

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

REPORT

PRESENTED TO THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

AT ITS THIRTY-NINTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 26, 1879,

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY,

1878—1879.

ALSO

Communications

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XXI.

BEING No. 3 OF THE FOURTH VOLUME.

CAMBRIDGE :

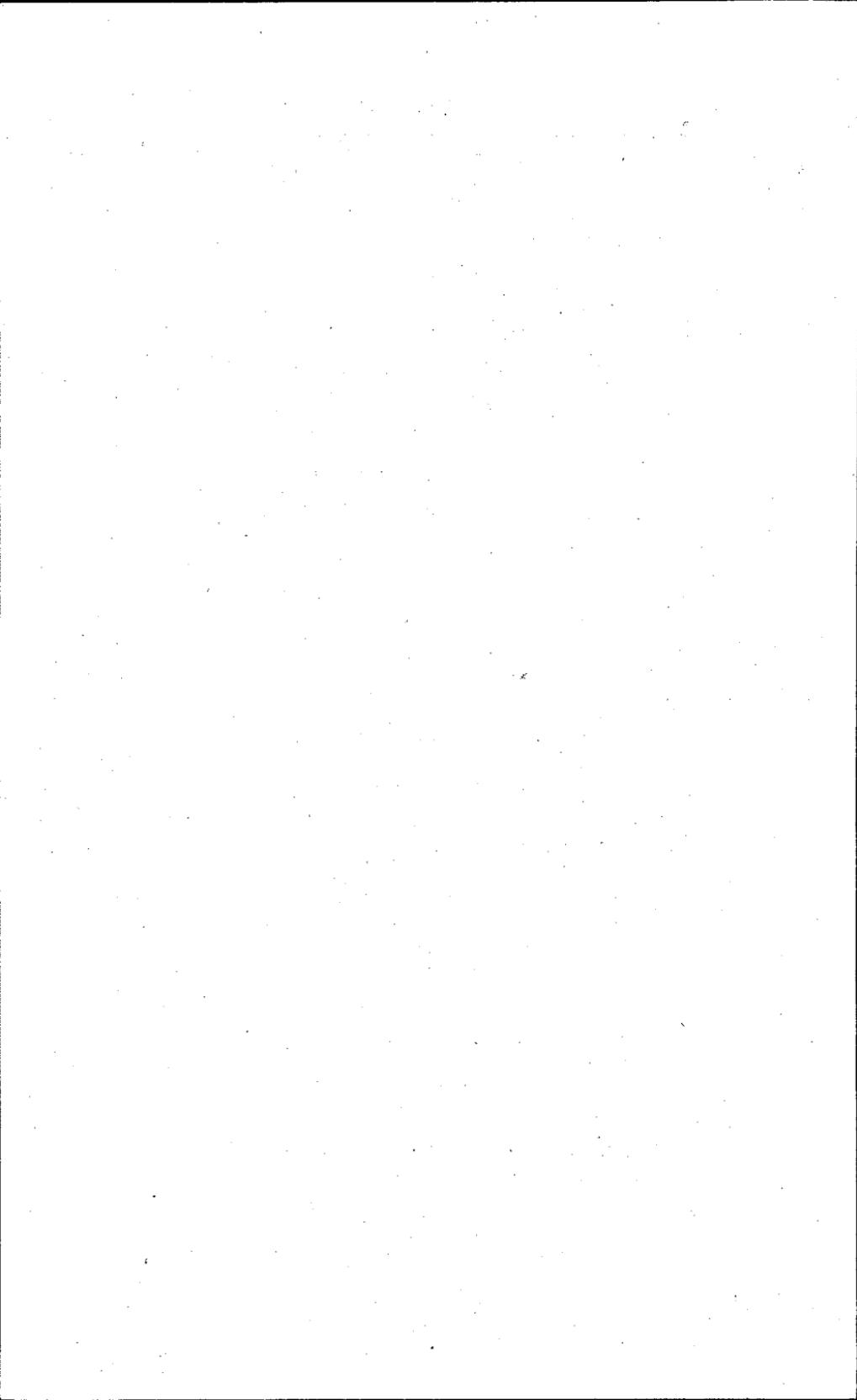
PRINTED FOR THE CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.

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AND MACMILLAN AND CO.

GEORGE BELL AND SONS, LONDON.

1881

Price Four Shillings.



CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
COMMUNICATIONS,

BEING

PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE MEETINGS

OF THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society.

