numero 2/2025

costituzionalismo britannico e irlandese

ISSN 3035-1839
DOI: 10.69099/RCBI-2025-2-04-E3F

Teoria e storia costituzionale

Reformation, Rebellion, and Murdered Monarchs: Historical Research Requests at the Crown's State Paper Office in the Long Eighteenth Century

Isabel B. Taylor
Head of Department, Archival Core Functions, University of Hamburg Archives

costituzionalismo britannico e irlandese

numero 2/2025

Reformation, Rebellion, and Murdered Monarchs: Historical Research Requests at the Crown's State Paper Office in the Long Eighteenth Century

di Isabel B. Taylor*

Abstract (Eng): This paper continues The Crown and Its Records' examination of historical research at the State Paper Office (SPO) to cover the period following 1689 and examine how political concerns influenced the granting of access to the archive's materials during this tumultuous era. The nineteenth-century readers' register is analysed in detail for the first time, in tandem with internal papers from the SPO and other sources, to provide insight into specific use cases and an overview of historical research at the SPO in general. Narrative history was still an important vehicle for constitutional-political polemic, and the Government provided generous access for projects that supported its own interests, such as David Hume's 'Tory' history of England. Conversely, the administration was concerned to prevent uses that could contribute to a febrile political situation, such as the crisis of 1812 or later tensions with the United States. Overall, however, a picture emerges of increasingly liberal access decisions --particularly following the 1832 Reform Act-- with generosity shown to non-Jesuit Catholics researching Reformation history, female historians exploring the lives of English Queens, and foreign scholars (against whom the Government was fearful of being perceived to discriminate).

This paper continues *The Crown and Its Records'* examination of historical research at the State Paper Office (SPO) to cover the period following 1689 and examine how political concerns influenced the granting of access to the archive's materials during this tumultuous era. The nineteenth-century readers' register is analysed in detail for the first time, in tandem with internal papers from the SPO and other sources, to provide insight into specific use cases and an overview of historical research at the SPO in general. Narrative history was still an important vehicle for constitutional-political polemic, and the Government provided generous access for projects that supported its own interests, such as David Hume's 'Tory' history of England. Conversely, the administration was concerned to prevent uses that could contribute to a febrile political situation, such as the crisis of 1812 or later tensions with the United States. Overall, however, a picture emerges of increasingly liberal access decisions --particularly following the 1832 Reform Act-- with generosity shown to non-Jesuit Catholics researching Reformation history, female historians exploring the lives of English Queens, and foreign scholars (against whom the Government was fearful of being perceived to discriminate).

Introduction

While *The Crown and Its Records* concludes after the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89, the period between this event and the amalgamation of the State Paper Office (SPO) with the Public Record Office (PRO) in 1854 also provides an interesting constitutional-political context (conflict between Whigs and Tories, Jacobite rebellion, repression and eventual emancipation of Catholics, reaction to the French and American Revolutions, and the democratic milestone of the Great Reform Act) in which to analyse the SPO's subsequent

* Head of Department, Archival Core Functions, University of Hamburg Archives

[1] * Affiliation: Head of Department, Archival Core Functions, University of Hamburg Archives. I. B. Taylor, *The Crown and Its Records: Archives, Access, and the Ancient Constitution in Seventeenth-Century England*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2023.

loys a number of examples in order to provide a first impression of these uses, with particular attention to the first half of the nineteenth century and the upsurge of historical research at the SPO as captured by both the Office's internal papers and its register of approved readers. Throughout, this essay explores how historians' access to the archives' officially secret holdings was regulated and whether, in a time when history-writing was extremely politicised, their respective political agendas played a discernible role in these decisions[2].

It is helpful first to clarify the nature and contents of the SPO after the upheavals of the seventeenth century[3]. The core collection remained the papers of the Secretary (later Secretaries) of State —traditionally regarded as secret because of the Secretary of State's role, ever since Thomas Cromwell, as the King's chief executive officer —and intelligence from English diplomats and agents abroad whom the Secretary co-ordinated[4]. (Over the centuries, however, some apparent red herrings made their way in, including poems, authors unspecified.)[5] The State Papers were officially seen throughout the period as the Crown's private collection[6]. In 1764 an official report by Sir Joseph Ayloffe and others described the contents as follows: "The State Papers relate not only to negotiations and treaties with foreign powers, but also to trade, &c., and to matters of state and council,

[2] The current boom in archival history includes some detailed examinations of access to archives during the period under review. For example, Philipp Müller's book *Geschichte machen* (Wallstein Verlag, 2019) investigates historians' uses of archives in nineteenth-century Prussia and Bavaria. Volume 2, Issue 1 of *History of Humanities* from 2017 includes a special subtheme dedicated to historians' scholarly practices –encompassing archival research and its regulation– in different parts of Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It contains Michael Riordan's essay *Materials for History?* which discusses the publication of official records editions in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an alternative form of primary source 'access'. Also in the British context, Asheesh Kapur Siddique's *The Archive of Empire* (Yale University Press, 2024) touches on the regulation of access to the original primary sources at the State Paper Office during the nineteenth century. It is worth noting that archival access is not a new historical research focus in Continental Europe: see Volume 13 of the *Pariser historischer Studien*, "Historische Forschung im 18ten. Jahrhundert," published in 1976 and containing essays on historians' uses of archives in France and the German-speaking lands.

[3] The history of the other governmental records repositories is covered in considerable detail in *The Crown and Its Records*, particularly in Part 1 ("The Institutional Background"), so that it would be superfluous to repeat it here. Given the *sui generis* nature of the State Paper Office as an officially 'secret' repository, it would also weaken the focus of this essay.

[4] I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 338. The preface to the calendar of domestic State Papers for George III evokes the activity and paranoia of this fulcrum of executive power in a small and heavily centralised island superpower: "the Secretary of State had the pulse of the people of this country in his hand; and if, from any cause, it became quickened to an unusual degree, these papers show the remedies resorted to in order to restore tranquility. Our foreign relations were also watched with an anxious eye. The regulation of the fishery upon a distant coast, or upon our own, might easily give rise to complications. A clever and unscrupulous journalist, or an emissary from abroad endeavouring to obtain skilled workmen, had the Secretary's attention. An overzealous or not over- judicious Admiral in our Navy abroad, or a Lord Lieutenant of Ireland lacking in sagacity, might either of them be the means of disturbing the Secretary's quiet. If a meritorious public officer had exerted himself in the discharge of his duties to the King's satisfaction, the Secretary had the pleasure to communicate the Royal approbation; or, should another require removing from his post, the Secretary had to make the announcement, to find fitting language for so disagreeable a duty." J. Redington (ed.), *Cal. Home Office Papers (1760 [25. Oct.] -1765)*, London, Longman & Co., 1878, pp. iv-v.

[5] PRO 6/325 f 34.

[6] I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.* p. 7; M. Riordan, *'The King's Library of Manuscripts': The State Paper Office as Archive and Library*, in *Information & Culture,* vol. 48, n. 2, 2013, p. 181.

which, since the death of Charles I., have been brought into the office and are exceedingly numerous, and of the greatest importance."[7]

At the beginning of the Office's history there was substantial concern to protect its sensitive contents from prying eyes. During the Jacobean era a tripartite system for approving access requests developed: the Keeper of the SPO (Sir Thomas Wilson) had discretion to grant access to government ministers himself, the Lord Chamberlain adjudicated requests from English agents abroad, and the King himself approved or denied all external requests, including historical research enquiries[8]. However, following the Restoration, access was simplified but also further restricted: Charles II appears to have insisted on applications for a Royal warrant for all uses, including official government use[9]. This essay examines the developments in the access regime following the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89.

Internal Government uses of the State Papers

Although external uses of the State Papers by historians are the focus of this essay, some useful context for this investigation may be provided by way of a brief description of the SPO's role in the administration. One piece of evidence following the Glorious Revolution suggests that in 1692 the Lords were able to order documents from the SPO directly, bypassing the permissions regime, but given how few internal SPO records have survived, it is impossible to determine whether this was representative of Parliamentary use in general at the time[10]. In 1794, a House of Commons Committee asked permission from the Home Department to search the SPO for material on the 1715 treason conviction of a Jacobite (the records were not, however, kept in the SPO)[11]. It therefore appears that if, indeed, Parliamentary access was liberalised following the Revolution, this convention did not hold over time.

