THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 138:
FAMILY MATTERS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 138: Family Matters. In this episode, we're going to look at the period of warfare in the mid-1400s known as the Wars of the Roses. The conflict was ultimately a family feud as two different branches of the royal family fought for control of the English crown. But that wasn't the only family conflict that was taking place in England at the time. Throughout the country, families were jockeying for position in a country where the old feudal order had broken down and where a new class of yeomen and gentry were acquiring estates at the expense of the traditional landed nobility. The Paston family was one of those newly rich families in the east of England. And the various members of that family wrote letters to each other throughout the 1400s. Most of those letters were saved, and they comprise the oldest collection of private letters in the English language. The letters not only highlight the struggles of this up-and-coming family, they also reveal a great deal about the state of the English language in the 1400s. So this time, we're going to look at this unsettled period of English history through the words and letters of the Paston family of Norfolk.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, we're going to turn our attention to the second half of the 1400s and the conflict commonly known as the Wars of the Roses. By this point in history, we are really in the final stages of the Middle English period. There is no magic date to mark the transition from Middle English to Modern English, but the two major factors that scholars usually point to are the Great Vowel Shift and the introduction of the printing press. The Great Vowel Shift altered the pronunciation of the language, and the printing press helped to standardize the grammar and spelling of the language. By the mid 1400s, both of those developments were underway. The Great Vowel Shift was in its early stages, and the printing press had been invented in Germany, even though it hadn't arrived in England yet. So we are really on the eve of early Modern English – and the literature of this period reflects that. Many of the English documents produced during this period can be read by modern English speakers without too much difficulty. Spellings had not become fixed yet, but the overall language is very close to Modern English.

Unfortunately, the 1400s are not really considered to be highpoint for English literature. We find ourselves in the middle of the period that separated Chaucer from Shakespeare. So we're in a bit of a valley between those two peaks. There were some important writers and poets like John Lydgate and Sir Thomas Malory, but overall, this period is more notable for the developments within the language itself than the body of literature that it produced.

But some aspects of English literature did flourish during this period. For example, ballads became very popular, like those about Robin Hood. And letter-writing became a common activity. For the first time, people began to correspond with each other in English. Prior to this period, most of the surviving letters were official government documents written in French or

Latin. We don't really find private personal letters composed in English until this century, and there are certainly no collections of English letters prior to this point.

The rise of English letter writing was facilitated by two factors. First, people now had access to cheap paper which provided a convenient writing material for letters. And second, more people could read and write. Obviously, people didn't tend to send letters to each other if they couldn't read and write. But by the mid-1400s, literacy had become common enough throughout the country that people could correspond with each other without too much difficulty. Literacy had spread with schools which were increasingly common throughout England. And there was a growing middle class who could afford to send their children to those schools. So with an increase in literacy, there were more people who could communicate with other by sending letters. Some estimates suggest that about 15 percent of the country could read and write by the end of the 1400s, with estimates as high as 50 percent within a city like London. That growing literacy rate also guaranteed a market for all of those cheap books that were about to be produced with the printing press when it arrived in England a few years later. [*SOURCE: 'A History of England: Prehistory to 1714,' Clayton Roberts and David Roberts, p. 212-3*]

In an era before books were common, and when personal writing was much more limited, people tended to treasure their letters. They didn't just throw them away. A lot of people kept both the letters they received, and the rough drafts of the letters they sent. That meant that there was a record of both sides of the conversation. Over time, as members of a family communicated with each other, the letters started to accumulate– from a handful, to a few dozen, to hundreds of individual letters.

Several of those letter collections have survived – and the most famous of all is a collection maintained by the Paston family who lived in Norfolk in the east of England. The Paston family name was derived from the small village near the coast where they lived and where their ancestors had worked the land as peasants.

The rise of the Paston family reflected the changing nature of English society after the Black Death. They had gone from poor peasants to wealthy landholders in less than a century. The family also maintained a residence in London because they often had business there as well. And there was a regular stream of letters between Norfolk and London throughout the 1400s. Hundreds of those letters have survived. [*SOURCE: 'The Stories of English,' David Crystal, p. 179*]

The letters coincide with the end of the Hundred Years' War and the entire period of the Wars of the Roses, but they only occasionally mention the political situation. They mostly deal with personal and business matters, but as time passed, those personal and business matters started to become mixed up with political matters. And that's because the Pastons' estate repeatedly came under attack by powerful figures who were aligned with various factions in the Wars of the Roses. So the rising and falling fortunes of York and Lancaster had a direct impact on the fortunes of the Paston family.

The Paston struggles stemmed from the fact that they were nouveau riche – in other words, their wealth was recently acquired. They weren't part of the traditional landed nobility. The Pastons had benefitted from the unsettled aftermath of the Black Death when poor peasants were suddenly able to demand payment for their services. The era of serfdom and forced servitude declined as many workers acquired some money and purchased land of their own. That land had previously belonged to powerful lords, and the descendants of those lords weren't willing to give up their wealth and power without a fight. That produced a whole range of family disputes throughout the 1400s as the old money tried to keep the new money from taking over. Those families looked for powerful allies to help them pursue their claims. So those local family disputes were often tied in with that larger family dispute between the Houses of York and Lancaster. If you had a powerful ally in the Lancastrian government, you didn't want the Yorkists to suddenly take over and kick your ally to the curb. Of course, the opposite was true for your rivals who probably sided with the Yorkists in hopes that their allies would rise to positions of power. So local families often aligned themselves with one of the factions in the Wars of the Roses. And that turned a family dispute for the English throne into a civil war that impacted families throughout the country.

The rise of the Paston family began with a peasant farmer named Clement who lived and worked in Norfolk in the late 1300s during the time of Geoffrey Chaucer. He was apparently a free peasant – and he took advantage of the unsettled economic situation after the Black Death. He was able to save some money to send his son to school. [*SOURCE: 'English Social History,' G.M. Trevelyan, p. 29-30*] Clement realized that the way to advancement was education and literacy. Those were the great equalizers, and while Clement himself never enjoyed much wealth, he educated son did.

