

Take a tour through the Tudor state

Archana Venkatraman meets the monarchs and enters their private worlds without leaving her desk

→ WEBSITE REVIEW

A peek into the diplomacy, culture and society of the Tudor age is just a click away. State Papers Online Part II is a digital gateway to the foreign affairs of 1509 and 1603 – if you want to research or simply understand the history, politics and government of Britain and Europe in the 16th century.

State Papers Online 1509-1714 is a searchable digital archive covering politics, government, and social, economic and religious history. Last year, Gale, part of Cengage Learning, announced it would release the archive in four parts over four years, the first in 2008. The separate parts are for the periods 1509-1603 and 1603-1714, each broken into domestic and foreign subject matter (IWR December 2008, issue 242).

Elizabeth's letters

Gale, in conjunction with the National Archives, has released Part II of this cornerstone digital resource for historians and academics on the 500th anniversary of Henry VIII's accession. While Part I covers the complete collection of domestic Tudor state papers, Part II covers foreign, Ireland, Scotland, borders and

registers of the Privy Council for the entire period. Used together the two parts create a backbone for understanding the socio-economic, political and religious phenomena of the period.

Academics can now read, written in Elizabeth I's own hand, her attempts to appease the Ottoman Sultan Murad III ("We beg that you will not... lose your respect for our good faith"), her on/off engagement to the Duke of Anjou ("If we only regarded our love to him, we should readily assent to it") and her view of Mary Queen of Scots' execution ("which cannot but be grievous to me").

In 2008, State Papers Online Part I opened the vault of history to the digital world. Part II brings more light into that vault with its coverage of such key themes as Henry VIII's break with Rome and the defeat of the Spanish Armada. It also crosses the border of Tudor England by incorporating foreign papers and the minutes of the Privy Council, the monarch's closest advisers.

Part II contains around 500,000 facsimile manuscript pages linking to fully searchable calendar entries. It also features introductory essays by leading historians on historiography and critical perspectives. The resource is user-friendly and under its comprehensive reference and links section, carries glossaries, abbreviations, chronologies, genealogical trees and diagrams.

Tudors brought to life

Images of the correspondence written and received by the monarchs, as well as those of their courtiers, administrators, judges and clergy, bring the Tudors to life. According to the publisher: "The great international themes – marriage

contracts, wars and treaties, trade and commerce and, crucially, religion – play out in document after document."

Part I allowed users to search, download and print a range of orders, letters and draft of prayers. Part II users can also access, for instance, all the material on the Armada because it contains the enormously important foreign section of the State Papers – the letters between the English government and European powers at a time when England was at the centre of international affairs.

Foreign themes include the French wars of religion between Catholics and Huguenots, the 1541 annexation of Ireland to England, Henry VIII's "rough wooing" of Scotland, the extent and valuation of the possessions of dissolved religious houses in Ireland, and the trial of the Earl of Kildare for treason.

Enchants and educates

State Papers Online Part II enchants and educates with images, references, calendars, chronologies and biographies.

Natalie Mears of the University of Durham says: "It'll be wonderful to show students authentic documents. There will be so much more for them to work on for dissertations, as well as being able to see what the originals look like of the modern printed letters that we analyse in class."

The National Archives has supported Gale in building an innovative online environment. The National Archives calls the State Papers its "bedrock early modern collection, representing the authentic, original workings of government at the birth of the modern state".

Any researcher will know what a challenge it is to match an individual cal-

VERDICT
State Papers Online
Part II 1509-1603
<http://gale.cengage.co.uk/statepapers>

Navigating the unique collection of manuscripts and through the lives of the 16th century English monarchs with a 21st century state-of-art tool is an absolute delight. But having to wait until 2011 to access all four parts takes some of the shine off.

endar entry to the original State Paper. But the digital resource overcomes the difficulties with cross-references and links between items. New features in Parts I and II include enhanced functionality, including requests by current users such as the search index for Calendar Entry number.

Users can carry out searches with limiters, view illustrations and maps, magnify or rotate documents, and view two manuscripts or calendar entries side by side to draw comparisons. A notepad-style tool allows users to take notes alongside the historical document, so they don't have to toggle between different screens and applications. There's also fuzzy search with low, medium and high match options. Users can even add their own comments, corrections and transcriptions for the benefit of others, says Cengage Learning publisher Mark Holland.

Enormous task

Pricing is tiered according to the size of the population served (public or special libraries) or FTEs (universities). But while institutions can buy Parts I and II, individuals can't. A pay-per-view site is planned once all parts have been published, which will allow researchers unaffiliated to institutions or libraries to access the collection.

Clearly, digitising an information-rich two centuries' worth of history for the entire State Papers Online project is an enormous task, but it's a pity Gale didn't introduce the skeletal structure or beta of all four parts simultaneously and then slowly add new tools and features.

Like the Parts I and II combination, Parts III and IV will cover domestic and foreign state papers, for the period between 1603 and 1714. When completed, State Papers Online will contain about three million pages of information, all offering a vivid portrait of the British monarchy, internal strife and religious conflict, as well as details of daily life and events across every level of society. ■



Above left: Letter in cipher decoded from Maitland, August 1570; Below left: State Paper Physical Volume; Above: Website home page