

The Silver Seal Matrix of the Peculiar Jurisdiction of the Prebend of St. Margaret, Leicester.

by John Cherry

This seal matrix, found in Derbyshire, was recently acquired by Leicestershire Museums. The matrix is described and discussed in relation to the history of St. Margaret, Leicester which was a prebend of Lincoln Cathedral and the seals of peculiar jurisdictions in general.

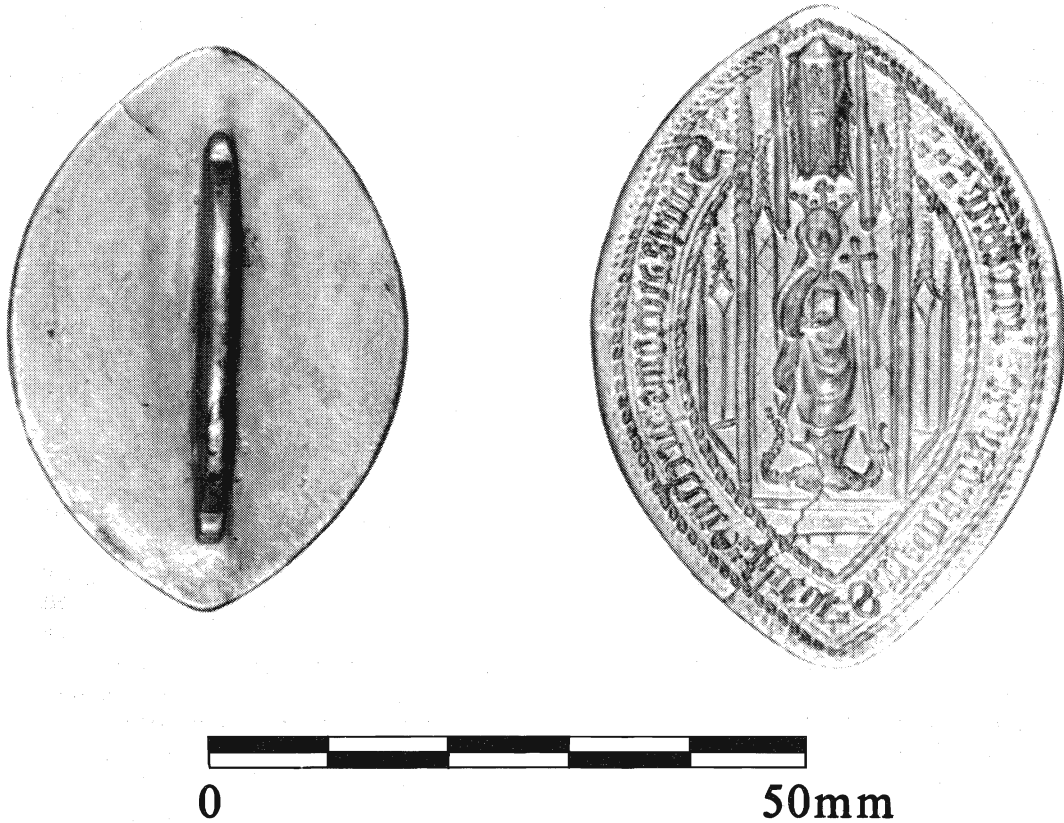
On 21 May 1989 Mr. K. Darby found this seal matrix at Hillside Farm, Kirk Langley, Derbyshire. It was sold at Sothebys on December 7th, 1989, Lot 1, and was acquired by Leicestershire Museums, Arts and Records Service with the aid of a grant from the Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund.

The seal is silver, pointed oval in shape, with a loop handle at the back. In the centre is engraved the figure of St. Margaret wearing a crown and holding in her left hand a staff with which she spears the dragon underfoot in the mouth. She stands in a niche which is surmounted by a triple canopy and central tower and has panels on either side. A black letter inscription within cabled borders reads *S' iurisdictionis pecliar' : pbi de: sci: Margarete: leicestrie* which may be expanded as *Sigillum iurisdictionis peculiaris prebende de Sancte Margarete Leicestrie* and translated as the 'Seal of the peculiar jurisdiction of the prebend of St. Margaret's Leicester'. It measures 55mm by 39mm.

A peculiar jurisdiction is a term used in ecclesiastical law which has the same meaning as the term franchise in common law since it implies the existence of a local jurisdiction enjoyed by a person independently of the usual legal authority in the district. There were a wide variety of jurisdictions that were exempt from the authority of the bishop notably royal peculiars, archbishop's peculiars, monastic peculiars, and the peculiars of certain deans and chapters. There is also a class of peculiar jurisdictions which were not exempt from, but were subordinate to, the bishop of the diocese. These are peculiars which belong to deans and chapters or to a prebendary which are exempt from the authority of the archdeacon. Such peculiars may be visited by the bishop in his primary and triennial visitations but in the meantime the official of the dean and chapter or the prebendary is the judge and any appeal may only be made to the bishop of the diocese. The most detailed summary of peculiar jurisdictions and their seals appears in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries* for 1870-3.¹

The prebend (*praebenda*) was the source of income for a particular canon, so that a canon of the church of Lincoln was also the prebendary of the prebend which provided his income. Many canons would never have resided at Lincoln, but were required to

1. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*. Second series, 5 (1870-3), pp. 238-250



The silver seal matrix of the peculiar jurisdiction of St. Margaret, Leicester.

provide vicars to serve in their place in the cathedral. The peculiar of St. Margaret in Leicester extended over the parish of St. Margaret and the chapelry of Knighton. The prebend exercised spiritual cognisance over the exempt district and held his court in the church of St. Margaret, of which he was the patron. He had the power of proving wills, of granting their administration, and granting marriage licences. It was in the authentication of these acts that the silver seal was used.

