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Medieval seals

What can seals tell us about medieval times?

Key Stage 3 | Medieval 974-1485

Lesson resource



Introduction

A medieval seal was used to prove that a document was really from the person or group that it said it was from. Not everyone sealed a document with their own personal seal. Seals have designs which show us what people wanted to say about themselves and the institutions that they were involved in.

This lesson looks at what seals can tell us about what it was like to live in medieval England and Ireland. It also explores why people from a range of social backgrounds might need or want to have a seal of their own.

Suitable for:

KS 3

Time period:

Medieval 974-148

Connections to curriculum:

Key stage 3:

The development of Church, state and society in Medieval Britain 1066-1509.

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Teachers' notes

In this lesson students examine 5 seals from the medieval period and one from outside it. They belong to a range of people and reflect a mix of designs in order to give students an insight into medieval society.

The first seal that students examine belongs to a noblewoman, Nicholaa de la Haye who inherited the role of constable of Lincoln Castle and the role of sheriff of Lincolnshire in the late twelfth century. Her seal shows her holding a falcon, reflecting her interest in falconry. The second seal is that of Gerald fitz Maurice, the earl of Desmond, who worked for the king in Ireland as the chief governor at time of issuing his document with a seal. The third seal belongs to John de Warenne, earl of Surrey. Here, students can see a really detailed seal which demonstrates his role and position in society. The fourth seal is attached to a document concerning the property rights of a woman named Desiree. The fifth source is a very striking document with many individual seals attached to it. It is an agreement about land exchange in Lincolnshire for other common lands and pasture in the early 13th century. Our final seal from Canterbury Cathedral in 1534, although outside the medieval period, shows earlier events involving the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170. It also gives opportunity to discuss its impact and how Canterbury Cathedral became a centre of pilgrimage.

Finally, full captions are provided to explain the context of each seal. Teachers may want to divide the sources in the lesson for students to work individually or in a pair/group. Students should also be encouraged to think about the value of looking at this evidence as part of their enquiry: What can seals tell us about medieval times?

Sources

Illustration image: Seal of John de Warenne, Catalogue Ref: E 26/1, B57

1. Seal of Nicholaa de la Haye, Catalogue ref: DL 25/2890
2. Seal of Gerald fitz Maurice, Catalogue ref: E 213/169i
3. Seal of John de Warenne, Catalogue Ref: E 26/1, B57.
4. Seal of Desiree, daughter of Ernulf son of Alulf, Catalogue ref: DL 25/127.
5. Sealed document agreement between the men of two Lincolnshire villages and the earl of Chester and Lincoln, Catalogue ref: DL 27/270.
6. Seal of Canterbury Cathedral, Catalogue ref: E 25/25.

Background

During the 'Middle Ages' in England and most of western Europe, instead of signing important documents or providing your password to prove who you are, you would attach your seal to a document to prove your identity. Many people could not write their own names and so by using a seal, they could show that they agreed with the document's contents in a way that could then be checked if needed. Sometimes people borrowed seals when they needed them rather than having their own, but what mattered was that the document was sealed in front of witnesses who could say that yes, the document was authentic and that its contents were correct.

Seals are usually made of beeswax (though the Pope used lead) and usually have a design on them, created by pressing a stamp known as a matrix into softened wax. Whoever was making the seal would heat the wax slightly so that it was about as soft as plasticine so then it could be pressed into the matrix. Some matrices were one-sided and quite small, for example, if they were set into a ring. Large double-sided seals were created by putting a disc of wax between two metal sheets with designs on them that were screwed together to imprint the design on the wax. Dyes could be added to the beeswax to colour it and make it more distinctive and look attractive and impressive.

Seal designs could be very personal and unique, or they could be bought ready-made. Personal designs tell us quite a lot about how people or an institution like a school or a hospital wanted to represent themselves on a public document. Sometimes, though, a seal might just be a blob of wax added to a document.

Medieval society was strongly hierarchical. At the top were the king and the nobility, who held large amounts of land in blocks known as manors from the king. The king had responsibility for justice and for war, and his government was based in London. The English king also claimed rights in France and Scotland and governed the lordship of Ireland, while from 1301 the heir to the throne was usually Prince of Wales. Other landowners who were not nobles were known as the gentry and were important in local government and Parliament. The land was worked by yeomen and peasants who might pay rent or who might owe a certain number of days work and other services and renders for their land. Customs varied across different parts of the country.

