

# FULCRUM

Edition 63

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Fulcrum is a newsletter for people interested in the history of weighing and measuring. It is published in February, May, August and November. Contributions are always welcome and can be sent to editor, John Knights.

## Auction watching (Dross or Desirable?)



The Internet has done a great job in matching up sellers and buyers of collectable weights and measures. It's also allowed browsers such as



myself to access much more 'market intelligence' than was possible years ago.

Back then you were required to be present at the viewing, or perhaps in possession of a printed catalogue, in order to see what was available, and to judge how prices were performing.

A dinky flip-over notebook and pencil were also requisites for a man of a certain age to keep track of what was seen where, and how much it fetched.

Now, from the comfort of your own living quarters, you can allow the search engines and digital browsers to integrate that information, clip photos and follow market fashions.

I've managed to do all of this so far without daring to bid – and it's a great way of engaging with the artefacts and the wilder shores of the hobby.

Two great sites you may already know are [www.the-saleroom.com](http://www.the-saleroom.com) and [www.easyliveauction.com](http://www.easyliveauction.com). They both link in to individual auction house websites, and offer items from Ireland, Continental Europe and beyond.



So here's a 'current market conditions report' for January 2024:

***Buyer's advantage** – most scales, weights, measuring instruments and accessories are fetching low prices due to lack of demand. It's a good time to start collecting if you're looking for nostalgia items. An example might be a W&T Avery counter scale with oblong porcelain plate and set of imperial weights, nicely preserved from mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, going for only £20.*

**House clearances** bring forth the occasional unusual item whose value to the collector is unrecognised. The photos on online sites are now of such good quality (zoomable, multi-view) you've every chance of picking out a rarity whose value has gone unnoticed.

A 'vernacular' / (for everyday use) yard stick with quite some history, on sale in July 2023 at Bigwood Fine Art Auctioneers, Stratford-on-Avon

**High prices for quality:** the impressive-looking metal ware of Inspectors' and County Standards are being released steadily on to the market by cash-strapped councils.

In January 2024 the Burnley Bushel from 1887 (right) was expected to fetch about £1500 - £2500 at Hutchinson Scott Auctioneers in Skipton, Yorkshire. You're gonna need a bigger mantelpiece, though!

In contrast, the fine engineering of an Oertling microbalance seems underappreciated: Barry L Hawkins Auctioneers of Downham Market, Norfolk, saw fit to estimate only

£40-£60 for this 20 grammes x 0.002milligrammes beauty – though with courier charges and buyer's fees of 27% your outlay might be twice that if you fight off the other enthusiasts hurtling around the auction site.



Some folks like the thrill of searching and haggling at antique fairs. The advantage of

auctions is the low price and the payoff of rescuing something attractive and has been of human usefulness, from the ravages of time.

The auction sites can even offer registered users a notification by email whenever a lot of a specific description is up for bids – every Oertling scale anywhere, for instance. In the future, Artificial Intelligence (AI) may even do your collecting for you, so long as you give it a steady supply of crypto currency...

Fashions in collecting do come and go, but knowing what value to put on a sale item, and WHY, is the great skill in collecting. Happy browsing!

[And for those who've managed to read this far, the two illustrations at the top are both of them **DESIRABLE**: a hallmarked solid silver postal scale from the Betjeman workshop (the Poet Laureate Sir John's family firm); and a delicate early scientific balance probably by Ludwig Oertling's master craftsmen.] Mike Sharpe



### One potato two potato

Far away from Mike's shiny trinkets described above, left is a more prosaic item that I saw at the Newark Antique Fair in February 2024.

This instrument did not spend its working life on an elegant partners' desk or in a Local Authority Standards room, but in a fenland field having potatoes thrown at it.

I may have mentioned before that these little wooden scales are probably my favourite type of instrument (yes you ruddy well have!). This one is in particularly nice condition and has not suffered the rust, rot and worm that usually befall redundant items chucked in the back of a farmer's barn.



The scale bears the name of E.J Tong and Sons, this being one Edmund Jackson Tong who, in the 1930's acquired an ironmonger's shop, in the small town of Spilsby Lincolnshire. In the 1950's he branched out into manufacturing simple devices for agriculture, including these scales which were designed to weigh sacks of

potatoes in the fields.

