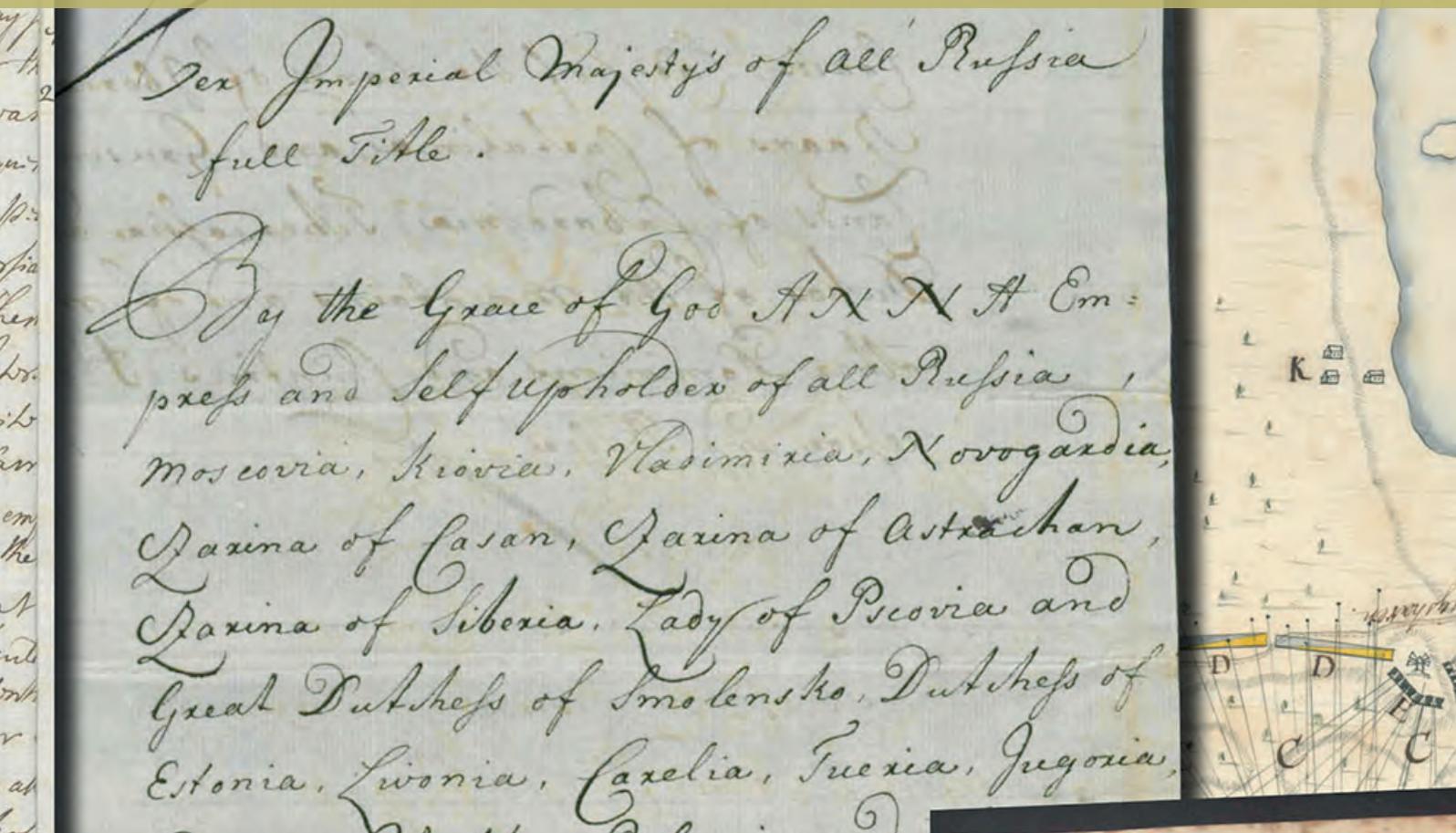


Introduction to *State Papers Online* and the Sixteenth Century State Papers, 1509–1603

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Various source media, *State Papers Online*



Parts One and Two of *State Papers Online* give us practically all the sources we need to investigate the government of the Tudor kings and queens in microscopic detail. Never before have students and their teachers been able to inspect the archives that formed the backbone of the Tudor state so carefully and so easily. Here is Tudor government stripped bare, exposed in all its fabulous richness and subtlety.

