

# Elizabeth's seals

*Margaret M. Smith & Claire Barnes*

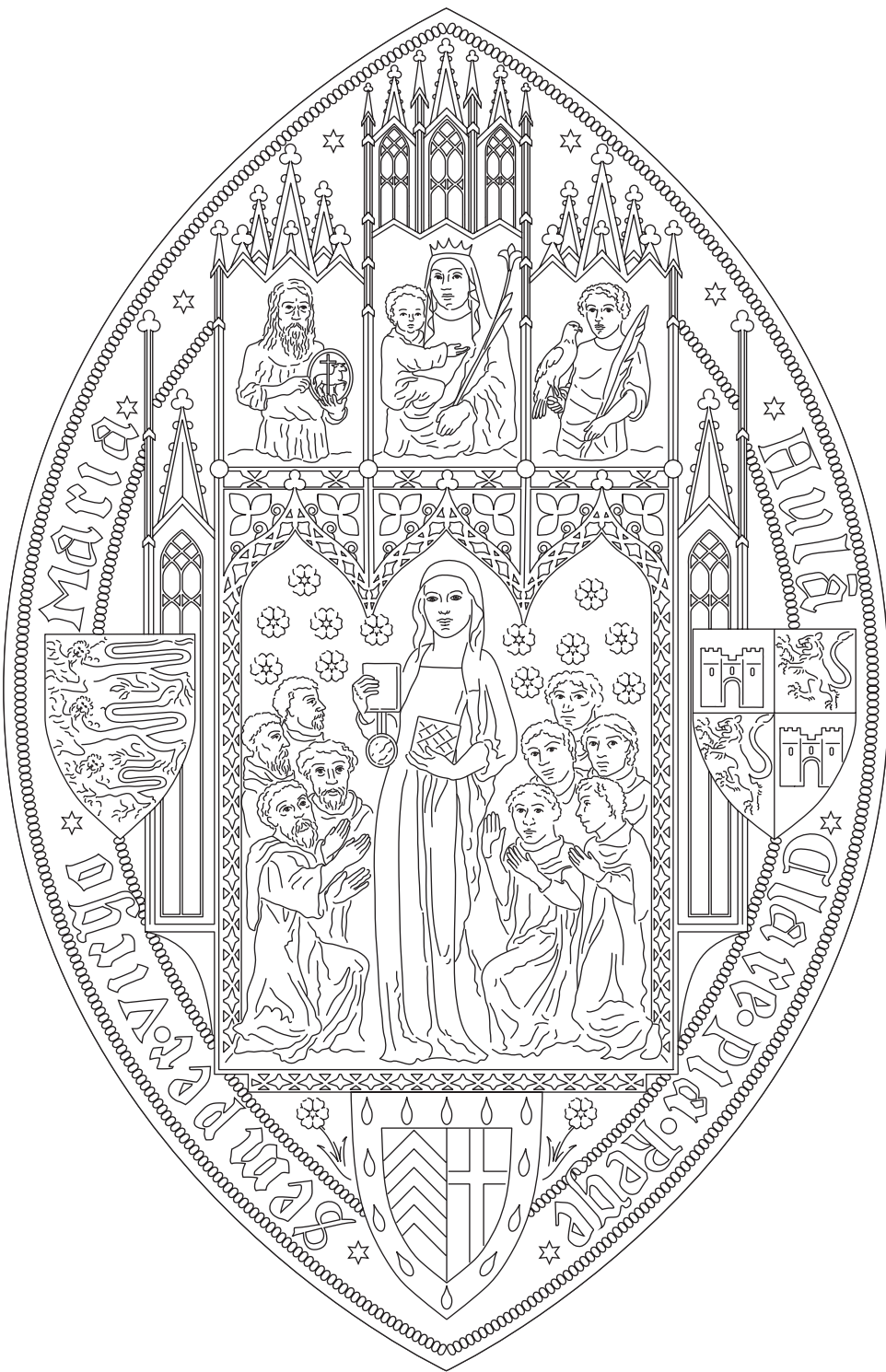
The only contemporary portrayal of Elizabeth is in the seal of Clare College Cambridge. The silver seal matrix dates from 1359 and is still in use today. It shows Lady Elizabeth presenting the charter of foundation to the kneeling master and fellows, while holding the book of statutes for the college which she had named and endowed.