The original ironmonger's shop still trades in the town and the manufacturing business is now a substantial engineering enterprise making all manner of machinery for handling and grading agricultural produce. Among their many products are automatic weighing machines designed to fill bags of potatoes. 'Plus ça change..... John Knights

### Never say never again!

This country is rife with antique shops, antique centres, antique fairs, auctions etc all selling items of varying quality, varying that is, from exquisite artefacts of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to plastic tat from the 1970's. When items are offered for sale these days, the question is often asked 'But what do you do with it?'

This seems to pre-suppose that in the good old days of antique collecting it was normal to brew up the Typhoo in the Whieldon tortoiseshell teapot when the Vicar came round. Valuable antiques were not generally used for anything, except perhaps items of furniture, and then only with great care. Now it would seem that collectable items are expected to earn their keep and this does unfortunately mean that interesting pieces are regularly butchered when being 'up cycled' or re-purposed' to give them a purpose in a modern situation.



Scales etc, can rarely find a practical purpose, once you have installed the obligatory 1950's fan scale in the kitchen to assist with the cake baking, so must be appreciated simply for their historic of aesthetic worth.

I recently acquired a new television after my hefty device of long standing finally gave up the ghost. The new one, by contrast, with all its smartness and ability to contact alien life etc, weighs as much as a basket of soup. It is however somewhat longer than the old one and I found to my chagrin that it would not fit on the glass topped table designed for the purpose.

I feared that I might have get a new telly table, but then thought, 'What I really need is two large, heavy plates of glass to stand on each end and extend the length.

My mind went back to some thirty years ago when I undertook a

trip to Wolverhampton. When I arrived I went to the City's Trading Standards Dept and when I left I was carrying a very heavy box, containing a set of glass discs of varying sizes that I had just bought. These were of course, glass striking plates that were once essential equipment when using the old fashioned gun metal local standard measures. Just why I wanted to acquire these strikes, let alone go to Wolverhampton, is a complicated story. Suffice to say I harboured expectations of selling them on for a profit. In the event however, the 'Buggeration Fairy' intervened and I ended up owning them for evermore. I suggested that they might come in handy one day, which did not entirely convince my wife who was still a bit narked about Wolverhampton.

A mere 29 years later I was proved right and the bushel and half bushel strikes now adorn my glass topped television table and provide an elegant solution to the problem of supporting the new set. You just have to play the long game! John Knights

### On Strike

The above mentioned glass strikes are beautifully made objects in their own right and of course, they were once an essential adjunct to the process of testing, using cylindrical gunmetal standard measures.





The method for comparing a working standard with the appropriate local standard was somewhat tricky, especially in the case of the larger capacity measures. To test, for example, a 5 gallon ‘chekpump’ measure, a half bushel and a one gallon standard had to be used. The bronze half bushel was pretty heavy to begin with and very heavy when you added 40lb of water. The standard would be filled with water (at 62°F if you were lucky) to just below the brim. The strike was then slid gradually onto the rim of the bronze beast. The leading edge of the strike was dipped onto the water so that

**Three Standard, Gunmetal measures, One Bushel, Half Bushel and One Peck from the Australian State of Victoria.**

**Each measure is complete with its glass strike, without which the measure could not be used.**

surface tension would cause it to grab onto the glass. The strike was then slowly advanced across the measure bit by bit and water was gradually added with a pipette, to maintain the surface

contact with the glass. If you did it correctly, you would end up with the strike pushed fully across the measure without any air bubbles underneath it. If there were air bubbles things could get very messy as you tried to chase them round the measure and remove them.

To transfer the water into the petrol measure the strike had to be slowly withdrawn until a small amount of water could be removed with the pipette, so that the surface was no longer in contact with the glass. At this stage spillage could easily occur and you would just have to start all over again. The pipette was emptied into the measure under test and the rest of the water was then siphoned from the standard into the measure. This again was a perilous activity as you could easily end up with a mouth full of water and an aborted test.



Posh offices were equipped with a tilting table so that the standard could be slowly tipped as it emptied until the last dregs were efficiently drained through the siphon. Otherwise it had to be tilted precariously by some hapless junior and the dregs removed somewhat less efficiently. In the case of a 5 gallon measure the procedure then had to be repeated with the one gallon local standard.

In the 1960’s these cumbersome metal monsters were replaced by wall mounted glass standards that could be filled and emptied automatically. Eventually of course, gravimetric testing became the standard method for all such comparisons. John Knights