

THE GOVERNMENT AND ITS RECORDS, 1603-1640

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During the early years of James I's reign the formal archive created in 1578 for the papers belonging to the secretaries of state began to take shape. Sir Thomas Wilson, appointed deputy keeper in 1606 and joint keeper in 1610, was instructed to keep these papers in a 'set form or library, in some convenient place' within Whitehall Palace, so that they would be ready at all times for the use of the king, 'and for the use of any of our principal secretaries hereafter, for the better enabling them to do us service'. Subsequently granted a set of rooms near the Banqueting House, Wilson spent the next eight years reducing to order the papers in his charge, dividing them into 'Domestical' and 'Foreign',¹ a basic distinction that is still used today. In 1623 he compiled a catalogue of the main heads of the collection, copies of which he evidently gave newly appointed secretaries of state.² Aside from sorting the documents, Wilson, whose salary amounted to just £30 a year, occasionally provided notes or abstracts for government ministers or diplomats from the papers in his care.³

On taking charge of the State Paper Office in 1610 – his fellow keeper, Levinus Munck, appears to have been wholly inactive – Wilson was promised by the king custody not only of the documents formerly in the care of his predecessor, Sir Thomas Lake, but also such papers as his patron and immediate superior, Robert Cecil, 1st earl of Salisbury, 'shall think fit to depart with, being either such as he hath collected of his own times, or such as were left to him from his late father', Lord Treasurer Burghley.⁴ Following Salisbury's death in 1612, Wilson procured a Council warrant requiring the late earl's secretaries to hand over to him Salisbury's papers, as a result of which he was able to bring away from Salisbury House, in the Strand, large quantities of official documents. Eleven years later he obtained 45 bundles of documents previously belonging to the Elizabethan Secretary of State William Davison.⁵

Despite these valuable additions – the papers acquired from Salisbury House alone greatly outnumbered the material Wilson had inherited from Lake - it was soon clear that the fledgling State Paper Office was beset with problems. In the first place, large parts of Salisbury's official papers remained permanently beyond Wilson's reach. One portion is to be found to this day at Hatfield House, the Cecil family's Hertfordshire seat, while another mass – the Burghley manuscripts – was ultimately acquired by the British Museum (and now forms part of the British Library's Lansdowne collection). A further difficulty faced by

Wilson lay in the ingrained attitude of senior Crown officials. Most officers of State regarded their official papers as private property, and though they were required as a matter of course to deposit treaty papers with the vice chamberlain of the Exchequer,⁶ neither they nor their immediate families saw any reason why they should surrender the bulk of their correspondence after they left office. When Lord Chancellor Ellesmere died in 1617, for instance, his papers were not transferred to Wilson (who clearly expected to scoop up the papers of all senior office-holders, and not merely those of the secretaries of state) but instead remained the property of his family.⁷ In 1623 the newly appointed Secretary of State Sir Edward Conway told Wilson that his office was needless,⁸ and despite Wilson's vigorous defence of his duties Conway took his papers home with him when he left office five years later; they were not acquired by the Public Record Office until 1857.

Even when a major officer fell from grace it often proved difficult for Wilson to lay his hands on their papers. When Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, lost favour and office in 1615 after being implicated in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, it was Secretary of State Sir Ralph Winwood who gained possession of his papers rather than an irate Wilson. And when, in 1624, Lord Treasurer Middlesex lost office after being impeached for corruption, Wilson not only failed to acquire his papers – even now they are in private hands – but also had to write to the disgraced Lord Treasurer asking him to return documents that Middlesex had borrowed from Wilson before his disgrace.⁹ Middlesex was by no means alone in failing to return documents, for as early as 1617 Wilson complained that the papers in his custody had been depleted by 'divers defects and embezzlements', and the same complaint was made by Arthur Agarde, the keeper of the Exchequer's records in 1610.¹⁰ On the death of Agarde in 1615, Wilson warned that it would be inadvisable to allow the well-connected private collector Sir Robert Cotton to influence the appointment of Agarde's successor, as Cotton had already injured the keepers of the State Papers enough by 'having such things as he hath coningly scraped together'¹¹

