

## THE ASSIZE OF BREAD.

OUR remote ancestors had an admirable method of protecting the interests of the public, which may not perhaps commend itself to the commercial world in these vaunted days of free-trade. Domesday-book informs us that in the reign of Edward the Confessor, brewers of bad beer, in the city of Chester, were condemned to stand in the tumbril or dung-cart. The same punishment was awarded to them in a Statute passed in 51 Henry III, which assigned the disgrace of standing in the pillory, to those bakers who fraudulently broke the assize of bread.\*

An early enactment compelled London bakers to make loaves of such sizes and weights as could be sold at either four for a penny, or two for a penny, and forbad them to charge three farthings, or one penny, or five farthings, for any one loaf.† The rule was relaxed respecting penny loaves, so that bread of that price could be made, but the half-penny and farthing loaves still remained the staple commodities during the Middle Ages.

Mr. Humphry Wickham, of Strood, has communicated to us the contents of a mediæval roll, 5 feet 9 inches long, which he obtained in Rochester, containing an elaborate set of tables, whereby the bakers of bread were bound to regulate the weight of their loaves. Since the price of each loaf was fixed by law, its weight naturally varied, as wheat rose or fell in value. The size and weight of each loaf increased as wheat became cheaper, and decreased when wheat was dear. These mediæval tables, found by Mr. Wickham, are calculated to shew the baker how much his loaves must weigh when wheat sells at any of forty-five different prices. They are probably some of the most elaborate tables ever made for the

\* Blackstone's *Commentaries*, book iv., chap. 12, sect. 5.

† Riley's *Liber Albus*, pp. lxxvi., 356, 358.

assize of bread. They commenced with the standard of weight for each loaf, when wheat was sold at 3s. per quarter; and ended with the standard of weight to be given, when wheat was 26s. 6d. per quarter.

At first sight, the weights enumerated seem to be very puzzling, but they become quite intelligible when we know that the current coin of the realm formed the weights used in these tables. Thus each loaf's weight is estimated, not by pounds or ounces, but by the number of shillings, or pence, which it will balance in the scales. Pence, be it remembered, being, at that period, silver coins.

These elaborate tables mention loaves of seven kinds, viz:—three sorts of farthing loaves, three sorts of halfpenny loaves, and one sort of penny loaf. Of the farthing loaves the heaviest, and therefore the commonest, was the *farthing white loaf*, the second was the *wastell*, and the lightest or best was the *symnell*. Of the halfpenny loaves the heaviest was that “*of all greynes*,” the second was the “*halfpenny wheat loaf*,” the lightest, and best, was the *halfpenny white loaf*. The “*peny wheat loaf*” weighed exactly as much as two halfpenny wheat loaves, or as six farthing white loaves. The halfpenny loaf of all grains weighed as much as four farthing white loaves; while three of the latter weighed as much as one-halfpenny wheat loaf.

The form of the tables may be gathered from the following extract.

V<sup>s</sup> a quarter of whete.

The fferthyng Wastell shall wey	xxvijs <sup>s</sup> ij <sup>d</sup> ob'
The Symnell shall wey	xxv <sup>s</sup> ij <sup>d</sup> ob'
The fferthing white loof	xxix <sup>s</sup> ij <sup>d</sup> ob'
The halfpenny white loof	lvij <sup>s</sup> v <sup>d</sup>
The halfpenny whete loof	iiij <sup>li</sup> vij <sup>s</sup> vij <sup>d</sup> ob'
The peny whete loof	vij <sup>li</sup> xv <sup>s</sup> iij <sup>d</sup>
The halfpenny loof of all Greynes	v <sup>li</sup> xvj <sup>s</sup> x <sup>d</sup>

This *formula* was repeated forty-five times upon the roll, which is written in double columns. In the first column are the standards of weight when wheat varied from 3s. to 14s. per quarter. The second column is mutilated; it begins with

part of the standards of weight when wheat was at 15s. 6d. the quarter, and it ends with those to be observed when 26s. 6d. per quarter was the selling price. The roll is repaired with a portion of a lease, dated 1586, respecting premises near Rochester Castle. This Bread Assize Standard was probably written early in the fifteenth century.

