

WAX SEALS

Seals were flat, round pieces of **wax** that acted like a person's signature does today. Because most people could not write their own name, they had to have someone else write up their documents for them. But in order to show the reader of the document that it was from them, they attached their personal seal to it. The wax was melted down and stamped with a personal design, before hardening onto the piece of parchment. Because it was extremely difficult to copy someone else's design, seals were very important for recognising who a document was from and spotting fake documents.

The stamp which pressed the design down into the wax was called the **matrix**. The design usually showed the person doing something: riding a horse, sitting on a throne, or standing dressed in religious robes. Sometimes the design was an animal, often birds or mythical creatures like a griffin.

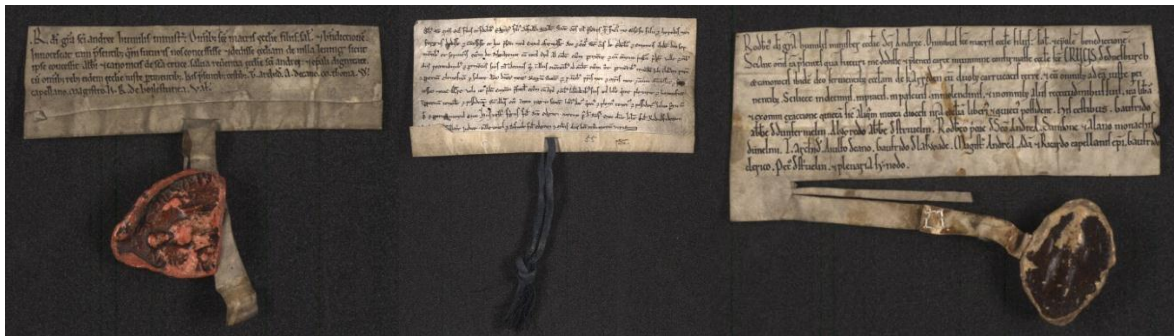
Royal seals were special because they were **double-sided**: they had one picture on each side to show off different sides of the king's personality. For example, he might be riding a horse on one side to display his good military skills and sitting on a throne on the other to show that he was a good ruler.

The design usually had words round the edge. This was called the **legend**. These were in Latin and told you whose seal it was with their full title. For example, David I's first seal said 'Seal of Earl David, brother of the queen of the English' but once he was king he had a new one made which said 'David, by God's rule king of the Scots'.

King Alexander III (1249–86) had two different kinds of seal: his **Great Seal** was used for very important public documents; his **Privy Seal** was used for everyday and personal business.

It wasn't just individual people that had their own seals. Sometimes groups of people had a seal, like the government or a burgh. In the War of Independence, the Guardians of Scotland had their own seal made when they were running the country. The seal had an image of St Andrew (the patron saint of Scotland) on one side and a shield of the royal Scottish arms on the other. Burgh towns like Glasgow also used their seal when they were making decisions on how to run the town.

Seals could be **attached** to a document in two ways: either by looping a piece of parchment (left) or string (middle) through a slit in the bottom, or by cutting into the bottom of the manuscript and attaching the seal to the tag (right).



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Seals were sometimes attached to important documents by lots of people to show that they agreed with the document. For example, the **Declaration of Arbroath** had the seals of the most important Scottish barons attached to it.



Here are examples of the seal of **William the Lion** (king of Scots 1165–1214). His seal is two-sided: on one side he is riding a horse (left); on the other he is sitting on a throne (right). Only kings had two-sided seals.



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Here is an example of the seal of **Alexander II** (king of Scots 1214–1249). This side shows him sitting on a throne.



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Here is the impression of the seal of **John Balliol** (king of Scots 1292–1304). His seal is also two-sided.



A remake of the seal of the **Guardians of Scotland** is available on the National Archives of Scotland website: <http://www.nas.gov.uk/about/051124.asp>

On one side it shows **St Andrew** with the legend (writing round the edge): 'Saint Andrew be the leader of the compatriot Scots'.

On the other side it shows the **lion rampant** (the heraldic symbol of the Scottish crown) with the legend: 'the seal of Scotland appointed for the government of the kingdom'.

Here is an example from a much later period: it is the seal of **James I** (king of Scots 1406–1437). Like the seal of the guardians, it also shows the lion rampant in the middle of a shield, representing the Scottish crown.



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Here is an impression of the seal of **King Edward of England** (probably Edward III, 1327–77). Like John Balliol's, his seal is two-sided showing him riding a horse and sitting on a throne.



Here are the impressions of seals of some important **Scottish bishops**.

Left: Jocelin, bishop of Glasgow (d.1199)

Middle: Richard, bishop of St Andrews (d.1178)

Right: Robert Wishart, bishop of Glasgow (d.1316)



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Here are the seals of the **prior of St Andrews** (left) and of **St Andrews Priory** (right). The prior's seal shows him standing like the bishops, while the priory itself (that is all the priests who live there) shows the priory building on its seal. More seals would have been attached to the other tags on this document, but they have fallen off over time.



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Here is the seal of a nobleman called **Thor son of Swain**. Thor was a noble lord and the sheriff of Edinburgh from around 1140 to 1153. His seal also shows him riding a horse and wearing a helmet.



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Here is the seal of a nobleman called **Uhtred, son of Fergus**. Uhtred was the lord of Galloway from 1161 to 1174 when he died. His seal seems to show a stag.



NRS 45/13/233. With grateful acknowledgement to the National Records of Scotland.

Here is the seal of a nobleman called **Ness of London**. He died in either 1232 or 1233. His seal shows him riding on a horse and holding a sword.



NRS 45/13/254. With grateful acknowledgement to the National Records of Scotland.

Here is the seal of a nobleman called **Roger de Quincy**. Roger was the earl of Winchester, and the constable of Scotland. He died in 1264. Like most noble knights, his seal shows him riding on a horse, and you can see that he is wearing lots of armour.



NRS 45/13/262. With grateful acknowledgement to the National Records of Scotland.