'[64] In seeking to explore absent objects, they have advocated for the need to examine not only people's experience of absence, but more fully to also consider what people do in response to absence.[65] More recently still, building on work by sociologist Susie Scott who has studied 'nothing' as a social process and action, sociologist Helen Holmes has focused

[60] Kevin Hetherington, 'Secondhandedness: Consumption, Disposal, and Absent Presence', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22 (2004), 159.
[61] Hetherington, 'Secondhandedness', 159. [62] Ibid., 166.
[63] Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr Sørensen, 'Introduction: An Anthropology of Absence', in Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr Sørensen (eds), *An Anthropology of Absence: Materialization of Transcendence and Loss* (New York, NY and London, 2010), 7.
[64] Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen, 'Introduction', 10. [65] Ibid., 11.
[66] Susie Scott, *The Social Life of Nothing: Silence, Invisibility and Emptiness in Tales of Lost Experience* (Abingdon, 2020), 3. See also Susan A. Crane, *Nothing Happened: A History* (Stanford, CA, 2020).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

on the materiality of nothing.[66] Holmes has shown how 'material affinities', namely, how 'objects and materials conjure connections beyond kin and kin-like relations', can be important even within everyday objects and can continue when the object is absent.[67] Thus, Holmes underscores how the relations an object creates do not disappear if the object is lost, allowing that lost things continue to impact.[68] Such work prompts us to take seriously absent objects and the effects they have on people and their relationships. It also suggests at the possibilities studying loss offers for understanding property and possession. It is an obvious but important point that for loss to exist, for people to count the object as lost, the object must first have been possessed. As the songwriter Lucy Dacus eloquently puts it, 'Can't lose what you never had'.[69] If we follow Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen and explore what people did in response to absence, we can see their reactions as enunciations not only on loss, but also, more pertinently, on possession and ownership. It is when Burney experiences her shoes being pulled away by the mud that she writes to her sister about the nature of possession.

It is important that Frances Burney *wrote* about her experience of loss. The question of what experience was and how we, as historians, might seek to understand it in the past has been central to the enquiries of social historians. Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* posited that workers' experiences were central to the emergence of the working class.[70] Within this position, Thompson understood experience broadly, as subjective responses to activities, events and exploitation. Reacting to Thompson's work in 1990, William H. Sewell, Jr. advocated for a narrower understanding of experience that followed more closely what was offered in *Webster's New International Dictionary*. Such a definition understood experience as concerned with 'actual living through an event or events' or 'actual enjoyment or suffering'. More recently, historians of emotions and the senses have argued for the need for a 'contextualised understanding of human experience'. In other words, that emotions, such as 'enjoyment' or 'suffering', open to historical actors, are historically and culturally dependent.[71] For Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, experience is 'the lived, meaningful reality of historical actors, whether as subjective or collective reality' and that any analysis must incorporate 'all the features of past perception in their own terms, be they sensory, emotional,

[67] Helen Holmes, *The Materiality of Nothing: Exploring Our Everyday Relationships with Objects Absent and Present* (Abingdon, 2023), 4.
[68] Holmes, *The Materiality of Nothing*, 17–37; Helen Holmes and Ulrike Ehgartner, 'Lost Property and the Materiality of Absence', *Cultural Sociology*, 15:2 (2021), 253.
[69] Lucy Dacus, 'Night Shift', *The Historian* (2018).
[70] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* [1963] (London, 2013), 8–9.
[71] Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge, 2020), 25.
[72] Boddice and Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience*, 17.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

cognitive, supernatural or whatever'.[72] Their definition of experience draws upon a wider range of perceptions and sees them as historically and culturally contingent. Such insights have implications not only for how historical actors thought and felt about events but also how they were able to construct and construe such experiences. Invoking Clifford Geertz, Sewell himself underlined the importance of thinking through experience as something 'construed': as something consciously encountered and constructed.[73] Building on Sewell's intervention, Carolyn Steedman has asked 'But *how* construed?'. Steedman has advocated for the importance of recognising that historical actors use language to construe experience and that it is through such (historically bound) language that historians come to see experience. There is value then in applying stylistic analysis to more fully understand the linguistic possibilities open to historical actors in construing an experience in a particular moment.[74] *Keeping Hold* studies the understandings of possession and ownership by looking to experiences of loss. However, it accesses such experiences – the sensory, emotional and cognitive responses and interpretations of reality – not only through language, but also through response and action. It sees that thoughts and feelings about loss were not always articulated through language, but rather that they were also construed through responsive actions such as marking objects, printing notices and writing advertisements. *Keeping Hold* sees such interpretative acts as articulations of feelings about loss, and ultimately about ownership.