The son's name was William Paston, and after receiving a basic education, he went on to study law. And in 1429, he became one of the six justices on the Court of Common Pleas. William used his income as a judge to purchase several estates in Norfolk. By the mid-1400s, the Pastons were one of the largest landholding families in the county. [*SOURCE: ' [The Past Speaks,' Lacey Baldwin Smith and Jean Reeder Smith, p. 209-10*] So in just one generation, the family status has risen from peasants to landed gentry.

Even though William was a powerful judge, he faced constant challenges to the estates he had acquired. This was an era before the modern rules of property ownership had been fully developed. England was still in transition from the feudal era where everyone held their property from a feudal lord. And a century of plague and death made it difficult to establish who had clear title to a piece of property. There always seemed to be a distant heir – or a prominent lord who claimed to have some historical right to every large estate. Very often, the heirs of the local lord simply didn't want the property to pass to a peasant or a family of former peasants. So it was common for a seemingly legal purchase to come under attack. Sometimes the dispute ended up in court. But other times, a powerful lord simply gathered up a group of men and took the property by force. The matter might still end up in court, but this was an era when possession was truly 9/10s of the law.

That's what happened to one of William Paston's estates. A property called Beckham manor was seized by a rival claimant. And William spent ten years in court trying to establish his legal right to the property. He finally won the case in the year 1444, but he died only a month later. [*SOURCE: 'Blood and Roses,' Helen Castor, p. 40*]

William was survived by his widow Agnes and five children. William knew the value of education as well as any one in England. He had been one of the richest men in Norfolk, while his father had been a poor peasant. William's rise was largely due to his education. And once he had acquired his estate, his legal knowledge helped him to defend it from the many powerful men who sought to take it away. This idea was expressed in a letter from his widow Agnes to his son Edmund who followed in his father's footsteps and studied the law in London. The letter was sent to Edmund a year after his father's death while Edmund was still studying law. Here's part of the letter – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English:

> 'To my well-beloved son, I greet you well, and advise you to think once per day of your father's counsel to learn the law; for he said many times that whosoever shall dwell at Paston should have need to know how to defend himself.'
>
> "To myn welbelouid sone I grete yow wel, and avyse yow to thynkke onis of the daie of yowre fadris counseyle to lerne the lawe; for he seyde manie tymis that ho so euer schuld dwelle at Paston schulde have nede to conne defende hymselfe."

Agnes then mentions several of the unresolved claims involving the Paston properties since her husband's death the prior year. She then includes the following passage:

> 'I send you not this letter to make you weary of Paston, for I live in hope, and you will learn that they shall be made weary of their work; for in good faith I dare well say it was your father's last will to have you do right well to that place. . .'
>
> "I sendde yow not this lettre to make yow wery of Paston, for I leve in hoope; and ye wolle lerne that they schulle be made werye of here werke, fore in good feyth I dare wel seyne it was yowre fadris laste wille to have do ryȝht wel to that plase . . ."

So in these passages we see the value that Pastons placed on acquiring a legal education, not just for the personal benefit of the child, but for the family's benefit as well. These passages also point to some interesting developments in the language. She writes that 'they shall be made weary of their work.' Apparently, she is referring to the people who try to raise legal challenges to the Pastons' ownership of the various properties. Edmund's legal knowledge will wear them down and make them weary. In that line she uses the northern pronoun ***they*** with its initial 'TH' sound, but then, instead of using the northern pronoun ***their***, she uses the southern form ***here*** with its initial 'H' sound. So within the same sentence, she mixes the northern and southern pronoun forms. That shows that both forms were probably common in eastern England at this time. And this type of mixed use occurs throughout the various letters.

The other thing that stands out is the relative lack of obsolete or archaic words. All of the words she uses are still commonly used today, even though the form of many of the words has changed over time. And that's true throughout the Paston letters, and also in most other English documents from this period. The vocabulary had become somewhat settled by this point. Of course, it would continue to grow and add new words, but most of the words that we would consider obscure today had already fallen out of use by the late 1400s. And that's why the documents of this period are much easier to read and follow.

Now at the end of this particular letter from Agnes, she asks Edmund to give a message to her other son John. And that's because John was also in London at the time. And in fact, John Paston is really the more important Paston brother for our story because he was the eldest brother, and he is the one who was ultimately responsible for dealing with his father's estate. And it is the letters between John and his wife Margaret and their children that comprise most of the surviving letters in the Paston family collection.

John had also been trained in the law, and as a young man, he had even spent a short period in the royal court where he had been in charge of the king's horses. As I noted, John had married a woman named Margaret, and they had both settled in Norfolk. And when John's father died, it fell to him to try to preserve the Paston estate. And he quickly realized that he had his work cut out for him.

I noted earlier that his father had spent about a decade litigating a claim against one of his most valuable properties called Beckham Manor, and that claim was finally resolved shortly before he died. Well, shortly after his death, the same claimant reappeared and renewed his claims to the property. A new lawsuit was started, and this time, the son John lost the manor house in the ensuing litigation. [*SOURCE: 'The Pastons and Their England,' H.S. Bennett*] As we'll see, that was only the beginning of John's problems.

A few years later, in May of 1448, we find a fascinating letter written to John by his wife Margaret. John was away in London, and Margaret was back in Norfolk. The letter recounts an argument between two men on the street that she had to break up. The letter is interesting both in the events that are described and the language that Margaret uses to tell the story.

Margaret writes that she and John's mother Agnes were attending church in town. Even though Agnes was her mother-in-law, but she refers to her here as her 'mother,' as was common at the time. Terms like ***mother-in-law*** and ***father-in-law*** were still relatively new terms in the language, and they hadn't yet replaced the more traditional way of referring to one's in-laws as simply 'mother' or 'father.'

