



# The Paston Letters

*James Gairdner*

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## **The Paston Letters** James Gairdner

Public attention was first drawn to the Paston Letters in the year 1787, when there issued from the press two quarto volumes with a very lengthy title, setting forth that the contents were original letters written ‘by various persons of rank and consequence’ during the reigns of Henry VI., Edward IV., and Richard III. The materials were derived from autographs in the possession of the Editor, a Mr. Fenn, of East Dereham, in Norfolk, who was well enough known in society as a gentleman of literary and antiquarian tastes, but who had not at that time attained any great degree of celebrity. Horace Walpole had described him, thirteen years before, as ‘a smatterer in antiquity, but a very good sort of man.’ What the great literary magnate afterwards thought of him we are not informed, but we know that he took a lively interest in the Paston Letters the moment they were published. He appears, indeed, to have given some assistance in the progress of the work through the press. On its appearance he expressed himself with characteristic enthusiasm:—‘The letters of Henry VI.’s reign, etc., are come out, and to me make all other letters not worth reading. I have gone through one volume, and cannot bear to be writing when I am so eager to be reading... . There are letters from all my acquaintance, Lord Rivers, Lord Hastings, the Earl of Warwick, whom I remember still better than Mrs. Strawbridge, though she died within these fifty years. What antiquary would be answering a letter from a living countess, when he may read one from Eleanor Mowbray, Duchess of Norfolk?’

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