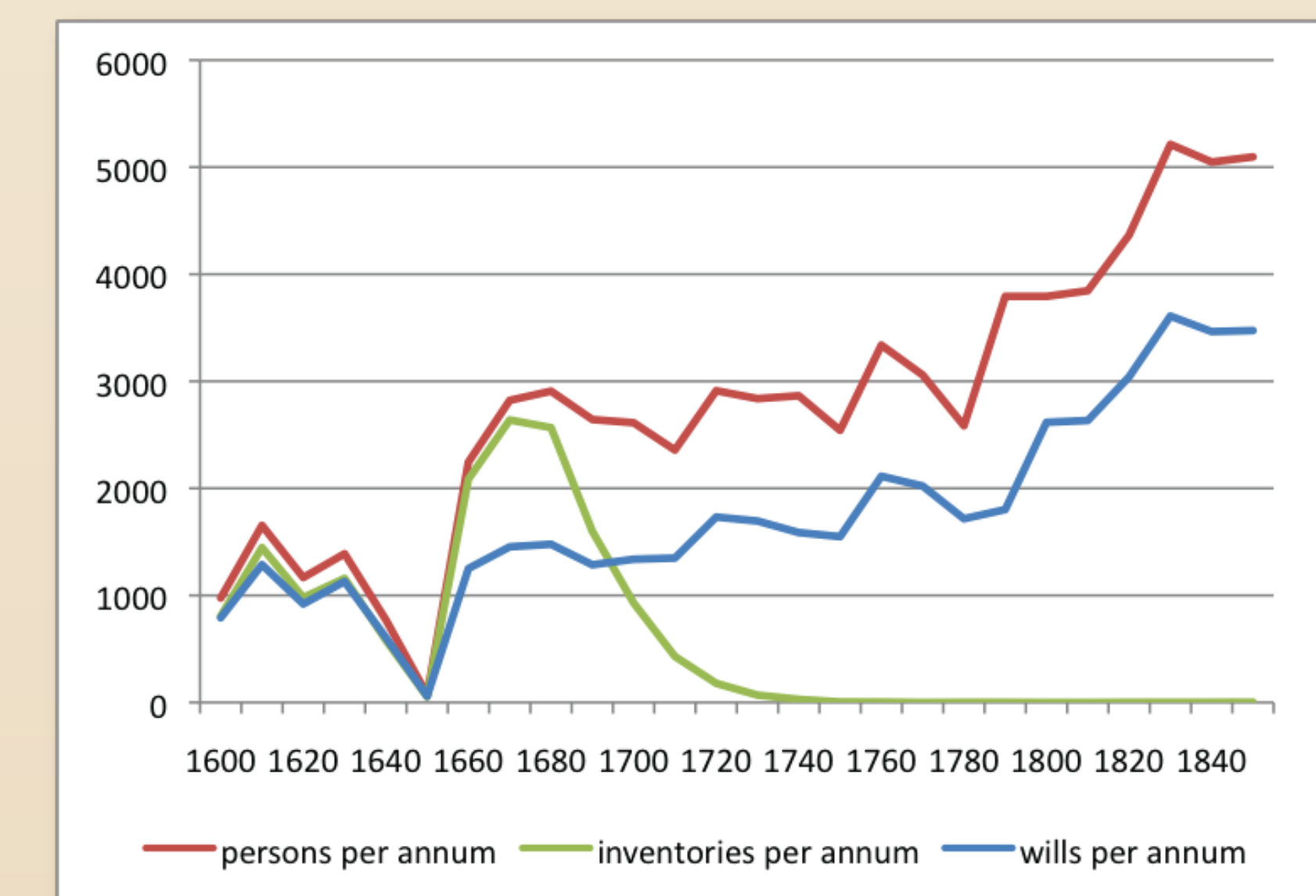


The completion of the North East Inheritance catalogue of the Durham probate records unlocks the research potential of some 150,000 documentary records for 75,000 individuals who lived and owned property in the north-east between the early 16th century and the mid-19th century.

