Wax seals

Wax seals were used on official documents and to seal letters in order to confirm the sender's identity. Wax hardens quickly and forms a strong bond that is hard to remove without obvious signs of damage so it helped ensure the contents of a letter could not be interfered with. Often the very rich would use a wax seal to sign important documents, like a will.

Early wax seals were originally uncoloured, but later vermillion was added to turn the wax red.

The melted wax would often be stamped with the sender's initials or coat of arms using either a signet ring or an engraved metal die. See how the letters on the ring below are in reversed so they recreate them in the correct order on the final wax seal.







Fragment of Elizabeth 1 seal

Official documents from the monarch often had a Great Seal, which was large enough to show a picture of the monarch.

People like Shakespeare would not have had such an elaborately designed seal, but their personalised design would have been instantly recognised by other people.

Wax seals

Make your own wax seal

Make your own seal by creating an impression of your initials (the first letters of each of your names, for example WS for William Shakespeare). Don't forget to write the letters in reverse.

Remember you can also add some extra detail like the love knot on the seal illustrated above.

We have included an easy and a harder way of completing this challenge. Which will you try?

For the 'wax'

Simple method
Use some soft, wet mud or sand.

Harder method
Use shop bought playdough or make your own with the help of an adult, using the ingredients below.

- 2 cups of all-purpose flour
- 3/4 cups of salt
- 4 teaspoons of cream of tartar
- 2 cups of lukewarm water
- 2 tablespoons of vegetable oil

You could even colour the playdough red with food dye. If you don't have any dye, you can paint your finished seal red once the playdough has set.

Wax seals

For the 'ring'

Draw your initials on a piece of paper. Use a mirror to see it in reverse. Copy the mirror image to create your seal.

Simple method
Use your fingers to push your initials in the wet mud, sand or playdough.

Harder method
Draw the mirror image of your design onto the flat cut side of a potato. Then use a knife (pumpkin carving equipment is ideal for this) to cut away pieces of the potato around the letters. (Please ask an adult to help you use the knife.)

Press the finished potato stencil into the wet mud, sand or playdough to create your seal.