The Coat of Arms

Annual Journal of the Heraldry Society

Series 4 Volume 8 Number 242 2025

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Registered office
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The Society was registered in England in 1956 as registered charity no. 241456.

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Printed in Exeter by Short Run Press Ltd..

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ISSN 0010-003X

Cover illustration: submission drawing from the Maharajah of Rewah 1876, source *Taylor* supplement f. 15v, courtesy of the Kings, Heralds and Pursuivants of Arms, see pp. 160-1.

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Figure 1: the Clare College seal matrix: a small silver masterpiece; 63 x 41mm. RTI photo flipped horizontally to display text and heraldry correctly, as in impressions. Silver matrix and photographs property of Clare College, Cambridge. Multi-light reflectance image by Cambridge University Library.

THE CLARE COLLEGE SEAL

CLAIRE BARNES, LIDA LOPES CARDOZO KINDERSLEY
and JACQUELINE TASIOULAS

Abstract
The symbolism and iconography of the medieval seal of Clare College, Cambridge, and the evolution of the heraldic identity of Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare

The 1359 seal

When the statutes of Clare College were formalised, the text set out the four parties to the agreement, and their four wax seals were attached. On 26th March 1359, the statutes were sealed by Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare, at her home in Bardfield. The seal of Thomas de Lisle, Bishop of Ely confirmed his approval. In Cambridge the following day, the Master Nicholas Brunne and all the Fellows ratified the statutes using the new public seal of the College. So did the Chancellor, Thomas de Sutton, and an assembled congregation, applying the public seal of the University.

The seal of Clare College (**Figure 1**) commemorates the occasion and was in regular use for several hundred years, a silver matrix used to make impressions upon wax. It shows Lady Elizabeth presenting the charter of foundation and the book of statutes to the kneeling Master and Fellows. Bearded senior figures and beardless younger men represent the whole community.

The inscription invokes for the College the eternal protection of the Virgin Mary:

Aulā (=Aulam) Clare Pia Rege Semper Virgo Maria

[Ever-Virgin Mary, faithfully rule Clare Hall]

and she is seen at the top, with a crown, holding the Child Jesus, flanked by St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist.

The shields to left and right show the royal arms of England, and of Castile and León, asserting Elizabeth's distinguished lineage. The lower shield depicts the final version of her personal arms, which were thereafter adopted by the College.

The statutes mention the seal, and the seal depicts the statutes. They were crafted together, with the seal as the visual counterpart to Elizabeth's ringing introduction to the statutes, explaining her intentions to future generations.

Elements of the seal (Figure 2)

1 The canopy, pinnacles, tracery and ogee arches evoke contemporary architecture in wood and stone, still seen at Ely, and at Walsingham Friary which Elizabeth had founded twelve years earlier.

2 The Virgin Mary, protector of the College. She is shown with a crown, and a palm signifying eternal life, holding the Child Jesus.

3 St John the Baptist, identified by unkempt hair, beard, camel-hair garment, and carrying an oval wax *Agnus Dei* with an image of lamb and cross. Clare College was in the parish of St John the Baptist, son of Zachary.

4 St John the Evangelist: young, beardless, with emblematic eagle poised to speak into his ear. John too carries a palm, evoking stories from the end of the Virgin's life on earth. He was her closest supporter, associated with loyalty and duty as well as learning. St John's Hospital, dedicated to the evangelist, was an important institution in Cambridge, which had been hard hit by plague.

5 The Lady of Clare dominates the composition, with a strikingly confident stance, a fashionable Gothic sway, and a direct gaze which seems, like the statutes, to command 'remembrance of our deed'.

6 In her right hand, the charter of foundation, with its large pendent seal, the double-sided Great Seal of her cousin King Edward III.

7 In her left hand, the book of statutes.

8 The Master, Nicholas de Brunne, surrounded by the Fellows and Scholars. The statutes provide for both Fellows and Scholars, and the seal depicts bearded older men and beardless youths.

9 Royal arms of England, three lions passant guardant: alluding to Elizabeth's maternal grandfather, Edward I.

10 Royal arms of Castile and León, quartering castles and lions rampant: alluding to Elizabeth's maternal grandmother, Eleanor of Castile.

11 Elizabeth's final arms, adopted by the College: the chevrons of Clare, impaling the cross of Burgh (dynasties united by her first marriage), surrounded by a distinctive border with droplets.