Revealing understandings of possession by looking to experiences of loss is particularly fruitful when studying eighteenth-century Britain because loss and losing were plentiful in this period. Historians have primarily written eighteenth-century Britain as a period of accumulation and expansion; however, loss and losing were significant preoccupations. They come into view if we see the eighteenth century as what I call an 'age of loss' shaped by wars, shipwrecks and fires. While concerned by their own losses, Britons were largely oblivious to the losses they forced on others through conquest, enslavement and coercion. Here is another example of the 'well-tended conditions of disregard' central to imperial projects.[75] Such disregard becomes more pointed when we consider that in their own experiences of loss, Britons acted. Rather

[73] William H. Sewell, Jr, 'How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation', in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Oxford, 1990), 64.

[74] Carolyn Steedman, *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class: Work, Self and Sociability in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2013), 26.

[75] The concept is Ann Laura Stoler's and has been invoked recently by Catherine Hall in her work on racial capitalism and disavowal. See Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ, 2009), 256; Catherine Hall, *Lucky Valley: Edward Long and the History of Racial Capitalism* (Cambridge, 2024), xxix.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

than listen to sermons which reminded them that losses were a sign of God's will and should be borne with patience, Britons were increasingly keen to mitigate the impacts of loss in this period.[76] The rapid expansion of fire, marine and life insurance industries in Britain over the century, for example, testifies to British society's attempts to allay the effects of loss.[77] Fire and life insurance grew exponentially, particularly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. While there were just 567 current life assurance policies in 1772, by 1796 there were 5,000 and by 1845 there were 100,000.[78] Similarly, by 1775, 'over one third of domestic assets were insured' against fire.[79] Looking to the insurance industry also reminds us that losses had significant ramifications in people's everyday lives. For all the changes in buildings after the Great Fire, the eighteenth century still witnessed devastating fires, such as that in Cornhill in 1748.

The eighteenth century was also a period filled with much more mundane forms of loss. In her work on debt and insecurity, Tawny Paul has argued that 'individuals experienced the world of goods through the process of loss as much as through the pleasures of acquisition'.[80] Paul discusses how people lost objects through distraint or having to pawn or sell them to pay off debts. *Keeping Hold* sees that people also lost 'things' due to theft, forgetfulness or having them up and leave.[81] In novels, diaries and letters, people moaned about their lost things, or, as we saw with Burney, the possibility of losing them or of having them go. In September 1775, Elizabeth Shackleton (1726–1781) noted that her servant Nancy Nutter had thrown "her clothes out of the Red room window and run home". At the time, Shackleton was sanguine about the departure, remarking "Keep her there".[82] In a letter to his

[76] Joseph Stennett, *The Works of the late Reverend and learned Mr. Joseph Stennett: in Five Volumes, Vol. 3* (London, 1731–1732), 264 and 279; John Tillotson, *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, the Late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury* (London, 1735), 80.

[77] Christopher Kingston, 'Marine Insurance in Britain and America', *Journal of Economic History,* 67:2 (2007), 379–409; A. B. Leonard, 'Underwriting British Trade to India and China, 1780–1835', *The Historical Journal*, 55:4 (2012), 983–1006; A. B. Leonard, 'Underwriting Marine Warfare: Insurance and Conflict in the Eighteenth Century', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 25:2 (2013), 173–185; Geoffrey Clark, *Betting on Lives: The Culture of Life Insurance in England, 1695–1775* (Manchester, 1999); Michael Lobban, 'Slavery, Insurance and the Law', *The Journal of Legal History*, 28:3 (2007), 319–328; Robin Pearson, *Insuring the Industrial Revolution: Fire Insurance in Great Britain, 1700–1850* (Aldershot, 2004).

[78] Liz McFall and Francis Dodsworth, 'Fabricating the Market: The Promotion of Life Assurance in the Long Nineteenth-Century', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 22:1 (2009), 35.

[79] Pearson, *Insuring the Industrial Revolution*, 30.

[80] Paul, *The Poverty of Disaster*, 18.