Margaret writes that the Paston family chaplian, James Glois, was walking down the street outside of the church and passed between two other men – one of them being a prominent man of the town named John Wyndham. When Glois passed by, he didn't tip his hat as was customary at the time. It was common for a man to lift his hat and lower it when he encountered someone. That was sometimes referred to as 'covering your head.' Well, when Glois failed to do that, it started an argument which turned into a fight. Here's one part of the letter:

> ‘And James Gloys came with his hat on his head between both of the men, as he was wont of custom to do. And when Gloys was against Wyndham, he said thus: 'Cover thy head!' And Gloys said again, 'So I shall for thee.' And when Gloys was further passed by the space of three or four strides, Wyndham drew out his dagger and said, 'Shalt thou so, knave?' And therewith Gloys turned himself, and drew out his dagger and defended himself. . .’
>
> “And Jamys Gloys come with his hatte on his hede betwen bothe his men, as he was wont of custome to do. And whanne Gloys was a-yenst Wymondham he seid þus, 'couere thy heed'. And Gloys seid ageyn, 'so i shall for the'. And whanne Gloys was forther passed by þe space of iij or iiij strede, Wymondham drew owt his dagger and seid, 'Shalt þow so, knave?' And þerwith Gloys turned hym and drewe owt his dagger and defendet hym. . .”

Now there’s a subtle use of language in that passage which I’ve noted before. It’s the use of pronouns in the exchange between the two men. Wyndham says ‘Cover thy head’ rather than ‘Cover your head.’ By this point, pronouns like ***thee*** and ***thou*** and ***thy*** were restricted to familiar or informal use. You would use those terms with a family member, or loved one, or a very close friend.

But for anyone else, you were expected to use the more formal pronoun ***you***. Of course, as we’ve seen before, ***you*** was originally the plural pronoun. But by this point, it had become the standard form of address when speaking to an individual as well. It could be very offensive to use words like ***thee*** and ***thou*** and ***thy***, unless the person was a very close friend or family member. It’s sort of like calling someone ‘buddy.’ If the person really is your buddy or mate, it’s probably OK. But if you address a stranger on the street by saying ‘Hey buddy,’ that person might take offense. And that’s what happened here. Wyndham said to Glois, ‘Cover thy head’ rather than ‘Cover your head.’ Glois took offense and shot back, ‘So I shall for thee’ rather than ‘So I shall for you.’ So the two men were addressing each other with pronouns that would have been considered insults at the time.

The exchange led to an argument which was so loud that it caught the attention of the congregation inside the church. Margaret writes:

> ‘And with the noise of this assault and affray my mother and I came out of the church from the sacring, and I bade Gloys go into my mother's place again, and so he did. And then Wyndham called my mother and me strong whores, and said the Pastons and all their kin were (...). Myngham ... said he lied, knave and churl as he was. And he had much large language, as you shall know hereafter by mouth. . .’
>
> “And with þe noise of þis a-saut and affray my modir and I come owt of þe chirche from þe sakeryng; and I bad Gloys go in to my moderis place ageyn, and so he dede. And thanne Wymondham called my moder and me strong hores, and seid þe Pastons and alle her kyn were (...) Myngham ... seid he lyed, knave and charl as he was. And he had meche large langage, as ye shall knowe her-after by mowthe. . .”

So Wyndham had some choice language for Margaret and her mother-in-law – some of which Margaret refused to repeat in the letter because she says that 'he had much large language' which 'you shall know hereafter by mouth' – in other words, she will tell John all about it later in person. Interestingly, many of these old letters are riddled with holes, and there happens to be a hole at that one key part of the sentence where Wyndham says that 'the Pastons and all their kin were (blank)' There happens to be a hole right there, so we don't know exactly what word he used. But I bet that Margaret told John all about when she finally saw him in person. Many scholars think the man probably called them peasants or churls given the context of the passage. And that would have been a major insult because it would have suggested that the Pastons weren't really entitled to their newfound wealth. They were just peasants.

Margaret concludes the letter by noting that the argument flared up again later in the day when one of Wyndham's men once again attacked Glois and her mother-in-law's assistant named Thomas. She writes:

> 'A short time later, he came down with a two-hand sword and assaulted again the said Gloys and Thomas my mother's man, and let fly a stroke at Thomas with the sword and ripped his hand with his sword. And as for the latter assault, the parson of Oxnead saw it and will avow it. And much more things were done, as Gloys can tell you by mouth.'
>
> "A-non he come doun with a tohand swerd and assauted ageyn þe seid Gloys and Thomas my moderis man, and lete flye a strok at Thomas with þe sword and rippled his hand with his sword. And as for þe latter assaut þe parson of Oxened sygh it and wole a-vowe it. And moche more thyng was do, as Gloys can tell yow by mouthe."

Iin those passages in that letter from Margaret Paston, there's something very interesting about the way she spells certain words. First of all, let consider the word ***assault***, which she uses several times. It's a French loanword, and Margaret spells it A-S-S-A-U-T, which was the French spelling. So there was no L in the word at that time. The spelling reflects the pronunciation of the word in both Old French and Middle English as /æs-out/. Now within Modern French, the word is still spelled the same way, but it's pronounced /æs-o/. The vowel sound has changed and the final 'T' has become silent. But again, it was once /æs-out/ in both French and English. The 'L' was added into the word in the following century – the 1500s. And it was added in to reflect the original Latin root of the word. So the Latin version had an 'L' sound which was dropped in French, and then English took the word and put the original 'L' back in. And after that spelling change, English speakers actually started to pronounce that 'L.' And the vowel sound also shifted slightly from the /ow/ sound to the /aw/ sound. That's when the pronunciation shifted from /ass-out/ to modern /assault/. The same thing happened with words like ***fault***, ***default***, and ***vault***. They were all borrowed into English without an 'L.' So in Middle English , we had /fout/, /defout/, and /vout/. But then, in early Modern English, the vowel shifted and the 'L' was added in to reflect the Latin roots, and we ended up with ***fault***, ***default*** and ***vault***.

So Margaret Paston's use of ***assaut*** (/assout/) instead of ***assault*** typifies the speech and writing of the late Middle English period. The Paston letters also use the word ***defaut*** for ***default***, and they use ***reame*** instead of ***realm***, and ***savacion*** instead of ***salvation***. These were all the original

French forms of the words which reflects the fact that they were all recent loanwords. In each of those words, the 'L' was added later by Latin scholars, and that shifted the pronunciation of those words. And that also points to the fact that arbitrary spellings can sometimes impact the way words are pronounced over time.

