

The Reigns of George I (1714-27) and George II (1727-60)

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George I

The death of Queen Anne on 1 August 1714 (os) had the potential to leave a serious power vacuum. Under the Act of Settlement of 1701, her heir was the Elector of Hanover, but Anne had refused to permit the presence of his family in Britain. It took until 18 September for George I to make his way to Britain, a delay which was partly due to bad weather. George was also concerned to see whether his succession would be challenged by Queen Anne's Catholic brother who had been excluded by the Act of 1701. Nevertheless provision for the continuity of government had been made and seven lord justices were sworn in to discharge the sovereign functions until George arrived.^[1] In the days after the new king's accession, mayors were alert to the possibility of unrest and the post was routinely searched to discover whether Jacobites were plotting a military challenge to George^[2]. Before the end of the month those inclined to support the Pretender, including Lord Bolingbroke, were dismayed by the change in politics that the succession had brought: Bolingbroke wrote 'I see plainly that the Tory party is gone'^[3]. George appointed Whigs to all leading posts and made no secret of his partisan politics.^[4] The devastation of the Tories by the new government was claimed to be one of the reasons for the Jacobite rising which began in August 1715. The Pretender was present in Scotland for only a month, from December to January before returning to France. The government was quick to arrest three peers and six MPs implicated in the rising and to despatch troops to major cities. In addition, the Duke of Argyle's swift military action in Scotland quickly quashed the rebellion^[5].

The rising of 1715 convinced George and the Whigs that they had to secure the new regime. The passing of the

Septennial Act meant elections were held every seven (rather than three) years^[6], and steadily Whigs were appointed to almost all public offices including the magistracy, lords lieutenant, militia and the revenue as well as senior university and church appointments^[7]. These measures cemented the Whig dominance and the Tory marginalisation in politics for decades.

George had spent the first fifty four years of his life in Hanover, and was keen to return home regularly through his reign. In 1716, 1720, 1723, 1725, and 1727 he visited Hanover, again leaving lord justices to discharge royal functions in his absence. The operation of the government in the King's absence demonstrated the resilience of the system of ministerial functions and the effectiveness of the various interacting government structures including the Privy Council, the cabinet and the meetings of lord justices.

In 1717 the birth of a grandson to George I, and the choice of godparents, led to a serious breach between the King and his heir, George Augustus. The King ejected his son from St James's Palace and the Prince's new home, Leicester House, became the centre of opposition to the King. The King's orders that no one employed or received by the Prince of Wales would hold office or be welcome at court intensified divisions^[8]. Although the King and his son were eventually reconciled, largely through the intervention of Robert Walpole, this breach was the start of a pattern of Hanoverian heirs opposing the monarch and providing a focus for opposition to the King and his government.

Meanwhile there was a series of challenges from the Jacobites, sponsored by foreign powers with which Britain had come into conflict. In 1717 the Gortz-

Gyllenburg plot was discovered, in which Sweden had promoted an armed rebellion against George I^[9]. It was no coincidence that Hanover and Sweden were rivals in the Baltic which ultimately led to war in 1719. Later that year, Spain sponsored an invasion of Scotland which was quickly suppressed at the battle of Glen Shiel in June. Again the machinery of state was raised against the rebellion, with the Archbishop of Canterbury offering prayers against it^[10]. The Spanish sponsorship of the invasion was a consequence of the Quadruple Alliance that George had formed against Spain in 1718 and the hostilities that followed. In such circumstances the vigilance of individuals against unexpected events and unknown ships was frequently reported to London;^[11] so were any expressions of disloyalty to the King.^[12]