Individual Government officials appear to have still been subject to the Royal warrant system following the Glorious Revolution, even for uses that were essential to allow the official concerned to actually perform the work for which he had been appointed. For example, Sir Joseph Williamson, Keeper of the SPO during the late seventeenth century, received a warrant from the (re-established) Crown in 1690 to permit "Sir Charles Hedges, Judge of the High Court of Admiralty, to search for all papers and books connected with his court, and to copy or carry them to his own house, upon giving receipt," while in 1775 Prime Minister Lord North needed a royal warrant to use all the SPO correspondence, access which was clearly necessary to enable him to do his job, particularly given the crisis in the American colonies[12]. By contrast, throughout the period the Secretaries of State themselves were able to obtain tranches of material without a Royal warrant, and often had them sent directly to their homes. These large-scale transfers began early (and, incidentally, often led to records going missing). For example, in 1704 the Earl of Nottingham

[7] Ayloffe quoted in W. N. Sainsbury, *7th Appendix to the Thirtieth Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1869, p. 259.
[8] I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 421.
[9] I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 432-436.
[10] I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 436-437.
[11] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 279.
[12] W. J. Hardy (ed.), *Cal. State Papers Dom. (1690-1691)*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1898, p. 157; W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, pp. 219, 267.

was able to directly order correspondence between Spain and the Crown with no warrant, and the SPO sent him all the King of Spain's letters from 1658-1672 although Nottingham had requested only one[13]. The old rule of more restrictive access for diplomatic use, as imposed under Wilson, was no longer observed: in 1770 Secretary of State Lord Rochford was able to obtain a loan of the Portuguese correspondence for Robert Walpole, the envoy to Portugal, with no reference to the Lord Chamberlain[14].

Extremely restrictive regulations for the use of the SPO's contents were in place for those working in the Office itself. For them, simply being appointed was not enough; additional Royal warrants were necessary to give them access to the SPO's materials. The special role played by the Office in the intelligence system may (perhaps) explain this practice. In an age before security clearances, these warrants may have fulfilled a similar function in providing long-term, in-depth access to the materials in this secret archive, clearly a different case to the targeted uses made by Secretaries of State of particular records or records groups (usually those generated by their own offices). For example, when Sir Joseph Ayloffe, Andrew Ducarell and Thomas Astle were appointed to catalogue the SPO's holdings in 1764, a warrant was granted by George III to the then-Keeper Andrew Stone (who had received his own warrant in 1762) to give them access to the holdings so as to enable them to actually do so[15].

This background may make some sense of the otherwise baffling restrictions imposed on official historical uses of the records. Rymer's *Foedera*, a compilation of treaties between England and other countries made by Thomas Rymer, the Historiographer Royal, was at least a semi-official project of the Whig government under William III, as shown by Riordan's excellent overview[16]. The work was eventually published in a very limited run of 250 copies and deposited in Government offices for reference or given to members of the Government and their friends –historians could only consult it on the spot at the records offices[17]. The limited diffusion of the work had the effect of keeping the contents semi-secret, so that the project had the appearance of an internal one from the outset.

A compilation of England's foreign treaties would clearly have been of particular utility for a post-Revolution Government headed by a new Dutch monarchy, but the problem of locating English treaties and thereby identifying England's relations with foreign states was an old one. It had already inspired a massive sortation project in the early Stuart era by archives keeper Arthur Agarde of treaties located in the separate Exchequer repositories[18]. However, with the establishment of the SPO a problem of divided custody of the treaties developed between it and the Exchequer repositories, which seems to have exacerbated the problems of physical control created by embezzlement, and eventually led to

[13] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-253.
[14] W. N. Sainsbury, op. cit., p. 265; G. W. Rice, The Fourth Earl of Rochford as Diplomat, www.gale.com%2Fintl%2Fessays%2Fgeoffrey-w-rice-fourth-earl-of-rochford-diplomat-secretary-of-state-1749-75&usg=AOvVaw0K4RAI9dhTwl1WgUkwbiQV&opi=89978449, accessed on 02.09.2025.
[15] J. Redington, *op. cit.*, pp. 237, 505.
[16] M. Riordan, *Materials for History? Publishing Records as a Historical Practice in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century England*, in *History of Humanities*, vol. 2, n. 1, 2017, pp. 62-63.
[17] M. Riordan, *op. cit.*, *Materials for History*, p. 63.
[18] N. Popper, *From Abbey to Archive: Managing Texts and Records in Early Modern England,* in *Archival Science* n. 10, 2010, pp. 260-261; I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61.

practical problems for searchers[19]. The consequences are evoked by a report from Henry Muddiman to Joseph Williamson (Keeper of the SPO) during the Restoration: following a summary of the latest domestic and foreign intelligence (Williamson's real main focus during his time at the Office), Muddiman comments that he despairs "of finding in the Paper Office several treaties wanted by Lord Arlington, they being in some private reserve."[20] It is noteworthy that despite this practical and semi-official background, Rymer still had to obtain a Royal warrant in order to hunt for treaties in the State Papers[21].

The warrants to carry out research for the *Foedera* were person- rather than project-specific, and even when the later regime accommodated historical research without a Royal warrant but with permission from the Secretaries of State, researchers on the project still had to obtain official permission to be allowed to use the SPO's materials for their work. This access was eventually scaled back and limited to specific documents, so that the *Foedera* researchers were deprived of the free run of the Office. It may be that these restrictions were imposed as a by-product of SPO Keeper John Bruce's territorial reaction to the activities of the Parliamentary Records Commission, as a result of which the commissioners' authority to access the records directly for their arrangement and description projects was removed in 1800: instead, Bruce's new access regulations of that year made the requirement of approval from the Secretaries of State universal[22].

Given the number of official actors now involved, the procedure for obtaining permission was labyrinthine. In 1812 John Caley, secretary to the Commission on the Public Records, sent a letter to Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth, enclosing an official Order from the Board of Commissioners, to ask for Sub-Commissioner Dr. Adam Clarke to be allowed to transcribe "certain Papers in the State Paper Office" contained in an enclosed list, since he was currently "employed by the Direction of the Board on a Supplement and Continuation to Rymer's *Foedera*."[23] Clarke himself noted in his own letter of request to the Commissioners that after receiving permission from the Principal Secretary of State (in 1810), he had "transcribed from the General Index at the State Paper Office, a List of such Instruments there deposited, as I judge necessary to supply defects in Rymer's *Foedera*, from the time of Hen. VIII to that of Charles I."[24] So Clarke first had to obtain permission simply to make this list of documents that he then wished to transcribe, and then again to transcribe specific documents from the list. In both cases he proceeded via a formal request made by the Commissioners on his behalf to Sidmouth.

In 1815 Clarke had to get another order from the Commissioners with which to ask Sidmouth for permission "to examine the Collection of Royal Letters in the State Paper Office, & to point out those which I might judge proper to assist in forming the continuation & supplement to the *Foedera*," a request accompanied by a list of specific letters to have copied by the SPO[25]. Later on, in 1821, the Commissioners' secretary Caley wrote

[19] I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 145.
[20] M. A. Everett Green (ed.), *Cal. State Papers Dom. (1664-1665)*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1863, p. 551.
[21] W. J. Hardy (ed.), *Cal. State Papers Dom. (1693)*, London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1903, p. 288.
[22] This episode is outlined by A. K. Siddique in *The Archive of Empire: Knowledge, Conquest, and the Making of the Early Modern British World*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2024 (Kindle edition), p. 234, 238.
[23] SP 45/25 f 34 r, f 35 r.
[24] SP 45/25 f 36 r and v; PRO 6/325 f 6.
[25] SP 45/25 f 43 r.

Henry Hobhouse, Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, to ask him to persuade Sidmouth (still Home Secretary) to allow transcripts of selected diplomatic papers from Williamson's collection in the SPO to be included in the new edition of the *Foedera*, and followed this up with a list of the specific papers that the Commissioners wanted transcribed, with a request to Sidmouth to allow this[26]. This extremely differentiated permissions regime continued, with individual permissions required respectively for the inspection, transcription, and publication of records for the *Foedera* – in another example in 1826, the Commissioners were allowed to obtain reproductions "of Treaties & Public acts, for continuation of Rymer's Foedera," and then again in 1830 of "the interrogatories framed by King James I" for the examination of Guy Fawkes under torture[27]. Overall it appears that, despite its at least semi-official status, no special favour was shown to the *Foedera* project.

