

S E A L

OF

The Benedictine Nunery at Carrow.

COMMUNICATED BY

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THE matrix of the seal, of which the kind liberality of Mr. Fitch has here supplied an engraving, is now in his possession. It was found among the *débris* of St. Paul's church, Norwich, at the time of the reparation and enlargement of that building in 1841. The plate exhibits it of its proper size. Its substance is lead: the reverse quite plain, except that in the centre is a slightly elevated ridge, still preserving some remains of the handle whereby it was used. The legend affords no decisive means of appropriating it; being equally applicable to the Monastery at Carrow and to the Chapels of St. Mary in the Fields and St. Mary in the Marsh: the latter pulled down by Bishop Herbert. It seems, however, most probable that it is rightly assigned to the first of these; seeing that the last is not known, or indeed likely, to have had any peculiar seal of its own; and that the seal of the Virgin in the Fields is quite dissimilar; whereas Dugdale, and after him Blomefield and Taylor, enumerate four belonging to Carrow. One of these, called the *Seal of the exempt Spiritual Jurisdiction of the Priory*, the author of the *Norfolk Index Monasticus*, who is most full upon the subject, describes as follows: "It is oval, pointed, representing the Virgin crowned, sitting upon a throne beneath a canopy, holding our Saviour in one hand and a sceptre in the other, with the inscription, S. PRIORISSE:



ANCIENT SEAL OF CARROW NUNNERY

NEAR NORWICH.

IN THE POSSESSION OF MR ROBERT FITCH. F. G. S.

S : MARIE : ECCE : DE KARHOWE." Judging from this description, the uniformity and the dissimilarity between the two seals might be supposed to be almost equally remarkable ; but Blomefield here comes to our aid, and, by figuring that of Carrow, removes all possibility of mistake ; the Virgin and Child upon it being seen in front face, and the whole workmanship and character of the two quite different.

As regards the seal communicated by Mr. Fitch, a more remarkable one in point of style and execution is perhaps nowhere to be found. Our great moral poet has observed, that "darkness strikes the sense no less than light." So, by a parity of reasoning, in tracing the history of art, extreme coarseness and rudeness are equally deserving of attention as the opposite qualities of elegance and care and beauty. Here too a motive is afforded for preserving and making known the representation of the Carrow Seal, in addition to the generally admitted desirability of recording all those that appertained to religious foundations. Very many of these are figured in the first volume of the *Vetusta Monumenta* ; and of such importance did the matter appear to Sir Henry Ellis, Mr. Caley, and Dr. Bandinell, that in their edition of the *Monasticon*, they bestowed considerable pains and cost upon collecting and engraving as many seals as they could find of the Benedictine establishments in England. Yet, in these plates, numerous as they are, no seal is to be met with which resembles this. What most approaches it is the seal of the Abbey of Wilton, a seal by no means equally curious in its bearings ; but still so much so, that one of the most learned antiquaries of modern times, the late Mr. Douce, presented a drawing of it, accompanied with a long and highly instructing disquisition, to the Society of Antiquaries, by whom it was published in the eighteenth volume of the *Archæologia*. Mr. Douce, judging from the individual represented, from the form of the letters of the

inscription, and from the rudeness of the work, considered himself justified in referring it to the time of Edgar, and thus giving it a priority in point of date over all others known to exist in the kingdom. A similar claim cannot be preferred in behalf of the seal here represented; for, though it be still more rude in the figures of the Virgin and Child, who (which is very remarkable) are seen in profile, yet the shape of the letters is far from indicating the same period, while its pointed oval outline equally forbids so great antiquity, and the monastery to which it is supposed to have belonged was not founded till the throne was filled by Stephen. In his reign, or in that of some of his more immediate successors, the seal most probably had its existence. The Virgin's crown accords with that worn by Henry I., as figured by Strutt in his *Regal and Ecclesiastical Antiquities*, p. 101, pl. II. Her sceptre greatly resembles that borne by William Rufus, as seen in the same work, p. 7, pl. IV. For her netted head-dress it would probably not be easy to find an equally satisfactory prototype. The author just quoted has figured none prior to the fourteenth century, at which time he gives an example, in his *Dresses and Habits*, pl. XCVII.; but the more learned French archæologist, Willémin, here stands us in better stead, introducing in the first volume of his *Monumens Inédits*, p. 61, pl. CI., a female holding a child, with her hair similarly confined, copied from a MS. in the Royal Library at Paris, of the year 1291.

If these deductions be legitimate, Mr. Fitch's seal may safely be considered the original one of the Priory; and the present brief observations may be aptly closed with the words applied by Mr. Douce to the more important subject of his paper, that "it is in all respects pre-eminently entitled to the consideration of this Society."