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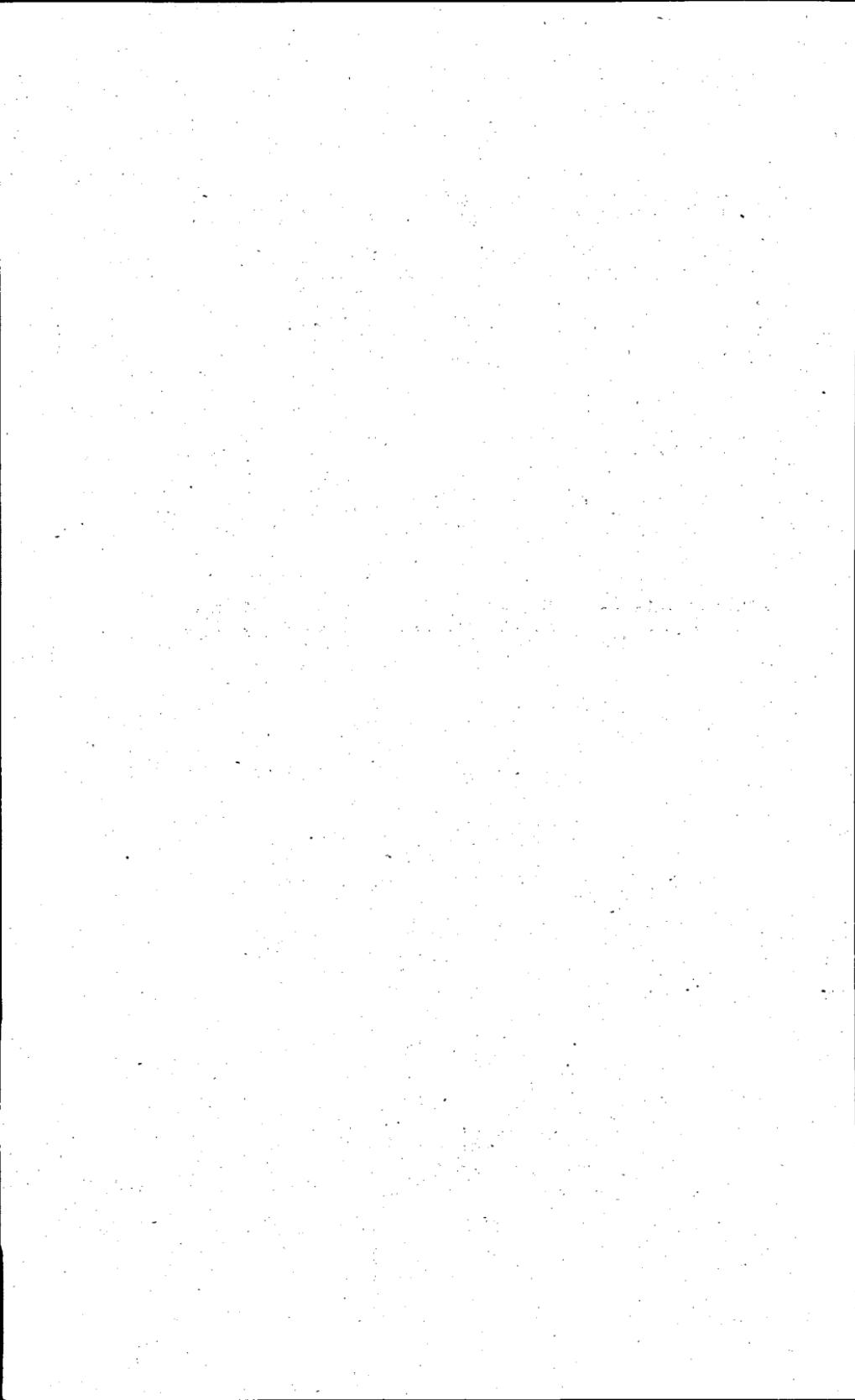
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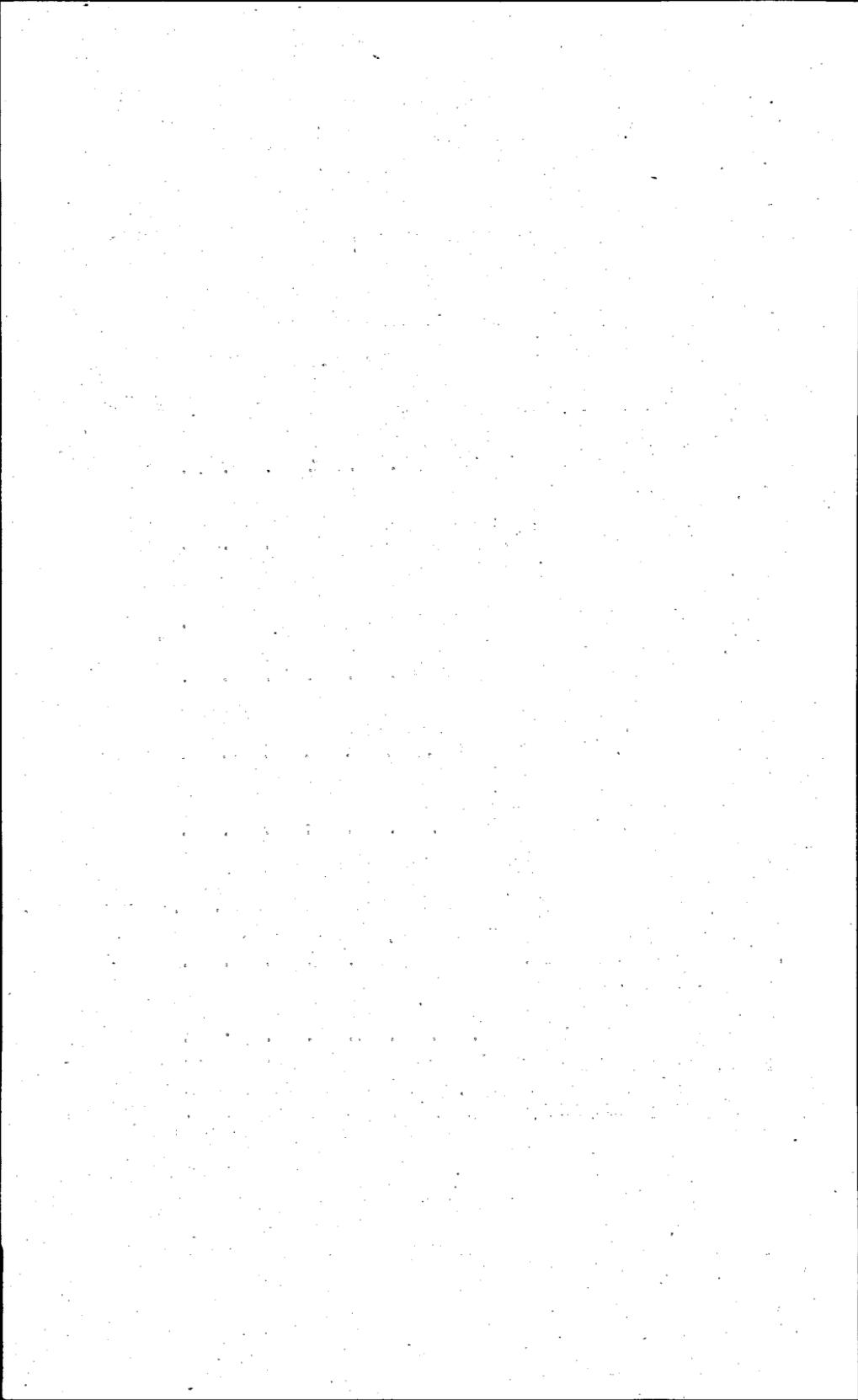
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AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