External non-historical enquiries

Legal enquiries, often made by law firms on behalf of their clients, were frequent in the eighteenth and particularly the nineteenth centuries, as many entries in the readers' register show. One highlight is a request by Messrs. Lawlesse, Crosse & Batty in 1829 for documents relating to "the title and family of the Duke of Lennox & Richmond."[28] Indeed, such requests mostly revolved around similar attempts to clarify property, estates and peerages, with enquiries covering, among other claims, property in Newfoundland, the entire province of Nova Scotia, Royalist estates sequestered during the Civil War period and seized Jacobite estates, as well as cases concerning properties in Ulster or Ireland more generally, sometimes stemming from the seventeenth-century Protestant plantations[29]. In 1821 an Irish solicitor corresponded at length with the SPO concerning the University of Dublin's claims to property in Ireland from the reign of James I[30]. The forfeited Jacobite Annandale estates and the succession to their title generated multiple requests over the years, including from a Mr. C. Johnson who seems to have had a mixed legal and genealogical interest: in 1822 he sought information on the possible pardon and first name of his (probable) ancestor, a Mr. Johnston (brother of the Marquess of Annandale) whom he described as "a revolting Captain" (emphasis in the original)[31]. Municipalities also used the SPO: in 1837 papers on the corporation of Louth (Ireland) were sought by its town clerk, while the 1684 charter for the town of Cambridge was requested in 1821[32]. A highly unusual use case in 1769 concerned access to papers relevant to the Rev. Thomas Sampson's Court of King's Bench action over profits from pews in Hammersmith Chapel against Stephen Bland --who took up the collection during the services-- in which the Secretary of State (Lord Weymouth) and the SPO's employees were also subpoenaed to appear at the trial[33]. The boundary between legal and historical research was sometimes

[26] SP 45/25 f 71 r, f 73 r.
[27] PRO 6/325 f 18, f 25.
[28] PRO 6/325 f 22.
[29] SP 45/25 f 12 r; PRO 6/325 f 21, f 41, f 45, f 48; W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, pp. 219, 262, 267-268, 276, 281.
[30] SP 45/25 f 74 r, f 75 r, f 76 r.
[31] SP 45/25 f 77 r; PRO 6/325 f 30, f 40.
[32] PRO 6/325 f 39, SP 45/25 f 78 r, f 79 r.
[33] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

ivated more by historical interest, such as Edward Protheroe's enquiry to see these papers *in general* in 1835[34]. In 1839 a barrister, F. O. Martin, for some reason wanted "returns […] of the number of Catholics in England" in 1705[35]. Foreign enquirers were given access to the State Papers, apparently in their countries' legal interests. In 1809, 1812, and 1814 a Mr Lorentz was allowed to view and sometimes copy treaties between Britain and Hesse-Cassel, while in 1840 the Dutch Minister Dedel was given access to British diplomatic despatches from Turin[36].

For legal or legal-adjacent enquiries, no Royal warrant was required: it appears that the approval of the Secretary of State was sufficient. It is unsurprising that enquiries made in pursuit of legal rights were approved. To have done otherwise would have been in dissonance with the longstanding common-law principle of every individual's right of access to the separate public records in matters concerning his or her own legal interest[37].

External historical enquiries

These examples provide a useful basis of comparison with external historical research requests made after the flurry of such uses that the Crown had approved at the SPO in the 1670s, discussed in *The Crown and Its Records*[38]. For instance, in contrast to the legal enquiries (for which permission was granted by the Secretary of State), rather less relaxation was shown concerning an apparently historical enquiry concerning the family of the Earl of Shaftesbury. Although Lord Shaftesbury himself was allowed by the Secretary of State to have the SPO papers searched without a Royal warrant in 1767 for information concerning his great-grandfather –one of various apparently genealogically-motivated enquiries by aristocrats throughout this period— a later, ostensibly unconnected enquiry by Edward Hooper "to inspect and take notes from correspondence in the Paper Office relative to Lord Shaftesbury's family" was approved only after the Secretary of State had laid his letter "before the King" and gained his permission[39]. The dating of this in the Calendar as "1769?" is mistaken; this is undoubtedly the same request that appears in the domestic papers for George III in 1772. In the latter it is related that Hooper, whose curiosity had been piqued by an incident recounted in Sir John Dalrymple's autobiography, wished to view correspondence written by a 'Mascal,' a spy at the Hague employed by Sir Leoline Jenkins (Secretary of State from 1680-1684), in which Mascal had apparently "offered to assassinate or poison" Shaftesbury, although Hooper's letter suggests that he actually wanted to verify a subsequent, unspecified episode from the correspondence[40]. It is hardly surprising that Secretary of State Rochford decided to obtain Royal approval to grant this request, considering that it suggested a plot by a member of the Government to

[34] PRO 6/325 f 34.
[35] PRO 6/325 f 43.
[36] PRO 6/325 f 5, f 7-8, f 48.
[37] Sir Edward Coke quoted in F. S. Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought, 1580-1640*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962, p. 32; Rot. Parl. ii. 314 Nr. 43 (1372), reproduced in F. S. Thomas, Notes of Materials for the History of Public Departments, W. Clowes & Sons, London, 1846, p. 114; I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70, 145-146.
[38] I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 435-436.
[39] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-264; R. A. Roberts (ed.), *Cal. Home Office Papers (1770-1772)*, London, Longman & Co., 1881, pp. 491, 630.
[40] R. A. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 491; D. Davies, *Sir Leoline Jenkins*, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, https://biography.wales/article/s-JENK-LEO-1625#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&manifest=https%3A%2F%2Fdamsssl.llgc.org.uk%2Fiiif%2F2.0%2F4670944%2Fmanifest.json, accessed on 02.09.2025.

kill a member of a leading family, and it shows an unexpectedly relaxed attitude by the Crown that permission was in fact granted. The rapid dynastic turnover in English history may have contributed to the Crown's overall liberal attitude to access at the SPO —the Hanoverians probably did not fear repercussions for themselves from Stuart-era intrigues.
While there were numerous enquiries concerning local history –especially in the nineteenth century, as shown by the readers' register— these appear to have been more focused (a particular charter granted to a particular borough by a particular king), often related to legal purposes, and on the whole politically neutral. It is worthwhile outlining the other main classes of historical user before embarking on a detailed analysis of use cases for which significant documentation has survived. Historically-minded aristocrats (such as Lord Gower, in 1832) seem to have had little difficulty in accessing State Papers, including foreign records, for their private research[41]. Army officers were also able to access military records for their historical interest: for example, in 1831 a Colonel Mackinnon was given access to Charles II's military papers and articles of war[42]. However, clergymen made up a particularly prolific group of historical searchers, as numerous entries in the readers' register testify (in addition to the specific cases examined in this essay). Of the episodes in England's tumultuous religious history that fascinated Anglican clergymen during this period, the Reformation, the Gunpowder Plot, and Archbishop Cranmer were particularly popular[43].
The convention of trusting divines with the State Papers had begun early: in the reign of Charles II, Scottish clergyman Gilbert Burnet had received a warrant to use whatever he needed at the SPO for his official history of the English Reformation[44]. A far more contentious church historian, Jeremy Collier, was given equally free rein in the SPO in 1709, with a warrant issued by Queen Anne for him to be allowed to use and copy whatever "records and papers" that he should "judge fit for his purpose" for his *Ecclesiastical History*[45]. Collier was a famous renegade Jacobite bishop, although his loyalty to James II may have worked somewhat to his advantage with Anne, as the last of the Stuarts[46]. His antipathies to the House of Orange, including his refusal to swear the Oath of Allegiance to William and Mary as a leader of the non-juror element in the Church of England, were well-known: he was imprisoned for a pamphlet rejecting the legitimacy of the new monarchs, visited Romney Marsh in the hope (it was suspected) of meeting the exiled James II there, and even granted absolution to two would-be assassins of William and Mary, as a result of which he was permanently outlawed[47]. Following Anne's accession to the throne, the Royal court attempted to draw the non-jurors back into the Church of England[48]. Anne's blanket permission to the still-outlawed Collier to use the SPO for his

[41] PRO 6/325 f 28.
[42] PRO 6/325 f 26.
[43] PRO 6/325 throughout.
[44] I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 435; W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 219.
[45] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, pp. 219, 256.
[46] W. Hunt, *Jeremy Collier*, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography,_1885-1900/Collier,_Jeremy, accessed on 02.09.2025; J. Paul, *Jeremy Collier RIP: Bishop and Outlaw*, https://spochistoryproject.wordpress.com/2014/04/06/jeremy-collier-rip-bishop-and-outlaw/, accessed on 02.09.2025.
[47] W. Hunt, *op. cit.*; J. Paul, *op. cit.*
[48] J. Paul, *op. cit.*

History may therefore have been part of her campaign to woo him and his followers back to the Church.

