

Chapter 1: State Papers and related collections

Natalie Mears

There are few collections so vast and varied that manuscript ‘placards’, vilifying Mary Queen of Scots’ involvement in the murder of her husband, Lord Darnley, in 1567, jostle with news reports of hundreds of apprentices attacking a brothel in Worcester a century later, but such is the scale and depth of the State Papers, housed in The National Archives in London.¹ The State Papers are those documents, principally papers of successive Principal Secretaries to the monarch, that were collected together in the State Paper Office from the sixteenth century to the late eighteenth century. They comprise 107 separate classes, divided into Domestic, Scotland, Ireland and Foreign series (the latter divided by country from 1577) stretching over 13,000 volumes, bundles and cases and totalling millions of documents and many maps.² The collection largely covers the period from 1509 to 1780, but contains manuscripts dating as early as 1231 and as late as 1888. A separate set of state papers – State Papers Colonial, comprising the state papers themselves, as well as the records of the Privy Council and Board of Trade relating to the American colonies and the West Indies, from 1574 to 1782 – are gathered in a separate collection: the Colonial Office.

As will soon become apparent, however, while the State Papers might seem a comprehensive, coherent, distinct and official collection, that is far from the case. It

¹ ‘The mermaid and the hare’, [June] 1567, TNA” PRO, SP52/13, fo. 60r; H. Muddiman to George Powell, 14 March 1667, TNA: PRO, SP29/193/113.

² Though the collection ends with SP110 (State Papers Foreign, Supplementary), classes SP 72, 73 and 74 have not been used.

is, in many ways, a rather haphazard collection built up from what the keepers could obtain from successive Principal Secretaries and could prevent from being 'permanently borrowed' by both politicians and enthusiastic collectors. The collections need to be combined, particularly for those working on political and administrative history, not only with other departments in The National Archives (such as the Privy Council Office) but also, and perhaps more especially, by other collections, such as those in the British Library, private archives, local record offices and in libraries abroad. These other archives contain not only whole or partial collections of Principal Secretaries that were not given to the State Paper Office but also the papers of other major and secondary figures.

With the growing availability of databases that include digitized images of documents, such as *State Papers Online* and *The Cecil Papers*, it is increasingly tempting for scholars to conduct their initial research through keyword searches and dip in and out of these electronic archives. This temptation needs to be avoided. Such a methodology presumes that all 'relevant' material will contain words that the researcher can identify at the start; it does not allow for the proper contextualization of search results; it does not allow for the important serendipitous find, and, simply, not all databases are designed to search for variant spellings. It remains essential for scholars to 'know their archives': not just what the collection contains, but how, why and by whom it was created and developed, and how it was organised and reorganized. This enables the researcher to know what they might find, explain why things are absent – and may point to where they are – and understand the documents contained therein better. For these reasons, this essay will address the history of the State Paper Office and some of its allied collections and it will discuss how these

collections were ordered by contemporaries and later archivists. The essay will then discuss some of the ‘finding aids’ for key collections – the catalogues and calendars that have been created by successive archivists and historians – including their strengths and pitfalls.

The history of the State Papers

The State Paper Office was founded by the crown as a working archive that could be consulted during the formulation of policy. *When* the office was founded is not clear. Its establishment is commonly dated to 1578 but the interpretation of the evidence on which this is based – the memoirs of one of the first keepers, Sir Thomas Wilson – is open to question.³ Rather, it appears that the State Paper Office, and its organization, developed over many decades. By the late sixteenth century, the papers of former Principal Secretaries, and other important figures such as Cardinal Wolsey, were in the custody of the current Principal Secretary, alongside the records of the Signet Office and the privy council, and were overseen either by one of the Secretary’s own servants or one of the clerks of the Signet.⁴ By 1610, an official Keeper(s) was

³ Wilson never stated the date he was appointed clerk or keeper of the office, only that it had occurred forty-five years previously and before the appointment of his uncle, Dr Thomas Wilson, as one of Elizabeth’s Principal Secretaries. On these grounds, archivists and historians have dated the founding of the State Paper Office to 1578. However, as the archivist and secretary to the Royal Commission on Public Records, Hubert Hall, demonstrated over a century ago, the dating of Wilson’s statement (that his appointment had been made forty-five years ago) to 1623 was ‘purely conjectural’ (Hubert Hall, *Studies in English official historical documents* (Cambridge, 1908), pp. 32-3, especially p. 32, fn 2 and see the reference in M.S. Giuseppi (ed.), *Guide to the contents of the Public Record Office* (3 vols, London, 1963-8), II, p. 1). Moreover, Dr Wilson was officially sworn in by the privy council as Secretary on 12 November 1577 (*Acts of the Privy Council of England: new series*, ed. J Dasent *et al* (45 vols; London, 1890-1960), X, p. 85).

⁴ Hall, *Studies*, pp. 33-4; Sir Thomas Wilson, *ODNB*.

appointed, though they continued to be selected from those who had worked with the Principal Secretary or in the Signet Office.⁵

As a working archive, the crown was not interested in preserving all of the papers of its Principal Secretaries and personal items seem to have been weeded out. This probably explains why there are no personal papers belonging to Sir Francis Walsingham or William Davison in the collection, though many of their political papers are there.⁶ As late as 1705, papers ‘which are of no use or Curiosity [were] laid aside or burnt’.⁷ However, the completeness of the State Paper archives was also affected by several other factors. Some Principal Secretaries, and their families, did not want to give up their papers. Like most officers of the state, some saw their papers as private property. Others did not want their papers to reveal, posthumously, their political and financial corruption and either retained or burned their archives. Some Keepers, such as William Boswell (Keeper from 1629), were more effective than others, such as Wilson, at acquiring Secretaries’ archives; some also received more support from the crown and the Principal Secretary.

