

Discovering Constance: Reconstructing the Life of the Illegitimate Daughter of John Paston II

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THE PASTON LETTERS comprise more than two thousand letters and documents, written over three centuries, both to and from members of a Norfolk family named Paston. More than a thousand letters were penned during the fifteenth century, over four generations, which were edited by Professor Norman Davis and published in two volumes in the nineteen seventies. This edition and a number of studies of the letters by various historians and scholars are referenced below.¹ For those who are not familiar with the Paston family, a genealogy is also included, figure 1. The Paston Letters are important documents for studying women's lives and writings in late medieval England. Around 150 of the fifteenth-century letters were composed by women members of the family, including a small number from more distant female relatives and friends. Of these, two letters from mistresses

1. Norman Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century: Part 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), and *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century: Part 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England: Studies in an Age of Transition*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1968); Roger Virgoe, *Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family: Private Life in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Macmillan London, 1989); Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf's Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Helen Castor, *Blood & Roses: The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Faber, 2004); Diane Watt, *The Paston Women: Selected Letters* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004).

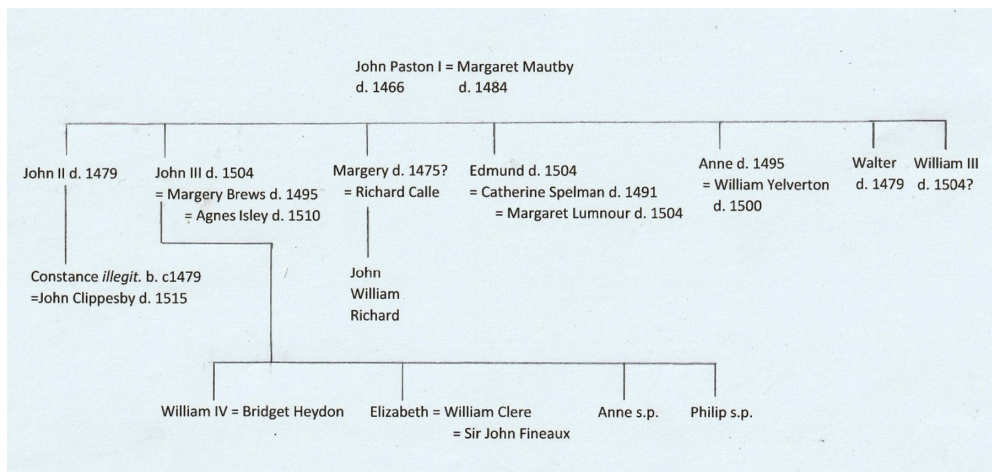


Figure 1. The Paston Pedigree.

of Sir John Paston have survived.² We already know from her letter that Constance Reynyforth was Sir John's mistress not long before his death in 1479 and also that she had a daughter from this relationship, because Sir John's mother Margaret Mautby Paston left the child, also named Constance, a bequest in her will. My research has uncovered the subsequent life of this child, Constance Paston, whose fate until now has remained obscure. While the details of her mother's life, as with the lives of many medieval women, are still unknown, various sources that I have recently examined render Constance Paston's life visible and reveal that while being female, illegitimate, and orphaned in infancy, she was acknowledged and cared for by the Pastons. It is also evident that she married into a local gentry family, lived a normal lifespan, and had a number of children and grandchildren. This article outlines my discoveries for the first time.

My research arose from a chance meeting. At a one-day symposium, "The Pastons, Great Yarmouth, and Their World," held in Great Yarmouth in October 2019 and organized by the University of East Anglia and the Paston Heritage Society as part of their Paston Footprints 600

2. I refer to him as Sir John Paston. He is also known as John Paston II, to distinguish him from his father, John Paston I, and his younger brother, John Paston III.

project, I happened to meet Mrs. Jean Lindsay, a church warden of St. Peter's Church, Clippesby, Norfolk. Mrs. Lindsay showed me a print of the drawing made by John Sell Cotman of a monumental brass that still survives in the church. The brass consists of an effigy and an inscription commemorating John Clippesby esquire and his wife and children, dated 1594, as shown in John Sell Cotman's drawing, figure 2.³ Arranged around the effigy are six heraldic shields. All have the Clippesby arms to the left, and to the right, the arms of six women who married into the Clippesby family in previous generations. One of the shields, to the bottom right of the stone, very clearly shows, on the right, the arms of the Paston family. The correct way to describe these arms, to quote Edmund Farrer, is "*Paston*, Argent, six fleurs-de-lis azure; a chief indented or," or six blue fleur-de-lis on a silver background, and above them a gold strip with a "toothed" bottom edge.⁴ Placed as they are on the right of the shield, these must be the arms of a Paston woman who married a Clippesby man. Over a number of years, I had pondered Colin Richmond's reference to Roger Virgoe's note that "a John Clippesby . . . married an unsurnamed Constance."⁵ It immediately struck me that this shield was the final piece in a puzzle. When put together with other evidence, which I will examine below, it seems unarguable that these arms represent Constance Paston, the grandmother of the John Clippesby in the brass, and the woman who, more famously, appears as a small child in the will of her own grandmother Margaret Mautby Paston, where she is described as "Custaunce, bastard daughter of John Paston, knyght."⁶

Constance, and her mother, Constance Reynnyforth, are each identified by name only once in the Paston Letters, and though these two appearances may already be known to scholars of the late medieval

3. John Sell Cotman, Dawson Turner, Samuel Rush Meyrick, Albert Way, and Nicholas Harris Nicolas, *Engravings of Sepulchral Brasses in Norfolk and Suffolk* (London: H. G. Bohn, 1839), plate 84, p. 43.

4. Edmund Farrer, *The Church Heraldry of Norfolk: A Description of All Coats of Arms on Brasses, Monuments, Slabs, Hatchments Etc. Now to Be Found in the Country* (Norwich: Goose, 1885), 346.

5. Richmond, *Paston Family: Endings*, 34n56.

6. Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers* 1, no. 230. Hereafter letters will be cited in text by number in Davis's edition unless otherwise noted.

Clippesby impaling Jerningham

Clippesby impaling Woodhouse

The families represented in the central heraldic shield have not all been identified but almost certainly are earlier ancestors of John Clippesby.



Clippesby impaling Knightley

Clippesby impaling Ellis

Clippesby impaling Spelman

Clippesby impaling Paston

Figure 2. The brass of John Clippesby and his wife Julian in St. Peter's Church, Clippesby, Norfolk from a drawing by John Sell Cotman. The inscription reads "Here lyeth the bodies of John Clippesby Esquire and Julian his wiffe, who had issue William deceased and lefte Audry, Frances and Julian his daughters and cohiers which John died the xxxi of March 1594." William, who died as a child, is shown in a shroud. The six heraldic shields around the brass represent the ancestors of John Clippesby. On the left of each shield are the arms of the husband, all Clippesby, and on the right, the arms of the family of the wife. The Paston arms, bottom right, are those of John's grandmother, Constance Paston.

period, it is worth rehearsing the evidence here. A letter from Constance Reynyforth survives, which was “Wretyn at Cobham, the xxj day of Marche” to her lover Sir John Paston, in which she requests Sir John’s help in executing a plot to deceive her kinsfolk into releasing her so that she can keep a secret assignation with him (no. 781). An addition to the letter, in Sir John’s hand, names the sender “Custaunce Raynford” and gives the year as 1478. Despite considerable research I have been unable to find any definite information as to the identity of Constance Reynyforth. Another addition to her letter is a note in Latin, which Norman Davis identifies as “a note by the sixteenth-century annotator [which] says that this letter was written by the woman by whom Sir John Paston had a daughter; and since the daughter’s name was Constance (see Margaret Paston’s will, no. 230, line 174) this is no doubt true.”⁷ That this relationship resulted in the birth of an illegitimate daughter is made clear by the entry in Margaret Mautby Paston’s will, which was written some four years later, to which Davis refers. This entry is the one and only time that Constance, the daughter, is identified by name in the Paston Letters.