The Anglican clergyman John Strype appears to have been given similarly generous access to the SPO for his own multi-volume history of the English Reformation: O'Day explains that Archbishop Tenison brokered Strype's access to the State Papers in 1699 for this project[49]. It therefore appears that, as with the earlier, officially-sponsored Burnet history, the Government was confident that Strype's account would conform to orthodox Anglican understanding of the Reformation. The SPO's papers contain a list of "Ecclesiastical Papers, from 1550 to 1580" of which Strype had ordered copies in 1725[50]. From the sources cited throughout his history, it is clear that Strype was given permission to use and publish a wide range of materials, including correspondence from Elizabeth I that has a strongly personal flavour, as well as Privy Council documentation concerning the imprisonment of Mary, Queen of Scots[51].

It is noteworthy that already in the early eighteenth century Strype had a sound understanding of the historical method, which he expressed in interesting harmony with the developing common-law rules of evidence: "My Relations of Things are not Hear-says, nor taken up at second hand, or compiled out of other Men's published Writings; but I have gone as near the Fountain-head as possible; that is, to Archives, State-Papers, Registers, Records, and Original Letters, or else to Books of good Credit printed in those Times; directing more surely to the Knowledge how Affairs then stood"[52]. He assures the reader of his conscious integrity and impartiality[53]. Further, in order to avoid inadvertent distortion, "I have chosen commonly to set down Things in the very Words of the very Records and Originals, and of the Authors themselves, rather than in my own, without framing or dressing them in more Modern Language"[54].

Strype's comments on the historical method contrast strikingly with David Hume's initial attitude to primary source research for his later, multivolume *History of England* project, as do their respective practices. For the same events, such as the fate of Mary, Queen of Scots, whereas Strype transcribes original sources from the SPO for his analysis, Hume relies on secondary sources including Strype and apparent transcriptions of State Papers contained in the Cotton collection (although considering the divided custody between Cotton's so-called "library" and the SPO, some of these "MS" may in fact have been original State Papers)[55]. Unlike other historians, Hume seems to have been defeated rather than inspired by the sheer volume of material available to him at the SPO. Gossip passed down to us via Isaac Disraeli relates "that certain manuscripts at the State Paper Office had been prepared for his inspection during a fortnight, but he never could muster

[49] Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation (Issues in Historiography)*, 2nd edition, Manchester, Manchester University Press, Kindle edition, 2015, p. 56.
[50] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 257.
[51] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 219; J. Strype, *Annals of the Reformation and Establishment of Religion […]*, vol. III, Part 1, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1824, pp. 524-526.
[52] J. Strype, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 6 (unnumbered).
[53] J. Strype, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 6 (unnumbered).
[54] J. Strype, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 7 (unnumbered).
[55] I. B. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 118; David Hume, *A History of England*, vol. 4 (1778 ed.), Indianapolis, Liberty Fund Reprint 1983, see eg. pp. 283-284, https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/791/Hume_0011-04_EBk_v6.0.pdf, accessed on 02.09.2025.

courage to pay his promised visit": although the context is not completely unambiguous, it appears to suggest that this was before, and not after, he had completed his *History*[56]. Another account relates that, probably on a completely different occasion (since it does not sound as if the staff had pre-selected sources for him in this instance), Hume did visit the SPO, and was horrified: "There is a tradition in the State Paper Office that when Hume was shown the vast mass of MSS. in that repository, he said that if he were to attempt to read them his history would never be written."[57] This anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that, contrary to the impression given by Firth, Hume was either granted permission to use the holdings *before* he began work on the History, or that this was at the very least seen as a possibility[58].

Hume covered up his overwhelm with braggadocio, outlining his historical method in a letter to the Abbé le Blanc in 1754 after he had concluded Volume 1: "If you consider the vast Variety of Events, with which these two Reigns, particularly the last, are crowded, you will conclude, that my Narrative is rapid, and that I have more propos'd as my Model the concise manner of the antient Historians, than the prolix, tedious Style of some modern Compilers. I have inserted no original Papers, and enter'd into no Detail of minute, uninteresting Facts. The philosophical Spirit, which I have so much indulg'd in all my Writings, finds here ample Materials to work upon."[59] This superficial method of working apparently eschewed other forms of fact-checking as well. While writing the history Hume was employed as the librarian of the Advocates' Library in the Cotton Collection, where he used "the common accounts, and the most obvious sources of history," as well as a faulty edition of a work that had long since been corrected[60]. Here he became so comfortable lying on the sofa with his legs up, writing inside the volumes as he used them (!), that he "rarely rose to pursue obscure inquiries, or delay by fresh difficulties the page which every day was growing."[61] There is a similar anecdote in circulation attributed to an old Scottish friend of Hume's, that the latter "read a vast deal before he set about a piece of his book; but his usual seat was the sofa, and he often wrote with his legs up; and it would have been unco' fashious [Scottish for 'extremely irksome'] to have moved across the room when any little doubt occurred."[62]

This slapdash approach eventually led to stress, however. Disraeli relates an incident detailed in a letter to one of Hume's friends, that the appearance of William Murdin's collection of Elizabethan State Papers in 1759, the contents of which contradicted Hume's preconceptions, caused Hume to wildly stop press on his own Elizabethan instalment and exclaim "We are all in the wrong!"[63] A perusal of the various volumes of the *History* shows

[56] I. Disraeli, *Curiosities of Literature* (2nd ed.), vol. 3, London, Frederick Warne & Co., 1889, p. 386.
[57] A. Bisset, *Essays on Historical Truth*, London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871, p. 152.
[58] C. H. Firth, *The Development of the Study of Seventeenth-Century History*, in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 7, 1913, p. 33.
[59] Hume quoted in M. Baumstark, *David Hume: The Making of a Philosophical Historian. A Reconsideration* (PhD thesis, Edinburgh 2007), p. 149.
[60] Disraeli, *op. cit.*, p. 386.
[61] Disraeli, *op. cit.*, p. 386.
[62] Quoted in W. Borman, *Hume as Historian*, https://incudireddere.wordpress.com/2017/06/06/of-humean-nature/, accessed 02.09.2025.
[63] Disraeli, *op. cit.*, p. 386. While Disraeli is not explicit about the topic of Murdin's book or Hume's new volume, the date cited for this episode in the context of the works' publication histories means that it can only have been the reign of Elizabeth I.

that Hume gradually abandoned his original bullish resolve to avoid using original sources and started to cite private collections of State Papers (originals or transcriptions), such as Milton's and Clarendon's, as well as accounts of State Trials. By 1760 his attitude to the usefulness of original primary sources had apparently transformed: with regard to the ancient Greek historians, in a letter to Dr Robertson he commented "what can you do in most places with these authors but transcribe and translate them? no letters or state papers from which you could correct their errors, or authenticate their narration, or supply their defects."[64]

The lack of SPO materials in Hume's own history increasingly troubled him, so that he formed a late resolve to go back and consult all the primary sources that he had left out and revise the *History* for a planned new edition, writing to Andrew Millar in 1767 that "I intend to give up all my leisure time to the correction of my History" and "read carefully all the records in the Paper Office, as far back as they go, and shall leave nothing untried that may bestow the greatest exactness upon it."[65] Although Hume seems to have given Secretary of State Conway and George III the impression of intending a *new* History, to pick up where the last one had left off at the Glorious Revolution and cover the Hanoverian era – at which the King offered him all the help that he could provide and "was pleased to say, that he very willingly complied with my request, and was glad to hear of my intentions"— Hume confessed in his private correspondence that actually his main object was only "to run over such papers as belong to the period which I have already wrote, in order to render that part of my History as little imperfect as possible. It would be folly to think of writing any more."[66] The King went to considerable trouble on Hume's behalf, even sending "to me the Baron Behr, minister for Hanover, to tell me that he had ordered over some papers from Hanover, to be put into my hands, because he believed they would be of use to me."[67]

The relationship between Hume's interactions with the King and his official request to use the SPO in 1767, which was granted by Lord Shelburne, Secretary of State for the Southern Department, is not entirely clear[68]. Hume's social connections had clearly helped him to obtain this access, which Firth describes as exceptional[69]. The economist Adam Smith had encouraged Hume to continue his history and expressed the opinion, reported to Hume by Millar in late 1766, "that the History of this country, from the Revolution, is not to be met with in books yet printed; but from MSS. in this country, to which he [Smith] is sure you will have ready access, from all accounts he hears from the great here" —which indicates, unsurprisingly, that post-Revolution materials were more strictly guarded than the sources for the period before, since they related to the current dynasty[70]. However, the King's enthusiasm for the project was likely prompted by the monarchist stance that Hume had taken in his earlier history, which was quickly received

[64] Hume quoted in J. H. Burton (ed.), *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, Edinburgh, William Tait, 1846, vol. II., pp. 83-84.
[65] Hume quoted in J. H. Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 409.
[66] Hume quoted in J. H. Burton, *op. cit.*, pp. 394-395.
[67] Hume quoted in J. H. Burton, *op. cit.*, pp. 394-395.
[68] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
[69] C. H. Firth, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
[70] Hume quoted in J. H. Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 393.

as a prominent example of Tory historiography (partly because it aimed at undermining Whig veneration for the 'Ancient Constitution') and despite its defects eventually became the leading work on English history[71].

