

A brief history of Scottish silver, its makers and marks, or...
'From Castles to Camels'

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Gold has been used in Scotland for some 4000 years to fashion jewellery and vessels, while the mining and working of silver arrived with the Romans in the first century AD. Both precious metals are found in Scotland but by the early modern period most of the metal in use was being imported from Europe and later the New World.

Although we know of goldsmiths working in Scotland from the medieval period, it is not until the 16th century that pieces survive which can be definitely ascribed to individual makers. The hallmarks on these pieces tell us who made them, where they were made and when. The first Scottish legislation enforcing hallmarking, the earliest form of consumer protection to survive to the present day, dates from 1458. The organisation of goldsmiths into trade bodies, known in Scotland as 'incorporations' rather than 'guilds', is chronicled in considerable detail in their own records, which provide us with a fascinating insight into the craft, illuminating the lives of people who made and used silver and gold in Scotland.

We will look at the raw materials used, how they were alloyed, and how they were tested to ensure customers were not defrauded. We will also consider how the craftsmen who worked in gold and silver organised themselves, how they were trained and how they were distributed throughout the country. Edinburgh, as Scotland's capital, was always a major centre of the craft, and normally had a significant number of talented craftsmen, producing major works of art for discerning patrons. However, the history of the craft is as old, if not older, in other burghs, and we will look at some of these and at the marks used by makers to identify their home town: Edinburgh, for example, used the castle, while Inverness makers used a camel! Dundee is of obviously of particular interest to us and we will look at some of the very fine pieces, adorned with the town's 'Pot of Lilies', that have survived from the 17th century.

While Scottish craftsmen produced high quality wares in the latest fashion, often drawing inspiration directly from the Continent, rather than from London, they also produced several uniquely Scottish types, be they quaichs or ovoid coffee urns. We will survey some of the most significant surviving examples of Scottish silver and gold from the 16th to the 19th century, covering domestic, sacred and ceremonial use. Hopefully this talk will give a brief introduction to the history of a craft that still boasts some of the finest and most innovative craftspeople working in Scotland today.