

Marking the New Year: Dated Objects and the Materiality of Time in Early Modern England

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Abstract

The article examines how people experienced time by looking at the material culture of New Year as a significant temporal passage in early modern England. It asks what material culture can tell us about how people experienced and gave meaning to the passage of time through an analysis of New Year's gifts and associated objects inscribed with dates from this period. It begins by exploring the cultural context of New Year's celebrations and gift-giving, and the conceptual framework of the gift. A case study of dated tin-glazed earthenware bottles, largely neglected by historians although thought by curators to have been given as New Year's gifts, provides the focus of the remainder of the article, which explores the various ways the dates on these bottles can be interpreted. In sum, the article argues that dated objects were fundamental in both responding to and shaping people's experience of time. Far from being passive tokens, they could actively influence social bonds and were thought to have a real impact on the coming year. Moreover, the exchange of dated New Year's gifts allowed people to give meaning to the passage of time collectively, and this was a key to their role within the wider rituals surrounding New Year.

Keywords: Dated Objects, Gift Exchange, Materiality, New Year, Time

1. *Marking the New Year*

In the last week of December 1621, Nehemiah Wallington made a decision many of us annually make at the close of the year – he decided on a New Year's resolution to reform himself entirely. In his notebook, begun in 1619, which he entitles *A Record of Gods Mercys, or a Thankfull Remembrance*, Wallington records: 'As I lay in my bed I did purpus on New yers day, to begine a new life' (2007, 32). Yet again like many of us, Wallington's earnest endeavours at self-betterment seem to have gone awry, as he records some eight years later that on 1 January again 'I begane to take another corsee with myselfe to overcome my corrupt nature and that was to write down my sinnes



in a booke' (2007, 49-50). For Wallington, as others, 1 January marked a significant turning point in time – not only did it mark the changing of the year (although not in all calendars, as will be discussed later), but the date had great symbolic meaning, which Wallington perceived as empowering him to make a real change in his life. Wallington's notebooks, and indeed the changes he desired, were motivated by an almost compulsive urge for godly self-examination which was not necessarily widespread. Yet the popular perception of New Year's Day as an important turning point in time and in one's life is evident in the counselling texts that appeared at this point in year, and which offered spiritual and moral advice. *The New-years-Gift complete in Six Parts* (Anonymous 1696) offered prayers and meditations for each day of the week, whilst *A New-Years-Gift for Youth* (Anonymous 1685) offered spiritual guidance to young men. Less overtly religious, *The Lady's New-Year's Gift: Or, Advice to a daughter* was composed by George Savile, Marquess of Halifax, and offered advice to his own daughter under various categories including 'Husband', 'Behaviour', 'Friendship' and 'Diversion' (1692).

The beginning of a new year evidently had powerful connotations in the early modern mentality. That this moment in time, in which the calendar underwent a marked shift, was seen to be appropriate above all others to engender change demonstrates how conceptions of time had real meaning in people's lives. This is certainly evident in the extensive rituals and festivities which took place to celebrate New Year, reflected in the literary descriptions found in journals, plays, poems, and broadsides, and in the material culture that gave a physical presence to the passing of time. It is this materiality of New Year in particular that is to be the focus of this article, examining dated objects which have become enduring material markers of fleeting moments in time. These objects, inscribed in some way with the date, often just the year, were owned across middling to elite levels and present an as yet unexamined body of sources with which to explore perceptions of time in this period. This article will focus specifically on objects which may have been used to mark or welcome in the coming year and explore the wider cultural context of this materiality. In doing so, it asks what material culture can tell us about how people experienced and perceived the passage of time in early modern England, and what methods we can employ to examine the role these objects had in celebrating and commemorating this transition. It will argue that dated objects allowed people to respond to and give meaning to this passage of time communally, through collective rituals and the furthering of social connections and obligations, and will also show that these items were not passive tokens, but could actively alter the course of the coming year.

Marking the end of one year whilst welcoming in another, New Year customs can tell us a great deal about the relationship people had with time. When exactly the year began, however, varied according to which calendar was adopted, and thus multiple New Year's Days coexisted for different purposes.

In *An Historiall Description of the Islande of Britayne*, first published in 1577, William Harrison offered an 'Account of Time and Her Parts', in which he lamented the confusing nature of the British calendar. He wrote: 'Herein one lie I find a scruple, that the beginning [of the year] is not uniforme and certeine, for most of our records beare date the 25 of March, and our calenders the first of Januarie; so that with us Christ is borne before he be conceived'. He goes on to complain that the different start dates of the various calendars 'bréedeth great confusion' (1587, 243), and if only all could agree on 1st January as the start of the year, 'I doo not thinke but that there would be more certieintie, and lesse trouble for our historiographers, notaries, & other officers in their account of the yere' (243-244). Lady day on 25 March, also known as the Annunciation, was adopted as the start of the year for legal, financial, and other civic purposes, and was thus the day when officially the year changed (Pollard 1940, 178). However, even the briefest examination of extant diaries, literature, and accounts shows that, despite this, 1 January was held by most as New Year's Day, following Roman tradition. So on Saturday 1 January 1652-1653, Ralph Josselin recorded in his diary, 'Jan: 1: This we call new years day' (1991, 292). Likewise Anne Clifford, in her entry for 1 January 1616 wrote, 'upon New Years day I kept to my chamber all the day' whilst her husband 'and all the Company at Dorset House went to see the Mask at the Court' (1995, 39). That this date was chosen emphasises that New Year celebrations were seen as a purely social ritual of the festive season, the date itself holding no specific legal, religious, or financial meaning.

