A brief history of Trading Standards

Weights and Measures

The earliest assessment of weight was simply the load which a person could carry. Measures of length, and thus area, were also assessed in relation to the body - the foot, a hand or a pace. Accurate measurement was only required by rulers who would weigh the treasures in the Royal strong room, whilst for ordinary people trade continued by barter.

The oldest known weights date back to around 8000 B.C. and by 3000 B.C., trade weighing had begun. This spread from the Indus civilisation and by 2500 B.C. the whole Babylonian and Egyptian empires were weighing goods for trade transactions. With the development of coinage around 700 B.C. the need for accuracy and standardisation became more important.

In England various systems of weights have come and gone. Different systems were used in different areas and in different trades. By Tudor times no fewer than six different measures of the pound weight were in use, according to what was to be weighed and in which industry.

In the field of length measurement there were similar variations. In the Thirteenth Century four different measures of the foot were in use in England and Wales, according to the area where they were used and whether they were used for building or land measurement.

Over the following centuries a slow process of standardisation followed with Monarchs and Parliament passing statues with the aim of producing conformity and accuracy. Standard weights and length measures were produced and maintained to provide accurate standards against which copies could be assessed.

In the 1790s in France the Metric system was introduced both for weighing and measuring. This system, based on natural constants, was adopted by 18 countries in 1875. In 1897 the Metric system became legal for trade use in Great Britain.

Today the United Kingdom, along with the United States, are the only major trading nations not solely using the Metric system. This however is changing. Already pre-packed goods are sold in Metric units, and by the beginning of the next millennium only a few transactions, such as the sale of pints of beer, will be in Imperial units.

Food and Drink

Apart from the systems of weights and measures the area of trading standards work with the longest history of regulation has been the composition and sale of food and drink.

The Assize of Bread and Ale of 1266 regulated the weight of the Farthing Loaf, and the quantity of a Penny of Ale according to the price of the ingredients. Bakers or Brewers who gave short measure could be fined, put in the pillory or flogged.

Over the following centuries, further legislation was enacted covering the selling of a wide variety of foodstuffs such as wine, cheese, fish, salt and tea. These Acts covered
the quantities products were to be sold in, and the measures to be used. Further Acts covered the checking of equipment and weights used in trade transactions.

Legislation was also passed to ensure the quality of foodstuffs and outlaw adulteration. Unscrupulous producers and traders would add sawdust to bread dough, grease to coffee and even sulphuric acid to vinegar. Where adulteration resulted in widespread serious illness, or even death, the tradesmen could be executed.

By the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, mill owners were complaining their workers were performing badly due to the poor quality, adulterated food. This again led to legislation being passed throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries.

Today the quality, weight and description of foodstuffs are covered by a wide range of laws. Trading Standards Officers, together with Environmental Health Officers employed within the London Boroughs, inspect factories and retail outlets to ensure standards are maintained.

Consumer Protection

From the 1960s onwards legislation was passed concerning consumer safety and consumer protection. This legislation includes the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 which prohibits false descriptions about goods and services; The Consumer Credit Act 1974 which regulates the provision of credit, and the Consumer Protection Act 1987 which covered the safety of consumer goods and also dealt with misleading prices.

In the 1990s legislation has largely been from the European Parliament or has enacted European Directives. This has included the General Product Safety Regulations which has the requirement that consumer products are safe.

Administration

In the Middle Ages, enforcement of weights and measures, and food statutes was in the hands of the Monarch's local agents. This could mean the local courts, magistrates or sheriffs. Trade Guilds often regulated food transactions in order to control quality.

In 1340 the post of the Clerk of the Market was established. The postholder in each town was responsible for ensuring that all false weights and measures were destroyed.

Acts of Parliament in 1834 and 1835 established the post of Inspector of Weights and Measures, and the Adulteration of Food and Drugs Act 1872 created the position of Food Sampling Officers.

Today, Inspectors of Weights and Measures, or Trading Standards Officers as they are now known, are employed by Local Authorities.

*Information supplied by West Yorkshire Trading Standards.*