There's also something else very interesting about the passages I just read. Margaret uses words like ***out***, ***down***, ***mouth***, ***avow*** and ***thou***. In each instance, she spells the vowel sound with either [OW] or [OU]. Remember that the letters U and W were not entirely distinct yet. They could represent the same vowel and consonant sounds. So ***out*** is spelled O-W-T. And ***mouth*** is M-O-W-T-H-E. And ***down*** is D-O-U-N. Now, you may be saying, 'So what?' After all, if we exchange those U's and W's, we basically have the modern spellings. But, this is actually a big deal because all of those words were traditionally pronounced with a pure /oo/ sound represented with letter U. So ***out*** was ***ut*** – spelled U-T. And ***thou*** was ***þu*** – spelled 'thorn-U'. Thorn was that letter that resembled a P, and represented the 'TH' sound. The word ***mouth*** was ***muþ*** – spelled 'M-U-thorn'. ***Down*** was ***dun*** – spelled D-U-N. And ***avow*** was borrowed from the Anglo-Norman word ***avouer*** (/a-VOO-ay/). But instead of spelling those words with their tradition letter U, Margaret consistently spelled them with either [OU] or [OW]. And that was because those words were no long being pronounced with their traditional /oo/ sound. They had acquired a new vowel sound, which Margaret and many other writers of the period represented with that new spelling.

Now modern linguists believe the vowel sound that Margaret was representing wasn't the modern /ow/ sound used today. It was actually an /oh/ sound. So ***ut*** (/oot/) had become ***owt*** (/oat/), and a couple of centuries later, the sound shifted again to become modern ***out***. ***ut*** (/oot/) – ***owt (***/oat/) – ***out***. That was the change. The same thing with the other words. ***Dun*** (/doon/) – ***doun*** (/doan/) – ***down***. ***þu*** (/thoo/) – ***þow*** (/thoa/) – ***thou***. ***muþ*** (/mooth/) – ***mowthe*** (/moath/) – ***mouth***. ***avouer*** (/a-voo-ay/) – ***avowe*** (/a-voa/) – ***avow***. Margaret was writing at a time when all of those words had those middle pronunciations between the original pronunciations and the modern pronunciaitons.

As you might have guessed by now, that specific vowel shift is one of several shifts that were taking place around this same time that are collectively known as the Great Vowel Shift. After the next episode, which will focus on William Caxton and the first English printing press, I'm going to try to break down the Great Vowel Shift and explore how modern English spellings still reflect these old vowel shifts. So we're going to spend some time dealing solely with that topic. But the important thing to take from the examples I just gave is that the vowel shifts were underway by this point – and also that the vowel shifts included back vowels as well as front vowels.

In earlier episodes, I gave a few examples of other early vowel shifts. I noted that the /ee/ sound and the /ay/ sound were shifting around. Well, those are both front vowels – pronounced high in the front part of the mouth. But this shift that we see in Margaret's letters – from /oo/ to /oh/ to /ow/ – that involved vowels pronounced high in the back part of the mouth. So we can see that the vowel sounds in both the front and the back of the mouth were shifting around, and they were tending to shift higher in the open cavity of the mouth.

Again, I'm going to try to break all of this down even further a couple of episodes from now, but I wanted you to see that a variety of vowel changes were underway when William Caxton arrived in England with the printing press, which we will explore next time. And for purposes of this episode, when I read a passage from the Paston letters, I'm trying to pronounce the vowels with these newer sounds. So I am accounting for the changes that we've discussed so far in the podcast.

Now around the same time that Margaret Paston composed that letter about the fight that she helped to break up, her husband John was involved in another dispute involving the estate that he had inherited from his father. As I noted earlier, this was an era when the heirs of the great lords were trying to reclaim properties that had been purchased by upstart peasants and yeomen. And I mentioned that John ending up losing Beckham Manor through one of these challenges.

Well, now he had to deal with a challenge to another property called Gresham Manor near the village of Gresham in Norfolk. John's father had purchased the estate from two joint owners. One of the sellers was actually Geoffrey's Chaucer's son, Thomas Chaucer. The other seller was a local landowner named Sir William Moleyns. John Paston inherited the manor from his father, and he and Margaret used it as their primary residence. Well, by the mid-1400s, one of the sellers' heirs known as Lord Moleyns had decided to lay claim to the manor. But rather than waste his time with the courts, he pursued his claim the old-fashioned way. He sent armed men to the property, and they seized the manor house by force. They then told the tenants to make all future rent payments directly to Moleyns.

John Paston's only recourse was to go to court to try to recover the property, but Molyens had connections extending all the way up to the royal court. So the legal proceedings bogged down, and that left the Pastons with very few options, but they weren't willing to give up. [*SOURCE: 'Blood and Roses,' Helen Castor, p. 70-1*]

A few months later, Margaret moved in a house nearby, and she directed the tenants to make their rent payments to her. This move angered Lord Moleyns, so his men began to stake out the house where Margaret was living. Margaret immediately realized that she had put herself in a perilous situation. So in October, she once again wrote to her husband John in London and told him what was going on. She told him to send her some weapons so she could defend herself and the house. She wrote the following:

> 'Right worshipful husband, I recommend me to you, and pray you to get some crossbows, and windlasses to bend them with, and quarrels or bolts for shooting; for your houses here are so low that no man may shoot out with no long bow, though we had never so much need.'
>
> "Ryt wurchipful hwsbond, I recomawnd me to ȝu and prey ȝw to gete som crosse bowis, and wyndacis to bynd þem wyth, and quarell, for ȝwr hwsis here ben so low þat þere may non man schete owt wyth no long bowe þow we hadde neuer so moche nede."

She then adds the following request: ‘And also I would aks that you should get two or three short pole-axes to keep indoors. . .’ – “And also I wold ȝe xuld gete ij or iij schort pelle-axis to kepe wyth doris. . .”

So right out of the gate, Margaret opens the letter by asking John to send crossbows, ammunition, and several short-handled combat axes. She’s clearly preparing for an attack. Interestingly, she asks for crossbows which could be fired like guns because she says that the ceilings in the house are too low to use the massive longbows that soldiers typically use.

