

seemingly impervious seventeenth century villager. When left overnight to cool, the clean fat would solidify and rise to the surface, making it easy to scrape off.

The lye and the fat would be then boiled together until it became a frothy mass. A small amount was then tasted (!) to see if it was ready. This boiling process would take six to eight hours. The resultant soft soap was stored until needed. To make hard soap, common salt was thrown in at the end of the process, but as salt was expensive and hard to get it was not usually wasted to make hard soap, unless it was for sale, when it was easier to store and transport. Hard soap for retail was often scented with lavender, caraway or wintergreen and sold as toilet soap in cities and towns.⁵

Laundry

Only linen was regularly washed. Woollen garments would have felted and shrunk if they were soaked and were too valuable to replace easily. In most seventeenth century inventories the first item to be appraised was usually 'His wearing apparel'. Clothes were inheritable items, passed from father to son and from mother to daughter. Presumably the lice and fleas were inherited with them! The process of washing linen was an arduous one. Any bad stains were removed with soap before being soaked overnight in a buck tub, the liquid then drained away and replaced with warmer and warmer solutions of lye which would be poured over the linen in the buck tub, the residual liquid being drained out from a tap at the bottom of the tub into a smaller buck called a buckette. Linen cleaned this way had to be well rinsed afterwards as it would have a characteristic smell, due to that vital constituent of lye, stale urine. Herbal rinses were much favoured at this time. Spreading the damp cloth over the grass would then bleach it. Providing the passing birds, village animals or thieves didn't get it, the oxygen released by photosynthesis by the grass, along with the sun, would bleach the linen in a couple of days. It could then be starched in a solution of flour and water. The smell must have been acrid, particularly in the earlier stages. It is no wonder that laundry was kept to a minimum, perhaps only done twice a year. There is supporting evidence from contemporary inventories that several dozen napkins and many pairs of sheets were commonplace in houses belonging to yeomen. This would be the quantity needed to support six-monthly wash days.⁶

⁵ *Soap making*: www.alcasoft.com

⁶ Kevin Lodge (ed): *Landscapes and Laundry* (Eydon Hist. Grp, Vol 3, 2002).