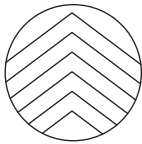
The Virgin Mary and Child Jesus look on from above, flanked by St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist. To left and right are the royal arms of England, and those of Castile and León, reflecting Elizabeth's distinguished lineage; below are her personal arms, adopted by the college. The inscription invokes for the college, which was then known as Clare Hall, the eternal guidance of the Virgin Mary:

**Aulā Clare Pia Rege Semper Virgo Maria**

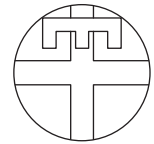
Seals proclaimed the identity of individuals and institutions, as well as guaranteeing authenticity and legal standing of documents to which they were attached. This seal may be read as the visual counterpart of Elizabeth's preamble to the college statutes, set out in Appendix 6. It establishes the identity of the college, proclaims Elizabeth as the key benefactor, and alludes to other affiliations, discussed at the end of this section. Her confident stance, visually as verbally, commands our attention, and "remembrance of our deeds".

Elizabeth was an enthusiastic patron of all the arts, but her buildings are vanished or in ruins, and none of the books or artworks she commissioned are known to have survived. Visual traces are few, in contrast to the voluminous written records which enabled this biography. However, we have impressions or casts from two personal seals, as well as the college seal matrix. These three tiny designs give us some insight into how Elizabeth represented herself, and the attention paid to personal branding in an earlier visual age. Her ideas evolved over time, and culminated in the masterpiece of 1359. The following pages set out that development.