The case of Hume is anomalous both in terms of the Crown's vocal excitement about his project and willingness to make extraordinary accommodations for him, and Hume's contrasting lack of application in using the sources so generously opened to him. It does, however, highlight the central importance of social connections and political outlook in brokering access to these normally very restricted sources in the eighteenth century. In 1780 an equally programmatic use of the SPO's papers was allowed, this time for a history of the North American British colonies projected by George Chalmers, approved by George Germain, Secretary of State for the Colonies[72]. Chalmers was a refugee from the American wars who had been vocally critical of the Revolutionaries, and Germain, noting the need "to encourage so useful a work," ordered the SPO's staff to allow Chalmers to access and copy whatever papers in the SPO "as he judges proper for his purpose."[73] Later Chalmers was given equally free rein in the SPO for his "History of Scotland" (1813), most likely the work known as *Caledonia*[74].

Hume and Chalmers' projects, both of which clearly supported Establishment interests, form an interesting contrast with the Roman Catholic priest John Lingard's project, which began publishing in 1819. This painstaking history of England from its beginnings until the Revolution of 1688 was characterised by a moderate tone calculated to support its political agenda: by distancing English Catholics from the Jesuits and Ultramontanism and aligning them with Cisalpinism, an English form of Gallicanism, it aimed to bring about Catholic Emancipation from the penal laws in Great Britain[75]. No trace of research by Lingard in the earlier stages of his project has survived in the SPO's internal papers, although he was given access in 1829 "To inspect the Council Books of the Commonwealth," which he duly cited in Volume 11 on Charles I and the Republican era (1830)[76]. It may be that the progress and mild style of the history had by now given him sufficient credibility to obtain permission to use these sources. Otherwise, Lingard appears to have relied throughout his work on his own meticulous analyses of other scholars' transcripts or on private collections of State Papers, such as Milton's and Clarendon's. (He was also able to enrich his history with sources from the Vatican and Propaganda Fide archives, and the famously secretive state archive in Simancas, Spain.)[77] Lingard's 1849 Preliminary Notice to his later edition of the *History* comments on the new calendars and editions of State Papers and other original sources then being published (including the collection of sources on Cromwell which Thomas Carlyle had compiled using the SPO),

[71] J. Baverstock, *'A Chief Standard Work': The Rise and Fall of David Hume's* History of England*. 1754-c. 1900*. (PhD Thesis, University College London 1997), pp. 2, 7, 17.
[72] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 268.
[73] W. N. Sainsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 268. Siddique analyses Chalmers' request in detail, A. K. Siddique, *Access Denied*, https://www.hnn.us/article/access-denied, accessed on 02.09.2025.
[74] PRO 6/325 f 7.
[75] J. Vidmar, O.P., *John Lingard's History of the Reformation: History or Apologetics?* in *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 85, n. 3, 1999, pp. 386, 392-394.
[76] PRO 6/325 f 19.
[77] J. Vidmar, *op. cit.*, pp. 391-392; E. Jones, *John Lingard and the Simancas Archives* in *The Historical Journal*, vol. 10, n. 1, 1967, pp. 57-76.

which he had taken care to integrate into this new edition –again, apparently, not attempting to obtain access to the originals in the SPO[78]. This discussion suggests that even at this late date and despite the fact that he had been allowed to see the Council Books, he still saw himself as dependent on published sources. Either Lingard never lobbied for comprehensive access to the SPO in the first place, because he felt that he would not be granted it, or he was denied and the record of the request has not survived.

The fact that the SPO was hardly consulted at all in Lingard's case makes all the more surprising the generous access granted for a later edition of another Catholic church history of England by Charles Dodd (the pseudonym of the Catholic priest Hugh Tootell), which began publishing in 1839 with extensive revisions by the Rev. M. A. Tierney, another Catholic historian[79]. Not only was access allowed to the SPO's contents in general for this new version (for example, Cecil's correspondence while Secretary of State is cited in Volume 2), but in particular to the records of the interrogation under torture of the Gunpowder Plotters, examined in detail in Volume 4 of the History. In 1839 Tierney was allowed to make copies from sources related to "church history" from the reigns of Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth, and then again in 1840 he was permitted to "have copies or extracts" relating to the reigns of James I and Charles I, which, despite the vague wording, would have encompassed the events of the Plot[80]. Also in 1840, he was allowed to obtain copies from "the Marini or Vatican Papers."[81]

There was significant anti-Catholic paranoia in mid-nineteenth century England: Cantwell describes the 1860 uproar by the Protestant Alliance pressure group in response to the projected cataloguing by the Roman Catholic William Turnbull of the "foreign diplomatic papers" starting with Edward VI, forcing Palmerston to restrict Turnbull's project on the grounds "that the appointment had been unfortunate because the events of the period to be documented were so intimately connected with the national break from Rome."[82] Turnbull was particularly unappealing to the Protestant Alliance (and the 1850s ushered in an especially febrile period for ultra-Protestantism) but even so, it is still startling that such liberal access to records on English Reformation history, and in particular the highly sensitive Gunpowder Plot papers, was granted to Tierney. (Certainly William Prynne, a violently Puritan archivist of the seventeenth century, would not have approved.)

A further example also renders peculiar the fact that Lingard did not make greater use of the SPO. Home Secretary Sidmouth showed generosity to formal requests by another Catholic historian, the lawyer (and similarly Cisalpine) Charles Butler, who was "publishi-

[78] J. Lingard, *History of England* (2nd ed.), vol. I, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1902, pp. viii-xiii; PRO 6/325 f 58 (for Carlyle's use of the SPO).
[79] E. Burton, *Mark Aloysius Tierney*, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14, New York, Robert Appleton Company, 1912, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14723b.htm, accessed on 02.09.2025.
[80] PRO 6/325 f 43-44, f 47.
[81] PRO 6/325 f 47.
[82] J. D. Cantwell, *The Public Record Office 1838-1958*, London, HMSO, p. 192. The Protestant Alliance, chaired by Lord Shaftesbury, began in 1851 in reaction to the 1850 Papal Bull which re-established a Catholic diocesan structure in England and therewith sparked a national hysteria. F. Wallis, *Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian Britain* in *Journal of Religion & Society*, vol. 7, 2005, p. 7.

ng a new Edition of his History of the English Catholics."[83] In 1819 Butler was given permission to use (if extant in the SPO) a letter from 1719 between the Duke of Norfolk and Mr Secretary Craggs concerning the Catholic relief that "was then intended," a document which was clearly of relevance to the contemporary struggle for Catholic Emancipation[84]. He wrote again in 1822 to the new Home Secretary Robert Peel, apparently concerning the same project but this time looking for material on the Gunpowder Plot[85]. Butler commented that "Much of the history of that remarkable event remains to be cleared up", which made him wish to see "the Examinations of Father Garnett and the other persons involved in the conspiracy" in the SPO, and asked Peel for an order to allow him and "another gentleman" to view the records "and make extracts from them."[86] Although the first part of this statement might suggest that Butler was sceptical about the attributions of guilt to the convicted parties, he hastened to reassure Peel that he wanted "to conciliate the general body of the catholics to the proceedings of Government and to soften asperities."[87] This promise to pour oil on troubled sectarian waters may explain Peel's decision to allow him "to see and make Memorandums from the Exam. of Fa. Garnet & the other Persons involved in the Conspiracy."[88] In 1824 Butler was similarly allowed copies of two interrogations of Francis Tresham, while he and a Mr. Gage were further permitted to see "the examinations taken in Sir Walter Raleigh's conspiracy."[89]

