INTRODUCTION

Overview

John Hatsell (1733–1820) lived and worked in the House of Commons for sixty years, as Clerk Assistant from 1760 to 1768, and as Clerk of the House from 1768 until his death, albeit with a Deputy performing the work from 1797 onwards. He was celebrated in his life for the Precedents of Proceedings in the House of Commons. Hatsell’s Precedents lost its primacy as a discourse on parliamentary practice following the publication of Thomas Erskine May’s Parliamentary Practice in 1844, but endured as a seminal source book for parliamentary practice and as a work of insight and wisdom on what Hatsell characterized with growing confidence as ‘The Law of Parliament’.

Hatsell’s letters and papers offer important insights into Hatsell as a parliamentary scholar and official practitioner. Hatsell also presents himself as a sharp and often witty observer of the political and social scene. He was both well connected and well informed. His letters demonstrate not only the depth of his knowledge of the business of parliamentary politics, but also his profound understanding of politicians, based on observation, coupled with social interaction. His own occasional journal cum memoirs, which he termed ‘Memorabilia’, helps to explain the insights in his letters, from his voracious appetite for reading and for gossip, and from his sense of history in the making, able to discern the enduring constitutional significance of the political events in which he was closely involved.

‘The best of Fathers’: Family Background

Hatsell’s paternal ancestors were West Country clothiers, and his great-grandfather, Henry Hatsell, served as an MP in Cromwellian parliaments. Hatsell gives pride of place to this Henry Hatsell at the outset of his ‘Memorabilia’. Hatsell then revisited his great-grandfather’s career in the 1796 and 1818 editions of Members/Speaker, the second volume of his Precedents of Proceedings in the House of Commons.
of Commons.¹ Of his grandfather, Sir Henry Hatsell, John has little to say, other than to refer to his five years’ service as Baron of the Exchequer (1697–1702) before being ‘left out’ by Queen Anne. This omission may have been political, although Edward Foss, naming a well-known proceeding at the Surrey Assizes, concluded that the ‘baron’s conduct on this trial does not tell much in favour of his judicial capacity’.²

Hatsell’s father, also Henry (1702–1772), was, like his well-known father before him and more famous most celebrated son after him, a lawyer and Middle Templar, but his career did not approach the heights of either. His son’s later verdict was that he, ‘from too great a delicacy, & too rigid honesty, did not succeed to attain either the Emoluments or Honours usually waiting on that profession’, noting that his income never exceeded £400 in any year.³

On his mother’s side, however, Hatsell had connections to the landed gentry. Hatsell’s mother was Penelope Robinson (1700–1739); her parents were Sir James Robinson (1669–1731) and Anne Jesson, of Cranford Hall, Kettering, Northants. This maternal background may help to explain the ease with which Hatsell integrated into the country house life which he recognized as central to the conduct of public affairs.

Henry and Penelope had five boys of whom John was the eldest. He was born on 22 December 1733.⁴ He grew up in Chancery Lane, then a residential district; the Hatsell family home was among many later demolished to make way for the Public Record Office (now the Maughan Library of King’s College London). After Penelope’s death in 1739, two of John’s brothers (Henry and Philip) died in 1740 at the ages of 5 and 3. Hatsell’s later writings reflect his warmth towards his surviving parent, whom he termed ‘the best of Fathers’.⁵ His surviving younger brothers were named William (1736–1811) and James (1738–1812). Only James (of the three male Hatsells) had children. These were Penelope Hatsell

¹ Members/Speaker, (1796 edn), 377 n. 1. In Appendix No. 3 to that work, Hatsell composed A List of the Names of the Persons returned to serve in Parliament in the Year 1656. His great-grandfather is the only MP meriting Hatsell’s further attention; the footnote he wrote for the 1796 edition of Members/Speaker expands on the Memorabilia Entry 1, pp. 167–168.
³ See pp. 167–168.
⁴ He was baptized on 3 January 1734 on Chancery Lane, presumably at the family home. The baptism records of St. Dunstan’s-in-the-West include the date of birth. His letter of 1 January 1813, p. 157, states that Hatsell celebrated his birthday on 1 January. The transition from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1752, we suggest, explains his preference in this regard.
⁵ See Memorabilia Entry 1, p. 168.
Powys (1783–1864), Frances Hatsell Ley (1784–1850), and Henry Hatsell (1790–1831).

