

# The Pastons And Their Norfolk

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## Abstract

The *Paston Letters* have two distinctive features as sources of agricultural history. On the one hand they illustrate exceptionally well some organizational features of estate management on a smallish estate, notably the absence of closely structured specialization amongst estate officers and the personal involvement of members of the family in minor matters. At the same time the letters demonstrate the problems of estate management in one of England's most commercialized regions during the 1460s and 1470s, and they suggest that the 1460s in particular were a period of agrarian depression in Norfolk. The combined effect of these observations is to show how even as a rentier family the Pastons were intimately involved in the commercial dilemmas and social conflicts arising from crisis management.

SOURCES for the agrarian history of the fifteenth century, when landlords large and small usually leased out their demesne lands,<sup>1</sup> are for the most part laconic. With few exceptions estate accounts and *valors* lack the current information about the commercial environment needed for explaining management in action. Fluctuations in rents and arrears of rent make poor indicators of either economic change or administrative policy, so that it is difficult to identify the problems confronting estate officials or to evaluate their performance. Memoranda and correspondence give occasional insights into thinking and practice on large estates, but such details are not abundant, and there is even less material with which to observe the way knights and gentlemen managed their affairs.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons the *Paston Letters* are of particular interest as a source of agrarian history. They discuss many

problems of estate administration, and their personal nature means that it is often possible to gauge the frame of mind in which particular decisions were taken. They come, too, from a poorly recorded level of landed society. It would be a pity if their evidence were to be ignored because of its unusualness.<sup>3</sup>

The letters are interesting for another reason. It so happens that the interests of the main branch of the Paston family were chiefly in eastern and north-eastern Norfolk, the most fertile and commercially advanced region of English agriculture. An examination of agrarian conditions here during the 1460s and 1470s from a landlord's point of view is of more than local interest. This period has been seen in many parts of England as the low point of the fifteenth-century economy with respect to population<sup>4</sup>, output<sup>5</sup> and levels of rent.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J L Bolton, *The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500*, 1980, p 220. For smaller estates see N Saul, *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*, Oxford, 1981, pp 234-8; N Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Knightly Families in Sussex, 1280-1400*, Oxford, 1986, pp 109-110; C Richmond, *John Hopton: A Fifteenth-Century Suffolk Gentleman*, Cambridge, 1981, pp 34-5, 79, 84; S M Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry of the Fifteenth Century*, Chesterfield, 1983, pp 14-16; C Carpenter 'The Fifteenth-Century Gentry and Their Estates', in M Jones (ed), *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, Gloucester, 1986, pp 46-7.

<sup>2</sup> K B McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, Oxford, 1973, pp 50-2; R R Davies, 'Baronial Accounts, Incomes, and Arrears in the Later Middle Ages', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXI, 1968, pp 211-29; J T Rosenthal, 'The Estates and Finances of Richard Duke of York (1411-1460)', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, II, Nebraska, 1965, pp 123-4, 137-8; A J Pollard, 'Estate Management in the Later Middle Ages: The Talbors and Whitchurch, 1383-1525', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXV, 1972, pp 563-5; C Rawcliffe, *The Staffords, Earls of Stafford and Dukes of Buckingham, 1394-1521*, Cambridge, 1978, pp 148-9.

<sup>3</sup> The letters are here cited from *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, N Davis, (ed), 2 vols. out of 3, Oxford, 1971, 1976, referred to hereafter as *PL*.

<sup>4</sup> J Cornwall, 'English Population in the Early Sixteenth Century', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXIII, 1970, p 44; J Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348-1530*, 1977, pp 43-4; R S Gottfried, *Epidemic Disease in Fifteenth-Century England*, Leicester, 1978, pp 228-9.

<sup>5</sup> M M Postan, 'The Fifteenth Century', in idem, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy*, Cambridge, 1973, p 43; Hatcher, *Plague*, pp 36-42; A R H Baker, 'Changes in the Later Middle Ages', in H C Darby (ed), *A New Historical Geography of England before 1600*, Cambridge, 1976, pp 202-4; A C Chibnall, *Sherington: Fiefs and Fields of a Buckinghamshire Village*, Cambridge, 1965, pp 147-54.

<sup>6</sup> F G Davenport, *The Economic Development of a Norfolk Manor, 1086-1565*, Cambridge, 1906, p 78; J A Raftis, *The Estates of Ramsey Abbey*, Toronto, 1957, pp 293-4; J Hatcher, *Rural Economy and Society in the Duchy of Cornwall, 1300-1500*, Cambridge, 1970, pp 159-65; Hatcher, *Plague*, pp 36-42; C Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680-1540*, Cambridge, 1980, pp 188-9.

The letters enable us to observe what agrarian problems there were in a well endowed region of the country and to discover what people said and did about them.

## I

The earliest Paston estates lay around the Norfolk coastal village from which the family took its name. Properties became more numerous and more widely distributed in the time of William Paston I, but many of these remained in his widow's hands for thirty-five years after his death in 1444.<sup>7</sup> The rest of his estate was divided between his children. His eldest son, John Paston I, had to be content initially with the manor of Gresham, near Cromer, though he later recovered his father's manors of Swainsthorpe, just south of Norwich, and Snailwell, Camb.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, by his marriage to Margaret Mautby, John held her manors at Bessingham, Matlask, Mautby and Sparham, all in Norfolk. The most important of these was Mautby, which gave him a foothold in the rich soils of Flegg.<sup>9</sup> John's interest in Flegg was increased from 1459 as a result of claims under an alleged will of Sir John Fastolf. The Fastolf properties were scattered, and some were lost after a few years, but the Pastons' permanent gains from this inheritance were all near Mautby: manors in Caistor, Winterton and Bastwick, together with one third of the manor of Runham and some lands in Stokesby. Caister (held 1459-69, 1470-1 and from 1476) was particularly important as

a new focus of the Paston estates in Flegg.<sup>10</sup> John Paston I died in 1466, and the estates were inherited by his elder son John Paston II, who died in 1479.<sup>11</sup>

