

## **Introduction to *State Papers Online* and the Seventeenth-Century State Papers, 1603–1714**

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The difference between popular perceptions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries usually focuses the monarchs: on one hand, the towering and charismatic figures of Henry VIII and Elizabeth; on the other, James II, who lost his throne, and Charles I, who lost both his throne and his head. And yet to focus solely on monarchs and personalities can be misleading. Great Britain in 1714 was unquestionably richer and more powerful than England had been in 1603, and Marlborough's stunning victories offer a striking contrast to Henry VIII's record of military failure.

Some features of government remained little changed. The Tudors had overcome many of the other bodies and powers which stood between the monarch and the subject – in particular the Catholic church, the nobility and many of the private bodies which exercised 'public' functions (although at the same time the Tudors increased the power of many towns to govern themselves). Crown and Parliament worked together to extend effective governance throughout the realm, culminating in the great Elizabethan poor laws. At the same time, the crown could not afford a significant professional administration at the centre, still less in the provinces, so the government of county, town and parish remained essentially self-government, with a high level of citizen participation. This ensured a general acceptance of governance – the English were indeed a governable people. This was seen under the Tudors when, despite all the differences about religion and the succession, there was no religious civil war. But the fact that so many people participated in government meant that they had some understanding of how it worked – and expectations of how it ought to work. Similarly, participation in law enforcement, especially through the jury system, gave people strong views on the nature of law and justice.

If much day-to-day government continued little changed, there were also dramatic changes after 1603. The issue of the succession seemed to be resolved with James VI of Scotland's peaceful accession as James I of England. He was succeeded by Charles I, who had three sons at the time of his death. It came as a nasty shock when the succession question was revived by the conversion of Charles II's heir presumptive, the future James II, to Catholicism. The issue of 'a popish successor', James's accession and conduct as king, and his expulsion in 1688 led to the succession remaining a live issue well into the eighteenth century. James VI's accession also brought together the crowns of England and Scotland. As, from Henry VIII onwards, the English monarch also claimed to be king, or queen, of Ireland, James was ruler of all three kingdoms, but they were just that: three kingdoms, with their own Parliaments, administrations, churches and laws. Each had a different ethnic and religious balance, which meant that it was wise to treat them differently; it also meant that the people of each regarded much of the population of the others with suspicion, hostility or downright hatred. James VI and I generally managed them skilfully; Charles I did not. Tudor England saw a string of rebellions. Stuart England did not; the exceptions were the agrarian Midlands rising of 1607 and Monmouth's rebellion of 1685. (There were, however, numerous rebellions in Scotland and Ireland.) On the other hand, all three kingdoms saw bitter and bloody civil wars in 1640s and 1650s. It is the civil wars which made the seventeenth century profoundly different from the sixteenth. In all three kingdoms they imposed a horrendous burden on the civilian population, with crippling taxation, free quarter, widespread plunder and frequent atrocities, often against civilians. In explaining the civil wars, it is essential to understand the interactions between the three kingdoms, but all too often the roots of distrust, division and hatred can be traced back to Charles I. His rigidity, duplicity and incomprehension all too often forced his subjects into taking positions which they had not sought, and unleashed a train of events whose outcome shocked Parliamentarians as much as Royalists. In particular, Parliament created the New Model Army, a kind of Frankenstein's monster, which turned on its creator. It purged Parliament, pushed through the trial and execution of the king, and established a republic which ended only when the soldiers became fatally divided among themselves.

If the breach with Rome and (more questionably) the defeat of the Spanish armadas can be seen as typifying the triumphs of the Tudors, defeat in the civil war and the regicide can be seen as evidence of the failures of the Stuarts. And yet the monarchy rose from the ashes in 1660. Charles I finally found his true destiny as a martyr, whose dignified suffering gave a huge boost to