This is the only seal recorded for this peculiar. It was probably engraved in the early fifteenth century, since it has a black letter inscription. The church of St. Margaret still preserves a large amount of fifteenth century work and it may be that both are indications of the prosperity of the church at this time.

Few silver medieval ecclesiastical seal matrices have survived since most were probably melted down for their metal. The silver seal of the abbot of Strata Florida was discovered in 1807, and it is likely that the silver seal of Saltwood, Kent, the only other silver seal of a peculiar jurisdiction, was discovered in the ground.² The design of

2. For the seal of Strata Florida see A.B. Tonnochy, *Catalogue of British Seal-Dies in the British Museum*, (London 1952), no.858 and for the seal of Saltwood *ibid.*, no.874.

the seal with a figure in a niche surmounted by a canopy is a conventional fifteenth century design derived from earlier episcopal seals.

The earliest surviving seal matrices of peculiar jurisdictions occur in the fourteenth century. The silver seal matrix of Saltwood in Kent represents a peculiar jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Here a traceried compartment encloses two hands holding a sword and a key respectively on a diapered field. The use of the key and the sword derive from the dedication of the church to St. Peter and St. Paul.³ Other surviving fourteenth century seal matrices of peculiars, although in bronze rather than silver, are Wingham, Kent, which shows the Coronation of the Virgin, Hartlebury, Worcestershire, which has St. James the Greater standing on a corbel, and Little Malvern, Worcestershire, showing St. Giles to whom the Benedictine monastery was dedicated.⁴

St. Margaret is shown on the seal because the church was dedicated to her. St. Margaret was a popular dedication since over 200 churches were dedicated to her in England in the Middle Ages. According to F. Bond, it was eleventh in order of popularity among dedications.⁵

It is interesting to note that a later seal of this prebend was recorded by John Nichols.⁶ It showed a shield with the arms of the See of Lincoln impaling Gules, a chevron argent between three crescents ermine. These are the arms of Gosling or Gostling, and it was probably engraved when John Gostling was collated to this prebend in 1689. The present location of this seal matrix, if it still exists, is unknown.

The only other medieval seal matrix known of a peculiar jurisdiction in the diocese of Lincoln is that of Long Stow, Huntingdon which is recorded in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries as having used up to 1837 a seal of another institution, in this case the fifteenth century seal of the Fraternity of Saint Lazarus.⁷ Since the Fraternity of St. Lazarus was attached to the house at Burton Lazars in Leicestershire, which was the chief house of the order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem, this is an appropriate opportunity to comment on the seal matrices of the house and Fraternity. The house had a seal, showing St. Lazarus and the arms of the founder Roger de Mowbray, whose matrix has not survived.⁸ There were at least four seal matrices of the Fraternity in the fifteenth century of which two have survived. One was found in Suffolk before 1814 when it was published in *Archaeologia*. In 1952 it was in the collection of Philip Nelson and its present whereabouts are unknown. It showed St. Lazarus in a canopied niche.⁹ The second was acquired by the British Museum in 1887 when it was purchased from Lieutenant Colonel H. Walrond. Like the other, it shows St. Lazarus in a niche.¹⁰ There are also impressions of two other seals in the collections of the Manuscript Section of the British Library.

Both these like the others show St. Lazarus in a niche.¹¹ The seal that was used up

3. Tonnochy 1952, as note 2, p.188, no.874.

4. For Wingham, see Tonnochy 1952, as note 2, p.189, no.876. For Hartlebury, see Tonnochy 1952, as note 2, no. 871. For Little Malvern, *Antiquaries Journal*, 4 (1924), p.245.

5. Francis Bond, *Dedications and Patron Saints of English Churches*, (Oxford, 1914), p.17

6. John Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, 4 vols, in 8 pts. 1, pt.2, p.624 and pl.xli. quoted by Salwey, as in note 1,p.246.

7. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, first series, iv, (1859), p.273.

8. W. de G. Birch, *Catalogue of Seals in the British Museum*, (London 1887), no. 2789.

9. *Archaeologia*, 18 (1815), p.425

10. BM MLA 1887, 7-27, 31. Tonnochy, 1952, as in note 2, no. 835. Gray Birch 1887, as in note 8, no. 2791.

11. Gray Birch 1887, as in note 8, nos. 2791 and 2792 .

to 1837 for the peculiar jurisdiction of Long Stow may have been one of the last three examples mentioned of the Fraternity, though it is possible that there may have been more than four seals of the Fraternity.¹² The occurrence of multiple seals for late medieval fraternities may also be observed in the case of the seals of the Fraternity of the Hospital of St. Thomas the Martyr at Rome.¹³

The discovery of the seal matrix of this peculiar provides new information on sigillography of Leicester and diocese of Lincoln. Leicestershire Museums are to be congratulated on its acquisition.

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12. Another seal matrix is mentioned in *Archaeological Journal*, 10 (1853), p.86. If the inscription is given correctly, this could be a fifth example.

13. Tonnochy 1952, as in note 2, nos. 885 and 6.