

# THE CECIL PAPERS: FOUR CENTURIES OF CUSTODIAL HISTORY

## Early dispersal of the papers

Historians of the Elizabethan and early Stuart period very quickly become aware of the dispersal of the papers of Lord Burghley and Robert Cecil amongst several different collections. These are chiefly those of the former State Paper Office at The National Archives, the Lansdowne Collection at the British Library and the Cecil Papers at Hatfield House.

The State Paper Office originated in Queen Elizabeth's reign and some of Burghley's papers no doubt were always kept there or in his office at Whitehall. Many others were to hand in his own house: according to his will, his political papers concerning 'affaires of Counsell or state' were kept in his study over the porch and in certain other specified rooms in his London mansion, Burghley House. These papers he bequeathed to his son and political heir, Robert Cecil, who was Secretary of State at the time of his death. In due course they were moved to Salisbury House, which was built by Robert soon afterwards on the opposite side of the Strand.

At the instigation of Robert Cecil, the powers of the State Paper Office were reinforced in 1610. One of his secretaries, Levinus Munck, and Thomas Wilson, his man of business, were appointed 'Keepers and Regesters' of the papers and records concerning matters of state and Council. The patent makes reference to

the careful endeavours of Robert Earl of Salisbury, our Principal Secretary and our High Treasurer of England, to reduce all such papers, as well those that heretofore remained in the custody of Sir Thomas Lake, Knight, being the papers of some of the Principal Secretaries of our Predecessors, as also some such papers as he 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 the Lord Burghley, then Lord High Treasurer of England, into a set form or library, in some convenient place within our palace of Whitehall . . . (HMC *Salisbury* vol. 1, 1883, p. iv).

When Robert Cecil died in 1612, a warrant was issued directing that his papers should be delivered up to Levinus Munck and Thomas Wilson. They transferred to the State Paper Office a mass of both Robert Cecil's and Lord Burghley's papers, both from offices in Whitehall and from Salisbury House. What they left behind at Salisbury House constitute the Cecil Papers now preserved at Hatfield House.

The other major surviving portion of Lord Burghley's papers, the Lansdowne Collection at the British Library, passed through the hands of Burghley's secretary, Sir Michael Hicckes. They were later acquired by Sir William Petty, 1st Marquess of Lansdowne, and were sold to the British Museum in 1807.

## Cecil Papers at Salisbury House: Captain Thomas Brett

The Cecil Papers now at Hatfield are those which remained in Salisbury House after Robert Cecil's death. Cecil also had a collection of over 1200 printed books there, some of which (like the manuscripts) he had inherited from his father. They may have been kept in the 'new library', one of the most important rooms in the house. It was inaugurated in 1608 with a visit from the King and Queen, for which an entertainment was devised by Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones. Besides the library, of which an inventory was taken in 1615, there was also an 'Evidence House' which contained the deeds, court rolls and other estate records relating to the Salisbury properties.

The printed books in the library at Salisbury House were listed in January 1615 by Captain Thomas Brett (1568-1638). From the scant details known about his life, Brett seems to have been a versatile and talented man. He was a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, from 1587 to 1598 and served as Bursar in 1596/97. Gifts by him of 27 titles to the College and of nine books to the Bodleian are recorded in the registers of benefactors of those libraries. He also gave a copy of Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte de la Pittura* (Milan, 1584) affectionately inscribed in his own hand, to Richard Haydock, who translated the work into English. Brett saw service in the army and is known to have travelled abroad before he joined Robert Cecil's employment in 1611. In the following year he became Receiver-General to the 2nd Earl of Salisbury but appears not to have had great success in managing the earl's estates, as he was superseded by his assistant after only two years. Nevertheless he continued to have friendly dealings with Hatfield for another two decades. He was briefly imprisoned in the Marshalsea in 1619 but became MP for Old Sarum on the Earl of Salisbury's nomination the following year. In the parliaments of 1626 and 1627/28 he served as MP for New Romney, whilst also taking part in Buckingham's disastrous expedition to the Ile de Ré in 1627.

