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THE BROAD ARROW

The origin of the 'Broad Arrow' symbol on government property

by

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The 'Broad Arrow' on government stores represents the Pheon (the barbed head of an arrow or dart) on the coat of arms of the Sydney family, dating from when Henry, Viscount Sydney, later Earl of Romney, was Master-General of the Ordnance from July 1693 to June 1702.

The origin of its placement on the Sydney blazon is the fact that it is not an arrow head as such, but the \uparrow or \hat{a} , the broad a of the Druids. This Celtic letter stood prime and marked superiority in rank or authority. In some circumstances it represented royalty.

As early as the late eighteenth century, the Board of Ordnance started using the familiar Broad Arrow (Crow's Foot) mark to identify government property. During the Crimea War, army clothing was marked this way to deter soldiers from selling their greatcoats, and in the 1870s, the mark was applied to all service articles including prison dress. This resulted in the familiar prison garb with Broad Arrows associated with the late nineteenth century.

The use of the Broad Arrow was discontinued in the 1920s in an effort to improve the dignity of those in prison.

