

9. A GREAT SIGNET OF JAMES IV.¹

It is now twenty years since R. K. Hannay published his sketch of "The Early History of the Scottish Signet,"² and, although some work has been done on the subject since then,³ further studies are needed. The history of Scottish administration in and after the later Middle Ages still remains to be written. The object of the present note is to record and describe the only example so far discovered in Scotland of the great signet of a Scottish king, and to comment briefly on its use.

The gist of Hannay's remarks on the great signet was as follows:

"The normal signet of Henry VII was barely an inch in diameter; but he had a larger matrix measuring an inch and three-quarters, which, as Sir Henry Maxwell-Lyte suggests, 'was perhaps used only for communications to foreign potentates.' Search among continental archives might verify the natural

¹ I am indebted to Professor W. Croft Dickinson, Mr G. W. S. Barrow and Mr John Imrie for assistance in the preparation of this note.

² In *History of the Society of Writers to the Signet* (1936), pp. 1-51.

³ E.g. W. Croft Dickinson, "Our Signet of the Unicorn," *Scottish Hist. Rev.*, xxvi, 147-48.

conjecture that the great signet of Scotland served an analogous purpose. . . . Whether James IV copied a fashion from his father-in-law of England does not as yet appear. At all events, in 1524, when the exercise of his royal authority by James V was recognised, 'the grete signet' seems to have been nothing new. David Betoun, sent as envoy to France, had 'ane lettir of estaite' under it, besides his commission under the great seal. Probably the letter contained instructions and articles, just as did 'ane lettir of staite' prepared a few years afterwards for dispatch to Henry VIII."

Hannay also commented that "the great signet can scarcely have been at this stage in other hands than those of the secretary himself."¹

Neither Hannay nor Stevenson and Wood² quote any specimen of the great signet. The example described below came to light in 1939, when the Incorporation of Cordiners of Edinburgh deposited some of their records in H.M. General Register House. For the sigillographer as well as for the administrative historian, it is of great interest, since, as the illustration (Pl. LXVIII, 1) shows, it is a fine example of seal engraving. The basic design—a shield of the Scottish arms surmounted by a crown—is that common to most of the Scottish signets from the time of James I.

A few other examples of Scottish great signets are known, but all are now preserved outside Scotland. James IV had another great signet, which was used on a letter to Ferdinand II, King of Aragon, dated 1 July 1512. This seal bears the Scottish arms surmounted by a crown and surrounded by a collar of seven thistles. Around the crown is a scroll with the legend "IN DEFENS." The seal is $1\frac{3}{4}$ ins. in diameter.³ A similar signet (possibly the same one) was used by Albany, as Governor of Scotland, in 1523; and James V employed a signet of similar design in 1538. These seals measure 45 mm. and 46 mm. in diameter respectively (about $1\frac{3}{4}$ ins.).⁴

Comparison of the Scottish great signets with those used by English kings is interesting. It has not been possible to trace any example of the great signet of Henry VII. In the Vatican Archives, however, there are examples of a signet of Henry VIII, 45 mm. in diameter, bearing the English arms on a shield surmounted by a crown and surrounded by a collar of SS.⁵ There is an obvious relationship of design between all these great signets, Scottish and English, and it is noteworthy that they are all of the same size as that known to have been used by Henry VII (about $1\frac{3}{4}$ ins.). These facts may strengthen Hannay's suggestion that James IV borrowed the idea from Henry VII.

The main interest, however, of the administrative historian is in the questions: Why and how was this seal used? Its use on this occasion was not connected with diplomatic business, but with purely domestic affairs. The precept to which it is appended relates to a dispute between the cordiners of Edinburgh and those of the Canongate and is not a document of outstanding importance. Nevertheless, it was perhaps the desire to emphasise the law that "thare suld be na markat haldin bot within oure fre markat in burgh" which suggested the use

¹ Hannay, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

² J. H. Stevenson and Marguerite Wood, *Scottish Heraldic Seals* (privately printed, 1940).

