

## THE SEAL OF CWM HIR ABBEY

Secure Communication in the Middle Ages and  
fraudulent practices.

Roger Coward



**T**he value of a small piece of wax attached to a document has the power to make or break the integrity of that document. Whether it was between an Abbey and its tenants, Kings of England or France or from the Pope to an Abbot. Attached to a document of 1533<sup>1</sup> is the only surviving, relatively complete, seal of Cwm Hir Abbey. It is attached to a lease, for the large and prosperous farm or grange at Brilley near Hay on Wye. It is the common seal of the abbey community or the abbey as an institution.

For many decades the expert on Welsh Seals has been Rev Dr David H Williams, who catalogued the National Museum of Wales collection<sup>2</sup> and wrote on several occasions about Welsh Ecclesiastical Seals in the professional historical journal *Archaeologica Cambrensis*.<sup>3</sup> This is the field of study called sigillography. One of his books entitled, *Welsh History through Seals*<sup>4</sup> inspired my interest in the Abbey Cwm Hir seal to see what could be found out about our local Abbey. We can learn a great deal about life in the abbey by understanding the role of the seal and its die, because it was at the heart of the business side of the monastery. This modest looking piece of wax is the equivalent of a debit or credit card today. Although the Seal was the essential guarantor of the source of the document, once it had reached its intended recipient it was not so important except as a record of the signatories to a past agreement. If you wanted to spend money or make a deal you needed to get hold of the device that made the abbey's seal: its matrix, stamp or die. Every seal was made with a die and each being different and particular to the person who owned it or had the responsibility of using it. After a certain date all Cistercian matrices were designed with the Virgin Mary in the centre, in this case with the Abbot or St Bernard, in a niche to the left, holding a book probably the Rule of St Benedict. Little is known about the engravers but they were obviously very talented as they had to put so much detail into such a small space. They also must have had a lot of design ideas for every seal had to be different, as they were a sign of identity of the individual who used it. Some seals did have a similar style because you could get a personal seal 'off the peg' with just the individual name added. Note the word signet includes the word sign. When you used a signet ring to make a seal you were signing or making your sign on that document.



Individuals would have a personal signet ring with a matrix built in, which could be worn at all times and thus kept safely.

All persons of note would have a personal die. Alternatively you could have a desk top seal matrix with a larger handle on it. Seals started to be used everywhere in the late twelfth century. Seal matrices could be made of clay, slate and stone matrices have been found locally, at Knighton, Llangynllo and Churchstoke<sup>5</sup>. We do not have a matrix for Cwm Hir Abbey, as when not needed

they were normally melted down or sent back to the mother abbey in Citeaux, France. On a Strata Florida matrix the Abbot's name has been obliterated possibly on his death or retirement in order to make the seal invalid or perhaps allow the matrix to be used fraudulently or temporarily by his successor until his own was made. Like a credit card, a matrix was non-transferable. The seal represented the identity of the individual or the abbey and was a guarantee that the document to which it was attached was from that person or institution.

The equipment to make a seal was therefore a powerful tool. Keeping these matrices safe was critical, since if they got into the wrong hands it could cost the abbey dear both in money and reputation. Security was essential. Cwm Hir Abbey would also have had a large wooden, iron bound chest with four or five locks. When the *Statute of Carlisle* was issued by King Edward I shortly after 1307, the Act required '*all religious houses to have a common seal kept by the prior and four monks chosen for the purpose ... in safe keeping under the abbot's seal*'.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the King was making a decree about the use of seals shows how important the matter was. It was necessary for the law to work that the seal really did provide absolute verification of a document's source. Opening of the chest, with four or five key holders, would have been quite a ritual, as you would need to get together all the key holders, the Abbot, Prior, Cellarer, Bursar and another. In principle the Abbot did have final authority - but over a devious Prior and a burly Cellarer.



This iron re-enforced box would have been where all the important documents of the Abbey were kept: the Deeds of Land for the Abbey, Deeds for the granges, Grants from local nobility, and the King's confirmations as well as the Pope's.

The paper in medieval times was vellum i.e. sheep or goatskin or

more important documents on parchment, made of calf skin, written with long lasting ink. The documents were very small, even the vellum announcing the major grant by Roger Mortimer of 1200 measured only six by eight inches, this being the earliest document to survive for Cwm Hir.

Much later in 1520 is a record that at Cwm Hir the seal matrix was:

*'won't to be kept in a chest with two locks, the key of one lock remaining with the abbot and the other with one of the monks appointed especially for that purpose'.<sup>7</sup>*

In cathedrals the Bishops would have one key, the Dean and Chapter the other.