One other quick linguistic note. This was still the era before dictionaries and spelling books, so people still tended to write phonetically. And Margaret begins the letter with the standard introduction ‘Right worshipful husband,’ but she spelled ***right*** R-Y-T. So notice that there was no G-H or any other letter in there to represent the old fricative sound that was normally pronounced in the middle of the word. It was traditionally pronounced something like /rixt/. And in other Paston letters that sound is generally represented with either the modern GH or the Old English letter yogh which was often used to represent that sound. But here, Margaret doesn’t represent that sound at all. So that is a strong indication that she didn’t pronounce that sound, just like we don’t pronounce it today. So that old fricative sound was disappearing in southern and central England here at the end of the Middle English period.

Now Margaret has requested all kinds of weapons to defend herself and her house. She then writes that the main manor house is still occupied by Lord Moleyns’ men, and that they are fully armed and ready to defend it against any potential attack. She then concludes the letter by asking John to send a few more items:

> ‘I pray you that you will vouchsafe – or agree – to buy for me 1 lb. of almonds and 1 lb. of sugar, and that you will buy some cloth to make your children’s gowns.’
>
> “I pray ȝw þat ȝe wyl vowche-save to don bye for me j li. of almandis and j li. of sugyre, and þat ȝe wille do byen summe frese to maken of ȝwr childeris gwnys.”

So in this letter, Margaret is demanding crossbows, ammunition, and axes to fend off the gathering horde, and oh yeah, while you’re at it, pick up some almonds and sugar and some material to make gowns for the kids. That’s a pretty remarkable grocery list, but it reflects what life was like for the Pastons in the mid-1400s.

A short time after Margaret wrote that letter, her fears came true. Lord Moleyns’ men broke into the house where she living and they ransacked it. Margaret took refuge in a room, but the men knocked down the walls and got to her anyway. Fortunately, they didn’t hurt her, but she and children had to flee to a friend’s house. The house was largely destroyed to prevent Margaret from coming back. [*SOURCE: Blood and Roses, Helen Castor, p. 80-1*]

Margaret’s husband John got word of the attack while he was still in London, and he petitioned the king for help. Parliament had assembled, so John asked the king to take the matter before parliament to restore his lands and punish Moleyns. In the petition, John pointed out the

corruption that he had encountered among local officials. He wrote of the local judges, "he that kepyth the seid courtis is of covyn with the seid misdoeres" – 'He that keeps the said courts is of coven – or in collusion – with said misdoers.' And he complained that Moleyns' power and connections prevented him from resolving the matter legally. He wrote that "your seid besecher is not abille to sue the commune lawe in redressyng of this heynos wrong for the gret myght and alyaunce of the seid lord" – 'Your said beseecher is not able to sue under the common law for redress of this heinous wrong because of the great might and alliances of the said lord.' He then asked that Moleyns be held to account, that the property be returned, and the Pastons and their tenants be protected from further attacks by Moleyns or his men.

John Paston didn't stop there. He then petitioned the Chancellor of England for a criminal investigation into Moleyns' actions. But there was no immediate action on the petitions. By February of the following year, John Paston had had enough. The details are sketchy, but apparently, John armed his own men, and they took back the manor by force. This was an era of 'might makes right,' and the Pastons finally realized that they were going to have to meet force with force. Though they were able to take back the manor, the Pastons didn't move back into the residence. [*SOURCE: 'Blood and Roses,' Helen Castor, p. 106-7*]

A few months later, there was finally a hearing to determine if Molynes had broken the law by sending in a private army to take the manor. It seems clear that laws had been broken, and that the Pastons were finally going to have their day in court. But when the officials met, John Paston learned that the king had instructed the sheriff to empanel a jury that would acquit Moleyns. And that's exactly what happened. [*SOURCE: 'Blood and Roses,' Helen Castor, p. 110*] Once again, Molynes' connections came through for him. The Pastons had taken their manor back by force, but there was no punishment for the men who had taken it from them in the first place.

The Pastons were certainly frustrated, and they were not the only ones. Even though we know the details of their story thanks to their surviving letters, similar crimes were being repeated around the country. Historical accounts often point to the rampant corruption that plagued the later years of Henry VI's rule, and this was just one aspect of that corruption. Local lords could often do as they pleased because the king wasn't willing to take decisive actions to stop it. Meanwhile, those around the king received valuable lands and titles while the country teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. And as I've noted before, England was still licking its wounds from the loss of the Hundred Years' War in France.

That was why so many people throughout England had become frustrated with the king and the people who advised him. And it was why so many people were looking for another alternative. And as I noted in the last episode, there was an alternative in the person of Richard the Duke of York. I traced his genealogy last time, so I won't do that again here, but he actually had the best overall claim to the throne in terms of family descent given that he was descended directly from Edward III's second son Lionel, whereas the king – Henry VI – was descended from Edward's third son John of Gaunt. Gaunt's Lancastrian descendants were only in power because they had usurped the throne a half a century earlier. So Richard of York had a legitimate claim to the throne. But much like John Paston, a legal claim didn't mean very much without the power to back it up. This was an era of 'might makes right,' and the House of Lancaster had firmly ruled

England for half a century. And there was no serious threat to King Henry's crown at this point in the early 1450s.

But what about Henry's successor? Well, the succession was always an important concern, and at this point, Henry didn't have any children. If Henry died, would the nobles stick with the House of Lancaster? If so, they would have to turn to another descendant of John of Gaunt, and that would presumably be Gaunt's grandson from his third marriage known as Edmund Beaufort. He was the Duke of Somerset, and he was one of King Henry's closest advisors. He is generally known to history as simply Somerset based on his title. But if the nobles looked beyond the House of Lancaster to the person who actually has the best overall claim to the throne, then they would presumably turn to Richard of York. So those two men, Edmund of Somerset and Richard of York, were jockeying for position in the early 1450s, and that created the rivalry between the Houses of Lancaster and York.

Then in 1453, King Henry succumbed to mental illness. He was a direct descendant of the English kings through his father, but he was also a descendant of the French kings through his French mother. She was the daughter of the mad king of France known as Charles the Mad. So Henry apparently inherited that genetic trait. And out of nowhere, he suddenly became unresponsive in 1453. He was conscious at times, but he had no idea what was going on, and he couldn't communicate.

