



The National Archives

Education Service



# The Royal Seal

## What can it tell us?

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## 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 a picture 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 - it belonged to the monarch and all important business that the monarch did had a Great Seal attached. If a document had this seal on it, it had the monarch's 'seal of approval'; it contained the monarch's wishes or commands.

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. Will you be impressed?

## Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. Can you find:

- mysterious hands holding up Elizabeth's cape?
- a coat of arms?
- a Tudor Rose?
- the motto '-Elizabetha Dei Gracia Anglie Francie Et Hibernie Regina Fidei Defensor'?

Look at Source 2

2. Can you find :

- the orb and sceptre?
- a fleur de lys?
- a harp?
- a ruff?
- some clouds?

Look at Source 1, 2 & 3

3. Looking at the images, which of the following words do you think Elizabeth would want people to associate with her:

- majestic
- foolish
- powerful
- warrior
- fair
- cruel

- unfeminine
  - weak
4. The Tudor Rose was the emblem of the Tudor monarchs. Why do you think it is on Elizabeth's seal?
  5. A fleur-de-lys stands for France, and a Tudor Rose stands for England. Which country does the harp stand for?
  6. Elizabeth was head of the Church of England. Which part of the seal tells us this?
  7. What things make Elizabeth look important?
  8. How can you tell that this seal belongs to a monarch?

Look at Source 4

9. This is a picture taken at the Trooping of the Colour sometime between 1948 and 1950:
  - 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?
10. Make 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 to put on the seal.
  - Remember to make a back and a front.
  - Write about your seal, explaining what you have drawn - and why.

## Background

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 had her own personal "privy" [private] seals for documents that she approved herself. When a King or Queen died the "matrix", the metal original of their Great Seal, 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. The seal was made of a mix of resin and beeswax and Great Seals come in a number of different colours, though age turns many of them the brown colour you can see here. Nearly all English great seals show the monarch riding a horse on one side and sitting on their throne with the orb and sceptre, symbols of their authority, on the other.

Elizabeth I took 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 sure that pictures of Elizabeth were done in the right way. Hilliard produced some of these patterns but 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.

Outside of 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 radio, television or newspapers and with a population who could mostly neither read nor write the Great Seal allowed Elizabeth's image to travel throughout her kingdom.

## 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 provided to study some of the key ways in which the Queens image was conveyed to her subjects. They are also encouraged to think about the current Queen and compare the way her image is presented with Elizabeth I.

Groups of pupils can study individual sources and report back to the whole class and then together arrive at an answer to the questions. Alternative pupils can work through the exercise as a self-contained study.

### Sources

Illustration : Detail from KB 27/1289/2 - Court of Kings Bench Coram Rege Rolls 1584

Source 1 & 2 : SC13/N3 - Second Great Seal of Elizabeth I

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 the Colour 1948-50 - Queen Elizabeth II on horseback.

## Schemes of Work

**Elizabeth I : How successfully did she tackle the problems of her reign**

Key Stage 3 Unit 5

**The role of the individual for good or ill?**

Key Stage 3 Unit 22

## Source 1 : Second Great Seal of Elizabeth I (SC13/N3)



## Source 2 : Reverse of Second Great Seal of Elizabeth I (SC13/N3)



## Source 3 : Detail of Elizabeth I from Court of Kings Bench Coram Rege Rolls 1584 (KB 27/1289/2)



## Source 4 : Trooping the Colour 1948-50 (WORK 21/292)