The unevenness of the State Papers between 1509 and the 1780s also needs to be seen in the light of what we might term ‘impersonal factors’. The first of these is the simple ebb and flow of government business: the abundance of material for the 1630s

⁵ It is possible that Wilson’s interest was a reversionary one because the patent was cancelled in December 1613 and reissued to Wilson and his son-in-law in July 1614. Hall, *Studies*, pp. 35-6; Sir Thomas Wilson, *ODNB*.

⁶ Simon Adams, ‘The Tudor State Papers in the Yelverton, Cotton and Harleian Manuscript collections’, *State Papers Online, 1509-1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2009).

⁷ Alan Marshall, ‘The Secretaries Office and the Public Records’, *State Papers Online, 1509-1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2010).

is partly because it was a decade of intense government activity. The second is any change in the structure and practice of governance: this could not only generate more documents, but could also place them beyond the reach of individuals who, as we have seen, may have been reluctant to relinquish possession. After the assassination of Lord Admiral Buckingham in 1628, control of the navy devolved to a commission whose members did not see its papers as their own personal property. Consequently, the commission's archive moved seamlessly to the State Paper Office.

It should also be noted that not all The National Archives' 'State Papers' are in the State Paper Office. First, the Colonial State Papers are in the Colonial Office. In the seventeenth century, Principal Secretaries had little involvement in the nascent British empire because most dealings between the government and its colonies were handled either by committees of the privy council or by special commissions, such as the Committee for Foreign Plantations (1634-41), the Council for Trade (from 1660), the Council for Foreign Plantations (from 1660) and the Board of Trade (from 1695). This changed in the course of the eighteenth century, largely because of war, and, in 1768, a third Principal Secretary was appointed to deal with colonial matters. Though this position lapsed after the American War of Independence (and duties passed to the Home Office), it was revived in 1794 and the colonial business that had earlier been assumed by the Home Office was transferred back. Further developments in the nineteenth century meant that the Colonial Office built up its own archive, though one that overlapped with the Department of War, the Home Office and the Commonwealth Office.

Second, there are a number of other classes that contain ‘State Papers’. ‘Special Collections’, for instance, include the Ancient Correspondence (SC1), comprising sixty-two volumes of correspondence, drafts and memoranda from the twelfth century to the early sixteenth century gathered from the Chancery, Exchequer and Privy Seal Office. There are also collections of gifts and deposits (PRO30/1-99 and PRO 44) and transcripts (PRO31/1-20), often from foreign archives, such as those made by M. Armand Baschet of correspondence relating to England from the French archives dating from the early sixteenth century to early eighteenth century (PRO31/3).

Other collections

As the State Papers in The National Archives are, therefore, neither complete nor comprehensive, it is necessary to look elsewhere as well. The other main collections of ‘state papers’ are those in the British Library (particularly the Cotton, Harley, Lansdowne and Additional Manuscripts); private archives, particularly those calendared by the Historical Manuscripts Commission; major public archives (such as Lambeth Palace Library); local record offices, and archives and libraries abroad.⁸ These are not all ‘state papers’ as defined by the State Paper Office’s remit, i.e. they are not all the papers of Principal Secretaries. Rather, they include the collections of a whole range of people who were involved, in varying capacities and in varying degrees, in the work of central government. Thus, they are part of what could be termed a ‘virtual archive’ of ‘state papers’. There is not space to describe all of these collections in full, so this section will focus on the main collections and provide pointers to where other collections can be found.

⁸ For an explanation of the term ‘calendared’, see the section ‘Calendars, catalogues and other finding aids’.

The British Library's Cotton collection was created by Sir Robert Cotton, an inveterate collector of manuscripts, and contains some of the papers of one of Elizabeth I's favourites and privy councillors, Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester,⁹ as well as originals and copies of material that had been in the State Paper Office and which Cotton 'borrowed'. There are also a significant number of scientific manuscripts. The Harley collection, created by Robert Harley, earl of Oxford and Lord Treasurer to Queen Anne, includes not only Harley's own papers and those of his son (another manuscript collector), but also those of Elizabeth I's principal secretary, William Davison (who delivered Mary Queen of Scots' execution warrant) and the MP and parliamentary writer, Sir Simonds D'Ewes. The Lansdowne Manuscripts, largely the collection of Sir Michael Hickes, one of the secretaries of William Cecil, Lord Burghley (Principal Secretary and Lord Treasurer to Elizabeth I), contains a very large proportion of Burghley's papers. The Additional Manuscripts include the very important Yelverton papers of Robert Beale, one of the clerks of the Elizabethan privy council, and into which some of the papers of the MP and City Alderman, Thomas Norton, were absorbed.

There are a number of significant private archives of 'state papers', most of which were examined by the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (more commonly referred to as the Historical Manuscripts Commission or HMC), established in 1869 to identify, examine and make information available on major private (and some public) archives. The biggest and most significant of these are the Cecil Papers at

⁹ For a full analysis of the location of Leicester's archive, see Simon Adams, 'The papers of Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester I: The Browne-Evelyn collection', *Archives*, 20 (1992), pp. 63-86; idem., 'The papers of Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, part II: the Atye-Cotton collection', *Archives*, 20 (1993), pp. 131-44; idem., 'The papers of Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, part III: the Countess of Leicester's collection', *Archives*, 22 (1996), pp. 1-26.

