

Gale Primary Sources

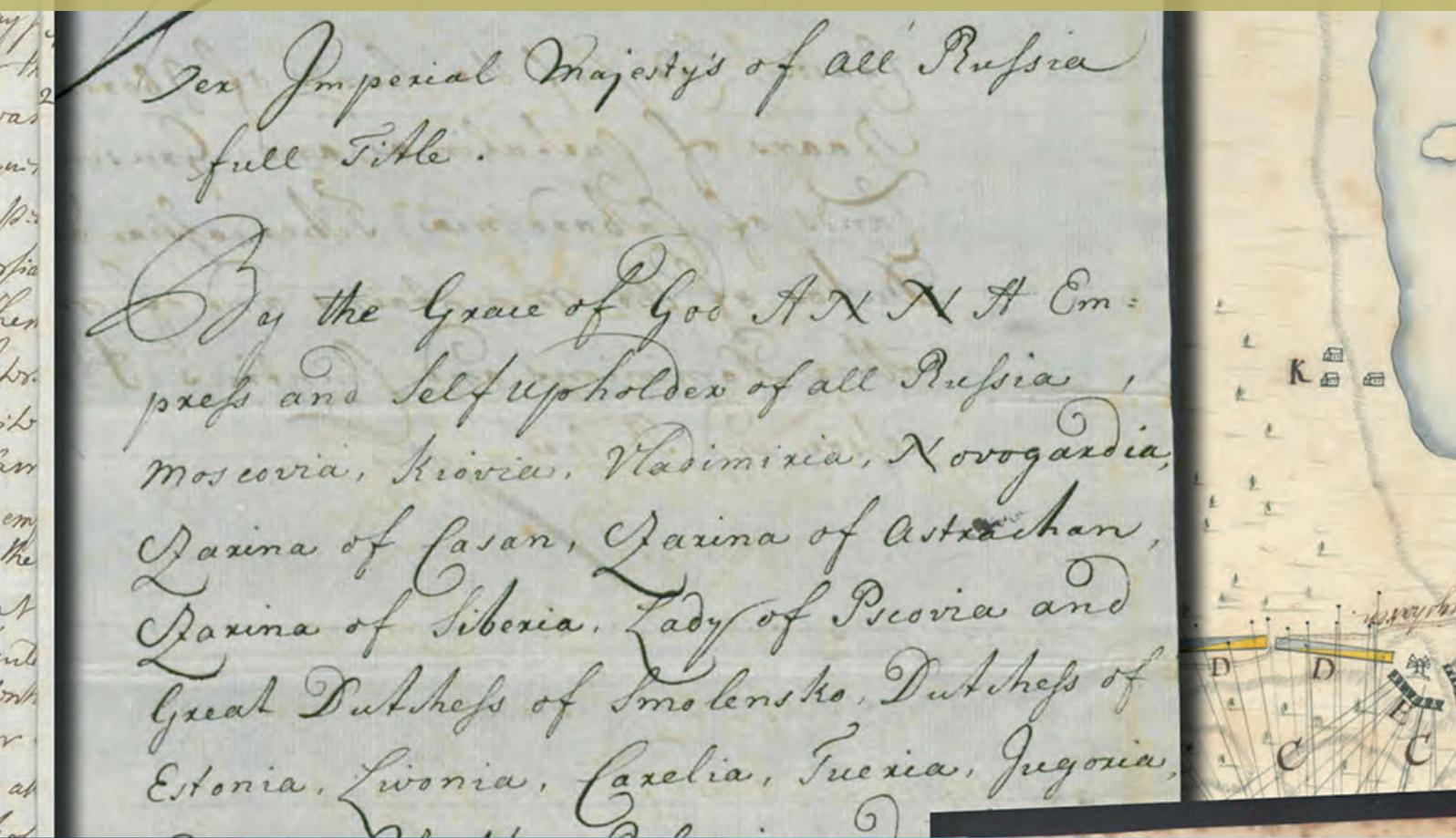
Start at the source.

The Collection of the Cecil Papers, Hatfield House Library, Hertfordshire

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Various source media, *State Papers Online*



The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts ^[1]

In 1872 the Reverend J. S. Brewer, classical scholar and editor of the great series of *Letters and Papers of the reign of King Henry VIII*, completed his first report on the papers in the collection of the Marquess of Salisbury at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire. Even an editor as experienced and distinguished as Brewer was staggered by the scale of what he found at Hatfield: 'The collection is so large and the papers so important that I was at a great loss how to begin and where to end.'