In the 1740s the widowed Henry cut a very minor figure in the literary world revolving around Henry Fielding.\(^6\) Henry’s attempts at raucous humour – dated to the 1740s – later found their way into print in 1765, just as John Hatsell’s career was gathering steam. Henry closes Letter IV with the cringeworthy: ‘I should be glad to see you with a friend or two at South Lambeth, to help drink my landlady into good humour, who is a covetous b------, and is not content with what my little family expends.’\(^7\)

John Hatsell married once, in 1778, to Elizabeth Ekins Barton (1735–1804). Elizabeth’s father, the Rev. Jeffery Ekins (1698/1699–1773), served as rector of Barton-Seagrave, Northamptonshire. The Rev. Ekins was also the executor to the will of Lady Lamington, the great-niece of Isaac Newton, and by her will came into possession of several of Newton’s manuscripts. Elizabeth had previously been married in 1758 to Newton Barton (1707–1768).

Hatsell’s letters relate Elizabeth’s interests and habits, such as riding and sea bathing. Continental travel was not to her taste. He takes a father’s pride in noting the accomplishments of Elizabeth’s two sons by her first marriage. These were John Barton (1759–1803) and Charles William Barton (1762–1808), who went by the name Newton. John married Mary Young (1755–1849) in 1789. After his untimely death in 1803, Mary moved to Hatsell’s house, Marden Park, near Godstone in Surrey, and served as chatelaine to the Hatsell household. Mary and John had no children; neither did Newton, whose life ended by drowning in Worthing, Sussex (1808). Hatsell remembered Mary generously in his will, directing that ‘thirty thousand pounds in the three percent consol annuities [be settled on] Mary Barton [as] a trifling return for those instances of attention and affection which I have received from the said Mary Barton during the last 14 years’.

‘Universal approbation’: Hatsell’s Career

Hatsell followed his father and grandfather into a legal career, being called to the bar on 20 May 1757. He soon came to the attention of Jeremiah Dyson (1722?–1776), Clerk of the House since 1748. Hatsell credited Dyson for his appointment in 1760 as Clerk Assistant; significantly, Hatsell noted that he obtained this post


‘even without any application’ on his part. Hatsell’s other patron was Arthur Onslow (1691–1768) – also a Middle Templar – who served thirty-three years as Speaker until his retirement in March 1761. When Hatsell first took his place in the Chamber on 10 May 1760, Onslow told him in no uncertain terms that, while he may have been chosen by Dyson, ‘now you are appointed […] you are my Clerk’. Hatsell later records that it was under Onslow’s ‘patronage, and […] instruction’ that Hatsell ‘learnt the first rudiments of his Parliamentary knowledge’. Although the overlap between them was only ten months, Hatsell clearly learnt a great deal from observing how Onslow conducted business in the House. Hatsell referred to Onslow as ‘my Old Master’, continuing to visit him in retirement and drawing on his notes and observations for his publications.

In 1762 Dyson left his post as Clerk to become a secretary to the Treasury and thereafter an MP, where he developed a reputation as an assured performer and a procedural expert on tap for the administration. Dyson’s expertise drew criticism; hence Edmund Burke’s reference on 25 February 1774 to persons ‘whose whole soul is a previous question, and whose whole life is the question of the adjournment’. Although Hatsell was Clerk Assistant, the choice of Dyson’s successor fell on Thomas Tyrwhitt (1730–1786). Tyrwhitt’s appointment was probably political, because he had held the post of deputy secretary at war, alongside a fellowship at Merton College Oxford, but he seems to have left little mark in his time as Clerk and in 1768 he surrendered his Letters Patent, preferring a ‘private station’, and devoting his remaining years to literary studies.

By the time of his appointment as Clerk in 1768, Hatsell had clearly acquired the depth of knowledge expected for the role, despite his relative youth. He had ‘serv’d an Apprentice-ship’, as George III remarked when Hatsell kissed his hand.