One of the most prominent social customs to mark this change of year was the giving of a New Year's gift. On 1 January 1602 Sir Robert Dudley emphasised that this practice was widespread in a letter to Sir Robert Cecil in which he wrote that he was 'bold to observe this compliment of fashionable custom, and present your Honour this New Year's Day with an ambling gelding of reasonable shape and, I hope, of no less goodness' (Roberts 1910, 1-22). Similar examples abound in diaries – Anne Clifford, for instance, remarked in December 1616 how 'upon the 31st this night I sent Thomas Woodyatt with a sweet Bagge to the Queen for a new years gift, & a standish to Mrs Hanno' (1995, 63). Gifts were not just given at court – Ralph Josselin recorded on 1 January 1677-1678: 'I gave above 20s. to my tenants and poor in meat, I received in gifts several monies, etc. lord bless my store' (1991, 606). Similarly, in January 1682-1683 he wrote that he had 'received good presents' from friends in London (641). Indeed, gift-giving took place across the social spectrum. In the mid-sixteenth century Thomas Tusser noted that New Year was a time during which 'the rich with the poor ... give many gifts' (1580, 29). Likewise, at the end of the period, Henry Bourne, in his survey of popular customs, *Antiquitates Vulgares*, recorded that giving a gift at New Year was very common among the populace, beginning the year 'with the Sending of Presents, which are termed New-Year's-Gifts, to their Friends and Acquaintances' (1725, 142).

Although it was part of the goodwill and merriment of the season, the giving of a gift at New Year may not have been entirely lacking self-interest. Conceptually, the nature of the gift has been the focus of sociologists and anthropologists, who have been particularly interested in reciprocity. The foundations for the theory of reciprocity were first set down by the French sociologist Marcel Mauss in his ground-breaking essay, *The Gift*, in which he argued that the impetus to get something in return was the 'spirit of the gift' (1954). Since then it has been constantly debated by scholars arguing whether the gift should be seen from an anti-utilitarian perspective, in which the gift having been given freely is paramount, or from a utilitarian view, in which getting something in return is key (Komter 2007, 93). In 'The Principle of Reciprocity', Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was greatly influenced by Mauss, wrote that, 'the skillful game of [gift] exchange consists of a complex totality of manoeuvres, conscious or unconscious, in order to gain security and to fortify one's self against risks' (1996, 19). Reciprocity provides an important basis for thinking about the New Year's gift – it could cement social bonds and hierarchies. However, this issue has also been explored in detail by sociologist Aafke Komter, who has argued that the gift must be seen as more complex than such essentialist constructions allow. For Komter, 'the gift does not exist, in the sense that there is not one general, unequivocal and non-ambiguous sense in which to understand the gift' (2007, 104). The complexity of the gift has also been discussed by Felicity Heal who has analysed the gift and gift-exchange in early modern England, particularly in the Tudor courts. Heal asserts that an object itself is not inherently a gift, but that specific contexts transform it into a gift. She therefore emphasises the importance of analysing the context and language of the gift to uncover the messages about social and political obligations with which contemporary audiences would have already been familiar (2008, 42-43; 2014).

The specific codes of New Year's gift exchange and their possible reliance on reciprocity have been discussed in depth in various studies. The art historian Brigitte Buettner has argued that the *étrennes*, the ceremonial exchange of gifts on New Year's Day in the medieval Valois courts, involved a reciprocal arrangement. In this way the nobility could 'renew their riches', whilst at the same time they were able to reaffirm social and familial bonds, as well as emphasise ideas of obligation and hierarchy. Buettner sees these ideas as becoming more prevalent between the fifth and the ninth centuries as a gift economy took hold. In this period, Buettner argues, Germanic law blurred the line between what the Romans had seen as a free gift and a contractual form of exchange. The necessity of making a counter-gift became both a moral and legal obligation (2001, 600). Similarly, Lisa M. Klein, in her study of the exchange of embroidery in Elizabeth I's court, has argued that gift exchange could 'assert hierarchy and incur mutual obligations'. Moreover, she argues that, whilst in theory presenting a gift in the Elizabethan court

was voluntary and spontaneous, in reality the offering was both obligatory and interested. For Klein, this sense of obligation is closely tied to social position – she compares gift-giving at New Year’s and other occasions to the ceremonial potlatch that the anthropologist Mauss had observed in the North American Indians, in which the presentation of a gift is used by individuals to ‘determine their position in the hierarchy’ (Klein 1997, 463-465). Using these ideas we can infer that the objects exchanged themselves would thus become tangible records of this obligation, and if they were inscribed with a date they were constant reminders of the exact moment such an obligation was incurred. Likely displayed in the home thereafter, these objects were a physical, daily reminder of the exchange as well as the wider social networks of family, kin, and community they represented.