That brought the matter of the succession to the forefront, but as it turned out, Henry's wife Margaret had become pregnant a few months before Henry's dementia sat in. Two months later, she gave birth to a baby boy. She was also French and a close relative of the French king. Like so many marriages of this era, it was a political marriage, but Margaret's son was now the heir to the English throne. And she would fiercely defend her child's claim to the throne even as the country descended into civil war.

So with King Henry suffering mental illness, the House of Lancaster was now led by his cousin Edmund of Somerset with his wife Queen Margaret playing a very important role behind the scenes.

Meanwhile, the House of York had a clear leader in Richard of York. And he made his position in the country even stronger by forming a close alliance with Neville family in northern England. The Nevilles had a long-standing rivalry with the Percy family in that same region, and the Percys were closely aligned with Lancastrians. So the leaders of the Neville family aligned themselves with Richard of York because they believed their complaints against the Percys would never be taken seriously by the Lancastrian court. So you can start to see how the division between the House of York and the House of Lancaster extended to other families throughout the country. Family rivalries were common in every corner of England, and if your family's rivals had connections to the Lancastrian court, then your family tended to align with the House of York. We saw this same issue with the Paston family in Norfolk. They couldn't get a fair hearing in the local courts because their rivals had connections with the Lancastrian rulers. So this scenario played out around the country.

The alliance between Richard of York and Neville family wasn't really a surprise because York had actually married into the Neville family. And his wife's nephew was Richard Neville, the earl of Warwick – often referred to as simply Warwick. He would turn out to be a key figure in the upcoming civil war. His support was so crucial that he became known as the Kingmaker.

With King Henry now mostly unresponsive, it was decided that a protector need to be appointed to run the country until the king's condition improved. Richard of York already had strong support among nobles in the south of England, and now he combined that support with the support of the Neville family in the north. That was enough to permit him to secure the position of protector for himself. He now became the de factor ruler of England – until either Henry's illness ended or until Henry's infant son was old enough to rule on his own. [*SOURCE: 'Lancastrians to Tudors: England 1450-1509,' Andrew Pickering, p. 20*] This meant that power temporarily shifted to the House of York.

Richard of York used his new position as Protector of the Realm to clear out most of his opponents from their official positions. Many of these people were accused of corruption, and Richard's primary rival, Edmund of Somerset, was accused of treason and sent to the Tower of London. Parliament didn't allow Somerset to be brought to trial, but Richard was content to have him out of the way. [*SOURCE: 'The Wars of the Roses,' Alison Weir, p. 186.*]

For over a year, Richard ruled England in his capacity as protector, and he went about restoring order and trying to root out the corruption that existed for some time at the highest levels of the government. But then, at Christmastime in the 1454, King Henry started to recover from his illness.

A few days later, in January of the following year, John Paston received a letter from a close friend in Norfolk named Edmund Clere. The letter informed John about the king's recovery. The letter begins with the following passage: "Blessed be God, the Kyng is wel amended, and hath ben syn Cristemesday" – 'Blessed by God, the King is well amended, and has been since Christmasday.' He then added the following details:

> '...on the Monday afternoon, the Queen came to him, and brought the infant Prince with her. And then he asked what the Prince's name was, and the Queen told him Edward; and then he held up his hands and thanked God thereof. And he said he never knew of anything til that time, nor what had been said to him, nor where he had been while he had been sick til now.'
>
> "... on the Moneday after noon the Queen came to him, and brought my Lord Prynce with her. And then he askid what the Princes name was, and the Queen told him Edward; and than he hild up his hands and thankid God therof. And he seid he never knew til that tyme, nor wist not what was seid to him, nor wist not where he had be whils he hath be seke til now."

Now as it turned out, King Henry's recovery was never a full recovery. He continued to suffer from bouts of mental illness, but he was well enough to resume some of his responsibilities. And more importantly for his allies, he was well enough to bring an end to the protectorate which had allowed Richard of York to rule England for the past year. [*SOURCE: 'The Wars of the Roses,' Alison Weir, p. 189.*]

This were merely the first of what would be several transfers of power back and forth between the Houses of Lancaster and York, and the Wars of the Roses hadn't even begun yet. Richard of York retired to the north of England. And the Lancastrians celebrated their return to power. The king's cousin, Edmund of Somerset, was released from the Tower and restored to his positions as well. Of course, Somerset now planned to take revenge on his rival York.

He called for a meeting to be held at Leicester in the Midlands north of London. And Richard of York and his ally Warwick were summoned to attend. The Yorkists thought it was a trap. Rather than being arrested and tried for treason, they decided to strike first. As we've already seen in regard to the Pastons, it was common for the local lords to have their own private armies. So it was relatively easy to Richard of York and Warwick to assemble an army of several thousand soldiers among their supporters. They headed south and intercepted the royal caravan as it departed from London on its way to the meeting in Leicester. The two groups met at the town of St. Albans just north of London. And that proved to be the site of the first battle of the Wars of the Roses.

The battle only lasted for about half an hour, and it was a decisive victory for the Yorkist forces. When it was over, the bodies of dead soldiers littered the streets, and that included the body of the king's cousin, Edmund of Somerset. With his rival now dead, Richard of York clearly had the upper hand. Meanwhile, the king was found in town with a serious wound to his neck. He had been struck in the neck with an arrow during the fighting – but he survived. [*SOURCE: 'The Wars of the Roses,' Alison Weir, p. 202*.]

At this point, Richard of York became the dog who caught the car. He had defeated the king, and he had possession of the king, but he wasn't the king himself. And he didn't have the popular support to depose the king. So after a few months, the situation slowly returned to some semblance of normalcy. But there was an uneasy impasse. King Henry was still on the throne, but Richard of York continued to play a prominent role on his council.

With Somerset now dead, and with the king still struggling with mental illness, Queen Margaret now emerged as the de facto leader of the House of Lancaster. Even though she was French, she was also the mother of the Lancastrian heir to the throne. So the future of the House of Lancaster rested on her shoulders. And in the same way that Margaret Paston had defended her family's estate against its rivals, her namesake Queen Margaret did the same thing. She defended her family against its Yorkist rivals. And both Margarets were willing to go to war to defend their turf. But for now, Queen Margaret needed some create some distance between her husband the Yorkists who now dominated the government. So she moved herself, her husband, and his royal court to Coventry in the Midlands. Meanwhile, York and his Neville family allies held onto London. For the next two years, the conflict simmered – as the two sides plotted their next move.