1881



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XIV. DESCRIPTION OF A MEDLÆVAL MERCHANT'S MARK,
AND SOME REMARKS UPON SEALS OF THE SAME PERIOD.
Communicated by REGINALD DUTTON, Esq., Trinity
College.

[November 25, 1878.]



THE Seal, which forms part of the subject of this communication, was found last year, in one of the coprolite pits to the left of the Newmarket Road.

It is cast in a mixed metal resembling brass, and has been carefully finished, both as to shape and design. Like all, or nearly all the seals of this period, used by secular persons, it is circular in shape, oval seals being rarely used by any save females or ecclesiastics.

1. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the wax used was commonly white; and it seems that it was not until the end of the twelfth century that green wax became at all common. In almost all instances, however, we find that the green seals are in better preservation than either the red or the white. This is probably owing to the better composition of the wax. Eleventh century seals are marked by a poverty of invention, a want of imitative power, and, in many cases, by a rude and superficial execution. At the close of

the twelfth century the introduction of heraldic insignia produced a large class of seals of an exclusively armorial character; and from this date may be traced an improvement in the design and execution of personal seals. At the commencement of the thirteenth century the legal necessity for seals was thoroughly established; and it is obvious that at that time there must have been a number of persons who required them for the ordinary transactions of life. Thus Yeomen, Merchants, and substantial artificers, in short all persons comprehended in the term *Middle Class*, continued to fashion their seals according to their own taste. For instance, a miller's would bear an ear of corn; the farrier's calling would be represented by a horseshoe; while the schoolmaster's symbol of office would most naturally be the birch.

