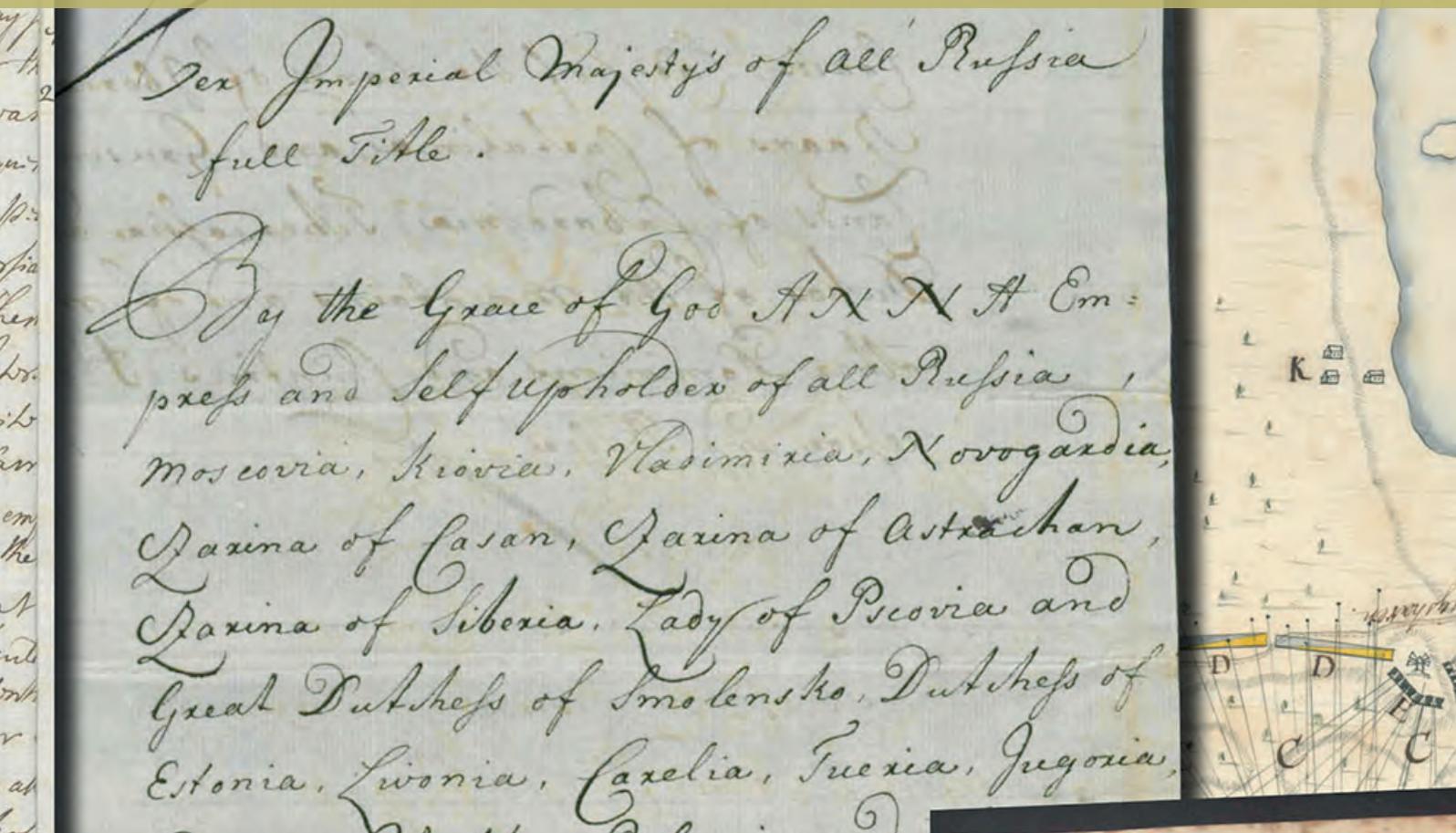


The Tudor State Papers in The Yelverton, Cotton and Harleian Manuscript Collections

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Various source media, *State Papers Online*



The Yelverton, Cotton and Harleian Manuscript Collections ^[1]

The key dates in the establishment of the State Papers as a formal archive are the creation of the State Paper Office in 1578 and the appropriation in 1612 of a large section of the Cecil Papers at Salisbury House by Sir Thomas Wilson, the Jacobean Keeper of the State Papers. The purpose of the Office appears to have been strictly functional, to provide reference materials for the formulation of policy, and therefore it was concerned solely with the working papers of the Principal Secretaries of State. What these were can be seen in the index to the papers of Sir Francis Walsingham (Secretary 1573–1590), which divides them into ‘books of matters’ (reference books) and bundles of loose papers.^[2] The near ubiquitous Elizabethan practice of filing loose papers by bundle or ‘pacquet’ of related material is the key to understanding the relationship of much that has survived, despite later rearranging and rebinding.