Hatfield House. These contain the remainder of Burghley's papers as well as most of those of his second son, Robert Cecil, earl of Salisbury (Principal Secretary to Elizabeth I and Principal Secretary and Lord Treasurer to James VI and I). In addition, the collection includes papers that Burghley 'borrowed' from the State Paper Office, including some of Thomas Cromwell's. Other important collections calendared by the HMC include the manuscripts of the Lord De L'Isle and Dudley (the Sidney family), the marquess of Ormonde, the duke of Rutland, as well as the Shrewsbury papers which are divided between Lambeth Palace Library and the College of Arms.

Though the HMC's coverage was wide – it is always worth checking the Keeper's Reports and the volumes of 'Various collections' that calendared smaller archives – it was not comprehensive and some important, smaller collections in public archives were not calendared by them. One example is the large Fitzwilliam (Milton) Papers at Northamptonshire Record Office, which includes, amongst other things, some of the papers of Sir Walter Mildmay (Chancellor of the Exchequer and Elizabethan privy councillors) and Sir William Fitzwilliam (Lord Deputy of Ireland, 1588-1594).

As has already been noted, not all 'state papers', whether in public or private archives, remain in the United Kingdom. The papers of Lord Ellesmere (Lord Chancellor, 1596-1617) and his descendants, for instance, are now at the Henry E. Huntington Library in California. The Folger Shakespeare Library, in Washington DC, has a number of family collections including those of the Bacon-Townsend and Shrewsbury-Talbot families, as well as a rich variety of individual items.

Just because these collections – whether they remain in private hands or have moved to public libraries – are those of individuals or families, it does not mean that they are any more complete or comprehensive than the State Papers themselves. There are a number of reasons why an individual's archive may be incomplete or scattered across a number of different libraries and why some collections, such as the Cotton Manuscripts, might appear a hotch-potch of manuscripts. First, political figures, such as Salisbury, stored their papers in several locations. Thus, they could easily be scattered on the owner's death and either be lost or end up in different archives. Second, the longevity of the dynasty: the archive of Burghley and Salisbury has survived very well partly because the family has maintained its social and financial position to this day. By contrast, the archive of their contemporary, Leicester, was quickly scattered because the earl had no direct, undisputed heir. Third, secretaries, like Hickes, were regularly in possession of large collections of documents belonging to their masters: it was their responsibility to look after them and they needed access to them as part of their work. Fourth, papers were also working documents that councillors, courtiers or officials might need to consult. Burghley, for instance, was a great 'borrower' of manuscripts which is why, for instance, some of Cromwell's papers are now at Hatfield House. Fifth, some of these archives or collections – notably the Cotton and Harley Manuscripts – were assembled by those who were collectors as well as officials. They either 'permanently borrowed' manuscripts from the State Paper Office or purchased collections commercially. Cotton, for instance, appears to have borrowed large quantities of Wolsey's and Cromwell's papers from the State Paper Office. His collection of Burghley's Scottish papers may have also been taken from the Office or acquired from the historian, William Camden, who had access to Burghley's archives to write his *Annales (History of Elizabeth)*. Robert

Harley, and his son, Edward, took advantage of the thriving commercial market in historical manuscripts that had developed in Britain by the early eighteenth century.¹⁰

Scope and subjects

Both the state papers and allied collections are of central importance for investigating the high political history of the early modern period as they abound with correspondence to and from the crown and between councillors and lively, gossipy ambassadorial reports. They also reveal much about how national political issues were understood – or even known about – outside the court, about local politics and about the interaction between the two. News was reported in both private correspondence amongst the nobility and gentry – such as the assassination of Henry III of France revealed in all its gory detail in a letter to Elizabeth Talbot (‘Bess of Hardwick’)¹¹ – and, in the seventeenth century, formal newsletters, the precursors of newspapers. Justices of the Peace reported potentially seditious and treasonous cases to the privy council, or individual councillors, to seek their advice as to what to do. SP12 and SP15, for instance, include a number of reports of men and women who had publicly stated that Queen Elizabeth had had an illegitimate child;¹² the Lansdowne collection contains a report on Anne Burnell who claimed that she was the daughter of Philip II of Spain and had the arms of England on her back.¹³ There is also much that might be considered the more mundane aspects of local government -- poor roads and crumbling bridges – where local elites sought the council’s authority to put pressure on those responsible to repair them. Far from commonplace, however, these

¹⁰ Adams, ‘The Tudor State Papers’.

¹¹ Gilbert and Mary Talbot to Elizabeth, countess of Shrewsbury, [Feb 1589], Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC, Folger X.d.428 (115)

¹² TNA: PRO, SP12/12/51, fo. 107r; SP12/13/21.I, fos. 56r-57r; SP15/11/86, fos. 151r-151v

¹³ BL, Lansdowne MS 53/79, fos. 162r-163r.

can reveal very important things about how local communities were organised, responsibilities shared and shirked, and local disputes resolved.