The greatest threat to George's standing did not come from overseas, however, but from domestic events. The South Sea Company, which had been formed in 1711, had given up the prospect of trade in the South Seas. Instead it had become a public-private company designed to reduce the national debt. It was managed by directors who had a close connection to the government. In 1718 the South Sea Company had written to the King telling of the 'difficulties of their trade.'^[13] In 1719, aided by bribes to ministers and George I's mistresses, the Company took over £31m of national debt and issued Company stock to the debtors. They created incentives of huge rewards on their stock built on the invented riches in the South Seas. Shares rose from £128 each to over £1000 by June 1720 before crashing in August leaving large numbers of stockholders ruined. The scandal over government involvement in the 'Bubble' was so serious that the crisis threatened to engulf the King. It was only through

the skilful management of Walpole that the King and court were shielded from blame. The debt was rescheduled, some compensation was paid and financial stability was restored.^[14] In the following year, a further Jacobite plot was discovered, this time involving the Tory Bishop Atterbury of Rochester. Atterbury had been carefully watched for some time and his post, which routinely used numerical ciphers, intercepted^[15]. Edward Wiles, the King's Decypherer, decoded Atterbury's messages to the Stuart court in France and revealed that the bishop was involved in a conspiracy to overthrow the King.^[16] A prosecution in court would reveal the nature of this evidence whereas a Bill of Pains and Penalties in Parliament could impeach Atterbury without revealing the evidence. The case in the Lords involved detailed and careful management which absorbed much government attention.^[17] Atterbury was found guilty and sentenced to banishment.

By the middle of the 1720s Walpole had established a firm grip on power. Lord Stanhope collapsed and died after the South Sea Bubble and Sunderland resigned following it. Walpole's influence can be seen repeatedly in the State Papers as matters were referred to him more frequently than previous First Lords of the Treasury. Although the term 'prime minister' had been used in the past, for example of Lord Godolphin under Queen Anne, Walpole emerged as a new type of prime minister. He was the main conduit of government business to the King and manager of the government's majority in Parliament. The idea that George I did not speak or read English has now been discredited,^[18] but he was certainly more recessive in the routine management of political and parliamentary matters than earlier monarchs -as well as regularly abroad.

This aided Walpole's emergence as the prime minister. Moreover Walpole appreciated the importance of newspapers and the careful management of public opinion. In the early 1720s Walpole initially bribed, and then bought, the London Journal to ensure that it abandoned highly vocal criticisms of the government and replaced them with supportive news and commentary.^[19] Nevertheless it would be an error to assume that Walpole was very like a modern premier as he often feared dismissal by the King.

The King insisted on the right to determine foreign policy, in part because he wanted to protect the interests of Hanover. He ensured the ratification by Great Britain of the 1725 Treaty of Hanover with France and Prussia, which was designed to offset the Austro-Spanish Treaty of Vienna and also ensure the protection of British trade. During a visit to Hanover in the summer of 1727 the sixty seven year old King died, following a stroke, and was buried in Hanover.

George II

George II's accession brought a period of insecurity for Walpole. While he had developed a good relationship with the new Queen, Caroline of Anspach, he was not in favour with the new King and feared that he would be replaced. Briefly Spencer Compton, the Paymaster General, seemed likely to succeed Walpole and initially acted as George II's channel of communication.^[20] But, by a combination of Compton's failure to exploit his advantage, the support of Queen Caroline and Walpole's ability to secure a large civil list grant of £800,000 from Parliament, the King retained him as prime minister. Initially Walpole deferred to his brother in law, Lord Townshend, in matters of foreign policy, in which the King took a considerable interest. But after

Townshend's retirement in 1730 Walpole assumed responsibility for foreign matters also.

George II's influence over government was considerable, but Walpole was able to prevail in many important decisions, such as preventing Britain from joining the War of Polish Succession in aid of Hanover's German allies in 1733. In other respects George II was vigilant and active in foreign affairs. His concern for European, and particularly German, affairs had wide ranging consequences, including in matters of religion. He was, for example keen to defend the rights of Protestants in Europe.^[21] Like his father, George II visited Hanover regularly and this resulted in periods of inaccessibility by his ministers in Britain and necessitated both regencies in London and long-distance working of government.

