

Some Ancient Measures

Introduction

While newspapers continue to publicise the more ridiculous consequences of the European Union's interference in the daily life of the British people, stories of resistance to the ruthless application of the new regulations governing the use of measurement systems will continue to promote laughter around our breakfast tables. The value of employing a common system of mensuration throughout the market is too obvious to need excuse or explanation, but the dictatorial elimination of all the systems traditionally used in the British Isles, and which could continue in use in parallel with the continental preferences without harm to anyone, appears to defy logic.

Back to School

So how many do you still remember? There were 12 inches to the **foot**, 3 feet to the **yard**, five yards and one foot and six inches to the **rod** (or **pole** or **perch**), 4 rods (or poles or perch) to the **chain**, 10 chains to the **furlong**, and 8 furlongs to the **statute mile** (but who can now explain why a furlong is a furrow long, despite horses in the British Isles still racing over furlongs.)

Let's start with the **acre**. Now that is 4,840 square yards, which is equivalent to the area of a rectangle one furlong in length and one chain in breadth. If we remember that the acre was the standard unit of area measurement and that a mediaeval ploughman with a team of eight oxen was required to till one acre a day, the significance of the furlong "furrowlong" is easily grasped. A furrow 220 yards long was about the most four yoke of oxen could pull steadily through heavy soil before they had to rest.

So the acre in mediaeval England was a furlong in length. But it was a chain wide, a chain being twenty-two yards. How was that figure chosen? Yes, twenty-two yards it is, but think of it as four rods. The rod was the ox-goad the ploughman used to control his team, and to reach his leading pair it had to be sixteen and a half feet long, five and a half yards. Such a convenient length allowed easy assessment at any time in the day of how much had been ploughed of the width of the acre.

The common land of the English villages was parcelled out as fairly as was possible and to ensure that everyone had his share of good land and bad land no one had his several acres adjoining each other. The dividing markers between acres were very narrow strips of unploughed land which, over the long years, as the land between them was worked and in consequence sank a little, appeared to be raised. When, every third or fourth year, the crop rotation allowed land to lie fallow, any games

played on its rich grass would be influenced by those markers. They would be the obvious locations to site the wooden stumps at which a ball might be aimed. And so cricket, England's oldest team game, even today places the wickets one chain, 22 yards, apart.

Now let's look down the acre, the length of the furrow. Where the oxen turned and rested, where one acre butted on the next, small mounds rose from the ground. They were called butts and were utilised, as butts are today, as protection for those who stood behind the archery targets. During the many centuries in which archery was a compulsory recreation in both England and Scotland, the yew longbow in the hands of a yeoman with a strong draw could hurl the grey goose-feathered, ash **clothyard** about 220 yards, a furlong.

As the clothyard sticks which gave their name to the English arrows were used to measure cloth, they were a little longer than a yard, 37 inches instead of 36. So what, before it disappears from British life forever, was the inch (one-twelfth of a foot ~ as its derivation from the Latin *uncia* indicates)? David I, King of Scots, that saintly man, first defined the inch as the breadth of a man's thumb at the base of the nail, but the precision of its calculation (owed to the measurement of the thumbs of three men, one of small build, one medium and one large, and the sum being divided by three) suggests its use may have originated in Flanders, then the most commercially advanced state in Europe and the ancestral country of many of David's principal counsellors. The English used the Scottish inch also, but defined it later as the length of three grains of barley placed end to end.

Down to the Inn

Gills, pints, quarts and gallons are also on their way into oblivion. Of course, gallons have always been somewhat confusing, as Americans visiting England for the first time quickly discover, but the confusion wasn't confined to the difference between an Imperial gallon of petrol and an American gallon of gasoline. The volume of a **gallon of wine** was 231 cubic inches, whereas that of a **gallon of beer** was 282 cubic inches, 51 cubic inches (or 22%) greater.

In Scotland the **pint** was standardised by Act of Parliament in 1618 as the content of river water in the "Stirling Jug" entrusted to the Royal Burgh of Stirling. This could be seen to be very good value, for at eight pints to the gallon the volume of this standard pint, 103.4 cubic inches, put the Scottish water gallon at three and a half times the volume of the English wine gallon. (Such differences are quite important to historians and to serious drinkers.) In both England and Scotland there were four **gills** to the pint and four **quarts** to the gallon.

The **chopin** in Scotland was half a standard pint and, at 51.7 cubic inches, was close to the English **quart** at 57.75 cubic inches. A **mutchkin** was half a chopin.