Historians of medieval England are well served by a vast array of extant documents. Royal and legal records, chronicles, wills, deeds, manorial rolls, literature and scholarly writings were all compiled and preserved for a future public readership. A collection of family letters, on the other hand, forms a completely different kind of archive. Such documents record private conversations between individuals, conversations that were not meant, or expected, to be overheard. Whilst the Paston family’s circumstances were not necessarily unique, the fact that their voluminous correspondence has survived certainly is. This archive, which comprises over a thousand letters sent and received during the fifteenth century, provides us with an unparalleled source for life in late-medieval England. Since their initial publication by James Fenn in 1787, the letters have aroused great interest. Transcripts of them are now relatively accessible in the editions by James Gairdner (London 1904; reprinted in facsimile, Stroud 1983) and Norman Davis (Oxford 1971-76), but the language does not flow for the non-specialist reader. In Blood and Roses, Helen Castor extracts the story of the Paston family from their letters, frequently quoting directly from them. Although spellings have been modernised, the original vocabulary has been retained, rendering the correspondents easier to understand but leaving them in their contemporary setting.

The family took just one generation to rise above its humble origins. Although Clement Paston (d. 1419) was a simple Norfolk husbandman, he ensured that his son William (d. 1444) was well educated. William pursued a career in the law and eventually became a justice in the court of Common Pleas at Westminster. But being a successful lawyer was not sufficient to secure his position within the Norfolk gentry community: he needed to acquire an estate because landownership was the defining mark of a gentleman. Although he was able to purchase several manors, the transactions were challenged at law by other interested parties. The overriding theme of the Pastons’ letters, therefore, is their struggle to retain those lands and to acquire more, a struggle that sometimes embroiled them in physical danger when their opponents resorted to violence but more often entangled them in lengthy lawsuits. Of course, the very fact that various family members, or their servants, were away dealing with these matters gave rise to the bulk of their letters: those at home needed instructions or news and vice versa.

William’s eldest son, John (died 1466), a serious, uncompromising man, was single-minded in his efforts to safeguard Paston interests. His refusal to accept that his father had revised his will verbally apparently contradicts his subsequent claim regarding the validity of the verbal will of his mentor, Sir John Fastolf. Dr Castor offers logical explanations for his actions in both cases and demonstrates how they shaped not only the family’s fortunes but also relationships within it. John’s subsequent quest to carry out what he believed to be Fastolf’s wishes became caught up in the political turbulence of the period. After his early death, his sons John II (died 1479) and John III (died 1504) continued the struggle for the Fastolf lands. They secured the support of various noblemen at different times and consequently their achievements, like their father’s, were dependent on national events. Unwittingly and unwillingly they became caught up in the political upheavals of the ‘Wars of the Roses’. The eventual settlement of the will not only released the family from an exhausting and bewildering roller-coaster of litigation and patronage but also removed the need for constant correspondence. Thereafter the torrent of letters dwindles to a trickle.

Running through the story is the stability provided by the Paston wives, in particular John I’s wife, Margaret (died 1484), who assisted her husband by providing both moral support in his legal battles and practical support in maintaining their various manors in Norfolk during his frequent absences. It is her correspondence that reveals most about relationships within the family and its immediate circle. Her defence of their eldest son, John II, against his father’s constant criticism contrasts markedly with her own frustration with that same son after his father’s death. But this book is not a simple narrative. Dr Castor not only describes the Pastons’ actions and reactions but also analyses them, always suggesting plausible motives or reasons. She is careful to place the family and its dealings in context so that the reader is always aware of the prevailing situation in Norfolk and, when it affects the Pastons, in London and elsewhere in the country at a time when, according to Johan Huizinga’s ‘so motley was life that it bore the mixed smell of blood and roses’ (Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, Harmondsworth 1968, p. 25).

This book is fascinating to read and has been well researched. Illustrations and figures include family trees of the Pastons and the rulers of England, a map of East Anglia and various relevant pictures, although sadly no images of the family have survived. A short glossary defines less familiar words and
those whose meanings have changed. All quotations are fully referenced to the editions by Davis or Gairdner, a particularly helpful and laudable aspect of the book. As many of the original letters were undated, where applicable, Dr Castor’s reinterpretation of a date given by those editors is explained. Like the Pastons, she shows no special preference for York or Lancaster: a stark assessment of Richard III’s actions (pp. 288, 289) is counterbalanced by a piercing epithet for Henry Tudor (p. 290). She displays her scholarship without being heavy-handed and in so doing provides the non-specialist with a vivid and balanced account not only of the Paston family but also of the period in which they lived.

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