The distinctive characteristics of medieval agriculture in north-eastern Norfolk are now well known through the work of Dr Campbell. The area was one of exceptionally rich soils, capable of supporting heavy crops with less frequent fallowing than elsewhere. Arthur Young cited Mautby by name in 1804 as an example of the exceptional fertility of Flegg soil, which he regarded as among the finest in the kingdom. It was normal here for over half the sown area to be under barley and for between a fifth and a tenth to be under wheat, as on the demesne lands at Ormesby Hall in Ormesby St Margaret, a well-documented manor near Mautby belonging to the Clere family. In the Paston correspondence there are details of a tenant's cropping on ten acres at Filby which suggest a pattern of this intensive character; 5 acres had been summer-fallowed and sown with barley, and the other 5 were divided between 3½ acres of barley and 1½ acres of peas. The Pastons liked to choose their tenants with care, since this type of husbandry called for knowledge which evidently not all small farmers possessed. In addition to its fertile soils eastern Norfolk had easy communications by sea to London and other east-coast towns. No region further inland could export grain and malt so cheaply.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> PL, I, pp 259, 376, 426-7, 503, 574, 619, 629; II, pp 280, 355, 421. The most important temporary gains from the Fastolf estate were Hellesdon and Drayton (both held 1459-65), Guton in Brandiston (held 1459-c1470), and Titchwell (held 1459-71): PL, I, pp 129, 132-3, 136, 145-6, 292-6, 301-5, 309, 311, 532, 553, 564; II, pp 218, 299, 311, 348, 359, 372, 395, 555, 571. The dates are those of effective occupation.

<sup>11</sup> PL, I, pp lv, lix.

<sup>12</sup> B M S Campbell, 'Agricultural Progress in Medieval England: Some Evidence from Eastern Norfolk', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXVI, 1983; idem, 'Arable Productivity in Medieval England: Some Evidence from Norfolk', *Jnl Econ Hist*, XLIII, 1983; A Young, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Norfolk*, 1804, pp 13, 366; PL, II, pp 408-9. For comments on the technical competence of potential tenants see PL, II, pp 217-18, 380. Cropping and rotations at Ormesby are illustrated in R H Britnell, 'Utilisation of the Land in Eastern England' and 'Agricultural Techniques in Eastern England', in E Miller, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, III, Cambridge (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> PL, I, pp xli-xliii, 22, 45, 175-7.

<sup>8</sup> PL, I, pp 45, 128-9, 223, 251; II, pp 64, 258, 297, 328, 555; F Blomefield and C Parkin, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 11 vols, 1805-10, V, p 60 and VIII, p 127.

<sup>9</sup> Blomefield and Parkin, *An Essay*, VIII, pp 84, 137, 259-60 and XI, p 228. PL I, pp 142, 222, 251, 259, 292; II pp 26-7, 141, 217-18, 223, 257, 280, 328, 353-4, 555.

Like most fifteenth-century families of their status the Pastons normally took no direct responsibility for the cultivation of their lands but leased them out. In most of southern England this policy would have implied freedom from all concern with marketing. But because of the commercial advantages of selling barley in bulk, Norfolk landlords often took much of their rent in kind, and in this part of the kingdom the prevalence of demesne leases did not imply a withdrawal by landlords from commercial activities. Rents in barley were not confined to the coastal region, but they probably accounted for a higher proportion of the total there than further inland. Fifteenth-century accounts from Burgh St Margaret and from Ormesby St Margaret give details of barley rents close by Mautby and Caistor, and it is evident from the *Paston Letters* that barley rents were a regular feature of the Paston family's income, particularly from the Flegg estates. Some of this barley was always malted for sale, but when prices were low the proportion going to malt was increased. John Paston I was said about the year 1445 to have 200 combs of malt for sale at Mautby. Involvement in this trade increased with the acquisition of Fastolf's lands in Flegg. In 1465, in a list of matters requiring sound counsel, John Paston I included 'the gaderyng of the reveueus of my livelode or greynes' and 'the more poletik meane of sellyng and cariing of my malt'. The importance of barley rents is yet more emphatic in letters of John Paston II. 'I pray yow,' he wrote in 1473 on return from a spell of service in Calais, 'make a goode bargeyn for my ferme barly in Fledge, so that I myght haue mony now at my beyng in Ingelond'. A year later, when aiming to return to Calais, he complained that he had not heard from his mother or her servant about how much he had made from the sale of his farm barley. John Paston III, the younger son of John Paston I, wrote to

his mother about the barley rents in Flegg in 1479; he wanted them to be gathered and sold or malted. The Pastons usually sold their grain and malt through merchants, so that they would receive only the local price prevailing in Norfolk.<sup>13</sup>

Besides barley, the other main commercial product of the Paston estates, and of the region as a whole, was wool. In eastern Norfolk there were extensive natural pastures in the marshes of the rivers Waveney, Yare and Bure as well as numerous tracts of heath on higher lands. At Mautby there was a tract of marsh which the Pastons leased for money rents, but elsewhere they had flocks of their own, some of which were large by contemporary standards. John Paston I reckoned to have taken 3000 sheep on Sir John Fastolf's manors in 1459, and he calculated that he had lost 1100 sheep and 400 lambs in 1465 in the raids on Hellesden and Drayton by the Duke of Suffolk's men. Another reference to these raids speaks of 1300 sheep and other beasts driven from Drayton. John Paston II claimed to have lost 600 sheep and 30 neat in the Duke of Norfolk's raids on Caister Castle and elsewhere in June 1471. An undated inventory of Margaret Paston's sheep at Sparham, Hellesden and Drayton lists only 166 sheep and 60 lambs, but shows that different manors specialized in different types of shepherding. Like other wool from south-eastern England, that of Norfolk was of inferior quality, and most of it was probably destined to make the relatively low-grade cloths of East Anglia. Hardly any wool was exported through Great Yarmouth at any stage of the fifteenth century. Wool was nevertheless a principal source of cash for Norfolk landlords, and it is sometimes coupled directly with barley or malt in this connection.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> PRO., SC.6/931/27 (Burgh St Margaret), SC.6/939/1 (Ormesby Hall); PL, I, pp 127, 456, 474, 619; II, p 26.