Little Constance was born, to judge from the dates, sometime between the end of 1478 and Sir John’s death in November 1479. Her appearance in her grandmother’s will suggests that Sir John’s paternity was acknowledged by the Pastons before his death, for if little Constance had been born after his death and had been presented to the family then, they might not have accepted that she was his child. So it appears that Sir John, who was probably alive when his daughter was born, decided against marrying Constance Reynyforth before the birth, in order to “make an honest woman of her” and save her from the shame of bearing an illegitimate child. By 1479 he was thirty-seven years old, worldly wise, and had had a good deal of experience with women. A letter survives in the Paston collection from another of his mistresses (no. 753), and elsewhere he is referred to by a friend as “the best cheser [chooser] of a gentellwoman þat I know” (no. 745). His decision not to marry Constance may have been based on the fact that he had only recently spent a great deal of time and money extricating himself

7. Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers* 2, no. 781, note.

from a betrothal—though Richmond asserts that they were “married privately”—to Anne Haute, a cousin of Edward IV’s queen Elizabeth Woodville. This relationship, which began in 1469, seems to have been entered into much more for political advantage than for love. In a letter of 1472, Sir John wrote to his brother that he would visit Anne just once more, “Now syn thys observance is ones doon I purpose nott to tempte God noo moore soo” (no. 267) to which Richmond adds, “this evidently was the moment when John became a confirmed batchelor.”⁸ About Constance Reynyforth we know very little; her letter gives us our only evidence of her life. She does not appear to have been an heiress, nor to have had connections which would have been useful to Sir John, though she seems to have belonged to a gentry family, for her letter implies that her uncle employed a number of men. She may have been a member of the Rainsford family of Bradfield, Essex, though there is no hard evidence for this. She seems to have been in love with Sir John, for she was prepared to risk the wrath of her family to spend time with him. Her invisibility may imply that she soon died, either as a result of her daughter’s birth or of the terrible plague of 1479 which killed her lover, or she may have been shunned for shaming the family, been obliged to seek shelter in a nunnery, and have disappeared from the record.

Sir John’s treatment of Constance Reynyforth does not reflect well on the Pastons. However, the opposite seems to be true of their behavior towards her daughter, for the evidence when put together seems to suggest that they acknowledged little Constance as a member of the family, gave her the Paston name, and provided and cared for her over many years. She was almost certainly born sometime in 1479, and would have been between two and three years old when her paternal grandmother Margaret Mautby Paston bequeathed “to Custaunce, bastard daughter of John Paston, knyght, whan she is xx yer of age x marc” (no. 230). In the late medieval period the adjective “bastard” was a statement of fact, the word itself as it is used here by Constance’s grandmother having no pejorative implications, meaning simply, “born out of wedlock, illegitimate.”⁹ Barbara A. Hanawalt, referring to London’s laws, writes

8. Richmond, *Paston Family: Endings*, 146n54.

9. *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Robert E. Lewis, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001). Online edition in *Middle English Compendium*, ed.

that “the status of bastard did not carry with it the slanderous meaning that it does today; indeed, it does not appear among the many terms of defamation that came before the London courts.”¹⁰ While the term itself was relatively mild, the social implications of bastardy for the father, mother, and child involved could be serious and are explored below.

However, Constance, the bastard granddaughter, is presented in her grandmother’s will as being no different from the other grandchildren; her bequest is certainly not an afterthought. The entry referring to her legacy is positioned squarely in the middle of the bequests to Margaret Mautby Paston’s other grandchildren—it is preceded by a gift to the two legitimate children of the head of the family John Paston III and followed by a legacy to the three sons of Margery Paston Calle. She is, however, left rather less money than the others. William and Elizabeth, John III’s children, are left fifty marks or £33 6s. 8d. each, John Calle gets £20, while Constance is bequeathed ten marks or £6 13s. 4d. The younger Calle boys, though, would receive nothing unless their elder brother were to die. Ironically, if Sir John had married Constance Reynyforth before her daughter’s birth, Constance Paston would have been heir to all the Paston lands and money, but her illegitimacy ruled out that possibility.¹¹ Lawrence Stone notes that by the thirteenth century the Church had managed to take control of marriage law and succeeded in getting “bastards legally excluded from property inheritance.”¹² It is clear, though, that Margaret saw Constance as important. Rachel H. Moss suggests that because Constance was Sir John’s only surviving child, “Margaret paid more attention to a bastard than she might otherwise have done.”¹³ A similar case of a bastard’s gaining importance

Frances McSparran, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000–2018), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary>, accessed 17 June 2020.

10. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31.

11. Another example is Sir Edward Poynings, who was Constance’s father’s cousin. He left seven illegitimate children, but no legitimate heir, and at his death his extensive lands went to the Dukes of Northumberland, his next heirs.

12. Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*, abr. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 30.

13. Rachel E. Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations in Middle English Texts* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2013), 176.

because of being the only surviving child is cited by Nicholas Orme, who notes that Henry V's brother Thomas Duke of Clarence had a "close bond" with his bastard son, John, "perhaps because Thomas had no legitimate issue."¹⁴

Margaret's gift to Constance is almost certainly meant as "marriage money," since it was to be delivered when she was twenty. Jennifer Ward notes that in late medieval England "the formation of marriage was based on careful, sometimes lengthy . . . negotiations which centred on the property brought to the marriage."¹⁵ It must have been evident to Margaret Mautby Paston, as she wrote her will, that despite Constance's being a Paston, she would have very little "property" to bring to her marriage. Sir John's impecunious ways are well documented in his mother's letters (nos. 212, 216, 221), and his last letter from London records how short he was of funds (no. 315). Sir John left a will, dated by Davis "nominally 1477, 31 October," but this was before the birth of Constance, so she is not mentioned (no. 309). Eileen Power notes that "a girl insufficiently dowered might have to suffer that disparagement in marriage which was so much dreaded and so carefully guarded against. Even in the lowest ranks of society a bride was expected to bring something with her besides her person when she entered her husband's house. Dowering of poor girls was one of the recognised forms of medieval charity, like the mending of bad roads."¹⁶ An example comes from the will of Margaret's friend, Elizabeth Uvedale Clere: "I beqwethe to the marage of vj pore maydenys, xx li., evenly to be departyd, that is to seye, to euery of them, lxxvj s. viij d., at there marages."¹⁷ It appears that Margaret's bequest to her base-born orphaned granddaughter was just such a gift, though luckily, as discussed below, Constance's lack of means seems to have made no difference to her marriage.

Constance's inclusion in her grandmother's will also suggests, perhaps,

14. Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 57.

15. Jennifer C. Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 11.

16. Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 41.

17. Will of Elizabeth Clere, Norfolk Record Office, NCC Woolman f.131 (1492).

that she was being cared for in Norfolk, rather than in some distant part of England, such as “Cobham” in Surrey or Kent, both possible places of origin of her mother’s letter. It implies, too, that Margaret expected that in eighteen years’ time, although she herself would be dead, the family would still be in touch with Constance. This again suggests that the child may have been being looked after locally. Furthermore, the executor of Margaret Mautby Paston’s will, who would be responsible for giving the legacy to the twenty-year-old Constance, would undoubtedly be her uncle John Paston III. Davis notes that the copy of the will that has survived is “a working copy used by John III as executor . . . many paragraphs are marked in the margin with a cross in his hand as he ticked them off as they were dealt with.”¹⁸ In a number of places in the will, opposite particular bequests, John III recorded in the margin the sum of money involved. The bequest to Constance has the note in the margin “x marke.” Davis records that this has been “erased,” but when or why, at this distance, is impossible to ascertain.