³ British Museum, Egerton MS. 616, fo. 51 (formerly fo. 39). On the use of the thistle as an emblem, see C. Rogers, *Hist. of the Chapel Royal of Scotland* (Grampian Club, 1882), p. ccxxviii.

⁴ Pietro Sella, *I Sigilli dell' Archivio Vaticano* (series: *Inventari dell' Archivio Segreto Vaticano*), vol. i (1937), Nos. 980, 989. These signets, and that in n. 6 above, lend support to the conjectures of Hannay and Maxwell-Lyte that the great signet was used for "communications to foreign potentates."

⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 978. The signet described by W. de G. Birch, *Cat. of Seals in the Dept. of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, vol. i (1887), No. 760, may be another example of the great signet of Henry VIII.

of a more formal seal. On the other hand, administrative convenience alone might be responsible for the use of the great signet, if the smaller signets were not readily available.

Hannay emphasised "the growing importance of the signet and the secretary in connection with the work of the council" from the reign of James III onwards.¹ The issue of the present document "ex deliberatione dominorum consilii" is an illustration of this connection and an example also of procedure by bill presented to the council.² The terms of the bill are preserved in the long preamble of the document which rehearses all that was "menit, schewin and complenit" by the cordiners. It is reasonably certain, too, that the document was drafted and written by a writer to the signet. The name "Clerk" on the document can be identified as that of Alexander Clerk, who was described as a "writer to the signet" in 1511-12,³ and who was also a notary.⁴ The great signet was appended, therefore, to letters which were issued in the normal course of administration. There is ample justification, too, for Hannay's surmise that the great signet was under the control of the secretary himself.

It is not proposed to comment here on the content of the document or on the curious relations between the cordiners of Edinburgh and those of the Canongate, since this would involve enquiry in quite another field of study. Nor is it possible to draw more general conclusions than those already advanced. Only further research can fully reveal the position of this unusual seal in the system of Scottish government of the time.

GRANT G. SIMPSON, *Scottish Record Office*.

Document.⁵

Letters under the great signet of James IV, granted on complaint of the Cordiners of Edinburgh against those of the Canongate, directing the sheriff of Edinburgh, the provost and bailies of Edinburgh, and all other officers and subjects, not to allow craftsmen (of the cordiner craft) to hold markets except in free burghs or burghs in baronies, and to ensure that the goods sold are of sufficient workmanship. Edinburgh, 13 July 1509. (Scottish Record Office, Writs of the Cordiner Craft of Edinburgh, no. 6).

James be the grace of God king of Scottis, to our shiref of Edinburgh and his deputtis, our provest and ballies of our burgh of Edinburgh, and to all utheris our shireffis, provestis, ballies of burrowis, officiaris, liegis and subdittis within our realme quham it efferis, quhais knowlege thir our letters salcum, greting. Forsamekill as it is humely menit, schewin and complenit to us be our liegis and daily servitouris, the maisteris of the faculte of the cordinare craft within our burgh of Edinburgh, apoun the lauboraris and wirkaris of the samyn craft duelland in the Cannongait of our said burgh and utheris, the quhilkis continually on the Settirday haldis comone markat, and on uther divers halydayis, within the toune of Leith, selland and ventand thare stuf of all sortis to the nichtbouris thereof and all maner of strangeris reparand thereto, howbeit that the said stuf thai make and

¹ Hannay, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

² No record of the subject has been found in the MS. *Acta Dominorum Consilii*, vol. xx, which covers the period November 1508 to September 1509.

³ *Treasurer's Accounts*, IV, 358.

⁴ At least two of his notarial instruments survive, dated 30th August 1511 and 4th October 1512 (Register House Charters, Nos. 771, 792). The script, signature and paraph in these documents can safely be identified with those in the document printed below.

