Seal Tags
Teffania de Tuckerton (teffania@gmail.com)

Seals and sealing
Seals were an early security measure, used much like a signature to verify the authenticity of a document. A blob of wax was applied to a document and a small carved object impressed into the wax, leaving an imprint. Confusingly, the word seal refers to both the seal die/matrix (for example a ring) used to create the impression as well as the wax seal impression placed on the document.

As a security measure seals functioned quite well - they were harder to forge than a simple written document, although some medieval forgeries definitely did occur. The pictorial nature of the seal was tailored to a semi-literate society who would have been unlikely to be able to spot differences in a signature. The pictures carved into the seals also allowed an individual to express themselves, and make strong statements about personality, rank and power through small alterations to standard depictions.

By the high medieval period in western Europe, two types of seal existed, the personal seal and the official seal. Personal seals were used to close rolled up letters to prove the letter is still private and unread upon arrival. This functions similar to the way modern envelopes do - it takes a lot of effort to open a letter undetected, and deters all but the most persistent intruder. Personal seals also began to be used like a signature on small business and credit transactions - probably similar to using a credit card or signing an interest free sale today.

Official seals developed out of the personal seal, but were used on documents intended to be consulted multiple times, where the aim was not to prevent the document being read but to authenticate it as genuinely from you, like a signature on a modern legal document. Seals used to seal a letter closed are designed to break upon opening the letter, so a change in technology to preserve the seal was developed. Various forms of attaching the seal to the parchment were tried, developing into the seal tag - a strip of parchment or braid that attached the seal to the document in a way that could not easily be tampered with.

Personal seals tended to be small objects that could be easily carried around, such as a ring or pendant. Official seals were larger, sometimes double sided, and used only on official documents. Official seals were more formulaic and represented a persons rank, role and sometimes allegiances. Like a modern business logo (and motto), they could tell you a certain amount about the person's business aims if you knew the art of interpreting them.

Lower ranked people might only have a personal seal to use on all documents, personal or official, the official seal was a marker of status and position. Surviving seals matrices and seal impressions are mostly of the official kind, as the kinds of uses of personal seals are rather ephemeral.

My favourite period, the 12th Century marks the genesis of widespread sealing in England, when conventions were being formed, and experiments with the practises and material objects of sealing common. It also marks a rapid increase in the formalisation of legal documents into charters and agreements - a transition that began in the 11th C to a culture which records increasing amounts of information in writing, flourishes in the 12th C. Seals represent an important part of that transition because they provided an authentication for documents, and a form of authentication that was not a
written word for those who were still suspicious of the new literacy. Adding your seal to a document added a degree of ceremony to an agreement, just as signing a document in front of witnesses does today. Such a ceremony was necessary to give this proposed replacement for old ceremonial practises associated with verbal agreements the same weight of ceremony.

By 1200 almost every man (or independent woman) who owned property or was in business in England would have had a seal, although many would have only a small multipurpose private seal rather than separate private and official ones. Seals were used in everyday transactions like agreements with moneylenders or pawnbrokers, and transactions involving small amounts of money, however few documents of this kind of transaction have survived. This is a big contrast to earlier periods - in the 10th C official sealing seems to have mostly been the province of the king, while in the 11th it has extended to the upper nobles, and in the early 12th C it seems to have been a noble only activity. Before these times, in Anglo-Saxon England, agreements were largely verbal ("my word is my bond"), and did not require writing down.

I believe continental western European practises mirror this fairly well, although possibly with a slight time lag. Sealing practises appears to be one of these practises that actually did have major innovations in England that spread elsewhere, namely the heightened use of seals and the development of the seal tag. This doesn't appear to be a solely Anglo Saxon or Norman thing, but rather a development that stretched across the transition between cultures. One can only speculate that perhaps the mixing of cultures was a catalyst for this development.

However, while the official sealing culture and seal tags may be an English innovation, there was a continental tradition of sealing official documents directly onto parchment, which can be seen on some documents of Charlemagne and early Papal Bulls. And the tradition of sealing letters close, I've heard dates back to roman times. However as a textile enthusiast, and 12th C western European reenactor, my research focus is on the wonderful invention of the seal tag, and the social traditions of sealing in the 12th Century.