Yet the meaning of the New Year’s gift was not restricted to the politics of gift-exchange. Giving a gift at this time was also a fundamental part of the wider social rituals and festivities which together served to celebrate the passage of the year and importantly sought to influence the course of the next, and in which a member of the community would have necessarily engaged. Indeed, Buettner’s work is particularly important as it reflects the approach adopted by Heal and explores the wider symbolic and cultural meanings of the New Year’s gift specifically. According to Buettner, gifts exchanged at New Year were a seasonal rite – they were seen as tangible good omens without which the coming year would not be bountiful (2001, 598-600). Indeed, this may have been the reason why, when on 1 January 1673 Bulstrode Whitelocke received no New Year’s gifts, he felt it noteworthy enough to include in his diary (1990, 820). Outside of the courts this is also exemplified in the practice of soliciting gifts in exchange for good wishes. The term ‘hogmanay’ was an ambivalent one, meaning both a present or a blessing, and popular songs attest to the idea that children from Scotland to Richmond would go door-to-door requesting small gifts, often of food and, if granted, the house would be blessed (Hutton 2001, 64-65). Likewise, the ‘Feast of Fools’ that took place in many French cities on 1 January and involved crowds of poor people going begging for small gifts or *aguilaneuf* in return for good wishes for the New Year can be compared to the Welsh tradition of going door to door on New Year’s morning asking for the *calennig*, or New Year’s gift (Buettner 2001, 602). Thus, marking the changing year by giving a gift was not just a friendly gesture, or even an exercise in political or social gain – for some the act of giving a gift in and of itself was seen to have the power to actively impact upon the following year.

The important social role of the New Year’s gift in early modern England is exemplified by the debate and defence of the practice in the seventeenth century, as it became caught up in the religious and political movements of the century. Since the Christian calendar began on 25 March, the more popular practice of celebrating New Year’s Day on 1 January had long been seen by

some to have pagan undertones. Indeed, the custom was certainly influenced by the Roman celebration of the *kalends* which took place around 1 January, and in which the change of year was in part marked by the exchange of gifts. In Republican Rome the *kalends* was originally celebrated in spring time to mark the start of the Roman year on 15 March, and involved the exchange of simple presents, such as laurel branches, honey, and nuts (Buettner 2001, 599). In 153 BCE, the start of the year was moved back to 1 January for military reasons, after which the *kalends* developed into a major festival, when gifts were presented to the emperor. Yet both official and private ceremonies took place in which all levels of Roman society took part (Blackburn and Holford-Strevens 1999, 6-7; Buettner 2001, 599). The festivities that took place at New Year in early modern England still contained many of these features, notably the presentation of gifts to the monarch, as well as more widely throughout society.¹

However, the development of the New Year's gift exchange undoubtedly had Christian influences as well. At first, the early Christian Church sought to eradicate the 'pagan' celebration of the *kalends* and prescribed against material gifts, instead advocating the channelling of money into almsgiving (Blackburn and Holford-Strevens 1999, 7). Yet the festival proved resilient, and eventually, as with many other Roman festivals, the *kalends* was re-appropriated by the Church. The Council of Tours in 567 incorporated 1 January into the Christmas celebrations, which were prolonged into a twelve-day festive cycle. New Year's Day became the Feast of the Circumcision, yet the customs associated with the pagan *kalends*, and notably gift exchange, persisted (Lawson 2013, 3). These could, however, be reinterpreted to give them Christian meaning. Some viewed this annual day of gift exchange as taking place as an act of remembrance to the Biblical gift-giving which took place at Epiphany (Cressy 1989, 16). Similarly, the Church of England clergyman and scholar John Day defended the practice in his collection of twelve sermons, published in 1615, each of which focused on a religious festival. In his sermon on the nativity Day, he compared the giving of a New Year's gift to the ultimate gift of Jesus' sacrifice. He wrote:

The very time of sending Gifts from one Friend to another drawing now neere at hand, I meane of Newyeares Gifts, may call to minde the presiousnesse of this Gift given unto us, whether wee respect the Gift itselpe, or the Giver of it, the Father of lights. (1615, 12)

Gift-exchange alongside the wider rituals associated with New Year came under further attack during the Civil War and Interregnum. It was the celebration of Christmas in particular that was targeted by some Puritans; yet

¹For example, see detailed descriptions of court ceremonies in Lawson 2013, 3-25, and Hayward 2005, 125-175.

since New Year was part of the larger festive period, it too came under attack (Durston 1985, 7-14). These writers denounced the pagan origins of New Year's customs in particular. In his *Histrion-Mastix*, the Puritan writer William Prynne argued that the exchange of gifts on New Year's Day was a heathen relic, quoting the twelfth-century work by Gratian who had condemned

The observation of Newyeeres-day, and the sending of New-yeeres-gifts, as a sinne ... because they were but the Reliques, and Observations of Pagans, who Consecrated this day, to the honour of Janus their Devill-God, and sent reciprocall Newyeeres-gifts to their friends upon it. (1633, 20)

Likewise, the antiquary Ralph Thoresby drew upon the language of the New Year's gift in his diary entry for 1 January 1680, in which he complained of how 'many present themselves as a new year's gift to Satan by their vain mirth and jollity upon this day, which custom was derived from the Heathens, who then sacrificed to their idol Janus' (1830, 34).

Whilst gift-giving at New Year was therefore not without controversy, the puritan assault on Christmas, and by extension New Year, was largely unsuccessful. On the one hand, maintaining these traditions was used as a sign of royalist resistance. Pro-Christmas royalist texts fought back against Puritan criticism. In 1644, for example, the royalist clergyman Edward Fisher published a tract entitled *The Feast of Feasts* which drew on scriptural and historical arguments in defence of Christmas. Additions were made to the tract and it was re-published in January 1649 under the title *A Christian Caveat to the Old and New Sabbatarians* in which he denounced those who condemned it as superstitious 'to give money to servants or apprentices box, or to send a couple of capons or any other presents to a friend in the twelve days' (63-64). The print-run of *A Christian Caveat* demonstrates that Fisher's ideas had purchase – some 6,000 copies were sold in the early 1660s, and it was reissued five times by the end of the decade (Durston 1985, 10-11). In reality, however, whilst New Year evidently sparked the wrath of Puritan writers like William Prynne, there were few attempts by the new republican government to eradicate New Year's festivities specifically. It was largely ignored in those ordinances that proscribed against the celebration of Christmas, whilst 1 January as the Feast of the Circumcision still appeared in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.² Indeed, there is evidence that Cromwell himself took part in New Year celebrations – in 1656 musicians were sent to play for foreign embassies on New Year's Day, whilst Cromwell participated in the gift-exchange, sending gifts to ambassadors and ministers (Pimlott 1960, 832-839).