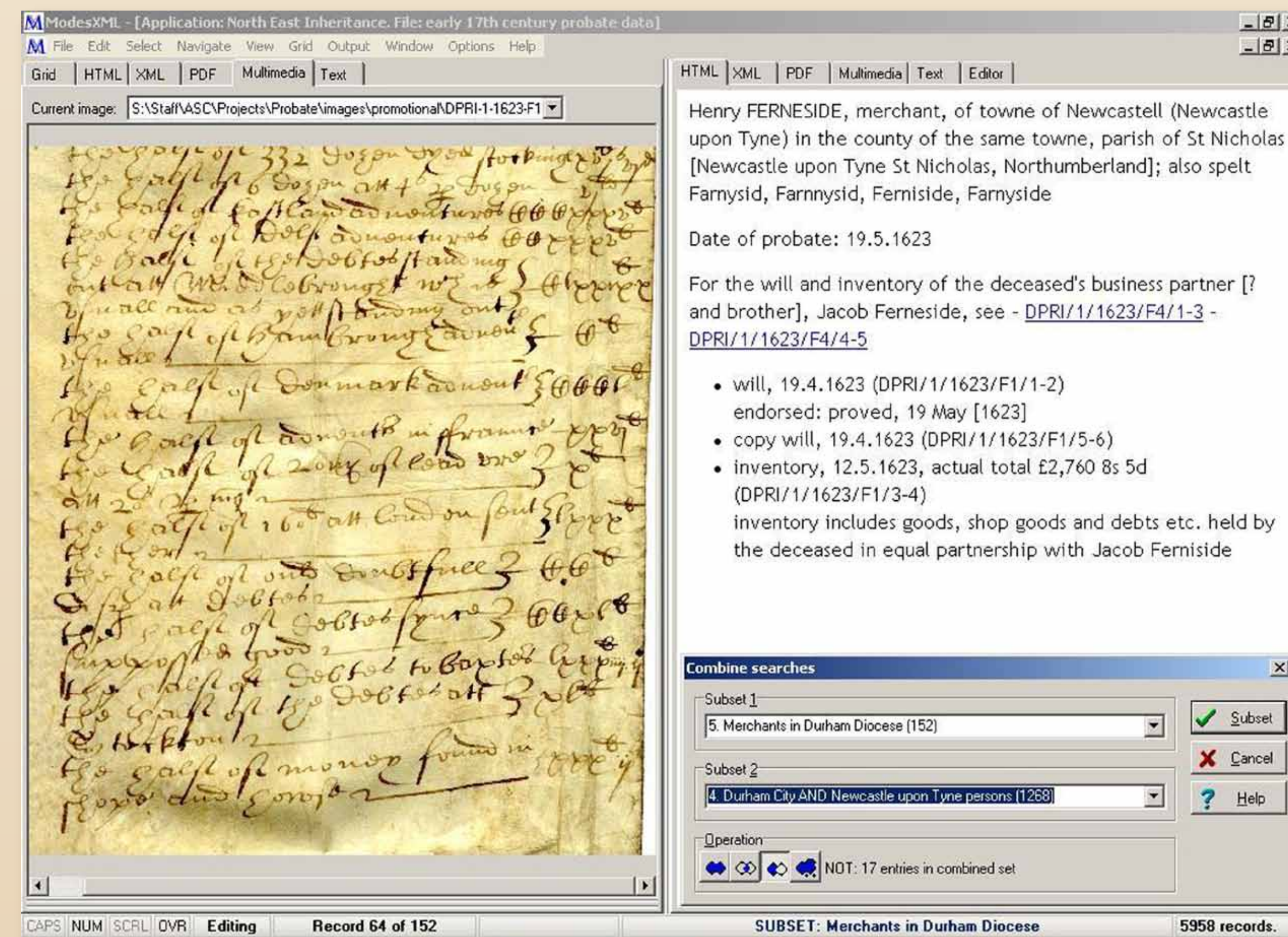
'In a Ph.D. project investigating the ownership of ships and working river craft in a relatively restricted area such as the lower River Tyne, access to a database which allows the relevant probate inventories to be identified is invaluable. Previously, a laborious search of the probate indexes was required followed by a prolonged examination of documents, many of which proved to be irrelevant. The database provides an excellent facility that both validates inventories which have already been studied, and identifies others which are worthy of further, more detailed study.'
Peter Wright.

