

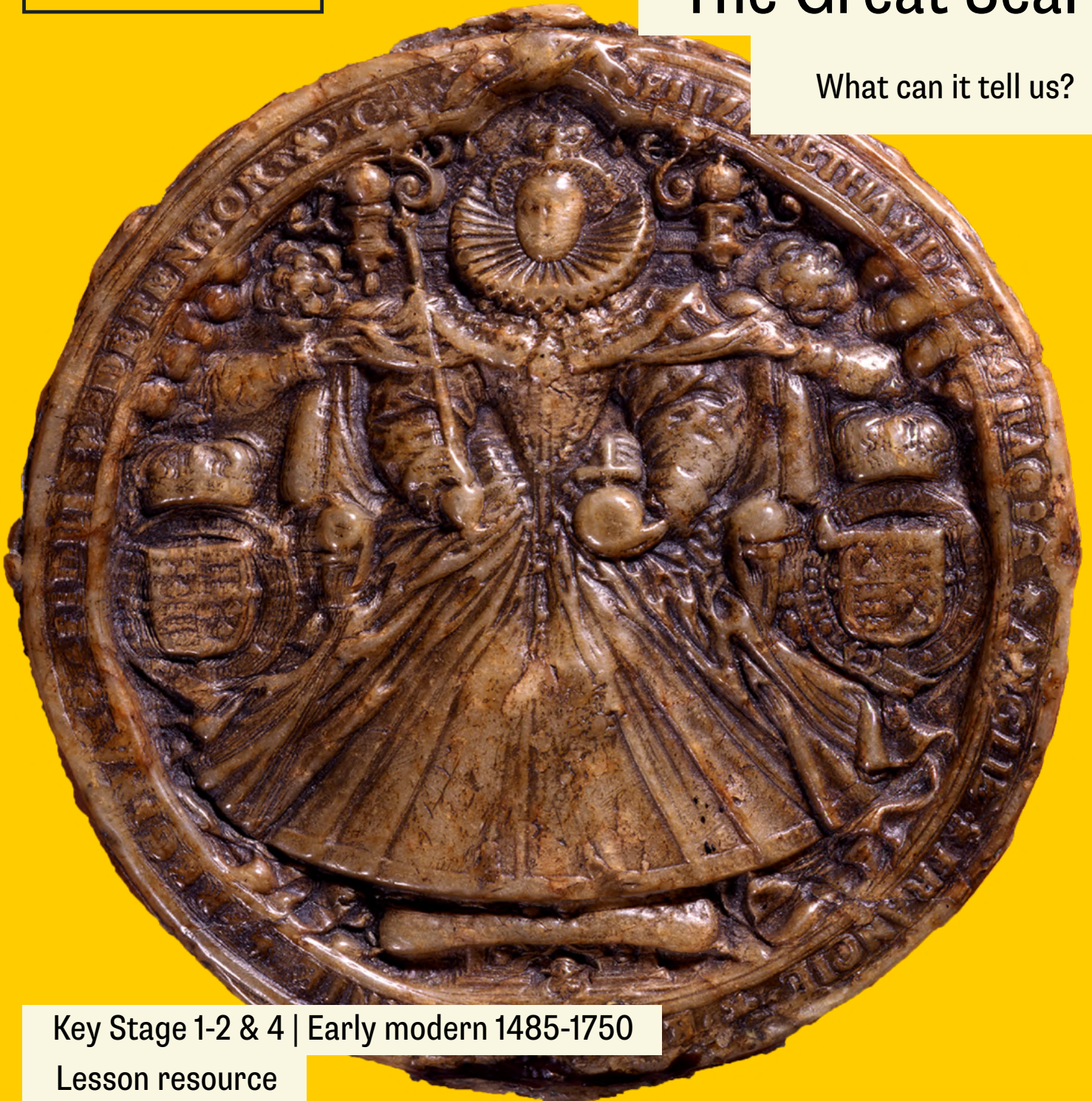
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The Great Seal

What can it tell us?