In the *Customale Roffense*, p. 50, we find a much earlier standard of Assize, which was set forth during the reign of Richard *Cœur de Lion*.

This is the assize made before the Lord H[ubert] Archbishop, and before the Bishops, Earls, and Barons at Can[terbury] by order of the Lord King Richard.

When a seam of wheat is sold for—

d.	d.	d.	d.	s.	d.	d.	s.	d.
16	18	20	22	2	28	33	3	40

The farthing loaf, wastel and simnel ought to weigh—

marcs.	m.	m.	m.	d.	s.	m.	m.	s.	d.
6	5	4½	4	22	50	3½	3	36	30

The farthing Pollard loaf ought to weigh 6<sup>s</sup> more, whether wheat be cheap or dear.

The peny loaf should weigh 20<sup>s</sup> more than the farthing loaf.

Another early Standard of Bread Assize is preserved among the municipal archives of Sandwich.\* It alludes to the Kentish custom of measuring bread, and other dry goods, by the gallon, stating that one gallon contains 8lbs. of wheat; also that 8 gallons and 8lbs. make a bushel; while 8 bushels make a London quarter. It requires that when a quarter of wheat sells for 12d., the farthing *wastel* bread should weigh as much as six pounds and sixteen shillings, while *cocket bread*, of the same corn and bultel, should weigh as much as do six pounds and eighteen shillings. If, however, the corn and bultel were of lower price, the cocket bread should weigh as much as seven pounds and one shilling.

This old Sandwich Standard goes on to say that *Simnel* bread is not commonly weighed, being used only in Lent. If brought to scale, the *simnel* loaf should weigh two shil-

\* Boys' *History of Sandwich*, p. 543.

lings less than the *wastel*, because the *simmel* is doubly baked. It adds that

- (i) A farthing *Bread of treet* shall weigh two *wastells*.
- (ii) A *Loaf of the whole wheat* shall weigh a *cocket* and a half.
- (iii) A *Loaf of the mixed corn* shall weigh two cockets of coarser meal.
- (iv) A *halfpeny loaf of fine flour* shall weigh as much as three farthing *wastels*.

When a quarter of wheat is sold at—

d.	s.	s.	d.	s.	s.	d.	s.	s.	d.	s.	s.	d.	
18	2	2	6	3	3	6	4	4	6	5	5	6	6

A farthing *wasted* shall weigh—

s.	d.	s.	s.	s.	d.	s.	s.	d.	s.	d.	s.	d.	
90	8	68	58	48	42	36	30	26	2½	24	8¼	22	8
20	11												

The Sandwich document\* ends by stating that “in this assize the baker, in every quarter of wheat, may gain 4d., besides the bran and two loaves in every baking.” This profit, it says, can be obtained after paying 1½d. for three servants; a farthing for two boys; one halfpeny each for salt, for yeast, for candle and for sifting; and three pence for wood. This was known from the experience of the King’s baker, who had proved the fact.

The power of enforcing observance of the assize of bread was vested in the various local authorities, of Hundreds, Towns, and Manors throughout the country. For example, the Hundred Roll for Kent, in the third year of Edward I (1274-5), says that the Hundred of Blakeburne is worth yearly, *with the assize of bread and beer, etc.*, 40<sup>s</sup>;† and that in Cranbrook Hundred, the Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury, the Abbot of Battel, the Prior of Cumbwell and Lord William de Valence had the *assize of bread and beer* from their respective tenants, to the damage of the King.‡ In Selebryhtindenne Hundred, the Archbishop had the return of pleas of illegal distress, wreck of the sea, a gallows, and *the assize of bread and beer*.§ The Hundred of Westerham was in the hands of Lord Robert de Caunvile, who had the assize of bread and ale.|| The Earl of Gloucester had a

\* Boys' *History of Sandwich*, p. 544. † Furlley's *Weald of Kent*, ii., 123.  
 ‡ *Ibidem*, 124. § *Ibidem*, 125. || *Ibidem*, 126.

