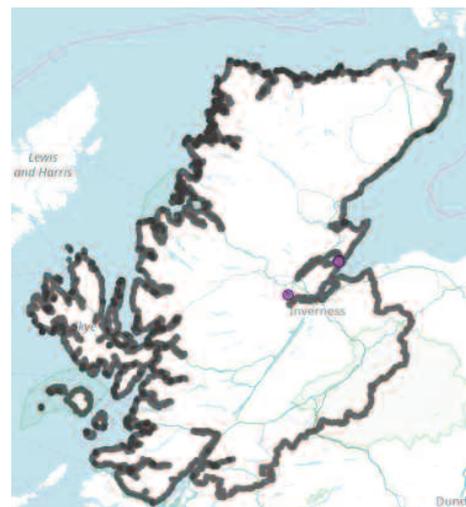


Lead seals

Period:	Post-Medieval (1560 AD – present)
Material:	lead
Composite item:	cords to attach the seals to bales of cloth

These lead seals and the punches and dies used to create them are based upon examples found in Cromarty. The seals were fixed to bales of flax and then hemp in the latter 1700s and first half of the 1800s in order to provide information about the quality and origin of the fiber bales. Vast quantities were shipped to the UK from Russia, including to Cromarty, where spinners turned the fibers into thread. The thread was sent to mills where the flax was woven into linen cloth, and the hemp into bags. These finished products were then shipped around the world. This international industry was an integral

part of the local economy for decades, employing hundreds of people.



© Cromarty Courthouse Museum

Lead seal from Cromarty

Cromarty on fields which had been spread with rubbish, a typical way of disposing of refuse before bin collections was common.

The designs on the seals could be very simple or quite elaborate, but would be designed to be easily recognized. Being able to quickly distinguish between the types and qualities of material would be very helpful for the people sorting and transporting the bales.

To make a seal, first the dies were designed using punches. Each punch has a different character or shape which is hammered into the die. In these examples from Cromarty the letters are from the Russian (Cyrillic) alphabet. The lead blanks were then threaded with cord and hammered between the dies. This created the seal with information on both sides detailing the date and origin of the flax and hemp bales. The cord could then be attached to the relevant bale so that the seal travelled that bale to its destination, where it was removed and discarded. Over 100 seals have been found at

The use of seals attached to fibers or fabrics to indicate quality and origin has a long history throughout Europe. Usually the fabric does not survive, with the seals and documentary records our only evidence of this thriving trade.

What abbreviations and symbols are used to show origin of goods today?

See also:
CT Creating Coins and Seals

The Experimental Archaeology: Learning about Craft and Technology in the Past project was funded by Historic Environment Scotland and the Heritage Lottery Fund (now National Lottery Heritage Fund).

