

Cloth Seals

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Photography by John Bailey

LEAD SEALS that had been attached to bales of cloth are occasionally found on excavations in London. Their exact function is difficult to ascertain: some were applied after a check on the quality of the goods at various stages of manufacture, while others were applied in the course of trading, serving to show excise had been paid. There is a reference to sealing cloth in 1323¹ but those found so far are of sixteenth to early eighteenth century date.

The devices impressed are often difficult to read. Apart from physical abrasion and distortion, or chemical deterioration, the impression may have been offstruck, multiple struck, or so weakly impressed that only part of the design registered at all. It is therefore frequently necessary to see a

number of seals with complementary parts from the same matrix, to build up the complete device (see Fig. 1). As most of the well-preserved examples are chance finds from the Thames, dating remains a major problem and relies heavily on relevant information given on the seals themselves.

Blank seals were cast in stone moulds; unstamped examples are sometimes found. There are three usual forms of cloth-seal: single-lobed with a central horizontal hole; two-lobed, one lobe having a projecting tongue which would have passed through a hole in the other when the two halves went bent together for application of the impression (Fig. 3); four-lobed, which are similar to the two-lobed ones, but with two further lobes between the binding ones.

Single-lobed seals would have been attached by tape through the hole, as surviving strands protruding from one example show. Some at least of

1. Quoted in E. Lipson, *Economic History*, vol. 1, London 1929.



Fig. 1: Similar seals with arms of the Dyers' Company SIG. SOC. TINC. LONDON(N) ('Seal of the Dyers' Company London'); W above of unknown meaning.

A compound sketch from the seals and a full version of the arms (a chevron and three madder bags) are given below. All figures are at a scale of 2:1.



Fig. 2: (top left) single lobed seal with merchant's mark AS
(top centre) searcher's seal, 'searched'

(top right) merchant's mark with the letters of RICHARDS. The lower serif of the 'T' (below the 'A' and 'C') has failed to register on this example.

(bottom) probably head of Charles II or James II; 34 yards (of cloth?); 2½ (duty paid?) and lion; ET (initials of searcher?).

these are dyers' seals and they almost invariably have the mark of a professional man ("merchants' mark"), based on his initials. (Fig. 2, top left). The dating of these is very difficult, resting purely on stylistic variations in the marks — most seem to be of the seventeenth century.

Two-lobed seals would have been attached to the edge of the cloth itself and impressed between dies in the manner of hammered coins. They bear a great variety of information. Some have merchants' mark (Fig. 2, top right) or other personal devices of a more heraldic type, whether of a manufacturer, or a guild official who checked the product. Officials' seals often say "searched" (Fig. 2, top centre); examples with "faultie" and "defective" presumably come from cloths which failed to satisfy the seacher (or *alnager*). Many seals have numerals on, some of which can be related to statutory lengths and weights for different kinds of cloth; others have the names of the cloth itself, such as "carsay" (= kersey), "bays" (= baize) or "worsted reformed."

Places of origin, both towns and counties, often appear. For example, there is a group dated 1611 having the Stuart arms of Britain on one lobe, with a variety of county names but in the same basic design on the other, showing these are part of the wide organisation of the trade documentary evidence reveals. Large seals, some over 40mm in diameter, from Essex towns where the manufacture of baize was very important are a particularly well documented group². Contemporary forgery of Colchester seals (Fig 4) was a great problem in the seventeenth century. There was a case in 1632, in which a clothworker detected in this malpractice was fined the colossal sum of £1,000³. The penalty reflects the serious effect sub-standard cloths bearing seals that should have guaranteed good quality were having on English trade abroad. English seals have been found as far afield as Hungary, and there are a number excavated in Amsterdam⁴, and Scandinavia.

Occasional scratched numerals or counterstamps of heraldic devices and letters are of uncertain sig-

2. Essex VCH, vol. II

3. *Ibid.*

4. J. M. Baart et al., *Opravingen in Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 1977.



Fig 3: Two-lobed seal blank.

nificance.

Four-lobed seals seem to appear in the early seventeenth century. The two inner lobes are often impressed with the mark of an excise official and (?) the amount paid. Later seventeenth and early eighteenth century examples have royal portraits (Fig. 2, bottom) and devices, like Britannia, similar to those on contemporary coinage, or other heraldic devices of obscure meaning. These seem to have been mass-produced. The outer two lobes which would bind the seal in place often have merchants' or searchers' marks and the dimensions of the cloth, just like the two-lobed seals, if they have been impressed at all.

At the time of writing over six hundred seals have been recorded, mainly from private collections, in an attempt to understand these neglected objects. It is only by looking at a great number that major trends can be determined.

It will be much appreciated if anyone who has examples, whether from a well-dated context or not, would get in contact with the writer at the Museum of London's Dept. of Urban Archaeology.

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Fig 4: Colchester Dutch community's baize seal, possibly a forgery. Three crowns in a shield; 15(71) to the sides is the date of the establishment of the trade there. 'D.V.Y.T.S. COLCHESTER 100 CRONE.' around one hundred crown was a type of baize, 'Dvyts' - Deutsch, i.e. Dutch.