These beautiful chests with their iron reinforcements show how seriously the matter of different key holders was taken. Abbeys usually had some valuable chalices and plates which would be stored in the chest. Nevertheless one of the last Abbots of Cwm Hir was reported to have got hold of both keys and used the seal without the agreement of the community.

### The relationship between Abbots' seals and Community Seals.

A typical Abbot's seal had an image of a hand on a Pastoral Staff. In the twelfth century it was his seal that was used for all Abbey business. Officially, no Cistercian Community of Monks had a seal, as a document from Cwm Hir explains.<sup>8</sup> Although clearly some abbeys of different orders did have them or else there would not be a reason to ban them. Probably because the affairs of abbeys became more and more complex as their new farms became successful and had surplus produce to sell, there was a need for a second seal for use by senior members of the Community.



In 1335 the General Chapter, the annual meeting of all Abbots at Citeaux, declared that all seals should have the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) on them. Common or Community Seal matrices could last a very long time, the longest known was 157 years (in Julita, Sweden). At Abbey Cwm Hir, one lasted 122 years. So the Community's Common Seal went on for ever; however the Abbot's seal changed quite frequently. Therefore it was essential that the Abbot's Seal had his name on it and became invalid when he left or died. There were always variations. Above is our Daughter House, Cymer's Seal, which does not have the BVM in the centre but a hooded or hallowed abbot, his pastoral staff (crook turned outwards) clutched by his left arm, a book held in his right hand.

<b>Table pertaining to of Regulations Seals</b>	
1200	The Cistercian General Chapter decreed that each abbey was to use only its abbot's seal which should not have his name on it.
1218	Abbeys with a Common Seal ordered to destroy it.
1235	There is a document from Cwm Hir which confirms that ' <i>It is not the custom of our Order to have a common seal except the seal of the abbot</i> '. (Beverley Smith '1970' p.91). Even Abbots will try to find ways around laws so in the same year the General Chapter had to ordain that ' <i>the Abbot should have only one seal</i> '.
1307	Edward I. Statute of Carlisle required a Common Seal. From this date onwards the Abbot had one seal and the Abbey had another.
1335	Pope Benedict, in his <i>Reform of the Cistercian Order</i> decreed that the Abbot's seal should have his name on it.
1336	Cistercian General Chapter ordered that the Common Seal of each abbey was to be ' <i>made rounded, of copper, and engraved with the image of the Blessed Virgin, in whose honour are founded all the monasteries of our order</i> '. (Statuta III p. 437 (1335).)

The signet or personal seal of the Abbot was sometimes used as a counter seal on the back of the common or corporate seal. A hand holding the pastoral staff on the Abbot's seal was required by the Cistercian General Chapter although its not obvious on either Strata Florida nor Cwm Hir Abbots' seals. The Strata Florida Abbot's seal has his name on it, Abbot R Dawson, in 1513.<sup>9</sup>

The signet seal of Abbot Richard Vaughan (1516-30), Abbey Cwm Hir, is on the back of the seal. On the document it's attached to, there is a comment that it '*ought to have upon the backside three small seals every of them four square*'<sup>10</sup> as in the arrangement of the seals here. It is possible that this was a secret code for checking authenticity between the Abbots of Abbey Cwm Hir and Strata Florida as they had a similar method. It was quite common for documents to have a statement at the end stating what form the seal should be so the receiver can judge whether it was genuine. Frequently abbey documents stated they were '*signed in the Chapter House*'.

Another interesting fact about seals is that they can be loosely dated by the style of the lettering on them. For example, Roman capitals indicate a date between 1140-1143; Lombardic Script 1193 - 1218; Black Letter font between 1398-1407 and Renaissance Capitals indicate dates around 1549. Seals were usually made of beeswax, easily available at the time. They were coloured with various pigments; vermilion for red; orpiment for yellow; verdigris for green; organic matter for brown. There were no hard and fast rules for when a particular colour was used but it tended to be that Royal seals used green; brown for less significant documents; red for privy seals and signets.

Green was widely used in the late twelfth century, red from the early thirteenth century. Sometimes seals and their matrices were double sided, when Edward I gave Haverfordwest its Charter in 1291, the burgesses chose a double sided seal.