the idea of divine-right, sacred monarchy – which (as Anna Keay shows<sup>[1]</sup>) Charles II exploited skilfully. Moreover, the visceral fear of another civil war was perhaps the greatest – if not the most apparent – political asset of the restored monarchy. There were others. The English state's ability to wage war was transformed beyond recognition in the 1640s, a process which resumed in the 1690s. One crucial weakness of the Tudor state had been an antiquated revenue system – a ragbag of feudal and other traditional royal revenues and a very limited range of taxes – essentially only import duties (mostly on luxuries, like wine and brandy) and taxes on land (which did not affect the landless). Add to this the fact that these taxes had to be voted by Parliament, that they were often scandalously under-assessed, and that they were eaten away by inflation and it becomes clear that the financial provision for the crown, as left by Elizabeth, was inadequate, and getting worse. That all changed in the 1640s. First, Parliament swept away all the feudal and other revenues, used and abused by James I and (especially) Charles I. Then it voted a new and efficient land tax (the assessment) and introduced the excise – taxes on a range of goods produced and consumed within the realm. These included everyday essentials like beer, ale and cider: for the first time, the poor were brought into the tax system. That system was refined under Charles II and extended after 1689 by the addition of many new excise duties. William III and Anne received far more in taxation than Charles I (or Elizabeth) could have dreamed of. Moreover, as these duties (like those of the 1640s) were collected by virtue of Acts of Parliament, they provided excellent security for borrowing – far better security than the word of a king. This meant that the English crown could raise far larger armies than the Tudors or Charles I. It also (thanks to Parliament in the 1640s and early 1650s) had at its disposal one of the largest navies in Europe. This was invaluable in wartime, but also enabled England to gain, and keep, a growing colonial empire and to attempt (with some success) to establish a monopoly of trade with its colonies. One reason why Anne's government could raise so much in taxes was that growing trade and manufactures were making England a much more prosperous country, and that prosperity was broadly based.

As Andrew Thrush shows,<sup>[2]</sup> under James I and Charles I the State Papers Domestic continue (despite vagaries of record keeping) to provide the central source for English political history, and much else. That continuity ended abruptly with the dramatic upheavals of the 1640s and 1650s. As Stephen Roberts shows,<sup>[3]</sup> the 1640s saw a bewildering and unco-ordinated series of changes. New institutions were created, adapted and abandoned; their functions were often ill-defined or overlapping. The 1650s saw greater stability and a new sense of professionalism and public service in the administration: offices were ceasing to be seen as private property. Whereas in the 1640s executive power was wielded by a range of committees, created by Parliament on an ad hoc basis without any coherent pattern, in the 1650s there was a single council of state and, from 1653 to 1659, a single-person executive, the lord protector. The Restoration saw a partial return to the old conception of office, but this new sense of service did not disappear, as we can see in the pride which Samuel Pepys took in doing his job well. As Alan Marshall shows,<sup>[4]</sup> much of the old structure of the administration was restored (this had already happened in local government in the 1650s). The regime's fear of popular upheaval meant that it was continually seeking information from the provinces, so that the State Papers Domestic of Charles II's reign (SP 29) are extremely rich. At the same time, however, new institutions were formed which began to generate their own records, which no longer form part of the State Papers: the War Office (WO) for example. Moreover, the State Papers themselves were often subdivided. The State Papers Domestic continued, but new categories appeared, such as State Papers Military (SP 41), which continued after the War Office began to generate its own records, or the Entry Books of letters sent by the Secretaries of State (SP 44). Thus to trace the activities of the secretaries under Charles II, one needs to look at the in-letters in SP 29 (often with other documents appended) and the out-letters in SP 44. This is made much easier by the printed Calendars, but they do not include all categories of State Papers. By the reign of Queen Anne there is still a rich range of documents in the State Papers, but they are scattered through different classes, so that the main run of State Papers Domestic (SP 34) is noticeably thinner than in Charles II's reign. There also remains the problem that many ministers took their papers with them when they retired, so that many 'state papers' are in private collections, some of them still in private hands, others in the British Library and elsewhere: many of the papers of William III's chief confidant, Hans Willem Bentinck, earl of Portland, are in Nottingham University Library. Other collections, such as that of the first duke of Marlborough, long kept at Blenheim, are now in the British Library.