Thus, despite the fact that the State Papers were still regarded as the Crown's private property and the monarch was also the head of the Church of England, the government was surprisingly relaxed about giving (non-Jesuit) Catholic historians access to what, by Butler's own testimony, was still politically very sensitive material. (Further requests to use the Gunpowder Plot papers were granted to a Mr. Poynder in 1823, to the Bishop of St David's in 1824, and, in an apparent Anglican reaction to Butler's project, to the Rev. George Townsend, who was allowed to transcribe the Plot papers in 1825 and then in 1826 to see "papers relating to certain Acts of Parliament of Queen Elizabeth 1 & King James 1 in order to answer Mr. Charles Butler's Book.")[90]

Depending on their political attitudes, indeed, Protestant historians could meet with rather less co-operation. George William Meadley, whose late nineteenth-century *Dictionary of National Biography* entry describes him as "somewhat fanatical in his liberalism" and who had converted to Unitarianism substantially before its 1813 legalisation, was received with great caution about a decade before Butler, while researching a biography of the Whig hero and suspected Rye House Plotter Algernon Sidney, a proponent of

[83] SP 45/25 f 59 r; D. M. Moore, *Butler, Charles*, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-4179, accessed on 02.09.2025.
[84] SP 45/25 f 59 r.
[85] SP 45/25 f 80 r.
[86] SP 45/25 f 80 r; PRO 6/325 f 12.
[87] SP 45/25 f 80 r.
[88] SP 45/25 f 80 v.
[89] PRO 6/325 f 13.
[90] PRO 6/325 f 13, f 14, f 16, f 18.

limited monarchy whose *Discourses on Government* advocated for the right of revolution[91]. Meadley had previously been allowed to view the documents on Sidney at the SPO due to an "obliging order" by John Beckett at the Home Department to let him "inspect (but not […] take copies)" of records on "the Rye-House Plot and Algernon Sydney."[92] His case is worth contrasting with the permission given to a Mr Howell in 1812 to see *and copy* papers relating to Sidney and the Rye House plot, including Sidney's petitions to Charles II, which suggests that in Meadley's case, the research topic itself was not the problem[93]. Now in the same year Meadley was attempting to obtain permission to transcribe and publish three of these sources to include in the appendix of his memoirs, "as vouchers for accuracy of research."[94] His previous request (to Beckett) having gone unanswered, Meadley had then called upon him "to explain myself more fully," which had clearly failed[95]. Afterwards Meadley had mentioned these circumstances in a letter to Palmerston (currently the Secretary of War) "about some private Documents, and to whom I had been most respectably introduced."[96] Meadley, as well as a religious radical, was also a merchant from the North-East of England, and clearly hoped to establish his social *bona fides* with this remark. Palmerston had encouraged him to write again and use the elegant gambit of presuming that the original letter had simply been mislaid[97].

In this new request Meadley appeared to address objections from his interview with Beckett concerning the three sources that he wished to publish. Not only was his purpose purely scholarly and not at all sensationalist, since he merely wanted to include these documents as historical evidence, it would be unfair to refuse him permission for Sidney's own *Petition to the King after Conviction*, since it "has been long before the World, being inserted in a folio collection of such Documents published at the Revolution, and recopied in many other Works."[98] Meadley tried to pre-empt arguments that he should simply re-use the published version: he wished to transcribe the original in order to be able "to publish from the most authentic source."[99] The second source, an earlier Petition by Sidney to the Long Parliament after the sentence of execution against Charles I had been passed, "is certainly new to the world, as it shews, what is not generally supposed, that Sydney solicited a commutation of his [the King's] sentence into perpetual Banishment. By being able to present it to the public I should certainly enhance the value of my Work."[100] Finally, "The Official Account of his [Sidney's] Execution, though quoted by Dalrymple, I believe is otherwise little known. Like the second petition it is brief, and confined to matter of

[91] Midland Unitarian Association, *Our History*, https://www.midland-unitarian-association.org.uk/about-us/our-history/, accessed 02.09.2025; A. Gordon, *Meadley, George Wilson*, in: *Dictionary of National Biography*, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography,_1885-1900/Meadley,_George_Wilson, accessed 02.09.2025; Encyclopedia Britannica, *Algernon Sidney*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Algernon-Sidney, accessed 02.09.2025.
[92] SP 45/25 f 30 r; PRO 6/325 f 6.
[93] PRO 6/325 f 6-7.
[94] SP 45/25 f 30 r.
[95] SP 45/25 f 30 v.
[96] SP 45/25 f 30 v.
[97] SP 45/25 f 31 r.
[98] SP 45/25 f 30 r and v.
[99] SP 45/25 f 30 v.
[100] SP 45/25 f 30 v.

fact."[101] Meadley continued by making another request to see and potentially transcribe (if present in the SPO) part of Sidney's correspondence from "1659-60."[102]

He appears to have received no response. A letter of the 17th of February 1813 from the office of Lord Holland to Home Secretary Sidmouth asks that Meadley be allowed to transcribe the two petitions to the King and Parliament respectively as well as the official report of Sidney's execution[103]. The letter asserts that Meadley "is a gentleman of respectability who will make no improper use of the documents entrusted to him," and also "well known in the literary world as the author of a life of Dr. Paley" (a key figure in the development of Unitarianism)[104]. As a result, Meadley was finally granted permission to "inspect and transcribe Papers relating to Algernon Sydney" on the 23rd of February 1813[105]. The Memoirs, published in that year, include transcriptions of these three documents, give thanks for Holland's intervention to obtain for Meadley "the un-restricted use of several documents in the State Paper Office," and contain the somewhat barbed remark that Meadley had "experienced much attention [...] from the gentlemen entrusted with the care of those public or private repositories of information, to which he had repeatedly occasion to apply."[106]

The official stonewalling in response to Meadley's requests initially seems baffling if one takes his repeated assurances of his purely scholarly purpose on face value. However, it seems likely that Meadley's actual polemical and highly propagandistic intentions —from both a constitutional and a religious point of view— were transparent. Rather than an attempt at an even-handed work of history and contrary to his protestations, the ultimate result was extremely partisan. In a key passage, he admires Milton and Sidney's "application of history to politics," of which his own book is a particularly virulent example[107]. This is a vigorously anti-Tory work: although Sidney was posthumously cleared of treason, "the inveteracy of tory prejudice still continues to assault his fame," and Meadley singles out Hume as Sidney's main impugner[108].

In this biography Meadley was still fighting the Civil War and its battles over constitutional issues, including religious freedom, of which he was ardently in favour[109]. More controversially, however, he revisited the Regicide, portraying Charles I as "a despotic and double dealing king" who ultimately compelled the Parliament to take up arms against him; far be it from *him* to celebrate Charles's end as "the fate of a misguided prince, thus solemnly called to an account."[110] Even if there were no precedent as such for Parliament's execution of the King, "the presumed sanctity of a crowned head had been as notoriously, and far more grossly, violated by Queen Elizabeth, in the trial and execution of the Queen of Scots."[111]

---

[101] SP 45/25 f 30 v.
[102] SP 45/25 f 31 r.
[103] SP 45/25 f 41 r.
[104] SP 45/25 f 41 r and v.
[105] PRO 6/325 f 7 r.
[106] G. W. Meadley, *Memoirs of Algernon Sydney*, London, Cradock & Joy, 1813, pp. xiii-xiv.
[107] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
[108] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, pp. 286-287.
[109] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
[110] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13, 33.
[111] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

Meadley describes the Regicide from what he portrays as Sidney's own point of view, that "the right of resisting oppression" is "essential to the general safety," so that it is "in all societies upheld by law; for when the ways prescribed by public authority cannot be resorted to, men may justly defend themselves against injustice by their own natural right," and he approvingly quotes Sidney's description of the Regicide as "the justest and bravest action that ever was done."[112] He implicitly claims that Charles was a traitor "and usurped a power above the law," so that he should not be spared "by the enormity of his wickedness, from the punishment inflicted on inferior delinquents."[113] Tacit support is expressed for Sidney's other Radical impulses, including Republicanism and proto-feminism[114]. Meadley's overview of how the Republican theory of "the origin of government" developed during the Commonwealth is highly enthusiastic, although Cromwell himself is portrayed as a usurper[115]. Not only was the later Restoration constitutionally indefensible, founded on Filmer's erroneous constitutional-historical theories, it also lowered the overall tone: "The returning exiles brought with them from the continent a supreme contempt for every moral virtue," sweeping away "The propriety and decorum" of the Commonwealth so that "a universal degeneracy prevailed."[116] Meadley's support for the eventual Glorious Revolution is very muted in comparison with the often bombastic rhetoric in favour of democratic Republicanism based on popular sovereignty that fills the rest of his book[117].

