THE GREAT SEALS OF ENGLAND AND SOME OTHERS

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The great seals of England and some others by Charles E. Dana

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CHARLES E. DANA

THE GREAT SEALS OF ENGLAND AND SOME OTHERS

Trieste

ART HANDBOOK

OF THE

PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM AND SCHOOL OF INDUSTRIAL ART

THE GREAT SEALS OF ENGLAND AND SOME OTHERS.

BY

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ILLUSTRATED.

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PREFACE.

All the Seals exhibited in the Museum of the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art having a glazed surface, which is produced by a sulphur solution, were obtained by the writer from the French Government, and are copies of those in the National Archives, in Paris. That collection, numbering more than fifty thousand specimens, is unique; no other is so systematically arranged, thereby enabling the student to devote his time solely to the class he is most interested in for the moment, be it Royal Seals, French or foreign, those of the great Feudatories, Ecclesiastical, Municipal or other, each class being displayed by itself and fairly well labeled.

The "Archives Nationales" are housed in the superb palace of the Princes of Rohan-Soubise, in the "Marais," once the aristocratic quarter of Paris, even yet the most interesting to the historian and the antiquary. There is no other "Hôtel" in Paris comparable to it. The great entrance court forms a statelier approach than that of any royal palace in this city of palaces. The grand stairway and state apartments, practically intact, give one a very fair idea of the regal splendor formerly existing in the homes of the great French nobles.

The limited size of this Hand-Book forced me to omit many interesting and amusing adventures of the English Great Seals. The names of some of the many authorities to whom I am indebted will be found at the end of the volume.

C. E. D.

PHILADELPHIA, September 1st, 1904.

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SEALS.

We have a right to assume that a Seal is, in all probability, as accurate a representation of the owner as the art of his day was capable of. It was seen and approved by him before being used. It was unquestionably contemporaneous and was executed, no doubt, by the best available artist. It must therefore be, what was considered by those best able to judge, a good likeness; it represents, in addition, the correct costume and the art of the period; this cannot be said of anything else until about the middle of the XV Century.

Painted portraits, of most dubious authenticity, begin, say, about the middle of the XIV Century. To one familiar with the dazzling Henry V. (died 1423); with that hero of song and romance, "the young and brave Dunois" (died 1468); with John "the Good" (died 1364), it is an utter impossibility to believe that the unpleasant suggestions of humanity bequeathed to us by the much belauded "Primitives" (early painters), are portraits, in our sense of the word, of those heroes.

The miniatures in the old missals were done in the dreamy quiet of the Scriptorium by monks, at best from vague descriptions of the originals, or were mere conventional semblances of what the old monks thought a warrior or a king ought to look like. Sculpture is better, for here we have the work of the same artist who made the Seal; unfortunately, many of the portrait statues, effigies on tombs, were from memory, done long after the death of the persons represented,—while, as I said before, the Seal was, with the rarest possible exceptions, contemporaneous.

It was, and in many cases still is, of vast importance. The Great Seal of England was supposed to be endowed with magic power; with it the King could do anything; with-

out it, nothing; he could not even govern. To counterfeit it was treason; the punishment, to be "hanged, drawn and quartered."

Those hazy great ones of yore, like William the Conqueror, Richard of the Lion Heart, and others, to whom distance lends such a glow of enchantment, were veritable savages; to them the laborious scrawling of their names, as a five-year old child of today might do, was an unknown accomplishment, so they fell back on Seals, and by the middle of the XII Century Seals were the universal means of authenticating documents. The wicked John of England *sealed, not signed,* on June 15th, 1215, the Magna Charta. The earliest *signed* English document is that of the unfortunate Richard II. (murdered 1400), though his father, Edward the Black Prince, knight "without fear and without reproach," has left us a warrant (1370) upon which he has written, "de par Homent Ich Dien," given by Homent, Ich Dien (his two mottoes). What does Homent (usually "Houmont") mean, and what Ich Dien (I serve)? That alas, the Prince has not told us.