<sup>14</sup> PL, I, pp 109, 129, 136, 145-6, 292, 314, 329, 488; II, p 359; V Young, *General View*, 366; T H Lloyd, *The Movement of Wool Prices in Medieval England*, Econ Hist Rev, Supplement 6, Cambridge, 1973, p 71; E M Carus-Wilson and O Coleman, *England's Overseas Trade, 1275-1547*, Oxford, 1963, pp 136-7.

## II

By the 1460s the Paston estates were large enough to need the services of a professional administrator. Between 1460 and the early 1470s the letters show that Richard Calle had central responsibility for the estate revenues; he is best thought of as John Paston I's receiver-general. Calle found tenants and employees, collected rents and debts, sold malt, barley and wool, and made payments or cash deliveries out of the sums he received. Occasionally he was commissioned to buy produce for the Paston household. He sealed tenants' leases after receiving authorization from his employer. Some at least of the estate records were in his custody, and he was expected to draw up occasional rentals and annual accounts. A few autograph drafts of his accounts, written in standard clerical Latin, survive on the backs of letters. There are also some English letters in his hand.<sup>15</sup> His place was eventually taken by an old servant of the Paston family, William Pecok, who exercised most of Calle's former duties between 1475 and 1479.<sup>16</sup>

Besides the receiver-general there were other literate family servants with administrative responsibilities, and in busy periods their duties overlapped with his. It is difficult to make clear distinctions between them. John Paston I's notion of efficiency rested on the principle that 'if on man may not attende a-nother shall be comaundid to do it'. Instructions from John Paston I written about 1463 were addressed jointly to Richard Calle, John Pampyng and John Wykes. While John Paston I was away in 1465 Calle was expected to work in tandem with John Daubeney, who was, in effect, steward of the household, and there are two sets of instructions addressed to Margaret Paston, Calle and Daubeney.

Another set of instructions that year is addressed to Margaret Paston, Calle and James Gresham. Calle is also found sharing some administrative duties on the estate with Sir James Gloys, the family chaplain. There was no estate steward to hold courts on the Paston manors; this task seems to have been allocated to varying groups of servants sometimes headed by one of the family. Once in 1465 Margaret Paston was all set to hold a court at Drayton herself if her husband wanted her to. The letters imply a household team dependent for its efficiency upon instructions from the head of the family rather than upon any careful demarcation of duties. The principal servants constituted the core of the family council referred to in some of the letters. They were associated there on occasion with more professional friends of the family; Margaret Paston, writing to her husband in 1465, referred to 'suche as be of yowr counsell lernyd'.<sup>17</sup> Councils such as these, predominantly composed of family servants, were a normal feature of households like the Pastons'.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimate responsibility for estate administration fell squarely upon the Pastons themselves. In January 1465 John Paston I recalled that, even without the Fastolf estates, he had had more cash at his disposal in the old days 'whill I toke hede to my livelode my-self', implying that he had been more in control before 1459. But he remained heavily involved in decision-making. When away from home, he was kept informed of negotiations with tenants, the collection of rents, sales of produce and some purchases. His letters from London in 1465 show that he could handle queries at a distance and was expected to

<sup>15</sup> *PL*, I, pp 92, 96, 117, 142, 259, 279, 309, 317, 377, 407, 522, 531, 542, 548-9, 551, 553, 581; II, pp 217-18, 223-4, 249, 256-8, 328, 373, 380, 395-6. Calle's letters are listed on *PL*, II, p xxvii.

<sup>16</sup> *PL*, I, pp 376-7, 380, 515, 619; II, pp 412, 421-3.

<sup>17</sup> *PL*, I, pp 116-18, 126-34, 136-8, 142, 168, 261, 310, 321, 470; II, pp 395-6. For Gloys, the family chaplain, see H S Bennett, *The Pastons and their England*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, 1932, pp 228-31. The comments on the holding of courts are based on *PL*, I, pp 294, 311, 318-20; II, p 257.

<sup>18</sup> *PL*, I, p 86; II, p 134; Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, p 99; Saul, *Knights and Esquires*, p 85; R W Dunning (ed) *The Hylle Cartulary*, Somerset Record Society, LXVIII, 1968, p xxiii; Richmond, *John Hopton*, pp 151-5.

give instructions about the letting of lands, the sale of grain, and other matters. He told Margaret to cross items off the list of tasks he sent her as she completed them. In September he made rules for drawing up manorial accounts, explaining that he did not want them to contain items which were not strictly manorial receipts and expenses. John Paston II's letters between 1466 and 1479, after his father's death, show less attention to detail, partly because of the amount of time he spent on active service abroad, partly because of disinclination.<sup>19</sup>

During John Paston I's absences from home he expected much of the everyday responsibility to fall upon his wife. In 1465 he enjoined that she, Calle, Daubeney and other friends and servants of the family should put their wits together in weekly meetings. In her husband's absence Margaret had to handle personally business which he would have undertaken had he been at hand, including the instructing of Calle and the other servants. It is unlikely, to judge from his letters, that Calle had much independent authority. He was in any case sometimes away for weeks at a time; he made at least two journeys to London in the Pastons' service in 1465.<sup>20</sup> In that year Margaret seems to have taken over some of his normal duties. Her correspondence shows her to have been exceptionally encumbered with responsibility. She is found having to deal with selling malt, organizing its shipping, supervising accounts relating to sales of barley and malt, and negotiating with tenants. But in other years, too, the same situation sometimes presented itself in the absence of her husband and, later on, when her son was away from home. In a letter of perhaps 1470 she wrote to John Paston II

to let her know as soon as possible how he wanted her to handle his affairs.<sup>21</sup>

Margaret was not the only member of the family to be busied with estate matters. John Paston III as younger son also came in for a share of the work. An early letter from him to his father, probably from 1461, shows him negotiating with potential lessees. In times of trouble he was involved in collecting rents and distraining tenants. In 1470 he was actively trying to collect arrears owed to his brother and in 1473 he was responsible for selling barley on the latter's behalf.<sup>22</sup> The *Paston Letters* conclusively support the idea that the members of gentry families concerned themselves with minutiae of policy and administration on their estates. This conclusion is particularly interesting because the Pastons were no mean gentry. What is true of them is likely to be true *a fortiori* of lesser Norfolk families.

