THE SECRETARIES' OFFICE AND THE PUBLIC RECORDS

Dr Alan Marshall, Bath Spa University

Paper empires

It is clear that all post-Renaissance states were drawn to the concept of statecraft. At least in its English context, this statecraft drew its evidence from the notion of the record and examples from the past; ideas, that were inherent in the notion of the common law with its steady accretion of documentary precedent, which became central to English consciousness and therefore to English men of government. These ideas were also at work in both domestic and diplomatic discourses. They were a vital auxiliary to the development of the office of secretary of state and to the idea of 'public records', both of which had some of their origins in medieval administration, but were transformed in the early modern English state.

It was a patent of 15 March 1610 that re-established the State Paper Office in Whitehall Palace under Thomas Wilson and Levinius Munck.[1] As a result the state papers as we now have them are essentially the 'private muniments of the king, his courts and his government'.[2] Yet, they were also meant to be working documents and in particular were the 'office archives of the secretaries of state'[3]. Only gradually, given their somewhat chaotic beginnings, were these manuscripts hammered into an order and routine useful for government. Indeed confusion was often still the norm in Wilson's time, so that he claimed to have found them 'in extreame confusion [and] to have reduced them into that due order & forme…wherein I have spent more than <u>ten</u> painfull yeares.[4]

The types of documents we find in the collection in this era are diverse, mainly in-letters (domestic and diplomatic), manuscripts from other departments of government, or commissions. The series SP 29 covers such documents for the reign of Charles II, while many ancillary documents for this reign are located in SP 30. The other material in the state papers is made up of working drafts of letters, or treaties, acts of parliament, personal journals, memoranda, depositions, or lists An example of such normal documentation, for early May 1665, can be found at SP29/121. As such, these documents occasionally represent something of a one-sided conversation for the historian and need to be tracked though into other collections. Nevertheless

all aspects of central, and some local, government activity are covered to a certain degree and the documents, wisely used, can allow us to get behind the scenes of the Stuart regime's narrative (its public policy-making), to see it at its daily work and meet the people involved in government, or those who sought to bring themselves to its attention.

The emergence of the Secretary of State's office

The office of secretary of state generally provided the focus for the documents. The office had emerged over two centuries as a post where a 'man of business' could at least make good and a man of high politics could enable policy. Originally the position had emerged as the private secretary to the monarch with a range of duties, particularly those relating to the signet. As it developed it grew in administrative significance to finally become the central hub of early modern administration. If much of the current collections of the seventeenth-century state papers are the secretaries' papers, then equally one of the secrets of the post's power lay in increasing the significance of the paper empire that the office brought with it. For such documents enabled the holders to know the current state of foreign and domestic affairs, as well as their precedents. They could thus mediate knowledge to the monarch and other government officers. Knowledge being power, it was the ability to exploit this advantage, that separated the great from the more mundane secretaries of state.

By 1600 the status of the secretary had moved beyond that of a mere court official, while still operating at the monarch's pleasure, with the cleverest keeping a base in both court and administration, and later on in parliament. However, the post was gradually reconstructed as the head of a real administrative office, with few rivals in government, aside from the Treasury. Not that all secretaries were exclusively concerned with administration, for the grand politician still tended to use the office to increase his personal power. The years from 1605 to 1649 were an age of administrative transition and this office tended to be limited by the men who were chosen to occupy it. While Robert Cecil (1596-1612) had set a high tone and Sir John Coke (1625-1640), could emerge under Charles I as efficient, and possess a good knowledge of the secretary's paper empire, it would be fair to say that lesser men were the norm prior to 1649. Business, however, became ever weightier and eventually meant the employment of two secretaries, who then divided the tasks of government between them and, in some cases, duplicated their roles.

It was the disruptions of civil war and the royal interregnum that made the secretary's post into what it later became in the century. The new 'Leviathan' of the 1650s threw up a man who was to set many of the trends to come. This was John Thurloe (1653-1659) and although Oliver Cromwell ultimately ruled all in the administration of the Protectorate, Thurloe proved the 'guiding spirit' in the regime's everyday work. Unusually enough for the period, his power was not diminished by a partnership and he was the only Protectoral secretary of state appointed. One ambassador implied that the reason for having only a single secretary at this time lay in one of the

> worst defects of the late Parliament...[being that] what was not divulged by the members [of Parliament] was published abroad by the Secretaries, this method of everything passing through the hands of only one [secretary] has been adopted a method, convenient in what concerns this purpose, but troublesome in that it makes negotiations very lengthy, and execution very slow. [5]

Yet Thurloe was frequently ill in these years and foreign commentators were also quick to note that the

> secretary …[was often] overwhelmed by the mass of business and the burden of so many difficult affairs, the perfect digest of which demands an immense amount of time. For this reason their decisions move slowly.[6]

Despite such problems, much administrative order was achieved in domestic affairs, with the development of espionage, the post office and diplomacy, pointers of significance on the road to the secretary's office becoming a central hub for government.