[81] For more on distraint see Sara Pennell, 'Happiness in Things? Plebian Experiences of Chattel "Property" in the Long Eighteenth Century', in Michael J. Braddick and Joanna Innes (eds), *Suffering and Happiness in England 1550–1850: Narratives and Representations: A Collection to Honour Paul Slack* (Oxford, 2017), 208–226.

[82] As cited in Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, 144.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

brother Thomas Robinson, 2nd Baron Grantham (1738–1786) dated 2 December 1785, Frederick Robinson noted that he had 'had the misfortune to lose [his dog] Vicky'. He reported that 'she was missed on the other side of Barnet & has not been heard of since'.[83] In the late 1820s when Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau (1785–1871) conducted a tour of England, he recorded his experiences in lengthy epistles to his former wife Lucie (they had recently divorced by agreement in order that he could find a wealthy English wife whose fortune might help save his beloved Muskau Park).[84] In a letter dated 5 October 1826, von Pückler-Muskau discussed how he had 'left a purse with eighty sovereigns in a drawer' in his 'quayside sleeping quarters'. He proved lucky, however, as when a messenger went to recover the purse, he found it 'lying untouched in the very drawer' he had described.[85] People were constantly losing things or having them leave, yet such experiences have received little historical attention.

Losing Possession

To bring everyday occurrences of loss into view and use them to consider property and possession, this book looks to cities and focuses on *the* city: London. By the end of the century, it had become the first modern city to reach one million and a greater proportion of the population lived there. While in the early 1500s only 2 per cent of the population lived in the capital, by the late 1600s that proportion had risen to 10 per cent.[86] Rather than permanent migration, a growing proportion of the population lived in London for part of their life.[87] The capital operated a 'revolving door' system which saw ever-greater numbers moving in and out, bolstering the city and increasing the proportion of the national population that experienced it. People were drawn to the capital by its cultural and social resources but also by its economic strengths as a port city and manufacturing hub and the employment opportunities it allowed. London became increasingly understood as a city of wealth and commerce in this period of growth. It was also, however, a space in which people lost things.

[83] Bedfordshire Record Office, Wrest Park Manuscripts, L30/14/333/331, Letter from Fritz [Frederick Robinson] to Thomas Robinson, 2nd Baron Grantham, 2 December 1785.
[84] Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau (Linda B. Parshall trans.), *Letters of a Dead Man* (Cambridge, 2016), xxix.
[85] von Pückler-Muskau, *Letters of a Dead Man*, 34.
[86] Leonard Schwarz, 'London 1700–1840', in Peter Clark, Martin J. Daunton and David Michael Palliser (eds), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Vol. 2: 1540–1840* (Cambridge, 2000), 644.
[87] Schwarz, 'London 1700–1840', 653.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

Historians have shown us the centrality of theft in eighteenth-century London. While it is difficult to track the true levels of crime within the capital, concerns over crime regularly emerged, particularly during periods of demobilisation after war.[88] As we will further explore in Chapter 2, such concerns shaped understandings of urban life, as did the stories of loss included in guidebooks, poetry, newspapers and novels. In the late eighteenth century, the trope of the city as a threatening space emerged.[89] London was understood as a dangerous space not only due to the numbers of people in it, but also because of the distractions it held and the uncertainties they produced. The stories of the capital written and published in this period showed that things could be stolen, but also that they could be dropped and mislaid as city diversions distracted their owners. As London came to be increasingly understood as a site of hustle and bustle, it produced uncertainties over loss: the lost possession might have equally been stolen or fallen loose in the jostle of the crowd. Similarly, the economic and social opportunities presented by cities often provided the necessary inducements needed for servants and apprentices to leave or escape. *Keeping Hold* reveals how these experiences of loss in urban spaces and the uncertainties they presented prompted people to articulate their understandings of possession and ownership and challenged and reconfigured those very understandings.

Rather than looking to Providence, in an 'age of risk', the majority of eighteenth-century Britons came to understand that threats could be managed and prevented and took steps to ensure they were.[90] For example, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the government brought in a slew of legislation that sought to prevent house fires.[91] It was also a period that saw the development of technologies aimed at stopping the spread of fires.[92] Similarly, alongside caring for possessions through cleaning, maintenance order and repair, the eighteenth century increasingly witnessed forms of caring linked to prevention and the mitigation of risks. As Chapter 2 will show, eighteenth-century Londoners developed means of preventing the loss of possessions carried on

[88] J. M. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London, 1660–1750: Urban Crime and the Limits of Terror* (Oxford, 2001), 45–46; J. M. Beattie, *The First English Detectives: The Bow Street Runners and the Policing of London, 1750–1840* (Oxford, 2014), 8–10. On the need for scepticism about concerns over crime see Robert Shoemaker, 'Worrying about Crime: Experience, Moral Panics and Public Opinion in London, 1660–1800', *Past & Present*, 234 (2017), 71–100.