The Tudor century was one of rapid, profound and irreversible change. Society was turned upside down by tectonic shifts in politics and religion. The kingdoms left behind by Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 were transformed from those ruled by her father in 1509, though for nearly ninety years the same problems arose over and over again: wars and entanglements with foreign powers; controversies about religious worship; the difficult politics of royal succession; fears of rebellion and invasion; the tested loyalties of the Crown's subjects. For a society that, as Matthew Clark shows us in his essay here, prided itself on a careful and settled order, this was bewildering; and yet we have to say that the Tudors coped remarkably well with what was, in all kinds of ways, little short of a revolution in many aspects of life in the sixteenth century. Still, great and rapid change often felt profoundly uncomfortable at the time.

It was a society of order and degree. Natural metaphors sprung easily to the minds of writers and theorists: society was a body, of which the king was head and his subjects the limbs; or perhaps, as Edmund Dudley had it in 1509, it was a tree, with roots, a firm trunk, branches, and fruit. Both metaphors reflected an essential truth, that everyone in the commonwealth of Tudor society, rich or poor, from titled nobleman to a prosperous farmer, was bound to one another by an

organic bond of loyalty to God and to the Crown. The interests of God, Crown and society were inseparable: after all, the king or queen was God's lieutenant on earth, His direct representative in the governance of His people. It was not an accident that in the coronation oath a Tudor king or queen swore to hold to people, law and church.

Tudor society was by no means simple. On the face of it, there was a neat hierarchy of ranks and degrees in society, a clear social order: but we know that economic pressures nibbled away at many social assumptions, so much so that Tudor writers and moralists fretted about their society been turned upside down, fearful of the dire punishments of God for the sins of the people. We find the same neat thinking about Tudor monarchy – profound and mystical, kings unbound and unlimited in authority, anointed with holy oils at their coronations – expressed by Shakespeare's King Richard II:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord. [*Richard II*, III.2.54-57]

Yet the Tudor kings and queens were challenged by rebellions, particularly when, like Henry VIII or Edward VI, they seemed intent on destroying the Church. And one queen of Tudor blood, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, was executed in 1587 on the orders of a fellow anointed monarch, Elizabeth I. So, as Shakespeare's Richard found to his cost, life for kings was not so straightforward after all. But probably the Tudors knew this from the beginning. Henry VII, who got the throne by force from Richard III in 1485, understood the power of dynastic imagery and iconography, in stone, paint, print and propaganda. The power of propaganda, as

John Cooper shows so well in his essay, was understood by all the Tudors.

It is impossible to say precisely when the revolution began, much less to suggest a year: historians can rarely afford to be that exact. Yet perhaps we can say that some of the seeds were sown in the later years of the 1520s, when King Henry VIII began to feel anxious about the legitimate male succession to his throne – and of course also to fall in love with Anne Boleyn. Richard Rex tells the story in fascinating detail, a dynastic crisis that led to a recalibration – or was it a reinvention? – of English monarchy. What is striking is how profoundly life changed even for ordinary people in the 20 years between 1520 and 1540: the monasteries and other religious houses gone, the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church denounced, the ‘empire’ of England proclaimed by Henry VIII; and with these enormous changes came many of the instruments and controls we associate with a modern state – tough laws against treason and conspiracy, the blurring of the boundary between private conscience and loyalty to the crown, the careful oversight by the royal bureaucracy of the king’s subjects. Here we can compare the Henrician years to the efforts of Mary I and her government in the 1550s to destroy heresy, or the arguments used by the Elizabethan state that it had not set out to persecute Catholics, merely to protect itself from treasonous enemies.

So much of this revolution can be traced in wonderful detail through *State Papers Online*, from the appraisal and dissolution of the kingdom’s religious houses to the plans for laws to break with the Church of Rome. Treason and suspicion in the 1530s have left behind them some rich sources which give us the inside story of Henry VIII’s reign. We can read the papers of

Cardinal Wolsey, whose rich and remarkable career – prince of the English church, papal legate, Henry’s lord chancellor and chief minister, the builder of Hampton Court Palace – is sketched for us by David Grummitt. The papers of Wolsey’s powerful successor, Thomas Cromwell, also survive: if Wolsey dominated King Henry’s policy in the 1520s, then Cromwell was as influential in the king’s affairs in the following decade. On all of these sources for the years between 1509 and 1547 Amanda Bevan’s essay is indispensable.