The secretary's office had in fact been a central place for gathering of intelligence since the era of Elizabeth I, and now employed numerous agents, both open and covert, to gather information. Nor was it above engineering clandestine actions in the world of espionage: spies, informers, the infiltration of plots and even plans for assassination, can all be found in the state papers. Although intelligence activities were part of the secretary's tasks they were also something that had to be frequently re-learnt as the office holders changed. A final element in this period was

that the secretary acted to pull all the threads of the administration under one hand. Centralisation was to become a major trend that others were determined to follow.

In the Restoration period these ideas were enhanced and while the favour of the king now governed access to the levers of power, major statesmen such as Henry Bennet, earl of Arlington (1662-1674), or Robert Spencer, earl of Sunderland (1679-1683; 1684-1688), sought to use the office for their own ends. They were often paralleled by those we can label administrators, such as Sir Joseph Williamson (1674-1679), or Sir Leoline Jenkins (1681-1684). It is to the latter type that we really owe the collection and cataloguing of the documents in the State Paper Office; although even the administrators could sometimes influence royal policy by mediating knowledge through their clients and acquaintances at home and abroad.

The Restoration secretaries were also central to the working of the Privy Council and its varied committees over the era and were closely involved in Parliament as government spokesmen. The day-to-day business for the Restoration secretaries was therefore varied and much of it can be found in the state papers. They contain not only local government issues of the day, but connections with other ministers, operational functions, the collections of fees for the processing of documents, passports and warrants, security and intelligence matters and the control of news.
It was with the latter element, firmly embedded within the later seventeenth-century public space, that we see the production of a manuscript newsletter service designed to keep the provinces informed of central government's affairs, and vice versa. Such items had an earlier history, but in return for their news correspondents gained (still censored, but not as public) information about government affairs. In 1665 control of the newsletter scheme was effectively secured by Joseph Williamson, who was steadily acquiring power under Arlington. A series of deft office manoeuvres in October 1665 undermined his rivals Roger L'Estrange and Henry Muddiman. Williamson first had Muddiman's newsletter service intercepted at the Post Office and then brutally pushed him out of his way. The result was a secretarial subscription service of correspondence with various domestic officials and others. A report by Henry Ball in 1674 to Williamson details the correspondents and their subscriptions, as well as the clerical industry needed to copy and produce such letters.[7] In 1665-1666 this part of the secretaries' task finally went public with the establishment of the Oxford, later the London, Gazette. It was a news

product designed, where possible, to keep out of the public space all but the most benign of newsworthy items, for the secretaries were careful to muzzle the press and engage in the censorship of dangerous ideas.

A further growth area lay in parliamentary management and in the formation of factions in parliament useful to the government of the day. As the monarch's representative in the Houses of Commons and Lords the secretaries now faced a formidable task in first stating, then attempting to get government policy through a body whose temper was never very safe at the best of times.

The return to the idea of two secretaries, later designated 'northern' and 'southern', was largely the result of an often-arbitrary division of the state's European foreign relations. It further complicated foreign policy matters. The southern secretary - the senior office- ostensibly dealt with all relations between the state and France, Switzerland, Spain, Italy and Turkey. While the northern office worked with the Empire, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Poland and Russia. In practice where a stronger personality dominated, foreign business with a major power went to that secretary. It seems to have been a truism post-1660 that one secretary would naturally come to dominate the other and that the southern office was considered the more prestigious post. With one secretary nearly always being left behind in Whitehall should the monarch go on a progress, this monopolization of business meant routine work would be left to the lesser office and major policy advice to the stronger man. Arlington, for example, being the stronger man over both Sir John Trevor (1668-1672) and Henry Coventry (1672-1680) and Sunderland over his partners. Indeed a certain amount of precedent in this matter became the norm, leading to many seeing the northern office as mere stepping stone into its neighbour at least until 1706. Thereafter secretaries were to remain in their particular office for life, or until dismissal or resignation.