gallows, and the assize of bread and ale in Brasted.\* In the half hundred of Bernefeld the Abbot of Boxley and the Prior of Cumbwell both had the assize of bread and ale, and the latter had a gallows.† The men of the Hundred of Rochester had a gallows, the assize of bread and ale, and other things which pertain to the Crown, by charter confirmed by the King from olden time.‡ In the Hundred of Chatham, R. de Crevequer had the assize of bread and ale from ancient time.§ At Tunstall, in Middleton Hundred, Stephen de Pencestre claimed to have a gallows, tumbrial, and assize of bread and ale; while, at Newington, in the same Hundred, the Abbot of St. Augustine's had a tumbrial, and the assize of bread and ale.|| These examples will suffice; and the mention of tumbrials, in the two last citations, may lead us to the question of punishment.

The usual penalty, for breaking the assize, was a fine; but in the City of London, fraudulent bakers were more severely punished. In the time of Edward II, the sheriff of London was forbidden to accept fines from them.¶ Upon the first occasion of a baker's bread being found in default, of weight or quality, he was to be drawn upon a hurdle from the Guildhall, through the most crowded streets, to his own house. Upon a second offence he was drawn on a hurdle from Guildhall to the Pillory, through the "great streets of Chepe," and made to stand on the pillory for at least one hour. For a third default, he was to be drawn on a hurdle, his oven was broken to pieces, and he was made to swear that he would never again pursue the trade of a baker.\*\* To facilitate detection of such fraudulent traders, every London baker was bound to have a seal or stamp peculiar to himself, with which he impressed every loaf that he made,†† and of this seal the Alderman of his ward retained a copy.‡‡ The London baker could not sell his own bread anywhere but in the public markets, where retail dealers (generally women) bought it at the rate of thirteen batches for the price of twelve; and by them the bread was sold

\* Furley's *Weald of Kent*, ii., p. 127. † *Ibidem*, p. 131. ‡ *Ibidem*, p. 145.  
 § *Ibidem*, p. 146. || *Ibidem*, 147. ¶ Riley's *Liber Albus*, p. lxx.  
 \*\* Riley's *Liber Albus*, p. 265. †† *Ibidem*, pp. lxxvii., 264. ‡‡ *Ibid.*, p. 702.

from house to house.\* The baskets, in which the baker carried his bread (*panis*) to market, were called *panyers*.† When the authorities assayed bread, they weighed each loaf while it was hot from the oven.

In the country, generally, the penalties for default of weight or quality were fines. The Sandwich records state that when the town-councillors were assembled, persons were despatched to the various places where bread was sold, and the bread thus obtained was assayed before the assembly. In *Views of Frank pledge*, the jury reported or “presented” all defaulters who broke the assize. For example, in the records of the Borough of Queenborough, we read how, in the eleventh year of Henry VII, twelve Jurymen, upon their oaths, represented that William Henakyre and John Bakare of Middleton were foreign (*i.e.* non-inhabitant), common bakers who sold bread for human food‡ within the Borough of Queenborough, but did not observe strict weight; each of them was therefore fined 4d. Also they represented that Andrew Mone, Richard Bessy’s wife, and Joan Freman, were common bakers inhabitant within the borough, and they likewise brake the assize in the weight of their bread; therefore Andrew was fined 6d., and the women were fined 3d. each.

Nor were the bakers of light or bad bread the only persons punished. Retail dealers, called “tipplers” of bread and beer, who probably kept houses of refreshment, were likewise visited with penalties. Thus at the *View of Frank pledge*, held in Queenborough on Monday, the 8th of May, 34 H. VIII, the Jurors represented that Thomas Hewett, Antony Nevell, and Richard Cockerell’s widow, are common tipplers (*tiplatores*) of bread and beer, and they break the assize. Therefore they are all fined; Antony in 6d., and the others in 3d. each. Such entries are found in the records of almost every *View of Frank pledge*, held in various manors throughout the country.

The laws now in force, respecting weights and measures, and for the regulation of the bakers’ trade, are perhaps as

\* *Ibidem*, pp. lxxvii-viii, 702.

† *Ibidem*, p. lxxviii.