Historians have to look at their sources with critical and appraising eyes. Rarely are manuscripts objects of unalloyed purity. Most of the original documents we read in *State Papers Online* were the everyday working papers of the royal government. Many were written quickly according to set forms and procedures and without great ceremony. Some are immensely valuable on their own and tell us a great deal about Tudor society: others communicate to us the fact of life that running a government can be a dull business. But even the dullest document can tell a story, and we have to be alive to it: Who wrote it? Why did they write it? Who read it? Whose handwriting can we see in the margin? How was it sent out? How long did it take to get from the royal palace of Greenwich to the Council of the North in York.

In reading *State Papers Online* we face too some intriguing matters of organisation. The wonderful thing about the resource you are reading is that it brings together documents which, though now in different archives in diverse collections and archives, once belonged together. If we want to understand the sheer scale of Tudor government – what it could do and how it

recorded its own activities – we have to re-integrate the archives: that is, to apprehend something of how these papers they were filed, arranged and used by the people who produced them.

Here it can help, oddly enough, to work backwards, and to understand something of the Victorian archivists who took the great piles of paper and parchment in the Tower of London and in private collections of families and archives and arranged them into the archives we use today. The Victorians' catalogues and calendars are indispensable, however much we need to read the original manuscripts. Indeed these catalogues and calendars are important historical documents in their own right. For a century and a half they have been the keys to the State Papers. They also tell us a good deal about what the Victorians believed was important in the sources they read, and we can compare their summaries of documents with what we might choose to write today. Indeed we can do that easily enough by comparing the Victorian work of Robert Lemon to the modern calendars for the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I edited by Charles Knighton. Dr Knighton's essay on the calendars must be read by anyone who wants to understand why the State Papers are arranged as they are today. When we look at these Tudor sources we have to recognise that we view them through a Victorian lens.

Certainly we can thank the tireless Victorians, rarely daunted by enormous projects and undertakings, for the State Papers as we have them today. But we must not forget the councillors, secretaries and clerks of Tudor government who left us the manuscripts in the first place. They bequeathed a truly vast archive, and one which extends out beyond what today is filed away

in The National Archives at Kew, to other libraries, archives and collections.

But why should this be? The story is a complicated one, but it has much to do with accident and happenstance. As Simon Adams shows in his essay on the Tudor State Papers in the British Library, the papers of the officials of government have been at times lost, or mislaid, or simply detached from other papers. Many of these papers entered private family collections in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were later bought by or bequeathed to the library of the British Museum (now the British Library). Many papers which were once filed in the State Paper Office now belong to the British Library's Cotton, Harley, and Yelverton collections. One major collection of Tudor State Papers is still in private hands. As Stephen Alford explains, the Salisbury, or Cecil, Papers exist as an independent collection for the reason that so much of the business of government in the later sixteenth century crossed the desk of Sir William Cecil, later Lord Burghley, Elizabeth I's secretary and lord treasurer. Senior Tudor officials worked at home as well as at the royal Court. We know that Burghley kept government papers in his rooms in the royal palaces between which the queen was always moving and in the studies of his own private houses in Westminster and Hertfordshire. Powerful royal ministers like Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell had done just the same.

Some men dominated Tudor government. Thomas Wolsey, Cardinal and Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII, is one: Thomas Cromwell is another. The careers of both men were fairly short. Wolsey was the pre-eminent power after the King for about 15 years, Cromwell ten.

In a career five times as long as Cromwell's, the great force behind Tudor government in the second half of the sixteenth century was Lord Burghley. Stephen Alford sketches this career in a short essay.

The career of William Cecil gives us a number of barometric readings for the Tudor century. As a young man new to politics and government, he served the radical regime of King Edward VI, the boy-king whose kingship was used to promote change and Reformation far beyond what Henry VIII had attempted. The reign of Edward saw the end of Catholic worship in England and Ireland (at least officially) and the introduction of the first book of Common Prayer. Edward was seen by his councillors and courtiers as a second King Josiah, an Old Testament king sent by God to bring 'true' religion to the people. This Edwardian Reformation was thrown into sharp reverse by Edward's eldest half-sister Mary, an uncompromising Catholic. For 11 years two Tudor monarchs and their advisors engineered a double revolution, first away from the Church of Rome and then back to the Catholic fold. Cecil, the barometer, was close to one government and then for a time out in the cold. But in 1558, at the accession of Queen Elizabeth I, he was very much back at the heart of government and politics.

