

IMMEASURABLY FISHY

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In a world where our weights and measures are increasingly being standardised to the efficient but dreary metric system, it is hard not to feel some sort of pang at the disappearance of the gloriously erratic measures of former days: the cubits and the ells, the arsins and the versts, leagues, grains, catties, scruples, and candareens. But all is not lost. "Fish Measure", which I discovered in a copy of Lloyd's Calendar for 1955, is hopefully continuing strong in the bleak wastes of the Outer Hebrides, at least. Here is the table in its entirety:

The barrel varies in size according to the fish under consideration; care must be taken accordingly in calculations.

1 Barrel = four baskets of sprats
or 160 red herrings
or 660 fresh fish
or 235 lb. (French barrels)
or 2 $\frac{6}{7}$ cwt. cured herrings

1 Basket = $\frac{1}{2}$ cran
= 4 to 6 stone of trawl fish
or $\frac{1}{2}$ cwt. sprats

(The $\frac{1}{2}$ cran basket used to discharge herrings from the drifters has the following dimensions:-

Diameter at top = 1 ft. 6 in.
Diameter at bottom = 1 ft. 0 in.
Depth = 1 ft. 3 in.)

1 Bushel = $\frac{1}{2}$ cwt. sprats

1 Cran = 10 long hundreds
or 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ cwt. herrings = 6 cubic feet

1 Cod = 3 baskets or 5,400 sprats

1 Draft = 21 lb. eels

1 Kit = 12 stone trawl fish

1 Last = 100 long hundreds

1 Level = 5 stone trawl fish

1 Long hundred = 132 fresh herrings or 120 mackerel

1 Maund = $\frac{1}{2}$ cran herrings or 1,100 sprats

1 Margarine = 2 qr. 10 lb. fresh herrings or 14 lb. kippers

1 Norway box = $\frac{1}{2}$ cran herrings

1 Ped = 36 to 40 crabs

1 Peck = 11 to 14 lb shrimps

1 Swell = 1 cran stowed in 3 boxes

1 Trunk = $\frac{7}{16}$ cran (Klondyke box size) is $\frac{1}{6}$ cran of ice herrings

1 Tub = 3 pecks or 6 gal. oysters

- 1 Warp = 4 herrings or mackerel
 1 Wash = 4 gallons oysters

I like to think of this as "British Imperial Fish Measure"--no other nation could have concocted such strange divisions as two and six-sevenths hundredweights, or seven-sixteenths of a cran (in the same breath as one-sixth of a cran!). And there appear to be a couple of errors: we see from the long hundred that mackerel and herring are not exactly equivalent, so that the warp is only an approximation; and if a maund contains a quarter of a cran of herrings, it should also contain a quarter of a cran of sprats (since the cran is a measure of volume). But a cod contains three baskets (each of a quarter of a cran), or 5400 sprats; so a quarter of a cran, or a maund, should contain 1800 sprats. Let's assume it does. You are now in a position to answer the following highly significant questions:

1. How many sprats are there to a mackerel?
2. How much does a red herring weigh?
3. Can eels be expressed in shrimps?
4. How many fresh herrings make a cod?
5. How many cubic feet in a basket?

We'll discuss arsins and poods and versts another time. But since versts are measures of length, and the "Fish Measure" table is mostly one of volume and weight, it seems that, unfortunately, there is no way that the last can be verst.

TROUBLESOME WORDS

The Facts on File Dictionary of Troublesome Words (revised edition) by Bill Bryson (hardback, \$17.95; 1988) exhibits three different sorts of words that can mislead writers:

- 1) words with unsuspected meanings (*deplore* is applied things, not persons; *noisome* is offensive, not noisy)
- 2) words that look or sound the same (*affect-effect, grisly-grizzly, prescribe-proscribe*)
- 3) synonym groups (*jargon-argot-lingua franca; prone-prostrate-recumbent-supine; fewer-less*)

In addition, it discusses various grammatical structures and issues: gerunds, prepositions, double negatives, proper nouns, dangling modifiers, errors of number. An appendix discusses punctuation.

In effect, Bryson has provided a "simple guide to the more perplexing or contentious issues of standard written English", a combination of Room's Dictionary of Confusables and Strunk and White's The Elements of Style.