

Notes

LIFE-RECORDS OF THE ENGLISH ANTIQUARY JOHN FENN

Two collections of life records have come into the public domain for the English antiquary John Fenn (1739–94), secured by the Paston Footprints project.¹

The first collection consists of eight engagement diaries, dating from 1786 to 1794 (with 1793 missing). Their provenance is from a direct descendant of Ellenor Frere (1744–1813), Fenn's wife. The diaries remained in the Frere family home until this descendant's kind agreement to deposit them in the Norfolk Record Office, NRO MC521/1.² Fenn's signature and the year is handwritten on the inside of the front cover of each of the pocket-sized volumes, with printed layouts of a week per page and space for the week's accounts on the facing page.

The diaries reveal insights into Fenn's last decade of life, when he was based in Dereham, in Norfolk. The weather is mentioned, perhaps most notably the heavy snow in April 1790, the locust swarms in May 1788, and an earthquake in Lincs and along the Norfolk coast in February 1792. There is evidence of Fenn's industrious work ethic, not shy of undertaking physical duties such as cutting hay, and his assiduous nature in the management of his tenants in his estates in Edgefield, Foulsham, and Themelthorpe. What also transpires is his fascination with history in all forms, with visits to tombs, monuments, and research of various documents. There are regular notes concerning home and garden improvements, trips to the theatre, his social networking, and travelling.

His working life is also discernible from the accounts, consisting of rents, sales of dividends and timber, rates, taxes, and travel costs. His antiquarian activities can be traced in the receipts from

George Robinson (Fenn's publisher) and his acquisitions of historic coins, for which he began an index in January of the 1786 diary. Family dynamics appear in his payments to Mary (Fenn's mother) and 'Nelly' (his wife), and in November 1788 with the gift of a pet, a dog named Taffy. Daily life is evidenced by expenditure on servants' wages (some are named, such as James Lynn, Robert Hawes, and William Reeder), and also by payments for household items, a hairdresser, wine and entertainment, not least dinners, book club, card assemblies, bowling club, and Christmas expenses.

Fenn's civic responsibility is documented in the accounts. He purchases lottery tickets (an eighteenth-century way of fundraising), provides charitable donations for enterprises such as Dereham's Sunday School and Foundling chapel and, in July 1789, pays for the inoculation of the poor of East Dereham. In April 1790, Fenn records that he gave £2, 2s to fire fighters and those who lost goods in a fire in East Dereham that resulted in four houses and other building losses.

His public duties are detailed with his service as a magistrate and on juries, his frequent attendance at assizes and quarter sessions, and visits to the house of industry (Gressenhall Workhouse). In 1791, we see the pinnacle of his public service work in the November 1790 entry for his appointment to High Sherriff of Norfolk for 1791–2, by the Privy Council. In December 1790, there is a passing thought when he considers fundraising (through a lottery ticket) for the first time for himself rather than others, for 'a Prize as may enable me to pay the Expenses of the Sheriffalty'. He did manage to secure a winning ticket of £25.

There are a large number of entries concerning Fenn's trips to friends and those visiting him at his home, named Hill House. For instance, the diaries detail visits to Coke at Holkham Hall, Sennowe Park, the Bishops of Norwich and Lincoln (who was the political advisor to William Pitt the Younger), and dinners and dealings with members of the aristocracy and the medical world. A frequent visitor is Dr William Donne and his wife Anne, who lived on the other side of Dereham's Market Place from Fenn. William was one of the first surgeons at the newly built Norwich Hospital in 1771 and fellow churchwarden of Fenn at St Nicholas' Church.

¹ Paston Footprints originated in 2018 and is a collaboration between the University of East Anglia (Karen Smyth) and the Paston Heritage Society (Robert Knee, Chair, and founder Lucy Care), dedicated to critical and community research (thisispaston.co.uk) and creative-cultural responses to the Pastons (pastonfootprints.co.uk).

² The direct descendant wishes to remain anonymous but the relationship has been verified by public records.

For scholars of the Paston letters, it is the 1787 diary that holds most resonance, in particular the entry for 29 January: Fenn notes his presentation to George III by the Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger and his giving to the King a copy of his edition of the Paston Letters, luxuriously bound in red Morocco leather. On 1 February noted is the presentation to the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society. On 3 February it is recorded the Paston Letters are advertised for sale and Fenn notes, on 5 February, that terms are agreed for a second edition of the medieval Paston letters to be published. The week of 12 to 17 February records meetings with George Stevens, who wrote additional notes for the second edition. The financial accounts on the right-hand page to this include a record of sums paid to him by his publisher, George Robinson.

The 19 May sees Fenn travelling to London and sending the Paston edition to William Pitt for transferring to the King's Library (though history was to prove that the transfer never took place). The 23 May has a simple, unassuming note, that on that day he was conferred a knighthood by George III. Fees of honour paid for the knighthood are noted in his sums on the adjoining page. Two months later, in July, he notes that he has produced a pamphlet for publication, entitled 'Observations on Knighthood'.

