

## STATE PAPERS OF HENRY VIII: THE ARCHIVES AND THE DOCUMENTS

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**Summary:** Dr Bevan looks at the history of the State Papers from the reign of Henry VIII and the impact of the extensive Calendaring. She also discusses the dating of the State Papers, letter-writing formulae, endorsements and filing.

### The Calendar

The multi-volume *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, edited by J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner and R. H. Brodie, is widely acknowledged to have had a profound effect on the study of early Tudor history. It was a hugely ambitious work: the first attempt to create a virtual archive in date order (hence a 'calendar') of all relevant letters, papers, reports, memoranda, treatises, grants, commissions, state trials, treaties and ambassadors' reports surviving from a long reign that saw the wrenching apart of a society based on long-established religious norms, and its move towards other ways of believing and behaving.

The construction of the Calendar also had a profound effect on the archival arrangement of the public records it covered. The core of the *Letters and Papers* is formed by the 'State Paper' collections of letters and papers: the creation of *Letters and Papers* itself led to the current order of documents now bound in red volumes in the TNA series SP 1 to SP 7. These papers, however, did not come from the official archive kept by the State Paper Office for the Secretaries of State (which did not exist until 1578). Instead, they were brought together from the various government archives, where they had been kept for three centuries, for the purpose of publication.

The editors of *Letters and Papers* also included descriptions of documents from many other series of public records, plus strays from official custody and relevant material from other British and foreign archives. Twisted round this main strand of correspondence and working papers was a Calendar of grants and commissions extracted from the enrolled Letters Patent (C 66) and the Warrants for their issue (C 82). (See C. S. Knighton's essay for the history of Calendars).

### History of the State Papers

Most of the government archives offices were united into one Public Record Office in 1838, not to be joined by the State Paper Office itself until 1852. However, the first consolidation of the scattered papers relating to the reign of Henry VIII had started in the early 1830s by the State Paper Commission, as part of a plan to publish the most interesting documents. The Commission was based in the State Paper Office, but unfortunately the most interesting papers were to be found among the collections of confiscated papers and diplomatic documents, kept by the Treasury of the Receipt of the Exchequer in the Chapter House of Westminster Abbey.

Among the confiscated papers were the official papers of Thomas, Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell, Earl

of Essex, and the private papers of Thomas Darcy, Lord Darcy (involved in the Pilgrimage of Grace) and Arthur Plantagenet, Viscount Lisle (a bastard son of Edward IV). Sir Thomas More, with a longer period of expectation of arrest, destroyed his papers after resigning as Lord Chancellor. The diplomatic correspondence was also in the Chapter House, although much had gone astray. (Sir Robert Cotton carried off large portions in 1614 or before: many papers that he took were destroyed in a fire of 1731, but the survivors are in the Cotton Collection in the British Library, and are described in *Letters and Papers*.) The Keepers of the Chapter House records (from Arthur Agarde in the early seventeenth century to John Caley in the early nineteenth century) had rearranged these diplomatic and confiscated papers in varying alphabetical or topographical orders.<sup>1</sup>

In 1832 the Commissioners requested the transfer of letters to Wolsey and Cromwell, and any other papers on matters of State of that time, from the Chapter House to the State Paper Office. Between 1832 and 1836 the State Paper Office received:

- 18 volumes of Wolsey's correspondence
- 13 volumes of miscellaneous letters, Henry VIII, series I
- 52 volumes of miscellaneous letters, Henry VIII, series II
- 18 volumes of Lisle Papers (now SP 3)
- 1 volume of Wriothesley Papers (now SP 7)
- 7 volumes of letters to the Council
- 1 volume of Scottish letters<sup>2</sup>

These were used in the publication of full transcripts of selected documents in the *State Papers published under the authority of His Majesty's Commission, King Henry VIII* (11 vols, 1830-1852).