The great majority of the Cecil Papers were docketed at the time they were received by the secretaries who filed them. Additional endorsements in Brett's rather lazy handwriting are to be found throughout the collection but particularly on papers dating from James's reign. He was probably the first person to look through them with an appreciation that they possessed more than simply administrative value. An example is to be found on a report of November 1605 on meetings between Catesby, Percy and other conspirators which Robert Cecil himself has endorsed '1605 Advertisements', to which Brett has added 'concerning meetings about the powder Treason' (CP 112/160). Another example is provided by a minute of Cecil's to the King, written in the hand of Levinus Munck with an endorsement by him '22. Octob. 1606' which continues in Brett's hand 'concerning a word lett fall that this state could never bee rich' (CP 134/096).

Besides noting their contents, it is quite possible that Brett was also carrying out some arrangement of the papers. Numerous 18th century endorsements throughout the collection (e.g. CP 134/051, 'Bundle No. 25 Containing 17 Papers') indicate that at that time the documents were still stored, folded, in unbound bundles. Lists of names in Brett's hand which bear no relation to the particular letter which has been docketed (for example on the verso of CP 058/078 or CP 121/128) are likely to be those of the writers of other letters which were originally kept together in the same, single bundle. Brett's knowledge of Italy is doubtless reflected in the list of 22 Italian names on the verso of the letter of 1596 written in Italian by J.B. Giustiniano (CP 040/023).

Before leaving the subject of endorsements, it should perhaps be noted that the 2nd Earl of Salisbury, not noted for his bookish interests, evidently looked through some of the papers himself. He occasionally wrote the single word 'readde' on the back of them (e.g. on CP 133/165, CP 134/044 and CP 135/037).

## **Move to Hatfield House, about 1700**

Salisbury House was pulled down after the death of the 4th Earl of Salisbury in 1694. The printed books, the Cecil Papers and the estate records from the Evidence House were all moved to Hatfield. The 5th Earl of Salisbury created a library room with fitted bookcases, some of which remain in today's Main Library. In 1712 the books were catalogued and a bookbinder, Joseph Pomfret, set up his press in Hatfield House. Unhappily he rebound nearly all the printed books and some of the manuscripts in uniform calf boards, cropping pages and discarding endpapers as he did so. The great majority of the Cecil Papers, however, escaped the bookbinder for another 120 years.

## **Samuel Haynes, William Murdin and Swithin Adee**

Transcripts of selected documents covering the period 1542-1570 were published by Dr. Samuel Haynes in 1740. Haynes was appointed tutor to the 6th Earl of Salisbury in 1729 and travelled with him on the continent for four and a half years until the summer of 1734. Three years later his noble pupil presented him to the valuable living of Hatfield and subsequently, in plurality, to the rectory of Clothall in Hertfordshire. He was also a canon of Windsor. His death in 1752 prevented him from publishing a second volume but the work was continued by another clergyman, William Murdin, whose edition of state papers from 1571-1596 appeared in 1759. In his preface Murdin acknowledged 'the friendly assistance this work has received from the Rev. Dr. Birch and Dr. Adee, who have cheerfully carried it on, which his own ill state of health would not permit him to complete'.

In fact the work never was completed, because it had originally been intended to publish transcripts of papers continuing until the death of Robert Cecil in 1612. At Hatfield there is an unnumbered manuscript volume titled on the spine 'Extracts of Hatfield Papers 1765'. It is inscribed with the ownership signature of Dr. Swithin Adee, FRS, who has written on the front free endpaper 'These Extracts are drawn from the Original papers of Lord Burghley & of his Son the Earl of Salisbury. These were deposited with me upon Mr Murdins being seisd with a Palsey, & were return'd to the present E. of Salisbury ticketed & are at Hatfield. Aug . . . 1765'. There follows a description of 2,769 documents, dating from the years 1565-1683. The list is a considerable achievement, although it covers rather less than one tenth part of the whole collection. Apart from a volume of letters which had been bound by Pomfret (CP 250), Adee numbered the documents in 33 bundles and arranged them largely in chronological order. A few were classified under particular headings, such as 'Oxford Papers', 'Cambridge Papers', 'Irish affairs', 'Q. Elizabeth's Letters', 'Papers thought Useless' and 'Ladies Letters. Inutiles'. Dr. Adee left two large manuscript volumes of the original transcripts, which are now in the Bodleian Library (MS. Add.c.27 & 28).