This raises the question, was little Constance Paston taken in and brought up by members of the Paston family, perhaps by John Paston III who had the responsibility of giving her her grandmother’s bequest, and by his wife Margery Brews Paston? There is no firm evidence for this—she may indeed have been boarded out—though her close relationship in later years with John III’s son, William Paston IV, which is examined below, suggests its possibility. John III was the only male Paston in a position to take her: her father and her uncle Walter Paston were dead; her uncle William Paston was and would remain single; and her uncle Edmund Paston who had recently married had little money. By contrast, her uncle John Paston III who, since her father’s death, was head of the family and heir to all the Paston land, could easily afford to provide for her. Also, his was a happy family. His marriage had been that rare thing in English medieval gentry circles, a love-match, as attested by his wife Margery Brews’s famous Valentine Letters (nos. 415, 416), by her addressing him, four years into the marriage, as “myne owyn swete hert” (no. 418), and on another letter of the same year, adding a postscript “I prey you if ye tary longe at London þat it wil plesse you to

18. Norman Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers* 1, no. 230, note.

sende for me, for I thynke longe sen I lay in your armes” (no. 417). John III and Margery also had a clutch of little children, who were very close in age to Constance. Their first child, Christopher, had been born in the summer of 1478, as a congratulatory letter from Sir John confirms (no. 312). In February 1482, Margaret Mautby Paston made her will, but she does not mention Christopher, so presumably he had already died. However, they had had two more living children, William and Elizabeth, who were mentioned in the will—that is three children born within three and a half years. Constance would have fitted easily into the family; she may have been taken in in 1479, before her father’s death, and might have been only a few months older than William. Research by the Paston Footprints 600 team has recently revealed that John III and Margery went on to have three more children who survived to adulthood, Philip, Philippa, and Dorothy, and at least one that we know of who died in childhood, Anne, who is buried at Oxnead.¹⁹ Constance, therefore, may have been raised as effectively the “big sister” of five or six younger cousins. Perhaps the main reason why John Paston III would have taken in and cared for his brother’s bastard child was because the same service had been performed by the family for him some years earlier. Evidence of this is examined below. Another reason why I believe John III would have taken in his orphaned niece was that he had loved her father, his elder brother Sir John. Only two years apart in age, the Paston brothers had always been close, exchanging letters over many years and almost always agreeing—about their mother’s criticisms and complaints, about their sisters’ relationships, and particularly about their mutual dislike of their mother’s chaplain, Sir James Gloys. His brother’s sudden death seems to have stunned John III; he wrote to his mother, from London, later the same November, “I haue myche more to wryght, but myn empty hed wyll not let me remember it” (no. 383). To have had Sir John’s only child, a little girl, born within months of his death, must have seemed strangely fortuitous.

Constance was not the first bastard child that the family had raised. Evidence survives of other examples of the Pastons and their circle

19. Paston Footprints 19 May, 2019, <https://www.pastonfootprints.com/post/the-children-of-john-paston-iii-and-margery-brews>.

acknowledging and caring for the illegitimate offspring of their menfolk. Indeed, it seems that two other Paston brothers as well as Sir John, and also an uncle, had illegitimate children. Much of this evidence has been uncovered by Professor Colin Richmond, though Richmond did not trace Constance.²⁰ In a letter of 1468, to his mother Margaret Mautby Paston, John Paston III, writing from “Brygges,” presumably Bruges, requests, “And modyr I beseche yow þat ye wolbe good mastras to my lytyll man, and to se þat he go to scole. I sent my cosyn Dawbeney v s. by Callys man for to bye for hym syche ger as he nedyth” (no. 330). Richmond, in 1996, suggested that John III was referring to an illegitimate son, and Rachel H. Moss agrees, adding “because John calls him ‘my lytyll man’ it seems more likely that the child was his son, than, for instance, a ward.”²¹ John III’s letter continues with greetings to “Syr John Styll, and to pray hym to be good mastyr to lytyll Jak and to lerne hym well.” There are some interesting aspects to this letter. Firstly, it appears that the child was being raised by John III’s mother, and the matter-of-fact tone suggests that this was not something out of the ordinary. Assuming, from the references to his education, that Jack was about six years old, he must have been born in about 1462, when John III was only eighteen. In 1468, though Margaret was in her late forties, she still had her youngest son William at home. Roger Virgoe, a very reliable Paston scholar, says that William Paston was “born in 1459.”²² However, in Margaret’s will of 1482, she leaves William a number of bequests, which were to go elsewhere “if the seid William dye or he come to the age of xxi yer” (no. 230). This suggests that by February 1482, William was not yet twenty-one, so he must have been born after February 1461, which makes him about the same age as Jack. Moss writes that “the implication [of John’s letter to his mother] is that John could expect his family to make sure that his bastard was looked after.”²³ Indeed the letter suggests that it was relatively normal for a woman family-member, if she had children of a similar age, to take in and raise the bastard child of

20. Richmond, *Paston Family: First Phase*, 162–66; *Paston Family: Fastolf’s Will*, 67.

21. Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations*, 176.

22. Virgoe, *Illustrated Letters*, 9.

23. Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations*, 176.

one of her menfolk, so Constance's being taken in and cared for was not unusual. Tim Thornton and Katharine Carlton note, from their study of illegitimacy in northern England, that legacies to baseborn children in a variety of wills show a "pattern of integration and wider kin support for illegitimate children."²⁴ When Constance was born, though, more than ten years after John III's letter about Jack, Margaret, who had already moved away to live on her natal estate of Mautby, would have been too old to care for her, but Margaret's daughter-in-law Margery might have been expected to take her. It seems that the care fell on the women of the family, while the cost fell on the men. A second interesting aspect of John III's letter is that he not only took responsibility for the child's material welfare, sending five shillings for "ger," probably clothes, for him, but he also placed emphasis, with two references to it, on his education. This suggests that John saw Jack as almost a proper Paston son, deserving a good, and by definition, expensive education, rather than seeing him as a second-class bastard child, for whom a laboring life would be good enough. Furthermore, John's affection for his son is evident from his referring to the child as "my lytyll man" and also from his having perhaps named the boy after his much-loved elder brother Sir John, who was probably the child's godfather. Moss cites a similar example of affectionate feelings for a bastard child expressed in the Cely Letters, when in 1481, George Cely's father said he was "ryught sory for the dethe of the schylde" on hearing that his son's illegitimate baby daughter had died.²⁵ Jack, too, probably died in childhood, for there are no further references to him in the Paston Letters. The fact that John III had lost at least one, and maybe two, children, by the time Constance was born may also have influenced his decision to care for his brother's child. Hanawalt suggests that "perhaps because the infant mortality rate was so high, surviving children were regarded as a blessing rather than a burden in medieval society."²⁶ Though John III had five children who survived to adulthood, he lost at least the three that we know of, which

24. Tim Thornton and Katharine Carlton, *The Gentleman's Mistress: Illegitimate Relationships and Children, 1450–1640* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 118.

25. Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations*, 175.

26. Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, 30.

includes an infant daughter named Anne buried at Oxnead, and maybe more, in childhood.

Another illegitimate child, Osbert Berney, the son of Margaret Mautby Paston's uncle, John Berney, was also looked after by the family and carried the Berney name. Richmond suggests that a letter from Margaret Mautby Paston to her husband, which refers to "þe chyld . . . a praty [presumably 'pretty'] boy," being "feched hom" from "Rokelond Toftes" (no. 150), may refer to Osbert being brought from his mother into the Berney household.²⁷ Unlike Constance, Osbert is nowhere named as a bastard, but according to Richmond, his illegitimacy is indicated not only by the fact that the will of his father John Berney makes no mention of a wife, but also by the way that Osbert was left land for his life only, it then reverting at his death to his legitimate cousin.²⁸ As it did with Constance, his illegitimacy ruled out inheritance. However, the Berneys and their relatives the Pastons took care of the boy throughout his life. Richmond recounts how both Sir John Paston and his brother John Paston III watched over him, making sure that he was gainfully employed.²⁹ Helen Castor writes that Osbert Berney, who was "Margaret's cousin, the illegitimate son of her maternal uncle," in 1469, was mistakenly reported killed while fighting against the forces of the Duke of Norfolk to save Caister Castle for the Pastons. Castor describes him as one of the family's most "valuable servants and loyal friends."³⁰ Bastard sons were often valued and useful members of the family. Orme notes that, like Osbert Berney, John, the bastard son of Thomas the duke of Clarence, brother of Henry V, fought with his father at the battle of Beauge and boldly rescued his father's body from the French after Thomas's death on the battlefield.³¹ Hanawalt adds that "some bastard children had productive roles in the family strategy," citing a London tanner "with only daughters [who] left his business to his illegitimate son. Tanning was not a trade that a woman could easily carry on

