

Lost things and the making of material cultures in eighteenth-century London

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KATE SMITH 

Lost Things and the Making of Material Cultures in Eighteenth-Century London

Abstract

This article focuses on everyday occurrences of loss and losing in urban spaces to examine the role that absence played in shaping material cultures in the past. It returns to a site that has remained central to material histories, eighteenth-century London, and shows how possessions regularly went missing due to theft and forgetfulness. Examining daily newspapers, alongside court cases, diary entries, and handbills, demonstrates how experiences of loss prompted urban denizens to devise systems of reclamation. “Lost” notices placed in London’s new daily newspapers became crucial to ensuring the return of lost possessions. While these systems were largely managed by thief-takers such as Jonathan Wild in the early decades of the eighteenth century, after Wild’s death in 1725, it fell to Londoners themselves to remember the salient features of their possessions and write the notices. These writings and the material practices that underpinned them shaped how people understood the material world around them and how they operated in urban spaces. As such, the article demonstrates the significance of absence in shaping urban material cultures.

On July 10, 1745, Thomas Piggott, Esq., appeared at the Old Bailey to offer up his version of the events that had taken place on the night of May 23, 1745, when he “lost” his watch and 40 guineas.¹ Piggott described how he had spent that Thursday evening with “some West India merchants at the King’s Arms Tavern, in Lombard street.” At the end of the night, as “no coach could be got,” he walked home. As he passed Somerset House, he noticed two men behind him and one in front. He carried on, but then mistakenly turned into Buckingham Street. Realizing his error, he turned around to find three men waiting for him. In court, Piggott reported that one of the defendants had grabbed him by the throat and put a pistol “or something like it” to his temples, while another had threatened him with a sword and the other held a hanger over his head. They then ripped his breeches and removed his pocket watch, took the “silver and brass” from his pocket and got hold of his purse with some “40 odd guineas.” The assault was duly reported in the *Penny London Post* (May 24–27, 1745) and *St James’s Evening Post* (May 23–25, 1745).² While both

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publications misreported his name as “John Piggott,” they both noted that he had been “seiz’d. . .by the Throat.” In response to the assault, Piggott said he had called out to the watchmen who advised him to go home, change his clothes, and then pursue his attackers.³ Piggott decided against this course of action and instead went to see his watchmaker. On losing his watch, Piggott determined to return to the person he had purchased it from.

Rather than focusing on the moment when Thomas Piggott and others like him bought their watches, this article studies experiences of loss, and tracks what urban denizens did when their possessions went missing through theft or forgetfulness. Piggott “acquainted Mr. Bowley [sic], the watchmaker in Lombard Street with the robbery” and the pair decided to advertise the watch, which was valued at £20, with a “ten guineas reward.”⁴ On May 25, 1745, the advertisement appeared in one of London’s chief daily newspapers, the *Daily Advertiser*:

LOST on Thursday Night last, at the Corner of Villers-Street [sic] in the Strand, a Silver repeating Watch made by Bowly, no Number, a gilt Cap over the Movement, the Case pierced in Relievo, a Blank Space at Bottom in a black Shagreen Case, with Silver Bessel and Edges, and a green Silk String with two Seals set in Silver. Whoever brings the said Watch to D. Bowly, in Lombard-Street, shall receive Ten Guineas Reward, and no Questions ask’d; or if already pawn’d or sold, your Money again with Thanks. Note, No greater Reward will be given.⁵

Although Piggott later testified in court that his watch had been stolen from him under threat of violence and the incident was reported as such in two newspapers, Mr. Bowly had advised him “not to advertise it as stole, but as lost” in order that he “might possibly have it again.”⁶ Piggott decided to follow Bowly’s advice and listed the watch as “lost.” Such strategies and the substantial reward on offer demonstrate that he was keen to “have it again.”

The experience Piggott reported to the Old Bailey was an ordinary occurrence in eighteenth-century London but our knowledge of it is unusual. Those placing notices rarely named themselves and there are only a few instances like Piggott’s in which “lost” notices can be linked to court cases. As such, we cannot systematically track the gender, age, or social group of those who placed “lost” notices. However, despite this lack of detailed information about the social makeup of those who placed “lost” notices, these notices were clearly a popular form of redress (see [Table 1](#)). Over the eighteenth century, the number of notices appearing in daily newspapers grew, and they continued to be present in the nineteenth-century press.

Although “victims” of crime in eighteenth-century Britain were obliged to pursue prosecution, they often sought informal settlements.⁷ Piggott’s case ended in court, but in placing a “lost” notice he had initially tried to effect an informal settlement. As Bowly knew, identifying the possession as “lost” rather than stolen ensured that the “finder” could return it to Piggott and receive a reward, without fear of prosecution and without Piggott necessarily needing to pursue prosecution. We might understand failing to pursue prosecution then, not only as reflective of attitudes towards the judicial system as previous historians have argued, but also towards possessions.⁸ On May 25, 1745, six other lost notices appeared in the *Daily Advertiser* alongside Piggott’s, as well as one for a “dropt” and one for a “left” item.⁹ Such objects were valued as emotionally and

Table 1. Average number of “lost” notices per issue: London Daily newspapers sample 1700–1830

	Average number per issue
<i>Daily Courant</i> , December 1702	0.19
<i>Daily Courant</i> , December 1710	2.08
<i>Daily Courant</i> , December 1720	3.46
<i>Daily Courant</i> , December 1730	0
<i>Daily Advertiser</i> , December 1742	6.92
<i>Daily Advertiser</i> , December 1752	5.92
<i>Daily Advertiser</i> , December 1760	5.58
<i>Daily Advertiser</i> , December 1771	9.46
<i>Daily Advertiser</i> , December 1782	9.65
<i>Daily Advertiser</i> , December 1792	6.96
<i>The Times</i> , December 1800	0.31
<i>The Times</i> , December 1810	0.23
<i>The Times</i> , December 1820	0.85
<i>The Times</i> , December 1830	1.19

economically important items that provided means of displaying social status and identities. “Victims” often simply wanted to find the best way of getting things back and, as this article will go on to show, across the long eighteenth century, lost notices were understood as a key method of achieving that aim.

Losing a watch and placing a lost notice in the newspaper was a particularly regular occurrence. Watches were one of the most frequently advertised objects in lost notices, making up 15 percent of the notices surveyed (see Table 2).¹⁰ While “lost” dog notices rapidly grew in importance in the later eighteenth century and money or financial instruments fell, “lost” watch notices remained an enduring and significant presence.¹¹ That Piggott (and Bowly) included details of when and where the watch had gone missing, what the watch looked like, and who it could be taken to for what reward, was also common. In writing the notice, Piggott (and Bowly) followed the established conventions. To make the watch visible and recognizable to readers of the *Daily Advertiser*, they utilized a new literary technique: description. Piggott would have needed material knowledge and a strong memory to construct his description. Rather than manage that alone, he asked for his watchmaker’s advice. In doing so, Piggott was not unique. Other lost notice writers utilized the material knowledge of artisans; some prepared for such eventualities by keeping records of the salient features of their possessions. Rather than a lone pursuit, material knowledge appears as shared between different people and sites. As such, the court testimony, newspaper reports, and lost notices reveal a series of events which were an everyday part of London street-life. They show how loss and people’s responses to it produced systems, such as the newspaper notices, which demanded material knowledge and remembrance, and shaped understandings of the material world.