However, it would be a mistake to think that these collections are only of use to political historians. They are rich in a variety of material and cover a huge range of subjects pertinent to religious, social, cultural and economic historians as well as those interested in politics. Aristocratic and gentry collections can tell us much about the family squabbles, legal wranglings, local rivalries and spending habits of the elite. Even their love lives can be scrutinised: Elizabeth, wife of the third duke of Norfolk, wrote repeatedly to Cromwell in the 1530s complaining about her estranged husband, alleging that he kept her a virtual prisoner and that both he and his servants beat her. She also had ripe words to say about the duke's mistress. The papers of Sir Thomas Cawarden, first Master of the Revels, that form part of the Loseley papers at the Folger Shakespeare Library, can be used to investigate court entertainments. Reports of religious change as a result of the Reformation filtered up into the state papers, including a dispute in 1545 between the parish priest of Milton, Kent, and most of the parish choir when the latter refused to sing the new English litany and stormed out of the church leaving the priest 'w^t owte eny to anser him, saue ij of the parishe the which do not commonly singe and if thei had not ben, he had songe alone.'¹⁴ One of the most striking documents in the Lansdowne collection is the examination of Agnes Bowker, a maidservant who alleged she had given birth to a cat in 1569. It includes a large drawing of a cat that the archdeacon of Leicester, Anthony Anderson, had

¹⁴ TNA: PRO, SP1/203, fos. 85r-90r.

killed, flayed and boiled to help prove that the Agnes had not given birth to a cat but had used one to cover up the birth and death of an illegitimate child.¹⁵

The structure and arrangement of the State Papers

The papers in the State Paper Office were originally gathered in paper books (sometimes indexed) and in bundles (or *pacquets*). From the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, they were housed in various places: initially in the Banqueting House, then in the Holbein Gatehouse at Whitehall and, later, in St John's Chapel at the Tower of London. There was little security or fire-proofing – as we have seen, officials and antiquarians were able to purloin manuscripts and the Banqueting House was damaged in fire in 1619.¹⁶ The collection was broadly divided into 'Domestical' and 'Foreign'. From descriptions of the papers of Charles I and Charles II, it appears that foreign papers were usually further divided by country and that domestic ones were either organized chronologically or thematically.¹⁷ Though this seemed orderly, a report issued in 1705 argued that the State Paper Office was overcrowded and chaotic and keepers apparently had difficulty in finding even recent manuscripts.

While there were attempts to reorganize the office in the eighteenth century, real progress was not made until the State Paper Commission was established in 1832. The Commission's aims were to make the collection more coherent and to reorganize it to make it easier to use. Its efforts defined the collection and how historians use it to this day. The Commission's effects were two-fold. First, it gathered most, but (as

¹⁵ BL, Lansdowne MS, 101/6, fos 27r-33r, See also David Cressy, *Agnes Bowker's cat: travesties and transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England: tales of discord and dissension* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 9-28.

¹⁶ Thankfully, Wilson had removed the State Papers from the Banqueting House before the fire and it was principally the archives of the Privy Council and the Signet Office that were lost or damaged.

¹⁷ Marshall, 'The Secretaries Office'.

we have seen) by no means all, of the 'state papers' from disparate parts of the government's archives. The most notable transfer was of more than a hundred volumes of Henrician correspondence (including some of Wolsey's papers, the Lisle Papers and the Wriothesley Papers) from the Treasury of Receipt of the Exchequer in Westminster Abbey's Chapter House to the State Paper Office. And, as if to underline the chaos of the eighteenth-century archives, 118 *sacks* of uncatalogued manuscripts were also moved from the Chapter House to the Office. Second, the Commission began to reorder the various collections and impose a uniform cataloguing system; this included attempting to date undated manuscripts.

The Commission broadly divided the collection into four categories: Domestic, Foreign, Scotland and Ireland. As noted at the start of this essay, the colonial papers were the responsibility of the separate Colonial Office (see below). The Domestic series was largely divided by reign, but there are two main exceptions: the reign of Henry VIII and the civil war and Interregnum period. The papers covering Henry VIII's reign were divided into six separate categories or collections: the general series covering in-coming (and some out-going) correspondence to the king's secretaries and other officials, working papers, memoranda, treatises etc on domestic and foreign matters (SP1); large documents (SP2); the Lisle Papers, formerly belonging to Arthur Plantagenet, Viscount Lisle and Lord Deputy of Calais (SP3); papers dated between September 1545 and January 1547 which had been stamped with the king's signature rather than signed personally by him (SP4); miscellaneous documents from the Exchequer (King's Remembrancer) relating to the dissolution of the monasteries (SP5); theological tracts, mainly from the 1530s (SP6), and the Wriothesley Papers,

formerly belonging to Thomas Wriothesley, clerk of the signet and Thomas Cromwell's secretary (SP7).

The sub-divisions covering the period of the civil war and the Interregnum are particularly complicated, partly because, between 1642 and 1649, there were two competing governments in England and partly because the parliamentarians created a series of committees to deal with specific issues arising during, and as a result of, the war. SP16 and SP17 (large documents) contain the correspondence of Charles I's principal secretaries, as well as material on the navy, taxation, crown lands, the Court of High Commission and the trials of Archbishop Laud and Charles himself. The equivalent classes for the parliamentary side, as well as the Interregnum government itself are SP18 and SP25, SP26 and SP27, the last three classes being the papers of the Council of State. The classes relating to specific parliamentary or Interregnum committees are: SP19 for the Committee for the Advance of Money which dealt with voluntary and compulsory collection of money to pay for the war against the king; SP20 (the Committee for the Sequestration of Delinquents' Estates) and SP23 (the Committee for the Compounding with Delinquents) that both dealt with royalists, Catholics and recusants, including imposing and collecting fines and compositions or the sequestering of property; SP21 for the Committee for Both Kingdoms (or Derby House Committee), an *ad hoc* committee formed to replace the Committee of Safety after the Scots entered England in January 1644; SP22 for the Committee for Plundered Ministers, which organized support for ministers who had been ejected from their parishes by royalists; SP24 for the Committee and Commissioners for Indemnity, dealing with those who had supported the parliamentary cause in the

1640s but were being vexatiously sued, and SP28, the Commonwealth Exchequer Papers.

