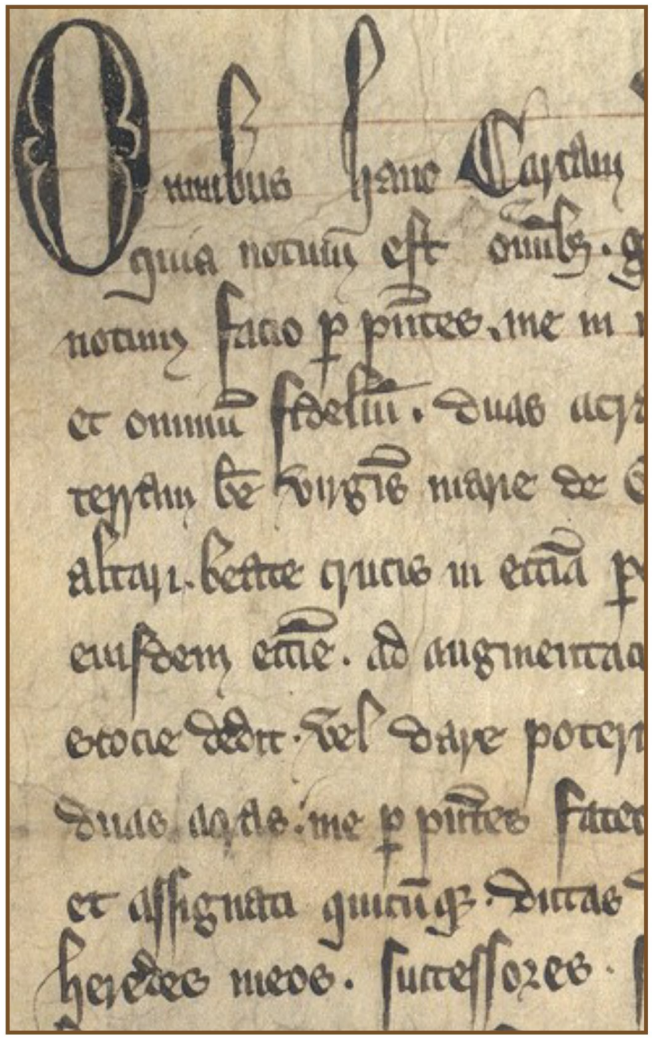
Medieval Charters

Charters are documents recording a grant, usually of land, but sometimes of property or rights. They were the medieval equivalent of what we now call a deed.
Burghs owed their existence to the king, but their wealth was based on trade, not land. Their rights and privileges were granted through royal charters.



Some Inverness Charters

The Inverness Burgh charters include royal charters such as that of Mary Queen of Scots, 1546, and The Great or Golden Charter of 1591 - James VI, (both of which are too long for this leaflet). Charters were also issued by the Church, and by local burgesses, for example a deed from 'Edona of the old Castle, 1361', the widow of a burgess, leaving land to her daughter Avok.

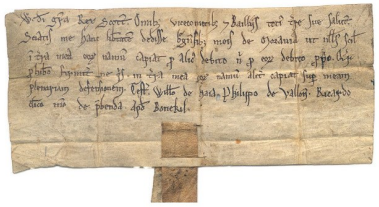
Many of these charters were translated by Charles Fraser MacKintosh in his book - 'Invernessiana, a history of the town & parish of Inverness'. 1875.

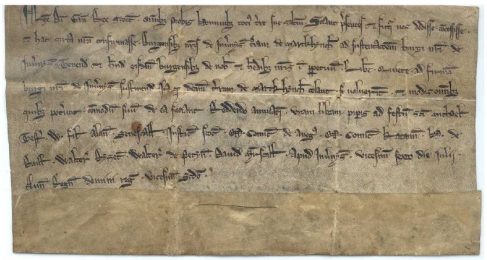
The following are translated texts of two early Inverness town charters, William the Lion, and Alexander II.

William (1165-1214)

'William, by the Grace of God, King of Scots, to all Sheriffs and Baillies of his whole land, Greetings. Know ye that I have granted this liberty to my Burgesses of Moray, that none whatever in my realm shall take a poinding for the debt of any one, unless for their own proper debt; wherefore I strictly forbid any one in my realm to take a poinding otherwise, upon my plenary Prohibition'.

William's charter gave the burgesses the right to settle trade disputes in their own courts rather than through the king's sheriff. This is particularly important as it shows that Inverness was a self governing community.
Other charters granted rights to hold markets, monopolies on the trade of certain goods and the power to elect their own councils and chief magistrates (provosts), whose power rivalled the nobility.