But perhaps the period when mediæval seals attained their highest excellence, from an artistic point of view, was from the thirteenth to the end of the fourteenth century. For with the accession of Henry III. a new impulse was given to all branches of art, and this is nowhere more conspicuous than in the design and execution of seals. The wax used during this period was usually dark green, and comparatively seldom red or white. After the year 1400, *personal seals*, which are not of an armorial character, gradually decline in importance, both as to size, design, and execution. *Merchants' Marks*, which appear to have been copied from the Flemings, during the reign of Edward the Third, and become very common during the fifteenth century, were usually composed of a private cypher, combined with the initials of the owner's name. They were generally used in the great seaports on the East coast of England; a fact which has been accounted for by the frequent intercourse between those ports and Flanders. Such marks chiefly belonged to *Woolfactors* or *Merchants of the Staple*.

And this may possibly account, in some measure, for the

device upon our Merchant's Mark in the Seal before you. For just as a miller would take an ear of corn, or a farrier a horseshoe, as the symbol of their respective trades, so a wool-factor might probably take a lamb as the symbol of his; and further, with a view to special patronage would take the Agnus Dei as the device upon his seal. It seems almost impossible to determine accurately what the other marks represent; or even to say to what particular town the merchant owner belonged. Mr Birch is of opinion that there is no clue whatever to locality, and, as to date, supposes the matrix to have been cast during the fifteenth century, in the reign of Henry VI. Another authority on these matters (Mr King) pronounces it fourteenth century work; so that the exact date is somewhat doubtful.

2. Next, as to the materials usually employed for making the matrices of mediæval seals. *Lead*, from the facility of working it, was naturally first adopted for the seals of the middle and poorer classes; and among the examples preserved of thirteenth century seals are many formed from that metal. The nobility, and the upper classes generally, used some harder metal, probably *silver*. From the thirteenth to the end of the fifteenth century a *mixed metal resembling brass* was mostly used, the manufacture of which was long confined to Cologne; of which metal the matrix before you is an example.

3. Then, as to the general devices on secular seals from the eleventh to the end of the fifteenth century. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the commonest symbols were, mounted knights; effigies of females; the Agnus Dei; birds (generally of the Falcon tribe); animals (commonly lions); stars and crescents, diversely arranged. During the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, they were heraldic devices; birds, animals, and flowers; symbols of crafts; satirical devices; effigies of patron Saints; the Agnus Dei; the head of S. John the Baptist, and symbols of the four Evangelists.

Having said thus much about the wax, the metal of the matrices, and the devices engraved upon the seals; I will pass briefly over their classification, and dwell upon examples of various seals.

As to their classification, seals are divided into two great classes or divisions: (1) *Ecclesiastical*, (2) *Lay or Secular*. These may again be divided into (1) *Official*, and (2) *Personal seals*. Once more we may subdivide these again, (1) the *Ecclesiastical Official Seals*, (a) seals of *individuals*, which make reference to their dignities, offices, or preferments; (β) *official seals not identified with any individual officer*. (2) While the *Lay Seals* comprise those (a) of *Sovereigns* and *Royal personages*; (β) seals of *other persons holding official appointments*; (γ) *common seals* of bodies corporate and the like.

As a fine example of engraving on seals, we may take the Seal of Margaret, the wife of Earl Seher, and daughter of the Earl of Leicester. This seal which she used in her widowhood about 1220, is inscribed, "Sigill: Margarete de Quency comitisse Wintonie". It represents her standing under an arch on which is a cinque foil, the badge of the Honour of Leicester. Her close dress is covered with mascles, and her mantle is figured wavy or vairée, probably intended to represent fur. On a tree by her side, are hung two shields, the lower charged with a fess and chevronels, like that of her husband, and the upper with seven mascles, 3, 3, and 1.

Among the most beautifully executed, as well as the most carefully preserved specimens of seals, are those of the Bishops of Durham. As the best or most curious of these, we may observe those of (1) Bishop Skirlaw, who is represented holding the head of S. Oswald. (2) Robert de Neville again is represented armed, upon his charger, the bardings of which have the Neville saltire charged with a gimel ring for difference. His helmet is surmounted with a coronetted mitre, from which emerges a bull's head, the crest of the Nevilles. Several of the

Bishops of Durham exhibit a similar treatment upon their seals; as for example Thomas de Hatfield, and John de Fordham.

But perhaps the most beautiful, as well as the most perfect seal of all, is that of Anthony Bek (Bishop of Durham). It is surrounded by the following legend:—† S^r : ARTONII : DEI : GRA : S^r : INCROSOLOMIT : AACLASIA : PATRIARANC : ET : EPI : DVRELMEN.