Of course individuals had seals as well as religious institutions. Of relevance to Abbey Cwm Hir is the seal of Llywelyn ap Iowerth or Llywelyn the Great. On normal transactions he would use the Common Seal but if he was writing to his father in law, his beloved wife Joan's father, King John of England, he would use the Privy Seal. His general household seal shows a warrior riding a war horse. His military strategy involved the use of horses and he bought three every year from Cwm Hir Abbey because the abbey had a particularly superior breed - possibly Spanish crossed with Barb Arabs or Andalusians descended from the Spanish Roman Legion once encamped opposite the Cabalva Grange. Very important deals were signed by a larger number of people. An Agreement settling a long and bitter dispute about land between Margam and Tintern Abbeys had six seals.



An even larger number of people sealed a deed of release, when Prince Rhodri agreed to sell his inheritance rights to his elder brother Llywelyn ap Gruffudd in 1272. It is possible that to enforce this sale he took himself out of the line of succession as well, so this was a very important document. It was sealed '*for greater security*' with the seals of the Bishop of Bangor; Bishop of St Asaph; Bishop of Enlli (Bardsey and Llyn); Abbot of Aberconwy; Abbot of Basingwerk; Archdeacon of Bangor & the Archdeacon of St Asaph, at least seven seals.

When an Abbot retired or died, his seal matrix would be sent back to the centre of the Cistercian Order at Citeaux. Sometimes they would be defaced but mostly melted down if made of metal. That's why there are relatively few matrices surviving. It was so important that this powerful object didn't fall into the wrong hands. It is particularly true of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd. No examples of his privy or general seals survive on documents.

Edward I made him 'disappear'. The report of his death mentioned that his privy seal was found in his breeches. Edward was determined to stamp out all signs of Welsh princely independence especially its most potent symbols.

King Edward himself went to Abbey Cwm Hir's daughter house, Cymer, to seize Llywelyn's Coronet which he had left there in the care of the monks on the way to his last campaign. All of Llywelyn's wealth was confiscated and guarded by '*forty men from Shropshire*,<sup>11</sup> at Castell y Bere just

south of Cymer. The vital symbols of his identity, especially his and his family's seal matrices, were also seized and sent to London to be melted down by the King's Goldsmith who commissioned one of the largest and finest medieval chalices still in existence today. He was then summoned to take it to the King, at Caernarfon, but somehow it went missing and found its way to Cymer Abbey again, near Dolgellau. There it was safely kept until the dissolution of the monastery in 1537 when the quick thinking monks hid it amongst boulders on the mountainside outside Dolgellau. There it remained until 1890 when some miners discovered it and sold it for fifty shillings. It has since been known as the Dolgellau Chalice and is now kept in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, but it is still owned by the Queen. That reflects how important symbols and signs were in the medieval period.



Before moving on to the Cwm Hir seal itself we can catch a flavour of life in medieval Cwm Hir by quickly looking at some other small round items that were found locally here, such as several Papal Bulls. A Bull was a seal stamped into lead instead of wax. The term Papal Bull also applies to what it was attached, the document sent from the Papacy, so the use of the term can be confusing. Several lead Papal Bulls from the ruins at Abbey Cwm Hir are safely preserved in the National Museum of Wales. These were found in the ruins by Col. John Lionel Philips (The Hall 1932 - 1959) and Thomas Wilson (builder of the Hall 1824-37). On the obverse side of all papal bullae, there is a picture of St Paul and St Peter labelled *Sanctus PAulus and Sanctus PETrus* (thus, *SPASPE*). From them we know that St Paul had straight hair and St Peter had curly hair. On the other side of the bull was the name of the current Pope, in this case Alexander IV.



In Wales today, dotted with Non-Conformist chapels and disestablished Welsh Churches it is hard to imagine the power of the Roman Pope here in the Middle Ages. But Llywelyn the Great and his successor, Dafydd, saw the Pope as their protector against the power of the English crown and as a guarantor of their independence. Llywelyn obtained Papal support in his bid to make his son Dafydd, Prince of Wales, and Dafydd himself even attempted to become a vassal of the Pope in the hope of making Wales subject to the Papacy rather than to England. A little later it was the papal legate



Ottobuono who negotiated the Treaty of Montgomery in which the English King Henry III acknowledged Llywelyn the Last, as Prince of Wales in 1267.