27. Richmond, *Paston Family: First Phase*, 163n131.

28. Will of John Berney, The National Archive (TNA), Prob 11/4/410, (1461).

29. Richmond, *Paston Family: First Phase*, 162–66.

30. Castor, *Blood & Roses*, 209.

31. Orme, *Medieval Children*, 57.

herself.”³² Margaret Mautby Paston later, in her will, left Osbert a legacy of ten marks—exactly the same sum as she left to Constance. Osbert Berney’s memorial brass still survives in the Church of St. Michael and All Angels, Braydeston. The date of his death is not known, so we cannot tell who had this expensive item made and installed, but it attests to the value that the family put on this bastard child. Edmund Paston, too, appears to have had an illegitimate son. Evidence in a letter, written by John Paston III to his brother, Sir John, on 6 November 1479, suggests that their younger brother, Edmund, had acknowledged paternity of a baby son by a married woman, Mistress Dixon, and had applied to take the child, but that the King had refused permission, “the chyl dys fadyr [i.e., the woman’s husband] being alyve” (no. 381). All these examples suggest that if the father chose, he could take his illegitimate child from the mother, regardless of her wishes, and this may have been what happened to Constance Reynyforth.

The implications of fathering a child out of wedlock do not appear to have been too serious for young men in the late medieval period. Thornton and Carlton note an “acceptance of bastard-bearing.”³³ Hanawalt, writing of London, says “bastardy must have been common,”³⁴ and indeed three of Margaret Mautby Paston’s five sons sired a bastard child. Moss writes that “social perceptions of young male sexuality accepted and even expected a certain degree of promiscuity, which might well result in the production of offspring.”³⁵ The matter-of-fact way in which John Paston III writes of his illegitimate son Jack suggests that the Pastons did not regard the siring of bastard children by the young men of the family as particularly dishonorable, but how far this was the general attitude is hard to tell. Christine Carpenter, addressing “the difficulties in uncovering the unspoken assumptions of any age,” adds that the Paston Letters have proved awkward to use, “because of problems in judging whether this family was representative or wholly unrepresentative of landowning mores.”³⁶ Moss, exploring this issue in the Cely Letters,

32. Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, 32.

33. Thornton and Carlton, *Gentleman’s Mistress*, 117.

34. Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, 31.

35. Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations*, 175.

36. Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401–1499* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 8.

notes how members of the Cely family were circumspect about it, never acknowledging in writing their brother George's paternity of his illegitimate daughter, referring to the child, rather, as "Margery's daughter," and describing George's relationship with Margery, who was a cook, as "eating pudding."³⁷ On the whole, the Pastons were less "nice" and referred openly to the true nature of the relationship, as in Margaret's will and the reference to Edmund's son by Mistress Dixon.

For the bastard child itself the prospects might be mixed. Deborah Youngs notes that families in medieval society "often took in children who they felt were in need," giving examples from Wales and Norway of "fathers 'adopting' their illegitimate children."³⁸ This suggests that the treatment by the Paston family of their illegitimate offspring was fairly typical of society in general. Hanawalt writes "the child's chance of survival depended on the social status of the mother and the willingness of the father to recognize and support the child," adding that though a bastard could not inherit the main estate, a father could still make bequests of money and movable goods or "the life use of real estate."³⁹ While it appears that most medieval gentry families, including the Pastons, treated their bastard children with care and, indeed love, it seems nevertheless that they were not seen as quite equal—leaving issues of inheritance aside—with legitimate children. While the Paston brothers, John II, John III, Edmund, and William were often concerned in helping one another to make lucrative marriages, their concern for their cousin Osbert Berney was to keep him employed. Michael K. Jones, writes about the Beaufort family, the four illegitimate offspring of John of Gaunt and Katherine Swynford, the eldest of whom, John Beaufort, was the great grandfather of Henry VII. Jones notes that while "they were recognized as members of his family and never ostracized" and after their parents' marriage they were officially legitimized, however "their bastardy was never completely forgotten. The mocking nickname 'Fairborn' was still in use at the end of the fifteenth century."⁴⁰

37. Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations*, 175.

38. Deborah Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, C.1300–C.1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 60.

39. Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, 31–32.

40. Michael K. Jones and Malcolm G. Underwood, *The King's Mother: Lady*

As for the experience of being the mother of an illegitimate child, we have no Paston daughter to serve as an example, nor do we have any knowledge of the fate of Constance Reynyforth. Stone writes of the double standard of sexual morality at the time, and how “a woman’s honour [depended] on her reputation for chastity.”⁴¹ Jean Imray notes “a refuge for unmarried mothers which [Richard] Whittington added to St. Thomas’ Hospital at Southwark,” earlier in the fifteenth century, in which the anonymity of the young women was strictly preserved, in order to enable them to find husbands later.⁴² The treatment of Paston daughters who defied the family’s wishes on matrimony was quite extreme, with Elizabeth Paston confined to her room and beaten for not marrying the man her mother had chosen (no. 446), and Margery Paston suffering complete ostracism for daring to marry the man of her choice (no. 203). Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove note that ‘the culture of the gentry was pervaded by a sense of insecurity; these people knew that their position was subject to the vagaries of fortune, so they assiduously maintained their own affairs in the hope to maintain, or indeed, better, their status.’⁴³ A daughter who married a man of inferior status, as did Margery Paston, or who, like Constance Reynyforth, bore a child out of wedlock, not only failed to enhance, but actually damaged the family’s reputation, and might expect to be disowned by them. Margery and Richard Calle were obliged to live at Blackborough Priory, a Norfolk nunnery, for some time after their clandestine marriage, having been shunned by the Paston family and their associates, and Constance Reynyforth, too, may have ended her days in a nunnery. A shocking passage in Margaret Mautby Paston’s letter of 8 July 1444 to her husband John Paston I gives a picture of the treatment that one mother of a bastard child received, though in this case the woman was married, so had also committed adultery and cuckolded her husband.

Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 18, 20.

41. Stone, *Family, Sex, and Marriage*, 316.

42. Jean Imray, *The Charity of Richard Whittington: A History of the Trust Administered by the Mercer’s Company, 1424–1966* (London: Athlone, 1968), 2.

43. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 14.

Margaret recounts how Eleanor Winter Heydon, the grandmother of Bridget Heydon, wife of Constance's cousin William Paston IV, was treated by her husband when she bore a child that was not his. Margaret wrote, "I herd seyn þat he [John Heydon] seyð 3yf sche come in hesse precence to make here exkewce þat he xuld kyt of here nose to makyn here to be know wat sche is, and yf here chyld come in hesse presence he seyð he wyld kyllyn. He wolle nowt be intretit to haue here ayen in no wysse" (no. 127). Eleanor's father refused to support her, siding instead with her husband, and Eleanor was obliged to enter a nunnery.

Constance Paston had probably already been born when the letter, referring to "my brodyr Edmundys son, otherwyse callyd Dyxsons," was written on 6 November 1479 by John Paston III to his brother Sir John Paston, in London (no. 381). Immediately after hearing of the death of their grandmother Agnes Berry Paston, who had been living with their uncle William Paston II in London, Sir John had hurried to the capital, despite there being plague in the city, to prevent their Uncle William from seizing control of their grandmother's property, which he had been managing for her during the preceding few years. Sir John perhaps never received the letter, for he died sometime that month in London, probably of plague. Indeed 1479 was a terrible year for plague throughout the country. In the same letter John III, writing from his house in Norwich, said "The pepyll dyeth sore in Norwyche, and specyally a-bought my house; but my wyff and my women come not ought." He added "and fle ferther we can not, for at Sweynsthorp, [their country estate] sythe my departyng thens, they haue dyed and ben syke nye jn every house of the towne." He also urgently requests "ij pottys of tryacle," a medicinal remedy thought at the time to give some protection from disease,⁴⁴ "for I haue spent ought that I had wyth my yong wyff and my yong folkys and my-sylff." John III refers here to having "yong folkys," more than one child, in his care. Christopher had been born the preceding summer in August 1478. He and Margery may have had a second child by early November the following year, or the second or third child in their care may have been Constance.