Two other considerations were no less importance in the formation of the State Papers. Firstly, there was no interest in papers of other than a relatively recent date. Wilson may have harboured ambitions of creating a grander historical library, but he was constantly on the defensive and forced to justify his existence on utilitarian grounds in the face of demands for economies. Secondly, material of a purely personal nature was undoubtedly weeded out when the papers of Secretaries of State were deposited in the State Paper Office. This is the only possible explanation for the disappearance of practically all Walsingham’s personal papers as well as those of the ill-starred William Davison (Secretary of State 1586–87), whose political and diplomatic papers dominate the Elizabethan State

Papers. It was only in the eighteenth century that ‘illustrations of manners’ as opposed to ‘papers of state’ were considered worth preserving, and then by private collectors.

Precisely what the State Paper Office contained when Wilson became keeper in 1606 is a mystery. Walsingham’s papers had been maintained as a separate collection in the early 1590s, but when and how they entered the State Paper Office is unknown. Indeed without Wilson’s enthusiasm, the State Paper Office might well have withered on the vine, because the crown was only concerned with maintaining the working archives of its various departments, and showed little interest in preserving the papers of its leading servants.

Having said that, there were exceptions; the collections of political casualties being the most important. The two earliest examples are Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell, without whose papers the history of Henry VIII’s reign would be difficult to write. On their falls from office, in 1529 and 1540 respectively, their papers were appropriated by the Crown and deposited in the Chapter House of Westminster Abbey, which served as a repository for the Exchequer. There they remained until the nineteenth century. Neither the Edwardian nor the Marian government showed any interest in the papers of its political casualties, the Dukes of Somerset and Northumberland, for example, but Elizabeth’s government revived her father’s practice. Her principal ‘victim’ was the captive Queen of Scots, whose papers were seized on several occasions between 1569 and September 1586.^[3] The same policy was adopted towards the papers of the Duke of Norfolk and the Earl of Essex, as well as those of lesser figures like the Catholic Clerk of the Signet, Francis Yaxley, in 1562 and

Thomas Norton (discussed below) on his death in 1584. Norfolk's, Essex's and Yaxley's papers were absorbed into the Cecil collection. Norton's were originally in the keeping of the Clerk of the Privy Council, Thomas Wilkes, and subsequently his colleague Robert Beale.

The papers of other privy councillors, officers of the Crown and ambassadors, many of which might be considered 'papers of state', remained in the possession of their families, secretaries or other trusted servants, to be preserved or destroyed as they or their descendants saw fit. In many cases the credit for the survival of Tudor papers of state belongs to seventeenth and eighteenth-century heirs of antiquarian tastes. A case in point is Thomas Thynne, 1st Viscount Weymouth, thanks to whom the Dudley, Devereux and Seymour collections now at Longleat House avoided destruction.^[4] Only two Elizabethan collections entered the State Paper Office after 1612. The first was 45 packets of the papers of the former Secretary of State William Davison, which Wilson appropriated in 1619. The other was the Conway Papers, which included part of the correspondence of Sir Nicholas Throckmorton. After a long saga they were deposited in the Public Record Office in 1857.

The Yelverton Papers are a good example of the family collection. The Elizabethan section originated with Robert Beale (1541–1601), Clerk of the Privy Council, whose daughter Margaret married the judge Sir Henry Yelverton.^[5] It is composed primarily of papers relating to Beale's various diplomatic missions from 1572 to 1587 and his involvement in the execution of the Queen of Scots. The most important of his diplomatic missions was that to the Netherlands with the Earl of Leicester in 1587, from which Beale retained possession of a large body of letters and papers. The collection

remained in the possession of the Yelverton family and then the Gough Calthorpes until it was sold to the British Museum in 1953. A substantial part of Beale's 1587 Netherlands material was published in the 1691 edition of *Cabala sive scrinia sacra*, one of the earliest English printed collections of historical manuscripts, and the collection itself was reasonably well-known, though its full extent was not revealed until it was catalogued by the British Library. At some point prior to the nineteenth century much of Beale's unbound correspondence was detached and is now widely dispersed.^[6]

Only very recently, however, has it been appreciated that many of the Elizabethan manuscripts, previously assumed to have been Beale's, belonged in fact to the celebrated parliamentarian and Remembrancer of the City of London, Thomas Norton (c.1532–1584). Thanks to the survival of an inventory of Norton's papers made when they were seized on his death, 50 of his manuscripts can be identified among the Yelverton Papers. They include much material relating to Norton's parliamentary activities and the agitation against the Queen of Scots in 1571–1572, as well as a narrative of the reigns of Edward VI and the first years of Elizabeth, which has been the subject of considerable recent scholarly interest.^[7]