John Brewer visited the Library of Hatfield House on behalf of a Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (popularly known as the Historical Manuscripts Commission, or HMC) set up in 1869. Its terms of reference were clearly set out by Queen Victoria in April of that year. Her commissioners would examine the papers of those families who gave their free consent to such an examination, 'providing that nothing of a private character, or relating to the title of existing owners, should be divulged'. The purpose of this royal commission was explained thus:

Whereas it has been represented unto Us that there are belonging to many Institutions and private Families various Collections of Manuscripts and Papers of general public interest, a knowledge of which would be of great utility in the illustration of History, Constitutional Law, Science, and general Literature, and that in some cases these Papers are liable to be lost or obliterated: And whereas We are informed that many of the possessors of such Manuscripts would be willing to give access to them, and permit their contents to be made public ... it appears to Us that there would be considerable public advantage in its being generally known where such Papers and Manuscripts are deposited, and that the contents of those which tend to the elucidation of History, and the illustrations of Constitutional Law, Science, and Literature should be published.

And so it was that distinguished scholars and antiquaries like John Brewer were dispatched to the

libraries of the castles and country houses of Queen Victoria's United Kingdom.

The Cecil Papers in 1872

Brewer found at Hatfield 310 'stout volumes' and 3,000-4,000 other papers unbound, enough, he thought, to fill 20 volumes more. Even those documents arranged in volumes were not in chronological order, and this became Brewer's great headache in his first assessment of the collection: he was compelled, as he put it, 'to recollate all that had been previously done, and arrange the whole series in one uniform chronological order; not indeed altering the place or position of the papers in the volumes where they now stand, but leaving them as before'.^[2]

Brewer had expected to find the Cecil Manuscripts in better order. In 1834 a catalogue of them had been made by a bookseller, one Mr. Stewart, for the Record Commissioners, 'and it was generally supposed', Brewer wrote in his report, that Stewart had furnished them with a complete list of the papers at Hatfield. He had not, and Brewer found grave deficiencies in his work. In 1868 more papers were discovered in the collection, including important manuscripts from the years before Elizabeth I's accession, some more relating to the Gunpowder Plot, and one of Lord Burghley's copies of the Casket Letters alleged to have been written by Mary, Queen of Scots (by 1872 Brewer had found two in the Library). So John Brewer, with the encouragement of the third Marquess of Salisbury (Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne Cecil, later a Conservative Prime Minister), and the help of Lord Salisbury's secretary and librarian, R.T. Gunton, set to work on a vast and important archive.

The Cecil Papers in 1872

What made, and still make, the Cecil Papers so important? Why are they at Hatfield House, and not in the public records or the British Library? As so often in the survival of historical records, the answers to these questions have something to do with happenstance and something to do with design.

For the volumes of papers that survive for the Tudor years to 1598 we have to thank Sir William Cecil, later first Baron of Burghley (1520–1598), Elizabeth I's Secretary (1558–1572) and Lord Treasurer (1572–1598), effectively her chief minister, and arguably the most powerful man in her government for 40 years. Burghley kept a vast political archive for which we know he had special indexes. The great masses of paper were stored in all kinds of places: in the various Tudor royal palaces, especially Whitehall; and in his great houses of Theobalds in Hertfordshire and Cecil (or Burghley) House on the Strand in Westminster. Many of his papers survive now in the State Papers in The National Archives and in the Lansdowne, Cotton and Harley collections of the British Library.

When Burghley died in 1598 he left his papers to his son Sir Robert Cecil (1563–1612), like his father Principal Secretary and later Earl of Salisbury and a very senior member of the government of Elizabeth I's successor, James I. He bequeathed to Robert 'my writings concerning the Queenes causes either for hir Revenue or for affayers of Counsell or state, to be advisedly perused by him'.^[3] Robert Cecil, well trained by his father, kept a great political archive of his own. It was Robert Cecil who finished building his great residence, Hatfield House, in 1611, the house in which the Cecil Manuscripts are kept today.