## Charles James Stewart's 1831 catalogue, revised in 1856

The Cecil Papers were used extensively by the unfortunately prolix Dr. Edward Nares when he wrote his *Memoirs of the life and administration of the Right Honourable William Cecil, Lord Burghley* (3 volumes, London, 1828-1831). They were to be the subject of a famously scornful review by T.B. Macaulay. While Nares was still working on the biography, the 2nd Marquess of Salisbury employed the London bookseller, Charles James Stewart, to catalogue the entire library at Hatfield, comprising both printed and manuscript material. This monumental task was carried out by Stewart between 1829 and 1831.

Arranging and cataloguing the Cecil Papers occupied 371 days (2M/Gen. May 1831). Stewart charged for time spent 'unfolding & pressing [the documents] preparatory to their insertion into the Guard Books' (2M/Gen. 24 July 1830). The papers were mounted on guards and placed in 141 calf-bound volumes. Stewart continued to look after the collection for the ensuing 37 years and by the time that he produced a revised catalogue in 1856, a sufficient number of additional documents had been found to fill a further 57 volumes. He explained in his preface to the revised catalogue 'there have been added to the Collection [since 1831] about five thousand Letters & Papers subsequently rescued from a mass of old domestic Accounts & family Deeds accidentally discovered in a decaying state. The Additions, which include many documents of high interest now form Vols. 142 to 199 of the Series'.

Stewart's handwritten catalogue was at first bound in two volumes but later rebound in three. The arrangement of the Cecil Papers is almost entirely chronological, although there is an element of subject classification. Letters are distinguished from other types of documents, such as reports and memoranda (which are placed under the dreaded heading of 'Miscellaneous Papers'). The latter are divided into different subject categories in the first volume of the catalogue, although many of the documents were actually bound together with the letters in a straightforward chronological sequence. Chronological order was only disregarded in the case of a few guard books, which were devoted entirely to particular groups of documents, such as royal letters, treaties, letters relating to the proposed Anjou marriage, records of the Cobham estates and genealogical papers. Inevitably the chronological principle which governed the 1831 catalogue was somewhat undermined when the contemporaneous documents which were bound into Volumes 142-199 were afterwards discovered.

Stewart's catalogues were highly praised in articles on the Hatfield library which appeared in the July and September 1831 issues of *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Their reviewer remarks 'We cannot conclude our present extracts without repeating our warm approbation of the plan and arrangement of Mr. Stewart's Catalogues. They combine a chronological arrangement with an intelligent regard to the classification of subjects; and afford, as we before stated . . . a very useful insight into the contents of the documents described'.

## Suspicion of theft

By mounting all the documents in guard-books, Stewart determined the physical arrangement of the collection which has been retained ever since. It also made the papers more difficult to steal. As an additional security precaution he stamped all the documents and all the printed books in the library with a book-stamp in red ink featuring the Cecil crest. The danger of theft had long been a concern and it was certainly the belief of the 2nd Marquess of Salisbury that

it had taken place. When asked in 1828 to initiate the publication of a supplement to the work of Haynes and Murdin, he replied that he was providing all the help that he could give to Dr. Nares but he believed that 'the papers which were before published to have been collected in a very negligent manner,' adding that 'I am sorry to say that many of the originals have been lost or stolen' (2M/Gen. 13 March 1828). On another occasion he wrote to the Duke of Buccleuch about the Cecil Papers that 'A very considerable number of manuscripts have been purloined from the collection at different times, some of which have found their way to the B Museum and others to the Bodleian Library' (2M/Gen. 18 June 1849). If he had the Lansdowne Collection and Dr. Adee's transcripts in mind, he was of course mistaken.

