

Notes on the numbering of the Cecil Papers and the scope of the digital collection

The main series of the Cecil Papers were created in the context of Lord Burghley and Robert Cecil's political careers. They would originally have been filed in a way that reflected their creation and receipt and it is likely that both William and Robert would have kept their letters in bundles according to subject, date or recipient. The usual method of cataloguing such collections today would be to retain the 'original order' of the collection, thereby preserving the context in which each document was created and their relationships with one another. However, in Victorian times it was more usual to re-arrange collections into chronological order and, as in the case of the Cecil Papers, bind them into large volumes.

The first 141 volumes of Cecil Papers documents were bound in chronological order in 1831 by Charles Stewart, who created the first catalogue of the collection. Numbers 142-199 were discovered shortly afterwards and bound in date order soon after this time. When Richard Gunton began his work on the collection in the 1860s, additional papers that had been discovered since Stewart's time were arranged chronologically and bound in volumes designated Cecil Papers 201-206. Other Tudor and Stuart documents that for various reasons had not been bound became Cecil Papers 207-288.

Whereas Stuart had restricted the Cecil Papers designation to papers bound in guard books, Gunton extended it to cover a wide variety of differing types of document, ranging from guard books to maps, account rolls, deeds and bound illuminated manuscripts. Cecil Papers 229-285 and 289-332, which include mediaeval illuminated volumes, had all been catalogued by Stewart but were not allocated Cecil Papers numbers until Gunton's time.

An archival collection usually has a single source and creator and it is these limits that define its scope. However, after the papers of Lord Burghley and Robert Cecil were catalogued, a mixed accumulation of estate records and other documents of all dates, together with several printed books, were given Cecil Papers numbers at various times, bringing the final Cecil Papers number to 368. The provenance of these later volumes is very different from that of the core documents in the collection (for example, documents that relate to Sir Crisp Gascoyne, who was the great grandfather of the wife of Robert Cecil's 6 x great grandson). In strict archival terms, these should form a separate collection, distinct from the Cecil Papers. However, as they have been used and cited by many scholars in the past, they have remained part of the Cecil Papers, although those from before 1540 (the beginning of Burghley's political career) or after 1668 (the death of the 2nd Earl) have not been digitised.

Each volume or box of the Cecil Papers has its own volume number, and each page has been through-numbered within the volume, irrespective of where a new individual document begins. The reference number used for each document is the number written on the first page of that particular document. For example, in volume 56, the first document is numbered CP 56/1. This document is 3 pages long (and the subsequent pages have the numbers 2-3 written on them), so the next unique document in the volume is CP 56/4. Therefore, while it may appear on browsing the collection that documents are missing, this is not the case, as CP 56/1 is followed by CP 56/4 (and CP 56/2 and CP 56/3 do not exist).

The Cecil Papers have been comprehensively catalogued and described in the Calendar of the Salisbury (Cecil) Manuscripts which was published in 24 volumes by the Historical Manuscripts Commission between 1883 and 1976. The entries within these volumes are not in the same order as the papers themselves. Instead, the calendar rearranges the several separate bindings listed above into one chronological sequence. As well as most of the documents with a 'CP' number, a small number of documents from other collections at Hatfield House Archives have sometimes been catalogued, for example, some of the Family and Estate Papers. These have been included in the digital collection.

The digitisation of the Cecil Papers will greatly enhance access to the collection, not only by allowing remote access by many simultaneous users, but will allow searching and browsing in a way that has not been possible before now. At Hatfield House Archives we feel that we are continuing and enhancing Stewart's and Gunton's fine work on the collection by allowing it to become available in a digital format.

Vicki Perry, November 2010