The most significant crisis of the early part of George II's reign was the Excise Crisis of 1733. It was increasingly obvious to Walpole that smuggling was reducing the income of revenue from imports. In January 1733 the government had even discussed of the use of troops to suppress smuggling.^[22] Walpole's solution was to remove the excise duty on luxury items like wine and tobacco, and impose it on more widely-consumed goods like soap. He planned to charge the excise duty at warehouses not the ports, making it more difficult to evade. The opposition to the 'Excise Scheme' was widespread and, although Walpole had the King's support, he wavered when it appeared that even the army opposed it. To try to force through the scheme, Walpole expended enormous credit with his political allies, some of whom he sacked for failure to support him. When the King wavered, Walpole was forced to drop the proposal. This was the first crack in

Walpole's political authority. Three years later a tax on gin led to riots in London.

A more serious incident was the Porteous riots in Edinburgh in April 1736^[23]. Captain Porteous had fired on Edinburgh citizens who had sought to prevent the execution of three smugglers. Subsequently Porteous had been captured and murdered. In London this raised the spectre not just of an ungovernable Scotland but also of possible Jacobite involvement.

The death of Queen Caroline in 1737 removed one of Walpole's principal supporters and thereafter he was subject to more frequent attacks on his regime for the use of government secret service funds to bribe MPs and officials. Moreover Frederick, Prince of Wales, formed an opposition to the King which he developed into a rival court at Leicester House. A number of rising young politicians, including William Pitt and George Grenville, who called themselves 'Patriot Whigs', joined this rival court giving it a political dimension. The 'Patriot Whigs' became increasingly vocal against Walpole in the Commons, and in 1739 they attacked Walpole's policy to Spain. They stirred up widespread public anger over the Spanish incursions on British trade which led to the War of Jenkins' Ear (called after Captain Jenkins whose ear was lopped off by a Spaniard inspecting his vessel). By the election of 1741, though Walpole retained a majority, his influence over borough patrons was in decline. He lost a vote in the Commons in 1742 and resigned, bringing to an end Britain's longest political premiership.

The Jacobite rising of 1745 dominates the State Papers of the reign of George II^[24]. The rising was planned to take place when the majority of the British army was in Europe, engaged in the War of Austrian Succession,

and therefore the country was thinly defended. Charles Edward Stuart landed in Scotland on 23 July necessitating the return of George II from Hanover in August. By September Edinburgh fell to the rebels and the Pretender was proclaimed James VII. The rebellion was at last regarded as a serious threat and the Duke of Cumberland was recalled to London to command the army. In November the rebels invaded England, quickly capturing Carlisle, Preston and on 4 December they reached Derby. In London panic broke out: Edward Weston, an undersecretary of state, receiving an unnerving note telling him 'it is plain they are coming this way.'^[25] Days of prayer and fast were held in support of the government; and London lawyers formed a bodyguard to defend the King. Other emergency measures taken were the strict enforcement of penal laws against Catholics. In Derby the Jacobite military commanders lost their nerve and advised against a pitched battle which would be necessary to take London. The rebels withdrew to Scotland. By December Carlisle fell to the Hanoverian army and in April 1746 the rebels suffered a bloody defeat at Culloden. In the wake of the defeat of the rebellion the Heritable Jurisdictions (Scotland) Act 1746 ended Scottish chiefs' traditional authority and the Act of Proscription 1746 outlawed traditional Highland dress. Of the rebels a number were executed at Carlisle and York and about 120 common soldiers were brought to London to be executed and a thousand were transported for life. A number of Jacobite peers were also executed of whom the seventy nine year Lord Lovat was the most senior.

The death of Frederick, Prince of Wales, in 1751 left George II's grandson as his heir. His final decade was preoccupied with overseas wars, culminating in the Seven Years War in 1756. His last year witnessed the

victories of Fort Ticonderoga, Minden, Lagos and Quiberon Bay. By his death, aged 77, in October 1760 George II was deaf and almost blind.