² <<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1662/baskerville.htm>>, accessed 15 February 2017.

2. *Types of New Year's Gift*

That New Year's gift-exchange persevered in the seventeenth century despite the ongoing debate surrounding it demonstrates the significant role these gifts had not just in commemorating the year but in actively influencing the fortunes of those involved. Despite their importance, however, there was no fixed rule on what ought to be exchanged, and a variety of different gifts could be given. Some gifts were fairly abstract, offering advice or demonstrating the skills of the donor. As mentioned earlier, many texts were written and presented under the title of New Year's gift, often giving moral or religious advice. Other literary gifts might be an offering of skills: as a child the future Elizabeth I presented Katherine Parr with a translation she had done of Queen Marguerite of Navarre's *Le miroir de l'âme pécheresse*. In an accompanying letter, Elizabeth emphasised that the gift was the effort itself that she had undertaken, as she had 'translated this little book out of French rhyme into English prose, joining the sentences together as well as the capacity of my simple wit and small learning could extend themselves'.³ At the other end of the spectrum, another common gift was money. Mrs Elizabeth Freke records in her diary for January 1683-1684, 'My Deer Father sentt mee over to Ireland A hundred pounds for A New Years gift', and notes another monetary gift some twenty years later, writing on 1 January 1705, 'I begged of Mr Freke to give my son Freke A New years Guiftt, which he most kindly did, of fifty pounds' (1913, 31, 57).

A range of material goods, meanwhile, are also known to have been given as New Year's gifts. The best documented are those given at court. Amongst monarchs and courtiers, coin, plate, and jewellery were most common. The New Year's Gift Rolls that survive for Queen Elizabeth's reign record twenty-five years of exchanges, with 4000 gifts given and some 4800 received. Earls and Countesses largely gave the Queen coin, and in return they received gifts of plate. However, a great variety of other gifts are recorded in these lists, including clothing, globes, musical instruments, medicines, spices, and even in one case a two-year-old lion that Elizabeth received in 1559 (Lawson 2013, v). Most interesting is the social diversity represented in the lists. A third of the participants were women, and amongst women textile gifts figured prominently. In her article on Elizabethan gifts of needlework, Lisa M. Klein has argued that such gifts allowed women to become 'active participants in cultural exchange', since they themselves made the embroidered gifts they were presenting. In this way, New Year's gifts of needlework were 'empowering as well as expressive' (1997, 462). Meanwhile, alongside courtiers, minor gentry,

³Elizabeth I, 'Letter to Katherine Parr, 1544', transcribed by Anniina Jokinen, *Luminarium*, <<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/elizlet1544.htm>>, accessed 15 February 2017.

London merchants, as well as household servants are represented in the lists. Gifts were not necessarily expensive. Whilst she was still a princess, the future Queen Mary received and gave costly New Year gifts, but her privy purse expenses also record rewards to the servants of great men who brought her venison, the poor bringing apples to the gate, and the countess of Hertford's servant bringing quince pies (Heal 2008, 66).

Indeed, gifts of food and drink in particular appear to have been popular New Year's offerings, and provide some of our best evidence for gift exchange outside of court. The nature of the food gift has been analysed in detail by Felicity Heal in her masterful article on the politics of exchange in early modern English households. Heal's article is important in emphasising how, as the most basic form of offering, food gifts differ from other forms of exchange. According to Heal, food gifts are distinctive because of their role in commensality and hospitality, as well as in the more fundamental relief of need. This is particularly interesting because Heal suggests that this bond is partly due to the implication that the gift will be shared. If we consider that the giving of gifts at New Year was part of wider communal rituals, including the sharing of food and drink, Heal's work reminds us of how even the most basic of offerings at New Year served to forge and reinforce social bonds (2008, 42-44).

Moreover, Heal's work is particularly important for this study since she emphasises how the exchange of food gifts was seasonal, peaking at New Year. This was the time of year when, in almost every household account, the clerks of the kitchen recorded an increase in giving, particularly of capons, turkeys, and geese (49). The Tawstock accounts for the week beginning 31 December 1643, for example, include money given 'to Mr Smiths servant that brought a gammon of Spanish bacon', whilst the accounts for the week beginning 28 December 1650 include money given to 'a boy that bought two capons' (Gray 1996, 33, 85). Similarly, the dominance of food gifts in the festive celebrations at New Year is evident in the book of Sir John Francklyn's household expenses, in which the following items related to the New Year are recorded for the year 1624:

Item to the musicians on New Year's Day in the morning ... 1s. 6d.
 Item to the woman which brought the apple stuck with nuts ... 1s. 0d.
 Item to the boy who brought two capons 1s. 0d.
 (Musgrave 1806, 159)

Capons above all appear to be a customary gift from a tenant to their landlord. In his collection of satires, *Virgidemiarum*, bishop Joseph Hall observed as such when he wrote: 'Yet must he haunt his greedy Land-lords hall, / with often presents at ech Festiuall; / With crammed Capons euery New-yeares morne' (1597, v, 57).