In addition to a hierarchy on the land, there were two other important areas of medieval society. Towns and cities had privileges of their own and were often independent of the surrounding manors. Here you would often find craftspeople and merchants, who were governed by guilds. A craftsperson had to pass a series of requirements to be accepted into them, so a goldsmith would have to prove his skill in making fine objects, including seal matrices, for example. Women might inherit family craft businesses and run them themselves. Women also traditionally made ale.

The final major part of medieval society was the Catholic Church, which had parish churches across Europe, where people were married, had their children welcomed into the church and where they were buried. Additionally, monasteries and cathedrals were large institutions where people came to pray, and which held large amounts of land themselves.

People could and did move around. They might seek work somewhere else or move down the road. Land and houses could be bought and sold. People could use the law-courts to argue about property boundaries or the terms of an agreement. Seals and the documents they are attached to tell us lots about changes in people's lives and society at large.

Tasks

Source 1

In this document Nicholaa de la Haye has granted land to a man named Simon. Nicholaa de la Haye was a noblewoman who inherited the role of constable of Lincoln Castle and the role of sheriff of Lincolnshire in the late twelfth century. She personally directed the defence of Lincoln Castle at least twice. She also defended it against French attackers in 1217, when Prince Louis of France tried to claim the English throne instead of the nine-year-old Henry III. Catalogue ref: DL 25/2890

Look carefully at both sides of Nicolaa de la Haye's seal attached to the document. Remember that the front of the seal is called the 'obverse' and the 'reverse' is the back of the seal.

- How would you describe this seal?
- Is there anything in the design that shows her importance and interests?
- Does this seal give any clues of her role as constable and sheriff? If not, why do you think they are not shown?
- What does this seal reveal about women in medieval times?

Source 2

From around 1369, Gerald Fitz Morice, the earl of Desmond, who held lands in southern and western parts of Ireland, attached his personal seal to this document. He was working for the king in Ireland as the chief governor and was supposed to be paid £500 each year. In the document he says that he has received some of the money at the Dublin exchequer, which held the king's money in Ireland. Catalogue ref: E 213/169i

- Can you use the TNA calculator to work out how much £500 would mean today?
- Why do you think he received only part of the money?
- Why do you think he had this document written?
- Why might he want to prove that he has been paid?

Now look carefully at Gerald fitz Maurice's seal. Notice the shields on the seal which show the saltire cross of his relatives in the fitz Gerald family. The fitz Gerald family was significant in Ireland too. They had been heavily involved in the English invasion there in 1169.

- Why do you think Gerald fitz Maurice refers to his relatives in the design of his seal two centuries later?
- What do you think this design reveals about Gerald fitz Maurice?
- What does this seal reveal about medieval times?

Source 3

This seal from 1301 is that of nobleman, John de Warenne, earl of Surrey. Noblemen were trained warriors and could be military commanders as well as major landowners, and John de Warenne

Tasks

was no exception. He took part in Edward I's wars in Wales and Scotland in the 1280s and 1290s among other campaigns and duties. The pattern of squares everywhere on the seal are Warenne's coat of arms, a chequerboard of gold and blue. Catalogue Ref: E 26/1, B57.

- How would you describe the figure on the seal?
- What is he holding?
- Why do you think he has his coat of arms on everything?
- Why might this be a useful way to identify himself?
- What message do you think John de Warenne wants to send with this seal image?
- Does the seal reveal anything else about the times in which John de Warenne lived?

Source 4

Look at this seal from around 1250. It is attached to a document in which a woman named Desiree, who was the daughter of Ernulf son of Alulf, gave up her rights to a house in London near St Paul's Cathedral which was owned by her mother, Denise. The house had originally been owned by Ernulf, and so these documents probably represent a shifting around of property after his death. London was an important commercial and manufacturing centre and so this house was very valuable. Catalogue ref: DL 25/127.

- How would you describe Desiree's seal?
- Do you think this is a seal designed specifically for her?
- Why might she need or want a seal of her own?
- Why do you think some people had seals which showed objects rather than people?
- Houses could be used as workshops and shops as well as places to live. Do you think Denise is likely to have been using the house for a business?
- What kinds of businesses do you think existed in London in the thirteenth century?
- What does this document and its seal suggest to you about women's lives and rights?

Source 5

This document with many seals is an agreement between the men of two Lincolnshire villages and the earl of Chester and Lincoln, where they all agree to exchange lands in West Fen in Lincolnshire for other common lands and pasture in the early 13th century. Catalogue ref: DL 27/270.

- How many seals can you see?
- Why do you think there are so many seals attached to the document?
- Why do you think it was important to have as many people as possible to agree to this exchange of lands?
- Are the seals individual enough to be identified?
- Do you think what matters is that the document has many seals which represent many people?
- Are there any designs that you particularly like?
- What insight does this document give about medieval times?