[89] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 2014), 53–54; Alison O'Byrne, 'The Art of Walking in London: Representing Urban Pedestrianism in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Romanticism,* 14:2 (2008), 97.

[90] Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 333–334; Emily C. Nacol, *An Age of Risk: Politics and Economy in Early Modern Britain* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, 2016), 2.

[91] Pearson, *Insuring the Industrial Revolution*, 44. [92] Ibid., 35.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

their person as they travelled the streets of the capital. The when, where and with whom of any urban outing required consideration. Certain items of economic or emotional value might be left at home. When people did take possessions with them, they increasingly used technologies to keep them secure. Pockets hid possessions away and kept them close. Chains, collars and locks secured 'property', making it harder for 'thieves' to steal items. These practices broadened what it meant to take care of your things.

When such strategies failed to prevent loss and things went missing, people also cared by working to get their possessions back. Chapter 3 will show how Londoners created systems for finding and reclaiming their things. In the age before lost property offices, missing person reports, dog homes and a uniformed police force, it was the great regime of print culture which aided urban denizens in their quests to get things back. Following the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695, print culture expanded rapidly, particularly in the capital. While there were estimated to have been twelve London newspapers in 1712, by 1811 that figure had risen to fifty-two.[93] The increase in the number of newspapers was accompanied by an increase in the number of newspaper purchasers. It is estimated that newspaper circulation increased 'twenty-fold between 1695 and 1855'.[94] When we look to newspaper readership, as opposed to purchase, we see that the figures are higher still. Joseph Addison estimated that at least twenty people read each copy of his *Spectator*.[95] While we might be cautious of Addison's boast, it has been estimated that the proportion of newspaper readers in the capital was much higher than elsewhere. Newspapers were distributed to coffeehouses, inns and taverns, meaning that non-purchasers had multiple opportunities to read them. Historian Michael Harris has argued that these forms of distribution 'meant that a single copy of London newspapers was likely to reach a very large audience'.[96] Notices were an increasingly important part of newspaper culture over the eighteenth century. Advertisements provided substantial financial support to any newspaper venture.[97] Such sections frequently included notices for lost and stolen items. As Chapter 4 will demonstrate people up and down the social scale printed handbills and placed newspaper advertisements to draw attention to their lost and stolen things.

In using handbills and advertisements, 'losers' sought the return of their possession and to avoid the legal obligation to pursue prosecution. Although it was unclear, particularly in urban spaces, whether 'things' had been stolen,

[93] Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society 1695–1855* (Harlow, 2000), 29.
[94] Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society 1695–1855*, 31.
[95] Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (Abingdon, 2010), 72.
[96] Michael Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study of the Origins of the Modern English Press* (London and Toronto, 1987), 47.
[97] Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole*, 58.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

most handbills and advertisements used the language of 'lost'. Victims were obliged to report crimes and to use their own resources to detect and track the criminal and follow prosecutorial proceedings.[98] Although the judicial system offered monetary rewards to encourage victims and thief-takers to pursue prosecution in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, 'the vast majority of crimes were not prosecuted'.[99] Instead, victims often sought to bypass the prosecution of misdemeanours (which included property worth less than a shilling, vice, regulatory and poor law offences, as well as offences against the peace), by using informal settlements.[100] Although informal settlements were illegal, particularly in the case of felonies, victims often found means of contacting the thief and settling.[101] Newspaper notices provided one such way. The careful use of 'lost' rather than 'stolen' in the great majority of notices allowed victims to reach thieves and finders and seek reclamation of their possessions, while simultaneously signalling that they would not pursue prosecution. Importantly, in some cases, these notices – and the information they might prompt – could also act as the beginnings of an investigation that might lead to prosecution. However, the popularity of the lost notices system (and its persistent focus on the possession lost rather than any potential suspect) demonstrates that for many urban denizens, the return of possessions was much more important than pursuing prosecution and punishing threats to property. Illuminating these strategies contributes to our understanding of histories of crime by further revealing the prevalence of a form of informal settlement that sat alongside judicial processes.

