In 1759 John Dalrymple of Cranstoun, a Scottish observer of British politics, wrote that the English 'bore two very low men Lord Oxford [Robert Harley] and Lord Orford [Sir Robert Walpole] long to reign over them, who had nothing but their own abilities and their princes favour to support them, men of low birth and of no connexions'. It would be no exaggeration to say that Harley and Walpole were the most influential, and in stature the greatest politicians of the first half of the eighteenth century. Though in the popular mind Walpole is credited with being the first 'prime minister' of Great Britain, Harley has an equally good claim to that title; indeed his own brother referred to him as 'becoming the "Primere" Minister'. Two major differences between Harley and Walpole were, however, the length of time each spent in office as head of the administration, four years in Harley's case and twenty-one in Walpole's, and the amount of personal papers they left behind. Walpole's papers, which form the Cholmondeley (Houghton) Collection in Cambridge University Library, are disappointingly sparse for such a great figure, the remaining items showing evidence of 'weeding' at some time. In contrast, Robert Harley's papers are probably the most extensive surviving for any early eighteenth century English politician (with the possible exception of Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle). Besides his own papers, there is an almost equally vast archive of papers relating to the Harley family. Furthermore, though the papers of the Harley family are scattered, the bulk of them are in five major deposits, the Portland Collection (split between the British Library, Nottingham University Library and the Nottinghamshire Record Office), the papers remaining at the Harleys' ancestral home at Brampton Bryan Hall in Herefordshire, and those at Longleat House in Wiltshire.

The Harley Family

Dalrymple was correct in stating that Harley and Walpole came from similar backgrounds, but exaggerated the lowliness of their births. Both their families may be described in national terms as middling to higher gentry (though in the mid-seventeenth century the Harleys' landed estates were worth twice those of the Walpoles — £1,500 in 1656 as opposed to £800 p.a. in 1668), but substantial gentry by county standards, holding important local offices and wielding considerable political influence. Both
families had a tradition of parliamentary representation, with Robert Harley's and Robert Walpole's fathers and grandfathers being M.P.s, though the tradition in the Harley family goes back further to the fourteenth century. A difference between the two men, however, was that Harley left high national office no richer than when he entered, while Walpole's twenty-one years of power enabled him and his family to acquire the means to sustain the life style suitable to an earl, including the building of a great house at Houghton and the acquisition of a large collection of works of art. Walpole's wealth and title were barely to survive one generation, though the house and the art collection (now largely in the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad) stand as a monument to the great man. Harley, by contrast, refused to enrich himself at the public's expense and, despite becoming an earl in 1711, remained essentially a country gentleman. Indeed, there was some comment in 1711 that Harley's income was not sufficient to support an earldom. The marriage in 1713 of Harley's son to the Cavendish Holles heiress rectified that situation, however; sufficiently so for Harley to apply unsuccessfully to Queen Anne for the vacant title of Duke of Newcastle for his son (the last duke, father of Lord Harley's new wife, had died in 1711). The Cavendish wealth was not to remain long within the Harley family. Through the extravagance of the second Earl of Oxford, and the settlement of the Cavendish estates on Lady Harley and her heirs by the private act of 1719, by which they passed to the Bentinck family with the marriage in 1734 of the Oxfords' only surviving child Margaret to the Duke of Portland, the third Earl of Oxford and his descendants were left with only the patrimony in Herefordshire. Much of the second Earl's money went on extending his father's collection of books and manuscripts. The manuscripts, which his widow sold to the nation in 1753, formed one of the British Museum's foundation collections, a fitting monument to Robert Harley and his family.