For Elizabeth's reign we can appreciate the richness, and also the vastness, of the State Papers. At times the sheer amount of detail is overwhelming. If we want to know how many armed men the county of Shropshire could provide to resist invasion, it is not hard to find it. If we wish to know how many men and women of Lancashire refused to attend Prayer Book services in their parish churches, a paper somewhere in the collection will tell us. Equally, intricate negotiations with foreign powers are set out in diplomats' letters to

the Queen and her Council, and plans for war and defence are given in policy papers written by Elizabeth's closest advisers. Elizabethan society and government, politics and religion, are laid bare in the State Papers kept by Lord Burghley and his successors and other Tudor officials. The amazing thing is that we can say very much the same kind of thing for the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary.

By the mature years of Elizabeth's reign it was essential for the royal government to know what was going on at home and abroad. Anxieties about the royal succession, fears of foreign invasion by Spain and rebellion at home concentrated the minds of Elizabeth's advisers. David Crankshaw writes in great detail about the Privy Council, the principal executive instrument of royal government in the Tudor realms. Councillors were sworn advisers of the monarch who met pretty much every day at the royal Court to consider routine matters of government as well as to debate great matters of policy affecting the kingdom. The councillors were not bureaucrats as such: they were important courtiers and senior officers in the royal household, and the composition of the Council changed over time, as we should expect it to – no institution remains static. And though Tudor government was to some degree 'centralised' and settled about Westminster and the royal palaces along the River Thames, the work of the Council reminds us that this was still government on the move, with Council papers and records carried around in a chest with its own keeper.

The Council was a well-oiled bureaucratic machine with methods and forms of business which were established over the course of sixty years. Clerks of the Council worked behind the scenes to ensure effective

government. The clerks of the Elizabethan years worked to keep the Council register of business meetings, met petitioners, took witness statements, worked in diplomatic embassies, even ran secret agents and attended the torture of prisoners interrogated in the Tower of London on capital charges. One busy clerk of the Council was Robert Beale, the brother-in-law of Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's secretary. Beale left us the Yelverton papers now the British Library, a fascinating record of his diplomatic duties abroad and of his involvement with the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots in February 1587. It was Beale who carried Mary's death warrant to Fotheringhay Castle in a mission of the utmost secrecy.

Today it is hard to ignore the story of the Queen of Scots in the papers of Elizabeth's government. Her name, so often associated with the plots and conspiracies of Elizabeth's Catholic enemies at home and abroad, appears in the collections we have: in the papers of Robert Beale, and the Harley and Cotton manuscripts in the British Library; in the Cecil Papers; in the collections of The National Archives, SP 12 (Domestic), SP 15 (Domestic Addenda), SP 70 (Foreign), SP 52 (Scotland), and in SP 53 (Scotland, Mary, Queen of Scots), the 23 volumes that relate to Mary's long detention in England between 1568 and 1587. Natalie Mears gives fascinating account of Mary Stuart's life and career and a sense of the richness and complexity of the surviving sources. Mary, Queen of Scots can be studied in her own right through the lens of these English sources – and that very lens gives us an extraordinary view of the anxieties she evoked in the minds of Elizabeth I's government.

If Henry VIII had extended the powers of the Crown so effectively – if the Tudor monarchs, excepting Mary I, refused to acknowledge any authority on earth but their own – all of this came with an anxious burden of eternal vigilance. If the Tudor state grew, and if its growth can be measured in good part by the sheer number of documents in the State Papers, then it was for the reasons of protection and defence in a world they believed to be so dangerous. This is one of the fascinating tensions of the Tudor century, and we can see it – almost feel it – in the State Papers. As Neil Younger has sketched, this was a state tied by habit to old ways of doing business but which had to change to survive.