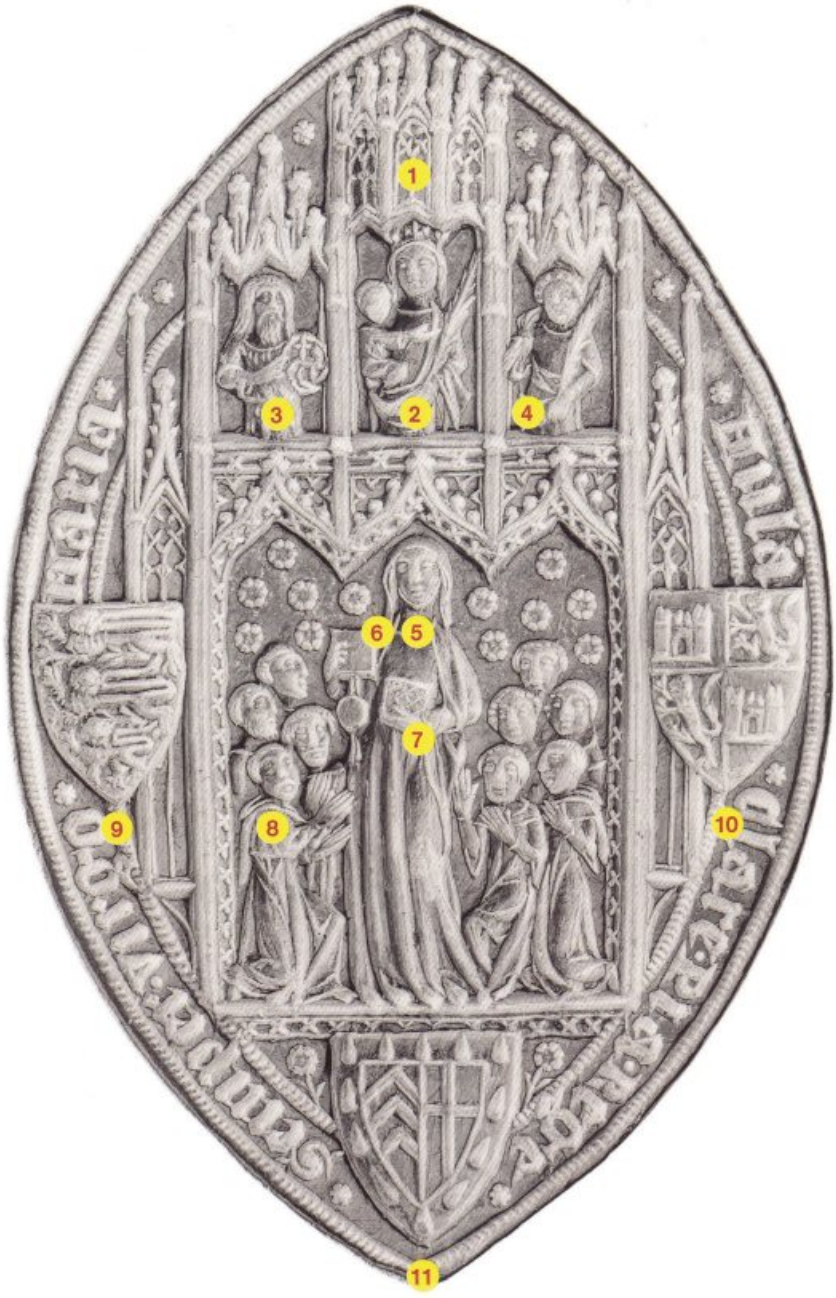

Figure 2: RTI photo of the seal matrix, flipped and inverted, with key. Multi-light reflectance image by Cambridge University Library, image property of Clare College, Cambridge.

Interpreting the seal

In a tiny creation only 63mm high, the unknown craftsman packed in fourteen people, five lions, one lamb and an eagle, together with three shields, seven words, and some highly ornamented architecture. Modern silversmiths are impressed. Several details of the design have been clarified by recent inspections and new photography, and our drawing has been updated accordingly (**Figure 3**).

