

# SIGNED AND SEALED

*Dick Henrywood looks at small seal boxes, by-gones which are virtually unknown today*



Figure 1. A collection of 28 wooden seal boxes with labels, all by London makers, 19th or early 20th century. The largest box (4½ in. diameter) has an impression of a royal seal for George IV.

There are quite a number of old phrases that remain in use despite their origins being obscure. One good example is 'on the nail' meaning to pay promptly, derived from a medieval term for a vessel on a pillar traditionally used for making cash payment at premises such as a Corn Exchange. Another is 'to pass muster', derived from the military practice of passing inspection when on parade.

My mind was drawn to such phrases when I came across 'signed and sealed' recently, well known to mean formally completed paperwork, although the 'sealed' part of the phrase is rarely appropriate nowadays. It refers to the use of a seal to make an impression in wax to be attached alongside a signature to validate a document – hence signed and sealed.

Although seals are still in use by royalty, governments, corporate bodies and the legal profession, personal seals have almost passed into history. In years gone by any individual of good social standing would have had a seal, usually engraved with their coat of arms, crest or motto. This seal might be a large formal desk seal, a smaller version to hang on a chain (such as the Albert holding a watch), or smaller still in the form of a signet ring. All would be made by craftsmen engravers, mostly employed by goldsmiths and jewellers. The seal itself might be made of a precious metal, but some form of hard semi-precious stone was the norm.

A fascinating description of seals and seal engraving can be found in *A Catalogue of Seal Engraving* by the important London engraver Thomas Moring of High Holborn (figure 2). Although undated, this booklet includes illustrations of two seals incorporating the dates 1886 and 1887. One of three pages illustrating seals is shown here (figure 3) and Moring's stature can be inferred by some of the seals featured, including the Borough of Aldburgh, the County Council of West Sussex, the Vale of Glamorgan Railway Company, and the Hamilton Provident Loan Society. Other seals in the booklet are predominantly ecclesiastical, covering churches in Aberdeen and Fulham, Truro Cathedral, and at least one bishop.

The booklet's main fascination is a lengthy introduction covering the



Figure 2. Front cover of Thomas Moring's *A Catalogue of Seal Engraving*, not dated but c.1890.

history of seals and the methods of seal engraving, but it also includes illustrations of the types of seals made (figure 4) and the stones available (figure 5). The list of stones employed includes carnelian and sard (9, 11 and 14 in figure 5), bloodstone or heliotrope (12, 15, 17 and 18), rock crystal (20), amethyst (2, 4 and 21),



Figure 3. A page of example seals from Moring's catalogue.

sardonyx (10), lapis lazuli (13 and 16), garnet (8) and jargoon (7).

When a seal was purchased, the engraver would supply a sample impression so that the buyer could see how the seal would appear. Anyone who has attempted to make a wax impression using a seal will know that it is much more difficult than it might

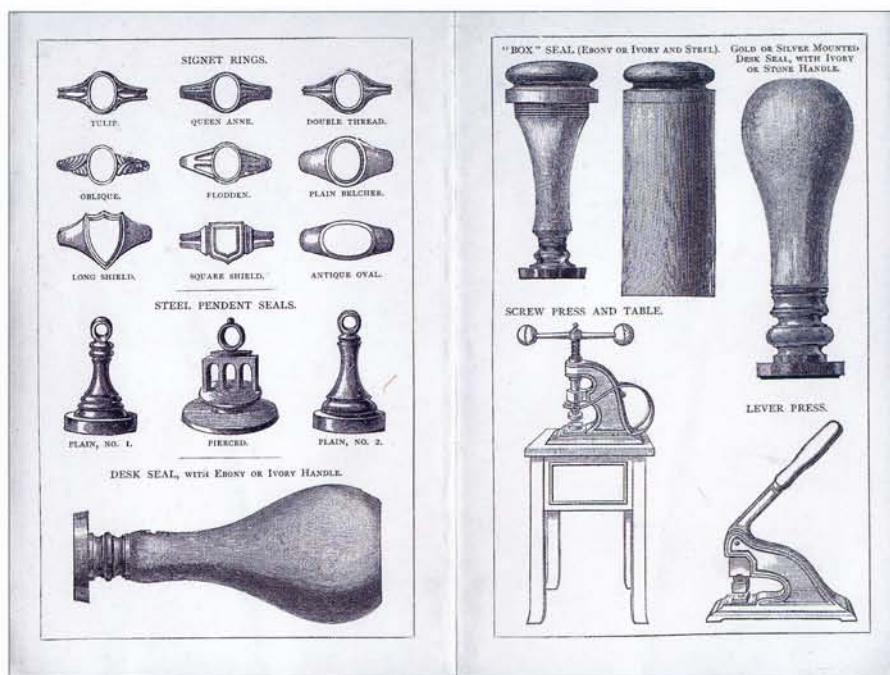


Figure 4. A two-page spread of types of seals from Moring's catalogue; note the descriptive names for the various signet rings.



