

"Stand at the door of a church on Sunday and bid 16 men to stop, tall ones and small ones, as they happen to pass out when the service is finished; then make them put their left feet one behind the other, and the length thus obtained shall be the right and lawful rood to measure and survey the land with, and the sixteenth part of it shall be the right and lawful foot."

The foot thus selected, though undoubtedly capable of considerable variation, was less elastic than the inch of our early ancestors. It was provided by law in 1324, during the reign of Edward II, that the inch should have the length of "three barley corns, round and dry, laid end to end."

Barley corns differ much in length, even if round and dry; therefore it must have been possible to vary an inch at will. Strangely enough, however, this old unit based on the barley corn persists to this day in some parts in the numbering of shoes.

No. 3 shoes are a third of an inch—that is, one barley corn—larger than No. 2; and so with other sizes.

Our yard represents another unsuccessful attempt to find a satisfactory unit in nature. In the twelfth century Henry I decreed that the yard should be the distance from the end of his nose to the end of his thumb; we are not certain, however, in what position he held his arm and head when the measurements were taken. He went so far as to have a metal bar of the proper length made, and then copies were prepared, stamped and declared to be the royal measures.

The earliest yardstick now in existence was prepared near the end of the fifteenth century in the reign of Henry VII. This stick was made of bronze, measures 35.924 four modern inches in length, and was used as the English standard until 1588.

The new British standard of 1588 was called the Winchester yard. It was made of brass, and remained the legal standard until 1826. The bar is in existence today and offers ample evidence of the truth of the report made by a commissioner who examined it in 1742: "A kitchen poker, filed at both ends, would make as good a standard."

Nevertheless the officials worried along with it until 1826, for the simple reason that they could not agree upon a new standard.

The belief became common in the eighteenth century that such perishable things as the king's arm made unsuitable standards; but it was thought that a unit in nature might be found in the pendulum. Therefore a committee of Parliament in 1760 caused John Bird to prepare a standard based on the seconds pendulum. This standard which measured 36.00002 of our inches, was not adopted for more than 60 years. Finally, in 1824, it was provided that Bird's yard should become the legal standard on January 1, 1826.