

SEAL MATRIX (ROBERT SON OF JOHN)

Dr Elizabeth New FSA explains the significance of one of the seal matrices in our collection, focusing on the matrix of 'Robert Son of John'. Dr New teaches at Aberystwyth University and is co-investigator of the [Imprint Project](#), which researches fingerprints and handprints on medieval seal impressions.



This medieval seal matrix made of lead is small and has little intrinsic value. We know virtually nothing about the person who owned it, and thousands of similar items survive in collections across the country. Despite this, I would suggest that it is important, for it provides a valuable insight into the lives of ordinary men and women for whom so little evidence survives, and who are so often absent from historical narratives.

Seals have appeared in European and Asian cultures since ancient times and were widely used across the European Middle Ages. They are small packages of image and text, with both individualised resonances and legal importance, and as such have much to offer those interested in past societies. Seal matrices are made from a hard material into which images and text are engraved or cast and are used to create an impression in a soft material, in medieval Britain invariably beeswax, often with mixed with a small amount of resin and pigment. A seal could confirm that a document or object had not been opened without permission, but seal impressions were also deliberately attached to documents as part of the process of authentication. The seal matrix represented its owner and impressing it into a wax disk that was retained, intact, along with the written record of an exchange was proof its veracity, in the way that we provide a signature or enter a PIN.

A seal also said something about its owner through the combination of motif and text employed: their social status, perhaps, through the representation of a person dressed or acting in a certain way (the image of a warrior on horseback was for example widely used by the nobility), or their place in a family revealed through their name-form. This is very valuable, for such details about the seal-owner might not be mentioned in the document. Furthermore, the design on seals can reveal glimpses of the owner's mindset and personality, with the choice of devotional motifs suggesting a degree of personal piety, or playful images hinting at a certain sense of humour.

Fellows of the Society have a long tradition of collecting and studying seals, and the Society's collection of seals (especially casts taken from matrices and impressions) is extensive: this particular matrix forms part of a collection given to the Society by the late Pierre Chaplais FSA. Despite the number of extant seals, and the work of Chaplais and others to broaden seal-based studies, those of individuals below the elites, which represent up to eighty percent of surviving matrices and impressions, remain the least studied.

We don't know who Robert son of John, whose name is on this matrix, was, but it was probably one of his very few personal possessions and represented him in a public and legal context. The motif, of foliage arranged in a radial pattern, is sometimes described as a 'conventional' one, but research suggests that nuances in the design could have specific meaning in a local context, and so the image might have had a resonance for Robert that is lost on us. In addition, we know that motifs went in and out of fashion, so by choosing this image above others popular at the time, such as birds, animals and stylised lilies, Robert was exercising a degree of consumer choice, and perhaps even fashion-consciousness. Many small matrices of this sort must have been damaged by accident, but the neat line across the face of Robert's matrix suggests a deliberate decommissioning. Might this have been when he acquired a new matrix, or perhaps after his death? Whatever the reason, it reinforces the importance of this object to its owner and his contemporaries and reminds us that historical evidence does not need to be grand, or associated with a well-known person, to make a significant impression.