State Papers Online gives us the Tudor world beyond the borders of England and Wales. We have, through papers on Scotland and the Borders, Tudor views on its neighbour to the north, so important strategically to England's security. In Ireland the Tudor story is fascinating, complicated and bloody: a Tudor realm governed (or perhaps ungoverned) between Dublin and Westminster, ethnically diverse, violent, yet like Scotland strategically essential for England's security. Tudor Englishmen who wrote on Ireland so often viewed the Irish with both revulsion and blank incomprehension, as Sir Philip Sidney in 1579: 'They choose rather all filthiness, than any law.' Rory Rapple gives us a rich account of law and disorder, the clash between Gaelic culture and traditions and the English state, the painful progress of Protestant Reformation in Ireland, and the realities of war and plantation.

The Tudor state put a very grand show to the rest of the world. England was not one of the first powers of sixteenth-century Europe, and however used we are to the grand glorious narrative of English history (think

here of the accretions of myth surrounding the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 or the speech Shakespeare put into the mouth of John of Gaunt: 'This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England') the comment attributed to the Ottoman Sultan Murad III is like a dash of cold water upon the face: why, he asked, when shown the position of England on a map, did not the King of Spain dig it up and throw it into the sea? Christine Woodhead explores England's relations with the Ottomans and the Barbary coast, which has much to do with sea and trade and the fascinating relationship between money and political understanding. There was a Europe beyond England, just as there was a world beyond Europe, and there was much more to it than the adventures of licensed privateers like Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Hawkins.

Elizabethan trading relations with the Ottoman empire can tell us something about the political situation in Europe in the later sixteenth century. In the eyes of her enemies, Dr Woodhead writes, 'Elizabeth I was guilty of active collusion with Christendom's greatest enemy'. Relations within Christendom were not of course easy from the 1520s, when the stirrings of Reformation collided in all kinds of complicated ways with the power politics of dynastic states and the affairs of princes. Simon Adams introduces us to Tudor England's relations with the first powers of Europe – the Holy Roman Empire, Spain and France – which were guided by distrust, hostility and mutual need. There was (and is) nothing simple or straightforward about international diplomacy, but we find in Anglo-French affairs the postings by treaty of gentlemen by Henry VIII and Francis I to the French and English royal courts. What Dr Adams and Tracey Sowerby show us is that over time certain patterns and principles became fixed

and that embassies, though very much the personal embassies of princes to other princes, established routines and methods of diplomacy. We can see resident ambassadors at work and special diplomatic missions at important moments of royal ceremony. We find also the use of ciphers and codes and other forms of secret correspondence, essential at a time in history when it was fairly easy for the agents of foreign powers to delay or to steal diplomatic post. It all feels somehow familiar, even contemporary: we find in the State Papers a window to a world that, for all its differences to our own, was forming a decidedly modern shape.

State Papers Online is a project on a vast scale. It is a fitting continuation of the work of the great Victorian archivists who, for all their faults, gave us the archives we use today. They may have been rather too rigorous in squeezing all the papers they read into neat categories and tidy volumes; in separating documents that belonged, and today still belong, together; in misdating or misunderstanding some of the sources they read. But they rescued papers from mice and damp and gave them order. If today we have use our skills as historians to read and use these documents as they were once read and used by Tudor officials, then perhaps that is not such a bad use of our time. *State Papers Online* gives us just what we need to learn and practise those skills. For everything we can learn about the Tudor century, the effort is worth it.

We stand on generations of insight and scholarship. *State Papers Online* is a living and growing archive which will allow many hundreds of scholars, each with their own fields of knowledge and expertise,

to add to our understanding of this fascinating, rich and revealing archive.

FURTHER READING

The following books will give you a good introduction to the broad history of the Tudor realms, and in turn they will lead you to scholarly monographs and articles. For an even fuller bibliography, see the Royal Historical Society's online Bibliography (www.rhs.ac.uk/bibl/bibwel.asp)

- Patrick Collinson, ed., *The Sixteenth Century* (Short Oxford History of the British Isles; Oxford, 2002)
- Susan Doran, ed., *Elizabeth: The Exhibition at the National Maritime Museum* (London, 2003)
- S. J. Gunn, *Early Tudor Government, 1485–1558* (Basingstoke and London, 1995)
- John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford, 1988 and later editions)
- David Starkey, ed., *Henry VIII: A European Court in England* (London, 1991)
- Simon Thurley, *Royal palaces of Tudor England: Architecture and Court Life, 1460–1547* (New Haven and London, 1993)
- Penry Williams, *The Later Tudors: England 1547–1603* (Oxford, 1995)
- Penry Williams, *The Tudor Regime* (Oxford, 1979)

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