Figure 5. Another two-page spread from Moring's catalogue, this one in colour and illustrating various stones suitable for engraving.

seem. These sample impressions were usually mounted in small screw-top boxes, traditionally made of lignum vitae although rosewood, boxwood and others are occasionally found. Very late examples, mostly made in the 20th century, are found in cheaper cardboard boxes. The size of the box is dependent on the size of the seal, but

most personal examples are between one and two inches in diameter.

The prestigious firms made great play of their important customers, with labels including phrases such as 'Engravers to His Majesty', 'Chief Engraver of Her Majesty's Seals' or more specifically 'Engravers to Her Majesty & HRH the Duke of Sussex'.



Figure 6. Three early 19th century seal boxes by John Strongitharm, Halfhide, Barnes & Co, and Edmund Hay, all of London. (Left-hand box, 2½in. diameter.)

Other labels serve as adverts for the firm's services, sometimes quite lengthy, such as 'Silver Plate, Cards, Bills of Exchange, Bankers Cheques, Notes &c. &c. Engraved / Arms found & Painted on Vellum'. They often mention copper-plate engraving and printing since there was a lot of business to be won engraving letter headings, invoices, and other stationery.

I can find no significant references in antiques literature to these small boxes. They appear to be little known, although a fair number have survived from desk drawers or jewellery boxes and they do turn up in the stocks of dealers specialising in jewellery or small by-gones. Their fascination is two-fold: many have heraldic connections and most have trade labels inside the lid.

The main illustration (figure 1) shows 28 typical boxes displaying their makers' labels. These are all by London makers, too many to list in detail here, but one or two deserve some comment. The largest box (top centre) is by Thomas Wyon, the first of a notable family known particularly as medallists but all of whom played an important role in engraving seals. This large boxwood example notes Wyon as 'Chief engraver of His Majesty's seals' and contains an impression of a Royal seal, inscribed 'Gulielmus IV, dei gratia Britanniarum Rex, fidei defensor' (George the Fourth, by the grace of God King of Britain and defender of the faith). The significance of this seal is not known but it was clearly important. Most of the other seals show arms, crests or monograms but one of the smaller seals by Jackson & Donne has just an address 'Pelling Place'; another by Lewis & Alston shows two racehorses; and a third by Metcalf has simply the name 'Anna'. I have not yet researched all the subjects found but the range is clearly quite broad.

A group of three seals (figure 6) shows all the characteristics of the early 19th century in the printed labels. John Strongitharm is described as 'Engraver to His Royal Highness the Prince Regent' and his firm was both important and long lasting. He was succeeded by Longman & Strongitharm, then Longman (late Strongitharm), then a reversion of style to Longman & Strongitharm Ltd (presumably the Strongitharm name



Figure 7. Five more seal boxes by London makers, various 19th century dates. The Benjamin Wyon box on the right contains an impression of the seal made for the Royal Society of Arts. (Boxes left and right, 2½in. diameter.)

was felt to be important). This firm absorbed Widdowson & Veale, themselves noted as 'late Salter', and labels provide much similar history for several of the firms. The centre box with the orange label for Halfhide, Barnes & Co offers a similarly complex history, with subsequent partnerships being Halfhide & Co, Halfhide & Son, Halfhide & Standish, and finally J. Standish & Co (late Halfhide). All these partnerships could be unravelled by reference to the annual London directories of the 19th century. The final box in this group has just the maker's surname Hay, but simple research soon identifies him as Edmund Hay, working circa 1799-1830.

The next five boxes (figure 7) are typical of the mid-19th century, made by Alston & Hallam, Vining, John Warwick, Henry Weigall, and the celebrated Benjamin Wyon, a descendant of the Thomas Wyon noted earlier. This later Wyon box contains an impression of the seal of the Royal Society of Arts, London. The central box by John Warwick, another important maker, has a rather fun impression of seal in the form of a rebus of pictograms, reading 'I (an eye) hope (the figure of Hope with an

anchor) you (a yew tree) are (just the simple word) well (a drawing of a water well)'. The Vining box has just the single place name 'Andalusia'.

Four more boxes (figure 8) represent the later years of the 19th century with shield-shaped and coloured labels for Harry Soane and Robinson &

Aumonier, and two good examples by Thomas Moring who produced the catalogue illustrated earlier. He describes his premises as the Middlesex Heraldic Office and offers 'Seals, Dies, Diploma, Share and Card Plates & Monumental Brasses in Mediaeval & Modern Styles'.



Figure 8. Four seal boxes by London makers, typical of the late 19th century. Two examples are by Moring, the one on the left utilising a gothic frame which matches a seal illustrated in his catalogue (see figure 3, lower left). (Box top centre, 2½in. diameter.)



Figure 9. Six later seals in cardboard boxes, again all by London makers, late 19th or early 20th century. Note the Masonic symbols in the label of E. Evans (centre left). (Box top right, 1 1/2 in. diameter.)