---

8 *Privilege of Parliament* (1776 edn), vi.
9 *Members/Speaker* (1781 edn), 176, n. 2.
10 *Members/Speaker* (1781 edn), ix.
11 *Members/Speaker* (1781 edn), 67, 155, 156.
12 See p. 150.
13 *Members/Speaker* (1781 edn), ix–x.
15 Thomas Tyrwhitt, *ODNB*. Tyrwhitt’s decision to retire was not made without regret, however. Shortly after Hatsell’s Letters Patent were issued, Tyrwhitt obtained a patent to the office of clerk of the House of Commons in reversion. That is, he would succeed Hatsell if the latter predeceased him. TNA, C.66/3718 f 16, Letters Patent Issued to Thomas Tyrwhitt; 18 June 1768.
16 See Memorabiliab Entry 3, p. 170.
master of them from early in his career. Hatsell’s later publications were derived from ‘a Collection of Precedents which the Compiler made several years ago for his own use’. Some of his letters, particularly those to Charles Jenkinson (1729–1808), later Lord Liverpool, draw upon his compilation. Jenkinson himself was no stranger to the study of the procedure of the House of Commons. In 1762 Jenkinson acquired an untitled MS of 128 pages; it is through this connection that this essay on the procedure of the House of Commons has become known as the ‘Liverpool Tractate’.

In 1776 Hatsell published *Privilege of Parliament*; this was the first volume in what would become the series *Precedents of Proceedings in the House of Commons*. Before publishing that work, Hatsell noted, in his ‘Memorabilia’, the ‘universal approbation which I pride myself in having receiv’d from all Parties’. His next entry records how he turned down an offer to be secretary to a lord lieutenant in Ireland because he could not imagine a post better than that of Clerk of the House. It was an attitude he maintained until his death.

Sir John Sinclair (1754–1835) drew on his thirty-one years’ experience in the House of Commons (1780–1811) to render this judgement: ‘I never met with any one possessed of a clearer head, or sounder understanding, than Mr. Hatsell, who for a great number of years was Clerk of the House of Commons, and who, on all questions of difficulty, was enabled, from his knowledge of the forms of the House, and great experience in Parliament, to solve any doubt that might have arisen. He displayed a great deal of public spirit, and disinterestedness in a very trying situation.’

‘Undeservedly possess’d of a very large Income’: Hatsell’s Earnings and their Uses

In his ‘Memorabilia’, Hatsell describes his ‘present Income’ as ‘larger than I wanted’. The entry is dated in 1776. His income was to grow larger still. Hatsell’s Letters Patent granted privileges and

---

17 *Members/ Speaker* (1781 edn), vii–viii.
18 Catherine Strateman (ed.), *The Liverpool Tractate: An Eighteenth Century Manual on the Procedure of the House of Commons* (New York, 1937). Strateman dates the *Tractate* to 1762 and credits George Grenville with the authorship, xii, xvi. Strateman also concludes that Jenkinson sponsored the *Tractate*, xi–xii.
19 See p. 168.
22 See p. 169.
emoluments to an extent that made him one of the wealthiest public officials in Britain. Hatsell retained financial benefits and a large measure of control over the Clerk’s office until his death in 1820. The immense financial rewards which John Hatsell enjoyed, via his Letters Patent, flowed from the demand for copies of documents generated by the work of the House of Commons. Public bodies, such as the City of London, wished to be kept apprised of developments at Westminster; low-level scrivening in the Clerk’s office satisfied this demand, with the Clerk retaining the lion’s share of the income. Hatsell’s income thus expanded with the growth of legislative business. In 1796, he estimated his annual income at £5,000, of which £2,000 was attributable to fees from enclosure bills. His earnings were to be thrown into sharper relief by his decision to retire from day-to-day duties the following year.

It had been not unusual before 1797 for another Clerk to deputize for the Clerk or Clerk Assistant at the table. Hatsell’s Letters Patent reserved the right to depute performance of an official function. The office of the Clerk of Parliaments, Hatsell’s counterpart in the House of Lords, had been exercised through a Deputy since 1716; from 1788, that post was held by George Rose, one of four remunerative posts he held alongside his main role of Treasury Secretary. Hatsell’s decision to relinquish his day-to-day responsibilities, but continue to hold the office of Clerk was, however, unprecedented in the Commons. He retained his residence in Cotton Garden, within the precincts of the Palace of Westminster, which was repaired in 1816 at a cost of £362.