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This greater dispersal of material to some extent reflects a greater dispersal of power and responsibility within the government. Marlborough commanded the armies of the coalition against France, so his role was quasi-royal, partly military, partly diplomatic, and much of the time he was abroad. He formed an axis of power with Lord Godolphin, the lord treasurer: Godolphin worked to supply Marlborough's army with the money and munitions it needed, while Marlborough's huge prestige, and influence with Anne, helped Godolphin to get his way in cabinet and Parliament. There were no longer the dominant ministers of the sixteenth century, such as Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell or Burghley. Burghley's son, Robert Cecil, earl of Salisbury, was the last; he died, worn out, in 1612. The two most formidable – and hated – royal servants under the early Stuarts, Buckingham and Strafford, did not owe their power to their mastery of administration. Buckingham's power rested on his personal influence over the king, while Strafford was a tough and often ruthless enforcer who spent most of his time in the North or in Ireland. Under Charles II the concentration of financial control in the treasury briefly gave the earl of Danby, as lord treasurer, wide power and control over government patronage, but his use of this power was widely unpopular, and he was impeached and fell from power in 1679. In general the preference now was to grant great offices (such as lord treasurer or lord admiral) to a group of commissioners, which gave lucrative employment to more politicians and should prevent any individual from becoming dominant. When Sir Robert Walpole became 'prime minister', it was as head of the treasury commission, not as lord treasurer. Meanwhile, the privy council, which had been the key decision-making body of Elizabeth's government, played a much less important part after 1660. It dealt with petitions to the king, and matters relating to the colonies and the Channel Islands. Some of its committees, notably the committee of trade, became influential, but the important government decisions were made in a variety of smaller, more informal bodies. Charles II, for example, created a committee for foreign affairs. If it kept formal records they do not survive, but Under-Secretary Joseph Williamson took notes for his own use (SP 104/176-7). This category is not covered by the Calendars but the manuscripts are include here in *State Papers Online*. (For more on Williamson, see Alan Marshall on the secretaries' office[5]). These informal bodies eventually evolved into the cabinet council, or cabinet, under Queen Anne.

One area of continuing concern for governments in the seventeenth century was religion. Like Elizabeth, the Stuarts, as heads of the Church of England, faced possible threats from both Catholics and more radical Protestants. As Michael Questier shows,[6] while there is relatively little in the State Papers about the routine governance of the Church, religious concerns pervaded debates on foreign policy; disagreements about worship, theology and the observation of the Lord's day caused contention in Parliament and elsewhere; and religious dissidents could be seen as posing a threat to the monarch and the regime. These were deeply emotive issues. The Thirty Years war, which began in 1618, was widely seen as a struggle to determine whether Europe would be Catholic or Protestant. Archbishop Laud and his followers among the clergy were widely seen (and not just by Puritans) as dragging the Church of England towards 'popery'. And at least some of the Catholic plots, most notably the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, contained a strong element of truth; even those which did not, like the Popish Plot of 1678, were widely believed at the time to be genuine. Early Stuart governments were inclined to see Catholics less as a threat and more as a source of revenue, from fines for absence from church. Charles II's government tended to leave them alone, unless under political pressure to do otherwise. Most of the Stuarts distrusted radical Protestants, a distrust reinforced by their prominent role on the Parliamentary side in the civil wars and in the republican regimes of the 1650s. By 1660 there were significant groups who had separated from the national church. Most wanted simply to be left alone to worship in peace, but the government continued to regard them with suspicion. Anxious Cavalier magistrates kept a vigilant eye on them and reported their activities to the secretaries of state. Most of the references to Protestant Dissenters depicted them as defiant and turbulent, a political threat. Even the Quakers, who were now committed to pacifism and non-violence, seemed threatening, thanks to their resolute insistence on meeting and worshipping as the spirit directed, impervious to the commands of magistrates. The Dissenters' local enemies made a point of portraying them as dangerous: when Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists met secretly in the early 1680s, this was seen as evidence that they were plotting against the state (see John Miller, Religion[7]). But while the bulk of material on religion in the State Papers relates to the Dissenters, there is also material on the Church of England, especially disputes about the nature of parish worship. Some clergymen were at odds with their congregations about the positioning of the communion table (whether it should be like an altar, or in the body of the church), or about 'beautifying' the church interior. Such disputes usually appear in the records when the clergyman sought the government's assistance against a recalcitrant parish patron or municipal corporation.