Keeping Hold primarily utilises a specially compiled database of over 4,000 'lost' and 'runaway' newspaper notices, which were identified in and transcribed from the period's most important daily newspapers, the *Daily Courant* (1702–1735), *Daily Advertiser* (1731–1796), *Public Advertiser* (1752–1794) and *The Times* (1785–present).[102] It argues that it is here in these many notices that we see what people did in response to losing possessions and thus where we find articulations of what it meant to own. Rather than formed through

[98] Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*, 1660–1750, 85.
[99] Mary Clayton and Robert Shoemaker, 'Blood Money and the Bloody Code: The Impact of Financial Rewards on Criminal Justice in Eighteenth-Century England', *Continuity and Change*, 37 (2022), 107.
[100] Robert B. Shoemaker, *Prosecution and Punishment: Petty Crime and the Law in London and Rural Middlesex, c. 1660–1725* (Cambridge, 1991), 311.
[101] Shoemaker, *Prosecution and Punishment*, 316.
[102] These newspapers were accessed via Gale's Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Collection, the British Library Microfilms A5002–5058 (in the case of the *Daily Advertiser*) and *The Times* Digital Archive.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

keyword searches, this database was created by systematically working through issues of these newspapers and transcribing each notice they contained.[103] This method allowed the identification and inclusion of a wide range of lost, stolen, found and runaway notices, and the variations of language and terms at stake within them.[104] To see changes over time, *Keeping Hold* analysed a sample of 1,655 lost and runaway notices, which included those notices published in December issues of the *Daily Courant* (1702, 1710, 1720, 1730), the *Daily Advertiser* (1742, 1752, 1760, 1771, 1782, 1792) and *The Times* (1800, 1810, 1820, 1830). December was chosen as the month with the most consistent extant issues and thus the most consistent and comparable data. Prior to the later eighteenth century, it was within the London season and thus December also has the advantage of being a period of the year when the capital included the widest range of social groups.

Many different 'things' appeared in lost notices in the eighteenth century. Snuffboxes, anchors, keys, jewellery, coins, papers, banknotes, trunks, monkeys, parrots, dogs and clothes all feature. Similarly, a range of different people are listed as having 'absconded', 'left' or 'run away'. Spouses, apprentices, enslaved people, soldiers, servants and children all went. Historians and literary scholars have examined 'lost' notices in London newspapers before, but these studies focused on the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.[105] Historians have also studied notices appearing in the provincial press, but here the focus was largely on stolen rather than lost notices, and their relationship to policing strategies and criminal investigation.[106] In contrast,

[103] Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital: Or How Academic Writing Lost the Plot', *Cultural and Social History*, 10:1 (2013), 9–23. Thanks to research assistance from Anna Harrington, Emily Jones and Rik Sowden in supporting this labour-intensive process.

[104] I use the term 'runaway' notice to cover the different people (enslaved people, wives, apprentices, servants) included in these notices. When only dealing with notices for enslaved people, I use the term 'freedom seeker' to denote the different power relationship at stake.

[105] Tim Wales has studied the lost notices in the *London Gazette* (1696) and all the papers in the Burney Collection, 1698–1700, while literary scholars Jonathan Lamb and Sean Silver have studied a selection of notices published in London newspapers from 1717–1725 and 1714–1725, respectively. See Tim Wales, 'Thief-Takers and Their Clients in later Stuart London', in Paul Griffiths and Mark S.R. Jenner (eds), *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London* (Manchester and New York, NY, 2000), 69; Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, 2011), 43–46; Sean Silver, *The Mind Is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia, PA, 2015), 255.

[106] John Styles has examined crime advertisements in Leeds and York newspapers in 1729, 1730 and 1784. Similarly, David Churchill has looked to this phenomenon in the provincial press of the nineteenth century, including newspapers in Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool in 1830, 1835, 1855, 1860, 1882 and 1895. See John Styles, 'Print and Policing: Crime Advertising in Eighteenth-Century Provincial England', in Douglas Hay and Francis Snyder (eds), *Policing and Prosecution in Britain, 1750–1850* (Oxford, 1989), 55–112; David Churchill, *Crime Control and Everyday Life in the Victorian City: The Police and the Public* (Oxford, 2018), 167–169.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

this book offers the first systematic study of 'lost' notices appearing in the London press over the long eighteenth century. *Keeping Hold* focuses on notices for those items which appeared most regularly, including watches, financial instruments (coin, bank notes and bills) and dogs, but also people (including servants, apprentices, enslaved people and spouses). The analysis included in *Keeping Hold* innovates by placing notices for lost possessions and lost people in dialogue with each other. As noted previously, it does so in order to grapple more fully with an eighteenth-century worldview that often saw and purposefully enacted slippages between these different 'things'.

