



NUMBER 50

FEBRUARY 2021

Fulcrum is a newsletter for collectors of antique weighing and measuring equipment and enthusiasts of historic metrology. It is published in February, May, August and November. Contributions should be sent to the Editor, John Knights.

Any Complaints?

During one of the brief respites from total lockdown one of my peripatetic scale correspondents took his mobile home to the East Midlands, and found himself in the town of Southwell.

In addition to the magnificent Minster and a racecourse, Southwell also boasts a Workhouse. It is no longer operational of course, but in light of the current political and spiralling financial situation, who knows what the future could hold.

These rather grim edifices, associated with the Victorian era, did not finally cease to function as Poor Law institutions, until 1948 and in many cases the buildings were



repurposed as equally grim National Health Hospitals.

The Southwell building is now run as a museum within which, that 'denigrated pauper experience' can be enjoyed by all. One of the exhibits is a rather plain 19th century counter machine whose steel goods pan is worn smooth and shiny by many years of use. Reproduced on the weights plate is the text of a notice that must have once been exhibited in the area where rations were doled out to the grateful inmates.

This, presumably, reflects a requirement of the Poor Law legislation which bestowed an iota of authority upon the recipients of the parish bounty, to ensure that the Guardians of the institution were dealing with them fairly. Thus, any 'pauper' had the right to demand that his or her food ration be weighed in the presence of witnesses to ensure that the correct quantity was being delivered.

This is redolent of the erstwhile rights given to customers in the outside world to have their purchases of bread or coal weighed by the vendor who was required to be equipped with scales and weights for the purpose.

There was also the practice within the armed services, especially during the era of National Service, whereby a visiting Officer would carry out an 'unannounced' visit to a canteen at meal time to receive any complaints about unsatisfactory food. The Officer would be accompanied by the resident Sergeant who would ask, in a caring and sympathetic manner if there were any complaints, all the while glowering somewhat menacingly at the hapless squaddies and erks. Surprisingly complaints were rare as the poor sods knew what would happen after the Officer had departed, if they were perceived as troublemakers.

It can only be imagined that the imperative to remain silent within the extremely hostile environment of the workhouse must have been even greater.



The Poison Squad

The gentleman shown above, twiddling with a Roberval scale is one Harvey Wiley who worked for the US Department of Agriculture at the turn of the 20th century.

In Edition 49 we looked at the somewhat precarious state of food standards in Victorian Britain and at this time in the USA, things were just as bad or even worse. It was deemed perfectly acceptable for food producers to sell bad food to the consumer and where necessary adulterate it with noxious substances to disguise the putrid texture and make it vaguely palatable. Formaldehyde, better known as embalming fluid, was a much favoured ingredient as it knitted together the decaying structure of fibrous foods



such as meat and vegetables. It also had a sweet taste which could make rancid milk taste slightly less disgusting. Another favourite was Borax, a highly alkaline compound of sodium which thereby acted as a preservative, preventing the growth of bacteria in poor quality food. It was normally used as a cleansing product although these days it has largely been superseded by more modern products.

Whilst these products mainly impacted upon the poorer members of society, future President Theodore Roosevelt encountered some of these unpleasant foodstuffs during his time in the military. Whilst serving in the Spanish American war of 1898 he came across soldiers in Cuba, throwing away cans of meat, given to them as rations, because they said he contents were inedible. Having tasted some of the stuff himself Roosevelt said he would rather eat his hat.

With this knowledge, it might have been expected that he would be open to pressures to improve food standards when he became President in 1901. Such pressure did indeed come from Harvey Wiley who spent his entire career trying to get legislation in place to protect the consumer from food crime. Oddly, once in office Roosevelt seemed to lose interest in the matter! This may have been unrelated to the powerful food industry lobby that had many politicians in their pockets and fought voraciously to protect their illicit profits. Nothing similar could happen today, of course.

To draw attention to the effects of the state of food at that time Wiley undertook an incredible (by today's standards) experiment. In 1902 he set up a panel of young men who were, over a period, fed a diet of foods laced with the various adulterants routinely used by manufacturers. This group became known, in popular culture, as 'The Poison Squad'. The participants were all volunteers and were attracted by the prospect of three free meals a day, despite the knowledge that all the food was contaminated. The diners were fit young men who probably considered themselves indestructible and blessed with cast iron digestions fully capable of dealing with such puny perils. The prospect of consuming such dodgy fayre did not therefore concern these immortals as they knew they were probably eating similar stuff in their normal lives.



In the event many did begin to suffer deleterious effects from the unsafe and adulterated food and had to be taken off the regime. By 1906 the Pure Food and Drug Act was passed which prohibited the sale of adulterated and misdescribed foodstuffs. Its initial impact was limited however because of poor enforcement. The food lobby was still very influential and the political regime was not really

committed to the new law.