There is a cluster of payments made in April to October of 1786, when he purchases a barn, houses, an Eagle stable, and other sundry items from Mr Barker and pays for the sinking of a well. The 1787 diary continues with more entries on the Paston letters with reference to his production of the fourth volume. This includes payments in April to William Dalton for copying the Paston letters. Dalton is also paid for helping with the cleaning of houses and garden work.

The most detailed day recorded in any of the diaries is when Dereham held a civic celebration of King George III's recovery from ill health, on 13 April 1789. Fenn was a key organizer of the all-day event, which attracted ten thousand people. One hundred of Ellenor's Sunday School children paraded at 10a.m. to the Market Place and down to the church for a service. At noon, Fenn notes, in the Market Place music played as 1,400 poor people of the parish had a lunch of beef, beer, and plumb-pudding, prepared by the kitchens of the nearby large houses. Sixty notable inhabitants

dined at the George Inn. In the evening, lit transparencies of painted cloths glowed across the whole town. These included full-length pictures of the King and Queen, and one installed at Fenn's house.

The engagements end on Friday 14 February 1794, with an entry in a different hand noting: 'This Day Sir John Fenn died suddenly of a paralytic stroke'. Two years earlier, in April 1792, Fenn noted he had gout and the year before, in July 1791, that he had a 'slight' stroke. Ailments are not recorded elsewhere in the diaries.

The second archive includes John Fenn's annotated copies of the first ten editions of the Society of Antiquaries journal, *Archaeologia* (from 1770 to 1792). Within these volumes was his application to the Society of Antiquaries (London) and some of his work for the Society. The provenance of this collection can be traced through their purchase by Paston Footprints through a Heritage Lottery grant at a public auction from an antiquarian bookseller in Boumemouth in 2019, who stated that they had come from the library of the historian and archaeologist Sheppard Frere (23 August 1916–26 February 2015). The handwriting of the annotations is the same as in Fenn's engagement diaries. Paston Footprints donated the *Archaeologia* volumes in 2022 to the Dereham Archive Centre (which has conservation controls and standards), situated in council buildings, and they are available for public consultation.

These first ten issues of the journal, published 1770–92, were rebound by Fenn in brown calfskin. In each binding is included other documents relating to the Society and his election as a Fellow. All ten volumes, except for volume four, have in varying styles a 'John Fenn' heraldic bookplate, opposite the front board. Volumes one to six have, in his hand, 'John Fenn' and the publication date annotated inside the front cover. Only volume four has no handwritten annotations by Fenn, all the others have his notes at the back of the volumes.

Volume six holds the greatest density of Fenn's annotations. In 36 pages are handwritten 'An attempt to exhibit in three chronological tables a state of the Society of Antiquaries'. There is also 'An index to the prints published by the Society of Antiquaries of London'. These tables and notes were the draft version and basis for Fenn's two articles on the history of the Society of

Antiquaries, both published as pamphlets by the Society in 1784.³

Four of the volumes contain bound papers. In volume one was three copy-book handwritten documents. The first being a letter-book copy of Fenn's letter dated 26 November 1770 to Edward King, in which he requests to be nominated as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Below is Edward King's confirmation of his willingness to nominate. (Edward King was a Norwich-native and respected antiquarian and barrister, later briefly to be the President of the Society.) The second paper is the nomination document dated Thursday 29 November 1770, signed by 'John Smith, Master of Caius College, Cambridge', 'W Richardson, DD, Master of Emanuel College, Cambridge', 'R. Farmer, Emanuel College', 'Henry Baker', 'Mat Dunne', and 'Edward King'. The final paper is an account by Fenn of his election as a Fellow of the Society, with copies of the receipts for admission fee and annual membership payments.

The bound papers in volume six consist of an eleven-page speech by Rev. Dr Milles, Dean of Exeter, President of the Society, dated 11 January 1781, about the move into the apartments in Somerset House, assigned to the Society. In volume seven is another published speech: twelve pages by the Society's chair at his resignation,

'delivered by Edward King Esq. President of the Society of Antiquaries of London, at Somerset Place, on the 23rd of April 1784'.

There were also sixteen collections of papers loosely interspersed in these volumes. They reveal insights into Fenn's research interests, draft research material on his publications about the Society of Antiquaries, and pro-forma documents of the Society related to meetings, elections, and finances. One loose unfinished document shows his plans for record-keeping, with vertical columns marked and headed alphabetically to create an index for the journals, volume by volume. Another dated 1782, is his list of the number of members beginning with the Society's foundation in 1751. On the verso are the members from 1717 to 47, and therefore prior to the grant of a charter by George II. The printed works and publications of the Society are also listed along with calculations and monetary matters in a handwritten document. The loose papers were deposited in 2021 with the Norfolk Record Office, MC 3546.⁴

KAREN ELAINE SMYTH
University of East Anglia, UK

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³ J. Fenn, 'An Index to the Prints Published by the Society of Antiquaries' and 'Three Chronological Tables, Exhibiting a State of the Society of Antiquaries' (London, 1784).

⁴ The catalogue deposited with the collection in the NRO for Paston Footprints was compiled by Matthew Champion.