Notices for white servants, apprentices, spouses and soldiers have been recognised as useful sources, but have only been studied sporadically.[107] In contrast, advertisements for freedom seekers (enslaved people who escaped) have been studied more fully, particularly in Atlantic World newspapers of the eighteenth century.[108] These notices have provided a vital source for historians seeking to further understand the lives of enslaved people. However, we must approach notices for freedom seekers with caution. We too must apply care. Seeking to understand property and possession by studying notices written by enslavers about enslaved people begets the possibility of perpetuating historic acts which commodified and objectified people. We read the notices advertising enslaved people who have 'absconded' and read only descriptions constructed by their enslavers. As Marisa J. Fuentes, who has worked on women's experiences of enslavement in urban Barbados, reminds us, the 'fragmentary nature and format of runaway ads confine enslaved women in a depiction of violence and commodification from the perspective of the slave owner and other white authorities'.[109] Often these notices are the only historic records

[107] See Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, 'Visible Bodies: Power, Subordination and Identity in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World', *Journal of Social History*, 39:1 (2005), 39–64; Joseph Cozens, '"The Blackest Perjury": Desertion, Military Justice, and Popular Politics in England, 1803–1805', *Labour History Review*, 79:3 (2014), 255–280.

[108] Martha J. Cutter, '"As White as Most White Women": Racial Passing in Advertisements for Runaway Slaves and the Origins of a Multivalent Term', *American Studies*, 54:4 (2016), 73–97; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, PA, 2016); Simon Middleton, 'Runaways, Rewards, and the Social History of Money', *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 15:3 (2017), 617–647; Simon P. Newman, 'Rethinking Runaways in the British Atlantic World: Britain, the Caribbean, West Africa and North America', *Slavery & Abolition*, 38:1 (2017), 49–71; Sharon Block, *Colonial Complexions: Race and Bodies in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia, PA, 2018); Newman, 'Freedom-Seeking Slaves in England and Scotland', 1136–1168; Simon P. Newman, *Freedom Seekers: Escaping from Slavery in Restoration London* (London, 2022); Jonathan Prude, 'To Look upon the "Lower Sort": Runaway Ads and the Appearance of Unfree Laborers in America, 1750–1800', *The Journal of American History*, 78:1 (1991), 124–159; David Waldstreicher, 'Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic', *The William and Mary Quarterly,* 56:2 (1999), 243–272.

[109] Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 44.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

attached to a particular person. Their larger world, relationships, hopes, dreams and fears are lost to us. Instead, in our focus on newspaper advertisements written by enslavers, we give room and air to the perspectives of enslavers. Similarly, in compiling databases, in counting and extracting we take a risk. As Simon P. Newman asserts, 'Historians today who collate and analyse these advertisements engage in an act of remediation that risks continuing the datafication of enslaved people.'[110] To combat such ever-present concerns, the book seeks out other sources, baptism records, material sources and newspaper reports of organising to illuminate where possible the lives (in their fullest sense) of the freedom seekers it touches upon.[111] It also frequently considers the why and how of the limitations of such attempts. Such working is important in giving depth to the lives of historic actors, their concerns and interests but also to show how and where the record obscures such depth and why. We must better understand the historic nature of caring for things but also the potential violence of caring when the possession in question was human.

Understanding the notices is important not only because of their ubiquity but also because of the range of social groups who wrote and read them. Pursuing lost possessions through advertising incurred investments of time, effort and money and yet, as Chapter 4 shows, a range of urban denizens engaged in the practice. We find evidence of the nobility engaging with these systems but also servants. They wrote these notices, aware that larger swathes of the capital's population would read them and that they might prove successful in relocating their lost item. While these notices were written by a range of social groups, they were also read by a wide variety of people. However, there were certain groups and occupations that were more involved in the system than others. We find that Hackney coachmen were important, as were pawnbrokers, dog dealers and kidnappers. These were people particularly on the lookout in eighteenth-century London. Central within the advertisements placed for lost objects and animals and runaway people was the textual practice of description. As we will see in Chapter 5, to write a notice required remembering features that could make the item visible and recognisable to others. In analysing these features, we see another form of caring in action. An important marker of ownership was knowing your possession and being able to adequately describe it should it go missing. Clearly, eighteenth-century Londoners did not always trust their memory in such an important task. We see people making notes about their possessions and their relevant characteristics: a watchmaker's name here, the number on a banknote there or the clothing

[110] Newman, *Freedom Seekers*, xxiv.