The Virgin is now seen to have a crown, she and St John the Evangelist are carrying palms, and the lamb is looking backwards at St John the Baptist. Discussion progressed from "Is there a bird?" to the type of eagle represented - probably a golden eagle, scaled down to stand comfortably on the arm of St John. At minute scale, the silversmith used a few bold lines to depict the power and speed of an eagle, here standing calmly to speak into St John's ear.

How the eagle is standing seems open to interpretation. Falconers expect that anyone holding a bird would do so on the fist, as shown by our sculptors. If the bird is standing on an open palm, as depicted in our drawing, it would emphasize the mutual trust in this unusual interaction - and that this is no ordinary eagle, but a messenger of God.

The flowers are also of interest, as all have six petals. The bending stems with alternate leaves point to a dicot (dicotyledon), and the bifurcated petals suggest a rose - but wild roses have five petals, and few dicots have six. Scholarly consensus currently favours a stylised rose. Perhaps the silversmith wished to suggest a fuller flower - or a special one, alluding again to another realm.

The presence of the Crowned Virgin and Child Jesus, with St John the Baptist carrying the lamb with which he identified the fulfilment of prophecy, and both the Virgin and St John the Evangelist carrying palms, represent the key stories of Christ's life and Mary's mission from beginning to end - a powerful evocation of the Revelation, and of eternal life, as the country recovered from plague and looked forward in hope of a brighter future.

Heraldry and identity

In 1885 William St John Hope described to the Society of Antiquaries the seals of the University and colleges of Cambridge. He had puzzled over one aspect of the heraldry of Clare College's "most beautiful seal":

> *"I am inclined to suggest; with the utmost diffidence from want of corroborative evidence in the shape of parallel contemporary examples, that the black bordure denotes the lady's widowed condition, and the drops her tears of sorrow"*

The conclusion has been oft-repeated ever since, usually without noting that it was a guess. The Lady of Clare had a long widowhood, but is it likely that she would have defined herself by mourning and sorrow?

It is timely to reassess, in the light of subsequent archival and archaeological evidence. We know more now about Elizabeth's character, how she chose to represent herself visually, and how that changed over time.

Figure 3: seal of Clare College: artist's impression by Sarah Beare, 2022. www.sarahbeare.com.

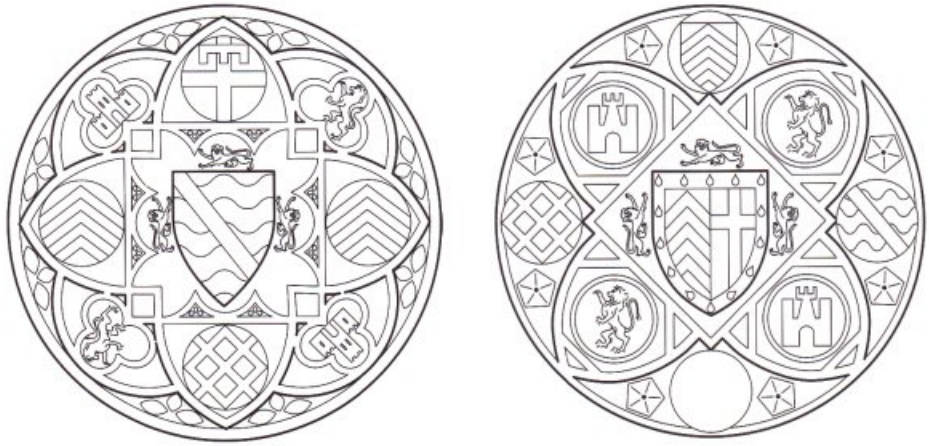

Figure 4, left, 4a: Elizabeth de Burgh's earlier seal, known impressions 1327-52; right, 4b: her last personal seal, in use 1353-60.

Character

In 1955 G.A. Holmes published a document in which we hear Elizabeth's own voice (as we do in the statutes, and her will). It is a vehement denunciation of her imprisonment and maltreatment by Edward II, and of the asset grabs and bullying of the Despensers. The secret testimony may have been prepared for later use in court, or to support the case for the imminent 1326 uprising against tyranny. Other victims remained silent at the time, filing claims only after the brutal Despensers had been executed; Elizabeth had repeatedly lobbied King and Parliament to mitigate injustice while it was ongoing.