It seems that whenever the Pope changed and that was frequently at this time, religious houses had to be re-confirmed by the new Pope. This is probably why the papal seals or lead bulls which were found in the ruins, came to Abbey Cwm Hir. The only known and recorded papal letter that came specifically to Cwm Hir was from Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) who in 1232 granted the abbey the privilege of administering the sacraments to the general public, like a cathedral or a parish church at a time when abbeys did not let the public in. This was because Cwm Hir was in '*a wild and mountainous place*'<sup>12</sup> and a long way from a parish church. Whilst exploring small round objects, a hoard of coins has also survived and was found in a package inscribed 'Anglo-Gallic coins c.1190' from the Abbey when Col. John Lionel Philips was clearing out the Hall around 1959. They are also in the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. A total of thirteen deniers including eight in either the name of Henry II or III and three in the name Richard I, all issued in their capacities as Dukes of Aquitaine, Western France, and Kings of England. The value in the twelfth century would have been two or three contemporary English pence, about a day's pay for an artisan.<sup>13</sup>

The Seal of Cwm Hir abbey was found attached to a lease signed and sealed in 1533 from Abbot Geoffrey Davys just four years before the Dissolution, or Suppression, of the Abbey by Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell. The Agreement or Lease appoints a 'Roger Vaughan of Clyroo and his sons', as stewards of land in Brilley in the lordship of Elfael and Huntington in return for an annuity of 13s. 4d. This would have been the Abbey Grange at Brilley and is a typical arrangement towards the end of the Abbey's life when there were no Lay Brothers (la-bourers) left to do the farm work, so the lands were rented out. A few years before, between 1516 - 1530, the Abbot of Cwm Hir was a Richard Vaughan. Was he related to the Roger Vaughan who obtained this lease of land?



It would not be surprising as it was the same Roger Vaughan about whom another monk complained in writing to our mother house at Whitland and to the Council of the Marches that he had taken the Common Seal out of the box and was using it without the consent of the community, to lease out three large farms or Granges at Carnaf near Hay, Mynachdy Poeth beyond Knighton and Nant yr Arian near Devil's Bridge.

The Cwm Hir common seal measures sixty eight by forty six millimetres and is a quite large and complex example. This is the only Cwm Hir seal that survives which is intelligible. It is made up of fragments that were put together on some resin by the Public Record Office in 1905. You can just

make out in the centre the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the infant Christ sitting under a Gothic style canopy with a halo. Cwm Hir Abbey was consecrated to the Blessed Virgin Mary as were all Cistercian Abbeys.

This was decided at the General Chapter in the 1140s. The General Chapter was the main governing body of the developing Cistercian Order which was held annually at Citeaux, where the Order started, and to which all Abbots were expected to go every year, however far away from Burgundy, France their abbey was. Capitula No. IX, states: '*All our monasteries ought to be in honour of the Queen of Heaven and Earth*'. At Abbey Cwm Hir the local church was dedicated likewise. Next to the image of the BVM is an image of an Abbot or more likely St Bernard who did so much to develop the Cistercian Order. He holds a Pastoral Staff and holds a book, perhaps the *Rule of St Benedict*, under the other arm. As we have seen the Seal was used to authenticate all major documents often involving financial arrangements and so its matrix was extremely valuable. On the back is an impression of the signet seal of Abbot Geoffrey Dafys (1532-4). Presumably this is what is meant by the

phrase in the Statue of Carlisle as '*under the Abbot's seal*'. The Signet probably represents the crook and pastoral staff or G (of Geoffrey) reversed. The three impressions of this seal made on the reverse of the monastery's common seal are in accordance with similar practice at Strata Florida. This seal was