Over the last thirty-five years, histories of the material world have become increasingly prominent within the discipline. While diverse and far-reaching, the field of material culture has been especially shaped by studies focused on the eighteenth-century Atlantic World, and Britain in particular.¹² New methodologies, approaches, and questions gleaned from anthropology, visual culture,

Table 2. Proportion (%) of notices advertising types of items

	Dog	Jewelry	Watch	Money/Financial instruments	Pocket book	Other
Daily Courant, Dec 1702	0	0	0	20	0	80
Daily Courant, Dec 1710	5	2	12	24	9	48
Daily Courant, Dec 1720	11	11	12	18	29	20
Daily Courant, Dec 1730	0	0	0	0	0	0
Daily Advertiser, Dec 1742	13	3	26	10	6	42
Daily Advertiser, Dec 1752	26	2	13	8	3	47
Daily Advertiser, Dec 1760	26	2	12	12	7	40
Daily Advertiser, Dec 1771	19	4	19	9	12	37
Daily Advertiser, Dec 1782	44	2	12	7	9	26
Daily Advertiser, Dec 1792	32	4	12	13	9	30
The Times, Dec 1800	0	0	13	63	0	25
The Times, Dec 1810	0	0	0	50	34	17
The Times, Dec 1820	30	0	10	45	0	15
The Times, Dec 1830	27	7	7	30	13	17
Total proportions over period:	26	3	15	12	9	35

global history, literature, sensory studies, and the history of emotions have allowed material culture studies to grow and develop. Yet, understanding the ways in which people consumed goods and why they did so have continued to act as key organizing principles within the field. Due to the centrality of consumption as the early driving force in histories of material culture, the field has largely focused on questions of acquisition and accumulation.¹³ Historians have looked to broader geographies, more diverse sites, and increasingly varied practices.¹⁴ Nevertheless, they have been primarily motivated by exploring how and why people in different social groups acquired (or sought to acquire) objects and what these objects meant and did once possessed.¹⁵ Here I explore what takes place when we stop writing the history of eighteenth-century Britain's material world as one of acquisition. Instead, by returning to a central site in studies of material culture, eighteenth-century London, I consider what happens when we look at histories of material culture from the other side, from the perspective of loss and losing.

Recent scholarship in sociology and anthropology provides important frameworks through which to consider the nature of absence and loss, especially in terms of how they impact people's relationships to the material world. Early work by geographer and sociologist Kevin Hetherington posited the importance of understanding "disposal" as a significant element within consumption practices. Hetherington argued that disposal was not "a final state of rubbishing," but rather acted as a form of placing and situating absence.¹⁶ Nevertheless, such "absent" things continue to have "translating effects." The photograph album placed in the attic or the shoes placed in the bin and sent to the landfill site, still "effect" their (previous) owners: "the erasure of an object is never complete."¹⁷ More recently, anthropologists Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, and Tim Flohr Sørensen have sought to build on this work. Stepping outside of consumption as their frame they have exposed "how absence—even if absence is only perceived absence—may have just as much effect as material presence."¹⁸ Bille, Hastrup, and Sørensen seek to further explore the idea that absent objects have an effect in the world by arguing that "it may be constructive to explore not only what people say or write about their experience of absence (about ontological problems, loss and transcendence), but also what they *do* in the presence of absence."¹⁹ In these terms, absence and loss are understood as prompting certain responses: they are generative states.

This article focuses on everyday experiences of loss on London's streets, to see what people did. Multiple types of sources can be brought to bear on questions of loss and the responses it prompted. Old Bailey court records are important, as are diaries, manuals, and manufacturer records. Alongside these sources, the lost notices that Thomas Piggott and others like him placed in daily newspapers to seek reclamation of their things are crucial. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London newspapers regularly included lost notices, advertising snuff boxes, spaniels, and lottery tickets as "lost," "misplac'd," and "dropt." This article draws from over 4,000 lost notices placed in the leading daily newspapers of the period: *Daily Courant* (1702–35), *Daily Advertiser* (1731–96), and *The Times* (1785–present).²⁰ It focuses on a sample of 1383 notices placed in the December issues of these newspapers at roughly ten-year intervals. The sample shows that lost notices were a consistent and expanding feature of daily newspapers across the long eighteenth century (see [Table 1](#)).

In the eighteenth century, it was foolish to hope that things forgotten on London's streets would be there when you returned. Everything was perceived as valuable. As the diarist Samuel Johnson joked, even orange peel found in the street would be scraped, dried, and then sold to distillers.²¹ Lost, found, and stolen were often interlinked and lost notices offered a means of navigating the space between these states in a way that the judicial system often failed to do. Threats to property constituted a central preoccupation of the eighteenth-century judicial system, particularly in London.²² The long eighteenth century has been re-written as a period that experienced different approaches to prosecution and conviction and one that utilized innovative forms of policing and detection.²³ Nevertheless, the persistent presence of lost notices in London newspapers in this era shows that Londoners also developed different systems for dealing with the effects of crime (or sometimes simply dropping things) and the loss it instantiated. People were primarily interested in reclaiming their possessions. Recent work by Alexandra Shepard has identified an important shift taking place in the later seventeenth century, in people's relationship to their belongings. While possessions had acted as a source of savings and investment, and thus a foundation for credit and worth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the eighteenth century, the selective display of possessions became increasingly linked to "securing personal and social identities. . . especially in urban environments."²⁴ From lost notices we learn that for certain things, their *continued* possession was significant. Perhaps unsurprisingly, maintaining possession seems to have been particularly important for items central to economic life, such as money and other financial instruments, but it was also crucial for highly visible things linked to people's emotional lives and social displays, such as dogs, and of course, watches. Alongside issues of emotional and economic value, continued possession allowed for the sustained display of a coherent and recognizable self.²⁵ When papers, canes, dogs, and watches went missing in cities, people worked hard to reclaim them and ensure continued possession. Analyzing lost notices and seeking to understand their workings and conventions by following the leads offered by Old Bailey court cases, diaries, manuals, and manufacturer records, shows that eighteenth-century Londoners continued to "do in the presence of absence."²⁶ They developed systems of reclamation, they learned and used new practices and techniques, and such systems and practices had impacts in their turn. Loss was generative in eighteenth-century Britain and as such shaped material cultures, print cultures, and city life.

"Lost," "Misplac'd," and "Dropt"

London's Goldsmiths' Company developed an early means of reclaiming lost valuables through their "warning carrier" system. From as early as the mid-sixteenth century it warned the luxury trades of the circulation of stolen property.²⁷ While in the sixteenth century the warning system was principally designed to ensure the security of royal plate, by the mid-seventeenth century, a wider variety of individuals used it. In 1652, John Evelyn paid for 500 notices to be printed and distributed.²⁸ Once printed, the Goldsmiths' Company beadles would carry the warning notices across the city to goldsmiths, jewelers, watchmakers, bankers, refiners, toymen, salesmen, and pawnbrokers. The notices alerted those in and connected to the luxury trades not to receive or sell stolen

property and told them where a stolen item should be returned to if they encountered one.

Despite evidence existing of the warning carrier system at work as early as the mid-sixteenth century, the conventions of the notices prior to the eighteenth century are unknown. Sixty-nine warning notices exist in the Goldsmiths' Company archive. They intermittently cover the period from August 1726 (Number 11489) to July 1731 (Number 11955).²⁹ The majority of the notices include details of where and when the item was lost, what was lost, to whom it could be returned, and for what reward. While some items were noted as "Dropt," "Left," "Stolen," "Supposed to be left," and "Lost or Mislaid," the majority were simply "Lost."³⁰ By listing them as "lost," the notices alluded to the possibility that things could simply go missing in urban spaces; however, if offered for sale or valuation to someone in the luxury trade, the items crossed a threshold and became understood as stolen. The item then needed to be "stopt" and returned for a reward. The types of items listed in these notices, rings, diamonds, snuffboxes, watches, plates, and bank notes, reflect the types of businesses on the warning carrier rounds.