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One reason why successive monarchs were so concerned about possible disorder was that the coercive and police powers of the central and local government remained pitifully weak. Another was that, as Jason Peacey shows,[8] the English people became much more politically informed and politically conscious in the course of the seventeenth century. News had always spread rapidly in London, and the Pilgrimage of Grace and other rebellions had shown that information could also become widely disseminated even in the more remote areas of the country. Much of this dissemination was by word of mouth, and much was distorted and inaccurate, but the impact of this information was sufficiently strong for people to appear in arms. In the seventeenth century, this dissemination became much more widespread. This was partly due to commercial newsletters and other manuscript news, supplemented (as always) by word of mouth. From the 1640s there was also a vast amount of print, as first Parliament and then the king competed to win hearts and minds before and during the First Civil War. From the later 1640s there were attempts to re-impose the controls over the press developed by the Tudors, but the regimes of the 1650s also accepted the need to provide 'correct' news and opinion through government newspapers. At the Restoration press censorship was imposed by the Licensing Act of 1662, but the king accepted the need to provide some information for the people, partly through the printed London Gazette and partly through quasi-official manuscript newsletters from the secretaries' office, providing selected recipients with authoritative 'inside' news (see Jason Peacey and Alan Marshall[9]). The Licensing Act lapsed in 1679, was renewed in 1685, and finally lapsed in 1695. Regular national and (later) local newspapers emerged, but the press was far from 'free' after this. Parliamentary reporting, rife in the 1640s, was strictly prohibited, and in general editors avoided stories which could incur the hostility of the government. Even so, the English people were very well informed of the issues of the day, not just by newspapers but by polemical pamphlets, prints and ballads. The emergence of vigorous party politics in 1679-81, and frequent general elections, meant that Whig and Tory candidates were competing to win over people to their side. Although many constituencies had small electorates, voting was public and even the unenfranchised could have an influence on the outcome of contested elections (see John Miller, *Order and Disorder*[10]). Not all disorders had a political dimension, however. Many grew out of economic grievances – high food prices, attacks on common rights over land, or industrial disputes. The huge increase in taxation from the 1640s provoked tax riots; high customs and excise duties made smuggling very profitable and some used violence to protect their profits. Riots in general became more violent and more worrying to governments always ready to suspect hidden political agendas behind what seemed at first sight to be simple clashes between economic interests. In such cases (for example the London weavers' riots of 1675) the secretaries of state collected extensive information, now in the State Papers, which casts more general light on the world of work and economic relationships in the seventeenth century.

For historians of Ireland the State Papers (notably SP 63) are a crucial source, especially since the Irish Public Record Office burned down in 1922. They have a separate set of calendars until 1669 (*Calendar of State Papers Ireland*) and are then included in *Calendar of State Papers Domestic*. There are other major sources. The archive of the first duke of Ormond, a dominant figure from around 1640 to 1685, is divided, somewhat untidily, between the National Library of Ireland and the Bodleian Library. The key source for the Irish rising of 1641, the 'depositions' of the Protestant victims, can be found in Trinity College, Dublin; they are now available online.[11] Much relevant material can be found in both Ireland and England, not least in the Public Record office of Northern Ireland, in Belfast. Ivar McGrath[12] gives an illustration of how much of Ireland's history in the seventeenth century can be written from the State Papers. Although they were generated by officials in Ireland, they include the sort of information on Ireland and the Irish which those officials, and the London government, would need to make informed decisions. Given the nature of English rule in Ireland, military affairs inevitably figure prominently, as do assessments of the threat from both the Catholic majority and the growing, and increasingly distinct, Presbyterian community in the North. They are particularly interesting during the reign of James II, as those who saw themselves as the leaders of the Irish Catholics sought to persuade the king to improve their lot. Scotland was very different from Ireland, as Laura Stewart shows.[13] Unlike Ireland, it was a separate kingdom, which happened to share the same king. It had its own administration and records, but the fact that its king was now also king of the larger and wealthier kingdom to the south meant that the affairs of Scotland and England became more closely embroiled with one another. This was less true of James VI and I than of his son, whose ignorance of Scotland was typified by his blithe assumption that he was supreme head of the Church of Scotland; he was not. His attempts to impose a new prayer book on Scotland led to increased Scottish involvement in the affairs of England. By the later seventeenth century the London