Statistical Analysis

These subsets can also be expressed in a number of template reports or downloaded as data files for more extended use by the researcher.



A graph demonstrating firstly the significant decrease in the number of inventories surviving in the collection from c.1680, after which date inventories may only have been exhibited to the probate court upon citation. The graph also reveals a stable level of intestacy for much of the period. The dip in the 1650s was caused by a hiatus in the court's function during the Commonwealth period.



From a subset of all merchants in County Durham and Northumberland between 1600 and-1649 (152 records), a subset of all persons living in Durham city and Newcastle city (1268 records) is subtracted; resulting in a third subset of 17 merchants operating outside the two cities in this period.

Selecting Probate Records

Formerly, in order to make effective use of probate records, whether of a town or of a particular socio-economic group, researchers would have had to spend long periods consulting a series of incomplete and antiquated indexes to build such thematic subsets and then still more time to extract the required information from each original record.

'Thirty years ago researching the probate evidence for industrialising Whickham c.1500-1760 was a mammoth task. Weeks' work sifting, then a long wait while documents were microfilmed (at considerable expense) before work could begin. The new catalogue is a remarkable advance, especially for researchers working at a distance. The benefits will be enormous.' Keith Wrightson, Randolph W. Townsend Jr. Professor of History at Yale University.

Now, however, the catalogue allows searches to be quickly made across a number of personal data fields (address, occupation, status) and also document details (date, type, monetary values). Many of these details were not formerly indexed until now, and the use of controlled forms of place names using modern spellings allows comprehensive datasets to be selected with more confidence. There is also the facility to combine multiple subsets of records in simple ways to further focus a dataset upon a particular group or theme. An image of each one of these records may then be viewed online, or downloaded to be viewed or printed later as required.

Parishes	Occupations	Documents
Alnwick	Merchant	9
Chillingham	Merchant	1
Hartlepool	Merchant	2
Morpeth	Merchant	2
South Shields	Merchant Adventurer	1
South Shields	Merchant	2

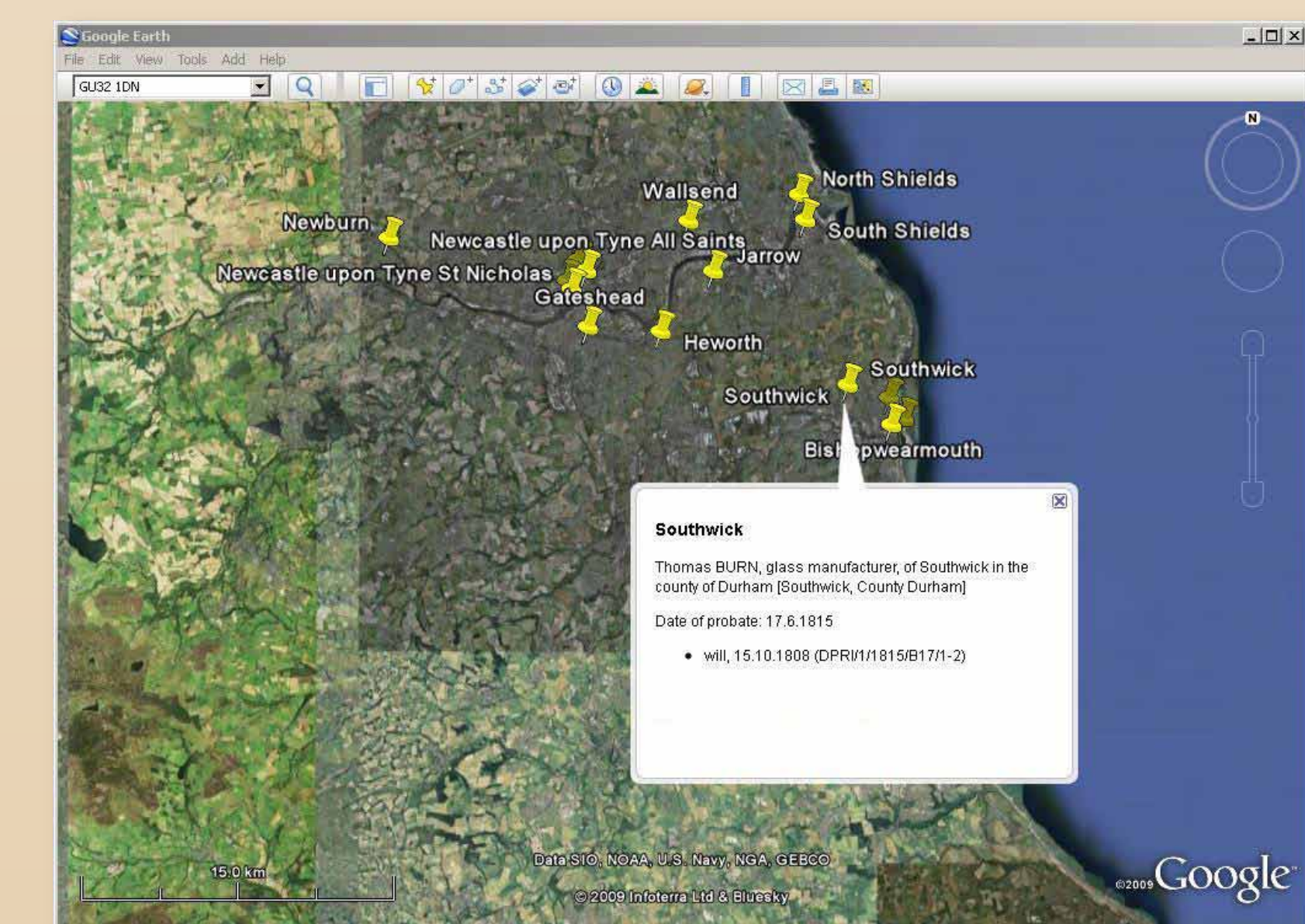
A report listing by parish the 17 merchants (1600-1649) living outside Durham city and Newcastle.