Within the larger class of State Papers Domestic, there are also other discreet or general collections of which the three most important are probably SP15 (Addenda, Edward VI to James I); SP45 (Various, Edward VI to 1862), and SP46 (Supplementary, 14th century to George III). There are also separate classes for the Channel Islands (SP47, SP111) and the Isle of Man (SP48).

Papers relating to foreign matters during the reign of Henry VIII were incorporated into the General Series (SP1 and SP2). Those dated between 1549 and 1577 were organized chronologically by reign: Edward VI (SP68), Mary (SP69), and Elizabeth (SP70). Papers dating from 1577 onwards continued to be organized chronologically but were sub-divided by country, rather than reign, beginning with the Barbary States (SP71) and culminating in Venice (SP99). There are also several other 'thematic' classes in State Papers Foreign, including News Letters (SP101), Ciphers (SP106) and Treaties (SP108).

State Papers Scotland and, in particular, the Border Papers, is largely an artificially created collection of material drawn from other classes. It is divided into three sections. State Papers Scotland (Series I) is the series of successive Principal Secretaries' correspondence relating to Scottish affairs from 1509 to 1603, organized chronologically by reign, with a further class (SP54) covering the period from 1688 to 1782. This series also includes material relating to Mary Queen of Scots' imprisonment in England (SP53). Series II contains the out-going correspondence of

the Secretary of State principally responsible for Scotland between 1709 and 1746 (Letter Books, SP55); the Secretaries' correspondence with the General Assembly of the Scottish Kirk (Church Books, SP56); the Secretaries' entry book of warrants, docquets and letters relating to Scotland (Warrant Books, SP57), and a collection of transcripts, made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of Anglo-Scottish material dating from 1065 to 1503 (SP58). The final section of State Papers Scotland is the Border Papers (SP59) containing material relating to the Wardens of the Marches. It is unclear whether this collection was originally a separate one or one artificially created in 1840 when the Commissioners of the Public Records had these papers bound together in volumes. However, it was subsequently partly broken up by the early editors of the Scottish Calendars and some material was transferred either to the other Scottish series or to the Foreign series.¹⁸

Like State Papers Scotland, State Papers Ireland is also, to some extent, an artificially created collection. At its core lies the correspondence of successive Lord Deputies, Lord Lieutenants, councillors, treasurers and higher clergy to the English government – sometimes accompanied by copies of letters from provincial governors, noblemen, chieftains, mayors and corporations – as well as drafts, memoranda, minutes, treatises, and books. But it also contains material culled from Sir Nicholas Throckmorton's collection and some of the Conway Papers, from Sir Edward Conway, Baron Conway and Viscount Killultagh, Principal Secretary to James I and

¹⁸ See *The Border Papers: Calendar of letters and papers relating to the affairs of the borders of England and Scotland preserved in Her Majesty's Public Record Office London*, ed. Joseph Bain (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1894-6), I, pp. vii-x.

Charles I.¹⁹ Primarily organized chronologically in four classes (SP60: Henry VIII; SP61 Edward VI; SP62 Mary; SP63 Elizabeth to George III), there are also separate classes for maps (SP64), large documents (SP65, SP66), and entry books (SP67).

As already noted in the previous section, the Colonial Office had a somewhat chequered history as responsibilities and oversight of the colonies was assumed by different individuals, committees, commissions and departments. The reorganisation of the Office's archives also began later than that of the State Paper Office: not until 1910. Broadly, the archive was arranged topographically by dominion, with these classes further subdivided by type of record, primarily correspondence, entry books, sessional papers, acts (ordinances, proclamations and acts of executive and legislative councils) and miscellanea. For instance, there are classes for Barbados (CO28-CO30, CO33), Bermuda (CO37-CO41), Canada (CO42-CO45, CO47), Gibraltar (CO91, CO95), and Jamaica (CO137-CO142). There are also classes that cover regional groups of dominions – including the East Indies (CO77) and Leeward Islands (CO152) – and classes for countries one might expect to appear in the Foreign series but were, at some point, British possessions, such as Minorca (CO174).

The exception to this is the collection of papers relating to the Americas and West Indies between 1574 and 1757 where the original order was retained. Thus, manuscripts dating from 1574 to c.1688 are collected in Colonial Papers, General Series (CO1); papers relating to America from c.1688 are in CO5; those relating to

¹⁹ *Calendar of State Papers relating to Ireland of the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth, 1509-1573*, ed. H C Hamilton (London, 1860), pp. i-iii.

the West Indies after c. 1688 are in CO318 and in the relevant topographical class.²⁰

There are also a number of general classes: Original Correspondence (CO323), which includes the Board of Trade's series 'Plantations General', official and semi-official correspondence and some legal reports from 1689; Entry Books (series I, CO324; Series II, CO381) which contain Orders in Council, petition, warrants, commissions and some correspondence; the Board of Trade series which includes the registers and indexes of correspondence from 1623 (Registers, General, CO326), the Original Correspondence from 1654 (CO388), Entry Books (CO389), Miscellanea (CO390) and Minutes of the Board's journals and proceedings from 1675 (CO391).