Although it began in the sixteenth century, the system continued to operate into the early eighteenth. Mentions of Goldsmiths' Hall beadles even appeared in newspapers as late as the nineteenth century.³¹ In the early modern period and beyond, the Goldsmiths' Company was recognized as playing an important role in communicating instances of loss and theft. By the late-seventeenth century, however, the warning carrier system was not the only response to lost possessions. As the city grew, so too did other systems of reclamation, superseding those of the Goldsmiths' warning carriers. In a similar manner to the warning carrier notices, those who found their possessions lost or stolen could have handbills printed for pasting on windows or distribution in the city.³² As newspaper culture grew, however, another significant avenue emerged for those simply wanting to reclaim their lost possessions. Over the long eighteenth century, lost property newspaper notices became an important part of London's growing print culture, often sustaining London newspapers and providing the principal vehicle for reclaiming lost possessions without necessarily pursuing prosecution.

In the late seventeenth century, London newspapers, such as the *London Gazette* (1666–1792), announced mislaid possessions. Circulation figures for the newspaper were impressive. If circulation is calculated as sales plus giveaways, between 1695 and 1697 the *London Gazette's* circulation peaked at 19,062 before averaging 13,846 per edition (published every three or four days).³³ The lost notices that appeared in the *London Gazette* in the final quarter of the seventeenth century were important. They set the conventions for lost notices over the next two centuries. Significantly, these conventions also align with those found in the extant warning carrier notices of the 1720s and 1730s. Although it is not possible to trace which form influenced which, the warning carrier and newspaper notices demonstrate that multiple systems were at play to deal with "lost" or stolen property in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that such systems were shaping and building on each other. As with the warning carrier notices, lost notices placed in London's newspapers noted where and when the item was lost, what was lost, to whom it could be returned and for what reward. Similarly, the newspaper notices also mirrored the warning carrier

notices in not naming the “victim.” Yet, one difference was the type of objects featured in newspaper notices. They included those items which had featured in the warning carrier notices, such as plate, watches, snuffboxes, jewelry, and canes, but they also listed others, including dogs, clothes, anchors, trunks, wigs, and bags. As increasing numbers of people entered London’s streets and urban “material cultures” expanded, new systems of reclamation were required that operated beyond the luxury trades and changes in print culture made them possible.

Following the *London Gazette*’s lead, other London newspapers came to feature lost notices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Placing a lost notice was relatively affordable, somewhere between 2 and 4 shillings.³⁴ After the lapsing of the Licensing of the Press Act in 1695, newspaper circulation grew: “twenty-fold between 1695 and 1855.”³⁵ As such, lost newspaper notices reached an ever-wider array of readers. London’s first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant*, became a key player in lost notices and had no direct competitors in the 1700s and 1710s.³⁶ It is estimated to have sold around 1,000 copies per day in the early eighteenth century.³⁷ Despite such growth, the lost notice system did not always prove efficacious. In response, thief-takers began to engage in, manipulate, and expand the system.

Over the long eighteenth century, thief-takers played an important role in pursuing prosecutions on others’ behalf. In this period, victims were required to discover, arrest, and prosecute offenders.³⁸ As we have already seen, after Thomas Piggott was assaulted the watchmen advised him to go home and change his clothes, before following his attackers.³⁹ In London, magistrates, constables, or watchmen were under little obligation to investigate offenses. Rather, the responsibility fell on private individuals. “Victims” of crime could hire a constable or any private citizen to locate a criminal and formulate charges, and it was thief-takers who often took on such detective work.⁴⁰ Thief-takers were increasingly encouraged to engage in such prosecution work through rewards offered by the judicial system, such as the £40 offered for the conviction of highwaymen from 1692 onwards and coiners and clippers from 1696. Then from 1720, as property continued to come under threat, an extraordinary reward of £100 was offered on top of the usual £40, for the conviction of those committing robberies in the metropolis.⁴¹ In the 1690s, pursuing the prosecution of coiners and clippers provided plentiful and relatively easy business for thief-takers, but by the end of the century these sources of revenue had begun to dry up.⁴² In the early eighteenth century, thief-takers looked elsewhere for business and lost notices in newspapers seemed to offer as much, including, as the Piggott example demonstrates, substantial rewards.⁴³

When engaging with the lost notices, thief-takers rarely pursued prosecution. Rather, they acted as brokers, mediating contact between victims and the thieves, who had often stolen their supposed “lost” property. Previous studies of lost notices by historians of crime and literary scholars have focused on the period between the 1690s and 1720s, principally to show the significant involvement of thief-takers in such systems of reclamation.⁴⁴ Essentially, it was not possible to ensure that the thief or “finder” in question saw the notice and responded correctly; as a result, thief-takers made sure it took place, and in some cases, encouraged thieves to steal the item in the first place. Thief-takers made these connections in return for the reward, which was often then shared with

the thief. In the 1710s, the thief-taker Jonathan Wild, came to organize the system of “lost property” on an ever-greater scale.⁴⁵ Wild ostensibly worked for the judiciary, as a thief-taker who was rewarded for finding and convicting criminals. Such a position meant that he could operate legitimately as a trusted figure, whom the public would seek the help of if they lost a possession. However, he simultaneously worked with thieves, organizing their activities to ensure maximum rewards. If the thieves slipped or proved troublesome, he could revert to his position of thief-taker and pursue their prosecution.

Jonathan Wild was able to organize the “lost” system more fully in the 1710s and early 1720s because thieves, victims, and intermediaries were willing participants. From 1691 onwards, legislative changes made “receivers” increasingly wary of accepting goods, reducing thieves’ options for fencing stolen objects. In these circumstances, working with thief-takers in the lost notice system became ever more attractive.⁴⁶ Thieves could steal goods and receive rewards for their return while thief-takers took care of organizing that return, all under the reassuring pretense of “lost” rather than “stolen.”⁴⁷ For victims, pursuing reclamation became more attractive as the judicial stakes were raised. In 1699 for example, shoplifting became a capital offense.⁴⁸ With the threat of harsher penalties for conviction and the challenges of pursuing prosecution, victims sought to simply reclaim their property. “Losers” even repeatedly published the same lost notice, particularly for certain possessions. They were keen to reclaim watches for example: 18 percent of lost notices for watches appeared more than once, in comparison to 11 percent of lost notices for dogs. Even though many avoided pursuing prosecution, people went to great lengths to get their things back.

In his 1725 publication *The Life of Wild*, Daniel Defoe noted how the practice of publishing lost notices became commonplace in the 1710s and early 1720s.⁴⁹ Even though, as this article has shown, the practice of publishing the particulars of lost items has a longer history, Defoe’s writings demonstrate how the practice was thought to be further encouraged and enlarged by Wild, who essentially ensured that the “system” worked more effectively and shored up its importance. On learning of a theft (or a theft’s completion), Wild would go to a victim and suggest that they advertise the item or offer do it on their behalf. As Wild became better known, victims began to approach him, and he would subsequently encourage them to advertise.⁵⁰ He involved himself in writing the notices and ultimately shaped their conventions, becoming critical to establishing the system more broadly. Wild was listed as the person to whom an item could be returned in 125 of the 825 lost notices placed in the *Daily Courant* in 1720. In 1725, however, as the inducements grew, Wild overstretched himself and arranged too boldly for the return of stolen goods.⁵¹ He was hanged that year and his elaborate means of organizing the “lost” notices system ended.