Problems of administration were a matter for frequent comment in letters between the Pastons and between them and their servants, and in the 1460s and 1470s problems were numerous. Despite the exceptional qualities of Norfolk estates the *Paston Letters* provide unambiguous and unusually intimate evidence of the difficulties facing landlords in these decades. This evidence needs careful handling, since the lack of money which Bennett identified as a recurrent theme in the Paston correspondence derived in part from some extraordinary vagaries of family fortune. Some of the former Fastolf manors were the scene of violent disputes with John Paston I's co-executors and with the Duke of Suffolk. Members of the family were often in the front line in defending their interests. There is little to be learned about the normal problems of estate administration from manors whose title was in dispute, since on these rent-collecting was liable to

<sup>19</sup>PL, I, pp lix, 125-46, 292-332, 396-516; II, pp 256-8, 261, 271, 280, 296-7, 299.

<sup>20</sup>PL, I, pp 127, 129, 131, 274, 306-7, 315, 319, 321-2.

<sup>21</sup>PL, I, pp 130, 142, 298, 301-2, 307, 315, 319, 321, 357; II, pp 353, 359, 367.

<sup>22</sup>PL, I, pp 117, 318, 456, 521-2, 529, 532, 557-8.

be interrupted by rival claimants and the problem of finding tenants was increased by the inevitable precariousness of leases.<sup>23</sup> But it is clear from the letters that in several years during the 1460s and 1470s members of the family were worried about their ability to raise cash even on manors whose title was not in dispute. This was so with Mautby, a manor whose title was clear, whose natural endowment was very favourable, and which lay only three miles from the coast. Nearly a month after Michaelmas 1460 the demesne had still not been leased. Calle wrote to John Paston I, probably at this time, to explain the situation; he could find only a man of doubtful suitability who would pay no more in rent than a comb (four bushels) of barley for each acre. Presumably the rent had to be lowered. In 1470 Margaret Paston faced a yet more serious crisis in the management of Mautby; the rent was still too high and the tenant could not pay it. She therefore felt obliged, with considerable misgivings, to manage the manor directly through her servants.<sup>24</sup>

The uncertainty which Margaret Paston expressed in her comments on Mautby was echoed in other letters written by the Pastons and their servants, and the nature of the record gives eloquent testimony to the way the difficulties of these decades were perceived and to the personal involvement of the Pastons in their resolution. There was a cluster of related problems which may be categorized under three heads: low prices, arrears of rent, falling rents.

### III

Low prices of grain in a number of years in the 1460s meant that the Pastons were earning less than they might hope from the sale of barley rents. Calle wrote to

John Paston I, probably in 1461, that 'wee can here non goode price of malt in no place'. In July the following year he reported that the price of malt in Great Yarmouth had fallen and was likely to fall farther because the harvest in Flegg was expected to be reasonably good. Sometime again in the earlier 1460s James Gresham explained the problems that low prices caused tenants: 'Halman can not yet gete monay, for his cornes arn at so litell price that he can not vtter them, and yet is ther noman wole bye it for al the gret chep'. In April 1465 Margaret Paston was already complaining that the price of malt was 'sore falle' to 2s 2d a comb (i.e. 4s 4d a quarter), and in May John Russe wrote to John Paston I saying he was unable to find a merchant who would buy his malt for more than 1s 10d a comb (i.e. 3s 8d a quarter). Then in August Margaret herself informed him that again the price of malt 'is fallen here sore', and was by now only 2s 8d a quarter in Yarmouth. There was another bad patch at the end of the decade. In 1469 Calle wrote to John Paston II telling him that malt should be sold to enable him to pay some overdue wages, including his own: 'the pris her is no better then xx d. a quarter. Neuertheles it were better to selle som of it as the price gothe than for to lete hem be on-payd'. Although prices were generally better in the 1470s there were some bad years, especially 1475, when the king prohibited agricultural exports in preparation for the invasion of France. In January that year Margaret Paston observed that unless barley prices rose she intended to have her barley malted, and she was still beset by marketing problems in May. In February John Paston II, explaining why he could not repay a loan from his mother, told her optimistically that 'iff the markett be nott goode yit I hope jt shall be better'. Low prices twice provoked comment from William Pecock again in 1477. This could

<sup>23</sup> Bennett, *The Pastons*, pp 10-21.

<sup>24</sup> *PL*, I, pp 259, 351; II, pp 217-18.

TABLE 1  
Selling prices of malt and barley at Ormesby Hall, 1440-1475 (prices per quarter)