The Harley family is of ancient lineage, one authority claiming it pre-dates the Norman Conquest. The name may be taken from the Shropshire village of Harley, possibly the ancient seat of the family. The first members of the family to impinge on national life were the brothers Malcolm de Harley, who became chaplain to Edward I, and Sir Richard, who was the first Harley to be elected to Parliament as Knight of the Shire for Shropshire in 1300 (he died circa 1320). The latter's eldest son, Sir Robert (d.1349), married in 1309 Margaret, eldest daughter and heir of Brian de Brampton (d.1293), thus acquiring the seat of Brampton Bryan in the far north-west corner of Herefordshire up against the borders of Shropshire and Radnorshire. The estate descended via Sir Robert's second son, Sir Brian, and from then on from father to eldest surviving son through eleven generations directly to Robert, first Earl of Oxford. The estate was then transferred in 1738 by the second Earl to his cousin Edward, later third Earl, from whom it eventually passed to Jane, Lady Langdale, sister of the sixth and last Earl of Oxford (see the genealogical table, p. 126). Upon her death in 1872 she willed the estate to William Daker Harley, a distant relative (they shared a common ancestor in the sixteenth century, one John Harley) who was grandfather of the present owner, Christopher Harley.
From the fourteenth century the Harleys had played a leading part in the county communities of Herefordshire and Radnorshire. The first member of the family to make a place for himself in national life in modern times was Sir Robert (1579–1656), Master of the Mint under Charles I and M.P. for Radnor Boroughs in 1604, for Herefordshire in 1624, 1626 and 1640 and for Evesham in 1628 (see below, pp. 134–57). Followed by his son Sir Edward (1624–1700), also M.P. for Radnor Boroughs and Herefordshire between 1646 and 1700, he established a tradition of the Harleys sitting in Parliament which continued almost unbroken for five generations down to 1802. Between Sir Robert and the Hon. Thomas, fourth son of the third Earl of Oxford and the last Harley to sit in Parliament, eleven members of the family were M.P.s. All of them sat for either New Radnor Boroughs (5), Radnorshire (1), Herefordshire (5), or Leominster (2), which were local seats. Occasionally one would sit for Droitwich in Worcestershire (2), while three members of the family represented distant constituencies. Robert Harley, first Earl of Oxford, sat for Tregony in Cornwall in 1689, when New Radnor Boroughs and Hereford proved impossible to obtain. He switched to New Radnor Boroughs in 1690 and remained its M.P. until his elevation to the peerage in 1711. The Harley interest at New Radnor was destroyed in 1715 by Lord Coningsby, the family’s Whig rival in Herefordshire, when Edward, Lord Harley (later second Earl of Oxford) was defeated. He was forced to find a seat for Cambridgeshire (1722–24), where he had some interest because of his residence at Wimpole, which had come into the family upon his marriage to Henrietta Cavendish Holles. Finally the Hon. Thomas Harley, a wine merchant in Aldersgate Street from around 1752, sat for London (1761–74), where he was Lord Mayor in 1767–8. In 1774, however, he refused to contest London, wishing to maintain the Harley interest in Herefordshire where he was to purchase an estate in 1778. No Harley had stood for a local seat since Thomas’s eldest brother succeeded as fourth Earl of Oxford in 1755. Their uncle Robert had, however, continued to sit for Droitwich until his death in 1774. Robert’s death may well have persuaded Thomas to move back to the ancestral interest in Herefordshire. Though he was defeated in 1774, Thomas was returned at a by-election in 1776 and remained M.P. for the county until 1802.

**Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer**

Robert Harley was by far the most important member of the family. Besides being a major politician and parliamentarian, he established the Harleys' position in society and politics for the rest of the eighteenth century. Though the family’s financial situation declined with the extravagances of the second Earl and the passing of the Cavendish estates to the Portlands, the Harleys retained a leading position in what remained of the Tory party after the establishment of the Whig hegemony under Walpole. Edward, third Earl of Oxford, was undoubtedly one of the leaders of the Tory party, partly because the family retained one legacy from Robert Harley which ensured its continuing position in society, particularly at a county level, the earldom of Oxford.14