Alexander II—1236

'Alexander, by the Grace of God, King of Scots. To all good men of his whole land (cleric and lay) greeting; know all present and to come that we have given, granted, and by this our present charter confirmed to our burgesses of Inverness, the lands of Merkinch, for the support of our Burgh of Inverness, to be held by the said burgesses of us and our heirs for ever, freely and quietly, for sustaining the rent of our burgh of Inverness, so that they may cultivate the said lands of Merkinch if they choose, or deal with it in any other way that may be for their advantage; rendering therefore one pound of pepper at the feast of St Michael yearly'.

This is a charter to the community of Inverness, granting the lands of Merkinch (then an island, considered to be worth ***one merk : 13 shillings + 4 old pence***) as common land where the burgesses (the freemen of the town) were enabled to graze their cattle and sheep. They would also be able to use the lands to take peat, timber and other materials for their use free of charge. Instead of money, Alexander charged the burgesses as rent 'a pound of pepper', useful at the time not only as a spice, but for helping to preserve meat through the winter months. This obviously indicates that Inverness had trading links with the rest of Europe and beyond in 1236. Alexander granted this charter whilst staying in the royal castle of Inverness, when he may have also been responsible for the foundation of Inverness's Dominican Friary (Blackfriars); at about the same time he confirmed the endowments and privileges of his new monastic foundation at Pluscarden.

How is a charter made ?

The process of parchment making is laborious, smelly and painstaking. The final product is a flexible material which is ideal for writing on, and is more durable than leather.

The *percamenarius,* or parchment maker, transformed fresh animal skins into a clean, white material suitable for writing, known as vellum or parchment. The skin could be taken from various animals, such as cow or calf, pig, deer, even squirrel but, whatever the source, it had to be good quality, unblemished skin.

The skins were washed, soaked in a solution of lime and water, and then scraped with a curved blade to remove the hair. Finally they were rinsed in fresh water to remove the last traces of lime. The skin was then stretched on a frame.

It was kept moist and repeatedly scraped and tightened, and worked until the desired texture and thickness was reached. Finally, the parchment was allowed to dry, tightening the skin even further and, after polishing and chalking (to absorb any grease picked up from handling) the surface was ready to be written on. Manuscripts were always

written by hand, with pen and ink. The pens, (from the Latin for feather - *penna)* came either from reeds or from the outer pinion feathers of geese or swans (quills).

Ink

Carbon Black:

The ink is essentially soot from burned wood or charcoal, often mixed with gum arabic. It is not permanent and can be removed with water or abrasion.

Metal gall ink:

This is made from mixing a solution of tannic acids with ferrous sulphate and gum. The blackness is a result of a chemical reaction between the ingredients. It is absorbed well into parchment and darkens even further after exposure to air. This kind of ink is acidic and, with time can 'burn' its way through the parchment.

A Recipe for Fine Black Ink

Galls (well bruised) - 4 ounces
Clean soft water - 1 quart
Macerate in a clean corked bottle for 10 days, or longer, with frequent agitation;
Then add 1¼ ounces gum-arabic (dissolved in a wine-glassful of water) and ½ ounce lump sugar, mix well.
Further add 1½ ounces sulphate of iron (green copperas) crushed small.
Agitate occasionally for 2 or 3 days, when the ink may be decanted for use; but it is better if left to digest together for 2 or 3 weeks.
The above will make 1 quart of beautiful ink, writing pale at first, but soon turning intensely black.

✶ **Oak galls are the 'nest chambers' of parasitic Gall-wasps. Female Gall-wasps lay their eggs under bark. In response, the Oak produces a growth around the wasp larva.**

Signs-Manual

Signs-manual are often elaborate. This was deliberate as they guaranteed the authenticity of the document, along with the signatures and seals, and were difficult to forge.

These complicated designs were the 'signature' of the notary public who penned the document. Originally monks were responsible for the production of charters. As medieval society developed, a separate vocation, that of notary public or professional scribe, arose to meet the demand. The signs manual are unique to each individual notary, and include elements of religious symbolism combined with the notary's initials.

A fine, local example of this is the sign manual of John Dingwall, dating to 1508. It shows initials, keys (to the kingdom of heaven) and 'INRI' (Jesus of Nazereth, King of the Jews) at the head of a cross.

This example is unusual, having the signs manual of two different notaries on the one document. It seems likely that the bottom sign manual was added along with a later addition to the text. The heart refers to the heart of Christ, and the cross, the crucifixion. Keys represent the keys to heaven, given to St. Peter by Christ.