3. *Dated Wine Bottles*

As a result of the popularity of ephemeral gifts like food and drink, very few extant objects can be clearly identified as New Year's gifts. Some medieval rings survive inscribed '*en bon an*' (Happy New Year), many of which are thought to be English, and can be said with some certainty to have been given in this capacity. It is possible that a number of the large amount of objects inscribed with dates that were made in early modern England may have been intended as New Year's gifts, with their inscribed years referring to the year they welcomed in, but there is no documentary evidence to confirm this.⁴ It has however been suggested that a number of dated tin-glazed earthenware wine bottles that were produced during the seventeenth century, and which survive in large numbers, were intended to be given as New Year's gifts. In his catalogue of English delftware, the curator Michael Archer argued as such, outlining that 'It was customary to give gifts at New Year, frequently of wine, and it is highly likely that this would have been sent in bottles with painted inscriptions identifying the contents and the year in which the gift was given' (Lipski and Archer 1984, 307-308; Archer 1997, 266). Yet Archer made the suggestion based on little evidence, pointing mainly to the large number that had survived which suggests they were given a higher status as gifts, and the fact that they had been inscribed with a year. There is very little documentary evidence which can be decisively connected to these bottles, and nothing to confirm that they were given at New Year. However, this article will now explore the various contexts of these bottles to determine the significance of their dates, and whether they may have been gifted at New Year.

⁴ Dated objects, or objects inscribed with a date, survive in large numbers and encompass a whole range of public and private wares. Within the home, table wares, textiles, furniture, and jewellery are among those objects most frequently dated. Dates, often just the year, could be engraved, painted, or moulded onto an object, and were sometimes re-inscribed at later dates as they were re-appropriated by new owners. These objects provide a unique, although as yet unstudied, body of material with which to examine ideas of time. They are the focus of my doctoral research which will clarify and quantify these groupings for the range of objects associated with the household.



Figure 1 – Victoria and Albert Museum, London, museum no. 414:819-1885

One example in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection is typical of the design (see Figure 1). It is decorated in white glaze with blue writing comprised of the words ‘SACK/1646’ above a flourish. The bottle has a diameter of 9.7 cm and a height of 15 cm, making it of average size (see below, p. 100), whilst the ovoid form, splay foot, and handle are all representative of others of this type. A further example also at the Victoria and Albert Museum is decorated in identical style, with the words ‘WHIT WINE/1641’ inscribed in blue (see Figure 2). This bottle is slightly bigger at 17.5 cm in height and 12.8 cm in diameter, but again has the same form. Across various collections, public and private, at least 219 of these bottles are known, but it is likely that there are many more. The bottles have proved popular amongst collectors, likely because of their inscribed dates, and thus additional unknown bottles may be held in private collections. The seminal catalogue of dated English delftware by curators Louis Lipski and Michael Archer meticulously recorded all the known bottles in 1984, and since then several additional bottles have come to light. The information from this catalogue has been combined with the available details from new finds, and will be used here in an analysis of these dated bottles.



Figure 2 – Victoria and Albert Museum, London, museum no. 414:818-1885

The wine bottles in question are all made from tin-glazed earthenware, and decorated with white backgrounds and blue inscriptions. Alongside the year, the bottles are inscribed with a type of wine, predominantly 'Whit', 'Sack', and 'Claret', as well as two bottles that are inscribed 'Rhenish wine'. 'Sack' is the most popular inscription, with at least seventy-seven being inscribed as such. Other than those that have suffered damage, all the bottles have handles. The size of the bottles notably varies, with a relatively large range in size between bottles. The smallest recorded is just 10.8 cm high, whilst the largest is 24.5 cm high. Over 85% of those recorded are between 12 cm and 20 cm high, and there is a great deal of variation within this range. Unfortunately height and sometimes diameter are almost always the only measurements recorded for most of these bottles, and capacity has only been recorded for one to my knowledge. However, the great variation in height suggests that the bottles were not generally made to fulfil set capacities. There is some grouping – twenty-one bottles are 15.9 cm high and sixteen are 15.2 cm high, but there is no correspondence of date within these groupings. This lack of standardisation in size is due to the bottles being made by hand and not by mould, which again suggests that they were not designed to hold

specific capacities.⁵ This makes it unlikely that they were used for the sale of wine in taverns, but instead were probably for private use.

The bottles were produced in factories along the south bank of the Thames from Rotherhithe westwards. Fragments have been found in sites of former delftware factories in London including Potter's Fields, Pickleherring or Still Stairs, and Rotherhithe (Archer 1997, 266). They were fired in two stages. After the clay pot was fired once a lead glaze with added tin oxide was applied, giving a thick lustrous glaze, and the bottles were fired again. The decoration, including the inscriptions, could be added with the same glaze, with copper oxide added to make the blue.⁶ Firing delftware in two rounds was necessary, since if glaze is applied to a clay body it will 'crawl' leaving bare patches – by firing it first then dipping it in glaze, such faults are avoided (Britton 1987, 11). This two-stage process meant there was an element of expense with English delft. Painted pieces were intended for show, whilst undecorated delftware was for everyday use. Undecorated wine bottles do exist, so we can infer that the decorated ones were intended for special occasions. Little evidence is known for the price of delftware, not least because items are rarely individually recorded in inventories, yet one document written for tax purposes and dated 4 April 1696 does give prices for five different kinds of pottery. Under 'Fine Painted Wares', 'Bottles and Flasks' are priced at '10s. To 2s. 2d.' per dozen. Meanwhile 'Wine Potts' are listed at the more expensive price of 16s. 6d. per dozen. In comparison, undecorated white ware was much less expensive. Although no bottles are listed in this section, 'Drinking Potts', 'Sillibub Potts and Cawdell Potts' could be purchased for as little as 16d. up to 2s. per dozen (Wills 1967, 443). This supports the idea that painted wares were more expensive and may have been intended for special occasions, or as a gift, rather than regular use.