|         | range          | malt<br>main sales | range          | barley<br>main sales |
|---------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| 1440-1  | 2s 0d-2s 8d    | 2s 0d              | 2s 0d*         | 2s 0d*               |
| 1441-2  | 1s 10d-3s 2d   | 1s 10d             | 2s 0d          | 2s 0d                |
| 1443-4  | 2s 0d-2s 8d    | 2s 4d              | 2s 1d-2s 4d    | 2s 1d                |
| 1444-5  | 1s 10d-2s 4d   | 2s 0d              | 2s 0d-2s 4d    | 2s 0d                |
| 1446-7  | 2s 0d-2s 8d    | 2s 6d              | 2s 2d-2s 8d    | 2s 2d                |
| 1447-8  | 2s 6d-3s 0d    | 2s 6d              | 2s 4d*-2s 10d* | 2s 8d*               |
| 1449-50 | 2s 4d-3s 0d    | 2s 4d              | 2s 0d-2s 4d    | 2s 4d                |
| 1451-2  | 1s 10d-2s 8d   | 2s 0d              | 2s 0d*-2s 8d*  | 2s 4d*               |
| 1452-3  | 1s 8d-3s 0d    | 1s 8d              | 2s 0d-2s 4d    | 2s 4d                |
| 1454-5  | 2s 4d-3s 0d    | 2s 4d              | 2s 8d-3s 0d    | 2s 8d                |
| 1457-8  | 2s 0½d-2s 10d  | 2s 6d              | 2s 4d-2s 8d    | 2s 4d                |
| 1458-9  | 2s 4d-3s 2d    | 2s 8d              | 2s 4d          | 2s 4d                |
| 1459-60 | 2s 4d-3s 6d    | 3s 4d              | 3s 0d*-3s 2d*  | 3s 0d*               |
| 1460-1  | 2s 6d*-3s 10d* | 2s 6d*, 2s 8d*     | 2s 6d-3s 4d    | 2s 6d                |
| 1461-2  | no sales       |                    | 2s 6d-2s 8d    | 2s 8d                |
| 1462-3  | 1s 8d-2s 4d    | 2s 0d              | 2s 4d*         | 2s 4d*               |
| 1464-5  | 4s 0d*         | 4s 0d*             | 2s 4d*-3s 8d*  | 2s 4d*               |
| 1465-6  | 4s 0d*         | 4s 0d*             | 3s 4d*-4s 0d*  | 3s 10d*              |
| 1466-7  | 3s 4d*-4s 0d*  | 4s 0d*             | 4s 0d*         | 4s 0d*               |
| 1467-8  | 4s 0d*         | 4s 0d*             | 4s 0d*         | 4s 0d*               |
| 1468-9  | no sales       |                    | 2s 0d*         | 2s 0d*               |
| 1470-1  | 3s 0d-3s 4d    | 3s 4d              | 4s 0d*         | 4s 0d*               |
| 1471-2  | 4s 0d*-4s 4d*  | 4s 0d*             | 4s 0d*         | 4s 0d*               |
| 1472-3  | no sales       |                    | 3s 4d*         | 3s 4d*               |
| 1473-4  | 3s 4d*-4s 0d*  | 3s 4d*             | 3s 10d*-4s 4d* | 4s 0d*               |
| 1474-5  | 4s 0d*         | 4s 0d*             | no sales       |                      |

Note: the 'range' column records the lowest and highest prices obtained for malt and barley. The 'main sales' column records the price obtained for the largest sale or group of sales. Prices marked with an asterisk were for grain sold with every fourth bushel heaped. Heaping a bushel raised the volume of grain in the measure by a quarter, so sales by heaping every fourth bushel raised the volume of a quarter of malt or barley by one sixteenth. The presentation of prices for sales by heaped and unheaped measures in the same table is justifiable because in practice the differences were slight. Sales by level measure were often made with 'advantage' to the buyer, commonly an additional twentieth.

Source: PRO, SC6/940/3-SC6/942/8

undoubtedly be a source of personal anxiety for members of the family. In Margaret Paston's case anxiety turned to distress in the summer of 1465. John Russe explained the situation to her husband, à propos the low price of malt: 'My mai-stresse is right heuy therfore, but I can not remedy it'.<sup>25</sup>

These comments present some problems of interpretation. It is not obvious, from such independent evidence as we possess, why the prices quoted by the Pastons and their servants were considered so depressed. The prices for malt and barley recorded by the Pastons' neighbours at Ormesby Hall (Table 1) imply that landlords had had twenty years to get used to

the price level of the 1460s. In fact malt prices for 1464-5 at Ormesby were above the average for the period, and even those quoted by the Pastons themselves were not low by normal standards (Table 2). The first point to observe is that evenness of prices for Ormesby produce through the fifties and early sixties probably misrepresents the real situation. The Paston correspondence implies that bulk buyers were harder to find than in the past, perhaps because of contracting demand in the east-coast towns.<sup>26</sup> To get the sort of contracts

<sup>25</sup> PL, I, pp 292, 314, 372, 375, 485; II, pp 257, 280, 306, 327, 396, 421, 423; C D Ross, *Edward IV*, 1974, p 218.

<sup>26</sup> C Phythian-Adams, 'Urban Decay in Late Medieval England', in P Abrams and E A Wrigley, (eds), *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology*, Cambridge, 1978, pp 167-8; R H Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300-1525*, Cambridge, 1986, pp 193-202.

TABLE 2  
Barley and malt prices in eastern Norfolk  
cited in the Paston Letters (price per quarter)

|             |        |        |
|-------------|--------|--------|
| Nov [1461]  | barley | 1s 4d  |
| Nov [1461]  | malt   | 1s 6d  |
| July [1462] | malt   | 2s 2d* |
| April 1465  | malt   | 4s 4d† |
| May 1465    | malt   | 3s 8d  |
| May 1465    | malt   | 3s 4d  |
| July 1465   | malt   | 4s 0d‡ |
| Aug 1465    | malt   | 2s 8d  |
| May 1469    | malt   | 1s 8d  |
| Jan 1475    | barley | 1s 8d  |
| Jan 1475    | barley | 1s 10d |
| Jan 1475    | malt   | 2s 2d  |
| May 1475    | malt   | 1s 8d  |
| Nov 1477    | barley | 2s 4d  |
| Nov 1477    | barley | 2s 4d  |

\* 'euery busschell streken in the combes'

† 'clenefyed and strek met and non jument [?]'

‡ 'at daijs xxj for xx deliuerid of Yermoth mesur'.

For the expression 'xxj for xx' see R H Britnell, 'Advantagium Mercatoris: A Custom in Medieval English Trade', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, XXIV, 1980, pp 43-50.

Note: prices per quarter have been converted from prices per comb where necessary.