The upper part bears the crucifix, with SS. Mary and John beneath a beautifully crocketted canopy. Below this is a compartment with the Holy Sepulchre, and sleeping guards, and an angel exhibiting the linen clothes to the three Maries, who are represented bearing spices to anoint the dead Christ. The angel holds a tau cross in his hand, in allusion to the Bishop's name. At the base is a kneeling figure of the Bishop, between two patriarchal crosses. On either side of this composition is a fine canopy: the dexter one containing a figure of the Virgin and Child, the sinister one a Bishop (probably S. Cuthbert), with the head of S. Oswald in his hand. The composition is completed by two small circles bearing the cross recercelée of the Bishop.

There are some very beautiful specimens, in good preservation, of the seals of Knights and civilians; as for instance that of Alexander de Neville, which bears a beautifully diapered shield of Neville, differenced with a crescent, suspended from a tree, to which are chained two muzzled bears, supporting the shield between them. This is a curious illustration of a badge being used as supporters.

The seal of Henry le Scrop again bears the Scrop shield, differenced with a label, hanging from a mantled helm surmounted by a crest, two arms issuant from a coronet. From behind the shield a lion's paw is holding a pennon.

The seal of Adam de Swyneburne seems to have been the most carefully finished of these. It has a shield charged with

five tapels on a cross; the composition being filled up with three boars' heads. Also a bearing of the family.

The seal of John de Louthre has a figure of S. George and the dragon, and a shield charged with six amulets.

The seal of William de Ilkystone has his shield bearing three mitres.

From the above examples, it will be seen how various the devices upon the different seals are. They are all in fair preservation, some of them even very well preserved, notably that of Adam de Swyneburne.

One more very curious shield of oval shape we get from Alnwick, in Northumberland. It belongs to Agnes de Vesci, and bears her effigy upon it, in a mantle lined with vair. In her left hand she holds a large cross patonce, and her right supports the shield of her husband, gules, cross patonce argent. On her left is the shield of her own family (De Ferrers), vairée or and gules.

The counter seal has a large *garbe* or wheatsheaf, from which hang four shields—Those of De Vesci, Le Maréshall (per pale or and vert, a lion rampant gules), Ranolph, Earl of Chester (azure three garbs or); the fourth shield has been broken off.

The seal of Anthony, the great Bastard of Burgundy, bears the arms of the Duke Philip his father, differenced by a mark of illegitimacy, viz., quarterly 1 and 4. Burgundy modern; 2 per pale Burgundy ancient and Brabant; 3 per pale Burgundy ancient and Limbourg, on an inescutcheon Flanders; over all a bâton sinister (the barre de travers mentioned by de la Marche) for a difference. The shield is ensigned with a helmet in profile; and for a crest an owl full faced; the supporters are two griffins; and the legend, which is on a scroll, is *anthoine bastart de bourgoinqne conte de la roche*. The words being on every occasion separated by a fleur-de-lys (probably derived from the crest of his father) instead of the usual point or points, and a fleur-de-lys also appears on one end of the scroll.

The above may be taken as fair instances of seal engraving during the middle ages. I have selected these, either because they had something peculiar in their design, or because of the care which the engraver had evidently bestowed upon his work. Like other works of art of this period, the artificer appears to have given much time and careful thought to his labour, which in many of the above instances is exceedingly well finished. The grouping of figures, as well as the general effect of the whole composition, and not least the sharp precision with which the matrix was originally engraved, all tend to show this; and among modern seal engravers, it is perhaps not rash or unfair to say that very few have equalled, and very, very far the greater number come short of, the engravers on metal of the middle ages.

I have just now had an opportunity of examining a very good specimen of a fine thumb-ring, on which is a merchant's mark similar to the one I have described. It was found in Winchester some time ago, and is, I believe, the only seal of the kind yet discovered in that city. This fact is the more singular, inasmuch as Winchester was once famous as one of the ten great marts for the sale of wool, woolfells, and leather, established by Edward III. The ring is of silver, massive and pure; the mark will be seen in the engraving. The letters



are "h" "a." The full name of the merchant, whose mark of cognizance and whose initials the seal bears, has not been found. As in the case of nearly all the merchants' marks that we have seen, it bears the sign of the cross. It may be well to remark for the information of those who would pursue this subject further, that Newton in his "Display of Heraldry" gives

several engravings of the more interesting devices on seals of this character. It would seem to me that these devices, simple as they are, and fanciful no doubt, have far more taste in them than some of the modern explanatory armorial bearings of the present day. In the latter case heraldry loses its ancient dignity.

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