

Resource focus

# State Papers Online

Tudor historians have been immeasurably enriched by the launch of State Papers Online from Gale-Cengage Learning, writes **Paul Ayris**. From digital facsimiles on his desktop, it was easy to understand more about crucial communication between Thomas Cranmer and Henry VIII about the annulment of the king's marriage to Catherine of Aragon.



THE TUDOR STATE PAPERS are pivotal for any researcher, student or learner with an interest in 16th-century politics, religion, economics or social history. The papers are not easy to track down, being split between several archives. As a research student in the 1980s, working on Thomas Cranmer's Register at Lambeth Palace, I well remember travelling to the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane (now the National Archives at Kew), and to the British Library to look at relevant contextual materials; important material is also available at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire.

## Content

The appearance of digital facsimiles is, therefore, a wonderful event for Tudor historical research. The first part of State Papers Online (SPO) was launched at the Guildhall in November 2008. Cengage envisages publication in four stages:

- Part 1: The Tudors: Henry VIII – Elizabeth I (1509-1603). State Papers Domestic, containing material from the National Archives, the BL's Lansdowne Collection Burghley Papers; calendars to the above series; and the

Haynes/Murkin transcriptions of the Cecil Papers at Hatfield House

- Part 2: [period as above] State Papers Foreign, Ireland, Scotland, Borders, and Registers of the Privy Council – National Archives and Cotton, Harley and Yelverton Collections in the BL
- Part 3: The Stuarts: James I, Charles I, Interregnum, Charles II, James II, William & Mary, Anne (1603-1714). State Papers Domestic – National Archives and Coke Papers in the BL
- Part 4: [period as above] State Papers Foreign, Ireland, and Registers of the Privy Council – National Archives, and Harley Manuscripts at the BL.

Part I consists of 380,000 facsimile manuscript documents linked to fully searchable calendar entries.

## Interface

The interface to the digital facsimiles has been specially constructed by Cengage and allows basic and advanced searching and browsing. The materials come with a toolset which helps the user understand what they are using – e.g. with links to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and to tools such as Archaeology UK's

**Illustration (left):**  
Thomas Cranmer's  
execution in 1556.

Placename Finder. The creation of this workspace is an interesting development and is surely in its infancy. State Papers Online will surely become embedded as the place to look at, and work on, Tudor documents. Once this is the case, the creation of virtual communities of scholars, the use of Web 2.0 tools, and the possibilities for text- and data-mining need to be explored. It is an exciting prospect.

### Significance of the documents

The ability to undertake detailed study of the Tudor State Papers in this presentation pays dividends. One small example follows.

On 11 April 1533, a matter of days after his consecration in March, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote to King Henry VIII concerning the annulment of the king's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. The letter survives in two forms in the archbishop's hand, both of which appear to have been sent. In one version, Cranmer asks:

*'... because I wolde be right lothe and also it shall not becom me (forasmoche as your grace ys my prince and sovereigne) to entreprise any parte of my office in the saide weightie cause without your grace's favour obtayned and pleasure therin first knowen, it may please the same to acerteyn me of your grace's pleasure in the premisses, to th'entent that the same knowen, I may procede for my discharge afore God to th'execution of my saide office and duetie according to His calling and yours; beseching your hieghnes most humbly uppon my kneyes to pardon me of thes my bolde and rude lettres, and the same to accepte and take in good sense and parte.'*

TNA, SP 1/75, fol. 80-v.


However, this version was not explicit enough for the

king and advisers, probably because Cranmer merely asked Henry to let him know how he, the archbishop, should proceed. Word clearly went back to Lambeth that the letter did not hit the mark and so, on the same day, a second letter was despatched which made the point that Cranmer explicitly sought the king's licence to proceed in the annulment. The relevant portion is:

*'...it may please therfore your most excellent majestie (considerations had to the premisses and to my moost bounden duetie towardes your hieghnes, your realme, succession and posterite and for th'exoneration of my conscience towardes Almightye God) to licence me according to mynne office and duetie to procede to the examination, fynall deternynation and judgement in the saide grete cause touching your hieghnes.'*

TNA SP 1/75, fols 78r-79v; printed (with modernised spelling) in *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, Martyr, 1556*, ed. for The Parker Society by J.E. Cox (Cambridge, 1846) pp. 237-8.

That the second of these letters is the final version is shown by the fact that this is the version which Ralph Morice, the Archbishop's secretary, copied into his copybook of Cranmer's letters in the British Library, in Harleian MS. 6148. Henry VIII, moreover, in his reply to Cranmer on 12 April, explicitly licensed Cranmer to proceed in his case, thus echoing Cranmer's own wording in his second letter.

The appearance of State Papers Online has the power to transform Tudor studies and the availability of texts to the researcher and student. No good academic library can afford not to subscribe. 

Paul Ayris is Director of Library Services at University College London and a member of the SPO Editorial Board.

**Illustration (below):** Thomas Cranmer and Henry Cole, Dean of Saint Paul's, from John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. Images: Wikipedia Commons.



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