It had been common practice to allow historians to borrow documents while they were working on them. Dr. Nares had been permitted to do this, although there was never any suspicion that he had failed to return any of the papers which had been lent to him (2M/Gen. 16 May 1827). Since no comprehensive list of the collection existed until Stewart made one, it is impossible to know whether or not papers had really disappeared from it.

## **Gift of documents by Sir Edmund Lodge**

Some papers were added. The herald, Sir Edmund Lodge, published transcripts of certain Cecil Papers in his *Illustrations of British History* (3 volumes, London, 1791). He wrote in the introduction

The Cecil Papers came about forty years since into the possession of the Editor's father, as residuary legatee to a lady whose maiden name was Nelme; and who was first married to one of the ancient Surrey family of Byne, and afterwards to the Rev. William Hollier, Vicar of Carshalton, in that county: It may possibly be discovered from this statement how they fell into her hands, of which the Editor confesses himself to be wholly ignorant. They comprise about one thousand original MSS. which evidently appear to have been detached from the vast treasure of state relics at Hatfield, previously to the publications of Haynes and Murdin, and supply many links to the curious chain of correspondence which those gentlemen disclosed. They are of several dates . . . so seldom connected with each other, and of such various degrees of merit, that there can be little doubt of their having been hastily snatched from their proper repository by an illicit hand. Impressed with this opinion, the Editor lately did himself the honour of presenting them to the Marquis of Salisbury, and they are now in his Lordship's possession.

The documents donated by Lodge were merged with the remainder of the Cecil Papers, though whether they had actually come from this source cannot now be determined. The 2nd Marquess supposed that they had been abstracted from the collection 'at some former time with many which are still missing from it' (2M/Gen. 9 April 1839). After Lodge's death in 1839 five more Cecil documents which had been found amongst his papers were sent to Hatfield.

## **Hatfield House fire of 1835**

The collection was stored by Stewart in pillar bookcases in the Main Library at Hatfield and escaped another threat when the west wing of the house was badly damaged by fire in 1835. The Dowager Marchioness lost her life in the flames but, according to a newspaper report, 'the printed books and manuscript papers, belonging to the Cecil family, and illustrating its history and that of the nation at large, were removed from the library into the grand drawing

room' (*The Reformer*, 1 Dec. 1835). The 2nd Marquess later gave a different account, recalling that the books had been thrown out of the Library windows to preserve them from the fire, but he confirmed that none of the manuscripts went missing (*Notes on Hatfield House*, 1886).

## **Access to the Hatfield library in the 19th century**

C.J. Stewart continued to be responsible for the supervision and care of the Hatfield library until the death of the 2nd Marquess in 1868. Limited access to the collection was allowed. In 1834 Stewart produced a transcript of his catalogue for the Record Commissioners. Their Secretary, C.P. Cooper, gave a promise that it would be accessible only to the Commissioners and that its contents would not be divulged to anyone else without permission (2M/Gen. 5 Dec. 1834). In 1843 Stewart reported to Lord Salisbury that the Record Commission's transcript had been transferred to the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane 'where anyone not only may have access to it, but may extract from it & publish if they please' (2M/Gen. 27 Oct. 1843). The P.R.O. Secretary, F.S. Thomas, was quick to give an assurance that they had received the catalogue without being told of the condition attached to it; he undertook that it would not be used for public reference thereafter (2M/Gen. 4 Nov. 1843).