‡ Horse-bread, of pease and beans, was made by bakers in the Middle Ages. (Riley’s *Liber Albus*, p. lxxi.)

stringent as modern notions will permit, but it is evident that seven hundred years ago, and throughout the Middle Ages, the public interest was much more carefully protected, and fraudulent bakers were more stringently watched and punished.

Mr. Wickham's Rochester roll gives the following standards of weight for the various loaves, according to the varying price of wheat.

WEIGHTS OF LOAVES.

WHEAT. Price of a qr.		½d. Wastell.		Symnell.		½d. White.		½d. White.		½d. Wheat.		1d. Wheat.		½d. of all grains.					
s.	d.	s.	d.	s.	d.	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.			
4	0	34	0	32	0	36	0	3	12	0	5	8	0	10	16	0	7	4	0
4	6	30	2½	28	2½	32	2¾	3	4	5½	4	16	8½	9	13	4½	6	8	11
5	0	27	2½	25	2½	29	2½	0	58	5	4	7	7½	8	15	3	5	16	10
5	6	24	8¾	22	8¾	26	8¾	0	53	5½	4	0	2¼	8	0	4½	5	6	11
6	0	22	8	20	8	24	8	0	49	4	3	14	0	7	8	0	4	18	8
6	6	20	11	18	11	22	11	0	45	10	3	8	9	6	17	6	4	11	8
7	0	19	5	17	5	21	5	0	42	10	3	4	3	6	8	6	4	5	8
7	6	18	1½	16	1½	20	1½	0	40	3	3	0	4½	6	0	9	4	0	6
8	0	17	0	15	0	19	0	0	38	0	0	57	0	5	14	0	3	16	0
8	6	16	0	14	0	18	0	0	36	0	0	54	0	5	8	0	3	12	0
9	0	15	1¼	13	1¼	17	1¼	0	34	2½	0	51	3¾	5	2	7½	3	8	5
9	6	14	3¾	12	3¾	16	3¾	0	32	7½	0	48	11½	4	17	10½	3	5	3
10	0	13	7¼	11	7¼	15	7¼	0	31	2½	0	46	9¾	4	13	7½	3	2	5

Having given completely these 13 variations of the standards of weight, appropriately to the subject, 13 being a baker's dozen, we will give only the basis of calculation in the other cases.

That basis is the weight of the Farthing Wastell.

The Symnell weighed always 2s. less than the wastell.

The Farthing White loaf weighed always 2s. more than the wastell.

The halfpenny White loaf always balanced 2 farthing white loaves.

The halfpenny Wheat loaf always balanced 3 farthing white loaves.

The Penny wheat loaf always balanced 2 halfpenny wheat loaves.

The halfpenny loaf of all grains always balanced 2 halfpenny White loaves.

The actual standard unit then, for the remaining variations in price, was as follows:—

When a quarter of wheat sells for .....	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>
The $\frac{1}{4}$ d. wastell shall weigh ...	10	6	11	0	11	6	12	0	12	6	13	0
	12	11 $\frac{1}{2}$	12	4 $\frac{1}{4}$	11	9 $\frac{3}{4}$	11	4	10	10 $\frac{1}{2}$	10	5 $\frac{1}{2}$
When a quarter of wheat sells for .....	15	6	16	0	16	6	17	0	17	6	18	0
The $\frac{1}{4}$ d. wastell shall weigh ...	8	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	8	6	8	3	8	0	7	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	7	6 $\frac{3}{4}$
When a quarter of wheat sells for .....	19	0	19	6	20	0	20	6	21	0	21	6
The $\frac{1}{4}$ d. wastell shall weigh ...	7	2	6	11 $\frac{3}{4}$	6	9 $\frac{3}{4}$	6	7 $\frac{3}{4}$	6	5 $\frac{3}{4}$	6	4
When a quarter of wheat sells for .....	22	6	23	0	23	6	24	0	24	6	25	0
The $\frac{1}{4}$ d. wastell shall weigh ...	6	0 $\frac{1}{2}$	5	11	5	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	5	8	5	6	5	5 $\frac{1}{2}$
When a quarter of wheat sells for .....	26	0										
The $\frac{1}{4}$ d. wastell shall weigh ...	5	2 $\frac{3}{4}$										