Hatsell shared half his income with his deputy, John Ley, but was conscious of how open to criticism he was for his position, dreading the ‘crisis’ brought on by the House of Commons Finance Committee’s exposure of sinecures. After his nominal retirement in 1797, Hatsell’s continued claim to the income of the Clerk’s office initially clouded his relationship with Charles Abbot. In 1799 Hatsell fiercely and successfully resisted Abbot’s idea that the Commons

---

25 See pp. 94–95.
26 McKay, 108, n. 1; Williams, Clerical Organization, 14–15.
examine the office of the Clerk of Parliaments, perhaps fearing for what it might mean for his own office.\textsuperscript{30} In 1801, Abbot as chief secretary in Ireland, seeking to arrange for additional clerks to handle Irish legislation, was met with a firm rebuke from Hatsell. ‘I have the sole & exclusive nomination of all the other persons, who may be employ’d about any part of the business of the House, as Clerks.’\textsuperscript{31}

In 1812, a rather unseemly dispute arose between Hatsell and Ley about the financing of a marriage settlement between Hatsell’s niece Frances and Ley’s nephew William Ley. To prove Ley’s means, Hatsell told Speaker Abbot that Ley’s revenues amounted to £34,000.\textsuperscript{32} This concession makes explicit that Hatsell himself had pocketed a like sum. In fourteen years the Clerk and Deputy Clerk of the House of Commons enriched themselves to the tune of one-sixth of a million pounds sterling and they had failed to inform anyone—the Speaker, the Prime Minister or the House of Commons itself—of the immense fortune they were sharing. Parliament took steps to curb this flow of income by legislation, but such was the respect for property rights that the changes only took effect on Hatsell’s death.\textsuperscript{33}

There is another measure of Hatsell’s takings from his office: the last version of his will (as submitted for probate) sets forth the legacies made during his lifetime. For example, he had (as of 1820) ‘formerly given to my two nieces daughters of my late Brother James to each of them twenty thousand pounds strl’. Adding these legacies, Hatsell was able to purchase 3\% consols and Bank of England annuities with a face value of £145,000 during his lifetime.\textsuperscript{34} Hatsell seemed at times embarrassed by his own wealth, claiming in 1806 to be ‘undeservedly possess’d of a very large Income’\textsuperscript{35} and stressing the virtue of charity.\textsuperscript{36}

Hatsell also maintained well-appointed country homes at Bradbourne\textsuperscript{37} (now demolished) and, later, at Marden Park in Surrey (now a private school) in the last twenty-eight years of his

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30}CDC, I, 173–174.
\item \textsuperscript{31}See pp. 127–128.
\item \textsuperscript{32}TNA, PRO 30/9/35, f. 138; 14 April 1812.
\item \textsuperscript{33}39 & 40 Geo. 3 c. 92 House of Commons Offices Act (1800); 52 Geo. 3 c. 11 House of Commons Offices Act (1812).
\item \textsuperscript{34}TNA, Prob 11/1635.
\item \textsuperscript{35}See pp. 134–135.
\item \textsuperscript{36}Memorabilia Entry 45, pp. 205–206.
\item \textsuperscript{37}According to his farm account books, Hatsell leased estates at Bradbourne, near Sevenoaks, and Marden Park from 1792 to 1799 and from 1799 until his death in 1820, respectively. (Taking all of his extant writings into account, Hatsell’s spellings for these estates include ‘Bradburne’ and ‘Morden.’) Parliamentary Archives; collection titled PA_HAT.
\end{itemize}
life. The revenue also funded a domestic ménage at Cotton Garden, the official clerk’s residence within the Palace of Westminster. His account books, preserved at the Parliamentary Archives, offer another measure of the ease he enjoyed in his nominal retirement. During 1819 he recorded household costs of £2,569.77 less ‘Rec’d from farm’ £361.71. This resulted in a net household cost of £2,268.06. Hatsell’s farming income (in 1819) of £361.71 should be compared with his father’s annual gross income of £400. Hatsell became so wealthy that he could afford to conduct his farming operations in such a marginal fashion. His farm income barely dent ed the cost of maintaining his domestic establishment.

‘An Index, or a Chronological Abridgment of the Cases’: The Precedents

Hatsell is more celebrated for his writings than his career as such, intimately connected though they were, and the letters and writings in this volume shed much light on those writings.

As already noted, Hatsell compiled precedents of proceedings in the House from the Journals and a range of other sources for his own use, and then used them as the basis for four separate volumes, dealing successively with Privilege, Members and the Speaker, Lords/Supply and Conferences and Impeachment. (Hatsell never published a ‘Collection on Proceedings in passing Bills’, which he promised to his readers in the first edition of Members/ Speaker).  

