



What are Charters?

A NEW CONTEXT FOR WRITING

In early twelfth-century Scotland, a new type of written record emerged: the single sheet of parchment with a wax seal attached. They were written in Latin, and derived ultimately from English sealed royal documents (of which the earliest survivors date from the mid-eleventh century).

This new form of document was used in different ways. The main type that survives is known as the 'charter' and was used to record donations and confirmations of property and privileges to a beneficiary. A charter would be drawn up as part of a public ceremony which would be witnessed by several people. Initially, the main purpose was endowing monasteries with property and privileges in exchange for prayers. This form of document was also used for written instructions by the king, or to record agreements between disputing parties.



In this example, a church in Cumbria and the land that goes with it is given by its lord (the Lord of Galloway) and his wife to Holyrood Abbey. It follows a set structure: an 'address', a description of the gift, and a list of witnesses. It does not contain a date, but from the people present it must have been written no earlier than 1164 and no later than 1174.

Uhtred son of Fergus and his spouse, Gunnild daughter of Waldef, send greeting to all sons of the Holy Mother Church. Let those to come as well as those present know that, with the consent of Lachlan our heir, we have given and by this our charter confirmed to the church of Holyrood at Maidens' Castle [i.e. Edinburgh] and to the canons in that place serving God, the church of Torpenhow with the land and all revenues rightfully belonging to it, in everlasting alms, for the redemption of the soul of Waldef and Fergus and of all our ancestors. For this reason we firmly resolve that the canons should have and possess the aforementioned church as free and quit as any church in the whole bishopric of Carlisle is freely held and possessed. With these witnesses: Geoffrey abbot of Dunfermline, Osbert abbot of Jedburgh, Alured abbot of Stirling, Gilla Muire mac Blancard, Gilla Muire Albanach, Gilla Brigte mac Gillai Finn, Serlo, Bernard, Richard Berth, burgesses.

INTERPRETING CHARTERS

Since the charter is written in the voice of the donor, it can be read simply as an act of lordship. But the beneficiary of a charter arguably had a more important role in its creation. Our research is looking at charters from the perspective of the scribes, who in this period were usually working for the beneficiary, not the donor.

WHY GET A CHARTER?

The idea of giving property and granting privileges to religious communities was not new in the twelfth century. The new idea was that the beneficiaries should have these gifts and grants recorded on a single sheet of parchment authenticated with the donor's wax seal. This novelty was quickly adopted by lay people too, who started to seek charters for their own properties. Why did they do this?

A charter could be useful if there was a dispute over the ownership of property. The original charter verified who witnessed the deed: these witnesses could then be called upon to testify. A charter could also be taken to a higher authority (a local lord, the bishop, the king, or even the pope) in order to obtain a confirmation, adding authority to the original gift. There was the extra security that if the original charter was lost or damaged, the confirmation could be used in its place.

This basic form of document was used across Europe. Here is a charter of Philip, Count of Flanders (1168–1191).