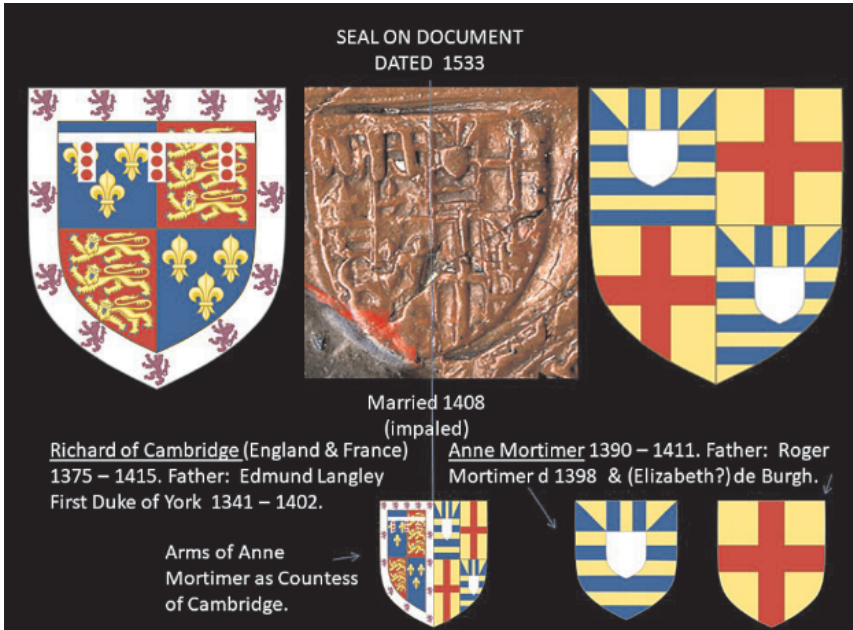


designed in the early fifteenth century but by the sixteenth century it was common to have a coat of arms on a seal.

You can recognise the features of the coat of arms in the wax impression, on the right. These represent the people who benefited the Abbey with funds. These are the arms of Anne Mortimer in her capacity as Countess of Cambridge, who was married to Richard of Cambridge.<sup>15</sup> In the diagram on the right are the arms of Anne Mortimer before she was married. Her father was Roger Mortimer, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of March, heir presumptive to her uncle King Richard II of England.

The red cross is the arms of the de Burgh family from Ireland who were distantly related and may have donated money into the Abbey. Anne Mortimer was a lady in a very unique position. She was not only a descendant of King Edward I and earlier English monarchs through her mother Eleanor Holland but more importantly, a descendant of King Edward III. Her arms are impaled (pushed together) with those of her husband Richard of Cambridge so the central image is really her arms in her capacity as Countess of Cambridge.





On the left are the arms of Richard made up of the arms of the King of England and France with the heraldic device of a *label and three points* at the top to show he was the son of the first Duke of York, fourth son of the King. The son of Anne Mortimer and Richard of Cambridge was Richard Plantagenet, who was significant in causing the Wars of the Roses. She was also the grandmother of King Edward IV and King Richard III. The Seal would have been made after their marriage in 1408 and before her death in childbirth in 1411. It was still in use in 1533, some one hundred and twenty two years later. A well worked matrix, this makes for an imposing seal for a relatively poor monastery. Everywhere there is English royalty in the seal of the Abbey of Cwm Hir, Wales! In fact it had been under Royal Protection since King John's Confirmation in 1215 but it took its Dissolution in 1537 for it to become crown property under Henry VIII.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> National Archives Ref. E 329/244.
- <sup>2</sup> DH Williams *Catalogue of Seals in the National Museum of Wales* (Cardiff 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> DH Williams *Catalogue of Welsh Ecclesiastical Seals down to 1600 AD Archaeologica Cambrensis 1987-1988*.
- <sup>4</sup> DH Williams *Welsh History through Seals* (National Museum of Wales 1982).
- <sup>5</sup> DH Williams *Catalogue of Seals in the National Museum of Wales* (Cardiff 1993) p4.
- <sup>6</sup> DH Williams *Catalogue of Welsh Ecclesiastical Seals, down to 1600 AD Seals of Cistercian Monasteries; Part IV* p139. *Archaeologica Cambrensis* 1987– 1988.
- <sup>7</sup> DH Williams in *The White Monks of Powys (Cwmhir Abbey)* in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* (1976) PRO C.24/29 pt 2 cited on P 82 by J Beverley Smith,
- <sup>8</sup> *The Middle March in the Thirteenth Century* (*Bulletin Celtic Studies XXIV* pt 1 Nov 1970). p91.
- <sup>9</sup> DH Williams Notes to Plate IX *The Welsh Cistercians* (Gracewing 2001).
- <sup>10</sup> PRO LR 2/76.F.19d cited P221 *Ibid*.
- <sup>11</sup> Breeches.
- <sup>12</sup> Arnold J Taylor, A Fragment of a Dona Account of 1284. (*Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies Vol 27 part II (1977) pp 253-262*).
- <sup>13</sup> Calendar of Papal Registers i 131.
- <sup>14</sup> John Brand, *Bulletin de la Société Française de Numismatiques* 1978 p 372-3 (Accession no. in National Museum of Wales 86.76H.).
- <sup>15</sup> Dr DM Siddons and DH Williams. Heraldic interpretations of the coat of arms in Part IV *Seals of Cistercian Monasteries in Welsh Ecclesiastical Seals* by David H Williams in *Archaeologica Cambrensis* 1988. Page 147 – 8.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.