During that period of time, some families were firmly aligned with one faction or the other. They were clearly Yorkist or Lancastrian. But many families simply had a preference for one of the factions without a formal alliance. That was essentially the case with the Paston family of Norfolk. Most of their enemies had connections with the Lancastrian government, so they tended to favor the Yorkists, but they didn't take up arms at this point for either side.

The same was basically true for one of the Pastons' Norfolk neighbors named Sir John Fastolf. He was an old man, but he had fought for many years in the Hundred Years' War in France. In fact, he had fought there with Richard of York, so he had sympathies for Richard. Over time, Fastolf acquired a very large estate, and he built a massive castle in Norfolk called Caister Castle. He is actually one of the inspirations for William Shakespeare's later character of Falstaff in his cycle of history plays that cover this period. But again, his name was actually Fastolf. By this point, he lived in retirement in Norfolk near the Pastons, and he was a close friend of John Paston. He didn't have any children, so by this point, he was trying to plan for the final distribution of his estate when he died.

Among other plans, he wanted to set aside part of Caister Castle as a chantry. In other words, he wanted to set aside part of the castle for a group of priests or monks. They would live there and pray for Fastolf's soul. In 1459, John Paston received a letter from a friar who was working with Fastolf on his plans. The letter reported that Fastolf was in poor health and he wanted John to come help him complete the terms of his Will. The letter mentions that Fastolf had previously discussed his plans for a chantry at the castle, "And fond that tyme no bonys in the matere" – 'and found at that time no bones in the matter' – or as we would say today, 'at the time he made no bones about the matter.' The letter then stated that those were still his wishes.

That particular passage in that letter is notable because it is the first recorded use of a version of the phrase 'make no bones about it' meaning 'to have no objections.' I noted in an earlier episode about medieval cooking that the phrase is ultimately derived from eating fish, especially a soup made with fish. Some fish have a lot of bones, and you have to pick out all of the bones, which is a pain. But a fish with very few bones makes it easy to eat. So if you 'find no bones in' something, which was the phrase used here, it meant that you didn't have a problem with it. And that led to the more modern version of the phrase 'make no bones about it.' But again, we can trace the first recorded use of that phase back to this letter to John Paston in 1459.

Now Fastolf died a short time later, and he was never able to complete the final version of his written Will. But John Paston visited Fastolf in his final days, and Fastolf told him his final wishes for the distribution of his estate. Now under English common law, and oral will recited on one's death bed can be a valid will under certain circumstances. The technical term for that type of will is a nuncupative will. If you've ever studied the laws associated with wills, you've probably encountered that term before. Well, the first recorded use of that technical term in the English language was in the Paston letters. And it appears in the Paston letters became Fastolf's oral or noncupative will left the bulk of his estate to John Paston, including the massive Caister Castle. Paston had instructions to complete Fastolf's wishes concerning the chantry, but otherwise, the castle was supposed to go directly to John Paston. Well, as you can probably guess by this point, there were other very important people who wanted that castle. And the fighting

and litigation surrounding Fastolf's Will and the ownership of that castle consumed the rest of John Paston's life. And it is a constant source of conversation in the Paston letters from this point forward.

For the first couple of years after Fastolf's death, the Pastons' rivals didn't challenge the Will or lay claim to the castle. That may have been because they were consumed with the renewal of fighting in the Wars of the Roses. Around the same time that Fastolf died, Queen Margaret decided that it was time to force the Yorkists out of London, and to force them out of the government. So Richard of York and his supporters were accused of treason, and the Lancastrian forces descended on London.

A series of battles followed with victories and defeats on both sides. But ultimately, Richard of York was forced to flee the country, and he took refuge in Ireland. His ally Warwick also escaped. He crossed the Channel to the port city of Calais, which was the only part of France still held by the English. With the Yorkist leaders on the run, Margaret had Parliament declare them all to be traitors. They were sentenced to death if they returned, and all of their properties were forfeited to the crown.

But the Yorkists were not deterred. A few months later, Richard of York's ally Warwick returned from Calais. And he was accompanied by Richard's son Edward. And Edward proved to be a very effective fighter. Warwick and Edward made their way back to London where there was strong Yorkist support – and the mayor allowed them to enter the city. They then left and pursued Queen Margaret's forces across the country. In July of 1460, the two armies finally met at Northampton where the Lancastrians were soundly defeated. King Henry was taken alive, but Margaret fled westward into Wales.

At this point, Richard of York returned from Ireland, and he tried to have himself proclaimed as king. But he didn't have enough support from the lords to push it through. It was agreed that Henry would remain king, but Richard would be designated as the heir. But that meant that Henry's young son was disinherited. Queen Margaret's goal was to protect her son's claim to the throne, so she had no choice but to regroup her forces and plan a counter-attack.

When Richard of York received word of Margaret's plans, he was apparently taken by surprise. He headed out of London with a small force to take on Margaret's forces, but when the two sides met at Wakefield in the north of England, Margaret actually had the larger army. Her forces overwhelmed the Yorkist soldiers, and Richard of York was actually killed in the battle which took place in December of 1460. [*SOURCE: 'This Realm of England: 1399-1688,' Lacey Baldwin Smith, p. 60*]

So by this point, both of the original rivals, Edmund of Somerset and Richard of York, were dead. They had been killed on the battlefield. King Henry was still alive, but struggling with mental illness. His cause was now clearly led by his wife Queen Margaret. Meanwhile, the leadership of the Yorkist faction passed from Richard of York to his son Edward. And Edward maintained his father's close alliance with Warwick and the Neville family.

Following the victory at Wakefield, Queen Margaret decided to head south to take back London. Her army now included a lot of mercenaries from Scotland. And as they traveled south, she allowed her forces to loot and pillage the towns and cities as they passed through. Word of these atrocities reached the south before her forces got there. Remember that Margaret was French – a close relative of the hated French king. And now she had a lot of Scottish mercenaries, which also generated resentment because Scotland was another traditional enemy. And the looting and pillaging in the north caused even more alarm and fear in the south.