The Desire to Reclaim

Thief-takers continued to operate in the capital over the course of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century. They largely ceased activities in 1818, with the end of the £40 reward.⁵² Although thief-takers still worked at ensuring the return of lost and stolen goods in the later eighteenth century, none of them did so on anything like the scale achieved by Wild.⁵³

Previous historical interest in the lost notices system has stopped at this point. However, despite the waning interest of thief-takers (and historians) from 1725 onwards, Londoners continued to place lost notices in newspapers across the eighteenth century (see Table 1). In fact, due to the consolidation of the lost notices system in the early decades of the century and the growth of daily newspapers, in the later 1700s the system expanded.

From the second quarter of the eighteenth century onwards, new daily newspapers such as the *Daily Advertiser* came to be central to the lost notices system and the lost notices became central to it. By 1750, readers in London could choose between eighteen different papers (6 weeklies, 6 tri-weeklies and 6 dailies); by 1811 the total figure had reached fifty-two.⁵⁴ Circulation figures also increased. While the *London Daily Post* circulated almost 2,500 copies in 1746, the *Daily Advertiser* circulated more.⁵⁵ The inclusion of greater numbers of advertisements and notices bolstered the growth of these daily publications, providing crucial revenue streams which allowed for further growth.⁵⁶

Between the 1760s and 1790s, daily London newspapers expanded further and began to increasingly serve national audiences.⁵⁷ The newspaper that most successfully captured this enlarged market was *The Times*, a newspaper which included lost notices amid its other advertisements. It was established in 1785 and by 1830 sold “just over 10,000 per issue.”⁵⁸ More people read newspapers than bought them, however, particularly in the capital which had high levels of literacy and ever-increasing numbers of sites and spaces in which to access newspapers.⁵⁹ Estimates suggest that while around “one quarter of the capital’s residents read a newspaper in 1750,” a third did so “in the 1780s.”⁶⁰ With growing numbers of newspaper buyers and newspaper readers, lost notices came to be seen by an ever-growing section of the capital’s population, increasing the efficacy of the system. The fact that lost notices appeared in *daily* newspapers was particularly crucial to the workings of the system. Information needed to move rapidly. Alongside placing notices in newspapers, individuals could distribute privately printed handbills. Printers stressed the speed of their processes when advertising. In 1790, J. Rozea, a printer based on “Wardour-street,” claimed they could get “Bills, relative to Goods, &c. Lost or Stolen, dispatched at Two Hours Notice.”⁶¹ Less than a decade later, the Tottenham-based printer E. Brown noted in 1799 that “BILLS relative to lost property, [could be] printed in One Hour, by E BROWN, Tottenham.”⁶² Time became of the essence in trying to reclaim lost things in eighteenth-century London and *daily* newspapers, which were unique to the capital, allowed for the rapid movement of information.⁶³ The growth, format, and distribution of London newspapers allowed the lost notices system to develop further, while the lost notices themselves contributed to the shape of newspaper culture.

Across the eighteenth century, until the substantial changes in policing took place towards the end of the century, “losers” persisted in placing “lost” notices in newspapers.⁶⁴ Those they wrote were remarkably similar in their conventions. They listed where and when the item had been lost, what the item was and where it could be returned to, and for what reward. Nevertheless, as this section has shown, the systems that lay behind the notices and facilitated the return of possessions changed. With the fading centrality of the thief-takers from the late 1720s onwards, “losers” increasingly wrote the notices without the help of the likes of Jonathan Wild. As the next section will go on to show, to

do so required material knowledge, an understanding of the conventions at stake, and a new textual praxis: description.

Description

From the second quarter of the eighteenth century onwards, “losers” needed to know and describe their missing possessions to make them visible and recognizable to others in lost notices.⁶⁵ Description was a “textual praxis” increasingly in use in eighteenth-century British culture.⁶⁶ It was not entirely new; textual praxes in seventeenth-century Britain had shown the importance of detail, setting the groundwork for the further changes to come in the eighteenth century.⁶⁷ Cynthia Wall has plotted the shifting nature of description as it operated in the novel and other prose genres. In later eighteenth-century novels, characters began to enter described spaces, filled with significant and meaningful objects, rather than (in the Defoe tradition) suddenly picking up an object that lay previously unseen and unreferenced.⁶⁸ Object descriptions were key to this textual praxis and in their turn, descriptions became crucial to eighteenth-century material cultures.⁶⁹ With an ever-more complex range of objects in circulation, description emerged as a tool for “making things visible.”⁷⁰

In contrast to the object descriptions that appeared in auction catalogues, wills, commercial advertisements, and novels, newspaper readers were expected to actively do things with those included in lost notices. Readers needed to use them to recognize an object among all those on the move in London. Jonathan Lamb has argued that the details included in lost notices are largely “superfluous,” focusing instead on the notices as sites of longing and desire.⁷¹ However, if we move beyond longing and survey lost notices across the long eighteenth century to contend with such details as empirical entities, we see the presence of recurring, notable features for each different type of object.⁷² John Bender and Michael Marrinan assert that descriptions “are based upon a finite and selective body of features” and “employ different media to transmit the salient characteristics of those objects.”⁷³ Modes of description are historically and culturally contingent, shaped by changing perspectives, context, and media. By including the “salient characteristics” of an object, lost notices communicated which aspects were important in distinguishing particular objects. As such, reading these descriptions shaped how people came to recognize objects more generally and contributed to the cultural construction of eighteenth-century material cultures. We particularly see this in action after the 1720s when a wider variety of people *wrote* descriptions, which included those same key features. However, what those features might be and how Londoners recalled them in moments of loss relied as much on material as textual practices.

Building on Wall’s seminal work, this article argues that object descriptions emerged not only as the outcomes of textual praxes, but also from material practices and attentions. Such insights not only allow us to consider description differently, but also the nature of material knowledge. Recent work has shown how eighteenth-century Britons amassed material knowledge through different means. In consuming, making, and adapting objects, people gained “material literacy.”⁷⁴ In contrast, when lost, this article argues, material knowledge worked differently. People relied on past encounters, their memory of things and those of others. The ever-present possibility of loss, and the power of the lost notices

system, prompted people to give attention to certain features of their objects and record that knowledge in new ways. In eighteenth-century Britain, loss emerges as reflective and generative of, not only sophisticated systems of reclamation, but also material and textual praxes.

“A Silver Repeating Watch Made by Bowly”

As we saw at the start of this article, the notice that Thomas Piggott wrote for the *Daily Advertiser*, probably with the assistance of the watchmaker Mr. Bowly, described his lost watch in detail. We learned that he had lost “a Silver repeating Watch made by Bowly, no Number, a gilt Cap over the Movement, the Case pierced in Relievo, a Blank Space at Bottom in a black Shagreen Case, with Silver Bessel and Edges, and a green Silk String with two Seals set in Silver.” As one of the most frequently occurring items in lost notices throughout the eighteenth century, watches provide a productive case study for considering what the notices reveal about material knowledge and the practices that underpinned it (Table 2).⁷⁵

The central presence of watches in these notices is unsurprising: watches were valuable items. E. P. Thompson estimated that in the mid-eighteenth century, watches cost between £3 and £5, which was equal to a skilled laborer’s monthly wage.⁷⁶ Such estimates are borne out in other sources: £4 was the average value of stolen watches noted in Old Bailey indictments between 1740 and 1800.⁷⁷ Despite their price, watches were a key possession, worth saving for and keeping. By the second half of the eighteenth century, men up and down the social scale owned watches.⁷⁸ Widespread watch ownership was particularly apparent in London. Again, cases heard in the Old Bailey show that by the second half of the eighteenth century, watches were predominantly stolen from plebian men.⁷⁹ While the notices rarely included the name, social status, or gender of the “loser,” making a systematic analysis difficult, focusing on this type of object potentially allows us to see men across the social spectrum responding to loss. It also allows us to see women. Again, while the majority of notices (84 percent) featuring lost watches noted no gender for the “loser,” 7 percent did note that a gentleman or man had lost the watch and 9 percent of the lost notices featuring watches and watch parts described the item as a woman’s or that it had been lost from a “lady’s” or “gentlewoman’s” side.⁸⁰ Focusing on watches thus allows us to consider how men and women might have encountered and responded to experiences of loss.