In recent decades, historians such as Frances Underhill, Jennifer Ward, and recently Kathryn Warner, have teased insight from administrative records. Widowed for the first time at age seventeen, the third time at twenty-six, Elizabeth flourished in later decades during the reign of Edward III. Leading intellectuals, society figures and young relatives all sought her company. She entertained with style, and worked with the finest architects and craftsmen in the land. Noticing the lack of hospitality for poor pilgrims at Walsingham, she established a friary that would be welcoming to all, facing down furious protests from incumbent monopolists. She took pleasure in gardens and pet parrots, books and music. She lived life to the full.

New discoveries continue. The significance of a letter in the Irish archives was realized in 2021. It is the sender's copy of a letter c.1334 about the return of personal effects from Greencastle in Ireland, including a velvet bedspread with the arms of Clare, Damory, and the King, and cushions of Clare and Damory. It shows two things: that Edward II made public his desire for the remarriage of his niece Elizabeth in 1315, before she followed his orders to return to England; and that eighteen years later, after the extinction of the de Burgh male line, amid civil war, household staff were still looking out for her interests. A bedspread so explicit about the King's plans for Elizabeth's marriage to his suddenly-elevated favourite Damory would have prompted discussion throughout the household and beyond. When Elizabeth was subsequently abducted by

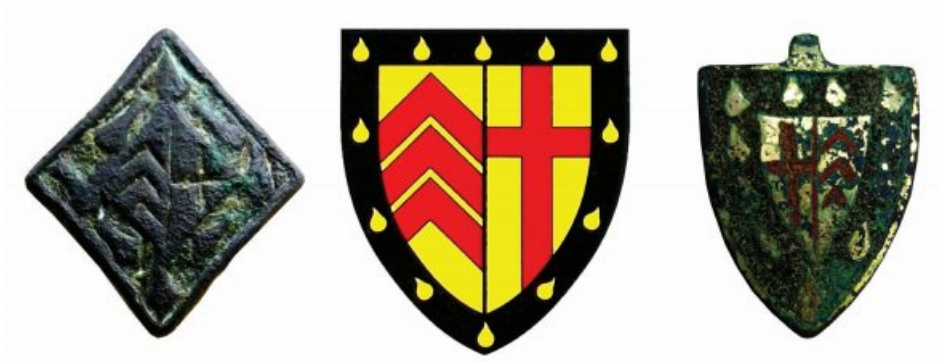

Figure 5, left, 5a: a diamond-shaped stud with Elizabeth de Burgh's final arms: John Baker Collection, JHB 1865; centre, 5b: the final arms of the Lady of Clare, and today of Clare College; right, 5c: shield-shaped pendant with Burgh impaling Clare, bordure gouttée, found outside Cranborne, Dorset: John Baker Collection, JHB 1854.

Theobald de Verdon, she never protested and he claimed a betrothal. The Greencastle letter supports the likelihood that the 'abduction'was prearranged, with the consent of 20-year-old Elizabeth. With outward obedience and careful ambiguity, she had found a white knight and eloped.

Visual representation

The Clare College seal, the subject of this paper, is the only contemporary depiction of the Lady's figure. She stands confidently, showing off this legacy with pride and great hope, demanding to be remembered for the achievement.

Elizabeth's final coat of arms, the shield adopted by Clare College, was in use by 1353; and is shown on a personal seal that she used from that date (**Figure 4b**). Until 1352 she continued to use a seal with the shield of her last husband Roger Damory at its centre (**Figure 4a**),but, over the three decades after his death, new evidence shows that her heraldic identity had been gradually evolving.

There was a medieval fashion for adorning horse harnesses with pendants, studs and bells (**Figure 6**). They were often brightly enamelled with heraldic arms or badges. Some were lost on roadsides, and many have now been unearthed by metal detectors.

Harness stud **Figure 5a** bears Elizabeth's final arms, those of Clare College today (**Figure 5b**): the chevrons of Clare impaling the cross of de Burgh, inside a border gouttee (with droplets).

Shield pendant **Figure 5c** found near Cranborne, has the same arms the other way round, with the Burgh arms in 'first place' on the dexter side. Octagonal pendant **Figure 7a** has these arms without the border.

Figure 6: manuscript illumination showing harness pendants including the arms of Clare, from the Trinity Apocalypse, c.1255: the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge. Trinity College, MS R.16.2, f.23r.