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government tended to see Scotland as a problem, manifested in Covenanter rebellions, which were bloodily put down. Following the Revolution of 1689–90 the Scottish Parliament became fractious and angry, not least because of the English Parliament's vesting the succession to the English crown in the House of Hanover without consulting the Scots, who never forgot that the Stuarts/Stewarts were a Scottish dynasty. The outcome was the Act of Union of 1707, as a result of which Scotland ceased to exist as a separate kingdom. Notionally it was now part of the kingdom of Great Britain, which many of the English continued to describe as 'England' – just as they had done after the union of Wales with England under Henry VIII.

When we move on to the State Papers Foreign, we move to areas where record keeping was more deliberate and self-conscious, to collections which were designed to be a complete record. Kings and ministers needed a careful record of their negotiations with foreign powers, as well as treaties and details of protocol, so important in upholding the king's standing in foreign courts. The continuity of these records was severely disrupted in the 1640s and 1650s. As a result, in the early 1660s, the ministers of Charles II, desperate to establish his credibility in the eyes of European royalty, wrote frantically to men who had served as ambassadors in the 1630s to find out the proper form for an ambassadorial entry into (for example) the court of Louis XIV. The nature of these records is explained by Thomas Cogswell,[14] who also discusses the personnel of the diplomatic corps and some of their trials and tribulations. Apart from formal dispatches, ambassadors often enclosed documents of all kinds which they had obtained locally: newsletters, petitions, reports from spies and anything else which might be of relevance to the authorities in London. In some cases, as with the State Papers Domestic, the correspondence of ambassadors ended up in private hands. These are more likely than domestic papers to have been copied in order to keep a full record, but this was by no means invariably the case. (By contrast the French diplomatic archives from the reign of Louis XIV seem complete, and are now preserved in uniform red bindings.)

Even where the records in the State Papers are reasonably complete, they can be fully understood only in conjunction with the records of other powers, as David Onnekink emphasises.[15] One cannot fully comprehend a bilateral relationship by looking at one side. In the Restoration period the often patchy runs of dispatches in State Papers France (SP 78) shed far less light on Anglo-French relations than the much fuller, more frequent – and complete – records in the French Foreign Office Archives. (Transcripts of much the greater part of these are available in the National Archives at Kew, in the series PRO 31/3). Not all relationships were bilateral. In the reigns of Charles II and James II there was a complicated triangular relationship between England, France and the Dutch Republic, in which each participant kept a wary eye on the other two. Spain, too, figured in everyone's calculations. As Christopher Storrs shows,[16] Spain at the start of the seventeenth century could still be seen as aspiring to universal monarchy, but as the century wore on its decline became increasingly apparent to all. Its loss of the seven provinces that made up the Dutch Republic was a severe blow, but still more decisive was the emergence of France under the young Louis XIV as a military superpower. The virtual lack of resistance of the Spanish Netherlands to French aggression in 1667–8 may have been a deliberate, if rather desperate, ploy to force other powers to come to the aid of the regime in Brussels, but it highlighted Spain's weakness: here was a once-great empire ripe for the taking. Moreover, its sickly king (Charles II) was unlikely to have an heir, so that the ultimate disposal of the Spanish succession became the key issue in European international relations for over thirty years. The conduct of Spain and the politics of the Spanish court became matters of key international interest – and concern.