The next group of six seals (figure 9) are all mounted in cardboard boxes, normally indicating a late 19th or 20th century date. Two are by Longman & Strongtharm Ltd, one noted as 'by

appointment to the late King George V' indicating a very late date, post 1936. The others are by Acheson Batchelor (successor to Allan Wyon), E. Evans, James Smith, and Thomas, the



Figure 10. Three wooden seal boxes containing attractive pictorial labels, from Belfast, London and Edinburgh, mid-19th century. (Centre box, 1 1/2 in. diameter.)

latter common surname only proving difficult to trace. The seal box by Evans has a label which features Masonic emblems and the seal impression for the Nottinghamshire PGL (Provincial Grand Lodge). The seal in the box by Thomas depicts a kneeling rifleman and may be earlier than the cardboard box might suggest. James Smith appears to have been a better publicist than most other seal engravers; he put his label on the outside of the lid rather than hidden inside!

Three boxes which I find particularly attractive feature pictorial labels (figure 10). These are by Ross of Belfast with a scene presumably depicting Belfast Lough with mountains behind, Silvester of London with a fine engraving of a resting knight, and Butters of Edinburgh with a distant view of Edinburgh dominated by the castle. Preliminary research indicates that the first is by James Ross of 6 Castle Place in Belfast, and the third by Laurence Butters whose firm was long-lived, circa 1806-76. The latter label is signed by 'Jn. Robertson, sculp'.

These pictorial labels show that some non-London makers marked their wares. Other provincial firms are represented by six boxes (figure 11) with labels for Page, Keen & Page of Plymouth; Royce of Leeds; Depree, Raeburn & Young of Exeter; Martin, Baskett & Martin of Cheltenham; Asken of Dublin; and Lewis & Son of Brighton. Again research indicates that Royce was a John Royce of 15 Boar Lane in Leeds (from a local directory of 1822) but Asken of Dublin is proving more elusive. In my own collection of nearly 100 boxes, only nine are by non-London firms, showing the dominance of the London trade and a scarcity of marked boxes from the provinces.

Similar boxes were also made outside Britain, although I have only one to illustrate (figure 12). This bears the label of the important Paris seal engraver Oblin of the Quai des Orfèvres. He was engraver to the King and the Duke of Bourbon (Prince de Condé) and this box was probably made in the 1820s. It has the added novelty of being double-sided, with screw tops to both sides, and contains three seal impressions. I have not yet encountered a similar box from any



Figure 12. An unusual French double-sided seal box, with Paris maker's label and three seal impressions, c.1820-30. 1 1/2 in. diameter.

Left. Figure 11. A selection of seal boxes with labels for provincial makers from Plymouth, Leeds, Exeter, Cheltenham, Dublin and Brighton, various 19th century dates. (Box top centre, 1 1/2 in. diameter.)

British maker.

I will finish with four large and important examples, the first two being ecclesiastical seals. One was made by Halfhide & Son for Thomas Kaye Bonney, the Archdeacon of Leicester, dated 1831 (figure 13); the other by Allan Wyon shows the provincial seal of York Chancery and Vicar General (figure 14). The latter would probably date from the 1890s and shows the change in style of makers' labels and the move away from fitted cases in the early 1800s to simple cardboard boxes by the end of the century.

The final two boxes have no makers' labels but date from the mid-19th century. The first contains a pictorial seal showing the Clifton Suspension Bridge with shipping in the Avon Gorge beneath (figure 15). This case is moulded and lined with tooled velvet, much in the style of daguerrotype and other early photographic images. The second contains an impression of the seal of the Whitehaven & Furnes [sic] Joint Railway Company, dated 1844 (Incorporated VII & VIII Vict), in a fitted case typical of the period (figure 16).

Either of these boxes would find a ready market with collectors of railwayana and early engineering.

I have collected seal boxes with labels for some 30 years now and have

relatively few duplicates. There must be many more to be discovered and I would be delighted to hear from anyone with information about other makers or interesting seals. They fascinate me and



Figure 13. An impressive and large ecclesiastical seal impression in a fitted and lined case, made by Halfhide & Son for the Archdeacon of Leicester, dated 1831. 4 1/2 in. high.



Figure 14. A similarly impressive large seal impression of later date and in a cardboard box, made by Allan Wyon for the Chancery and Vicar General of York, late 19th / early 20th century. Box 5½in. high.



Figure 16. Another fitted case with no maker's label, containing the seal of the Whitehaven & Furnes [sic] Joint Railway Company, dated 1844. Box 3in. square.

Left. Figure 15. A fitted case, unfortunately with no maker's label, the seal with a pictorial view of the Clifton Suspension Bridge but with neither inscription nor date, mid-19th century. Box 2½in. wide.

seem to be antiques which are both little known and inexpensive. I still find them for £5 although the average for an ordinary box with label would tend to be £10 or so now. The large and impressive examples are obviously worth a little more.

To put their value in a historical context, I hope the following post-script may be enlightening. George Brown, aged 32, an employee of

George Halfhide, appeared at the Old Bailey on 9 December 1830, charged with the theft of various small items, including 300 wax seal impressions valued at £1 and one seal valued at ten shillings. Part of the case rested on the fact that he was moonlighting and also worked for John Metcalf without Halfhide's knowledge. He was convicted and sentenced to transportation for 14 years.

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