In his lost notice Piggott listed the type of watch, the material it was made from, its maker, its lack of a number, its casing, and the other objects (two seals) that were attached to it. As such, Piggott provides us with a largely representative advertisement: it lists many of the key features apparent in other lost notices for watches placed in London newspapers over the long eighteenth century. Perhaps surprisingly, these notices rarely mentioned the social importance of, or emotional attachment to, the watch concerned. John Styles has shown how watches were sources of pride and social status for men.⁸¹ Similarly, eighteenth-century diaries reveal that men were attached to their watches and were particularly fearful of losing “family” watches, yet these relationships were not highlighted in the notices.⁸² Such omissions might be understood as evidence of the writer’s awareness of lost notices as spaces of negotiation: they knew that

Table 3. Breakdown of descriptive features in “lost” notices for watches: London Daily newspapers sample 1700–1830

	Number of notices	Watch notices (%)
Total of “lost” notices featuring watches	157	
Notes material of watch	136	87
Notes name of maker of watch	120	77
Notes number on watch	67	43
Notes size of watch	29	19

highlighting the social or emotional value of a possession might raise the reward required. Similarly, it might appear odd that lost notices, in contrast to practices undertaken in court, rarely noted damage or marks of wear.⁸³ Such details are seldom noted, with only 7 percent of lost notices for watches noting imperfections in the item.⁸⁴ Given the importance of watches and the centrality of cultures of repair in eighteenth-century Britain, watches might have been largely free of damage. Finally, it is also surprising that few notices gave detailed descriptions of the watch or watchcase’s decoration. Although some mentioned that the watch or watchcase was “plain,” “chased,” or “enamelled,” few details of decoration or design were included. Rather, surveying lost notices shows that despite the possibility of different genders and social groups placing these advertisements, when writing about watches, notices were highly consistent. They focused on four features: the size of the watch, the material it was made from, who made it, and its serial number (see Table 3). Instead of descriptions of decoration, damage, or marks, or notes on their emotional attachment to the object, examining notices systematically across the long eighteenth century shows that writers understood the size, material, maker, and number of the watch to be its salient characteristics; noting these features made the watch recognizable to others, and thus reclamation possible.

Noting the size of the watch, or the material it was made from did little to distinguish a particular watch from others, yet writers were keen to list these features (see Table 3). Lost notices reveal that watches mostly came in four sizes: very small, small, middle-sized, or large. Similarly limited in choice, watches that went missing were mainly made of one of two materials—gold or silver.⁸⁵ From the 1740s onwards, other materials also came to be listed for watches, such as metal gilt, silver gilt, and pinchbeck (alloy of copper and zinc), but these instances were occasional: gold and silver dominated watchmaking. While listing the material make-up of the watch might offer some sort of distinction to those involved in the reclaiming process, listing the maker’s name and the number of the watch must have proved more helpful in making a particular watch discernible to others.

Maker’s names often appeared on the dial plate, or the back of the watch, sometimes accompanied by the city of making and the serial number identifying a particular watch.⁸⁶ Lost notices frequently included the maker’s name, in this case, 77 percent of the notices sampled (see Table 3). They included some of the most prestigious of the period, such as John Ellicott (1706–72), Thomas Tompion (1639–1713), and Daniel Quare (c.1648–1724), as well as lesser-known names such as John Ward, Thomas Hally, and Charles Clay. Due

to the high levels of subcontracting within the watch and clock making trade, the “maker’s” name referred either to the finisher, or simply to the person who had requested the making and finishing of the piece and had their name attached before selling. Rather than simply a form of branding, in looking at responses to loss we see how the maker’s name played other roles in material cultures. Including the maker’s name in notices meant that writers could offer a clear identification mark that required textual literacy. We also begin to see how making cultures marked objects and that such material practices in turn shaped descriptions and understandings.

Making practices produced other marks that became crucial to descriptions. It was common for people to include numbers in their lost notices (see [Table 3](#)). Such numbers were given to watches by the watchmaker to allow watches to be tracked through finishing and future repairing processes.⁸⁷ The convention of including the watch’s number in lost notices became quickly entrenched. By the time Thomas Piggott came to write and place his notice on May 25, 1745, he noted that the watch he had lost had “no Number.”⁸⁸ Other individuals also sought to clarify their watch’s number in notices. On placing a notice for “a large old-fashion Silver Watch” in the *Daily Advertiser* on December 21, 1742, the writer noted “Number not certain.”⁸⁹ Despite such uncertainty, they were prepared to hazard a guess, “but believ’d to be 4560.” Others placing notices mentioned that they had forgotten the number entirely.⁹⁰ In forgetting the number, “losers” rarely offered more detail as recompense. Nevertheless, that the writers of notices felt compelled to include their forgetting underlines the importance of numbers in identifying specific watches from the middle decades of the eighteenth century onwards. It also shows that in producing these descriptions, victims of theft had to rely on their memory of the possession.

Material Knowledge

That people were able to produce descriptions demonstrates that they possessed material knowledge and were aware enough of the lost notices system to produce the *relevant* details when needed. It shows that while visual practices were important in the eighteenth century, they need to be understood alongside broader material practices.⁹¹ Material knowledge has been shown to be crucial within practices of consumption, but it operated differently in instances of loss.⁹² Absence was key and when writing lost notices, individuals called upon a range of technologies to remember the “salient characteristics” of their possessions.

When writing the first volume of his diary in the late 1780s, the coal merchant Elijah Goff decided to include a note to himself on the inside of his diary’s cover: “No. of my watch 7613 made by Ellicott.”⁹³ As his diary shows, Goff was a regular at “the Change” (the Royal Exchange in the City), a site that was often listed in lost notices, both as the site of loss and as the location in which or near which a reclamation of the item could take place. As such, Goff would have been aware of the possibility of having his watch go missing. Other diaries also reveal how people were aware of the possibilities of loss, particularly for objects worn on or near to the body, such as watches, and acted to mitigate against its effects. On Saturday December 12, 1767, Sylas Neville noted in his diary how he had bought a new outer case for a watch, to “preserve the original

one” that bore the arms of his uncle, “if I should by any accident lose the watch.”⁹⁴ Other individuals took more violent routes to security. Gervase Leveland recounted a conversation with “a drole genius” who remarked that pistols were required to protect his “Family Watch.”⁹⁵ In traversing the streets of London, people understood that their watch case or watch might go missing and due to their value, people sought to protect them.

In his memorandum to himself in his diary, Elijah Goff was careful to note that the number referred to “my watch,” demonstrating a keen sense of ownership. Significantly, Goff made note not of the size of the watch, its material, decoration, or damage, but rather of the name of the maker (“Ellicott”) and the number (“7613”). Perhaps his daily handling of and interactions with the watch had produced a “somatic memory” of its size, material, and decoration, such that Goff felt these details were unnecessary to record.⁹⁶ Instead, he chose to make note of details that were crucial to the process of reclaiming the watch through the lost notice system in eighteenth-century newspapers. Here we see how the potential for loss and their desire to maintain possession of certain items shaped people’s relationships to the material world, encouraging them to take note in ways quite different to those required in sites of consumption.⁹⁷

Goff was not alone in understanding that the maker’s name and number of the watch were the “salient characteristics” to record. At an Old Bailey trial in 1782, when Alexander Colderhead was asked how long he had owned his watch he remarked, “Between eight and nine months, I am a journeyman baker, I know the man that made it, his name is Wilson, the number is 1,267.” When asked if he had known that information before he lost it, he answered “I always look at the number of my watch when I have it first, and commonly set it down; I have lost watches before now, and that makes me careful when I buy a watch to set down the number.”⁹⁸ Recording details of personal possessions acted as insurance against loss. They provided a ready means of remembering the salient features of their possession, allowing for processes of reclamation and proof of ownership. People paid attention to certain features that the lost system made significant, and rather than relying on their memory they decided to put pen to paper. Making such records suggests that Londoners were aware of the workings of the lost notices system and that the system (and their desire to maintain possession of their things through possibly using the system in the future) prompted the generation and recording of personalized systems of remembrance to help them in that task.