Collectors, curators, and archaeologists have analysed the bottles predominantly in terms of function, and this discussion sometimes involved a consideration of the dates. It has been suggested that they were used by vintners to hold wine for prospective customers – the inscription thought to have corresponded to the year and type of wine (Howard 1931, 47). The bottles themselves could not be used by vintners to sell wine – an act in 1636 prevented the sale of wine by the bottle in an attempt to regulate capacity (Dumbrell 1983, 19). Whilst this was intended to regulate the sale of wine in *glass* bottles since no two could be blown to the same capacity, as stated, delftware wine bottles were handmade and so would be subject to the same problem. It is possible that vintners might have used them for samples, yet it seems unlikely that sufficient bottles would be kept to correspond with every

⁵ Roy Stephenson (Museum of London), personal correspondence, 11th December 2013.

⁶ Roy Stephenson (Museum of London), personal correspondence, 11th December 2013.

year and type of wine available. Moreover, the argument that the inscription corresponds not to the year the bottle was made but to the year of the wine assumes that vintage dates were keenly observed. Yet it was only in the second half of the seventeenth century, some time after the date of many of these bottles, that storage methods improved enough that wines from particularly good years could be preserved and the practice of bottling vintage wines began (McNulty 1971, 99). Whilst the years on the bottles did not therefore refer to vintages, they could have still been utilitarian, acting as a marker of freshness or a kind of expiry dates, or alternatively they could have been a more abstract temporal reference.

It is likely that the bottles would have been used as decanters. Wine was stored in casks in cellars and small quantities transported to the table in these or comparable bottles (McNulty 1971, 99; Archer 1997, 266). Although it would have been possible to store wine in the bottles, and glass storage bottles were not introduced until later in the seventeenth century, the design of these bottles made them undesirable for storage.⁷ Even the largest of the bottles is too small to be used in either capacity, whilst the attention given to their decoration and finish makes it likely that they were intended for special occasions and possibly for subsequent display (Lipski and Archer 1984, 11). Meanwhile, the position of the handle would have made drinking directly from the bottle difficult. If the bottles were used as decanters, then, rather than for storage, it is necessary to consider what kind of occasion they may have been used in. This can shed light on the meaning of the year dates on the bottles.

4. *The Cultural Context of Drinking*

There is a great deal of evidence that alcohol played a major role in the activities that took place at New Year, and over the Christmas period in general. As such, it is possible to place the dated wine bottles within the context of other drinking vessels associated with seasonal festivities. The popular rituals involved in the celebration of the Twelve Days incorporated a degree of disorder, with a Lord of Misrule, ritualised inebriation, and communal wassailing all taking place on New Year's Eve (Cressy 1989, 16; Hutton 1994, 9). Many broadside ballads from the seventeenth century document these practices. In 'A pleasant Countrey new Ditty: Merrily showing how to drive the cold Winter away' (Anonymus 1625), the importance of drinking

⁷ That the bottles could adequately store wine is suggested by the story of a bottle that was found in 1735. The mouth had been waxed over and the wine found inside was reportedly perfectly good. The bottle was inscribed 'New Canary put in to see long keep good. April 1659. Ri. Combe'. See Hodgkin and Hodgkin 1891, 83. On glass bottles, see McKearin 1971, 126-127.

during the festive period is emphasised. The ballad describes how the winter pastimes of the country, which centre around drinking alcohol, are more agreeable than those of the ‘City and Court’. In the country, ‘More Liquor is spent, / And with better content / To drive the cold winter away’. Even ‘The poorest of all’ can enjoy ‘a Pot of good Ale’, whilst ‘Wassels of hot brown Ale’, and ‘a cup and a Song’, are also encouraged specifically at the close of the year, ‘With mirth and good cheere, / To end the old yeere, / And drive the cold winter away’ (Anonymous c. 1625). The accompanying illustration on this broadside also depicts a group of men sitting around a table. One drinks from a tankard, and a bottle can be seen on the table.

Moreover, there are references in almanacks and prognostications that suggest the consumption of wine was particularly associated with the month of January because of its medicinal benefits. In the broadside ballad ‘The Country-Mans Kalender’; notably, calendar is spelt with a K, making direct reference to the Roman *Kalends*), each month is described in terms of the popular activities associated with it, with the entry for January significantly referring to the drinking of sack – the type of wine most commonly inscribed on the dated bottles:

This Month may be cold, and therefore behold,
 All those that have plenty of Silver and Gold,
 If Garments you lack, buy them to your back,
 And see that you line them with Malago-Sack;
 It will warm you. (Anonymous 1692)

The idea of wine being a warming drink ideal for the winter is again taken up in Nicholas Breton’s *Fantastickes*, in which he devoted a section to each month. In January, he writes, ‘the fruit of the Grape heats the stomake of the Aged’ (1626, 10). Again, Richard Saunders, in his astrological prognostications for the year 1665, advised in January: ‘drink often white Wine in this Moneth, because Flegm is very predominant ... drink also these Spices with either Wine or Ale, as Grains, Ginger, Nutmegs and Cloves, and such like, are greatly commended this Moneth’ (1665, 43).