Source: PL, I, pp 136, 292, 314, 372, 375; II, pp 257, 280, 306, 396, 421, 423.

they required for their malt they were having to engage in a more energetic search for buyers, and this inevitably made for higher costs and more anxiety. The prices for 1461-2 and 1465-6 cited in Table 2 from the Paston correspondence are generally lower than those received at Ormesby Hall, and though this could be because they relate to different months of the year it may be that the prices obtained for Ormesby malt and barley give an optimistic impression of the movement of prices locally. This possibility has some support in the Ormesby accounts themselves. Normally malt from Ormesby was sold in Great Yarmouth, but in 1460-1 two-thirds of the total was marketed at a distance; 60 quarters were delivered to a servant of

Elizabeth Clere's to sell in Newcastle upon Tyne and 100 quarters were sold in London. The costs of marketing that year were therefore higher than usual, even though the price ultimately obtained for Ormesby malt was not low by the standards of the 1450s. When they could not sell grain locally on favourable terms the Pastons too sought buyers at a distance and themselves bore more of the expenses of marketing. In 1461 Calle reported that because the local price of cereals was low he had ventured sending 100 combs of malt across the Channel to Flanders. In 1462 (probably) he reported that there were likely to be 400 quarters of new and 40 quarters of old malt available at Caister and recommended shipping them from Great Yarmouth to London at 6d a quarter to get a better price than he could hope for locally. A policy of direct shipment is also implied in John Paston I's instruction to his wife in 1465 that malt from Guton should be shipped from Blakeney, fifteen miles to the north-west. The Pastons had the particular advantage that when John Paston I was in London he was able to gather market information there, to sell any wool and malt which was sent to him, and to find contractors for produce still in Norfolk. In 1465 Margaret Paston let him know that she had heard neither from Colte of Newcastle nor from any other contractor who would buy his malt, which suggests he had previously told her about some of his negotiations.<sup>27</sup> Such active marketing involved landlords in higher costs, even if they eventually obtained better prices for their grain than they would otherwise have done. On this interpretation, then, lower prices in the local market encouraged more personal involvement by members of the Paston family in the 1460s, though even their most strenuous endeavours could achieve no more than making the best of a bad job.

<sup>27</sup> PL, I, pp 126, 130, 136, 298; II, pp 257, 280; PRO, SC6/941/5.

## IV

The second main problem was arrears of rent. Tenants were not able to engage in the type of marketing activity which the Pastons undertook; they were restricted to selling at local prices. And low prices meant that they often fell behind with their money rents. A letter from Calle to John Paston I, probably of 1461, mentions problems in collecting rents at Gresham. Margaret Paston wrote to her husband early in 1462 that 'as for gadyryng of mony I sey nevyr a werse seson', telling him that Calle could collect debts neither on the Pastons' own lands nor on those claimed from the Fastolf estates. Sometime in the earlier 1460s James Gresham corresponded about arrears of rent at Great Cressingham, which he partly explained by reference to low prices. The rent for the manor of Stratton was behind 'for certeine yeres' in 1462. Arrears were one of the things depressing Margaret Paston in the summer of 1465; Russe told her husband that 'she considerith the gret decay of youre lyfode, the gret dettys that hange in detourys hands'. In 1469 there were problems all over the estate; in May Calle wrote a sombre letter to John Paston II saying how little money he had been able to collect and observing that 'her is moche malte made and not solde'. The problem of accumulated debts continued to present administrative problems in the summer of 1470, when John Paston III wrote that he had been unable to collect any arrears from his brother's estates. He proposed that a clear assessment of arrears should be drawn up for the whole estate, together with a statement of his brother's debts. By October that year Margaret Paston reckoned she was owed over £80 by the farmer of Mautby manor. There are more references too of arrears of rents from the late 1470s.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> PL, I, pp 279, 351, 557-8, 615; II, pp 258, 272, 306, 327, 395-6, 412.

The problem of arrears did not reduce the Pastons to passivity. On the contrary, it induced a more embattled attitude towards their tenants. The failure of tenants to pay rents and arrears was at least in part the result of marketing problems like those of the Pastons themselves, and this was well understood to judge from some of the comments already cited. But the Pastons did not restrict themselves to charitable explanations. They also believed that tenants were deliberately resisting payment. Such suspicions were particularly acute during the period of political unrest between 1461 and 1463; in 1462 'John Paston seyth they that may pay best, they pay werst. They fare as thow they hopyd to haue a newe werd (*world*)'.<sup>29</sup> But even in other years the Pastons sensed a spirit of tenant resistance not uncommon in the fifteenth century.<sup>30</sup> This in turn encouraged them to adopt an aggressive approach to rent-collecting. In 1465, for example, John Paston I noted that the lessee of Swainsthorpe, and probably those of Snailwell and Gresham, had fallen heavily into debt because they had not been visited often enough and that greater exertions would be necessary to collect the rents there. Some later resolutions are more explicit. The seizing of crops at harvest time to ensure the payment of dues was adopted where necessary. John Paston III wrote to his brother in 1472 that his servant William Barker could collect no money till the harvest, but intended then to distrain on crops in the field. There survives a plan of campaign for the harvest of 1477 on the estates of Agnes Paston, the aged widow

<sup>29</sup> PL, I, p 279. This letter reports rumours of an immanent popular uprising hostile to the Duke of Suffolk. For the instability of the time, see Ross, *Edward IV*, pp 41-5.

<sup>30</sup> C. Dyer, 'A Redistribution of Incomes in Fifteenth-Century England?', in R. H. Hilton (ed), *Peasants, Knights and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History*, Cambridge, 1976, pp 203-14; Dyer, *Lords and Peasants*, pp 275-82; R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1975, pp 64-73; R. H. Hilton, 'Ideology and Social Order in Late Medieval England', in idem, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, 1985, pp 246-52.

of William Paston I. The properties from which rents were to be collected were listed with a view to making sure that Agnes's interests were remembered. In 17 out of 35 cases tenants were to be distrained for arrears of rent, and the way of doing so was prearranged. Eight tenants were to be left to take their corn in, then the Pastons' officers were to seal their barn doors and distrain them. At Trunch the crops were to be distrained immediately after cutting, while they still lay on Agnes's land, presumably because the tenant's barn was held from someone else. Evidently collecting rents in the 1470s was a matter for vigilance and the judicious use of force. These problems were the result only of economic conjuncture; the ownership of these properties, which had belonged to William Paston I, had never been in question.<sup>31</sup>

## V

The third area of difficulty was the problem of maintaining the level of rents; the difficulty of letting lands on the old terms meant that there was downward pressure on rents which it was often hard to resist. Calle wrote to John Paston I in 1461 that a lease of 40 acres of arable in Boyton was so out of tilth that scarcely anyone would give anything for it; to get any rent at all it would be necessary to spend a lot of money on repairs. 'And as for Spitlynges,' he added, 'I haue lete som of the land in smale parcelles because I cowde gete no fermour for it'. A certain Kook, the tenant of 18 acres at Earlham, was at this time refusing to lease them on the old terms at 7*d* or 8*d* an acre; he would only have them at 6*d* an acre and would not commit himself to undertaking repairs. Maintaining the rent of Mautby manor was a problem in the sixties, as we have already seen. There were arguments against struggling too hard to maintain existing levels of rent.