The context for Meadley's requests in 1812 was a highly nervous Government –understandably so given the assassination in the House of Commons of Prime Minister Spencer Perceval in May of that year, which may have made Meadley's enthusiasm for the violent elimination of political figures somewhat unwelcome[118]. There was still considerable Establishment concern over popular sympathy for the American and French Revolutions, while in that year the Government also had to contend with the War of 1812 against the United States, domestic bread price riots and the ongoing Luddite Rebellion, with its anonymous letters threatening to bring down the "Hanover tyrants" and impose a Republic[119]. Under these particularly trying circumstances, it seems obvious that if Meadley's pro-Regicidal and Republican agenda (including his repeated defences of violent resistance) for using the State Papers had shown through his protestations, he would have been viewed with disfavour. The reluctance that his requests encountered suggests that Beckett, at any rate, suspected something of his real project. It is therefore all the more remarkable that Meadley was able, through sheer persistence and by contacting different officials, to eventually wear down the Government.

Users' access to the State Papers could also be restricted not because of overtly political reasons, but because they had apparently become burdensome to the SPO's staff. Patrick Fraser Tytler, who was given access to the former Keeper of the SPO Thomas Wilson's

[112] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 85.
[113] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.
[114] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 52-53, 57, 291-292.
[115] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, pp. 57, 188.
[116] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, pp. 73, 89, 188.
[117] G. W. Meadley, *op. cit.*, pp. 187, 281-283.
[118] Encyclopedia Britannica, *Spencer Perceval*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Spencer-Perceval, accessed 02.09.2025.
[119] E. Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia?: Reflections on the threat of revolution in Britain, 1789–1848*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, pp. 36-41.

journals for his examination of the latter's surveillance of Sir Walter Ralegh in the Tower of London as part of his 1833 biography of Ralegh, was a repeat enquirer[120]. Tytler was given equally generous access to papers on Scottish history from 1497-1693 and was allowed to transcribe "manuscripts between the death of James the 5th of Scotland & the Union of England & Scotland" in 1835, as well as, in 1838, documents from the reigns of Edward II and Mary "contained in Portfolios I and II of Belgian transcripts."[121] However, in 1839 the curt comment appears in the readers' register that Tytler was only to be allowed to continue his research on Scotland (it was later clarified that this *did* encompass access to the relevant "English and Foreign Correspondence"), but that all other previous permissions were rescinded[122]. Indeed, Tytler seems to have become a problem user. At a certain point he even appears to have lost track of which sources he had used, as suggested by an 1839 permission to himself and a friend to see documents in the SPO that he had already published, "for the purposes of collation."[123] (Interestingly, the historian John Bruce --apparently not related to the former Keeper of the SPO-- was granted permission in 1840 for the biography that he was writing of William Cecil, Lord Burghley "To collate certain documents printed by Mr. Tytler relative to" Cecil.)[124] Later the administration again rowed back on a permission previously granted to Tytler to make copies *from all the correspondence of the reigns of Elizabeth and James I*, and added that he was *not* to be given access to the not-yet-processed papers[125]. Given the uninhibited manner in which Tytler had expressed himself on the character of Thomas Wilson in his biography of Ralegh, it can be imagined that he was perhaps not the easiest personality to have at the Office on what was threatening to become a permanent basis. This background probably explains the fulminating letter that Tytler wrote in 1839 to Home Secretary Lord Russell accusing the State of encroaching on the privileges of historians[126]. However, considering the very generous access practices that had otherwise developed in the 1830s, Tytler's case appears to have been *sui generis*, attributable to personality and practical considerations rather than policy.

The question of access to the documentation of the crisis in the American colonies and the following Revolutionary War caused significant official anxiety. While Chalmers had been seen as a "safe" historian, the Government was uncertain how to react when, at the end of the 1820s, Americans began asking to use these papers[127]. The prominent historian Jared Sparks encountered obstacles in 1828 when attempting to access the American correspondence in order to supplement and verify the biography of George Washington that he planned to publish[128]. Home Secretary Robert Peel, previously so relaxed on Catholics' access to the Gunpowder Plot papers, was far less so concerning more recent history and

[120] PRO 6/325 f 28.
[121] PRO 6/325 f 29, f 33, f 41.
[122] PRO 6/325 f 43-44.
[123] PRO 6/325 f 44.
[124] PRO 6/325 f 45-46.
[125] PRO 6/325 f 47, f 49.
[126] Tytler quoted in A. K. Siddique, *Access Denied*.
[127] C. K. Webster, *Some Early Applications from American Historians to use the British Archives*, in *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 1, n. 3, 1929, p. 416.
[128] C. K. Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 416; G. Broeker, *Jared Sparks, Robert Peel and the State Paper Office*, in *American Quarterly*, vol. 13, n. 2, Part 1 (Summer, 1961), pp. 140-152.

contemporary diplomatic tensions, in particular the Oregon-Northeastern boundary dispute between the United States and Britain[129]. In a letter concerning Sparks' request, Peel claimed that there were many documents in the hundred volumes of correspondence concerning the American Revolutionary War that should not be disclosed, as they could confirm, extend, and intensify anger on the American side and make Great Britain look bad, while the later Colonial Secretary Sir George Murray also expressed the fear that allowing Sparks access could "revive feelings which have in a great measure subsided."[130] Interestingly, Peel's concerns about the potentially inflammatory nature of the materials appear to have focused not on Britain's conduct of the war itself, but on British attitudes prevailing before the war "as to the relative rights and duties of the Mother Country and her Colonies"[131].

Confusion over whether the Home Secretary or the Colonial Secretary was entitled to grant access, and consternation caused by Sparks' insinuation of anti-foreigner discrimination given that the poet Robert Southey had been given generous access to browse (actually entirely different) parts of the State Papers for his history of the similarly recent Peninsular War, ultimately worked in Sparks' favour[132]. Although the Southey case was clearly distinguishable, in 1819 –far more recently than Chalmers— a Dr. Brown *had* been granted access to the "Commissions for settling the Colonial Disturbances" of 1778, apparently for a historical project concerning the American colonies[133]. However, Sparks was allowed only to make undetailed "short extracts or abridgements" to be submitted to the Government for approval --or alternatively redaction— afterwards[134]. Sparks' project incidentally highlighted so much interesting material amongst the papers that it inspired the Government with the idea of telling its own side of the story, and Southey claimed to have been approached for this official history, which he declined[135].

The approach to requests from subsequent American historians was far from consistent. Waller Berry, despite an official research commission from Congress, was turned down by Foreign Secretary Palmerston in 1833 on the ground that it would be unfair to Great Britain as well as to the individuals concerned (and their descendants) to allow access to "the crude and unarranged records of those recent times," an argument which interestingly blends the political with the archive-practical[136]. A controversy was caused by Obadiah Rich's order in 1835 of a fifty-two-page-long list of papers from the American correspondence that he wished to have transcribed, raising suspicion that Sparks had illicitly shared a list of SPO documents with Rich[137]. However, as some other unnamed "certain persons" had in the interim also viewed the American papers "at the intercession of the American Minister," apparently circumventing the normal regime, the circumstances

[129] G. Broeker, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
[130] G. Broeker, *op. cit.*, pp. 143, 151; C. K. Webster, *op. cit.*, pp. 416, 418.
[131] C. K. Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 418.
[132] C. K. Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 419; G. Broeker, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-151; R. Southey to John Rickman, 01.02.1823, https://romantic-circles.org/editions/southey_letters/3961Southey, accessed 02.09.2025.
[133] PRO 6/325 f 10.
[134] C. K. Webster, *op. cit.*, pp. 416, 419.
[135] C. C. Southey, *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, London, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849, p. 45.
[136] Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 417.
[137] Webster, *op. cit.*, pp. 417, 419.

are cloudy[138]. In any case, by 1840 much of the heat seems to have gone out of this topic: Sparks was permitted to obtain copies "from the correspondence between the American States & the Government at home from 1763 to 1774" –subsequently extended up to 1776— including letters from "Generals Gage and Haldimand"[139].