Following the Revolution of 1688 there were further important changes in the secretaries' offices that reflected William III's desire to act as his own foreign minister. His attempt to maintain a balanced ministry with men of rank and weight meant that he divided the spoils of the secretariat between the Whigs and Tories. While Nottingham (1689-1693) had zeal and some energy, it was not always wisely used and the earl of Shrewsbury (1689-1690; 1692-1698) was querulous, a hypochondriac, and seemingly negligent of ordinary business. In policy terms, although not in

administrative reform, the other secretaries of the reign were generally undistinguished. In any case the secretaries were often kept in the dark by William and often regarded as little more than clerks by many foreign powers. Nor did they follow William aboard. William Blathwayt, the secretary at war, was used as the official conduit for most official business when William was campaigning in Flanders; he was, said the king, 'dull, but had a good method'.[8] Under Anne it was Robert Harley, who became secretary of state in 1704, who finally stands for all the office could bring and who ultimately emerged as a premier minister. Once more if the post had always carried the potential to do this, it was personality that drove it into a great office of state.

Staffing

Underneath the secretaries lay the staff that organised the bureaucratic routine within the office. It was usually up to the secretary himself, or some trusted individual within the office (later named an 'undersecretary'), to organise the daily work routine. A clerkship was a prize of patronage and neither easily obtained, nor to be lightly given up, as varied remuneration was obtainable and at times seems to have provided the clerks' primary motivation. Throughout the state papers we meet their work; a seemingly endless cycle of arranging, copying, transcribing, translating, deciphering, and précising documents as they came into the offices and went out. For much of this work from the early 1660s to the early 1700s we can turn to the documents located in SP 44. Here we find the secretaries out books, with copies of documents ranging from the King's letters, to warrants and petitions and other correspondence. One particularly valuable resource in this collection is from 1672: lists and indexes of the licenses issued to dissenting preachers and ministers under the abortive Declaration of Indulgence of that year.[9]

As the period progressed, office routine, knowing where things were stored, and having foreign languages were becoming essential, as was having a good hand in writing. Yet in numerical terms the staffing of the offices remained small and would do so for some time to come.

'Arcana imperii'

What then were the state papers created for? Ultimately as Arthur Agarde had noted in 1631 they were concerned with matters of 'state and crown'.[10]

They may otherwise be divided into a number of areas of use:

- Diplomatic: correspondence with other powers, including treaty obligations, instructions, and negotiations of the past.
- Domestic: correspondence with the English provincial authorities and other bodies in the country, as well as with the Kingdoms of Ireland and Scotland and the colonies.
- Precedent: documents that could be used for present-day political consideration; often it seems as much for the purposes of self-defence in the constitutional conflicts of the period as to establish form.
- Short or long-term bodies of information: this was to create a public memory, allow it to be subject to record and to some extent to veneration. Members of the public were generally limited in their access, on payment of a suitable fee, to these documents and those who did get permission to consult them were more likely to swerve towards papers that could assist in legal or land tenure.
- Entertainment: as the process of historiography developed in the era, so did the care and establishment of sets of official documents for the creation of contemporary and antiquarian histories. Such histories could set out to inspire, provide examples of patriotism, or promote moral excellence. The idea grew that publishing state papers would provide veracity and legitimacy to historical work. The process of historical writing was undeniably prompted by a series of political crises that struck the state from the 1640s onwards and especially by the Revolution of 1688 and the events which followed. As such, it was thought, as it is today, that collections of state papers might provide the solutions as to why such events had actually occurred. It was for this reason that in November 1688 the House of Lords authorised William Peyt, amongst others, to 'methodise' the records. This was one of a series of moves made up to 1705 to address and remedy the problems of keeping and maintaining state records as well as justifying their purpose.

Agarde also listed fivefold hurts records could suffer in his day: fire, water, rats and mice, misplacement and 'plain taking of them away'. The state papers as a body of record suffered from all of these problems and especially from some significant losses. For the question of whether the state papers were actually the monarch's property, or that of their creators, the men who occupied the office, bedevilled the collection in early modern government and its impact is still with us today.