Parishes	Inventory Values	Documents
Alnwick		3
Alnwick	£128 19s 4d	1
Alnwick	£130 12s	1
Alnwick	£2 13s (with account of debts of £7 4s 4d)	1
Alnwick	£282 0s 2d	1
Alnwick	£67 2s	1
Alnwick	£81 9s 5d	1
Chillingham	£27 7s 4d	1
Hartlepool		2
Morpeth	£103 16s 4d	1
Morpeth	£39 16s 3d (with account of debts and funeral expenses of £7 2s)	1
South Shields	£1,695 7s 2d (with account of debts and funeral expenses of £35)	1
South Shields	£151 18s 4d (with account of debts and funeral expenses of £267 7s 4d)	1
South Shields	£499 12s 4d	1

Another report on the same subset, this time tabulating the different inventory values by parish.

Data Exploitation

The catalogue data is held in XML, which maximises the opportunities to exploit the data in other contexts, for further analysis and incorporation within other projects or alongside other datasets available in XML.



Subsets of records might be mapped in a number of ways and combined with other geographical datasets to offer new perspectives on the data. In this case a subset of persons with glass trade occupations has simply been displayed on a satellite photograph of part of the Northumbrian River Basin area in Google Earth in order to demonstrate the component resources of this industrial activity: access to coal for the furnaces and to shipping for import of sand and fire-clay and export of manufactures. This is a good example of an industry that in the 17th century took advantage of the dynamics of an already vigorous coal trade south into London and east into Europe.

The probate records of the region have long been considered a valuable primary source for historical research. The evidence they contain has frequently supported academic theses of regional and national scope, as well as more narrowly focused urban and industrial analyses. Nevertheless, these studies have only scratched the surface of the research potential of these records: it is anticipated that the North East Inheritance catalogue, by rendering all of these records accessible to researchers online and in a form that facilitates sophisticated analysis as well as individual document study, represents a great opportunity both for researchers who are already familiar with the probate collection and for those new to the field. The Special Collections staff will of course be happy to support this work in any way we can, and researchers whose needs are not answered by the online facilities may contact us through the website at <http://familyrecords.dur.ac.uk/nei>.