Key Stage 1-2 & 4 | Early modern 1485-1750

Lesson resource

Introduction

Seals were used on most documents in the past to 'close' them and to prove that the document really was from the person who sent it. Most seals had an image of the owner and a motto or legend around the edge. It would usually show the type of job the owner did and contain information about their family.

However, a Great Seal was special as it belonged to the monarch and was attached to all important documents which specifically came from the monarch. If a document had this seal on it, it had the monarch's 'seal of approval' and reflected their wishes or commands. The seal used in this lesson is the Second Great Seal of Queen Elizabeth I.

The Great Seal can reveal important clues about the way a monarch wished to be seen by their subjects and the responsibilities that they had. Elizabeth I wanted to create an image of herself that would impress her subjects. Find out and see if you think she succeeded.

Suitable for:

Key Stage 1-2 & 4

Time period:

Early modern 1485-1750

Connections to the Curriculum:

Key Stage 1:

Lives of Significant individuals in the past who have contributed to national and international achievements.

Key Stage 4:

GCSE history period studies covering the Early Modern era including the reign of Elizabeth I.

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Teachers' notes

This lesson is designed to help pupils understand how Elizabeth I presented herself to her subjects in the days before mass media. Pupils can use the sources to study some of the key ways in which the Queen's image was conveyed to her subjects. They are also encouraged to think about our current Queen, Elizabeth II and how her image is presented in comparison to that of Elizabeth I.

Groups of pupils can study the document extracts and seal to report back to the whole class and discuss the answers to the questions. Alternatively, pupils can work through the tasks independently. To find more examples of seals online consult this National Archives guide on seals:

[The National Archives' research guide on seals](#)¹

Go to the National Portrait Gallery's website to compare the seal to any portrait of Elizabeth I and discover how she fashioned her image through portraiture:

[National Portrait Gallery: Queen Elizabeth I](#)²

Sources

Source 1 (a) & (b): SP 15/28 f79 Extracts from a warrant sent to Derek Anthony, Chief Graver at the Mint and Nicholas Hilliard, 8th July 1584.

Source 2 (a) & (b): SC13/N3 Second Great Seal of Elizabeth I (a): Obverse: front & (b): Reverse: back

Source 3: Detail from KB 27/1276/2: Court of Kings Bench: Plea and Crown Sides: Coram Rege Rolls 1581

Source 4: WORK 21/292: Trooping of the Colour 1948-50, Queen Elizabeth II on horseback.

External links

[Kings and Queens of England](#)³

A short biography of Elizabeth I

[The face of Royalty](#)⁴

View a selection of Royal Seals and plea rolls held by The National Archives on our Pinterest board.

¹ <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/seals/>

² <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp01452/queen-elizabeth-i?search=sas&sText=Elizabeth+I>

³ <https://www.royal.gov.uk/output/Page46.asp>

⁴ <https://www.pinterest.com/uknatarchives/the-face-of-royalty/>

Background

A seal was created by pressing an engraved metal die or matrix into a mixture of resin and beeswax to create an impression to make the seal.

The Great Seal was used by the Chancery, the Tudor Civil service, to show that the document attached was ordered in the Queen's name. Elizabeth I had her own personal 'privy' [private] seals for documents which she personally approved as well. When a King or Queen died, the matrix was destroyed. The punishment for illegal copying of the Great Seal was death.

The matrix for this seal was produced by the artist Nicholas Hilliard in 1586. It took around two and a half years to produce the Second Great Seal of the Realm. The document used in this lesson was dated 1584 and the extracts from it explain why Queen Elizabeth requested the creation of a new Great Seal and reveals how it was made. Designs for the matrix, according to the source, had been made 'upon parchment by you our servant Hilliard' to begin with. The Queen agreed that these should be engraved in silver and 'bringe to perfection ready to be used with all convenient speede suche a new Greate Seale'.

Great Seals come in a number of different colours, though they darken with age as with this example. Nearly all English great seals show on the front or obverse, the monarch sitting on their throne with the orb and sceptre, symbols of their authority. On the reverse they are usually shown riding a horse as a military leader and defender of the kingdom.