The State Papers series 35 (George I) and 36 (George II)

As one historian has pointed out, the State Papers must be read with care and with regard to the nuances of the context and author.^[26] The usual assumption is that the State Papers, of George I's reign, show the clear development of Cabinet government. While there is some evidence of the development of Cabinet government, this was in many ways a progression of trends that can be detected under Queen Anne (1702-14). Much of the series of SP 35 contains details of ministerial meetings at which the King was not present, and decisions taken by ministers, but these do not mean that he did not strongly influence decisions at other times. There is much also about the routines of government which rarely feature in the major themes of history. For example the appointment of magistrates, excise and revenue and other officials and the work of the vice admirals of the coast loom large in the State Papers but rarely attract historians' attention. Trade was also a major preoccupation of the secretaries of state and their correspondents.

There are also important conclusions to be drawn from the absence of evidence. George II was a naturally splenetic and given to moments of intransigence, from which Walpole and Caroline became adept at soothing and moving him. But the State Papers do not suggest that he was, as one historian has claimed a 'king in toils' led by his ministers.^[27]

Much in the State Papers relates to crime and the care taken to prevent unrest and treason. The papers

relating to the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 is extraordinarily large. The secretaries of state spent a good deal of time monitoring intelligence gathering, reading reports in newspapers, pamphlets and ballads and even receiving accounts of individual treasonable comments referred by agents up and down the country. Managing the customs and excise matters also played an important part in the work of secretaries of state. The management of Privy Council business, especially appointments, was also a major part of the work, reflected in the inclusion of orders in council, and minutes of Cabinet meetings.

NOTES

^[1] State Papers Domestic [hereafter SP], 35/1 f.8, 1714, "Additionally George had nominated a number of regents whose names were revealed by the Hanoverian minister from a letter sealed until Queen Anne died."

^[2] SP 54/7 f.164 (previous SP 35/1 ff. 9, 10)

^[3] SP 35/1 f.117, 1714) previous f. 31b)

^[4] SP 35/1 ff. 40-42, 1714

^[5] SP54/11 f. 81 All that was left was dealing with the numerous Jacobite prisoners and their petitions for clemency makes up a substantial portion of SP 35 vol 2, ff 6-39 and vols 6 and 7.

^[6] SP35/5 f.107, 1716, "Though in April 1716 the borough of Cockermonth petitioned against the Septennial Act" (previously f.32)

^[7] References to appointments to these positions are frequent entries in the State Papers.

^[8] SP 35/10 f.106, 1717 (previously ff. 65-70)

^[9] SP 35/8 f. 38, 1717 (previously volume 9, ff.68-9)

^[10] SP 35/15 ff. 174, 205, 1719 (previously ff.96, 117)

^[11] For example SP 35/15 f.126, 1719

^[12] SP 35/16 f.78, April 1719, Such as that of the 'Protestant boys of Warwickshire' (previously f.41)

^[13] SP 35/12 f.330, 1718 (previously f.188)

^[14] J. Black, *Walpole in Power* (Stroud, 2001), pp. 19-20

^[15] SP 54/17 f. 212 (previously SP 35/22 f.14; SP36/62 f.86)

^[16] W. Gibson, "An Eighteenth Century Paradox: The Career of the Decypherer-Bishop Edward Willes" in *The British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, 12,1 (1989)

^[17] See especially SP35 vols 32-34, 1722

^[18] R. Hatton, *George I: Elector and King* (London, 1978) p. 131

^[19] J. Black, *The English Press, 1621-1861* (Stroud, 2001)

^[20] SP 36/3, 1727

^[21] SP 78/187 ff. 1-7, 1727 [found in State Papers Online 18th Century, Part 3]

^[22] SP 36/29, 1733

^[23] SP 36/40 f.61, 1737 (previously volume 39)

^[24] SP 54/34 f.153, The Jacobite rebellion of 1745-6 (previously SP 36/65 to SP 36/104)

^[25] Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Edward Weston Papers, xvi. anon.

^[26] J. Black, *George II: Puppet of the Politicians?* (Exeter, 2007), pp. 213-4

^[27] J. D. Griffith Davies, *A King in Toils* (London, 1938)

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