From 1852, the State Paper Office itself came under the authority of the Public Record Office. A larger rearrangement of documents to the much grander publication plan of *Letters and Papers* began, with Thomas Duffus Hardy (later Deputy Keeper of the Public Records) as the prime mover. This grand plan was not completed until 1930. Part of the motivation seems to have been a commitment to the Protestant Reformation. John Sherren Brewer, the first editor of *Letters and Papers*, declared the intention to produce:

such a mass of materials, not only for the reign of Henry VIII, but of Europe generally, during the most momentous crisis, one only excepted, in the history of the world, as, in interest and completeness, no parallel can be found in this or any other country.<sup>3</sup>

To achieve this ambition, Brewer and his colleagues had to overcome several logistical problems:

The correspondence of Wolsey, Cromwell, Norfolk, and the King, was broken up between the State Paper Office, the Record Office and the British Museum. Parts of the same letter were not unusually found in different libraries; addresses were detached from the bodies of letters to which they belonged, and inclosures inserted in the wrong envelopes.

To add to the confusion, special modes of arrangement were adopted in different offices; and not infrequently the system pursued under one officer was modified or reversed by his successor ... But as none of these projects were completed, and never could be so long as portions of the same series remained in different depositories, these successive attempts at arrangement ended, as might be expected, in utter confusion.<sup>4</sup>

Brewer described the accumulation and sorting of the public records:

Such portions of the series as belong to the nation, and were hitherto dispersed in different offices, have now for the first time been brought together and arranged chronologically. They consisted originally of 328 miscellaneous volumes found in the Rolls House, 242 bundles and books in the State Paper Office, [and] numerous documents and fragments placed in portfolios and boxes, gathered up in the searches made by the officers at the Chapter House, Westminster. The number has since been greatly augmented by valuable additions from different quarters; partly by an examination, made by Mr Gairdner and myself, of 118 sacks of unsorted documents transferred from the Chapter House to the New Repository; partly by occasional papers kindly brought to my attention by Mr Nelson and Mr Burt, of the Record Office; and, more recently, by searches in the Rolls Chapel and elsewhere, conducted under the direction of Mr Hardy.<sup>5</sup>

As an aid to the work of sorting by date, a brief Calendar in English of the rigidly dated Patent Rolls (usually in Latin), signed bills and Privy Seals in C 66 and C 82 was produced and included.

### Dating

The dates of correspondence as given in the margins of *Letters and Papers* are conjectural, based on the editors' knowledgeable and careful analysis, unless an exact date is also printed in the text. Documents dated between 1 January and 24 March are arranged by modern form (for example, a document originally dated 10 February 1535 is placed as 10 February 1536). This was before the PRO assigned titles or numbers to the records brought together in its keeping, and so Brewer was only able to indicate the location of any public record by the marginal notation 'R.O.' or 'Record Office': Identification of any document was dependant upon a manuscript key of references at the PRO, which was amended as series names and numbers were allocated over time.<sup>6</sup>

The reduction to chronological order has been of great use to historians, but the decision to re-sort without keeping a record of the previous arrangement has been regretted. Brewer argued that:

a return to the primitive arrangement of the papers, however desirable, was altogether impossible, for no memoranda had been kept of these changes [by Agarde, Caley, etc]. To have catalogued the papers as they stood was scarcely more possible. Nothing remained except to bring the different series together, and patiently proceed *de novo* to arrange the whole in uniform chronological order. The task was extremely difficult and fatiguing. The labour was increased by the dispersion of these papers, the variety of experiments to which they had been subjected at different intervals, and the total obliteration of all traces of their original sequence ...

Nothing seems more easy or obvious after the true [chronological] order has been discovered; nothing is more perplexing before.