Applications from historians to consult the Cecil Papers were considered by the Marquess personally. Edward Edwards was allowed to transcribe the letters of Sir Walter Raleigh and John Bruce borrowed the correspondence which was exchanged before Queen Elizabeth's death between King James VI and Sir Robert Cecil for the Camden Society edition of those letters. Access was sometimes refused: a request from John Waddington, the historian of the Congregational church, to search for references to William Brewster, leader of the Pilgrim Fathers, whom he believed to have been introduced to the court through the influence of Lord Burghley's daughter, met with the splendidly lofty but actually perfectly reasonable answer: 'I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 16th requesting permission to examine the manuscripts of my family and more especially of Lord Burghley. I regret that I must decline to gratify your curiosity but if you will furnish me with the date when William Brewster was introduced to the court of Elizabeth I will communicate to you any information I may possess upon the subject' (2M/Gen. 16 June 1854).

## **Historical Manuscripts Commission: Dr. J.S. Brewer**

In 1869 the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts was appointed to survey the great wealth of archives which were in the ownership of institutions and private families. The 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, who had succeeded his father the previous year, was one of the Commissioners. They were quick to turn their attention to Hatfield and the Cecil Papers were listed in the Appendices to their Third to Seventh Reports, which appeared between 1872 and 1879. These gave the dates of the documents only, not an indication of their contents.

In the Appendix to the Third Report (1872) Dr. J.S. Brewer described the importance and large size of the collection. Referring to the Record Commissioners' transcript of C.J. Stewart's 1831 catalogue in less than generous terms, and not even mentioning the existence of the revised catalogue of 1856, he wrote

It was not suspected until I visited Hatfield that this catalogue was incomplete; and it was generally supposed that Mr. Stewart had furnished the Record Commissioners with a

complete list of the Hatfield Papers. On a subsequent search fresh letters and papers, now bound in 58 large volumes, were discovered, during the life of the late Marquis, many of them of the greatest interest and value; and scarcely less important than those in Mr. Stewart's catalogue. In the year 1868 the present Marquis instituted a further search, which resulted in adding to his collection a number of letters relating to Queen Elizabeth's history before her accession – to the intrigues connected with Mary of Scotland – and to the Gunpowder Plot . . .

In preparing the following list, which contains all the correspondence now existing relative to the important reign of James I, my progress was necessarily impeded by the want of chronological order in a collection of papers, which had by successive discoveries reached its present state. Besides, in examining that portion of it of which a report had been furnished many years ago, I found numerous omissions I had not suspected. I was, therefore, compelled to proceed de novo; to recollate all that had been previously done, and arrange the whole series in one uniform chronological order; not indeed altering the place or position of the papers in the volumes where they now stand, but leaving them as before.

No doubt his greater academic expertise enabled Brewer to re-date with confidence some of the papers which Stewart had dated wrongly but in fact, with some inevitable amendments, Brewer's list appears to have been lifted to a considerable extent from Stewart's revised catalogue. That catalogue had naturally not included those papers which had come to light since 1856. Important amongst these were contemporary copies of two of the Casket Letters.

## **The HMC Calendar**

The final 'list' of the Cecil Papers appeared in the Appendix to the *Seventh Report* of the Historical Manuscripts Commission in 1879. This was the year in which Dr. Brewer died. Shortly afterwards the Commission embarked on their far more ambitious and comprehensively informative *Calendar of the Salisbury (Cecil) manuscripts*. The first volume was published in 1883. The work was carried out by staff at the Public Record Office, where volumes of the Cecil Papers were transferred from time to time until the project was triumphantly completed with the publication of the 24th volume in 1976.