⁵ Punctuation and capitals are editorial.

sellis thare is nowther sufficient in werkmanschip nor stuf, and tharefore thai dar nocht compeir to the markat of our said burgh tharewith for danger of correctioun lymit and ordanit, as is allegit tharefore, in the commoun proffit of all oure liegis and strangearis resortand thereto, and with that thare stuf and unsufficient werk causis the said werkmen within oure forsaid fre burgh and the hale countre to be murmurit and sclanderit, howbeit that thare stuf and werkmanschip is alssever and sufficient as is maid in ony uther landis, and als the said maisteris of the faculte forsaid understandis thare suld be na markat haldin bot within oure fre markat in burgh and sua thareintill thai ar hevely hurt and skathit divers wayis incontrare iustice, gif sua be; oure will is, herefore, and we charge yow straitlie and commandis that ye nor nane of yow suffir na craftismen abonewritten to hald na markat bot in fre burrowis or burghis in baronyis, and that the stuf that the said craftismen makis and selis be sufficient and gude, under the pane of escheting of the sammyn. This ye do as ye will ansuere to ws apoun the execution of your officis and under all the hiest pane and charge that efter may follow. Gevin under oure grete signete, at Edinburgh, the xiii day of Julii, the yere of God ane thowsand five hundreth nyne yeris and of oure regnne the xxij yere.

Clerk [signature, with paraph, at lower right-hand corner of document].

E[x] deliberatione dominorum consilii. [These words, which are visible only under ultra-violet light, are written along the tongue at the foot of the document. For explanation of the missing letter *x*, see description of seal attachment given below.]

Endorsements: (i) Die lune vicesimo die mensis Augusti anno domini mv^c nono, proclamata fuit hec littera infrascripta publice ad crucem fori burgi de Edynburgh in omnibus suis punctis et articlis in presentia multitudinis populi et coram hiis testibus, Andre Gray, Alexandro Fauside, Thoma Arnot, cum multis aliis. Strathauch' [signature with paraph].

(ii) Vicesimo quinto die mensis Martii anno domini mv^c tricesimo secundo, proclamata fuit hec littera infrascripta publice ultra archim inferiorem burgi de Edynburgh in omnibus suis punctis et articulis in presentia multitud[inis] populi coram hiis testibus, Willelmo Watsoune, seriando, Willelmo Hammiltone, allutario, et Vincentio Strathauchin, notario publico, cum diversis aliis. Strathauchin [signature with paraph].

(iii) [This endorsement is largely illegible, having been over-written by later endorsements, but appears to be another record of publication beyond the Netherbow of Edinburgh, dated 25 March, 1590 (?)].

(iv) Registrat in the 7th, 8th, & 9th pages of the register of parchments belonging to the Cordiners of Edinburgh, Aprill 20th 1715.

(v) Precept for holding no mercats but in Burrows & Burghs of Barronies. Dated July 13th 1509. N^o/4. [18th century hand].

(vi) Horning for Unsoficient Lether, 13 July 1509. [18th century hand].

(vii) 1509, July 13 [*bis*; modern hand, in ink].

Description: parchment, 11 in. × 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Seal attachment: on tongue, $\frac{3}{4}$ in. wide, cut from foot of parchment. Until recently the seal had been appended by using this strip of parchment, passed through a cut in the document, as a tag. It is certain, however, that this

strip was originally a tongue, which probably became torn at the root due to the weight of the seal. This is proved by the fact that in the words "Ex deliberatione dominorum consilii" the letter *E* is on the parchment of the document itself, the letter *x* is missing where the tongue was torn off, and the remainder is written on the tongue itself. No doubt the cutting of the slit and the use of the tongue to form a tag were resorted to in order to preserve the seal. The document was repaired in the Scottish Record Office on 15 August 1956 and the seal was then re-appended tongue-wise in its original form.

Seal: a shield of arms—a lion rampant within a royal tressure. Above the shield, a closed crown. Surrounding the remainder of the shield, a collar of nine thistles. Beaded border at edge of seal, not continued above crown. Diameter $1\frac{3}{4}$ ins. Red wax in cup of natural wax. Good impression. Seal complete; slightly rubbed but otherwise well preserved (Pl. LXVIII, 1).



1. Great Signet of James IV.



Bronze beads, and (?) spacer-plate (1/1), from the Migdale Hoard. (Note 11.)

GRANT G. SIMPSON; R. B. K. STEVENSON.