The holders of such offices more often than not looked on their office as a freehold and if the papers were not actually their own property, then they were certainly the viewed as the property of the office they had occupied and therefore upon leaving office it was thought that they should go with them. This means the early modern secretaries' papers in particular are often scattered in a number of depositories, despite the best efforts of some early modern administrators to get them back into the State Paper Office. It does leave us with a problem in that while some papers naturally survived in the State Paper Office, others have disappeared and this may leave historians struggling with notions of just how representative the resulting archive actually is of the real division of labour and day-to-day work

The physical presence of the State Paper Office had also had a peripatetic existence. A patent of 1610 had placed it within the Holbein Gate in Whitehall Palace. These rooms were later damaged by a fire in January 1619 from which the papers were saved but left in considerable disorder. The activities of aristocrats at court created further problems; Williamson, in April 1684, noted that 'Lord Manchester hath taken away severall roomes, which did belong to the office, and they have not roome enough for the Papers'.[11] Finally, a report of 1705 noted that the State Paper Office was in poor repair, overcrowded with documents and very difficult to access. It was, moreover, badly indexed, and it was claimed that many papers were missing. It was even alleged that the whereabouts of the relatively recent treaty of Ryswick was uncertain amidst the chaos. The report also detailed how the collection was arranged, which gives us some idea of how it was used at the time. Presses were located in various parts of 'two rooms, three closets and 3 Turretts' in the Holbein Gate. The papers of Charles I were divided into 'England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Italy &c…according to order of time with a labell on each Bundle expressing what sort of papers it contains'. One of the closets had the papers of Williamson and Jenkins in it; another the foreign papers of the reign of Charles II 'placed upon shelves, according to their severall country's, the Other Domestick papers of the same K[ing]'s reign [placed] according to their severall subjects'. The turrets were lined with 'books and things that past (sic) during the Civil Warr, all of these collections are not so full, nor so well continued as they should be; as appears by severall Distances & intervals in ye time of their Dates'.[12]

As a consequence of the report recommendations were made for the repair and enlargement of the papers, their storage and rebinding into volumes. As a result some of the papers, 'those wch are of no use or Curiosity [, were] laid aside or burnt', the others were finally moved to relative safety.[13] That we have so much left is in the end due to certain early modern administrators, who aware of their significance made it their task to hold onto and rescue the collection we now know as the State Papers.

Citation

Alan Marshall, 'The Secretaries Office and the Public Records', *State Papers Online, 1603-1714*, Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2000

Further Reading

G. E. Aylmer, *The Crown's Servants; Government and Civil Service under Charles II, 1660-1665* (Oxford, 2002).

G. E. Aylmer, *The King's Servants: The Civil Service of Charles I, 1625-42* (London, 1961).

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Notes

[1] F. M. G. Higham (née Evans), *The Principal Secretary of State: A Survey of the Office from 1558 to 1680* (Manchester, 1923), p. 187; F. S. Thomas, *A History of the State Paper Office* (1849), p. 7.
[2] R. B. Wernham, 'The Public Records in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries' in L. Fox (ed), *English Scholarship in the 16th and 17th centuries* (Oxford, 1956), p. 11
[3] G. R. Elton, *The Sources of History, Studies in the use of Historical Evidence: England, 1200-1640* (1977), p. 66.
[4] SP 14/88, f. 83

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[6] M. Roberts (ed.), *Swedish Diplomats at Cromwell's Court, 1655-1656: the missions of Peter Julius Coyet and Christer Bonde* (Camden Society, 4th series 36, 1988), p. 280.

[7] For this affair see P. M. Handover, *A History of the London Gazette, 1665-1965* (1965), pp. 6-7; J. B. Williams, 'The Newsbooks and Letter of News of the Restoration', *English Historical Review*, 23 (1908), pp. 252-76. For Ball's 1674 report see W. D. Christie (ed.), *Letters Addressed from London to Sir Joseph Williamson* (2 vols, 1874), II, pp. 161-5

[8] M. A. Thomson, *The Secretaries of State 1681-1782* (1968), p. 11

[9] SP 44/38/A and B are the licences, and an index, for non-conformist ministers under the Declaration of Indulgence. Other secretaries work from the 1680s, such as Jenkins and Sunderland for example, may be found in SP 44/62-68.

[10] Wernham (see note 2 above), p.11.

[11] SP 29/417, f. 25

[12] British Library, Stowe MSS, 549, 'An Account of the Present State and Condition of the Paper Office, 28 Dec. 1705, by John Tucker, Keeper', f.20

[13] Idem.