

North Walsham and the Pastons

North Walsham lies at the centre of what can be called 'Paston Country'. The first reference to the Paston family and North Walsham appears in Francis Blomefield's 18th century History of Norfolk.

The family is important throughout the history of the Norfolk. They were – and remain to this day – a family of visionaries who chanced everything to rise through the ranks from peasantry to an influential landowning family, in just two generations.

First, I am focusing on some of the male line of Pastons from around 1320 – 1656 and would like to include the well documented Paston Letters.

Some early Pastons include:

Walter b1270 and his wife Cecily Pecche b1270-d1310 who were paternal grandparents of:

William Paston (I) (bc1320) wife Elizabeth Staleham (bc1325) who were parents of Elizabeth, Clement and Margery.

Clement Paston (I) b circa1355, soon after the Black Death of 1349. Clement was of humble origin compared with his descendants. The labour shortage caused by the death toll from the plague meant that many workers were able to command higher rates than was previously the case, and he took full advantage of this.

(As an aside: it is interesting that the black death led to women entering previously male dominated

areas, like land ownership, commerce, craft guilds and legal rights which they hadn't had access to before and gained greater autonomy and social standing for the first time.)

In 1381, at the height of the Peasants Revolt, Clement was involved in an altercation with the Abbot of St Benet's men in North Walsham. In 1413, 32 years later, Clement was still at odds with the Abbot when he was accused of stealing the Abbot's fish from the ponds near North Walsham. Clement may have been from humbler origins but by the time of his death in 1419 he had amassed over 100 acres of land.

Clement's increased status led to a rewarding marriage to Beatrice Somerton (1357-1419), daughter of John and Mary Somerton who was well enough connected for the couple to have ambitions for their son William.

Clement died in June 1419 and had requested a burial next to his wife Beatrice, near the north door in Paston Church (a location usually reserved for suicides, criminals and infants not baptised).

Sir William Paston (b1378-d1444) only known son of Clement and Beatrice, married Agnes de Berry (Barry) in March 1420 who survived him by 34 years and died in 1479; they had 6 children, 4 sons, 2 daughters, between 1421 and 1441.

William was a lawyer and is considered the real founder of the Paston family fortunes. Two decades after William Paston's death it was alleged that the Paston

family had descended from serfs. However, during the reign of Edward IV the Pastons were granted a declaration that they were "*gentlemen descended lineally of worship blood within the conquest hither*"

John Paston (b1421-1466) son of William and Agnes, had an advantageous arranged marriage in 1440 to Margaret Mautby (b1422 d1484), heiress of John Mautby Esq. They became major figures in the county but lived in a time of relative lawlessness in Norfolk, the Wars in France and Margaret through the Wars of the Roses during which 2 of her sons were soldiers.

It was John Paston who took the "great gamble" which almost destroyed his family and may be explained shortly. It ultimately secured their position and saw the family rise through the ranks.

During his many visits to London, John befriended the ailing Lord Fastolf (b1380-1459) a lifelong soldier who had led the Battle of Patay on 18 June 1429 in which Joan of Arc took part.

John Paston eventually "found himself" the knight's lawyer. Fastolf's deathbed testament naming John Paston as his executor and heir. The Paston family gained land and riches, but it began years of disputes, both in and out of the courts. Sir John Snr died in 1466, leaving these unsettled matters in the hands of his wife and children. Interestingly, Lord Fastolf is the man Shakespeare used to model his portrayal of Falstaff)

John had inherited the manor of Gresham but it was disputed in 1448 and seized by Robert Hungerford (Lord Moleyn's men) in 1450 with Margaret carried forcibly from the house which was reduced to a ruin.



Gresham Castle
southerly aspect
courtesy of the Paston
Portal.

John and Margarets' story is greatly complicated by them naming their first two sons John!

John Paston the elder (1441-1466) did not marry but had an illegitimate daughter named Constance (by Constance Reynforth who features in the Paston Letters).

John Paston the younger lived from abt. (1444-1503/4). He married Margery Brews (1446-1495) and there were three children, Elizabeth (b1468 in Kent), Christopher (b1478 d?) and William (abt.1479-1554). This is said to have been a "love marriage" and Margery wrote John 2 Valentines in 1477, the first known to exist in England, in which she addresses him with obvious affection as "my right well-beloved Valentine".

His second marriage was to Agnes Morley of Sussex.