Elizabeth I took the cultivation of her image very seriously. Part of the way that she maintained her authority over the English nobility and her ambitious courtiers was through elaborate rituals and performance. She was given names like Astraea, a goddess from Greek mythology, or Gloriana, a character in poet Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Portrait painters were given special "face patterns" by the government in order to make ensure that pictures of Elizabeth reflected her preferred image. Hilliard produced some of these patterns, however he is most famous for his 'portrait miniatures', tiny images of Elizabeth or members of her court. In the 1580s wearing miniatures of the queen became very fashionable and a sign of loyalty. Like the Great Seal and large scale portraits, these miniatures were highly effective instruments of propaganda.

Outside London few people would have known what the Queen looked like, although Elizabeth and her Court travelled across southern England and East Anglia on 'progresses' which allowed more people to catch sight of her. Before the internet, radio, television or newspapers and with a population who could mostly neither read nor write the Great Seal allowed Elizabeth's image to be visible throughout her kingdom.

Tasks

1. Look at Source 1a.

Source 1a: An extract from a warrant, a document giving a royal command. Catalogue ref: SP 15/28 f79

1. Can you find these words in this part of the document?

- Great Seale of England
- much use
- wearing
- new
- made

2. Now read the transcript:

Forasmuch as our Great Seal of England by much use and wearing waxing unserviceable, we have resolved that a new Great Seal shalbe made...

3. Why does a second Great Seal need to be made?

4. Can you put this sentence from the document into your own words?

2. Look at Source 1b.

Source 1b: An extract from a warrant, a document giving a royal command. Catalogue ref: SP 15/28 f79

1. Can you spot the following words:

- 'paterne made upon parchment by you our servant Hilliard'

The words mention Nicholas Hilliard, the artist who designed the seal. The document is made from parchment which was thin, dried, animal skin used for writing on.

2. Have a go at reading whole part of the document. It helps to read the letters 'y' for 'i', 'f' for 's' and 'c' as 't'. You can also use the transcript.

3. After reading the document, can you explain the different stages for making the new seal?

3. Look at Source 2a.

Source 2a: Obverse (front) of Second Great Seal of Queen Elizabeth I. Catalogue ref: SC 12/N3

1. Can you find:

- mysterious hands reaching from clouds to hold Elizabeth's cape
- an orb and sceptre
- a ruff

Tasks

- coat of arms
 - Tudor Rose
 - background leaves and flowers
 - motto -'Elizabetha Dei Gracia Anglie Francie Et Hibernie Regina Fidei Defensor'? ['Elizabeth, by grace of God, Queen of England, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith'.]
2. What do the 'mysterious hands' suggest?
 3. Can you describe Elizabeth's dress and hairstyle?
 4. Why does she hold an orb and sceptre? Do you know what they mean?
 5. Elizabeth was Head of the Church of England. Which part of the seal tells us this?

4. Look at Source 2b.

Source 2b: Reverse (back) of Second Great Seal of Queen Elizabeth I. Catalogue ref: SC 12/N3

1. Can you find:
 - a fleur de lys
 - a harp
 - clouds and rays around the Queen's head
 - a horse with plaited mane
 - Tudor Rose
2. The Tudor Rose was the emblem of the Tudor monarchs and stands for England. Why do you think it is on both sides of Elizabeth's seal?
3. A fleur-de-lys stands for France, which country does the harp stand for?

Why would she want to include these symbols?

5. Look at Source 3.

Source 3: An image from a plea roll document which records details of law suits or actions in court. Catalogue ref: KB 27/1276/2

Which words do you think Elizabeth I would want people to use to describe her?

- majestic
- foolish
- powerful
- warrior
- fair
- cruel
- unfeminine
- weak

Tasks

6. Now look again at all of the Sources 1-3.

1. What things make Elizabeth I look important?
2. How can you tell that the seal belongs to a monarch?
3. Is it clear that Elizabeth I was keen to control how she appeared?