A couple of letters of 1467 argue that rents for manorial demesne lands at Snailwell and Sporle should be lower; Gloys wrote that 'if ye vndo your tenauntes with ouer-chargyng of your fermes it shall distroy your tenauntes and lordshepes'.<sup>32</sup>

The maintaining of rent levels inevitably required complex deals with potential tenants. Usually these negotiations were conducted by Calle, but as with the other main problems of estate management difficult cases were often taken up by members of the family. A couple of instances will demonstrate the intricacy of such dealings. In an example probably from 1461, both John Paston III and his mother are seen haggling about the level of rent at Earlham. The information is known from a subsequent letter from John Paston III to his father. It is interesting to see in this example how the money rent, the length of the lease and responsibility for repairs were seen as interdependent items for negotiation:

I haue spoke wyth Warwyk and Stwkle fore the plase [*residence*] and the londys in Arleham, and they wyle not geue but vij d. for an acre, and they to kepe the reparacion of the plase; but so I wold not lete heme haue it. But Stwkle hathe promysyd me that all the londys schalle be purveyd for as for thys yer [*leased on the same terms as this year*]. Warwyk was wyth my modyr as thys day, and he desyryth to haue the londys in Arleham for vij d. an acre as for thys yer. And in as myche as Stwkle had promysyd me to purvey for [*lease*] the londys for thys yer, I cownselyd my modyr that he [*i.e. Warwyk*] schuld not haue heme wyth-owt he wold tak hem for a longer terme.

The second example involves correspondence from Calle to John Paston I in London, a further letter from John to Margaret, and then an interview conducted by Margaret. In 1465, seven years or so after the rent of Mautby Marsh had fallen from £8 6*s* 8*d* to £8, Margaret described her attempt to make the sitting tenant pay the old rent. Her husband had told her on

<sup>31</sup> PL, I, pp 128-9, 175-7, 576.

<sup>32</sup> PL, I, pp 521; II, pp 256, 261, 376-7.

Calle's authority that there was an (unnamed) rival bidder who would pay more, so Margaret used this phantom in her negotiations:

I have spoke wyth Borges that he shuld heyne [*raise*] the price of the mershe or ellis I told hym that he shuld no lenger have it, for ye myght [*have*] other fermors therto that wold geve ther-fore as it was late be-fore; and yf he wold geve therfore as moche as a-nother man wold, ye wold that he shuld have it be-for any other man. And he seyde he shuld geve me answere be a fortynyght after Esterne. I can get non other fermor ther-to yet.

The delay of three weeks suggests that Borges was unconvinced.<sup>33</sup>

These observations imply that the financial problems of the Pastons in the 1460s and 1470s were not caused solely by personal failings and misfortunes, such as John Paston II's alleged improvidence or the loss of most of the Fastolf lands. The Pastons' friends were in the same sort of difficulty. In 1461 Sir John Heveningham wrote to excuse himself from doing a favour for John Paston I on the grounds that he was having problems in collecting his dues and maintaining his livelihood. A letter from Margaret Paston to John Paston III, probably in 1470, tells of her 'cosyn Calthorp', who was in such in straitened circumstances because his tenants would not pay him that he was having to reduce the size of his household. Margaret Paston had feared the same fate in 1469, when she told her son that 'as fore myn owyn lyuelod, I am so symppely payed thereof that I fere me I xale be fayn to borow fore my-sylfe ore ell to breke vp howsold, ore bothe'.<sup>34</sup> The Pastons were perhaps less hard pressed for cash in the 1470s than they had been in the 1460s. Most problems concerning the Fastolf inheritance were resolved in 1470, though possession of Caister Castle was not assured until 1476. The recovery of several properties in eastern Norfolk from junior branches of the

family enabled John Paston II to raise money on mortgages without any reduction of his normal income, and he benefited temporarily by the sale of timber from Sporle Wood. At times he earned an income in Calais, where one could obtain wages sufficiently high to live like a gentleman. But although the 1470s were less troubled than the previous decade, the Pastons remained aware of living in hard times. A memorandum concerning the income of Oxnead parsonage drawn up in 1478 describes a severe decline from the level of 1420.<sup>35</sup> It is tempting to describe the problems described in the letters as those of agrarian depression. A contemporary formulation of the problem in 1475 was that 'the contry is bareyn of money'.<sup>36</sup> The letters imply that malt prices in the years 1460-2, 1465, 1469-70, 1475 and 1477 were particularly low and that on each occasion the problem was viewed as more than a transient disappointment. The family's concern with low prices and rents in eastern Norfolk, despite the commercial opportunities available there, confirms the view of these decades – and particularly the 1460s – as a period of difficulty for landlords in eastern England.

## VI

The *Paston Letters* have been used to illustrate the ravages of lawlessness and violence in the later Middle Ages while this less conspicuous evidence of the problems of estate management during the 1460s and 1470s has been ignored. Such one-sidedness needs correcting if only because it leads to an unduly particularized interpretation of the family's problems. It is of course true that the Pastons were in a self-imposed predicament after 1459 because of John Paston's claims on the

<sup>33</sup> *PL*, I, pp 129, 293, 521.

<sup>34</sup> *PL*, I, pp 346-8; II, pp 258-9.