Two Pastons held the office of Sheriff of Norfolk, John in 1486 and a William in 1517

Skipping forward now to William Paston (1654-1732) who was the son of Robert Paston 1st Earl of Yarmouth and Rebecca Clayton.

William Paston (1654-1732) resided at Oxnead Hall and was the Tory MP for Norwich in 1678 and he continued to represent Norwich until he inherited his father's title of Earl of Yarmouth.

His wife was Charlotte Jemima Henrietta Maria Howard (nee Fitzroy – the acknowledged illegitimate daughter of Charles II and Elizabeth Boyle).

Their daughter Lady Charlotte was buried at Westminster Abbey.

Lady Yarmouth died in 1830 and Lord Yarmouth died, heavily in debt, on 25 December 1732 at Epsom, Surrey, aged 78. As his sons, his brothers and their male heirs had predeceased him, his titles became extinct. His heavily mortgaged estate had to be sold.

THE PASTON LETTERS

The Paston Letters are a collection of correspondence between members of the Paston family and others in England between 1422 and 1509 and are important because they provide a unique and detailed glimpse into the daily lives of a mid-15th century English family, offering insights into social, political, and economic conditions during the Wars of the Roses, providing a valuable primary source for the development of the English language at a crucial period in its evolution.

They are of particular interest to linguists and historians of the English language, being written during the "*Great Vowel Shift*" and documenting the transition from Late Middle English to Early Modern English.

(The Great Vowel Shift

This was a significant sound change in English that occurred between the 15th and 18th centuries, primarily affecting long vowels, where vowels shifted upwards in the mouth

Some examples are:

Middle English 'meet' had originally sounded like "mate" and shifted to today's pronunciation. 'Mouse' was "moos", 'to' was previously "toe" and 'wife' was called "weef".)

TIMELINE

1735 - The letters and papers were from the executors of the estate of William Paston 2nd Earl of Yarmouth and last in the Paston line, acquired by antiquary Francis Blomefield who wrote a county history of Norfolk.

1752 - They came into the possession of Thomas Martin of Palgrave, Suffolk. On his death in -

1771 - Some passed into the hands of John Ives, while many others were purchased by Diss Chemist, John Worth.

1774 – Ives' executors sold them to antiquary Sir John Fenn of East Dereham.

1787 – Some letters published by Fenn which piqued interest with the originals of the first 2 volumes being dedicated to King George III and Fenn was knighted.

1789 – 2 more volumes were published

1794 – 5th volume prepared for publication – manuscripts disappeared casting doubt on authenticity.

1823 – 5th volume published posthumously by Fenn's nephew William Frere.

1865 - Authenticity questioned in the *Fortnightly Review* but countered by James Gairdner who was proven right in the same publication by the discovery of the originals of the 5th volume with other documents.

1872 - Gairdner published first volume of a new edition taking Fenn's work as a basis and ultimately published over 400 previously unpublished letters in 3 volumes.

1889 - Originals of Fenn's third and fourth volumes were discovered in 1889 in Ipswich, the last being the ones presented to George III.

The Paston Letters are primarily held by the British Library with some associated documents and letters located at the Bodleian Library at Magdalen College Oxford and a few at Pembroke College Cambridge.

THE PASTON TREASURE



The Paston Treasure is a c. 1663 oil painting depicting two figures among the family treasures of Sir William and Sir Robert Paston, a father-son pair of English adventurers. Commissioned by either Robert or William in the early 1660s, it serves as a historically rare record of a cabinet of treasures in British collecting. It was executed by an unknown Dutch artist who resided at the Paston family residence at Oxnead Hall near Aylsham in Norfolk for approximately 3 months, in order to complete the commission.

The objects were collected by Sir Robert and Sir William who made acquisitions on a long journey travelling through Europe and on to Cairo and Jerusalem. The

collection consisted of over 200 objects and included many natural curiosities made into decorative art objects, such as mounted seashells and ostrich eggs. The painting was unknown for centuries, and before it was donated to the Norwich Castle Museum in 1947, its last owner warned that it was "very faded, of no artistic value, only curious from an archaeological point of view." It is now on display, with the Strombus shell in an enamelled mount, as part of the Norwich Castle Museum Collection.

The people shown in the painting include a girl, possibly Margaret, daughter of Robert Paston and a young Black man, who may represent a real enslaved individual or a fictional person included to symbolise reference to William Paston's travels.

It was displayed as part of a Norwich Castle Museum exhibition in 2018.