Hatsell was uncharacteristically modest about the scope of this enterprise, at least initially. He implied in the context of his volume on privilege, that it was ‘an Index, or a Chronological Abridgment of the Cases to be found upon this subject’. But his collections were always more than that. He rarely used the formulation of the Journals word-for-word in the main body of the text, making their study easier by extracting the essential points from each case, and leavening the formal record with historical sources. The heart of his writings lies in the thematic Observations in each volume, which sift precedents to discern principles of parliamentary practice and, most importantly from the perspective of a working official, to winnow good precedents from bad. This enabled them to serve as a basis for rulings from the Chair and the maintenance of order by the Speaker. Thus, he considers the question of which side should stay in

38 Parliamentary Archives; collection titled PA_HAT.
39 Members/ Speaker (1781 edn), viii.
40 Privilege of Parliament (1776 edn), v.
the Chamber and which side should go forth in the event of division, a time of potential confusion among Members and where the question of who stayed might be felt to affect the result, and concluded: ‘But in these, and every other instance of this sort, it is more material that there should be a rule to go by, than what that rule is.’

The same theme appears in another publication. He introduced his *Collection of Rules and Standing Orders* with an advertisement that these

Orders are indispensably necessary to be observed by all Gentlemen who intend to inclose their Estates, and by all Surveyors, Engineers, Agents, and Solicitors, who are likely to be employed in the Prosecution of Bills for Turnpike Roads and Navigable Canals.

It is not surprising that he began his publications with a discourse on privilege, which was for him at the heart of the development of Parliament’s role as the guardian of liberty. His letters show the extent to which privilege remained a live issue for many Members, including John Wilkes, in respect of whom a small clerical oversight for which Hatsell took responsibility had wider implications.

His second volume on Members and the Speaker was equally fundamental to his enterprise. His own career was founded on his relationships with successive Speakers, beginning with Onslow who remains central to his vision of the Speakership. It is striking that in the later editions produced after his retirement from the Chamber, Hatsell refers to reliance on information and notes on procedural developments of the Speaker, Charles Abbot, rather than his own Deputy.

The third and fourth volumes deal with the development of rules in areas such as Supply and Impeachment, which he knew were fiercely contested in an era when the procedural groundwork was being laid for the transformation of the fiscal machinery of the State by William Pitt and when the impeachment and trial of Warren Hastings was a feature of parliamentary proceedings.

At the outset of his enterprise, Hatsell disavowed writing about contemporary events and rulings, but as he proceeds through the volumes and editions, the commentary in his Observations becomes increasingly laden with anecdotes and insights drawn from current

41 *Members/Speaker* (1781 edn), 138.
42 [John Hatsell], *A Collection of Rules and Standing Orders of the House of Commons; Relative to the Applying for and Passing Bills, for Inclosing and Draining of Lands, Making Turnpike Roads, Navigations, and Other Purposes* (London, 1774), 1.
43 See pp. 29–30.
44 *Privilege of Parliament* (1818 edn), v–vi.
events. He was also conscious of the influence his writings could have and adapted them in the light of this. Thus, in October 1790, he told Speaker Addington of a dinner party exchange with the Duchess of Gordon about admission to the galleries of the Chamber. He reported that ‘Her grace made a violent attack upon me […] as an enemy to the admission of Women.’ He confirmed his ‘very decided opinions upon the subject’, but she suggested she might win the point owing to powerful political support: ‘I ventur’d to offer a Wager that She would be mistaken.’

He increased his own chances of winning the wager by an addition to the third, 1796, edition of Members/Speaker noting how the last and present Speaker had constantly declined requests for ladies to be admitted to the gallery. Hatsell declared that, if this privilege was ‘allowed, to any one individual, however high her rank, or respectable her character and manners, the galleries must be soon opened to all women, who, from curiosity, amusement, or any other motive, wish to hear the debates’, making attendance difficult for ‘many young men’ whose attendance was ‘necessary to them and of real use and importance to the publick’. Jeremy Bentham, in his Essay on Political Tactics (a work some of which was composed and published in 1791) also struggled with the issue: ‘Females are not permitted to be present at the parliamentary debates,’ he opined. ‘They have been excluded from the House of Commons, after the experiment has been tried, and for weighty reasons.’

‘With You, & towards You, I always think aloud!’: The Letters

A total of 297 letters (including fragments and memoranda composed as letters or preserved with other letters) have been located in public and private collections in the United Kingdom. We have selected either the complete text or portions of 138 for inclusion. The majority of Hatsell’s letters and associated memoranda in this volume are directed to eight correspondents. These are Wm. Eden/Auckland 53 letters, Henry Addington/Sidmouth 32, John Ley 21, Wm. Pitt the Younger 8, Charles Abbot/Colchester 8, Charles Jenkinson/Liverpool 4, and Nathaniel Ryder/Harrowby 3.