44. "an antidote for poison or venom, a medicament for drawing out or neutralizing the poison engendered by infection, suppuration etc." *Middle English Dictionary*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary>, accessed 17 June 2020.

The same letter of 6 November 1479, moreover, begins to focus on the important role which Constance's uncle, Edmund Paston, was to play in her life. In the letter her uncle John III requests the help of her father Sir John, and also of their uncle "myn oncle, Syr George Brown," in acquiring, for their younger brother Edmund, "of the kyng the wardshepp of John Clyppysby, son and heyer to John Clyppysby, late of Owby in the conte of Norffolk, sqwyr."⁴⁵ A brief explanation of this passage is necessary. William Clippesby of Oby, Norfolk, had recently died leaving a young widow Katherine Spelman Clippesby and a son John, who was his heir, but who was still underage. For a genealogy of the Clippesby family, see figure 3. The wardship of an underage heir, whether a boy or girl, could be purchased, either from the king, or from his tenant in chief, usually a nobleman. Peter Fleming writes that, for the king "the greater gentry were the key to control of the shires [and they] demanded tangible benefits in return."⁴⁶ The granting and sale of wardships was one such "benefit" by which the king could both raise money and ensure the loyalty of country gentry families like the Pastons. The purchaser of a ward would enjoy the income from the ward's land until he or she came of age and would also have control of whoever the ward married.⁴⁷ Often a ward was purchased in order to marry him or her to the purchaser's own son or daughter. This was common practice in the medieval period. Margaret Mautby Paston in her will left a hundred marks to her youngest son William with which to buy some land "or ellys to bye a warde to be maried to him, if eny such may be gotten" (no. 230). The above letter, spelling out Edmund Paston's plan to buy the wardship of the Clippesby heir, also suggests that this ward was not particularly desirable, so was going cheap, "iiij or v mark," for it appears

45. There is some doubt over whether young John Clippesby's father was John Clippesby or William Clippesby. William Clippesby is more likely, since his will survives (Norfolk Record Office, NCC Aubrey f. 53), as does Blomefield's record of a Latin inscription on a brass to a William Clippesby, dated 24 September, 1479, in the long-vanished Church of St. Mary, Ashby, which is nearby (Blomefield, vol. 11, 146–49). The name, "John," in the letter may simply have been an error.

46. Peter Fleming, "Politics," in Radulescu and Truelove, *Gentry Culture in Late-Medieval England*, 57.

47. Noël James Menue, *Medieval English Wardship in Romance and Law* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 1–3.

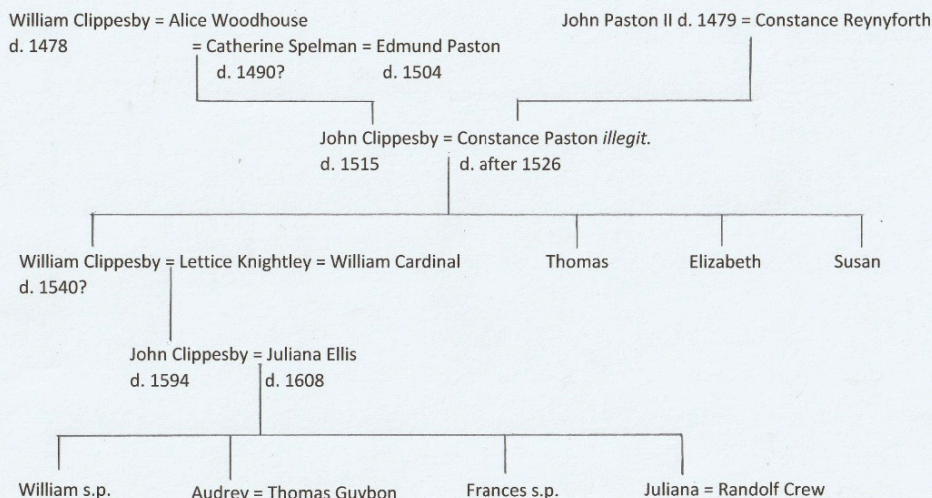


Figure 3. The Clippesby Pedigree.

that young John's father had willed the income from the Clippesby's estate of Oby to his young widow for life. John III notes "the chyld shall haue no lond dwyrng hys yong modyr's lyff, and ther is no man her that wyll mary wyth hym wyth-ought they haue some lond wyth hym; and so the gyft shall not be gret that the Kyng shold geve hym." "Mary wyth hym" here means "purchase his wardship." Although a ward's mother, as a woman, could not control the legal process by which her child and her late husband's land were "sold," sometimes she seems to have been able to involve male friends or relations and to negotiate or to pay for some involvement in her child's future. That is evident here, and was so again in Constance's own life when she herself was left a widow with an underage son and heir. While John III, with the family's help, was planning to assist Edmund in buying the wardship, he was also playing a deeper game, for he adds, "And yet I trow he shold get the modyr by that meane." Though we have no further information about the progress of this case, a letter from Edmund Paston to his mother Margaret Mautby Paston written in January 1481, just over a year later, indicates that he was by that time married to the young widow and had his feet firmly

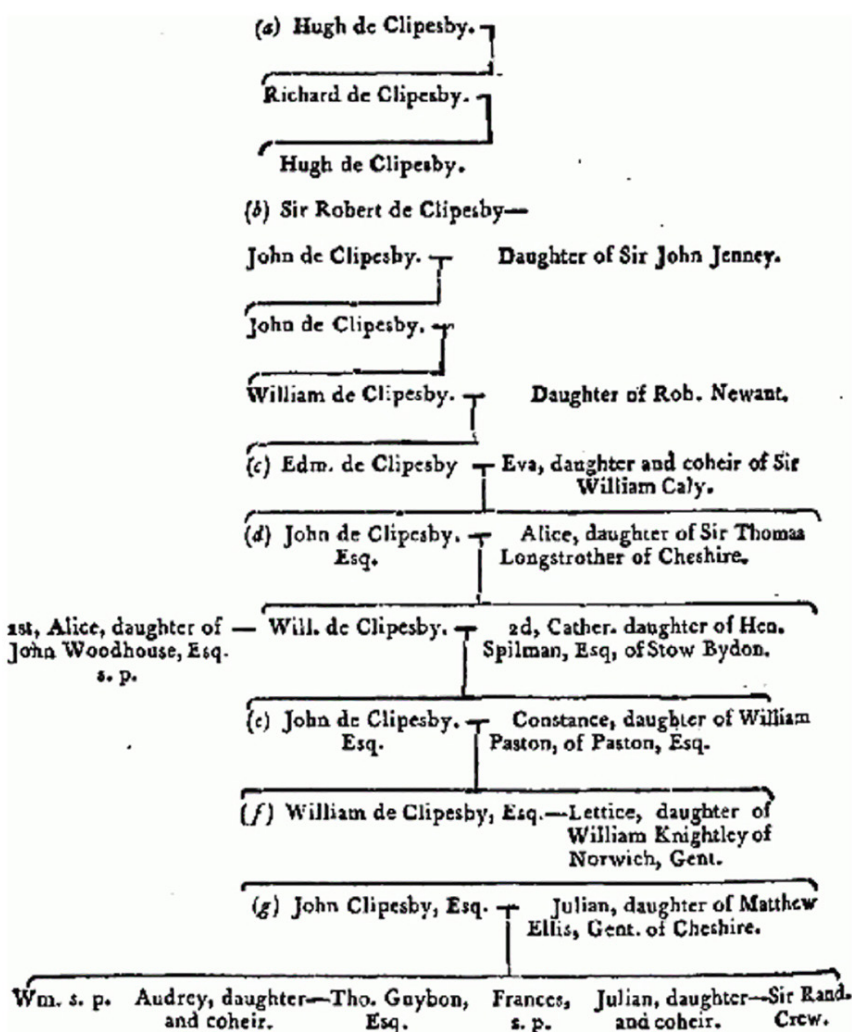


Figure 4. The Clipesby Pedigree according to Blomefield.