So we have in the Cecil Papers one large and significant piece in a jigsaw. Today, thanks to time, accident, incident, keen collectors of manuscripts and autographs, and over-zealous cataloguing in the nineteenth century, the government papers for the reign of Elizabeth I lie scattered about. The largest pieces are in the State Paper classes of The National Archives, the major collections of the British Library, the Cecil Papers at Hatfield, and in some libraries and archives abroad, especially in the United States (principally at the Henry E. Huntington Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library). Although in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was some consciousness that government papers had to be preserved and organised, many manuscripts were kept by Elizabeth's courtiers and officials in their private houses.

The significance of the Cecil Papers, and the close connections between the collection at Hatfield and those elsewhere, were noted by two antiquaries of the eighteenth century, Samuel Haynes and William Murdin. In 1740 Haynes, the rector of Hatfield, published a large volume of transcripts of selected papers in the Library running from the year 1542 to 1570. William Murdin (like Haynes an Anglican minister) continued Haynes's work and produced a similarly hefty volume which went up to 1596. Murdin was helped in his work by Dr Swithin Adee, who left two large manuscript volumes of the original transcripts made of the Cecil Papers. These are now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.^[4] Murdin, writing in 1759, six years after the foundation of the British Museum, was particularly aware of how the Cecil Papers related to the Museum's Cotton, Harley and Royal collections of manuscripts.

The Salisbury Calendar, 1883–1976

In 1872 J. S. Brewer reported that R. T. Gunton was 'preparing a complete catalogue of the whole collection, upon the same plan as that adopted in the Calendars of State Papers, published under the superintendence of the Master of the Rolls' – that is, for the same series of Calendars of the State Papers in the Public Record Office.^[6]

The HMC continued its work at Hatfield in 1874, 1876 and 1877. Another visit was made in 1879, the year of Rev. Brewer's death. All of these formal accounts of what had been found at Hatfield were published in the Royal Commission's large reports.

But in 1883 there appeared the first of 24 volumes (or 'parts') of a Calendar especially devoted to the Cecil Papers. The reason behind this major venture was clear to the Historical Manuscripts Commission:

The Cecil Manuscripts preserved in the Library of Hatfield House, although forming a private collection, may indeed be justly regarded in the light of a national treasure. Their value is not to be described by the mere statement that they contribute to the elucidation of one of the most remarkable epochs in English History; no complete narrative of the period to which they relate could be constructed without their aid.

The collection represented 'a detached proportion of the State correspondence' for the years of Lord Burghley and his son the Earl of Salisbury 'without which the national muniments would exhibit a very imperfect record of the transactions of those stirring times'.^[6]

The first part of the Calendar was prepared by four archivists from the Public Record Office, and best thanks were given for 'the courteous and ready help' of R. T. Gunton.^[7] The series ran from 1883 to 1976, essentially following the method set out in the first

part, which no doubt owed a good deal to the systematic work of Brewer and Gunton in the 1870s. It is a remarkable piece of scholarly work on a vast scale.

From the beginning to the end, the arrangement of each volume was chronological, on the model of the Victorian Calendars of the State Papers. Documents which had to be tentatively dated were put at the end of years, suggestions and attributions given in square brackets with some question marks. The editors stepped silently into the background. They gave each document a short summary, though sometimes, if the manuscript was held to be a particularly important one, they offered quotations or even full (or nearly full) verbatim transcripts. For every item the editors gave an indication of whether it is original or copy, said something about the type of document it was, and stated its length. For the most part they did not attempt to include references to documents in other libraries or archives. But they did refer to the volumes published by Samuel Haynes^[8] and William Murdin^[9] and gave page references to any documents printed in those collections.

It is no easy business to move from the calendar to the volumes of manuscripts themselves, at least for a historian interested in the years before 1594. From the fifth volume onwards, the editors printed two numbers in brackets, one in bold type and one in ordinary type: in bold is the volume number, in ordinary the item or folio number. For the years till 1593 (and so for the first four volumes of the series), a historian has to use the marked copies either in the Manuscripts Reading Room of the British Library or in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC.

As ever in large projects, papers found or identified after volumes went to press were calendared as addenda published in 1915, 1923, 1973 and 1976.