John Ley (1737–1814) was a fellow Cambridge graduate and Middle Templar. Moreover, like the Hatsells (and many other

---

45 See pp. 77–78.
46 Members/Speaker (1796), 176 n.1.
Middle Templars), Ley had West Country connections. Hatsell appointed him Clerk Assistant in 1768. Of the 112 letters that the Devon Heritage Centre holds, we draw on selections from 21 letters. When they worked together, their correspondence was largely reserved for recesses, and often concerned travel adventures and family gossip, and so a small selection is judged to suffice. Ley died in 1814 but the last letter preserved is dated in 1803, reflecting the deterioration in their relationship.

Hatsell’s relationship with Addington as Speaker was exceptionally close, reinforced by social links. One of Hatsell’s stepsons obtained an ecclesiastical preferment to the parish of Addington’s country home and Addington appointed the other stepson as his private secretary. We include thirty-two letters from a correspondence which continued during Addington’s premiership, although no letters after 1803 survive.

Hatsell’s most enduring correspondence was with William Eden, a fellow Middle Templar, an MP, and later Lord Auckland. Their correspondence, from which we publish fifty-three letters, charts Eden’s passage to diplomat and then, as a late convert to Pitt’s cause, an effective administrator. The correspondence alludes to the difficulties in Auckland’s personal relations with Pitt occasioned by the termination of Pitt’s courtship with Auckland’s daughter. It also shows Hatsell’s concerns at the proposed income tax, and its apparent inability to distinguish between earned and unearned income.

Five letters from Hatsell to Pitt the Younger survive, three of which are accompanied by an extensive memorandum, and we produce each letter and memoranda in full. Hatsell offers serious and thoughtful discussion into the ways and means of promoting Pitt’s ultimate goal: using legislated financial arrangements to secure investor support for his administration, with Hatsell focused particularly on the use of life annuities. His letter to Pitt of 26 March 1787 and the accompanying memorandum on impeachment demonstrate how he had the Prime Minister’s confidence sufficiently to offer blunt advice, not about procedure as such, but about the realities of managing the House’s business. Burke had begun his attack on Hastings on 17 February 1786, but Commons proceedings on the impeachment could not be completed during that Session. The examination of witnesses resumed in January 1787, but progress was slow. On 22 March 1787 it was suggested that the witnesses ‘should be examined

48 Called to the Bar (1757).
49 John Barton was vicar of Sonning, Berkshire, and was later appointed Chaplain to the Speaker, p. 92 and note. On Newton Barton’s appointment as Private Secretary, p. 82 and note.
before a committee above stairs’, but Dundas and Pitt had vehemently opposed the idea of a select committee. The Ministers had a shared interest with Burke in a thorough approach, which enabled the Ministers to pick and choose which charges they would support, and debate that day concluded with apparent agreement between them and Burke to continue as before.\(^{50}\) Hatsell’s letter and memorandum set out the political and reputational risks of such a path, with the final charges considered in such a poorly attended House as to constitute ‘a disgrace’.\(^{51}\) In the debate the next day, Pitt avowed ‘that he had himself made up his mind on’ all the charges levelled against Hastings, urging the House to take steps to enable the matter to come to a head, which it did with final votes on impeachment in the first half of May.\(^{52}\)

The correspondence with Abbot commenced after Hatsell’s partial retirement, but Hatsell remained willing to offer the Speaker both procedural advice and political opinions. We saw earlier his attitudes to the attendance of women in the gallery of the House of Commons, and his closing letters to Abbot reflect a hardening of views on women provoked by the Queen Caroline affair.

The four letters to Jenkinson we publish cover largely procedural matters, whereas the letters to Nathaniel Ryder indicate a far closer relationship, including frank assessments of the political scene and parliamentary debates.

Correspondents receiving a single letter are John Wilkes, Edmund Burke, William Eldred, Anne Macvicar Grant, Thomas Mathias, John Sinclair, John Strange, and Dudley Ryder. We also include Hatsell’s ‘resignation’ letter to the House of Commons (1797).