There is also evidence that wine was a particularly common New Year’s gift. In ‘Christmas, His Masque’, written in 1616, Ben Jonson includes a description of the personified ‘New Yeare’s Gift’, introduced as one of Christmas’ many children. Amongst the attributes of ‘New Yeare’s Gift’ are different food gifts such as oranges, rosemary, and gingerbread, and significantly ‘a bottle of wine on either arme’ (1969, 235). Similarly, on 2 January 1659-1660, Samuel Pepys recorded in his diary how he both received and gave bottles of sack as gifts, referencing three occasions of someone giving wine as a gift, highlighting its typicality. He wrote:

In the morning before I went forth old East brought me a dozen of bottles of sack, and I gave him a shilling for his pains. Then I went to Mr. Sheply who was drawing of sack in the wine cellar to send to other places as a gift from my Lord, and told me that my Lord had given him order to give me the dozen of bottles. (1905, I, 3)

Likewise, the journal of Timothy Burrell provides further evidence that wine was chosen as a gift. Burrell used his journal to record his accounts, and at the end of every year he includes a summary of the gifts he received. At the end of 1693, for example, it is recorded that, 'Among many presents received this year, 62 in number ... a dozen bottles of wine from P. Courthope' (1850, 15). Again at the end of 1687 and 1688, Burrell's journal records that his brother sent him two dozen bottles of claret and twenty-four bottles of Rhenish respectively. Wine was evidently a popular gift and the dated tin-glazed bottles would have been ideal containers in which to give it.

The dated wine bottles can also be put into context with other communal vessels intended for seasonal drinking, such as posset pots, some of which are markedly similar in design and which significantly are often inscribed with the year. Posset was a warm, restorative drink which was often drunk at special occasions where a pot of the mixture was passed around and consumed collectively by all the revellers. It was made with wine, eggs, sugar, cream, and spices, with the mixture ideally separating so that the liquid bottom half could be drunk, whilst the crust that formed on top could be eaten with a spoon (Glanville and Lee 2007, 58). Sack possets were most common, with several seventeenth-century recipes surviving for possets made with various quantities including 'half a pint of sack', 'a spoonful of sack', 'a point of sack', and even 'so much Sack as will make it taste well' (Anonymous 1669, 131-135; Woolley 1675, 92-93). In their work on the material culture of drinking, Philippa Glanville and Sophie Lee have asserted that sack possets were 'much consumed over the Christmas period by nocturnal revellers' (2007, 58). Indeed, this is supported by contemporary references that demonstrate that the drink was a tradition around Twelfth Night. On 5 January 1659-60, Samuel Pepys was greatly disappointed when, 'there being a great frost', he went to visit a friend 'in expectation to eat a sack posset but Mr. Edward not coming it was put off' (1905, I, 9). Likewise on 6 January 1667-1668 Pepys recorded that, after an evening of singing and dancing, 'we had a good sack posset' (254). It is important that sack wine was desirable for the making of this festive drink, suggesting that bottles of sack may have been given as gifts around New Year for use in possets.

The design of posset pots and cups can provide a valuable material comparison with these wine bottles, particularly since so many are also dated. Posset pots and cups have multiple handles to facilitate the passing of the posset around a gathering. One lead-glazed earthenware pot confirms that such multi-handled vessels were intended for posset with the inscription

'Robart Pool mad this cup and with a gudposet fil'.⁸ As well as the year, some have names and inscriptions that suggest they were given as gifts – one is inscribed with the three initial cipher 'B/E*D', thought to have been used to commemorate a marriage, along with the date 1653.⁹ The inscription on a later pot overtly records it as a gift: 'TOMAS DAKIN MADE TIS CUP FOR MARY SCULLTHARP OR HER FREND AB 1710'.¹⁰ Indeed, whilst posset was also drunk for medicinal purposes as a remedy for minor complaints like colds, their inscriptions as well as the fine decoration that appears on many suggests that these pots were intended for special occasions, in contrast to those plain, undated ones that also survive (Lipski and Archer 1984, 200). Posset pots were likely also given as gifts at New Year since their use corresponds to those seasonal practices associated with New Year, whilst their design confirms that they were used for special, social occasions. Indeed, some even have dates specifically around the festive period – one in the Fitzwilliam Museum is inscribed 'December the 2 M' and below 'A BOOL TO FEEL Y', meaning, 'A bowl to fill you'.¹¹ Furthermore, like the wine bottles, many larger posset pots are made from tin-glazed earthenware with blue and white decoration. One such pot is inscribed with 'K.G/1651', and significantly above the inscription is a crown – a similar motif is seen on a number of the wine bottles.¹² This places the cultural meaning of posset firmly within the same context as wine.

Wine meanwhile had its own symbolic meanings and associations. Felicity Heal has argued that food gifts constructed a distinctive bond between giver and receiver – this can help us to interpret wine gifts which had their own distinctive connotations (2008, 44). Historians like Angela McShane and Charles Ludington have emphasised that wine was perceived as a royalist drink, adopted by those loyal to the Stuart crown as a symbol of their cause during the Civil War, Restoration and later Jacobite uprisings (McShane 2004; Ludington 2013). The increasingly widespread practice of loyal healthing involved the ritualised drinking of wine and became a powerful symbol of royal allegiance during the turbulent political years of the seventeenth century. Indeed, following the Restoration, the ritual had become such a potent indicator of loyalty that refusing a loyal health became increasingly dangerous (McShane 2014, 250). Wine drinking also served to create a sense of community, particularly amongst royalists who were dispersed in exile following their defeat in the Civil War. Through an examination of extant letters from royalists living in exile,

⁸ Victoria and Albert Museum, London, museum no. C.24-1949.