The difficulties experienced by Wilson and his successors in persuading senior office-holders to surrender their official papers on leaving office go some way towards explaining why the State Papers Domestic for the period 1603-1618 are disappointingly thin. However, another factor that helps to explain the slender nature of the archive for these years may have been belated attempts by James I to stamp out the corruption that bedevilled royal administration. In 1618 and 1619 leading officials in both the Exchequer and the Navy were exposed as

corrupt, among them Lord Treasurer Suffolk, the Exchequer auditor Sir John Bingley and Sir Robert Mansell, Treasurer of the Navy. Faced with the prospect that their own papers might serve to incriminate them, many of the miscreants may have sought to cover their tracks by destroying the evidence. Certainly, few of the papers belonging to Suffolk have come down to us,¹² and it is striking that a history of the mid-Jacobean Navy cannot be written from what little survives in the State Papers. However, if large quantities of government papers were indeed burned by their creators there is now no proof of the fact.

Although Wilson spent much of his time battling the proprietary instincts of senior office-holders, his period as keeper was not without its successes. Indeed, it was perhaps down to him that many of the papers he managed to amass actually survived. Anxious that the office in which the papers were stored might easily be broken into, in 1618 he enlisted the help of the rising royal favourite, George Villiers, Marquess of Buckingham, to secure a suite of rooms in the stone tower at Whitehall, where the records would be less exposed to theft. The documents were transferred to their new location just in the nick of time, for in January 1619 a blaze destroyed the Banqueting House at Whitehall (near which the State Paper Office had previously been located), and with it a large quantity of records pertaining to the Privy Council and Signet Office. Wilson was understandably exultant at this narrow escape, and immediately notified the king of this great piece of luck.¹³ Unfortunately, the Crown is not known to have capitalized on this success by creating a fire-proof vault for the records in Wilson's care, even though this precaution was taken for the archives of the House of Lords.¹⁴

Following Wilson's death in 1629 the keepership of the State Papers was bestowed on William Boswell, who was knighted in 1633. In many respects Boswell was better placed than Wilson to gain possession of precious State Papers once their creators left office, despite the fact that, as England's ambassador to The Hague, he was often abroad. As a Privy Council clerk in extraordinary, he not only had right of access to the Privy Council's own papers but must also have been well acquainted with most members of the Council. It is certainly striking that in 1632 either he or his deputy was able to take possession of the papers belonging to the lately deceased Secretary of State, Dudley Carleton, Viscount Dorchester, without apparent difficulty.¹⁵ It was perhaps because of his contacts on the Council that Boswell was able to secure documents of a sort that had previously escaped inclusion in the State Papers. For instance, the minute books of the Court of High

Commission, which hitherto make no appearance among the State Papers, appear from the middle of the 1630s.¹⁶ And since he himself was closely involved with royal administration, Boswell was well placed to ensure that considerable quantities of papers found their way into his office, among them, no doubt, the papers belonging to the special commission of enquiry into the Navy of 1626-1627, on which he himself served as secretary (see especially the commissioners' minute book, SP 16/45).

Another factor in his favour was that Boswell seems to have enjoyed greater support at Court than his predecessor Wilson. In 1633 Secretary Windebank had the papers of the lately deceased Clerk of the Commons, John Wright, seized.¹⁷ The following year the king issued similar instructions regarding the books and papers of the former Lord Chief Justice, Sir Edward Coke,¹⁸ as a result of which more than 50 manuscript volumes were forcibly acquired.¹⁹ Old habits nevertheless died hard, for more than one senior officeholder failed to make arrangements to hand over his papers on leaving office or at his death. When the Master of the Rolls and former admiralty court judge Sir Julius Caesar died in 1636 his voluminous papers remained in private hands.²⁰ On being forced into retirement in 1640, Secretary of State Sir John Coke took the bulk of his correspondence on domestic affairs home with him to Derbyshire.²¹

Boswell's position as a clerk of the Council in extraordinary, coupled with the support he received from the king and Secretary Windebank, help to explain why the State Papers Domestic after 1630 are considerably more numerous than they are for the period 1610-1620. (The scale of the change can perhaps best be demonstrated by reference to the nineteenth century *Calendars of State Papers, Domestic Series*: whereas just one single tome covers the eight years between January 1611 and December 1618, no less than seven entire volumes - as well as portions of two others - were employed to cover the period 1631 to 1638). However, perhaps the main reason why the State Papers for the 1630s are so much more abundant than for earlier periods is that the decade itself was a time of immense government activity. The long period of peace following the end of the Elizabethan war with Spain had led to a diminution in State business, whereas the ending of hostilities in 1630 was followed by a marked rise in Council activity: this was, after all, the era of 'Thorough' and Ship Money.