Queen Anne’s decision to promote Robert Harley from the office of Chancellor of the
Exchequer to that of Lord Treasurer with an earldom was a recognition of his successful leadership of the new Tory administration, as well as an expression of gratitude at his escape from the assassin’s knife.\textsuperscript{15} His promotion to a peerage was not without controversy: some thought that the small estate of the Harley family was insufficient to maintain the dignity of an earldom, while some thought it inappropriate that Harley should claim the ancient title of Oxford. On hearing of Harley’s elevation, Jonathan Swift, a confidant of the chief minister, wrote ‘I believe Mr Harley must be lord treasurer; yet he makes one difficulty which is hard to answer: he must be made a lord, and his estate is not large enough, and he is too generous to make it large’.\textsuperscript{16} Contemporary opinion was certainly coming to regard sufficient wealth as a \textit{sine qua non} of a peerage, and there was an increasing fear amongst peers over the expansion of the peerage by the intrusion of undesirable newcomers.\textsuperscript{17} Harley compounded this fear by claiming the distinguished title of Oxford, only recently vacated by the death in 1703 of Aubrey de Vere, twentieth Earl of Oxford. The title had been in the de Vere family since 1142, and was considered one of the most prestigious in the kingdom. Moreover, by 1711 it was not clear that a claimant might not exist amongst the heirs general of the de Vere family. Indeed, the Marquess of Lindsey did enter a caveat against the granting of the earldom.\textsuperscript{18} The Duke of Newcastle, Lord Privy Seal, who had suggested the title to the Queen (while planning to marry his own daughter to Harley’s son), ignored the caveat and passed the grant. To guard against possible claimants, Harley took the cumbersome single title of ‘Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer’.\textsuperscript{19} He had only a very tenuous relationship with the de Veres (his grandmother, Brilliana Conway, the wife of Sir Robert, was a niece of the wife of a grandson of the fifteenth Earl of Oxford), or for that matter with the Mortimers, but the relationship with the de Veres was recognized in the special remainder granted with the title, that failing heirs male of his body the title was to pass to those of his grandfather, Sir Robert.\textsuperscript{20} This did indeed happen in 1741 when Harley’s nephew succeeded as third Earl. The title marked the arrival of the Harley family at the summit of society despite their origin in the middling gentry and their inadequate financial base.\textsuperscript{21}

Historians have not been slow to follow the recognition by contemporaries of Harley’s pre-eminence in early eighteenth century politics. Despite this there has so far been no satisfactory biography or study of Harley’s ministry of 1710 to 1714. From the contemporary \textit{History of the Four Last Years of the Queen} by Swift\textsuperscript{22} down to the present day, no historian seems to have fully grasped Harley’s complex character and the full range of the subtlety of the manoeuvres which were characteristic of his whole political career. His humour ‘was never to deal clearly or openly’, reflected Lord Cowper, ‘but always with reserve, if not dissimulation, or rather simulation, and to love tricks even where not necessary’.\textsuperscript{23} Obfuscation was raised to an art form by Harley and this, together with the sheer bulk of his correspondence and other papers, private and official, makes his archive difficult to evaluate.
The Harley Papers

On 21 May 1724 Robert Harley died. Seven weeks later Swift wrote from Dublin to the new Earl of Oxford with the request that 'you would please to inspect among Your Father's Papers, whether there be any Memorials that may be of use towards writing his Life'. So daunting was the task that the Earl did not reply until 2 November, and then only that 'I have not at present found any [memoirs] among his papers... There is certainly a very great number of materials for a history, a vast collection of letters and other papers'.

Before examining these papers in detail, two important distinctions must be kept in mind. Firstly, the Harleian Manuscripts were and are distinct from the Harley Papers. They were part of the collection of mediaeval and later materials (by 1715 over 3,000 books, 13,000 charters and deeds, 1,000 rolls and parliamentary journals, and a large collection of letters and other papers) started by Robert and expanded by his son. After the second Earl's death this great collection was split, the books and curios being sold in 1742, while most of the manuscripts came into the possession of the nation in 1753.