In the 1830s and 1840s the SPO also increasingly attracted distinguished Continental European scholars, some of whom were repeat users. They were often permitted to use the materials on a very liberal basis, including sources on England's relations with foreign powers. French scholars were especially frequent visitors: Alfred de Vigny was allowed to view the records on English history from "the end of the 16th to the middle of the 17th century," Delpit, Martial, and Janin were given generous access to a great number of sources for their history of France from Henry VIII until the mid-1700s, while Dumont and Lenglet received access to the sources on France up until 1714[140]. German researchers made appearances: "Professor [Leopold] von Ranke" was allowed to see sources relating to Germany for the period 1700-1756, while Baron Knesebeck and his assistant Nagel were allowed to copy material on the Seven Years' War from papers seized from the French at the Battle of Minden[141]. The SPO also furnished materials for writers of Scandinavian history: Grimur Thomsen inspected sources on early eighteenth-century relations between England and Denmark, a Mr. Becker received access to records on Danish history from 1648 to 1700, and a researcher called Carlson was given access to the Crown's correspondence with Sweden between 1709 and 1723[142]. The intense Russian interest in Mary, Queen of Scots can be seen in the permission to "Prince Labanoff" (actually Lobanov-Rostovsky) to see the papers concerning her in 1840, obviously for the seven-volume work on her that he would publish in 1844[143]. Here again, amongst all the requests from foreigners the only detectable sticking point was the crisis in the North American colonies: although the German historian Raumer was allowed to view papers from the accession of George III up until the end of the American war, he was required to submit extracts to be vetted and was not allowed to publish them without permission[144].

Overall, a significant increase in generosity to enquirers in the 1830s and 1840s across the board can be discerned. Almost no topic was too sensitive. A Mr Jardine (who was later given access to the Gunpowder Plot papers) was allowed in 1836 to see any records illustrating "the use of torture in England" and to have extracts from some of them[145]. Increasingly broad requests were also approved. A Mr Lynch was allowed to see whatever he wanted in 1832, apparently for a project on the seventeenth century, while in 1839 George Brodie (and his brother) were given access to all the materials from the accession

[138] Webster, *op. cit.*, p. 419.
[139] PRO 6/325, f 47-49.
[140] PRO 6/325, f 42, f 55-56.
[141] PRO 6/325, f 56, f 63-64.
[142] PRO 6/325, f 40, f 59, f 68.
[143] PRO 6/325 f 46; Natalia Elagina, "Manuscripts and documents on Mary, Queen of Scots, in the collection of the National Library of Russia," https://varieng.helsinki.fi/series/volumes/09/elagina/, accessed on 02.09.2025.
[144] PRO 6/325 f 37.
[145] PRO 6/325 f 37, f 46.
[146] PRO 6/325 f 26, f 43.

ale historians received similar accommodation: in 1840 Agnes Strickland (and her sister) were given access to all materials "relating to the Queens of Henry VIII" for her historical biography of them[147]. Strickland returned in 1843 for research on Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots and again in 1845 to investigate further Queens of England from 1661-1718[148]. Mary Wood (and her sister) were similarly allowed to research "English Queens" in 1845[149]. Indeed, beginning in the 1830s, openness seems to have guided many access decisions, even though official permission was still required –which raises the probably unanswerable question of whether the liberal spirit of Earl Grey's 1832 Reform Act had permeated the SPO. The timing is, however, suggestive. In any case, the fact that in 1844 the SPO clerk Robert Lemon asked Peel to (further) liberalise access to the State Papers, highlighting their usefulness to historians and their decreasing use by the administration, should not be taken to indicate that a particularly restrictive approach had prevailed in the previous decade[150].

When in 1858 unrestricted public access to the pre-1688 State Papers was introduced, permissions were still required for papers of later date, which were screened by the records officers for the following categories of problematic content: relevance to "current negotiations with foreign governments"; potential for damage to relationships with foreign powers; "the domestic lives of members of the English or foreign royal families"; and revelations "of English persons who may have been involved in foreign political intrigues," since this "might wound the feelings of their relatives or descendants."[151] Although it appears impossible to determine whether these rules had been consistently applied to access requests previously, it is likely that the regulations were, again, a codification of usual practice.

Conclusion

The example of the State Paper Office illustrates in miniature the progress of the Government administration from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries towards greater regulation and formalisation, in this case with a delegation of the authority to decide access cases from the Crown *in personam* to the Secretaries of State, in a regime that was eventually set down in the form of written regulations by John Bruce in 1800. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a very few were granted access to the State Papers, usually clergymen or those researchers, such as Hume, who were able to exploit their social connections in order to gain admittance. By contrast, from 1800 the formalised permissions system, though strictly controlled and (in the earlier part of the century) limited to specific records, enabled many more research projects than before. This is shown by the readers' register, introduced in tandem with the new regulations, which provides a detailed picture of historians' uses of the State Papers in the nineteenth century. A handful of sensational research topics, mostly concerned in some way with the relationship between Crown and people, predominated to the point where an archivist must wonder whether (for example) the frequent use of the Gunpowder Plot papers posed a conservation risk. Religion, treason and revolution, queenship (and therewith -- implicitly-- power and gend-

147 PRO 6/325 f 45-46.
148 PRO 6/325 f 56, f 62.
149 PRO 6/325 f 65.
150 A. K. Siddique, *The Archive of Empire*, Kindle edition, pp. 242-244.
151 J. D. Cantwell, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

er) were the topics that drew the most researcher interest, obsessions which reveal much about the mentality and concerns of nineteenth-century people themselves. It was probably because a different dynasty was on the throne that, overall, the Crown's ministers were quite relaxed about providing access to its pre-1688 documents on the Reformation, the fates of Henry VIII's wives and Mary, Queen of Scots, Sir Walter Ralegh and Algernon Sidney, and even the Regicide of Charles I.

Nevertheless, it is clear that despite the formalisation of the access regime around 1800 and the development of a more open attitude in the 1830s, political considerations influenced decisions on granting historians access to the State Papers from 1689 until the 1850s. This was true in a positive as well as a negative sense: overall, a willingness to accommodate programmatic uses of these sources was evident. During this period narrative history was still a major vehicle for political arguments concerning the Reformation, Civil War and Regicide, Commonwealth, and Glorious Revolution, as demonstrated by Hume's 'Tory' history of England, so that it could be deployed in the Government's interest. Access restrictions on the same materials were imposed and lifted on a flexible basis in response to the changing political situation. Crises such as the multifaceted emergency of 1812 could lead the Government to attempt to temporarily close pre-1688 records that could become dangerous in the current situation and in the hands of a particularly Radical enquirer such as Meadley, while access to the American papers varied depending on contemporary diplomatic relations and the nervousness of the particular ministers in power. As the century progressed, however, access was increasingly granted to the records of the Hanoverian dynasty to the point where even the papers on the American Revolutionary era had evidently lost their power to frighten the Government. Political concerns were also not the only factor in the Government's access decisions. Practical considerations and possibly even individual personality (as shown by the reactions to Tytler's demands) also seem to have played a part. It should be noted that the formalised access system was not watertight: in a time when much still depended on personal contacts, it was possible for a well-disposed Government minister to override the official permissions regime and winkle open the door of the SPO, even for a genuinely problematic firebrand like Meadley.

Siddique may be right in his claim that the State Papers' dwindling use for government business in the mid-nineteenth century facilitated a more generous research framework, but if so, this was probably no more than a necessary condition: records' gradual slide into administrative irrelevance is not usually sufficient to bring about greater access for historians[152]. In fact, as this study of use cases has shown, the process of steady liberalisation began significantly before Lemon's plea for increased openness on the basis of the records' declining governmental use. It cannot be excluded that the increasingly generous attitude of the Secretaries of State to research requests in the 1830s and 1840s, as well as the access reforms of the 1850s, were influenced by the wider atmosphere that accompanied the Great Reform Act and (perhaps) the ongoing Chartist agitation. Other contemporary political developments, including the dawn of the Pax Britannica following the Napoleonic Wars and the upsurge in patriotism that marked the ascendant Whig school

[152] A. K. Siddique, *The Archive of Empire*, Kindle edition, pp. 243-244.

of history, may also have fostered a greater sense of security on the part of the administration. In particular, the Government's willingness to accommodate Continental scholars who increasingly flocked to an office that had clearly gained an international reputation as an important historical archive suggests the influence of the increased Whiggish confidence in the trajectory of English and British history for which the nineteenth century is known. However benighted the past, it had led inexorably to the ever-more-glorious present: *ergo*, surely little harm could come of allowing foreigners to rummage about in it.