The English crown maintained continuous diplomatic relations with the major European powers – France, the Dutch Republic, Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. With smaller powers relations were more intermittent, low-level or informal. In some cities there were residents or consuls rather than ambassadors. There was usually an ambassador in Constantinople, but he was paid for by the Levant Company, which traded with the Eastern Mediterranean, and much of his time was taken up with Levant Company business. These more informal and occasional arrangements are illustrated by Steve Murdoch.[17] The importance of Denmark and Sweden in English foreign policy varied over time. Trade with the Baltic, especially in pitch and timber for the navy, was always important, but Sweden seemed an impoverished second-class power until Gustavus Adolphus burst on to the European stage in the 1630s, playing a dramatic part on the Protestant side in the Thirty Years War. Denmark was usually seen as a more powerful country, with the potential to control access to the Baltic via the Sound. Moreover, James VI and I's relations

with Denmark offer a reminder that Scotland was an independent kingdom with a foreign policy of its own. James had married a Danish princess and so had a family relationship with Christian IV. Steve Murdoch explains how James tried to navigate his way through the potentially tricky problem of a possible war between Denmark and Sweden. His accredited representatives were both Scots, related to one another, and (unusually for diplomatic representatives) they held military commands in the respective armies. This case study illustrates how, alongside increasingly formal diplomatic channels, informal methods had their place; this was later to be shown by the role of Charles II's sister Henriette in concluding the Secret Treaty of Dover with Louis XIV. Murdoch also reminds us that one should not necessarily assume that the official description of classes of State Papers is necessarily accurate: State Papers Denmark and Sweden (SP 75 and 95) also include material on Hamburg and a variety of other cities, as well as Norway and Finland.

To conclude, the collections included in *State Papers Online*, Parts III and IV contain a vast quantity and variety of material. Some of this has been intensively used by generations of historians. This is especially true where there are printed calendars to inform readers of what is there and to guide them through the manuscripts. Others have been comparatively little used. Many of these are foreign collections: Thomas Cogswell[18] laments that the riches of many of the State Papers Foreign remain untapped. Other collections are simply difficult, like SP 18 which, as Stephen Roberts explains,[19] is a highly miscellaneous and chaotic jumble of papers which historians have to tackle without the benefit of a calendar. Before they were available online, historians had to come to Kew to consult them – and even at Kew many categories (for reasons of conservation) are available only on microfilm. Now they can be accessed from anywhere. Moreover, those who hitherto made use only of the printed *Calendars* can now go from the calendars to the original documents. The *Calendars* vary a great deal in terms of accuracy and fullness, but even the best volumes (which tend to be the most recent) can be enhanced by going to the originals – for example for lists of names which the compilers thought it unnecessary to reproduce. *State Papers Online* is a scholarly resource of the first importance.

## Citation

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## Notes

[1] See Dr Anna Keay's essay 'Seventeenth-Century Monarchy'

[2] See Dr Andrew Thrush's essay 'The Government and its Records, 1603–1640'

[3] See Dr Stephen Robert's essay 'The Government and its Records, 1640–1660'

[4] See Dr Alan Marshall's essay 'Stuart Government, 1660–1714'

[5] See Dr Alan Marshall's essay 'Stuart Government, 1660–1714'

[6] See Professor Michael Quesier's essay 'Religion in the State Papers, 1603–1640'

[7] See Professor John Miller's essay 'Religion, 1640–1714'

[8] See Dr Jason Peacy's essay 'News, Politics and People, 1603–1714'

[9] See Dr Alan Marshall's essay 'Stuart Government, 1660–1714' and Dr Jason Peacy's essay 'News, Politics and People, 1603–1714'

[10] See Professor John Miller's essay 'Order and Disorder in the Seventeenth Century'

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[11] See <http://1641.tcd.ie/>

[12] See Dr Ivar McGrath's essay 'Ireland and the State Papers, 1603-1714'

[13] See Dr Laura Stewart's essay 'Scotland and the 'British problem', 1603-1714'

[14] See Professor Thomas Cogswell's essay 'State Papers Foreign, 1603-1640'

[15] See Dr David Onnekink's essay 'The Dutch Republic'

[16] See Dr Christopher Storrs' essay 'The "Decline" of Spain in the Seventeenth Century'

[17] See Professor Steve Murdoch's essay 'Seventeenth-Century Scandinavia: The Evidence in the State Papers'

[18] See Professor Thomas Cogswell's essay 'State Papers Foreign, 1603-1640'

[19] See Dr Stephen Robert's essay 'The Government and its Records, 1640-1660'