

Seal making

with carving tools

Put your own stamp on things with inspiration from medieval seals!

Why were seals used?

In medieval times most people couldn't read or write, so wax seals on documents acted as signatures to show who sent them and that the message was not a fake.

What were seals made of?

A seal matrix (stamp) was usually made of metal with a design that was unique to the person who owned it. The sealing wax was initially part beeswax and part resin.

How did seals work?

The stamps were pressed into blobs of melted wax onto letters to create a seal impression. The seal matrix (2cm wide) and wax seal pictured here and above belonged to William de Westondeb. They were found at Linlithgow Palace.

Who used seals?

At first seals were used only by monarchs, princes, feudal lords and religious authorities. From the late 12th century they began to be used by towns, nobles, professional colleges, corporations of artisans and tradesmen. By the 14th century ready-made simple seal matrixes could be purchased by anyone with money.

How were seals attached to documents?

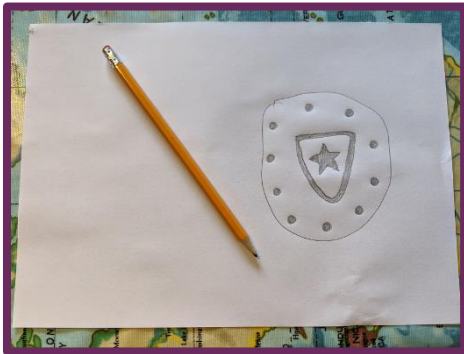
Sometimes the wax impression was hung from the document by silk or hemp cord or by parchment or paper strips; sometimes warm wax was poured directly onto the document and stamped. Have a look at the [3D Sketchfab model](#) of the oval seal pictured here from Melrose Abbey. The document it was once attached to was never found.

What did seal matrices look like?

Most seals matrices (stamps) are round in shape but some can be oval, shield-shaped and octagonal. From the 11th century onwards they often included portraits – showing the head, bust or entire body of the owner. Seals showing a figure sitting on horse were only used by monarchs, princes, nobles and knights.



Put your own stamp on things with inspiration from medieval seals! You'll need a potato, apple or some Styrofoam for the stamp and some home-made or shop-bought playdough.



Design your seal. What words and symbols best represent you?



If you're including words, use a mirror to make them back to front.



Choose your material! If your carving tools are blunt, pick apples as they're softer. Styrofoam is easy but messy!



Cut a slice of the potato or apple so it doesn't rock as you carve. Carve slowly as you can't stick bits back on! Make the grooves deep.



If you're using potatoes or apples you'll need to dry them off before you stamp them into playdough.



Stamp and enjoy your very own signature seal!

We love seeing your #LearningWithHES creations – do share them with us online!

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