under the table at Oby (no. 399). Richmond summarizes that though “Edmund . . . had nothing by way of land, money or prospects to offer her . . . to get Katherine Clippesby [he had] sought to purchase her son and recommend himself that way.”⁴⁸

In order to show Constance Paston’s life chronologically, I present here a letter which relates to her marriage to John Clippesby, the child described above, who was her uncle Edmund Paston’s ward. Constance appears for a second time in the Paston Letters in Additional 27446, folio 102 in the British Library, though here she is not identified by name, only as “your nyce,” in the letter, which is addressed to her uncle, John Paston III. The original editor of the collection, John Fenn, who died in 1794, recognized that this referred to Constance. Fenn noted “this lady must be . . . the natural daughter of the late Sir John Paston.”⁴⁹ Since then, owing probably to Blomefield’s misidentification of Constance as the daughter of *William* Paston (see fig. 4), this letter has been lost to sight. Davis includes it as no. 841 in his second volume of the Paston Letters, published in 1976, but probably as a result of this confusion makes no attempt to identify the young woman referred to in it, and no Paston scholar of the twentieth or twenty-first century has given the letter any attention, nor it seems recognized that “your nyce” is almost certainly Constance. The letter is from Sir John Kendal, identified by Davis as “Prior of the Knights of St. John,” Clerkenwell, to Sir John Paston, or John Paston III, Constance’s uncle, who had been knighted after the Battle of Stoke in 1487. I give most of the text of the letter here, from Davis. Sir John Kendal writes:

I wryte this onely vnto you to aduise you that I was mynded that my cousin Clippesby, berer herof, shuld wele haue maryed here in thies partes; wherein your nyce toke hevy conceyte, thinking in

48. Richmond, *Paston Family: Endings*, 34.

49. John Fenn, William Frere, and John Murray, *Original Letters, Written During the Reigns of Henry Vi. Edward Iv. Edward V. Richard Iii. And Henry Vii. By Various Persons of Rank or Consequence; : Containing Many Curious Anecdotes, Relative to That Turbulent and Bloody, but Hitherto Dark, Period of Our History; and Elucidating, Not Only Public Matters of State, but Likewise the Private Manners of the Age; Digested in Chronological Order; with Notes, Historical and Explanatory; and Authenticated by Engravings of Autographs, Fac-Similes, Paper Marks, and Seals* (London, 1824), 424.

hir mynde that I was not willing that my said cousin shulde marye with hir. At that tyme I knewe not what love was bitwix them. But now I vndrestand that bothe there myndes is to mary to-geders, whervnto on my parte I am agreable and wel content, desiring and praying you to be the same, and to be the better frende vnto them at this my prayer and instaunce. . . . And I pray you to recommaunde me to my cousin, your nyce (no. 841).

The date of the letter is uncertain, but there is no mention in it of John III's wife Margery, who died in 1495, and Davis notes that references in other documents point to Sir John Kendal's having died by 1500, so the letter probably belongs between those dates. It was being carried by John Clippesby, the "berer herof," from London, though whether to John Paston III's house in London or to Norfolk is not clear. It seems that Sir John Kendal was a relation of John Clippesby and also a relation of the Pastons, since he greets John III as "my right entierly welbeloued cousin and frende." Sir John Kendal describes how he had suggested to the young man that it was time he married, perhaps in London, "here in thies partes." This advice indicates that John Clippesby had reached the age of twenty-one, so was free from his wardship and able to choose his own wife, and also that he had come into his inheritance, the Clippesby and Oby estates, and was now in a position to support a wife and family. The dates support this reading: if John Clippesby, referred to as "the chyld" in John Paston III's letter of 1479 (no. 381), was then aged four years or less, he would have reached his majority some time between 1495 and 1500. Constance, probably born in 1479, would have been in her late teens. Fascinatingly, the letter records how upset John III's "nyce" was by this suggestion, for she "toke hevy conceyte," thinking that Sir John Kendal was against young John's marrying *her*. Sir John Kendal recounts that, having understood by her reaction that the young people were in love, he gave his full permission for them to marry, and he urges John III to do the same. As a friendly and reassuring gesture, he closes the letter by sending the young woman greetings "I pray you recommaunde me to my cousin, your nyce." These final good wishes indicate that, though her aunt had died, the niece was still living with her uncle John III, which adds weight to the theory, posited earlier, that

Constance was brought up in their household. The letter also suggests that John III had control of the girl's marriage, for there is no mention of her father, which implies that she was an orphan and in her uncle's care. All these clues combine to strongly suggest that the "nyce" of John Paston III who is referred to in this letter must be Constance Paston, bastard daughter of Sir John Paston

Until I became aware of the above letter, I had assumed that the marriage of Constance Paston and John Clippesby was arranged by the Paston uncles, Edmund Paston, who had control of the marriage of his ward John Clippesby, and John Paston III, in whose hands Constance's marriage lay. I was delighted to discover that their union was that rare thing in the Paston family—a love match. Though the young men of the family enjoyed considerable freedom in choosing a partner, this was not true of the girls. The Pastons generally, and particularly the older women, attempted to keep tight control of their daughters' marriages, which were effectively arranged, with money and status being given priority over the brides' feelings. Agnes Paston confined and beat her daughter Elizabeth in an attempt to force her to marry the elderly, disabled, but well-connected widower whom Agnes favored. Margaret Paston too, when she discovered that her daughter Margery had secretly married Richard Calle, an employee of the family, initially incarcerated the girl, then organized her complete ostracism. Ann Haskell refers to "the intractable attitudes of medieval mothers toward their daughters," while Nikki Stiller notes the Paston women's "cruel attempts at subjugating [their] daughters."⁵⁰ The men were not much better, for the Paston brothers showed considerable heartlessness in their attitude to the marriages of their sisters. Along with their mother, they roundly condemned Margery's lovematch with their excellent steward, with John III writing to his brother, Sir John, snobbishly mocking the humble origins of Calle, whose father was a grocer "he shold neuer haue my good wyll for to make my sustyr to selle kandyll and mustard in Framlyngham" (no. 541). Philippa Maddern points out though that

50. Ann S. Haskell, "Marriage in the Middle Ages, 3: The Paston Women on Marriage in Fifteenth-Century England," *Viator* 4 (1973), 469, <https://doi-org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.2.301660>; Nikki Stiller, *Eve's Orphans: Mothers and Daughters in Medieval English Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 50.

“the family opposition to this match” was not just a matter of snobbery and the wish for social advancement, but was bound up with the important medieval concept of family honor. She adds that the Pastons would have made “the assumption that [Calle’s] lineage and position were dishonourable” and that they themselves would be dishonored by the association.⁵¹ Similarly their sister Anne’s relationship with another employee, John Pamping, was deliberately disrupted by Sir John, who dispatched him to London, warning his brother to “be ware that the olde love off Pampyng renewe natt” (no. 472). While we hear the voices of the powerful members of the family, Diane Watt notes that “no letters survive which reveal unmediated the state of mind of those suffering under the pressure to conform to the family’s expectations concerning marriage.”⁵² Other voices, though, describe the young women’s feelings. Elizabeth Uvedale Clere wrote to John Paston I of his imprisoned sister Elizabeth’s “hevynes” (no. 446), and Calle wrote to Margery acknowledging that, because of their union, she had had “as moche sorwe . . . as any gentelwoman hath hadde in the world” (no. 861). How marvelous it seems, then, that when a letter tells us that Constance “toke hevye conceyte” at the idea that John Clippesby might marry someone other than her, her feelings were recognized, respected, and acted upon. For her uncle John Paston III, who had himself wed the woman he loved, clearly followed the advice of his friend Sir John Kendal, and did not stand in the way of the young people’s marrying.