Filling the gap, as it were, between the State Papers and the private collections were the collectors. It was thanks to the somewhat fluid situation surrounding the establishment of the State Paper Office that the greatest of British manuscript collectors, Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631), flourished.^[8] Cotton himself occupied an anomalous position, combining the roles of private collector and informal political advisor. It was in the latter capacity that he enjoyed the benevolence of

James I and his access to the State Paper Office. By the same token, it was the political exploitation of his library that cost Cotton the favour of Charles I in 1629. Charles closed the library until Cotton's death, but he did not confiscate it. A further dimension was Cotton's relationship to his old schoolmaster, William Camden. If it was to Camden that Cotton owed his antiquarian tastes (the inspiration for his collection of medieval and ex-monastic manuscripts), recent scholarship has given increased prominence to Cotton's role in the research for the *Annales* of Elizabeth I that Camden unenthusiastically undertook. It was specifically as assistant to Camden that Cotton was granted access to the State Paper Office. What made his access controversial was that Cotton did not simply transcribe documents, but, as Wilson regularly complained, removed and retained originals as well.

Tudor 'papers of state' form a large part of the present Cotton Manuscripts. Much is in the form of copies, often of originals that can be found in the State Papers, though occasionally the position is reversed, the Duke of Norfolk's second confession of November 1571, for example. Of the original material, roughly half was either abstracted from, or should have been included in, the State Papers, and half came from private collections, either by gift or purchase. The latter includes the large section of the Earl of Leicester's correspondence that Cotton obtained from Leicester's former secretary Arthur Atye, the correspondence of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Earls of Sussex, the diplomatic correspondence of Sir Thomas Bodley in the Netherlands in the 1590s and of Sir Thomas Parry as ambassador to France from 1602 to 1606.

By some unknown means Cotton was able to help himself to a large section of the Wolsey and Cromwell

papers in Westminster Abbey. He also collected a large body of material relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots. Some of the Marian material came from the various seizures of her papers, including the report by her commissioners at the York and Westminster 'trials' in 1568 (MS Titus C XII) and her draft will of February 1577 (MS Vespasian C XVI, f.145). But there is also a large body of Burghley's Scottish papers from the 1560s. Whether Cotton abstracted them from the State Papers, or whether they were among the documents that Burghley placed at Camden's disposal when he began his history in the mid-1590s is, as yet, impossible to determine.

The provenance of the papers of state has been obscured by two events in the library's history. The first was the arrangement into subject categories within the famous 'Imperial' classification system. Although Sir William Dugdale later claimed credit for undertaking the arranging at the request of Sir Thomas Cotton in the 1640s, there are grounds for suspecting that he only completed what Sir Robert had begun. If the overall plan was Cotton's, the strong similarities to Wilson's contemporary arrangement of the State Papers suggest a degree of possibly reciprocal influence. On the other hand, Cotton's antiquarianism is reflected in his assigning of a number of letters to a proposed 'Book of Hands' (a collection of famous autographs). The result of the arranging is a series of roughly chronological volumes by country or subject (*Transacta*, Cotton termed them) containing both copies and originals of diverse provenance. Apart from the addressees of letters, only chronology provides a rough guide to provenance. Leicester's papers dominate the period from 1574 to his death in 1588. Most of the 1559–1570 papers are either Burghley's or Sussex's. The

Irish papers in MS Titus B XIII provide a good illustration of the way in which the volumes were assembled. Those dating from the period to 1564 are almost entirely Sussex's, those between 1574 and 1588 Leicester's. Apart from Bodley's Netherlands and Parry's French papers there is comparatively little material for the period after 1590.

The second event was the notorious fire that destroyed or damaged much of the library in 1731.

The *Transacta* volumes came off relatively lightly; the worst damaged being the Henrician series. However, some reconstruction can be attempted from copies made before 1731. The three volumes of maritime papers (MSS Otho E VII-IX) were quite seriously damaged, but Samuel Pepys had two of them copied in the 1680s. Pepys' copies also reveal that the reconstruction of the volumes after the fire followed the original internal sequence quite carefully.^[9]

The Harleian manuscript library was the creation of Queen Anne's Lord Treasurer, Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford and his son Edward, the 2nd Earl.^[10] The first major accession was made in 1705 and additions ceased with the death of the 2nd Earl in 1741. In the century since Cotton a number of trends in manuscript collecting had become stronger. The emphasis in collecting had become more overtly antiquarian and historical, there was now an active market in historical manuscripts and the easiest way to build a large collection was to buy existing libraries. Much of the day to day work was left to librarians, in the Harleys' case the well-known antiquary Humfrey Wanley (1672–1726).^[11] Thus while Cotton may have been his library's presiding genius, the Harleian Library was shaped by Wanley as much as the tastes of his patrons.