On decorative items, the heraldic charges could be combined in different ways. On round harness fitting **Figure 7b** gouttes (droplets) are the central feature, with Clare chevrons and Burgh cross on the outside.

A diamond-shaped harness pendant with droplets, **Figure 7c**, was found at Broughton, on the route between Clare/London and Elizabeth's Dorset headquarters at Cranborne, a route often ridden by Clare officials. Within hours of the 1326 invasion that overthrew Edward II, a messenger left Clare Castle "in haste to Cranborne" to alert and summon counsellors.

Meanwhile, fragments of opaque dark glass with golden droplets were found in recent excavations at Clare Castle, with size and spacing suggesting standalone use for a window border. The technique to stain glass yellow had been discovered only a few decades earlier.

Badges were popular at the time, used like logos: they could be adopted without formality, and changed at will. Elizabeth's Bohun cousins used a swan, and the Black Prince adopted the three feathers still used by the Princes of Wales.

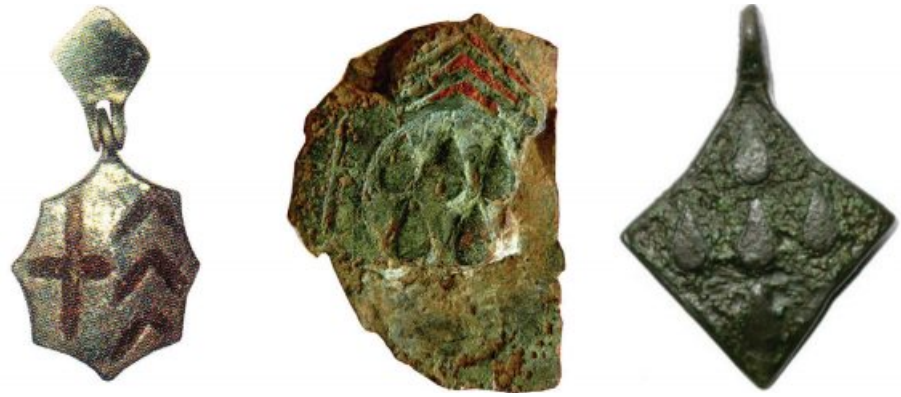

Figure 7, left 7a: octagonal pendant with Burgh impaling Clare: Nigel Mills Collection, NM.167; centre, 7b: Round harness fitting with chevrons and cross outside central circle with droplets, found at East Harling, Norfolk: John Baker Collection, JHB 925; right, 7c: diamond-shaped pendant with five droplets, found at Broughton, Hampshire. *PAS* SUR-AF6861.

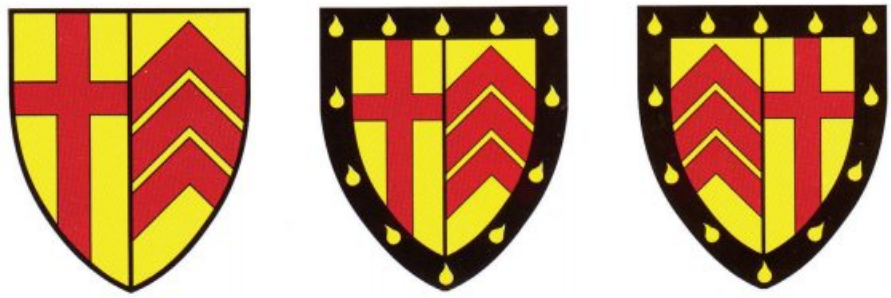

Figure 8: proposed evolution of the arms of the Lady of Clare by Claire Barnes.

Neither the octagonal nor the round harness fitting of Figure 7b can definitely be tied to Elizabeth, although the relationship to other finds is suggestive, but the round harness fitting of Figure 5e and the window glass suffice to suggest that Elizabeth adopted droplets as a badge.

Since we know the final version of Elizabeth's arms, we can guess at the order in which the various designs were rolled out (**Figure 8**), as she proclaimed her identity in different ways - a de Burgh wife/widow, innovating with the addition of border and droplets, and later re-emphasizing her Clare lineage.

