

The Pastons

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The Pastons were a family from Norfolk who are now famous because, unusually, a large amount of correspondence written by members of the family between 1422 and 1509 has been preserved.

They were an upwardly mobile family of ambitious lawyers who had acquired a considerable amount of property in Norfolk and Suffolk, and it became necessary to live mainly in London to defend the numerous legal challenges which their new wealth attracted. But, the manors they owned had to be maintained, the rents collected, and disputes resolved. This task devolved on their wives and most of the letters are concerned with instructions or reports on their properties, together with the doings of their children.

The letters stayed in the Paston family until the Paston line died out in 1735, and then passed through a number of local hands. In 1774, they were acquired by John Fenn, an antiquary, who published two volumes of the letters, which stimulated public interest. After a period of disappearance, they re-emerged and are now mainly in the British Library. The letters are considered one of the most important primary sources of historical information about the period of the Wars of the Roses and the early Tudors.

William Paston (1378-1444) was educated at a grammar school in Norfolk and the Inns of Court in London at the expense of his uncle, and was described as a "right cunning man" in the law. In 1429, he became a Justice of the Common Pleas. He bought a great deal of land, mainly in Norfolk, and Suffolk. He made an advantageous marriage to an heiress, Agnes Barr. She was a quarrelsome, quick-tempered woman, who had frequent quarrels with the villagers and also with her own children.

William left the eldest of his four sons, John Paston (1421-1466) a large and valuable inheritance. England was experiencing a period of instability in which the nobles were preventing Henry VI and his ministers from governing effectively, so a general lawlessness prevailed.

John was also a lawyer, and spent much of his time in London, leaving his wife Margaret to run his business affairs in Norfolk. Margaret was a sensible and competent woman, and managed this task with great skill. She was the most prolific of the letter-writers in the family.

John became the lawyer for Sir John Falstaff, a successful soldier who had acquired great wealth. He lived at Caister Castle near Great Yarmouth, which he had built at enormous expense. Falstaff became very concerned about the state of his soul, and decided to devote a large part of his wealth to founding a college of six priests and six poor men at Caister to pray for his soul after his death. He made two wills in 1459, the first with many noble executors from the local area. He then changed his mind, thinking that it would be safer to entrust the task to his lawyer and a family friend. On his deathbed in November

1459, he told John, his lawyer, that he had decided to leave all his property to John, on payment of 400 marks, and that, if the college was not successfully established, Caister Castle should be pulled down completely. Proving this verbal will, and defending their title to Caister Castle, became the main preoccupation of the Paston family in later years.

John's son, Sir John Paston (1442-1479), was knighted by King Edward IV, and inherited Caister Castle and the other Paxton manors. After much struggle and after two seizures of the castle by the Duke of Norfolk, Paston finally gained undisputed possession of Caister Castle in 1476.

The Pastons continued to be large landowners in Norfolk and Suffolk. A lineal descendant, Robert Paston, was created the 1st Earl of Yarmouth

in 1678. His son, William, succeeded to the title and had four children who survived childhood, but when he died, heavily in debt, in 1732, he had no male heir, and all the Paston properties were sold.

The Paston connection with Fleet Street was considerable, since successive members of the family lived and worked in the area. The letters record that Justice William Paston (1378-1444) died in a rented house in Fleet Street near St. Bride's church in 1444. His son John (1421-1466), Margaret's husband, lived in the Inner Temple and in Fleet Street at various times, and then moved to a house near Paul's Wharf the other side of the River Fleet. John spent considerable time incarcerated in the Fleet prison on three separate occasions in the 1460s on trumped up charges. John's younger brother Edmund went to live and study law at Cliffs Inn in Fleet Street, and died there young.



The Paston Treasure. An enigmatic painting from around 1466, showing some of the valuable possessions of the Paston family, held in Norwich Castle Museum



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Additional notes

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Additional notes

Sources and further reading:

The Paston Letters by James Gardiner

Royal Game, by Anne O'Brien (one of many historical novels based on the letters) Wikipedia articles o the Paston family, the Paston Treasure, and the Earl of Yarmouth.