This description of the Harley Papers is not concerned with the Harleian Manuscripts as such, only with those papers that relate directly to the Harley family and were generated by its members during their lives. Secondly, a distinction must be made between the Harley Papers and the Portland Collection. The great bulk of the Harley Papers that survive descended to the Bentinck family by the marriage in 1734 of Margaret, only surviving child of the second Earl of Oxford, to the Duke of Portland, and remained at Welbeck Abbey until deposited in various public repositories after the Second World War. The Harley Papers form only a part of this vast family archive, the rest being the papers of the Cavendish-Bentinck family and their connections. There is, however, a considerable body of Harley Papers outside the Portland Collection, mainly those which descended with the title through the third Earl of Oxford. The distinction between these overlapping categories will become clear upon the examination of the various collections.

THE PORTLAND COLLECTION

The vast Portland Collection of manuscripts descended to the seventh Duke of Portland, who in the late 1940s began to deposit parts of the collection in the British Museum Library, the University of Nottingham Library, and the Nottinghamshire Record Office. These deposits were accepted by the Government in March 1986 in lieu of Capital Transfer Tax. In May 1987, upon the advice of The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (H.M.C.) and in accordance with the wishes of the Portland executors, the Government decided that the papers were to remain with the institutions where they were already deposited. This collection from Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire contained the great majority of the Harley Papers. Early on, however, a small section of the collection was separated from the main body of the papers by the marriage in 1759
of Elizabeth Cavendish Bentinck to Thomas Thynne, Viscount Weymouth, later first Marquess of Bath. This section of the Portland archive largely consisted of Harley papers and is now to be found at Longleat House in Wiltshire.

British Library (Loan 29)

This collection, which consists of seven separate deposits by the seventh Duke of Portland between 1947 and 1965, consists mainly of material relating to the Harley family. The only major sections of the loan not concerned directly with the Harleys are the Vere and Cavendish papers, documents relating to Tichfield and Godsfield, and other mediaeval material.

The first main section of the Harley Papers came with the original deposit of 1947, which consisted of seventy-two bound volumes, largely the letters and papers of Robert Harley, first Earl of Oxford, though there is material covering the period 1582 to 1724, containing documents of Sir Robert, Sir Edward Harley, the second Earl of Oxford, and Nathaniel Harley (the first Earl’s brother). The Harley material was calendared by the H.M.C. in volumes III to VI and VIII to IX of their published reports on the Portland Manuscripts. The other material in the first deposit (such as charters, miscellaneous papers, letters of William Stratford to Lord Harley, the Vere and Cavendish papers) were covered in volumes II, VII, and IX. In 1947 there was also a temporary loan (converted into an indefinite loan in 1949) of thirteen box cases of the papers of Humfrey Wanley, librarian to the first two Earls of Oxford.

The second major section of Loan 29 was the second deposit made in 1949 which consisted of 203 volumes and box cases of unbound letters and documents. Though the bulk of this deposit consists of the papers of the first Earl of Oxford, four generations of Harleys are represented from Sir Robert to the third Earl. The next deposit in 1950 of sixty-seven packets of items again mainly related to the first Earl, though the previous four generations of the family were also represented. Several smaller deposits followed in 1952 and 1953, coving the same family span, plus mediaeval charters. The seventh and last deposit of fifty-four packets contained a further major section of the Harley Papers covering five generations, including the wardship papers of the second Earl’s nephew, Thomas Osborne, fourth Duke of Leeds.

Now that these Portland Papers are the property of the British Library they can undergo a programme of conservation and cataloguing. Eventually the current, very rudimentary, outline list of the collection will be replaced by a full catalogue. The present arrangement of Loan 29 is being kept, with very few exceptions. When the unbound papers are arranged in volumes they, along with the existing bound material, will be allocated Additional Manuscript numbers. Besides an index to the catalogue, a concordance should allow the conversion of Loan 29 references into Additional Manuscript numbers.
Within the Portland deposits (1947–68), which consist largely of the papers of the Bentinck family, there are two sections which have Harley material. Firstly, a small but important collection of papers of the first Earl of Oxford was deposited in 1968. This contains mainly private, with some official, correspondence from 1677 to 1724. There are also papers of Oxford's grandfather (Sir Robert), father (Sir Edward), and other members of the family, most notably his uncle (Sir Robert), brother (Auditor Edward), cousin (Thomas), mother (Abigail) and grandmother (Brilliana). Most of this collection originally went unreported by the H.M.C. Further details can be found in the National Register of Archives (N.R.A.) Report no. 7628.