The structure and arrangement of other collections

The structure and arrangement of 'state papers' in other public and private archives varies and there is no space in this short essay to describe them all. The most famous arrangement – and possibly the oddest to novices – is that of the Cotton Manuscripts. These were originally kept in fourteen bookcases, each of which was surmounted either by a bust of a Roman emperor (Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian) or an Imperial lady (Cleopatra and Faustina). The classification of each volume comprised the name of the bookcase it was in, the shelf (denoted by a letter of the alphabet) and a Roman numeral denoting the volume's order on the shelf. This neat and precise ordering contrasts with that found by John Brewer when he went to assess the Cecil Papers at Hatfield House in the 1870s. He found that not even the manuscripts that had been bound in one of the 310 volumes in the library were in chronological order.

²⁰ Though note that, according to TNA's online catalogue, there is a significant chronological overlap between these classes and it is worth checking all of them to ensure you identify all relevant manuscripts.

Some of these collections – such as the Cotton and Harley Manuscripts and the Cecil Papers – have retained their original classifications. Despite the ‘disorder’ of the Cecil Papers, Brewer was careful not to alter ‘the place or position of the papers in the volumes where they now stand’.²¹ Other collections, however, were reordered by later archivists and cataloguers. For instance, the Historical Manuscripts Commission rearranged the papers of Lord De L’Isle and Dudley at Penshurst Place, into sections, including Deeds, Accounts, Family Papers, Irish Accounts, and Papers relating to the Council of the Marches of Wales.²²

Scholars have debated the impact of the reorganization of early modern archives in the State Papers Office and in other libraries, and the imposition, through cataloguing, of what are perceived as nineteenth- and twentieth-century perceptions of politics. Geoffrey Elton, for example, deplored the ‘many grave sins’ the Public Record Office had committed in reorganizing collections, picking especially (but unsurprisingly) on Cromwell’s papers, ‘preserved for three centuries in a separate collection, [and] now broken up and redistributed’.²³ It is argued that, though reorganisations might make a collection easier to use without the need for complex finding aids, it masks how contemporaries understood politics as reflected in the way they ordered their (working) archives, as well as obscuring ‘office practice’ (i.e. how contemporaries ordered and stored working records). By reordering collections, we lose an important insight into how individuals and societies engaged with, and understood, politics.

²¹ *Third Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts* (London, 1872), Appendix, p. 147.

²² *Historical Manuscripts Commission. Report of the manuscripts of Lord De L’Isle and Dudley preserved at Penshurst Place*, ed. C.L. Kingsford et al (4 vols, London, 1925-42), I, pp. v-lx.

²³ G.R. Elton, *England, 1200-1640* (London, 1969), p. 72

These criticisms are, perhaps, not fair and we might more sensibly agree with one of the Commission's archivists, John Brewer, who said, when surveying the Henrician state papers, that retaining the original (or even existing) order of the manuscripts was 'desirable' but 'altogether impossible'.²⁴ First, it is important to recognise that the Commission did retain some of the original or existing broad categories of the State Papers ('Domestic' and 'Foreign') and maintained the integrity of some specific collections (e.g. the Lisle and Wriothesley Papers). More importantly, as we have seen, though the State Papers were a working archive, it was not always well organized. The Office had also been reorganized many times already so that the original order was not readily apparent. The task facing the Commission was also immensely challenging. Different offices (including the State Paper Office and the Record Office) used different classification systems; many manuscripts were not dated; others were in pieces spread across different archives; some enclosures had been separated from the letters to which they belonged, and, as we have seen, there were sacks of uncatalogued manuscripts. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that Brewer (so keen to retain the order of the Cecil Papers) concluded of the State Papers, that 'Nothing remained except to bring the different series together, and patiently proceed *de novo* to arrange the whole in uniform chronological order.'²⁵

Calendars, catalogues and other finding aids

²⁴ Amanda Bevan, 'State Papers of Henry VIII: the archives and the documents', *State Papers Online, 1509-1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2007).

²⁵ J.S. Brewer, *Preface to Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, of the reign of henry VIII, preserved in the Public Record Office, The British Museum and elsewhere in England* (HMSO, 1861: for private circulation), pp. ix-xi, cited in Bevan, 'State Papers of Henry VIII'.

The State Paper Commission (1832) was just one of the most prominent commissions founded between 1800 and 1837 to organise the State Papers. As well as sorting and cataloguing the manuscripts, these commissions also made the collections available to the public by printing ‘calendars’: volumes that not only listed the contents of each class of state papers but also provided summaries or partial or full transcriptions of all the individual manuscripts contained therein. Thus began some of the Commission’s most important, influential and long-lasting work. It not only provided finding aids scholars could use to study the State Papers themselves but also influenced the work of the HMC and individual scholars by setting precedents and standards for finding aids for other collections. This section outlines some of the different finding aids for these collections.

The Commission’s first calendar was *State Papers during the reign of Henry the eighth* (11 volumes, 1825-32). This, however, only included a selection of the Henrician State Papers and so was followed by the comprehensive *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic*, published in twenty-four volumes between 1860 and 1932. *Letters and Papers* not only included the State Papers themselves, but also other Henrician material from other departments in the Public Record Office (notably the Patent Rolls) and from other public and private archives.