## **Richard Thompson Gunton: 'an indefatigable worker'**

In the Appendix to the *Third Report* of the Historical Manuscripts Commission Dr. Brewer acknowledged the help which he had received from R.T. Gunton, who was 'now engaged in preparing a complete catalogue of the whole collection'. Having left school very young, R.T. Gunton (1846-1921) learned shorthand as a reporter for Frederick Pitman. In 1866, at the age of 20, he became private secretary to Lord Cranborne, who succeeded to the ownership of Hatfield two years later as 3rd Marquess of Salisbury. Gunton soon began rearranging the library under Dr. Brewer's direction. When not occupied with his numerous duties as private secretary to the Prime Minister, he devoted himself to cataloguing the books and manuscripts at Hatfield, most notably the very large archive known collectively as the 'Cecil Family and Estate Papers' to distinguish them from the political and state papers (the Cecil Papers). These he separated into classes entitled *Court Rolls, Deeds, Bills, Accounts, Legal* and *General*. It was a librarian's rather than an archivist's approach and not one which would be adopted today. But archive administration had not yet emerged as an academic discipline when Gunton was working: dividing records artificially was normal procedure at the time and was

practised at the Public Record Office, where such classes as *Ancient Correspondence*, *Chancery Miscellanea*, *Ancient Deeds* and *Exchequer Accounts* were created.

Apart from a short break in the 1870s, Gunton continued to work on the Hatfield archives for his entire adult life; indeed, he had more time to devote to them in his later years. The 3rd Marquess of Salisbury died in 1903, having resigned the premiership the previous year, and Gunton was able to give up the secretarial part of his work. He was employed by the 4th Marquess solely to look after the library and archives. His industry was phenomenal: apart from compiling 40 volumes of indexes, he collected and transcribed extracts from the more interesting documents into 67 folio volumes, each containing an average of 250 pages.

## Care of the Cecil Papers since 1921

When Gunton died in 1921 the 4th Marquess was unwilling to appoint a full-time, resident librarian. He consulted his cousin, the historian and biographer Algernon Cecil, about the best way of continuing to make the Cecil Papers available for research. In a lengthy letter, Algernon Cecil reported discussing the question with A.E. Stamp, Secretary of the H.M.C. and the Public Record Office (4M/98/127). Rather alarmingly, they suggested that volumes could be transferred to the P.R.O. by registered post but this had the disadvantage that most historians would probably be wanting to consult a number of volumes, not just one. Alternatively, the whole collection could be deposited on loan in the British Museum or the P.R.O. but an objection to this was that 'in the course of some decades the public might get to look upon their presence at the Record Office more as a right than a privilege'. Another solution might be to appoint a really competent person to have charge of the papers. Men retired from the P.R.O. might do it for a modest honorarium or 'Much younger men who would be competent could be got for perhaps £200 or a competent lady for a minimum of £100 if she "lives in"'.

In the event the 4th Marquess reverted to an earlier tradition and appointed a Hatfield curate, the Revd. Wilfred Stanhope-Lovell, as part-time librarian. In 1932 he left to become chaplain of Dartmoor Prison and was succeeded by J.V. Lyle of the Public Record Office. Lord Burghley's biographer, Conyers Read, wrote appreciatively in 1934 to congratulate Lord Salisbury upon his librarian. 'Mr. Lyle is a careful custodian of your papers, but he is also a gracious host to your guests. This combination of qualities is too rare and too delightful to be allowed to pass without remark' (4M/152/90).

Hatfield House was used as an army hospital during the Second World War and then became a Civil Resettlement Unit. It was several years before the family were able to occupy it normally again and in 1948 the 5th Marquess acted as something of a pioneer when he opened the house to the public on a commercial basis. For a time the post of Librarian was combined with that of Curator of House Showing. In 1955 a professional librarian was appointed to make a new catalogue of the early printed books, under the supervision of Edgar Osborne, the celebrated collector of early children's books who had recently retired as County Librarian of Derbyshire.

Access to historians was made easier in 1956, when the Cecil Papers were microfilmed for the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington D.C. The 5th Marquess of Salisbury donated a copy of the microfilm, consisting of 126 reels, to the British Museum for the use of researchers.

The library and archives at Hatfield House are now administered full-time by two professionally-qualified archivists. The payment of staff salaries and provision of an appropriate level of conservation constitute a substantial annual charge, which is borne at no cost to public funds. Never in the past four centuries has greater commitment been shown by the owner to preserving the Cecil Papers and making them available for research than at the present time.