Secondly, the Portland (London) Collection, of which only a rough listing is available (N.R.A. Report no. 28916), contains besides some correspondence and Brilliana Harley's commonplace book of 1622, deeds and legal papers referring to the marriages of Robert Harley in 1694, and of Henrietta Cavendish Holles in 1713, plus her will of 1776. There are also deeds relating to the estates of Wimpole and Bolsover. This collection does not form part of the Portland Papers accepted by the nation in 1986.

The Portland Collection (deposited 1950–69) consists of estate papers, deeds, settlements and legal papers relating to the Bentinck, Cavendish, Harley and Holles families (see N.R.A. Report no. 5959). The Harley material consists largely of deeds of property in Berkshire, Essex, Herefordshire (Brampton and Wigmore), Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire. There are also pedigrees of the family from Sir Robert to the second Earl of Oxford; securities on estates, 1621–1715; leases on Wimpole and other properties, including the London and Middlesex estates; estate and household appointments; surveys and valuations of the Herefordshire, London and Middlesex estates; estate and household correspondence; local legal and administrative papers for Herefordshire; and material on the seventeenth century rebuilding of Brampton Bryan.

This section of the Portland archive consists of twenty-four volumes of papers (plus three boxes and thirty-seven notebooks), only part of which are concerned with the Harley family. Outline reports of the collection can be found in H.M.C., Third Report, Appendix, pp. 193–4, and H.M.C. Bath, vol. I, pp. v–vi. Volumes III to VIII contain the correspondence of Robert Harley with Queen Anne, the first Duke of Marlborough, the Duke of Shrewsbury, Viscount Bolingbroke, the first Earl of Godolphin, and the fourth Earl Rivers. Volumes IX and X contain miscellaneous papers of Harley, along with the correspondence of Sir Robert, Sir Edward and the second Earl of Oxford.
Volume XII holds the letters of Alexander Pope to the second Earl, while volumes XIV to XVI have the correspondence and papers of Margaret, Duchess of Portland (1712–81). Volumes XVIII–XXII are largely concerned with miscellaneous material collected by Margaret and her mother, Henrietta, Countess of Oxford. Other miscellaneous papers fill the rest of the collection, including the letters of Brilliana, wife of Sir Robert Harley, relating to the siege of Brampton Castle in 1643. A large number of these letters from the time of Sir Robert to the second Earl of Oxford have been published in H.M.C. Bath, vol. I. The whole of the Longleat Portland Collection has been microfilmed and a copy is available in the British Library, Department of Manuscripts, M921 (15 reels).

BRAMPTON BRYAN HARLEY PAPERS

A brief listing of these papers can be found in N.R.A Report no. 0686. A more detailed card catalogue of the collection is available at the Herefordshire Record Office, where the papers can be ordered for consultation (photocopies of a small part of the correspondence are permanently available at the Record Office). The papers largely consist of family and estate papers ranging from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Non-estate papers are mainly confined to sundry papers and deeds, including the appointment as J.P.s of the fourth Earl of Oxford and his brother, the Rev. John Harley (Bundle 28); a catalogue of the Harleian Library at Eywood, Herefordshire (the house bought by Auditor Harley in 1702), sold in 1816 (Bundle 39); miscellaneous letters and papers (Bundle 102); and letters and papers of the first Earl of Oxford, the future third Earl, and other members of the family (Bundles 115–17). 28