**Types of Seal Tags**

Seals on letters intended to be broken off as a simple security measure, but also acted as authentication of the sender. Seals affixed to the surface of a page of a public document as authentication of the writer had a tendency to fall off, which was a problem when the seal was the a major means used to prove a document was genuine, which was a concern in a rapidly bureaucratising society making the transition from verbal to written agreements.

Seal tags were a way to attach a seal to documents in a more secure way. That required that the seal was still firmly attached to the document (so that seals couldn't be swapped between documents), but would not be subjected to as bad a stresses as seals attached directly to the page were.

**integral seal tag**

In earliest form of seal tag, the spare parchment at base of the document was slit to form a long thin strip (like tearing up a minties wrapper), which the wax and seal was applied to. See the example below. Like many other examples, there is a second strip of parchment, cut just like the seal tag, with which to tie the document closed when folded up. (which does suggest a possible origin for this method if it can be dated to before seal tags)
Charter with Seal of King Edward the Confessor
Seal in use 1042-1066, charter c1050. Diameter 70mm.
(London British Library, Campbell charter XXI.5)

Of course a long thin strip of parchment wasn’t very durable, and a seal didn’t authenticate a document it was no longer attached to, new ways of sealing were soon developed. This type of sealing was primarily used in the 11th Century, or on documents only expected to need to last a short time.

**pendant seal tag**
The most common form of seal tag by the 12th C is a strip of parchment which is a separate piece from the document. Any remaining parchment on the charter is folded up towards the writing so the edge of the parchment sits just below the end of the writing, permitting no space for additional words to be added. This turn-up is generally only a couple of cm wide - If large amounts of parchment remain at the end of writing a scribe could be expected to cut this off for other documents, and smaller portions for use as seal tags. One or three horizontal slits were cut in this doubled parchment, the width of the strip of parchment used as a seal tag. The seal tag was inserted through the slits with ends dangling below the parchment for the seal to attach to. The example below shows both front and rear of the document.
**Feoffment by Thomas Yates** alias Parker to Elizabeth, his wife, and Thomas Yates, Jr., his son, of a croft in Kirtling, Cambridgeshire. 1538/39
Tag with red wax seal, depicting a coat-of-arms (cracked, lacking portions).
Tag made from waste material, bearing inscription on inward side.
(McMaster University, British Legal Instruments Collection Ms. 51)

This parchment seal tag remained the most common variety of seal tag throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods. However, for some applications, a fancier document was desired. Just as fancier fonts and illuminated first letters could be used in the text, so could fancy seal tags be used. Such seal tags were normally made of fibres, braided or woven narrow strings. The earliest fibre seal tags I know of date from the late 12th Century, showing this technology developed quickly, although most documents stick with the utilitarian parchment seal tag.

**fibre seal tags**
The conceptually simplest forms of fibre seal tags (although often most decorated) are woven strips which replace the parchment seal tag in the same manner. Although the simplest seal tag to attach, these wider tags provide more space for more elaborate textile techniques, as seen in the example below.
**Twist**

A form of fibre seal tag which uses a much simpler to make seal tag, but develops it's own method of attachment is the simple "twist" pattern. At it's simplest form the seal tag is a coarse piece of string (as exhibited on the papal bull below), at it's most complicated a narrow piece of braiding or weaving.

*William de Brus to Durham cathedral priory*

c1194x1215. Double faced tabletweaving.

(Durham Dean and Chapter Muniments 4.8 Spec 2)

*Mandate of Pope Martin IV for a case to be heard*

1284

(DCM, 4.2.Pap.4)
Diamond
One of the most complex forms of seal attachment is the "diamond" seal tag attachment. 2 braids or narrow cords are combined with a plait to make a pretty result, often with contrasting colours. The example below doesn't clearly show details, but you can see the diagnostic diamond pattern. This example appears to be a single coloured braid, but I'll explore the intricacies of the diamond pattern seal tag later.

Charter of Richard I, confirming to Alexander de Barentin, butler to Henry II, all his property fairly purchased or confirmed to him by Henry II.
12th Century

Other
A few much rarer fibre seal tag attachment patterns also exist, but generally are rare. Pendant parchment tags comprise the vast majority of examples. Where I’ve only found one example of a rare method, It’s hard to prove that wasn’t just an accident or a bad repair.

More extant examples
I’ve been blogging
http://teffania.blogspot.com/search/label/seal%20tag