Tasks

Look at these seals again: number 1: Nicolaa de la Haye, a noblewoman; number 3: John de Warenne, a nobleman, number 4: Desiree, daughter of Ernulf from London.

- Which is the smallest seal?
- Which is the most complicated?
- Do these seals have anything in common?
- Can we tell anything about the importance of these 3 people from their seals?
- How do you think each seal is related to its owner's position in society?
- Write 10 lines which sum up the value of using medieval seals to find out about this early period of history. Use examples from this lesson to explain your ideas.

Source 6

This is not a medieval seal. It is the seal of Canterbury Cathedral from 1534. It is particularly large and has images on both sides. On the obverse, it shows the story of Thomas Becket from earlier times, who was killed inside the cathedral in 1170. Like many monasteries and cathedrals, it shows pictures of the cathedral itself on the reverse. The motto around the edge was written in Latin and said: "The Seal of Christ's Church Canterbury, the principal bishopric of Britain". Catalogue ref: E 25/25.

Look carefully at both sides of the seal belonging to Canterbury Cathedral. Remember that the front of the seal is called the 'obverse' and the 'reverse' is the back of the seal.

- Can you find out and explain what happened to Thomas Becket shown in the obverse of the seal?
- Who are the figures shown on the obverse of the seal? Where is the scene taking place?
- Why do you think the monks wanted to reveal Becket's story on their seal?
- What are the buildings shown on the reverse of the seal? Can you describe them?
- What do you think the figures shown on the reverse of seal are meant to show? Why are they included do you think?
- Can you find the motto around the edge of the seal?
- What does the amount of detail on the seal reveal about the monks who used it?
- What does the seal reveal about the importance of religion?

Source 7

Design your own seals.

- Can you design your own seal to show who you are?
- Include your own motto around the edge.
- What would a seal for your school or a club you are involved in look like?
- What elements would you want to represent on it?

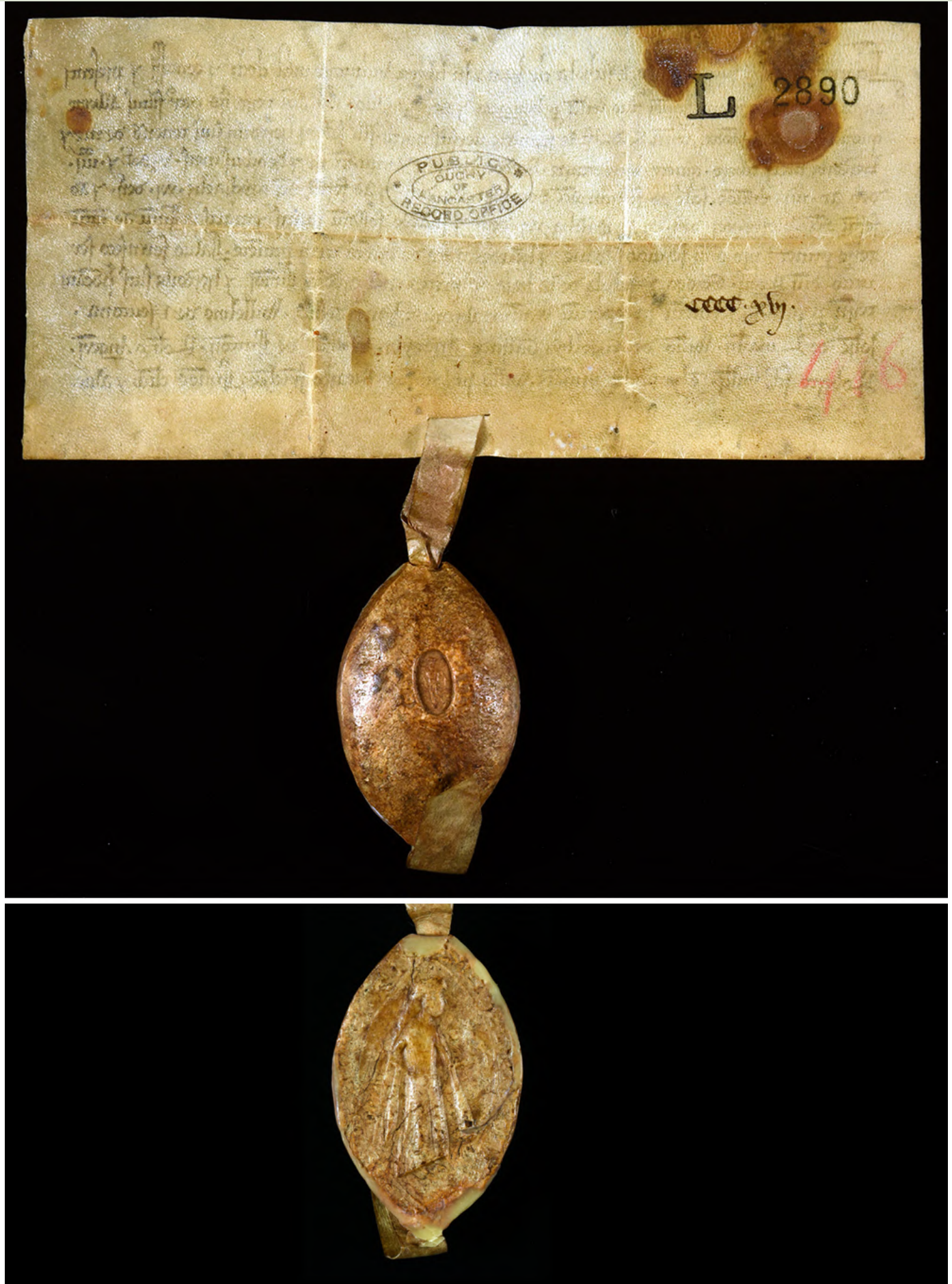
Source 1: Nicholaa de la Haye's seal, 1201-1266.