Examples of the treasures within the Cecil Papers

The Cecil Papers, as every commentator has said clearly since the eighteenth century, are vast, so there is little space here to explain at length what they contain. But we can point to some highlights; and we can also discern something like a method of understanding how the Cecil Papers can be used with other collections from the reign of Elizabeth I.

First of all, we might look at the Casket Letters, the evidence (or so it was claimed) of Mary Stuart's adulterous relationship with James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell, in the 1560s. The documents are described in Part I of the Calendar, pp. 376-80. Building on Brewer's discovery of the letters, we find that the editors in 1883 decided that they were important enough to deserve full transcripts. They noted that Sir William Cecil had read and annotated them. They gave references to any printed texts of the documents, and also to other manuscripts they knew about: there are examples here of Mary Stuart's letter to the Abbot of Arbroath^[10] which has references to copies in Mary, Queen of Scots' papers in the Public Record Office^[11], and a reference to Samuel Haynes's *Collection of State Papers* (1740), which gave an imperfect transcript of the document. We find something very similar for Queen Elizabeth's 'answer' to Mary of 16 December 1568^[12] (For a compelling forensic analysis of the Casket Letters, see John Guy, *'My Heart is My Own': The Life of Mary Queen of Scots*).^[13]

Great moments of Elizabeth's reign come vividly alive in the Cecil Papers. We can begin to unpick the so-called Ridolfi plot of 1570-1571 and see the trail of events and investigations that led eventually to the execution of England's premier peer, Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk in 1572.^[14] We find in the Cecil Papers many of the papers to do with the long negotiations in 1579-1580 for a marriage of the Queen to 'Monsieur', the Duke of Anjou.^[15] We can read in full the paper written by Sir Francis Walsingham and Lord Burghley that set out the arrangements for the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots at Fotheringhay Castle in February 1587^[16] (see Calendar) as well as Burghley's defence of the Privy Council's decision to order Mary's death without first informing Elizabeth.^[17]

Of course these are only some of the documents. There are many thousands of others that have to do with politics, religion, war, society, the economy. There is much here to keep the keen historian occupied, looking at the papers, at printed texts of them, at papers related to them in other archives, always comparing and contrasting, and, above all, recognising that in Elizabeth's reign all these papers now in different libraries were once filed carefully together in Lord Burghley's formidable archive.

NOTES

^[1] The manuscript documents of the Cecil Papers are unfortunately not included in State Papers Online. However the HMC Calendars and the two volumes of transcriptions of selected documents by Haynes and Murdin (see notes 8 and 9 below) are included and searchable.

^[2] HMC, Third Report, Appendix, p. 147

^[3] The National Archives (TNA), PROB 1/3, Lord Burghley's will, 1 Mar. 1598, f. 7.

^[4] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Add.c.27 and MS Add.c.28.

^[5] HMC, Third Report, Appendix, pp. 147-8.

^[6] Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, S. R. Scargill-Bird, ed. Vol. 1: 1306–1571 (London, 1883), p. iii.

^[7] *Ibid.*, p. xvii

^[8] A Collection of State Papers, Relating to Affairs in the Reigns of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, Queen Mary, and Queen Elizabeth, Transcribed from Original letters and Other Authentick Memorials, Left by William Cecill Lord Burghley, Samuel Haynes, ed. Vol. 1: 1542–1570 (London, 1740).

^[9] A Collection of State Papers, Relating to Affairs in the Reigns of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, Queen Mary, and Queen Elizabeth, Transcribed from Original letters and Other Authentick Memorials, Left by William Cecill Lord Burghley, William Murdin, ed. Vol. 2: 1571–1596 (London, 1759).

^[10] HMC Calendar (as note 6 above), Vol. 1, p. 380, article 1223.

^[11] TNA, SP 53/2.

^[12] HMC Calendar (as note 6 above), Vol. 1, pp. 381-2, article 1226.

^[13] John Guy, *My Heart is My Own: The Life of Mary, Queen of Scots* (London, 2004), chs. 25 and 26.

^[14] HMC Calendar (as note 6 above), Vol. 1 pp. 494-574; and Vol. II, p. 19.

^[15] HMC Calendar (as note 6 above), Vol. II, pp. 231-522.

^[16] HMC Calendar (as note 6 above), Vol. III, pp. 216-18, article 471

^[17] HMC Calendar (as note 6 above), Vol. III, pp. 218-19, article 472.

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