Hatsell relates his cameo appearance in Mathias’s ‘Pursuits of Literature’: ‘He again does me the honour to speak very handsomely of one in the Prefatory-discourse.’\(^{53}\) His only letter to Anne Macvicar Grant—a poet to whom Hatsell confesses a great admiration—is included in full. ‘I have never risen from the several of these Volumes, without feeling myself a happier, & better Man.’\(^{54}\)

What has been selected for inclusion in this volume is sufficiently rich to permit the reader to measure Hatsell’s reliability as a narrator of the history which he relates. He urged Addington to reconcile with Pitt, advice which presaged Pitt’s return to power the following year.

---


\(^{51}\) See p. 71.


\(^{53}\) See p. 112.

\(^{54}\) Letter to Anne Grant; 26 April 1806. See p. 134.
Hatsell makes ‘no apology for having written’ to Addington on this subject. As

I may flatter myself, I have a right to say to You, what came with more importance from a Greater Personage, That, with You, & towards You, I always think aloud!\textsuperscript{55}

‘Having had an opportunity of knowing more, than a private person’: The ‘Memorabilia’

To an even greater degree than his letters, Hatsell’s ‘Memorabilia’ entries demonstrate the scope and nature of Hatsell’s involvement in high politics in the 1770s and 1780s. There are sixty-two entries; he made his first entry in 1775 and his last in 1797. In many cases, Hatsell states that he composed his entries at the time of the events he describes. They begin with the family history referred to earlier and end with a series of reflections on his classical reading.

Hatsell’s voice is that of a reliable witness to proceedings at Westminster. Hatsell elevated the expectations of the reader of his ‘Memorabilia’.

Having had an opportunity of knowing more, than would naturally fall to the share of a private person, of the very curious circumstances attending this change in the Administration, I have thought fit to preserve them to Posterity; not only for this curiosity, but as I think this History conveys a very important lesson, both to the Monarch & the People.\textsuperscript{56}

Hatsell’s unique position – seen as a honest broker by all parties and sufficiently separate from the political hurly-burly to record events objectively – makes him an invaluable resource. The ‘Memorabilia’ are also crucial for understanding Hatsell’s interpretation of the momentous political events through which he lived.

‘The true & essential Interests of the people’: Hatsell on Politics

Hatsell provides a brutal assessment of the failings of Lord North personally and of his administration. He comes to office knowing nothing of foreign affairs, and refuses to learn from those who do.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} See p. 130.
\textsuperscript{56} Memorabilia Entry 19. See p. 193.
\textsuperscript{57} See pp. 212–213.
His actions in response to the rebellion in the American colonies are always too little and too late. His government’s fatal flaw for Hatsell lies in the fact that it derives its existence from the wishes of the monarch, rather than from the breadth of its support in the House of Commons, so that North, ‘by the King’s support, maintaing’d his Post, until half the Empire was torn away’. Hatsell welcomes the loss of the American colonies, because it prevents the further enlargement of the patronage State, expressing ironic gratitude that ‘Providence by the means of George, the 3d, chose out the only set of Men, that could be found in the Nation, for Ministers by whose blunders, & inattention, & want of foresight this blessing could have been dispense’d.’

Hatsell provides a compelling account of the discussions leading to the formation of Rockingham’s administration in March 1782 in his ‘Memorabilia’. Paul Langford wrote that this episode represented a landmark in constitutional history. The ministerial changes of 1782 involved a more extensive upheaval among office-holders than any since 1714, virtually replacing one administration with another drawn from opposition. Rockingham also came to power with what would have to be described in modern parlance as a legislative programme.

This has echoes of what Hatsell predicted as ‘the Conclusion which Historians will draw’ from the events he related:

no power of the Crown, no extraordinary exertion of influence, nor even the personal wishes of the Monarch, can stand in competition with the good of the Country, & the true & essential Interests of the People.

The correspondence charts Hatsell’s intellectual journey from an enlightened Whig in the 1770s and early 1780s to an increasingly conservative figure following the onset of the Revolution in France. Prior to 1789 Hatsell travelled widely in France, Italy, and Switzerland, seeking an audience with Voltaire along the way and investigating other countries and cultures. He was politically detached, priding himself on the high opinions of politicians of different hues and expressing indifference as to the outcome of the 1784 general election.

From 1789, and more particularly from the outset of the Revolutionary Wars, his horizons narrow as his travel is confined...
within England. After his retirement from active clerking, he becomes more willing to express political opinions, increasingly stern in defence of the status quo in Church and State. He commends Burke’s writings for their ‘Sound Philosophy’ and ‘Wisdom & Foresight’. He remains a sharp observer of politics, social change, and the wealth generated by industry. Throughout, he shows sympathy and understanding of politicians and the challenges they face, and offers stronger insights accordingly.