Constance’s uncle John Paston III probably thought that marriage to the heir of a respectable local gentry family, the Clippesbys of Oby, was good enough for her. The land owned by the Clippesbys was in an area, once an island, known as Flegg. R. H. Britnell writes of “the exceptional fertility of Flegg soil,” which is “among the finest in the kingdom.”⁵³ Oby is also situated above, and looks out over, the productive marshland surrounding the River Bure. By allowing her to marry a Clippesby, John III was ensuring that his niece would always be comfortable. So John

51. Philippa Maddern, “Honour among the Pastons,” *Journal of Medieval History* 14, no. 4 (1988): 369, [https://doi-org/10.1016/0304-4181\(88\)90033-4](https://doi-org/10.1016/0304-4181(88)90033-4).

52. Watt, *Paston Women*, 150.

53. R. H. Britnell, “The Pastons and Their Norfolk,” *The Agricultural History Review* 36, no. 2 (1988): 133, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40275338>.

Clippesby was good enough for Constance, and apparently she was good enough for him. John Clippesby loved and wanted to marry her; neither her bastardy nor her probable lack of dowry seem to have given him a problem, and she was, after all, a Paston. Perhaps Constance was very pretty. The Pastons appear to have been a good-looking family, for Constance's father, Sir John, was described by a friend as "the best cheser of a gentellwoman" (no. 745), someone who could take his pick of the ladies, so he was obviously a handsome man. Likewise, Constance's mother, one of a number of ladies whom he picked, was likely to have been an attractive young woman. Her uncle John III, too, was assured "ye be personable" (no. 236) by his elder brother, when, in 1467, he was considering courting Anne Boleyn, great-aunt of Queen Anne Boleyn. Constance's illegitimacy may even have worked to her advantage, in that when it came to the family's choice of a husband for her, love could be allowed to override other concerns. She was not John III's daughter, so her marriage did not depend on those factors, listed by Keith Dockray, such as "property, status, social and political connections [and] worldly advancement," which controlled so many gentry marriages.⁵⁴ Her cousin Elizabeth, in 1498, made just such an illustrious marriage to William, the son and heir of the very wealthy Clere family of Ormesby, who owned extensive lands on Flegg. We do not know what was objectionable about William Clere, apart from the fact that his grandmother, Elizabeth Uvedale Clere, who was a close friend of both Agnes and Margaret Paston, thought very little of him. In her nine-and-a-half page will, which I have transcribed, but which is not in the public domain, she devoted a whole page to conditions preventing William from inheriting anything from her until he was thirty, and then only if he was "of good sadde and vertuous disposicion and rewle lykly so to contynue."⁵⁵ Fortunately perhaps for Elizabeth, William died in 1501.

The shield in the corner of the monumental brass in St Peter's Church, Clippesby, confirms that Constance Paston's marriage to John Clippesby did take place. The shield is one step in a trail of evidence, all

54. Keith Dockray, "Why Did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry?; the Pastons, Plumpton and Stonors Reconsidered," in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael Jones (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 62.

55. Will of Elizabeth Clere.

of which needs to be examined. Firstly this shield, which represents a Paston woman, can by a process of elimination be shown to be that of the *grandmother* of the John Clippesby in the brass, for with the help of Blomefield's Clippesby pedigree (fig. 4) his other female ancestors can be identified by their family heraldry (fig. 2).⁵⁶

The other shields, clockwise from bottom left, show the arms of John Clippesby's great-grandmother, Spelman; his mother, Knightley; one unidentified, Jerningham; his step-great-grandmother (great-grandfather's first wife), Woodhouse; his wife, Ellis; and bottom right, the arms of Paston, almost certainly his grandmother, Constance Paston. Also, according to Blomefield's Clippesby pedigree, John Clippesby's grandmother was called Constance. Further evidence of her identity can be found in Blomefield's *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, in the section on the history of the estate of Clippesby, Norfolk. In compiling this, Blomefield consulted early documents, and his record of court proceedings from later in Constance's life concerning the wardship of her son, William, on the death of his father, John Clippesby, assist us in being able to identify her with some certainty. Despite considerable research, I have been unable to locate the original documents from which Blomefield worked. Blomefield writes, "In the 6th of Henry VIII, Thomas, Duke of Norfolk . . . granted to William Paston, Esq. and Constance, widow of John Clipesby, Esq. the wardship, and custody of the lands of William Clipesby, son and heir of John Cliespy (sic), Esq. deceased, and held of the Duke."⁵⁷ This entry clearly identifies Constance as having been the wife of John Clippesby, who by 1515 had died, leaving her a widow, with a son, William, once again like his father an underage heir to the Clippesby lands. Further support for the theory that this Constance "widow of John Clipesby Esq." is Constance Paston, bastard daughter of Sir John Paston, is given by the information that her son's wardship was "bought" for her, with

56. Francis Blomefield. "West Flegg Hundred: Clippesby," in *An Essay Towards A Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, vol. 2 (London, 1810), 157–64, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/topographical-hist-norfolk/vol11/pp157-164>, accessed June 17, 2020.

57. Blomefield, West Flegg Hundred, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/topographical-hist-norfolk/vol11/pp157-164>, accessed June 17, 2020.

the help of a William Paston—surely a member of her own family, who assisted her in keeping both the lad and the land “in the family,” as it were, allowing her not only custody of her young son, but enabling her to stay in her own home and to continue living on the income from her dead husband’s estate. Constance as a woman could not take legal action in a case of wardship, but the fact that a *Paston* stepped in to protect her whole lifestyle must suggest that she too was a Paston and that the family cared about her

Blomefield continues with a further entry referring to events eleven years later “and on February 14, in the 17th of that King, they grant to the said William, the benefit of his marriage, for the virtuous manners and good conditions which he according to his duty hath used to the said Constance his mother.” This entry referring to “they,” meaning William Paston and Constance, and dated 1526, must mean that William Clip-pesby, Constance’s eldest son was still a minor, that is below the age of twenty-one, for “they” still have control of his marriage. However, the passage indicates that, owing to the good behavior of her son towards her, his widowed mother, Constance, and her relation William Paston have agreed to lift the restriction on his marriage and allow the young man to marry the girl of his choice. William, Constance’s son, must have been near his majority—he was, perhaps, nineteen or twenty—and maybe he had already met the girl he loved and wished to marry. This was presumably Lettice Knightley of Norwich, who became his wife and whose shield appears on their son’s brass. Just as importantly, though it is not stated, the grant of “the benefit of his marriage” must have included some financial arrangement whereby the young man would be enabled to keep a wife and family. As Rowena Archer points out, on her husband’s death, Constance would have had a right to the “common law dower of one-third of [her] dead husband’s estates,”⁵⁸ though her relation, William Paston may have allowed her and her family to enjoy the other third, which the heir would inherit when he came of age, but to which William, having bought the wardship, had a right, until then.

58. Rowena Archer, “How Ladies ... Who Live on Their Manors Ought to Manage Their Households and Estates’: Women as Landholders and Administrators in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. P. J. P. Goldberg (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), 162.

The final third was, as Henrietta Leyser tells us “set aside to be used for the benefit of the dead man’s soul.”⁵⁹ How much of this income, and how much responsibility for managing the estate Constance made over to her eldest son in 1526 we cannot know, but it appears that there was goodwill on both sides and that they acted as a team. Archer adds that “much evidence suggests that [sons] generally set a high premium on the experience and expertise of a mother’s lifetime sharing in estate administration.”⁶⁰ Some further information about Constance’s later life is given by the antiquarian, Walter Rye, in his 1891 edition of the much earlier *Visitations of Norfolk*. This includes a pedigree of the Clippesby family, suggesting that Constance and John had four children who survived to adulthood: William, Thomas, Elizabeth, and Susan.⁶¹ Rye, though, like Blomefield, is not always entirely reliable. Perhaps more could be learned of Constance’s life if we had the wills of her father Sir John Paston, or her uncles Edmund Paston and John Paston III, or of her husband John Clippesby, but unfortunately none of these has survived. After the death in 1491 of her husband’s mother Katherine Spelman Paston, her uncle Edmund married again. Though the will of his second wife Margaret Monceaux Paston is among the Paston Letters, and though she must have known Constance and John, neither of them is mentioned in her will.⁶² Constance herself, as a widow, probably also left a will, but unfortunately like many sixteenth-century wills, it too has been lost.