Although the Harleian collection is much larger than the Cotton, Tudor papers of state form a much smaller proportion of it. Nevertheless, there are two subsections of importance. The initial large accession was the manuscript library of Sir Symonds D'Ewes (1602–1650). D'Ewes had begun his library with the purchase in 1628 of the library of Cotton's friend and collaborator Ralph Starkey.^[12] In 1619 Starkey had just purchased the papers of William Davison from Davison's son Francis when Wilson appropriated them for the State Paper Office. A rump, but an important one, of the Davison papers remained in Starkey's possession and now form Harleian MSS 284-7 and 289-290.

A more complex history lies behind the 'miscellany' volumes, MSS 6990-7002. Their late place in the sequence of pressmarks and the fact that one item in them was obtained in 1740 suggest that they were not finally bound until the last phase of the library's independent existence, if then. They are chronologically-arranged collections of Elizabeth and Jacobean papers of state from a variety of provenances, and owe their creation to the contemporary antiquarian habit of exchanging autograph letters like philatelists swapping postage stamps. Best known is the series of letters to Burghley from the future Lansdowne Manuscripts that John Strype sold to Wanley between 1708 and 1711. A collection of letters to Sir John Puckering (Lord Keeper 1592–96) Wanley purchased from Thomas Baker, the Cambridge antiquary. A third series, a number of letters to the earl of Leicester, came partly from Longleat, partly from Cotton strays.^[13]

The Cotton and Harleian Manuscripts were two of the founding collections of the British Museum. As such they have been in the public domain for nearly 250 years and publication from them was extensive if

unsystematic by the time the Public Record Office was opened to the public in 1859.^[14] A major problem faced by the editors of the *Calendars of State Papers* was the integration of the British Museum's collections. This was undertaken by the editors of the *Letters and Papers ... Henry VIII* and the *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots*, but was abandoned in the other Elizabethan series (specifically the *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign*) on grounds of expense. The result has been an unfortunate tendency to write Elizabethan history chiefly from the State Papers, with the British Library's collections being considered somewhat peripheral. Thanks to online publication they can be consulted together in a way that has not been possible before.

NOTES

^[1] Selected documents from the Cotton, Harley and Yelverton Collections are included in *State Papers Online*, Part II.

^[2] British Library (BL), Stowe MS 162, entitled 'Walsingham's Table-Book' and dated 1588. One of the 'books of matters' may be the 'Book of Muters 1588' in the Savile Foljambe collection, see the discussion in Adams, 'The Armada Correspondence in Cotton MSS Otho E VII and E IX', in *Naval Miscellany VI* (Navy Records Society, cxlvi, 2003), p. 40.

^[3] It's not entirely clear whether those seized on earlier occasions were returned to her.

^[4] See Adams, 'The Papers of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester III: The Couness of Leicester's Collection', *Archives*, xxii (1996), pp. 1-26.

^[5] The best guide to the collection is the *Catalogue of the Yelverton Manuscripts* (British Library, 1994).

^[6] Three volumes of Beale correspondence can be found elsewhere in the British Library (Egerton MSS 1593-5), other sections are now in the libraries of Aberdeen and Brigham Young Universities.

^[7] The narrative has recently been published as 'A "Journal" of Matters of State', ed. S. Adams, I. W. Archer and G. W. Bernard, in *Religion, Politics and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Camden Society, 5th ser., xxii, 2003), see pp. 38-9 for a discussion of Norton's papers. The inventory is Hatfield House, Cecil Papers, MS 140, f. 51-v.

^[8] Of the considerable literature on Cotton, the most relevant to what is discussed here are Colin C. G. Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton* (British Library, 1994) and Adams, 'The Papers of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester II: The Atye-Cotton Collection', *Archives*, xx (1993), pp. 131-44.

^[9] See Adams 'Armada Correspondence' (note 2 above).

^[10] The central work on the Harleian manuscripts is C. E. Wright, *Fontes Harleiani* (British Museum, 1972).

^[11] The main sources for Wanley are C. E. and R. C. Wright (eds), *The Diary of Humfrey Wanley, 1715-1726* (1966), and P. L. Heyworth (ed.), *Letters of Humfrey Wanley* (Oxford, 1989).

^[12] See A.G. Watson, *The Library of Sir Simonds D'Ewes* (1966).

^[13] See the discussion in 'Leicester Papers II' (note 4 above) pp. 142-3.

^[14] Mainly in the form of miscellanies like Sir Henry Ellis (ed.), *Original Letters, illustrative of English history* (11 vols, in 3 series, 1824-46), or Thomas Wright (ed.), *Queen Elizabeth and her Times* (2 vols., 1838).

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