We can also guess at the timing. Elizabeth's first husband John de Burgh died before succeeding his father, and used the Burgh arms with a label of difference, as shown on the earlier of Elizabeth's personal seals. She would not have used the Burgh arms undifferenced until after her father-in-law died in 1326. Using them in a novel composition to signify her dowager status during her son's life seems possible, but after his death in 1333 more likely. The addition of droplets may have followed by the early 1340s, with decorative windows among many building improvements then at Clare

Figure 9: Castilian horsemen, c.1340: Libro de la Cofradia de Santiago de Burgos, ff. 26r, 28v. Archivo Municipal, Burgos; Heraldry Society image library.

Castle. The flipping of Burgh-Clare precedence probably occurred before 1348, as the first wave of the Black Death seems to have curbed either the fashion for harness pendants or the availability of their makers. Elizabeth's Burgh granddaughter married the King's son Lionel in 1342; it may have been after this that she chose to reemphasize her Clare heritage.

The black border

What might have prompted Elizabeth to adopt a black border and golden droplets?

Borders were not yet common in English heraldic design, but in more widespread use in Castile and Portugal (**Figure 9**). The well-read Elizabeth was a granddaughter of Queen Eleanor, so Castilian influence seems possible.

In England, two border precedents would have been familiar to Elizabeth: a black one for Richard Earl of Cornwall (**Figure 10a**), married to her aunt Margaret de Clare who lived until 1312, and the more recent white border around the royal arms for Edmund Earl of Kent (**Figure 10b**), shockingly executed in 1330. Elizabeth would have grown up with Edmund, and several of his supporters were close to her; solidarity with his widow and infant children might have been considered by Elizabeth when choosing a black border.

The border may also signal mourning for the two powerful families of Clare and Burgh, extinguished in the principal male lines by the deaths of Elizabeth's brother and son (Gilbert de Clare, d.1314; William de Burgh, d.1333). The families had been allied by the double marriage in 1308 of John de Burgh to Elizabeth, and his sister Matilda to her brother Gilbert. A quarter century later, Elizabeth was the only survivor of the four, and the Burgh heiress was her infant granddaughter. Through heraldry, the Lady of Clare could commemorate her role in uniting the Clare and Burgh families, and highlight the

lineage of her granddaughter Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Ulster, as she focused on securing the infant's future.

Golden droplets

Heraldic 'gouttes' or drops of fluid might evoke blood, tears, water, oil, honey, or molten gold. All of these had some of the connotations of cleansing, healing, and purity.

Puns could help recognition of emblems. Elizabeth's de Vere neighbours at Hedingham used the badge of a boar (Latin: verres). The sound of Clare in Latin and French would evoke clarity, light and insight.

Tears were thought useful in a spiritual context, to prepare the soul for meditation and insight. Almost a millennium earlier, St Augustine prayed for the *Gift of Tears*. By the fourteenth century, advice abounded on the cultivation of affective piety. Weeping was thought to wash away sins, validate repentance, and deepen empathy with the suffering of Christ and His mother Mary. Both men and women were exhorted to imagine the grief of a mother at the death of a son.

The Three Marys at Christ's tomb (**Figure 11**) formed the dramatic peak of the mystery plays enacted around the country during the summertime feast of Corpus Christi. Their tears of sorrow are rewarded with the first insights into Resurrection, and transformed to tears of joy. It might well be appropriate to depict these as golden.

Tears were a sign of humanity and compassion, not weakness. They were included in practices to strengthen character and refine the soul - a process analogous to tempering