Eventually of course, it did dawn on the legislators that food safety was something of a basic requirement and there were votes to be had by protecting the consumer. The US eventually established the Food and Drug Administration which still serves to police the output of food producers in the USA.

Hit me with your big artic!

Back in edition 47 we featured the Clifton Suspension Bridge and the weigh-pads at each end which serve to protect the delicate structure from overloading by heavy goods vehicles.

Another aspect of modern vehicles that can be problematical is their height which can equally be incompatible with historical infrastructure. We regularly see reports of a double-decker being converted into an open topped sightseeing bus as it attempts to pass under a low bridge. Busses however, are not the only lofty conveyances on modern roads. In April 2018 there was a report about an incident in Woodbridge, a town in the English County of Suffolk. Woodbridge is famous for two things, an ancient Tide Mill and a 17th century cart weighing steelyard, one of only two that survive in situ in the UK. The Woodbridge steelyard is attached to a public house, called, somewhat

predictably Ye Old Bell and Steelyard. The wooden housing that protects the weighing beam and the associated hoisting mechanism protrudes somewhat precariously over New Street, a major route through the town. The only protection from impending disaster is a warning sign, advising drivers that there is a 14 feet 6 inches height limit along the street. The UK adopted the metric system in 1990 but in a spirit of Anglo Saxon arsiness retained imperial units for certain purposes such as draught beer sales and road measurements. Thus foreign HGV drivers are presented with distances and allied road dimensions in miles, yards, feet and inches. They should be grateful that we've dispensed with rods, poles or perches and furlongs (which we retain solely for racehorses).

Thus at 7.00am on 10th April a tall lorry came bowling along New Street. The driver either missed, misunderstood or ignored the 14 feet 6 inches height warning and clouted the steelyard housing causing an estimated £10,000 worth of damage to the historic structure. Pictures of the scene indicate that the wooden housing suffered the major damage although a close examination suggests that the steelyard itself may have acquired a bit of a bend. The driver was subsequently apprehended and eventually fined for his lack of care.

Repairs to the steelyard were delayed because it was necessary to close the road and permission was required from the Highways Authority. If anybody knows the current situation I should be pleased to hear.



**WIN
the weight
of your baby
in TRIPE!**

Are you feeding your little angel on tripe? It's the perfect food for growing babies! Bring them to the official weigh-ins and you could win their weight in tripe!

**TRIPE
for
STAMINA**

HEIGHT RESTRICTION: 18"
PROMOTED BY THE BRITISH TRIPE COUNCIL

AS FEATURED IN THE
Wigan Daily Mail

A Load of Tripe

There was a time when it was considered a good idea to visit the local lunatic asylum and watch the antics of the inmates. The modern equivalent appears to be looking at the ravings and meanderings of crazy people on the internet. There seems to be a lot of these characters about and some of them are not even leaders of major world powers.

Fortunately, among all the frothing invective, misogyny and misanthropy there do appear little nuggets of humour which serve to remind us of what a witty bunch of idiots we can be at our best.

I recently came upon, what appeared to be a newspaper advertisement from the 1950s which spoke volumes about the social and commercial imperatives of those times. The advertisement, sponsored by the British Tripe Council was for a competition in the Lancashire town of Wigan which offered the competitors the chance to win their baby's weight in tripe. Tripe is, or was, a popular food in the north of England. It was however held in low regard in other parts of the country where weird offals were not seen as proper sources of nutrition. This might explain why the word is also a popular expression indicating that something that is false, worthless etc. The promotion therefore seemed very much of its time and place and spoke volumes about life and the social divide in the post war years in Britain. You could, apparently turn up at an 'official' weighing session and have your child weighed and win a baby's worth of tripe. On closer examination however warning bells began to ring. It is not clear what the rules were for deciding the winner. Was it simply the weight of the child that decided or were there other criteria? There was a height limit of 18 inches, suggesting that the heaviest one and a half foot long child would win the large parcel of offally goodness (which was also promoted as being the ideal diet for that giant baby). What was the Tripe Council? There were indeed several Marketing Boards in the UK, designed to facilitate the efficient production and supply of staple agricultural products such as milk, potatoes, eggs etc. These were eventually done away with as being too redolent of ultra socialist command economy mechanisms which stifled the invisible hand of the free market. It is feasible therefore that there was, at one time, some great bureaucracy overseeing the production of tripe in the Duchy of Lancaster and this was an ingenuous marketing ploy to popularise the bleached innards.

Of course it's all horse manure; a piece of whimsy dreamed up by somebody and put into the public domain where an amazing number of people took it seriously as a genuine item of social history. This is truly what the internet was invented for!