It was this point, in January of 1461, that John Paston received a letter from his brother Clement. Clement wrote that the men in his community were joining with the local lords to confront the forces that were headed down from the north. He wrote the following:

> In this country, every man is well-willing to go with my lords here, and I hope God shall help them, for the people in the north rob and steal, and have been appointed to pillage all this country and give away men's goods and livlihood in all the south country, and that will ask a mischief – or call for punishment. My lords that are here have as much as they may do to keep order in all this country, more than four or five shires, for they will soon be upon the men in the north, because it is for the well-being of all the south.
>
> In thys cwntré euery man is well wyllyng to goo wyth my lordys here, and I hope God xall helpe hem, fore þe pepill in þe northe robbe and styll and ben apoyntyd to pill all thys cwntré, and gyffe a-way menys goodys and lyfflodys in all þe sowthe cwntré, and that wyll ask a myscheffe. My lordys þat ben here haue as moche as þey may doo to kep down all thys cwntré, more þan iiij ore v scherys, fore þey wold be vp on þe men in northe, fore it ys fore þe welle of all þe sowthe."

The opposition in the south bolstered the Yorkist cause, and it allowed Edward's Yorkist forces to resume control of London. The opposition to the Lancastrians was so fierce by this point, that it allowed Edward to proclaim himself as the new king in March. He received the support of the gathered Parliament, and at just 18-year years of age, he became Edward IV – the first Yorkist king of England.

A few days later, Margaret Paston sent a letter to her husband John. In it, she wrote the following:

> 'There is great talking in this country of the desire of my Lord of York. The people report full worshipfully also of my Lord of Warwick. They have no fear here but that he and the other should show too great favor to them that have been rulers of this country beforetime. . .'
>
> "Ther is gret talkyng in thys contré of the desyir of my lorde of York. The pepyll reporte full worchepfully of my lord of Warwyk. They haue no fer her but þat he and othyr scholde schewe to gret favor to hem þat haue be rewyllerys of thys contré be-for tyme. . ."

By this point, Queen Margaret was aware of the opposition in the south, so she pulled back her forces and retreated to the region around Yorkshire. Edward then headed north to confront Margaret's army, and the two sides met at Towton in the north on March 29.

The ensuing battle is known as the Battle of Towton. It was fought in a blinding snowstorm, and it is considered to be one of the bloodiest and deadliest battles ever fought on English soil. It is estimated that somewhere between 60,000 to 100,000 soldiers were on the ground that day. The battle lasted for much of the day, and some estimates suggest that nearly 10,000 men were killed. [*SOURCE: 'Lancastrians to Tudors: England 1450-1509,' Andrew Pickering, p. 25*] Edward's Yorkist forces finally prevailed and secured the victory, and thereby secured his status as the new king. The Lancastrian cause never fully recovered from the defeat.

Meanwhile, Margaret and the deposed king received word of the defeat, and they fled to Scotland. Despite Edward's victory, there was still deep-rooted support for the Lancastrians in the north, and Henry would eventually recover the crown – albeit for a very brief period.

With that brief exception, Lancastrian rule of England came to an end, and we now enter into a protracted period of Yorkist rule. Edward reigned for most of the next two decades. And his reign was marked by extended periods of relative peace punctuated by occasional flare-ups in the fighting between the two factions of the royal family.

Back in Norfolk, the Pastons had Yorkist leanings and were probably happy with the turn of events. John Paston was actually selected a member of Edward's first Parliament. But his elation didn't last for very long. Around the same time that Edward became the king, John Paston's inheritance from his friend Fastolf came under attack – both legally and physically. Some of the properties were taken from him by force, and the ownership of the massive Caister Castle became tied up in the courts.

The castle was claimed by the powerful Duke of Norfolk, and the Duke happened to be a Yorkist ally of the new king Edward. So for the Pastons it was a case of 'meet the new boss, same as the old boss.' Even though the crown had changed hands, the Pastons' enemies once again had a direct connection to the king, and for a second time, the Pastons found themselves on the outside looking in.

John Paston did everything he could to defend his rights to the Fastolf estate. But his opponents were powerful and politically connected. The defense consumed the rest of Paston's life. In October of 1465, Paston received a letter from his elderly mother Agnes. She seemed to be concerned about the toll that the conflict was taking on John's life. She wrote:

> 'By my counsel, dispose yourself as much as you may have less to do in the world. Your father said, "In little business lies much rest." This world is but a thoroughfare and full of woe; and when we depart therefrom, we bear with us nothing but our good deeds and ill. And here no man know how soon God will call him, and therefore it is good for every creature to be ready.'

> "Be my counseyle, dyspose ȝoure-selfe as myche as ȝe may to haue lesse to do in þe worlde, ȝoure fadyr sayde, 'In lityl bysynes lyeth myche reste.' þis worlde is but a þorugh-fare and ful of woo, and whan we departe þer-fro, riȝth nouȝght bere wyth vs but oure good dedys and ylle. And þer knoweth no man how soon God woll clepe hym, and þer-for it is good for euery creature to be redy."

It seemed like a premonition, and it turned out to be true. Seven months later, John Paston died suddenly while he was in London. That was Agnes's last surviving letter to her eldest son. In the end, the Pastons were able to hold on to Caister Castle, but most of the rest of the Fastolf inheritance was lost.

Interestingly, Agnes's final letter to her son uses two proverbs – 'In little business lies much rest' and 'This world is but a thoroughfare and full of woe.' She attributes those saying to John's father and her late husband, William Paston. But William didn't make those up himself. They are both found in the writing of Geoffrey Chaucer. The first is found in a poem by Chaucer called 'Truth' and the second is found in the Canterbury Tales. We don't know if William Paston repeated those proverbs because he read them in a copy of Chaucer's work. Maybe they was just common expressions at the time. But we do know that a lot more people were about to be exposed to Chaucer's poetry because William Caxton brought the printing press to England in the decade after John Paston' death. And one of the books Caxton published with the new press was a copy of the Canterbury Tales.

Caxton's press began a process that changed the English language by melding it into a fixed form, and by making the dialect of London the standard dialect of English. So next time, we'll look at Yorkist England and the arrival of the printing press in the 1470s.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.