[111] For more on interpreting the broader lives and pleasures of those people who were enslaved see Tara A. Bynum, *Reading Pleasures: Everyday Black Lives in Early America* (Champaign, IL, 2023).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

gifted to a servant or apprentice. People cared for their things by writing down details about them. Such knowledge could then be picked up and used if the item became lost. To keep possession was not simply a physical act, rather it required that certain forms of knowledge be remembered and stored over time. To possess something was to know it.

Locating Value

Possession was distinctly tied to questions of value in the eighteenth century. Property rights largely existed to protect and organise things of value. As William Blackstone argued, 'Whatever. . .hath a *Value* is the Subject of Property'.[112] Yet, what value was, how it was produced and where it was located was open to interpretation. The financial and monetary instabilities of the eighteenth century meant people frequently worried as to the nature of value. Given value's importance to property but also its instability in this period, the final two chapters of this book seek to interrogate its place and position. Looking to the range of values at stake in possessions offers a means of understanding why people invested time, effort and money in securing the return of lost and stolen goods. Thinking through value also provides a way of interrogating the importance of the relationship of possession and the forms of value it accrued.

Historian Rebecca L. Sprang argues that 'Value is a product of humans' interactions with objects and with each other.'[113] Yet losing things, distinctly reorientates such interactions, disrupting and sometimes intensifying the values at stake. As Chapter 6 explores, the act of writing a notice which sought the return of a lost item itself indicated that the item was valuable to the loser. More particularly, lost and runaway notices often included monetary rewards, which acted as inducements to return or report the 'thing' concerned. Rewards provide us with a measure of value which can be read in relation to the description of the 'thing'. In writing a notice, describing the possession and deciding upon the amount of reward offered, losers conjured with questions of value. Such decisions, Chapter 6 argues, both reflected the values at stake in the possession concerned and often forced the construction of new values. The absence of the 'thing' and the threat of it not returning decidedly changed the loser's interaction with and relationship to that 'thing'. Loss asked pertinent questions as to what the possession was worth and why.

[112] As cited in Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman 1689–1798* (Oxford, 1990), 3. Citation from the case of *Tonson v. Collins* (1762).

[113] Rebecca L. Sprang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2017), 14.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

Finally, Chapter 7 considers the value at stake in the relationship of possession (rather than the possession itself). It asks what value owners could claim by maintaining possession over time. As stated earlier, part of the calculation here was clearly that of achieving and sustaining a good character. To show yourself as careful rather than careless meant maintaining and retaining your possessions. Yet, the final chapter of the book suggests we can push this idea a little further by looking to a fictional example in which the author Frances Burney imagined the loss of property and possessions more fully. In this period, possessions, particularly worn on or about the person, were material manifestations of your self; they reflected and communicated who you were. Thus, to keep an ordered assemblage of things about your person, to have them neat and tidy and *there*, also signified the state of your*self*. Such a connection was important because this was also a period in which self-possession was increasingly valued. The eighteenth century was an age that appreciated order but also control and composure. As we will explore in Chapter 7, to have things ripped from you, to have them rifled through, to have them lost entirely or have your servant leave was suggestive of the state you your*self* were in. Rather than composure, the loss of possessions marked disorder. Sustaining relationships of possession showed that you were of good character and that you were in control of your*self*. It was not simply that possessions held value, rather the relationship of possession itself had value too.

Keeping Hold shows that across the eighteenth century, possession and ownership were understood not as self-evident states but rather as ongoing relationships that people negotiated and re-asserted over time. Understanding possession as an active relationship that required care emerged in this period because of the rise of moveable property and the variety of formations that threatened it. Urban spaces and the increasingly dense social formations they contained meant keeping hold of your things became no easy task. The constant threat of loss significantly shaped conceptions of possession. At the same time, the importance of maintaining possession, and all that showed and did, also grew. The desire to 'keep', as Samuel Johnson would have it, shaped how people comprehended who and what they were and how they related to wider society. As such, the relationship of possession grew into an important and changing entity in eighteenth-century British society and culture.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 13:31:52, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009617628.001