<sup>35</sup> *PL*, I, pp xlviii-1, 178, 410-11, 470, 474, 477, 486. For the sale of timber from Sporle Wood, see *PL*, I, pp 372, 447, 458-9, 550, 569-70; II, pp 356-7, 406-7.

<sup>36</sup> *PL*, I, p 377.

Fastolf inheritance and the violent opposition he encountered. But the Pastons also suffered, as did their neighbours, from the problem of maintaining their livelihood in a period of stagnant or contracting demand. They were no more passive in the face of economic difficulties than they were in warding off challenges to their property. In adverse circumstances they and their servants responded speedily to changes in prices and other economic circumstances, even on occasion acting in anticipation of events. When things seemed blackest they engaged more energetically in finding buyers for their barley and outmanoeuvring their tenants. Estate organization involved close co-operation between members of the family and their servants and the frequent interchange of news, comment and advice. Without the letters this is something we could never have known and should not have presumed to guess.

Can the personal involvement of the Pastons in their estates be used as evidence that the smaller landlords of fifteenth-century England possessed a more commercial spirit than the nobility? The question needs subdividing, since even within the category of smaller landowners there is a distinction to be made between knights and others. Did knightly status induce an ethic opposed to preoccupation with mundane affairs? It is interesting that John Paston II, knighted in 1463, shared less in the administration of the family estates than either his mother or his younger brother. Bennett describes him as 'easy-going'; his father used stronger language. But this probably tells us more about elder sons in *nouveau riche* families than it does about the knightly ethic as such. To counter the example of John Paston II we need look no farther than the Paston family's benefactor Sir John Fastolf. Not only did he acquire his English estates with great shrewdness; he administered them with the personal touch of a committed businessman. The knight was plainly more of an

entrepreneur than his secretary, William Worcester, who had qualms about his employer's tying up capital in ships, merchandise and Yarmouth property. Fastolf was extraordinary, but the fact that so successful a military man should have such interests is enough to sink the idea that the knightly ethic precluded the energetic management of worldly goods. The business-like attitude which fifteenth-century knights adopted to military campaigns should, in itself, warn us against assuming that they thought like Sir Percival.<sup>37</sup>

The distinction between smaller landowners and the nobility is a different question. It was more the rule than the exception for noblemen to take an active interest in the administration of their estates, though the extent of their involvement depended in part on the time taken up by military or political duties. Some leading landlords of the later fifteenth century – Anthony Wydeville, Earl Rivers, or Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham – became known for their mercenary attitude. Lord Edmund Grey whose political role was slight, took so great an interest in estate matters that he took over financial responsibilities from his household officers. It would be a mistake to suppose that the nobility were less commercially minded than smaller landlords; the difference between winning and wasting was more a matter of personality than of social class. The differences between great landlords and lesser men lay rather in the type of tasks that they undertook and the type of administration that they headed. The estates of the nobility inevitably needed more administering because of their greater size and wider geographical spread. The

<sup>37</sup> Bennett, *The Pastons*, pp 13, 230; *PL*, I, p 132; II, pp 171–2; K B McFarlane, 'The Investment of Sir John Fastolf's Profits of War', *TRHS*, 5th ser, VII, 1957, pp 115–16; A Smith, 'Litigation and Politics: Sir John Fastolf's Defence of His English Property', in A J Pollard (ed), *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History*, Gloucester, 1984, pp 60, 73; E M Carus-Wilson, 'Evidences of Industrial Growth on some Fifteenth-Century Manors', in idem, *Essays in Economic History*, 3 vols, 1954, 1962, II, pp 160–2.

Pastons' personal attentions to local detail across their estates was more than a nobleman would have been able to tolerate. Large estates required their bureaucracies to be carefully structured; the tasks of different servants had to be separately demarcated to eliminate slackness and to allow for accountability. There had to be more tiers of administration between a lord and his manors, usually with some sort of regional division. Even Lord Edmund Grey needed to delegate much of the local administration to local receivers. The councils of noblemen, too, had sometimes to be capable of taking command of affairs. When a nobleman was preoccupied with other business, as during a military campaign, he was more likely to leave responsibility in the hands of his council, his receiver-general and his auditor than to his wife.<sup>38</sup>

In this respect the *Paston Letters* illustrate with exceptional clarity the main features distinguishing smaller estates from greater ones in the late Middle Ages. Even in regions where the commercial opportunities were fewer than in Norfolk the personal involvement of landlords in minute matters was characteristic of small estates. The servants of minor families were accordingly less specialized than those of the nobility and estate organisation was less structured. These points can be demonstrated with shreds of evidence from earlier periods and in other parts of England. But there is no other evidence to compare in vividness and coherence with that of the Paston correspondence. Despite their neglect by historians of agriculture, the letters deserve to be ranked as a source of major importance for the history of estate management in England.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> McFarlane, *The Nobility*, pp 47-53; J T Rosenthal, *Nobles and the Noble Life, 1295-1500*, 1976, pp 77-9; Bolton, *Medieval English Economy*, pp 225-8; C D Ross and T B Pugh, 'Materials for the Study of Baronial Incomes in Fifteenth-Century England', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, VI, 1953-4, pp 190-4; C D Ross, *The Estates and Finances of Richard Beauchamp Earl of Warwick*, Dugdale Society Occasional Paper 12, Oxford, 1956, pp 5-14; J M W Bean, *The Estates of the Percy Family, 1416-1537*, Oxford, 1958, pp 141-7; R I Jack, (ed) *The Grey of Ruthin Valor, 1467-8*, Sydney, 1965, pp 45-51; Rosenthal, 'The Estates and Finances', pp 169-85; Hatcher, *Rural Economy and Society*, pp 42-51; Pollard, 'Estate Management', pp 554-5, 561-4; Rawcliffe, *The Staffords*, pp 45-65.

<sup>39</sup> R H Britnell, 'Minor Landlords in England and Medieval Agrarian Capitalism', *Past & Present*, LXXXIX, 1980, pp 7-8; Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, p 98; Richmond, *John Hepton*, pp 97, 117-20, 137.