⁹ British Museum, London, museum no. 1887, 0210.124.

¹⁰ Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, museum no. C.257-1928; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, museum no. C.770-1922.

¹¹ Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, museum no. C.107 & A & B-1928.

¹² Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, museum no. C.1319 & A-1928.

Marika Keblusek has argued that drinking wine was an important part of their experience abroad, as drinking someone's health became 'a confirmation of friendship, of shared intimacy, sometimes even of consolation'. In this way, drinking wine in a loyal health was an act of resistance, marking one out as a member of 'an underground community' (2004, 55, 58). This reflects Heal's argument that food gifts cemented social bonds through shared use, or could simply symbolise such sharing through the act of giving (2008, 44). The communal drinking of wine re-enforced the bonds between royalists, and was such a powerful tool that it produced the same effect even when those involved were dispersed in exile. We can see the giving of a gift of wine as a way of symbolising these bonds.

The dated wine bottles may have been used as part of these communal drinking rituals. McShane has shown how the Reformation had important ramifications for the drinking of wine and loyal healthing. Since all Christians were now allowed to take part in communion, there was a significant shift in the material and social experience of ritual – 'in principle, every person could now drink wine from a fine cup ... three or more times a year' (2014, 251). This impacted the design of the vessels, with overtly Catholic iconography removed, whilst political iconography was added (262-263). These changes provide important context for the dated wine bottles – the inclusion of political iconography such as the letters CR, crowns, or even portraits of monarchs were influenced by the design of other ritual vessels used for the drinking of wine. Moreover, McShane has argued that providential tales relating to the drinking vessels demonstrate the belief that the objects themselves actively made revelations about the integrity of drinkers (262-263). The way these objects were decorated thus took on added importance. For the ordinary health-drinker, this might mean earthenware mugs decorated with loyal mottos. Whilst the dated wine bottles were used for decanting wine rather than drinking it, they were likely used for the sharing of wine in communal rituals such as these. The addition of royalist mottos or iconography on some made overt claims about the loyalties of their users – one in the Victoria and Albert Museum for example is decorated in blue with a large crown alongside the inscription 'SACK/1643' (see Figure 3), whilst another bears a portrait of Charles II; but even those bottles that simply recorded a type of wine could possibly associate the owners, givers, or users with royalist sympathies.

This cultural context can be used to further analyse why there were dates on these bottles. The earliest dated example is inscribed 1621, whilst the latest seventeenth century bottle is dated 1676.¹³

¹³ There is one eighteenth-century bottle, dated 1719, but this appears to be an anomaly.



Figure 3 – Victoria and Albert Museum, London, museum no. C.114-1938

Interestingly, the dates on the bottles group around the mid-seventeenth century, with over 70% of the recorded dated wine bottles inscribed with years between 1644 and 1652. There are at least 131 known bottles dating to these years. At least thirty-one are dated 1650, whilst 1647 was also a popular year with at least twenty-one bottles inscribed with this date. Several conclusions are possible for the popularity of these years. If the wine bottles were being used by a community of royal supporters who were now dispersed or driven underground, the dates created temporal links across this diaspora, fixing a loyal community temporally when they could not be joined geographically. Likewise, the dates served to bolster and reaffirm the presence of loyalty to the crown in the very years when it was suffering a crisis. With the King defeated by 1647, executed in 1649, and a republican government in power by 1650, the dates on these bottles could emphasise that royal support would not die.

5. *Conclusion*

This article has explored the materiality of a moment in time, the passage of one year to another, in order to examine what material culture can tell us

about how people experienced and perceived time in early modern England. It has looked at the practices, rituals, and debates surrounding New Year's gift exchange, and has taken as a case study the dated tin-glazed earthenware wine bottles that may have been part of this materiality. In doing so, it has shown that through the exchange of dated wares and associated activities like food exchange and wassailing, people responded to and gave meaning to this passage of time communally through seasonal rituals and the reinforcement of social bonds and obligations. Moreover, the discussion of the conceptual nature of the New Year's gift, its role as an omen of good luck, and puritan hostility towards it, has demonstrated that these objects were far from passive tokens. They were thought to actively influence the coming year, they prompted specific memories or obligations, and they embodied communities near-by or disparate. Those gifts marked with a date and perhaps other decorative messages like initials or loyalist iconographies would have been kept and displayed in the home, a tangible reminder of both the temporal moment of exchange and the social networks and customs it represented, and its meaning would have been drawn from this context. This article has also shown the various methods we might use to interpret this meaning, as dated objects often leave little documentary trace. Whilst no definitive evidence survives to prove that the bottles were given as New Year's gifts, by exploring the wider context of New Year's customs and gift giving, it has been shown that the bottles can be placed within the rituals that took place at this specific moment of the year. Yet the bottles also demonstrate the variety of different ways we need to think in order to interpret a dated object. On the one hand the dates may be a reference to the changing year, but on the other, the wine bottles also fit into a range of different discourses. The connection between objects and time was therefore never straightforward, but had multiple layers of meaning, even when associated with just one specific moment.

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