It quickly became apparent that *Letters and Papers* was a huge, ambitious and expensive project that could not be sustained for the rest of the collection. Therefore, a new Commission formed in 1840 and, led by Senior Clerk of the State Paper Office, Robert Lemon, instigated a new structure beginning with the Edwardian State Papers (1547-53). First, no attempt was made to combine different classes of papers, as had

been the case with *Letters and Papers*. Instead, separate series of calendars were begun for the Domestic, Foreign, Scotland and Ireland classes. Second, material from other sections of the Public Record Office was largely (though not completely²⁶) ignored and manuscripts from other archives and libraries were not included. Third, Lemon chose to summarise each document very briefly: each entry for the *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic series, of the reigns of Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth 1547-1580*, for instance, is only two or three lines long.²⁷

The Calendars for the Domestic, Foreign, Ireland series and the Colonial Papers are straightforward because there is a relatively uniform series for each. The *Calendars of State Papers Domestic* were organised by reign starting with Edward VI, though, as we have just seen, the first volume covered the reigns of Edward VI, Mary and the first twenty-three years of Elizabeth's. The *Calendars of State Papers Foreign* (covering the period 1547-July 1589) also organise the material chronologically, even though the actual manuscripts dating from 1577 onwards are subdivided by country. The period August 1589 to 1596 is covered by R.B. Wernham's seven-volume *List and Analysis of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth I* (1964-c.2000). State Papers Ireland are calendared in the *Calendar of State Papers Ireland*, but some Henrician manuscripts were selected for inclusion in *State Papers during the reign of Henry the eighth* and all Henrician manuscripts relating to Ireland are also calendared in *Letters and Papers*. Colonial Papers relating to America and the West Indies were calendared in the *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies* (45

²⁶ Lemon included some items from SP 9 (Grants of Arms) and SP38 (Docquets) into *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic series, of the reigns of Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth 1547-1580, preserved in the State Paper Department of Her Majesty's Public Record Office*, ed. Robert Lemon (London, 1856)

²⁷ See *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic series, of the reigns of Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth 1547-1580*.

volumes, including a supplement to volume fourteen, with addenda covering the years 1688 to 1696). The minutes for the Board of Trade are included in this calendar until 1704, where after (at least until 1784) they are printed in full in the *Journals of the Board of Trade and Plantations* (14 volumes, 1920-1938). Other colonial records are indexed in volume thirty-six of the List and Index Society.

The calendars for State Papers Scotland are more complicated; there are a number of overlapping calendars and some material is calendared in other series. The ‘main’ calendar is the *Calendar of State Papers, Scotland, 1509-1603* which covers the sixteenth century but its entries are very brief. Some Henrician material is also contained in the fourth and fifth volumes of *State Papers during the reign of Henry the eighth* and all Henrician manuscripts relating to Scotland are also calendared in *Letters and Papers*. Longer, more detailed, entries are provided for material dating from 1547 to 1597 in the *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary Queen of Scots, 1547-1597*. Scottish material dating from 1558 to June 1577 is calendared in the *Calendar of State Papers Foreign*. The Border Papers are calendared separately. The revised three-volume *Guide to the Public Record Office*, edited by M.S. Giuseppi (London, 1963-68), is an invaluable guide to identifying the correct calendar(s) for each class, not just those relating to Scotland.

In the one hundred and fifty years over which the calendars were produced, there have been some changes. Lemon’s brief entries allowed him to cover over three decades in one volume – as opposed to the twenty one volumes (in thirty five parts) required for *Letters and Papers* – but the brevity of entries was unpopular. Consequently, the Commission adopted the editorial approach practiced by one of the Commission’s

four external editors, Mary Anne Everett Green. Green summarised each document fully, ensuring all significant information was included and that the structure of her summary followed the structure of the original; important phrases were repeated verbatim or clearly quoted. As a result of the unpopularity of the *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic series, of the reigns of Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth*, new calendars of the Edwardian and Marian papers, with very full summaries, were published in 1992 and 1998, edited by Charles Knighton. A new *Calendar of State Papers Ireland*, covering the period 1571 to 1575, was also produced in conjunction with the Irish Manuscripts Commission in 2000 under the editorship of Mary O'Dowd.

Unfortunately, some classes of State Papers, such as SP28 Commonwealth Exchequer Papers, have not been calendared at all. For other classes, there are only handwritten or typed lists of contents, either available in The National Archives' reading rooms only or through the List and Index Society, founded by Professor Geoffrey Elton to make these lists available publically. The Society has also published calendars of some classes of State Papers to fill the gaps left by the Commission; these include calendars for State Papers Supplementary (SP46).

Most University libraries and some archives have full sets of the Calendars of State Papers, either in their original editions or in reprints. Electronic versions can also be found on the website British History Online (hosted by the Institute of Historical Research, London) and through sites such as TannerRitchie's *Medieval and Early Modern Sources Online (MEMSO)*, where the volumes are available as online searchable facsimiles or facsimile PDFs to download. *State Papers Online* also provides non-facsimile versions of the calendars.

Moving from calendar to document is easy on *State Papers Online* because links are provided between each calendar entry and its corresponding document (providing that document is in State Paper Office of The National Archives). Otherwise, readers need to identify the volume and item number of the document from the calendars. This is usually signified in one of two ways. For instance, in the *Calendars for State Papers Domestic*, the content of each manuscript volume is listed in order with the number of the volume printed as both a sub-heading and as a running head. Each entry is then numbered, providing the item number of the manuscript. In contrast, for the *Calendars of State Papers Foreign* covering the period after June 1577, each entry is followed by a document reference number comprising the class and volume number e.g. SP78/10. Some of the referencing in the early calendars is a little opaque, there are some quirks, and some call numbers have changed altogether. Some of these issues are addressed in the essays by Charles Knighton and Amanda Bevan on *State Papers Online*. The National Archives also has excellent information on its website about each class, what finding aids are available and how to use them.