Another reason for the increase in the volume of material during the 1630s is that there was a significant alteration in the government of the Navy. Prior to 1628 the Navy had been headed

by a single officer, the Lord High Admiral, but in September of that year, following the murder of Lord Admiral Buckingham, the king decided to place the admiralty in commission. Unlike successive lord high admirals, the newly installed admiralty commissioners did not, on the whole, consider their papers as their own but as the property of the State, since no one individual commissioner could justifiably lay claim to them. Whereas many of Buckingham's admiralty papers have either vanished or are now in the British Library,²² most of those of belonging to the admiralty commissioners have survived intact in the State Paper Office. The only significant loss is that of the admiralty commissioners' warrant and order book covering the period September 1628 until November 1632, a disappearance which, though unfortunate, is to some extent offset by the survival of an index of its contents (SP 16/156).

It is because the admiralty was in commission between 1628 and 1638, and because the years between 1634 and 1640 witnessed an immense amount of naval activity in the form of the Ship Money fleets, that as many as a quarter of all the surviving State Papers Domestic for this period relate to the Navy. Not only do most of the admiralty's warrant books survive, so too do the draft minutes of their board meetings (see particularly the notebook at SP 16/475/106, large quantities of correspondence, sea journals and naval estimates. From an archival point of view, if for no other reason, the winding up of the admiralty commission in 1638 and the corresponding appointment of a new lord high admiral was singularly unfortunate.²³

Citation

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Notes

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1. *30th Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, p. 225.
 2. SP 14/137/35; Historical Manuscripts Commission, 12th Report, Appendix, part 1, p. 224. The catalogue may be the one preserved in copy form in BL, Stowe ms 548, ff. 2-8.
 3. K. Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton 1586-1631* (Oxford, 1979), p. 80; Cal. State Papers Dom. 1623-5, p. 549.
 4. F. S. Thomas, *A History of the State Paper Office* (London, 1849), pp. 7-8.
 5. *30th Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, pp. 225, 235.
 6. See SP 14/180/99, printed in F. Taylor, *An Early Seventeenth Century Calendar of Records Preserved in Westminster Palace Treasury* (Manchester, 1939), p. 114.
 7. Ellesmere's papers now reside in the Henry E. Huntington Library, California.
 8. *30th Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, p. 235.
 9. *30th Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, pp. 228, 236. Middlesex's papers are currently deposited at the Centre for Kentish Studies, where they bear the prefix U269/1.
 10. Ibid. 228; F. Palgrave, *The Antient Kalendars and Inventories of the Treasury of his Majesty's Exchequer* (London, 1836), vol. 2, p. 314.

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11. SP 14/81/69
 12. For a small but important sliver, see Bodleian Library, MS Carte 77. Wilson complained in about 1620 that he could not lay his hands on the papers of Lord Treasurer Suffolk: *30th Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, p. 233.
 13. *30th Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, pp. 229-231.
 14. A. Thrush, 'The House of Lords' Records Repository and the Clerk of the Parliaments' House: A Tudor Achievement', *Parliamentary History*, vol. 21, p. 368.
 15. *30th Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, p. 240.
 16. See SP 16/261; SP 16/324; SP 16/434; and SP 16/434A.
 17. S.L. Lambert, 'The Clerk and Records of the House of Commons, 1600-1640', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol. 43, p. 218.
 18. SP 16/272/62.
 19. SP 16/278/10, 28, 35; Cal. State Papers Dom. 1634-5, pp. xvii-xviii; HMC 11th Report VII, p. 241.
 20. Most of Caesar's papers are scattered throughout the Lansdowne and Additional manuscripts in the British Library, though one portion has ended up among the North manuscripts in the Bodleian Library.
 21. Coke's papers remained at Melbourne Hall in Derbyshire until the late 1980s, when they were acquired by the British Library.
 22. For Buckingham's admiralty warrant books covering the years 1625-1627, see BL, Additional mss 37816, 37817.
 23. Most of the admiralty papers of the admiralty commissioners' successor, Algernon Percy, 4th earl of Northumberland, remain to this day at Alwick Castle, Northumberland. They were incompletely calendared by the Historical Manuscripts Commission in the 1870s (HMC 3rd Report), but can be viewed, with the permission of the duke's solicitors, on microfilm in the British Library (M285).