Catalogue Ref: DL 25/2890



Source 1: Nicholaa de la Haye's seal, 1201-1266 - full document.

Catalogue Ref: DL 25/2890



Source 2: Gerald Fitz Morice's seal, 1368-69.

Catalogue Ref: E 213/169i



Source 2: Gerald Fitz Morice's seal, 1368-69 - full document.

Catalogue Ref: E 213/169i



Source 3: John de Warenne, earl of Surrey's seal, 1301.

Catalogue Ref: E 26/1, B57



Source 4: Desiree, daughter of Ernulf son of Alulf's seal, 1201-1266.

Catalogue Ref: DL 25/127



Source 4: Desiree, daughter of Ernulf son of Alulf's seal, 1201-1266 - full document. Catalogue Ref: DL 25/127

Scdm p[re]sentes & fut[ur]a Q[uo]d Ego Desiderata filia Ernulfi filii Alulfi & uxoris sue Dionisie
 in mea legit[im]a potestate & iunguntate mea & eadem spontanea uoluntate mea remisi quietamclama
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 cont[ra] murum Cimitu[m] Gate s[an]c[t]i Pauli ex p[re]d[ic]ta quilonali in p[re]s[ent]e s[an]c[t]e fidei de Crugas sine
 iure hereditario ut rone testam[en]ti. Salend[um] & tenend[um] de Dionisie & eius assignatis & heredib[us]
 eor[um] ex me & heredes meos lib[er]e quiete b[on]e & in pace i[m]petuum sicut medam puram & finalem re
 missionem & quietamclamat[io]nem. Et sciend[um] est q[uo]d nec ego Desiderata p[re]d[ic]ta nec heredes mei
 nec aliquis p[ro] nos ut p[ro] nob[is] ius ut clamum in p[re]d[ic]ta maritagio cum p[re]sentis aliquo modo h[ab]ere
 potimus ut debemus. Nec aliquid inde h[ab]ere exigere ut clamare potimus i[m]petuum. Hac
 autem mea remissione quietamclamat[io]ne & forisaffidat[io]ne dedit michi da[m]na Dionisia Cui
 q[uo]d g[ra]tia m[ar]cas esterlingor[um]. Et ut hec mea remissio quietamclamat[io] & forisaffidat[io] rata
 & inconvulsa i[m]petuum p[er]seuet. p[re]s[ent]is scriptam sigilli mei munimine roboravi. H[uius] testib[us].
 Willelmo Joym. Rad[ulpho] Ely. Guardo Bath. Joh[ann]e de Coud[er]. Rogo blimdo. Steph[ano] bukere.
 Thom[as] de Dunholm. Laur[entius] de froldike. Ham[on] Costantini. Ric[ardus] de ark[en]. Rob[ertus] de Basing.
 Adam de Linc. Rob[ertus] lebreo. Willelmo Ely. Waltero asore. Alexandro chio & aliis.



Source 5: Agreement between the men of two Lincolnshire villages and the earl of Chester and Lincoln, 1201-1266. Catalogue Ref: DL 27/270



Source 6: Seal of Canterbury Cathedral, 1534.

Catalogue Ref: E 25/25





Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

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