Finding aids for other ‘state papers’ in other archives and libraries vary. The British Library collections have only been catalogued, usually with very brief notes of the contents of each document, and not all these catalogues are available online.

Nevertheless, it is worth trawling through the paper catalogues to ensure that you identify everything you might possibly need, rather than relying on online keyword searches (where available). The Cotton Manuscripts have been refoiled several times, so it is important to use the item numbers from the catalogue – as well as be

consistent in which foliation you will adopt and follow when you study the manuscripts themselves.

Many major collections in private and public archives benefitted from the attention of the HMC. There are four series. The main series are the first nine General Keeper's reports which address many different archives in one volume; these volumes include collections which were subsequently given more extensive treatment in the other series. The second series comprises fourteen later keepers' or inspectors' reports which tend to calendar smaller collections. The third and fourth series contain individual series of calendars of larger collections (such as the twenty-four volume series on the Cecil Papers); appendices to the tenth and fifteenth keepers' report which calendared individual collections in separate volumes, and the final four keepers' reports. The HMC broadly adopted the editorial practice of the State Paper Commission (under Green's purview) when producing its calendars. Indeed, some of the same archivists and editors, like John Brewer, worked for both commissions. Thus, there is a summary or a partial/full transcription of the contents of each manuscript, and there were attempts to date undated items, which were placed at the end of the relevant year. Manuscript references are usually given (though, annoyingly, not for the first four volumes of the Cecil Papers). Note that many of these collections are private, and access to them can be restricted for a variety of reasons. The Cecil Papers have long been available on microfilm at the British Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library, but this has now been superseded by the digitised *The Cecil Papers* (available only by purchase or subscription) which simply organises the collection by volume and item number.

Conclusion: where to start

State papers, whether in The National Archives or in a public or private archives elsewhere, are daunting collections to start working on, but they can be mastered. As with any other source, collection or archive, it is important to do your homework and understand as much about the collection as possible before visiting the archive. Once there, don't be afraid to ask the archivists for assistance: they know their archives very well and are invariably happy to help readers.

There are many ways in which you can prepare yourself for venturing into state papers. Though peppered with some rather trenchant criticisms, and a false distinction between 'official' and 'unofficial' manuscripts, Geoffrey Elton's *England, 1200-1640* (London, 1969) is an excellent starting point as it not only discusses the State Papers themselves but also much of the rest of The National Archives (formerly The Public Record Office) and other sources. On its website, The National Archives provides a wealth of helpful detailed guides and information on each class within the State Paper Office (and all the other departments). These explain some of the history of each class, what it comprises, finding aids and any quirks, such as if the class has been re-catalogued and how readers can negotiate between old and new references. Older sources should not be ignored. M.S. Giuseppi's three-volume revised *Guide to the contents of the Public Record Office* (London, 1963-8) might seem out-dated and old-fashioned and, certainly, some of the figures provided on the number of volumes or bundles are now incorrect. But, it provides an excellent introduction to each department within The National Archives, identifies and provides a description of every single class and lists all the relevant calendars (up to the 1960s). Introductions to the calendars themselves should not be ignored either. Though many of them focus

on providing a brief narrative of events to provide some context for the documents, they (particularly the first volumes in the series) can also include important information about the class itself and how it has been calendared. Finally, those who have access to *State Papers Online* should make a beeline for the specially-commissioned essays hosted there. Those by Charles Knighton (on the calendars), Amanda Bevan (on the Henrician state papers), Andrew Thrush (covering 1603-1640) and Stephen Roberts (1640-1660) are particularly useful starting points.

Starting points for material in other archives are less straightforward. *State Papers Online* includes some useful essays on some of the British Library collections (by Simon Adams) and the Cecil Papers (Stephen Alford), even though the database includes digitised images of only a small selection of the former and none of the latter. The online Cecil Papers includes important essays about the history of the archive and how to use them. Introductions to HMC calendars, websites of archives, and scholarly essays on specific collections or individuals (notably those by Simon Adams on the earl of Leicester) also exist.²⁸

Useful sources

Simon Adams, 'The Tudor State Papers in the Yelverton, Cotton and Harleian Manuscript collections', *State Papers Online, 1509-1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2009)

Stephen Alford, 'The Collection of the Cecil Papers, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire', *State Papers Online, 1509-1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2009)

²⁸ See above, fn 9.

Amanda Bevan, 'State Papers of Henry VIII: the archives and the documents', *State Papers Online, 1509-1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2007)

Geoffrey Elton, *England, 1200-1640* (London, 1969)

M.S. Giuseppi (ed.), *Guide to the contents of the Public Record Office* (3 vols, London, 1963-8)

Robin Harcourt Williams, 'The Cecil Papers: four centuries of custodial history', *The Cecil Papers* (Pro-Quest, 2010-15)

C. S. Knighton, 'The Calendars and their Editors, 1856-2006,' *State Papers Online, 1509-1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2007)

Alan Marshall, 'The Secretaries Office and the Public Records', *State Papers Online, 1509-1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2010)

The National Archives website: see the list of guides in the section on Medieval and Early Modern History in their 'Research Guides'

Vicky Perry, 'Notes on the numbering of the Cecil Papers and the scope of the digital collection', *The Cecil Papers* (Pro-Quest, 2010-15)

Stephen K. Roberts, 'The Government and its Records, 1640–1660', *State Papers Online, 1509–1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2010)

Andrew Thrush, 'The Government and its Records, 1603–1640', *State Papers Online, 1509–1714* (Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2010)