XXV. *Description of the Matrix of the Seal of Southwick Priory, in Hampshire; in a Letter to THOMAS AMYOT, Esq. F.R.S., Treasurer, from FREDERIC MADDEN, Esq. F.S.A.*

Read 24th March, 1831.

MY DEAR SIR,

British Museum, March 21, 1831.

I BEG leave to submit to the attention of the Society impressions in wax of the singular and beautiful Seal of Southwick Priory, in Hampshire, to which I am happy to be enabled to add, by permission of the owner, John Bonham Carter, Esq. M. P. the original Matrix from which the impressions were taken. It is presumed with some confidence, that this Matrix is the only specimen in existence of a very peculiar and artificial mode of forming ancient conventual Seals, nor have my researches enabled me to discover any similar instance of a seal so made, except that of the Priory of Christchurch, Canterbury.^a It is much to be regretted, that the few writers who have endeavoured to illustrate the use of ancient English Seals, should have chiefly directed their attention to the antiquity of the practice, or to the explanation of the figures, badges, or bearings of the Seals themselves, but afford us but little, if any, information concerning the mode of preparing the wax, taking the impressions, affixing the seals to the deeds, or even of the forms and material of the matrices. In short, whatever is known of the theoretical, we are as yet almost ignorant of the practical use of sigillation adopted by our ancestors. The only distinct treatise on the subject I am acquainted with, is a thin quarto pamphlet, written by the

^a Cott. Chart. xxi. 11.

Rev. John Lewis, in 1740, and entitled “Dissertation on the use and antiquity of Seals in England ;” a very meagre and jejune performance ; and if I add to this the Papers of the Rev. Dr. Pegge and Mr. H. Ellis in vols. V. and XVIII. of the *Archæologia*, and some observations of Mr. Dallaway, in his “*Inquiries into the Origin of Heraldry*,” 4to, 1793, I believe I shall have mentioned nearly every thing of moment touching the ancient usage of Seals.^a It is far from being in my power to supply the deficiency ; but perhaps the curious facts exhibited in the peculiar construction of the Southwick Seal may lead some one who has more leisure, and is better versed in the subject than myself, to pursue the inquiry.

The Matrix which I have the honour to lay before the Society is of brass, of a circular form, and about nine inches and a half in circumference, and exhibits the appearance represented in the annexed drawing.^b It consists of three distinct pieces (*a. b. c.*), of nearly equal diameter, but varying in thickness and weight, the lower piece weighing 1 lb. 1 oz. the centre $7\frac{1}{2}$ oz. and the top $14\frac{1}{2}$ oz. or all together 2 lb. 7 oz. Each of these pieces has two roundels or ears placed opposite to each other, without the extreme circle of the Seal, in the two lower of which are firmly inserted iron pins, of about two inches length, and as thick as a common tobacco-pipe. These pins, by means of holes pierced in the ears of the centre and top pieces, pass through them, and serve to keep the whole compact and even, so as to ensure the exactness of the impression. To prevent also the possibility of error in the adjustment of the several parts, a small cross is engraven on the top ear of each, thereby indicating the position in which they are to be placed.

To those who are unacquainted with the structure of this Matrix, the use of the centre piece, and of the figures engraven on either side, will appear wholly inexplicable, nor would the difficulty perhaps ever have

^a Two Dissertations in MS. on this subject are said to have been written by Francis Tate, in the reign of Elizabeth ; probably of the same trifling nature as the remarks of his contemporary, Arthur Agarde, preserved in Hearne’s “*Collection of Curious Discourses*.”

^b Plate XXXII. fig. 5.

been explained, had not a broken impression of the Canterbury Seal been found among the Harleian Charters, No. 75. F. 46, by an attentive examination of which the ænigma was easily solved. The mode therefore of taking an impression^c is simply this: A layer of wax is spread or poured over the face of the lower portion (Pl. XXXII. fig. 5, *a*) of the matrix (forming the *Obverse* of the seal) on which, by means of the two pins, the centre piece (*b*) is immediately fixed, thereby impressing the wax on both sides. Another layer is then laid over the top surface of the centre piece, on which the upper portion of the matrix (forming the *Reverse*) is placed, and the whole submitted to pressure. As soon as the wax has cooled, the upper and centre portions of the matrix are removed, when a perfect impression of the Seal will remain, consisting of two halves, impressed on both sides. The lower half will bear the obverse of the Seal, (fig. 1.) representing the Virgin seated, with the Infant in her arms, within the portal or arch of a magnificent building, intended probably for the Priory of Southwick; with this legend round the margin, SIGILLUM: ECCLESIE: SANCTE: MARIE: DE: SUWIKĀ. On the back of this half will appear the figures engraven on the lower surface of the centre piece (fig. 4.) viz. above, a half length of Christ, holding a cross in the left hand, whilst the right is in the attitude of benediction. Lower down are two heads of Apostles or Saints, and beneath, the angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin. The other half of the Seal (fig. 2.) will represent the reverse, viz. another elevation of the Priory, with this rhyming legend around it:

SIT . PRO : SUWIKĀ : MEDIATRIX : UIRLO : PVDICA :
ET . PAX : ANGELICA : SIT : NOBIS : SEMPER : AMICA .

whilst on the back will be impressed the figures on the upper surface of the centre piece (fig. 3.), namely, four heads of Apostles or Saints. All that now remains to be done is to unite the two halves together, in doing

^c By the assistance of a very ingenious artist, Mr. J. Doubleday, of 5, Hyde Street, Museum Street, a number of accurate impressions have been made, and to his remarks I own myself much indebted.

which the ingenuity of the inventor becomes a subject of surprise and admiration, for by the peculiar construction of the centre part of the matrix, the portions of the obverse and reverse of the impression which correspond to, and are intended to receive the figures on the centre piece, are rendered so thin as to be transparent, and easily broken through, by which means the back of each half becomes, as it were, part of the opposite face, and although four distinct surfaces were originally formed, yet by this happy and simple artifice they combine together and form only two. This will be shown more satisfactorily by the impressions I have caused to be taken, which represent the Seal both before and after the two halves are united.

From the broken impression of the Canterbury seal before alluded to, it is evident that the two halves were anciently fixed together by means of gum or cement, and to render the junction more secure, small pieces of spiral wire were introduced, and pressed into the substance of the seal. The method adopted by the artist I employed was merely that of pressure, and afterwards searing the edges with a hot iron.

With respect to the design and workmanship of this Seal, it will be allowed, without contradiction, to be of the highest merit, and from its close resemblance to the Seals of Canterbury, Norwich, Merton, and others, may safely be assigned to the same period, viz. the latter half of the thirteenth century, which is beyond all question the best and finest epoch of early English art, whether considered in regard to painting, architecture, or engraving. The seal of Merton Priory^d is of an oval form and of one solid piece of wax, so that it is not of the same peculiar class as the one I am describing, but for the high relief, and beautiful execution of the figure on the reverse, it must ever remain unrivalled. It is remarkable also, in common with the seals of Canterbury, Norwich,^e Rochester, and some others, for bearing an inscription round the edge, which must have been impressed by a *lamina* of metal, either circular or oval, and in the latter instance, probably with a hinge or pivot to

^d Cott. Chart. xxi. 25.

^e Top. Chart. 43.

turn on. The charter to which the Merton seal is affixed, in the Cotton collection, must certainly be earlier than 1252, since Eustachius, the Prior who is a party in the document, died in that year. The charter also, which bears the Canterbury seal in the Harleian collection, is dated 1278, and these dates will sufficiently warrant the assumed age of the Southwick Seal, even if we admit it to be rather more recent than either of the preceding.

From the new edition of the *Monasticon*, vol. VI. p. 244, we learn that this was not the earliest seal of Southwick Priory, but had been substituted for one more ancient, a practice by no means unusual. Among the charters of the Augmentation Office is preserved an impression of the former one, affixed to a deed bearing date 1189, representing on one side a very ancient church, and on the other (as a counter-seal) is a gem with the figure of an eagle, and this inscription, SPIRITVS. VERVM. VICTVS. SPIRAT.

It was, in all probability, this custom of counter-seals that gave rise to the invention exhibited on the Southwick seal, and on that of Canterbury, as the one might naturally lead to the other. But it has also been suggested, that this mode was perhaps invented for the purpose of preventing forgery, in which the monks of St. Austin were, perhaps, greater adepts than any of their brethren. Be this as it may, the fashion or invention seems to have been very limited in its use, and to have lasted but a short period, which might have proceeded, in some measure, from the trouble attending it.

The history of the Matrix itself is brief. It undoubtedly formed part of the possessions of the Priory of Southwick at the Dissolution, and passed, together with the muniments of that house, into the hands of the feoffee, to whom the site was granted by the Crown. These muniments have descended with the Southwick estate to the respective owners, and belong at present to Thomas Thistlethwaite, Esq. by whose liberality I have been enabled to consult the ancient cartulary of this Priory, with a view hereafter of giving its history to the public. At what period the matrix escaped from the rightful possessor seems doubtful, but it appears to

have been received by the father of the late John Bonham, Esq. of Petersfield, from a Mr. Smith, attorney, of Southwick. From Mr. Bonham it came to the present owner, John Bonham Carter, Esq. M. P. for Portsmouth, and I may congratulate myself on having been the first to point out the value and curiosity of this interesting relic.

It was originally my intention to have added some remarks on the preparation of the wax, and mode of affixing ancient Seals, but the length of this Paper (already beyond the limits I had designed) deters me from pursuing the subject at present.

I trust that the Society will consider the Matrix of Southwick Priory of a sufficiently curious and unique nature to authorise an engraving of it to be made, which would be a great satisfaction to,

My dear Sir,

Yours very faithfully,

FREDERIC MADDEN.

THOMAS AMYOT, Esq.
Treasurer S.A., &c. &c. &c.