Sharing Knowledge

It was not owners alone who held knowledge of their possessions. The work of attending to objects and forming knowledge about them was often performed by a network of people and stored in a variety “places.” In the case of watches, watchmakers, and the records they kept, proved important. Even though watchmakers only acted as finishers, putting watch pieces together, the role required knowledge and judgement.⁹⁹ As Robert Campbell noted, the watchmaker “must be a Judge of the Goodness of Work at first Sight, and put his Name to nothing but what will stand the severest Trial; for the Price of a Watch depends upon the Reputation of the Maker only.”¹⁰⁰ Watchmakers knew watches.

Cultures of maintenance and repair were also important in shaping who possessed material knowledge. People constantly re-used, transformed, repaired, and salvaged materials in eighteenth-century Britain.¹⁰¹ Engaging in such practices informed people's worldview and ensured that they gave attention to objects. In households, mistresses, masters, and servants practiced "an everyday regarding for objects," working to ensure the longevity of materials at stake in everyday and dynastic items.¹⁰² However, certain objects, such as ceramics, required specialized cleaners and menders.¹⁰³ Watch owners also relied on others to clean, maintain, and repair their watches. In 1756, Samuel Harper took his watch to the watchmaker Christopher Potter to have it cleaned.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Annie Lambert recorded in her 1845 diary how on February 24 she had gone to the city and "took my Watch to Wests to have a new face put in & the Case new lined."¹⁰⁵ The specialist expertise of watchmakers was called upon to enact such repairs, furthering their knowledge of watches.

The case of Thomas Piggott suggests that people readily called upon the material expertise of watchmakers when things went missing.¹⁰⁶ Other cases in the Old Bailey suggest that it was not unusual to engage your watchmaker in the reclamation process. When a pawnbroker advertised a missing watch case in November 1729, Edward Yates "went with the Watch-maker to see it, and he said it was mine."¹⁰⁷ In recalling what he did after finding his watch missing, Constantine Gahagen recounted to the Old Bailey on January 17, 1750, that he "went to the Maker, and had it advertised."¹⁰⁸ Similarly, when James Weeden had his watch stolen from him on Saturday May 27, 1769, on the Monday he went to the "watchmaker that made my watch" and had him draw "up the advertisement."¹⁰⁹ When a coach-master Samuel Heaven lost his watch at the Angel Inn on or around August 3, 1791 and thought he saw it at John Fielding's Bow Street offices, he "could not swear to it without sending to my watchmaker, and he sent me the number to refresh my memory; I recollect the maker's name, Philip Page, London, No. 23626."¹¹⁰ While some individuals, such as Elijah Goff, were well-versed in the details of their possessions because of the records they kept, others relied on the material expertise (and records) of sellers and makers. Such insights reveal how artisanal and material knowledge came to be disseminated between makers and consumers. Even after purchase, makers remained important repositories and sharers of material knowledge. These insights also re-situate individual and household practices of knowing within broader networks and show how material knowledge was held collectively and called upon at different moments. Household knowledge (in the form of a servant's memory, or an inventory) and collective knowledge (in the form of watchmaker's memory, or their account books) were particularly important when navigating moments of loss.

Recognition

In the end, Thomas Piggott's advertisement proved effective. In the Old Bailey, Piggott was recorded as stating that "I advertised it on Saturday the 25th of May. Mr. Hall seeing the advertisement that morning, went to Mr. Bowley [sic], and told him that such a watch had been offered to him to be pawned to him for three guineas, and he refused to take it in." Despite Mr. Hall's conscience stopping him from receiving it, the lead he offered was enough. Piggott

tracked the watch to “Sarah Holland’s in Stewart’s Rents in Dirty Lane” and learned that it was kept in a chair there. When he got into the room, he “went directly to the two armed chair, and found the watch in a white paper in the inside of the cushion among the hair.”¹¹¹ After no little tribulation, Piggott managed to reclaim his possession.

In the age of the new and novel, by switching focus from consumption and use to question experiences of loss, a different history begins to emerge. Possessions regularly went missing on London’s streets and this impacted how people related to the material world. People sought to maintain possession of their wares. Rather than (and sometimes alongside) pursuing prosecution, people went to see the warning carriers at the Goldsmiths’ Company and they printed handbills. In addition to these strategies, they placed “lost” notices in newspapers and these proved increasingly important over the eighteenth century. While they had been exploited by thief-takers such as Jonathan Wild in the 1710s and 1720s, the growth of daily newspapers and daily newspaper readership secured the responsiveness of the system from the 1730s onwards. More and more people placed notices in the *Daily Advertiser*. Although the innovations piloted by Sir John Fielding came to impact the rates of prosecution and popularity of pursuing prosecution in the 1770s and 1780s, people continued to place lost notices. Notices even appeared regularly in *The Times*. As “losers” predominantly wrote these notices from the later 1720s onwards, they became adept at knowing and recording details which were specifically important. Doing so impacted what they understood objects to be. People also utilized the knowledge and expertise of others. Material knowledge and remembering was shared among retailers, makers, diaries, account books, and repair records. Losing things was a mundane and everyday occurrence, but it was also generative, prompting the creation and sustaining of new systems and textual and material practices. By changing our focus, a different view emerges. Here we see an eighteenth-century Londoner traversing the streets of the metropolis with a watch in their pocket, but also know they have the details of that watch firmly secured in their memory and recorded in their watchmaker’s account book should the worst take place and the watch fall or be ripped from its place, to become, perhaps temporarily, lost.

Endnotes

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1. Old Bailey Proceedings Online (hereafter “OBPO,” www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, August 5, 2019, unless otherwise noted), July 1745, trial of William Kelly Thomas St. Legar Patrick Cave Sarah Cave (t17450710-27).