7. Look at Source 4.

Source 4: This is a picture taken at the Trooping of the Colour between 1948-1950. Catalogue ref: WORK 21/292

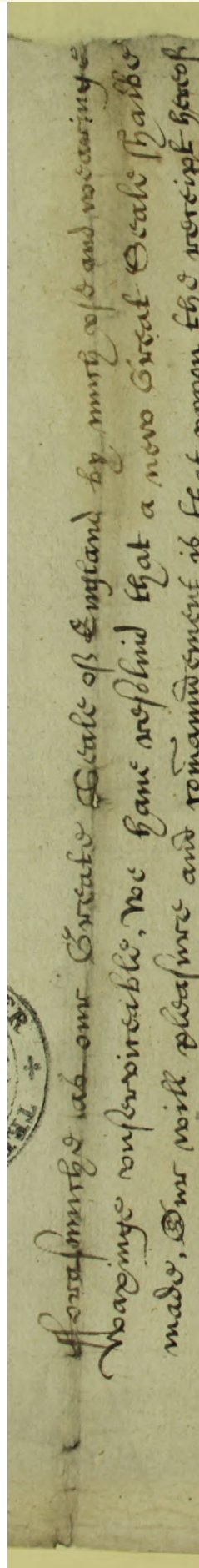
- Who is the person in the photograph?
- How do you think this person creates an image of herself?
- Write a list of the different ways you can find out information about this person, then think about how you would have found out about Elizabeth I in her day. How do they compare?
- How difficult do you think it was for Elizabeth I to present herself to her subjects?

8. Design your own seal for a person of your choice.

- The seal must tell us something about the person who it belongs to. What is their job? Where do they live? Are they important?
- Try to use emblems or symbols. If the seal belongs to a film star or an important scientist, how would you show this?
- You must also think of a motto or words to put on the seal.
- Remember to make a back and a front.
- Write about your seal, explaining what you have drawn – and why.

Source 1a: An extract from a warrant, a document giving a royal command.

Catalogue Ref: SP 15/28 f79



of our former the late our Great Seal of England by many of us and now writing
havinge unperceivable, we have resolved that a new Great Seal should
made. Our will pleasure and commandement is that every one that receiveth heretofore

Source 1a: Transcript

Forasmuch as our Great Seal of England by much use and wearing waxing unserviceable, we have resolved that a new Great Seal shalbe made...

Source 1b: An extract from a warrant, a document giving a royal command.

Catalogue Ref: SP 15/28 f79

made, Our will pleasure and commaundement is that upon the receipt hereof
you shall embosse by your selfe, and by other skilfull workmen by your thoure
if made require it, in Lead, or in other such like and more strong for to at
embrace, patentes for a new great Scale according to the last patentes
made upon parthment by you & servant Githard, delivered unto us, and
by us allowed, And by the same patentes you shall make, engrave, strike
finishe and bringe to perfection ready to be used wth all convenient speede
wth a new Great Scale in silver, of a convenient manerment most

Source 1b: Transcript

Our will pleasure and commandement is that upon the receipt hereof you shall embosse [engrave] by your selves, and by other skilfull workmen by your choice if need require it, in Leade [lead] wax or other stuf fit and necessary for that purpose, paternes [patterns] for a new greate Seale according to the last paterne made upon parchment by you our servant Hilliard, delivered unto us, and by us allowed, and by the same paternes you chall [shall] worke, engrave, sinke finishe and bringe to perfection ready to be used with all convenient speede suche a new Greate Seale in silver...

Source 2a: Obverse (front) of Second Great Seal of Queen Elizabeth I.

Catalogue Ref: SC 12/N3



Source 2b: Reverse (back) of Second Great Seal of Queen Elizabeth I.

Catalogue Ref: SC 12/N3



Source 3: Detail of Elizabeth I from Court of Kings Bench Coram Rege Roll, 1584. Catalogue Ref: KB 27/1289/2



Source 4: Photograph: Trooping the Colour, 1948-1950.

Catalogue Ref: WORK 21/292





Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

Our [Onsite Workshops](#) are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

Find out more:

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