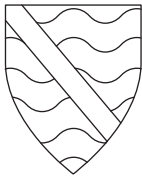




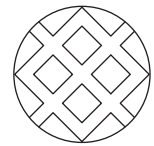
de Clare



John de Burgh



Damory



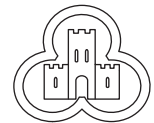
de Verdon



Lion rampant  
of León



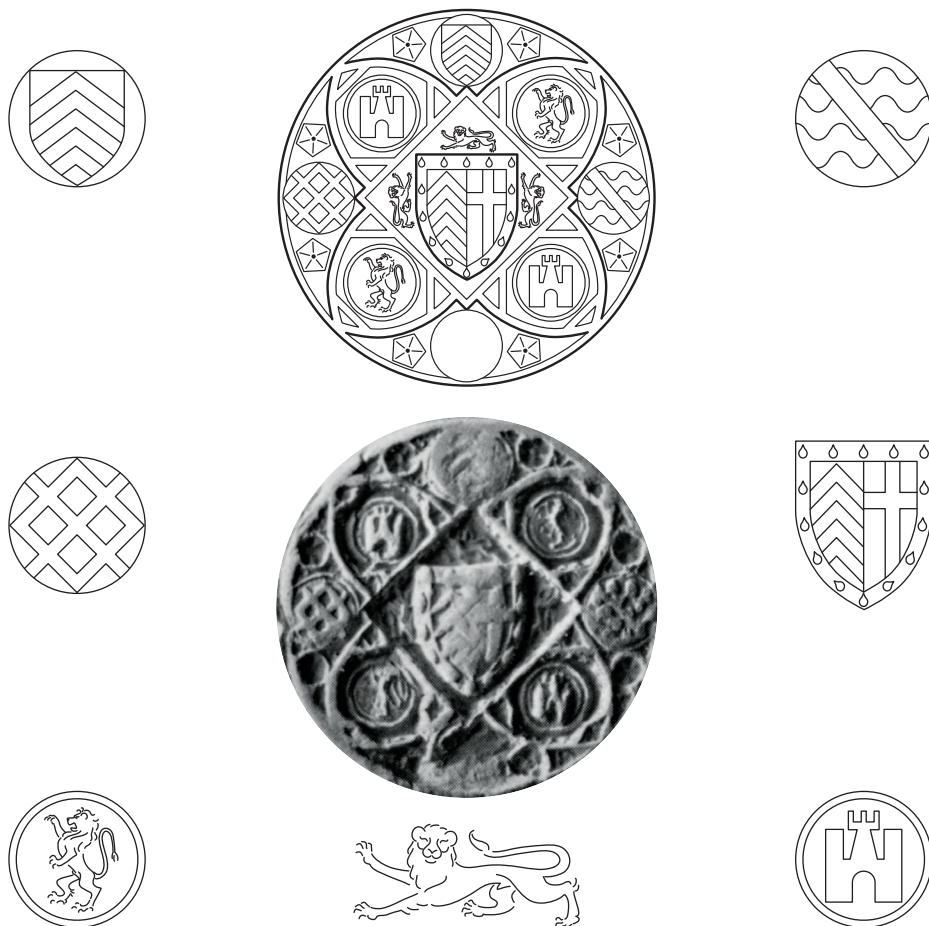
3 lions passant guardant  
for England



3-towered castle  
of Castile

The first of two personal seals used by Elizabeth features in the centre a shield with the arms of her third husband Roger Damory. This is surrounded by three lions passant guardant from the royal arms of England, alluding to her grandfather King Edward I. The three chevrons of her natal family, de Clare, are in roundels to left and right. A roundel at the top carries the arms of her first husband John de Burgh: the de Burgh cross overlaid with a three-point label differentiating John as the heir. The lower roundel carries the arms of her second husband, Theobald de Verdon. Surrounding trefoils contain the lion rampant of León and the castle of Castile, alluding to Elizabeth's grandmother Queen Eleanor (known as Eleanor of Castile) and the kingdoms of León and Castile which had been united by Eleanor's father.

The prominence of the Damory arms suggests that this seal may have been made before 1322 when he died, but the known impressions date from 1327 to 1352; according to *Clare College 1326-1926* by Mansfield Forbes, Elizabeth was still using this seal in 1353. This image was recorded by the National Archives from a document dated to the 20th year of Edward III's reign, 1346/47.



In Elizabeth's second personal seal, these elements are rearranged. She had resumed the use of the de Burgh name, styling herself Elizabeth de Burgh and Lady of Clare. The central shield reflects this, the Clare chevrons impaling the cross of de Burgh, with a border of teardrops representing her widowhood. The Clare arms appear on the dexter side, proclaiming her family the more prominent of the two. This coat of arms, used by Elizabeth in 1353–1360, was later adopted by her Cambridge college. The photo of this seal is taken from the book by Mansfield Forbes, published in 1928. The diameter of both personal seals is 32 mm.

Arms of de Clare: Or, three chevrons gules

Arms of de Burgh: Or, a cross gules

Arms of John de Burgh: Or, a cross gules, a label azure

Arms of Damory: Barry wavy argent & gules, a bend azure

Arms of de Verdon: Or, fretty gules

Arms of Clare College: Or, three chevrons gules, impaling Or, a cross gules; all within a bordure sable guttée d'or.





1



2



3

The Virgin and Child in the Clare College seal (1) partly mirror the revered statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, as depicted with lily sceptre in the seal of Walsingham Priory (2), on which modern versions are based (3). The canopy, pinnacles and tracery evoke contemporary design in wood and stone, for example at Ely, and at Walsingham Friary, which Elizabeth had founded twelve years earlier.



4



5



6

St John the Baptist (4), identified by unkempt hair, beard and camel-hair garment, is holding an oval wax *Agnus Dei*, with a lamb and cross; Merton's variant carries a flag (5). Clare College was in the parish of St John Zachary (the Baptist, son of Zachary). St John the Evangelist is young, beardless, carrying an emblematic eagle, and probably a long quill pen (6). He was associated with loyalty and duty, good practice, and learning. St John's Hospital was important in Cambridge, and dedicated to the evangelist; it received a bequest in Elizabeth's will.



7A



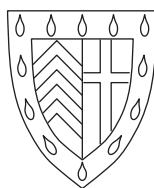
7B



8



9



10

From the charter hangs a large round wax seal, probably the double-sided Great Seal of Edward III (7). Royal lineage is emphasized by the arms of England (8), and Castile and León (9). Elizabeth is clearly identified by her arms, henceforth also assumed by the college (10). The seal measures only 63 x 41 mm; in each use by the college it would proclaim Elizabeth's role, and highlight her legacy.

OPPOSITE: *Seal of Clare College Cambridge – from the last available photograph, published in the 1939 Catalogue of the Plate of Clare College.*