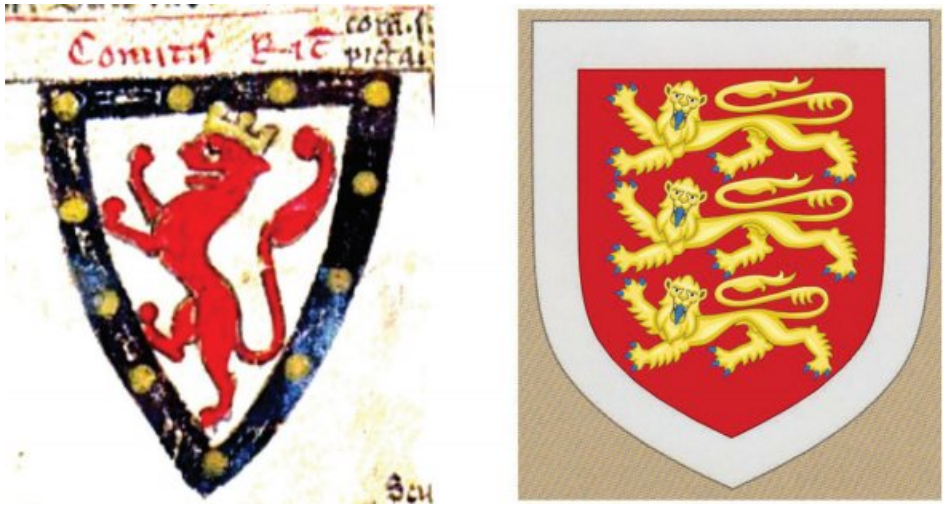

Figure 10, left, 10a: arms of Richard, Earl of Cornwall, drawn by Matthew Paris c.1259: British Library Cotton MS Nero D I, f.171v; right, 10b: arms of Edmund, Earl of Kent: from blazon, thanks to DrawShield.net.

Figure 11: Three Marys at the tomb, c.1290: Beaupré Antiphonary. Walters Art Museum, Ms. W.759 f.3v.

steel. In medieval romances, King Arthur and his knights weep copiously, before great challenges as well as after.

> *"I beg you, most sweet Lord, that there may come from my wicked hard heart a great abundance of tears and that they flow from my eyes in streams for you just like the blood that coursed out of that blessed side for us"*
>
> *& to Our Lady of Sorrows, "I pray you, my Lady that my wicked heart be so washed and washed again and so fully and so often immersed in those tears that my heart may dissolve completely into tears and flow out of my eyes".*
>
> *[Henry of Grosmont, Duke of Lancaster, one of the foremost military commanders of his day, in his Book of Holy Medicines, written in 1354, here in the 2014 translation by Catherine Batt].*

Visually, Elizabeth's novel combination is aesthetically satisfying, the black border balancing the red and gold of the Clare and Burgh arms, and the fluid droplets complementing their straight lines. Metaphorically, she may have known that gentle streams can wear down mountains. She certainly took an interest in their power, and the design of her water mills. In her confrontations with the powerful, she may have reflected on water's ability to find a path through apparently-impenetrable rocks.

Elizabeth was also devoted to the Virgin Mary, for whom tears could be a symbol. Corpus Christi was one feast celebrated with particular fervour at Clare Castle; the other was Candlemas in midwinter. She ordered the finest beeswax candles, and the flickering glow through the innovative golden glass must have made quite an impression.

Following devastation by plague, the guildsmen of Cambridge founded the College of Corpus Christi and the Virgin Mary under the patronage of Elizabeth's close friend Henry of Grosmont, Duke of Lancaster. Elizabeth set out a vision for the preservation of learning at Clare College, to serve the needs of society.

The droplets may thus be read as tears, without any implication of self-pity. We interpret them as a symbol of survival through dark times, sustained by faith. Out of darkness and sorrow may come determination and new joys.

Clare College carries forward Elizabeth's hopes for a better future.

A large stone statue of the seal (**Figure 12**) was commissioned to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the admission of women to the College, the completion of major renovations to Old Court, and ongoing appreciation of the Precious Pearl of Learning. It was unveiled in 2023, near the Hall, at the heart of College life.[1]

1 This paper has been extracted from the booklet 'The Clare College Seal & the Making of the Seal Sculpture', Moonwort Press 2023: it is available from Clare College, and online at https://www.barnes1.net/seal/. The authors wish to thank John Baker, Paul Binski, Fiona Boyd, Emily Bunton, John Cherry, Alex Devine, William Foster, John Guy, Cally Hammond, Jamie Hawkey, Roxanne Kindersley, Vincent Kindersley, Michael Michael, Jeremy Purseglove, Margaret M. Smith, Nigel Woodcock, and the late Jennifer Ward.

Editor's note. The 35th International Congress of Genealogical and Heraldic Sciences, sponsored by the Heraldry Society, was held at Clare College in 2022. The hon. editor would like to thank Michael Fowle, C.B.E, Hon. F.H.S., a graduate of Clare, and a former Treasurer of the Heraldry Society, for bringing this most excellent and worthy project to his attention.

Figure 12: the Seal Sculpture, a large stone carving of the tiny silver seal, by the Cardozo Kindersley Workshop. H staircase, Clare College Old Court