2. *Penny London Post or The Morning Advertiser*, May 24, 1745–May 27, 1745; *St. James's Evening Post*, May 23, 1745–May 25, 1745.
3. OBPO, July 1745, trial of William Kelly Thomas St. Legar Patrick Cave Sarah Cave.
4. OBPO, July 1745, trial of William Kelly Thomas St. Legar Patrick Cave Sarah Cave. In the court case, the value of the watch was listed as twenty pounds.
5. *Daily Advertiser*, May 25, 1745.
6. OBPO, July 1745, trial of William Kelly Thomas St. Legar Patrick Cave Sarah Cave.
7. Robert B. Shoemaker, *Prosecution and Punishment: Petty Crime and the Law in London and Rural Middlesex, c. 1660-1725* (Cambridge, 1991), 5, 316.
8. Shoemaker, *Prosecution and Punishment*, 5.
9. *Daily Advertiser*, May 25, 1745.
10. Figure based on analysis of 1170 “lost” notices appearing (with duplicates of the same notices removed) in the *Daily Courant* (December 1702, 1710, 1720, 1730), *Daily Advertiser* (December 1742, 1752, 1760, 1771, 1782, 1792) and *The Times* (December 1800, 1810, 1820, 1830).
11. [Table 2](#) records the proportions of notices featuring certain items. The trends outlined are more apparent when the number of “lost” notices for each year are taken into account: *Daily Courant*—December 1702 (5), 1710 (42), 1720 (66), 1730 (0), *Daily Advertiser*—December 1742 (142), 1752 (131), 1760 (121), 1771 (211), 1782 (220), 1792 (168), and *The Times*—December 1800 (8), 1810 (6), 1820 (20), 1830 (30).
12. Frank Trentmann, “Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices and Politics,” *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 2 (2009): 284.
13. For early work on consumption and material culture see Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (London and New York, 1988); Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990); John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London and New York, 1993); Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London, 1996).
14. Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (Cambridge, 2013); Maxine Berg, Felicia Gottmann, Hanna Hodacs, and Chris Nierstrasz, eds., *Goods From the East, 1600-1800* (Basingstoke, 2015); Markman Ellis, Richard Coulton, and Matthew Mauger, *Empire of Tea: The Asian Leaf That Conquered the World* (London, 2015); Robert Du Plessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing the New World, 1650-1800* (Cambridge, 2015); Meha Priyadarshini, *Chinese Porcelain in Colonial Mexico* (London, 2018).
15. Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005); John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 2007); Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore, 2008).
16. Kevin Hetherington, “Secondhandedness: Consumption, Disposal, and Absent Presence,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22, no. 1 (2004): 159.
17. Hetherington, “Secondhandedness,” 167–168.
18. Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr Sørensen, “Introduction: An Anthropology of Absence,” in *An Anthropology of Absence: Materialization of Transcendence and Loss*, ed. Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr Sørensen (New York and London, 2010), 10.

19. Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen, "Introduction: An Anthropology of Absence," 11.
20. The full collated sample contains 4253 notices from the *Daily Courant* (1702, 1710, 1720, 1730), *Daily Advertiser* (1742, 1752, 1760, 1771, 1782, 1792) and *The Times* (1800, 1810, 1820, 1830). For more on the *Daily Courant*, *Daily Advertiser* and *The Times* as three of the leading daily newspapers see Michael Harris, "London Newspapers," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. Michael F. Suarez and Michael L. Turner (Cambridge, 2010), 424, 427, 430.
21. Jerry White, *London in the Eighteenth Century: A Great and Monstrous Thing* (London, 2012), 200.
22. Douglas Hay, "Property, Authority and the Criminal Law," in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* [1975], ed. Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson and Cal Winslow (London and New York, 2011), 18; J. M. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London, 1660-1750: Urban Crime and the Limits of Terror* (Oxford, 2001), 1.
23. Ruth Paley, "Thief-takers in London in the Age of the McDaniel Gang, c.1745-1754," in *Policing and Prosecution in Britain, 1750-1850*, ed. Douglas Hay and Francis Snyder (Oxford, 1989), 301-341; Shoemaker, *Prosecution and Punishment*; Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*; Tim Wales, "Thief-takers and their clients in later Stuart London," in *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*, ed. Paul Griffiths and Mark S.R. Jenner (Manchester and New York, 2000), 67-85; J. M. Beattie, "Sir John Fielding and Public Justice: The Bow Street Magistrates Court, 1754-1780," *Law and History Review* 25, no. 1 (2007), 61-100; J. M. Beattie, *The First English Detectives: The Bow Street Runners and the Policing of London, 1750-1840* (Oxford, 2014).
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25. Margreta de Grazia, "The Ideology of Superfluous Things: King Lear as Period Piece," in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge, 1996), 24; Lynn Festa, "Person, Animal, Thing: The 1796 Dog Tax and the Right to Superfluous Things," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 33, no. 2 (2009): 13.
26. Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen, "Introduction: An Anthropology of Absence," 11.
27. Judy Jowett, "The Warning Carriers: How Messengers of The Goldsmiths' Company Warned the Luxury Trades of Criminal Activities in Eighteenth-Century London," *Silver Studies* 18 (2005): 12.
28. Jowett, "The Warning Carriers," 12.
29. The Goldsmiths' Company Library & Archive, "Copies of warning notices from a private collection," R13846.
30. Thirty-three of the sixty-nine notices listed the item as simply "lost."
31. OBPO, September 1735, trial of Patrick Gaffney James Barthelemi (t17350911-14); OBPO (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 12 May 2020), April 1755, trial of Francis Pryer John West Edward Wright Winifred Farrel (t17550409-25); OBPO (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 12 May 2020), February 1766, trial of Susanna M'kenzie Edward Tricket (t17660219-20); *The Times*, August 29, 1820.
32. Bodleian Library, Oxford, John Johnson Collection, "Gun. Lost this morning," 1784, Window Bills, t192080; Bodleian Library, Oxford, John Johnson Collection, "Bank notes

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33. Natasha Glaisyer, "'The Most Universal Intelligencers,'" *Media History* 23, no. 2 (2017): 259.

34. Ingrid H. Tague, *Animal Companions: Pets and Social Change in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Philadelphia, 2015), 15.

35. Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society 1695-1855* (Harlow, 2000), 31.

36. Harris, "London Newspapers," 420.

37. Harris, "London Newspapers," 419; Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society*, 31.

38. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*, 85.

39. OBPO, July 1745, trial of William Kelly Thomas St. Legar Patrick Cave Sarah Cave.

40. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*, 131, 227.

41. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*, 256.

42. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*, 249.

43. The majority of rewards (84 percent) offered for watches were one guinea or over, a substantial amount given that the average value of stolen watches noted in Old Bailey Proceeding was £4. On value of stolen watches, see Anne Helmreich, Tim Hitchcock and William J. Turkel, "Rethinking Inventories in the Digital Age: The Case of the Old Bailey," *Journal of Art Historiography* 11 (2014): 15.

44. See Gerald Howson, *Thief-Taker General: The Rise and Fall of Jonathan Wild* (London, 1970), 74–80; Wales, "Thief-Takers and Their Clients in Later Stuart London," 67–85; Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*: 226–258; Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton, 2011), 35–48; Sean Silver, *The Mind is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia, 2015), 252–268.

45. Howson, *Thief-Taker General*, 55–56.

46. Howson, *Thief-Taker General*, 36; Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*, 39, 250.

47. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*, 249.

48. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*, 249.

49. Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Actions of Jonathan Wild*, in *Defoe on Sheppard and Wild*, ed. Richard Holmes (London, 2004), 86. See also Capt. Alexander Smith, *Memoirs of the Life and Times of the Famous Jonathan Wild* (London, 1726), v–vi.

50. Howson, *Thief-Taker General*, 67, 75.

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52. Peter King, *Crime and Law in England, 1750-1840: Remaking Justice from the Margins* (Cambridge, 2009), 102.

53. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London*, 382.

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55. Michael Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole: A Study of the Origins of the Modern English Press* (London, 1987), 190.

56. Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole*, 58.
57. Harris, "London Newspapers," 426.
58. Harris, "London Newspapers," 430.
59. Brian Cowan, "Mr Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37, no. 3 (2004): 347.
60. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society*, 47.
61. Bodleian Library, Oxford, John Johnson Collection, "J. Rozea, letter-press and copper-plate printer," c.1790, trade card, t161075.
62. W. Daviss, "Stolen or strayed, On Tuesday Morning last," Tottenham, 1799. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. University of Birmingham. September 24, 2020.
63. Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* [1987] (Abingdon, 2010), 1.
64. Beattie, *The First English Detectives*.
65. Although "found" notices were not as common as "lost" notices in eighteenth-century newspapers, these too relied on descriptions. The object descriptions included in these notices were limited but they often asked the owner to prove ownership by providing a description.
66. The idea of description as a "textual praxis" comes from Philippe Hamon and Patricia Baudoin, "Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 6. As cited in Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2006), 20.
67. Wall, *The Prose of Things*, 43.
68. Wall, *The Prose of Things*, 112.
69. See Amanda Vickery, "'Neat and Not Too Showey': Words and Wallpaper in Regency England," in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America 1700-1800*, ed. John Styles and Amanda Vickery (New Haven and London, 2006), 205; Amanda Vickery, "His and Hers: Gender, Consumption and Household Accounting in Eighteenth-Century England," *Past and Present* Supp. 1 (2006): 35; Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter, Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London, 1998), 147, 151; Maxine Berg, "Women's Consumption and the Industrial Classes of Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of Social History* 30, no. 2 (1996): 418.
70. Wall, *The Prose of Things*, 14.
71. Lamb, *The Things Things Say*, 38.
72. For the importance of moving beyond longing and desire when understanding responses to loss see, Severin Fowles, "People Without Things," in *An Anthropology of Absence*, Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen, 37.
73. John Bender and Michael Marrinan, "Introduction," in *Regimes of Description: In the Archive of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. John Bender and Michael Marrinan (Stanford, 2005), 4.
74. Serena Dyer and Chloe Wigston Smith, "Introduction," in *Material Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Serena Dyer and Chloe Wigston Smith (New York, 2020), 1; Serena Dyer, *Material Lives: Women Makers and Consumer Culture in the 18th Century* (London, 2021), 9.
75. Watches and watch parts appeared in 15 percent of the 1170 "lost" notices surveyed (excluding duplicated notices). As such, watches were the second most significant

category behind dogs (26 percent) and financial instruments and money (12 percent), but also the most consistent category.

76. E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (1967), 67.

77. Helmreich, Hitchcock and Turkel, "Rethinking Inventories in the Digital Age," 15.

78. Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 98; Moira Donald, "The Greatest Necessity of Every Rank of Men: Gender, Clocks and Watches," in *Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspective*, ed. Moira Donald and Linda Hurcombe (Basingstoke, 2000), 55.

79. Sara Horrell, Jane Humphries and Ken Sneath, "Consumption Conundrums Unravelling," *Economic History Review* 68, no. 3 (2015), 847. The notices themselves also suggest at wide-ranging social engagement with the system. A notice placed in the *Daily Advertiser* on December 24, 1742, noted that "a Gentlemen's Servant" had lost a watch and it was "his own Property." See *Daily Advertiser*, December 24, 1742.

80. Of the 173 "lost" notices in the sample surveyed which featured watches or watch parts, 16 noted the watch as a female gendered item or that it had been lost from a "lady's" or "gentlewoman's" side. Women were also specifically warned to take care of their watches in urban environments. See *The Countryman's Guide to London* (London, 1775), 21.

81. Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 97.

82. See for example the diaries of Gervase Leveland and Syllas Neville. British Library, London, "Diary of Gervase Leveland," 1764-5, BL Add MSS 19211, 37; Basil Cozens-Hardy, ed., *The Diary of Syllas Neville 1767-1788* (London and New York, 1950), 28.

83. For more on practice in court cases of listing damage and marks, see Sara Pennell, "A Cake of Beeswax, Which I Knew to be Mine': Materiality and Identification Amongst the Mundane in Eighteenth-Century England," first given: Things That Matter CRASSH seminar, January 28, 2015.

84. Twelve of the 173 notices listed forms of damage, such as "a little Hole in the inward case" (*Daily Courant*, December 1, 1720); "Glass was broke when lost" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 28, 1752); "a little Piece on one side loose" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 30, 1752); "the Chrystal was crack'd in two Places" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 12, 1760); "broken China seal" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 2, 1771); "Half of the Gilding is worn off the case" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 3, 1771); "the Glass crack'd" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 31, 1771); "the Enamel Plate cracked" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 6, 1782); "small Piece of Enamel broke off the Back" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 10, 1792); "Lost some Time in June last" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 18, 1792); "the Watch is in very bad Condition" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 25, 1792); "Cases much bruised" (*Daily Advertiser*, December 29, 1792).

85. Of those notices listing the material of the watch, 52 percent were silver, 29 percent were gold and 19 percent were other materials such as metal and pinchbeck.

86. Edward Town and Angela McShane, eds., *Marking Time: Objects, People, and Their Lives, 1500-1800* (New Haven and London, 2020), 347.

87. See for example, Guildhall Library, London, Thwaites and Reed Collection, "Watch Repair Book," 1825-42, MS09194.

88. *Daily Advertiser*, May 25, 1745.

89. *Daily Advertiser*, December 21, 1742.

90. Keyword searching the Burney Collection, shows the earliest example of someone noting that they had forgot the number in a notice in the *Daily Courant*, May 15, 1716, entitled “Lost or mislaid, a small flat Silver Watch.” More examples of inclusion can be found in *Daily Courant*, August 26, 1720; February 18, 1723; January 14, 1724; April 21, 1724; January 11, 1725; *Daily Post*, November 11, 1729, April 30, 1730. After this point, “number forgot” became more regularly used, see for example *Daily Advertiser*, December 8, 1742. For more on the problems of keyword searching digital databases, see Tim Hitchcock, “Confronting the Digital: Or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot,” *Cultural and Social History* 10, no. 1 (2013): 9–23.
91. For more on the growth of visual practices see Peter De Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, 2003), 2.
92. Kate Smith, *Material Goods, Moving Hands: Perceptions of Production in England, 1700-1830* (Manchester, 2014), 150–160.
93. Tower Hamlets Local History Library, London, “Diary of Elijah Goff (Coal Merchants, St George in the East),” 1788-96, P/GOF/1.
94. Cozens-Hardy, *The Diary of Syllas Neville*, 28.
95. “Diary of Gervase Leveland,” 37.
96. Susan Stewart, “Prologue: From the Museum of Touch,” in *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, ed. Marcus Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley (Oxford, 1999), 19.
97. Vickery, “Neat and Not Too Showey,” 205
98. OBPO (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, August 15, 2019), December 1782, trial of William Seton (t17821204-42).
99. G. T. E. Buggins and A. J. Turner, “The Context of Production, Identification and Dating of Clocks by A and J Thwaites,” *Antiquarian Horology* 8:4 (1973): 372.
100. Robert Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (London, 1747), 252.
101. Ariane Fennetaux, Amélie Junqua and Sophie Vasset, “Introduction,” in *The Afterlife of Used Things: Recycling in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Ariane Fennetaux, Amélie Junqua and Sophie Vasset (New York, 2014), 1.
102. Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York, 1999), 22.
103. 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 *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meaning*, Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (Abingdon, 2010), 37.
104. OBPO (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, September 25, 2020), February 1757, trial of John Howland (t17570223-18).
105. Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, “Journal of Annie Lambert,” 1845-46, MS241.
106. For more on the relationships between artisans and their customers see Anita McConnell, “From Craft Workshop to Big Business: The London Scientific Instrument Trade’s Response to Increasing Demand, 1750-1820,” *London Journal* 19, no. 1 (1994): 50.
107. OBPO (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, July 31, 2019), December 1729, trial of Mary Cox (t17291203-28).
108. OBPO, January 1750, trial of Lawrence Savage (t17500117-49).

109. OBPO (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, August 9, 2019), June 1769, trial of Robert Merry Richard Belcher Samuel Cornwall (t17690628-46).
110. OBPO (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, August 15, 2019), September 1791, trial of Richard Gardner (t17910914-35).
111. OBPO, July 1745, trial of William Kelly Thomas St. Legar Patrick Cave Sarah Cave.