OTHER HARLEY PAPERS

British Library

There are small caches of Harley items scattered through the Additional, Harleian and Sloane Manuscripts. The most substantial is a volume of family papers for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Add. MS. 40621), which includes letters from Sir Edward to his son Robert. Letters of other members of the family from Sir Edward to Jane, Lady Langdale, including the first to fifth Earls of Oxford, can be found in Add. MSS. 18249–18256, 18258, 18261–18265. A catalogue of the second Earl's manuscript collection, 1708–59, is in Add. MSS. 45699–45711. The recently acquired Blenheim Papers contain many Robert Harley letters (with thirteen different correspondents), including three volumes of Harley-Marlborough correspondence (Add. MSS. 61123–61125). Other major recipients include Godolphin, the Duchess of Marlborough, the political writer Arthur Maynwaring, and Sunderland. Other Harley papers in the British Library are Harleian MSS. 7404–7500 and 7639 A; B (official papers of the first Earl of Oxford); Lansdowne MS. 1236 (for which see below, pp. 206–8); and two Add.
MSS. acquired in 1981: 61899 (miscellaneous papers, including genealogical notes and a printed pedigree, covering the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries), and 61989 (miscellaneous letters, papers and correspondence from the Brampton Bryan archive). A photocopy of the latter volume is available at the Herefordshire Record Office.

Other Repositories

Because of the position of the family in national and county life, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Harley material is to be found in many collections of private papers. This is especially true of Robert Harley, whose letters can often be found in the papers of the major political figures of his day. It is to a lesser extent also true of his successors. Odd items of Harley material also survive in various collections. Edward, third Earl of Oxford, for example, left a valuable parliamentary journal covering part of the time he was in the House of Commons as M.P. for Herefordshire and part of the time he was in the House of Lords (1734–51). This is now Cambridge University Library, Add. MS. 6851. There is also a collection of Harley letters to be found in the Admiral Rodney Papers at the Public Record Office (Kew), P.R.O. 30/20/24/2: letters of the third Earl of Oxford and of his sons, Edward, fourth Earl, and William. The Hereford Public Library has an account book for the Brampton Bryan estate for 1723.

This introduction has benefited greatly from the comments of Frances Harris, David Hayton, Jacqueline Eales, Richard Olney and Christopher Wright.

3 The standard explanation is that it was done at the time of his fall when there was the possibility of his impeachment. It is instructive to remember that Harley’s papers did not suffer the same fate despite his being under impeachment from 1715 to 1717.
4 The bulk of Newcastle’s papers are official rather than personal. Few English politicians of the early eighteenth century left any papers of note, major exceptions being Lord Cowper (the Panshanger Papers at the Hertfordshire Record Office), the 2nd Earl of Nottingham (the Finch Papers at the Nottingham Record Office), and the 3rd Earl of Sunderland (Blenheim Papers at the British Library). The comparison with Scotland is interesting, where all politicians of note (with the exception of the 2nd Duke of Argyll and his brother Lord Ilay) left extensive collections; some (such as the 1st Duke of Montrose’s) rival Harley’s.
5 Dalrymple was making a comparison with the aristocratic Bute.
7 Ibid., vols. ii, iii passim.
8 See the material cited in nn. 16 and 17 below.
11 Brampton Bryan MSS. (Mr Christopher Harley, Brampton Bryan Hall, Herefordshire), Bundle 7: agreement conveying property (including
Brampton Bryan) to Edward Harley, 18 July 1738.


13 See Henning, op. cit., vol. ii, pp. 494–9; Sedgwick, op. cit., vol. ii, pp. 110–12; Namier and Brooke, op. cit., vol. ii, pp. 586–7; unpublished biographies for the period 1690–1715 by David Hayton. I would like to thank Dr Eveline Cruickshanks and Dr Hayton for allowing me to use unpublished material.

14 Stephen Taylor and the present author are editing the parliamentary papers of Edward Harley, 3rd Earl of Oxford.


21 See Harley's attempt to refuse a grant by the Queen of £10,000 to accompany the title (H.M.C. Portland, vol. v, p. 656).


28 Some of the documents from this archive, particularly the letters of Francis Prideaux Gwyn to Edward Harley, jr., will appear in the edition of the parliamentary papers of the 3rd Earl of Oxford being prepared by Stephen Taylor and the present author.

29 An edition of this journal is in preparation, see above n. 28.