The monumental brass in St. Peter’s Church, Clippesby, presents Constance’s grandson, John Clippesby, in full armor. Nigel Saul refers to this “convention of attire” as being “obviously at odds with social reality. Many, perhaps the majority, of those shown in armour would never have donned a suit of armour in their lives. By the end of the Middle Ages the country gentry were becoming increasingly civilianized.

59. Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England, 450–1500* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), 169.

60. Archer, “How Ladies,” 165.

61. Walter Rye, ed., *The Visitation of Norfolk, Made ... By William Hervey ... 1563, Enlarged with Another Visitation Made by Clarenceux Cooke ... And Also the Visitation Made by J. Raven*, Publications of the Harleian Society, vol. 32, 77.

62. Will of Margaret Paston, Norfolk Record Office, NCC Rix f. 128–129, (1504).

Yet an unchanging funerary dress code required that they be shown in armour.”⁶³ Maurice Keen also notes that “the gentry’s interest in the martial insignia of heraldry was notably avid. . . . gentlemen liked to be shown in armour on their tombs or brasses, and to have escutcheons of their arms displayed beside them.”⁶⁴ Indeed, the Paston arms displayed on the Clippesby brass were not without significance, for in about 1594, when the brass was made, the status of the Paston family was considerably higher than it had been a hundred years earlier, when Constance was born. Constance’s cousin William Paston IV married Bridget Heydon, who was a first cousin of Thomas Boleyn, the father of Queen Anne Boleyn. So when the brass first went on show in the late Elizabethan period, the Pastons were related, though rather distantly, to the reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth I. Although the Paston arms on the Clippesby brass refer to a female Paston, and a baseborn one at that, two generations later, the Clippesby kinship to the Pastons, and thus their relationship to the Queen of England, was a sign of status well worth flaunting.

The identity of Constance seems to have both puzzled and eluded antiquarians and historians down the years. It seems that, since John Fenn’s identification of her in Sir John Kendal’s letter to her uncle (no. 841) in the late eighteenth century, she was lost sight of, and nobody, until now, has definitely linked Sir John’s illegitimate baby daughter Constance with the adult woman, Constance Clippesby. It is not clear how much this is merely accidental, how much it is a result of male historians not seeing women’s history as interesting or important, or how much it is the result of the delicacy of early recordkeepers, who chose not to blemish the Paston heritage by recording the “stain” of illegitimacy. Blomefield himself, in his genealogy of the Clippesby family published in 1805 (fig. 4), recorded John Clippesby’s wife as “Constance, daughter of *William Paston, of Paston, Esq.*” (my italics). This is very understandable; Blomefield had been recording, from original documents, details of the wardship of Constance’s son, which I have discussed above, and

63. Nigel Saul, *English Church Monuments in the Middle Ages: History and Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 237.

64. Maurice Keen, “Chivalry,” in Radulescu and Truelove, *Gentry Culture in Late-Medieval England*, 45–46.

very naturally he had assumed that the man helping her, William Paston, was her father. However, Paston scholars will know that there was no William Paston who could have been Constance's father. William Paston I, her great-grandfather, died in 1444; William Paston II, her great-uncle, had three daughters none of them called Constance and lived in London; her uncle William Paston III never married and had no recorded children. The William Paston who helped her must have been her first cousin William Paston IV, the eldest son of her uncle John Paston III, who after his father's death in 1504 was head of the Paston family and heir to all the Paston money and land. William and Constance were very close in age, and the very considerable help that he gave her when she was widowed adds credibility to the theory that she was brought up with him in the household of her uncle John Paston III and that she and her cousin William were as close as brother and sister.

Yet another scholar, Edmund Farrer, when compiling his *Church Heraldry of Norfolk* in 1885, failed to recognize Constance. He noticed and described the shield with the Paston arms in Clippesby Church, but could not identify the Paston to whom it referred. He wrote with some bafflement "Katherine Spelman, married first to William Clippesby, remarried Edmund Paston. But that does not account for this shield."⁶⁵ Walter Rye, who compiled his Clippesby genealogy in 1891, recognized Constance as a Paston, but could not be exact as to her parentage, recording her as "Constance, daughter of — Paston of Norfolk."⁶⁶ Contemporary historians, including those interested in Norfolk in the late medieval period, and particularly in the Paston family, have not made, or have not been concerned to make, the connection between the baby and the adult Constance, despite the name Constance being relatively uncommon at the time. Roger Virgoe who had, before his untimely death in 1996, planned to publish a volume about Norfolk gentry families in the late Middle Ages and whose notes for this work remain in the Norfolk Record Office, seems to have moved towards, but not made, the connection. Richmond, studying Virgoe's notes, wrote, "Roger Virgoe's Clippesby genealogy has, as the son and heir of William

65. Farrer, *Church Heraldry*, 346.

66. Rye, *Visitation of Norfolk*, 77.

(died 1479), a John Clippesby, who married an unsurnamed Constance, but he gives no references.”⁶⁷ Even Richmond, whose work on the Paston family is celebrated, either did not notice or did not bother to draw attention to the connection. Richmond’s reference to Virgoe’s work, though, is what made me realize, as soon as I saw the arms of a Paston woman on the Clippesby brass, that there was no other Paston woman of that generation whom it could represent but Sir John’s “bastard” daughter Constance.

So assuming that this theory is correct, what conclusions can we come to about Constance Paston’s life? It seems that despite her being illegitimate, the Pastons acknowledged her and raised her as one of their own. It appears that she married the man she loved, and though she was widowed at the age of thirty-six, she had a number of children and enjoyed a good relationship with her eldest son, as she did with her cousin William Paston IV, who helped and supported her in her widowhood. She may have been brought up with her large family of cousins, and indeed, her cousin William may have been godfather to her eldest son William, and likewise, her cousin Elizabeth may have been godmother to her eldest daughter Elizabeth. We know that Constance lived until she was forty-six, but she probably died before reaching the age of sixty-one, which was a normal lifespan at the time, for in 1540 her eldest son William wrote his will, which has survived but does not mention her.⁶⁸ William died in his early thirties. Quite frequently at this period if a man died young, and his mother was still living, he would name her as one of his executors. If his mother Constance, with whom William had always been on good terms, had been alive in 1540, he would surely have named her. William Clippesby chose as his executors his wife and his son John, who cannot have been older than fourteen, and it is this John, whom his grandmother Constance almost certainly knew, whom we can still see depicted on the monumental brass in St Peter’s Church, Clippesby.

In conclusion, my discoveries contribute to current scholarship on the historiography of the late medieval family, and in particular, reveal

67. Richmond, *Paston Family: Endings*, 34n56.

68. Will of William Clippesby, Norfolk Record Office, NCC Attmere, f. 343, (1541).

the strong sense of familial responsibility towards illegitimate children in gentry families, with financial responsibility falling on the men, while the women provided everyday care. They contribute to scholarship on the Pastons, suggesting that while the Pastons were used to raising and caring for their baseborn sons, they were also prepared to treat a bastard daughter in the same way. It seems too that a baseborn girl might have been given more freedom of marital choice by the family than was given to legitimate daughters, and she may have been allowed to marry for love. These discoveries are also important because they are indicative of how women's lives are often written out of the historical narrative, even when evidence survives in written records. They also suggest how much still remains to be uncovered. For, as the monumental brass indicates, Constance Paston was there all the time, hidden in plain sight.

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