‘The Wisdom & Foresight of the wisest Politicians’

John Hatsell, an honest broker of inside information, served a readership that he was confident would be curious about the times in which he lived and worked. Accordingly Hatsell assures us that the relation of historical events is a didactic enterprise.

It may also be argued that Hatsell’s letters and ‘Memorabilia’ reveal another purpose. Members of Parliament grappled with highly unpredictable events. In 1781 Hatsell declared that the British ‘Constitution […] had for its direct object Political Liberty; so there is none other in which the laws are so well calculated to secure and defend the life, the property, and the personal liberty of every individual.’ This declaration may be taken as a statement of the grand theme that unifies the four volumes of his Precedents.

If a constitution is ‘calculated to secure and defend’ life, property, and liberty, then it must also be answerable to the purpose of enabling ‘the Wisdom & Foresight of the wisest Politicians’. The four volumes of his Precedents of Proceedings in the House of Commons take as their implicit purpose the task of detailing parliamentary machinery at work. Hatsell elaborates what this machinery is, what it does, and what it does not do. This machinery was designed to link the aspirations of a ‘new system of government’ (Hatsell refers to events ‘at the [Glorious] Revolution’, 1688–1689) to the technical challenges involved in ‘better securing the rights, liberties, and privileges of the people of this country’. As he asserts most strikingly in his letter to Addington on 1 March 1796, ‘the establish’d practice’ of the House was derived from the gathered wisdom of past generations. Hatsell also recalled the maxim attributed by Onslow to old and experienced Members:

62 See p. 81.
63 Members/Speaker (1781 edn), xi. Internal quote marks omitted. See p. 193.
64 Memorabilia Entry 61. See p. 217.
65 Lords/Supply (1796 edn), 179.
66 See p. 97.
That nothing tended more to throw power into the hands of Administration, and those who acted with the majority of the House of Commons, than a neglect of or departure from these rules – That the forms of proceeding, as instituted by our ancestors, operated as a check and control on the actions of Ministers, and that they were, in many instances, a shelter and protection to the minority, against the attempts of power.  

Of course, politics abide in the material world which supplies a steady stream of irrational, indeterminate, and unpredictable events as well as those which may be taken as if they were randomly generated. Stupidity and cupidity, likewise, provide a vibrant counterpoint to the successes of politicians. If human beings were not prone to fail in achieving transcendental aspirations, there would be no purpose in parliamentary proceedings.

Hatsell’s writings chart those failures, but do so with warmth as well as insight. His hitherto unpublished writings complement the published works for which he was celebrated in his lifetime and broaden our understanding of them. Hatsell’s letters and ‘Memorabilia’ stand alone and offer a testament to Hatsell’s knowledge of high politics, which he shared with his readers through his observations on social and political change during the reign of George III. When Hatsell privately published a selection of his favourite poems, the volume opened with Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’. ‘Let not Ambition mock their useful toil’ is a motto that well serves Hatsell’s life and work, and that motto might even be applied, in a liberal spirit, to many of the persons about whom Hatsell wrote.

Note on Sources

A total of 297 letters (including fragments and memoranda composed as letters or preserved with other letters) have been located in public and private collections in the United Kingdom, alongside some letters which now survive only in print. We have selected either the complete text or portions of 138 for inclusion. The archival location of each manuscript letter is identified prior to the letter itself. We also include Hatsell’s ‘resignation’ letter to the House of Commons (1797). Letters selected from the published volumes on Charles Abbot and William Eden are noted as such prior to the letter. We

67 Members/Speaker (1781 edn), 157.
68 Select Poems (London: ‘Printed in 1795’).
note the instances when we publish a fresh transcription derived from manuscript sources.

Unlike the scatterings of Hatsell’s private correspondence, his ‘Memorabilia’ has been remained as a single bound volume and is now held by Huntington Library at San Marino (near Los Angeles, California). The volume is in Hatsell’s own hand, to a generally higher standard of handwriting than many of his letters, and internal evidence suggests it was written contemporaneously.

69 The volume was listed for sale in 1989, but the list price of £150 did not tempt any buyers, and Bloomsbury Book Auctions sold the record book holding the Memorabilia entries to the Huntington Library in 1989. The British Library holds a virtually unreadable copy, RP 4177/3.