The first step was to number all the documents in the several bundles, boxes and portfolios as they were produced to me; then to deal into boxes marked with the regnal and dominical year all papers of which the dates were certain, setting aside for the present the less certain and obvious. The residue thus set aside had to be examined again and again, subjected to various processes and reduced to the smallest compass compatible with accuracy of arrangement'.<sup>7</sup>

These reorganised collections became:

- SP 1: State Papers, Henry VIII: General Series [foreign and domestic] 246 vols
- SP 2: State Papers, Henry VIII: Folios. 20 vols of large documents
- SP 5: Exchequer: King's Remembrancer: Miscellanea relating to the Dissolution of the Monasteries and to the General Surveyors (formerly State Papers Henry VIII Suppression Papers). 5 vols of the remains of a diverse collection of papers and accounts most connected with the dissolution of the monasteries during the 1530s. Many, but not all, were included in *Letters and Papers*
- SP 6: Theological Tracts, Henry VIII. 13 vols of documents, mostly from the 1530s, concerning the Reformation

Some series are a closer reflection of the original order:

- SP 3: Lisle Papers. 18 vols of letters of Arthur Plantagenet, Viscount Lisle, dating from 1533 to 1540, when Lisle was resident in Calais as Lord Deputy. Many were published in full in *The Lisle Letters*, ed M. St. C. Byrne (Chicago, 1981).
- SP 4: Signatures by Stamp. 1 vol. of monthly registers, for September 1545 to January 1547, listing all grants authorised by the stamping the king's signature (effectively a fourth royal seal).
- SP 7: Wriothesley Papers. 1 vol. of letters addressed to Thomas Wriothesley 1536-1540, as clerk of the signet and secretary to Cromwell.

The actual documents often bear the editors' pencilled marks, giving the *Letters and Papers* reference, conjectural date etc, as well as several numerations from past arrangements.

The main source is SP 1, which contains in-letters to the king's ministers and secretaries, with some out-letters, as well as working papers, memoranda, drafts, treatises, and so on. As a general principle, individual letters have been given in a fairly full précis in *Letters and Papers*: lengthier documents received a more cursory treatment. This is particularly true of the large documents bound in SP 2.

### Letter-writing formulae

The actual letters are always a surprise after reading the cool prose of the published précis. Calendar entries use the formal third-person style approved by the Master of the Rolls: it can be quite a shock to discover the vitality of the letters themselves. Yet these too had their own standard structure, loosely based on the medieval formula for letter-

writing.<sup>8</sup> In order, a letter should ideally contain a:

*salutation* (which varied according to the rank of the writer and reader)

*exordium* (a commonplace, to set the right frame of mind)

*narration* (stating the purpose of the letter)

*petition* (asking for action)

*conclusion* (some element of prayer)

Of course, much depended on rank, and the nature of the correspondence. Regular reports to a master or colleague were briefer on the courtesies. Outgoing letters and warrants from the king's officials are much more directive, but still observe at least some of the proprieties.

### Endorsement and filing

Most incoming correspondence appears to have the name of the writer written on the back of the letter (along with the original direction for delivery). These endorsements were used to identify, order and file papers, before reading to the King if necessary. Perhaps filing systems could be reconstructed by printing off the backs of the letters and folding them into the original shape as delivered or filed, to compare endorsements, shape, and so on: it would be interesting to see if different office practices emerge, allowing the rediscovery of original arrangements. *State Papers Online* will allow us to see even further than Brewer, Gairdner and Brodie - but only by standing on the shoulders of these giants.

### Citation:

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### Notes

(Endnotes)

- 1 J. S. Brewer, *Preface to Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII preserved in the Public Record Office, The British Museum and elsewhere in England* (HMSO, 1861: for private circulation), p. viii.
- 2 See TNA: SP 45/39 p 59 and SP 45/81 p 316 for the transfer. It is not clear if these descriptions covered Cromwell's papers, which were also transferred, nor is it possible to reconcile the figures that Brewer gives which may include material from other series.
- 3 Brewer, *Preface*, p. cxxii.
- 4 Brewer, *Preface*, p. ix. Clues as to the earlier arrangements may be gleaned from the obsolete manuscript calendars and editors' working papers in TNA: OBS 1/1165-1212.
- 5 Brewer, *Preface*, pp. vii-viii.
- 6 Later volumes, and the revised Volume 1, were able to give more precise references.
- 7 *Ibid*, pp. ix-xi
- 8 P. Beale, *England's Mail: Two Millennia of Letter Writing* (Stroud, 2005), p. 90, quoting C. H. Haskins, *Studies in Medieval Culture* (Oxford, 1929), pp. 2-3.