The Great Seal of England was originally about three inches in diameter; today its size is doubled. It started archaic but sincere; in the XIV and XV Centuries it became rich and artistic; it is now wanting in relief and weakly decadent. The wax is contained in a box, called a "skippet" or "fender," to better preserve the precious but fragile Seal, which is attached to its parchment document by cords woven through holes therein, the ends of which cords pass through the waxen Seal, so that either parchment, Seal or cords must be mutilated to separate them. It is said that the color of the wax betokens the permanent or temporary character of the document; be that as it may, red is the color most commonly used.

The Seal must be attached to all documents to which His Majesty, as Sovereign, gives his royal assent;—these are, treaties with foreign powers, charters of towns or institu-

tions, appointments of colonial governors, "congés d'élire," etc., etc. The congé d'élire is one of those funny fictions England so abounds in. When a new bishop is appointed by the Government and the matter is absolutely settled, his name, and a congé d'élire (permission to elect the bishop) is sent to the Chapter of the Cathedral over which he is to preside, so that the assembled Dean and Canons may enact the innocent comedy of an election, if it gives them any pleasure.

The Penn Charter is the royal document with which we are most familiar. Such were executed in triplicate. The one which belonged to Penn is preserved in Harrisburg, lacking, by some mischance, the all important Seal. That colossal bronze disc, supposed to represent the Seal, which dangles from the Charter beside the gigantic bronze William Penn on the top of the City Hall, Philadelphia, combines two most important errors: The sculptor made a Seal which in no wise resembles any Great Seal ever used in England, and then, to add to the absurdity, put upon this Charter of 1681 the coat-of-arms of *Queen Victoria,* absolutely unknown before the year *1837*. The true Seal, that of Charles II., is represented on the cover of this handbook.

The Penn Charter when it left the Privy Council, was folded in a peculiar manner and encircled by a ribbon of parchment, which passed through a slit cut in the document; the ends of this ribbon were sealed together as well as to the Charter itself by the "Privy Seal." Thus it went to the Lord Chancellor. His voucher was the Privy Seal, which he was forced to destroy in order to open the document; as this Seal always had to be broken, not a single example of it can be found. The Lord Chancellor wrote at the foot of the Charter, "Recepi, 4 March, 1680," (sometimes he added his signature) and this was the authority to the Clerk of the Patents for making the very handsome, engrossed copy now at Harrisburg, and suspending therefrom the Great Seal of England.

This mode of attaching Seals, by a cord or ribbon of

leather, silk or parchment, came in a little before A.D. 1100. Documents exist from which 39 and even 59 seals dangle. The earlier way of attaching the Seal was to make two cuts, crosswise, in the document. The corners thus formed were turned back; a sheet of soft wax was applied on the face side, a smaller sheet on the back. The two matrices were then pressed against the two sheets of wax and this, meeting through the space formed by the turned down corners, made a sort of rivet of wax. The smaller matrix was called the *Secretum.* Such Seals are sometimes found in the very middle of a document, but are usually on the lower edge, which is doubled back to make it stronger.

Until the XI or XII Century pure wax was used, then coloring matter was added, white, red, green, black or blue. In the accounts of the Archbishop of Rouen we find the proportions for wax for the official Seal,—50 lbs. of bees-wax, 2 lbs. of coloring matter, 16 lbs. of rosin; the last makes the mixture very brittle. Some twenty years ago the English Parliament passed an Act permitting, from motives of economy, the use of a wafer.

The matrices of the Great Seal of England look very much like a pair of waffle-irons. They were formerly made of copper, but, since 1818, have been of silver; weight about 185 ozs., value, of the metal, say, $150. Gold, silver, bronze, copper, iron, pewter, ivory, jet, etc., have been used for matrices. Those for the leaden Seals or bullæ, attached to Papal documents (from whence "Papal Bulls" or edicts) were of tempered steel, as, in this case, the impression was made on cold metal. Gold and silver Seals were sometimes used.

In England the first act of a new sovereign is to order a new Seal. When this is finished the old one undergoes a process called "damasking"; it is supposed to be broken; in reality it receives but a gentle tap from a hammer wielded by the sovereign, in the presence of the Privy Council, after which it becomes the perquisite of the Lord Chancellor.