

English Bread Assizes from Reigns of Henry II to Edward II

Assisa Panis (Assize of Bread): When a Quarter of Wheat is sold for 12d., then Wastel Bread of a farthing shall weigh £6 and 16s. But Bread Cocket of a farthing of the same grain and bultel, shall weigh more than Wastel by 2s. And Cocket Bread made of grain of lower price, shall weigh more than Wastel by 5s. Bread made into a Simnel shall weigh 2s. less than Wastel. Bread made of the whole Wheat shall weigh a Cocket and a half, so that a Cocket shall weigh more than a Wastel by 5s. Bread of Treet shall weigh 2 wastels. And bread of common wheat shall weigh two great cockets.

When a quarter of wheat is sold for 18d.,
then wastel bread of a farthing white and
well-baked shall weigh £4 10s. 8d.

When for 2s., then £3 8s.

When for 2s. 6d., then for 54s. 4d. ob. q.

When for 3s., then for 48s.

When for 3s. 6d., then for 42s.

When for 4s., then for 36s.

When for 4s. 6d., then for 30s.

When for 5s., then for 27s. 2d. ob.

When for 5s. 6d., then for 24s. 8d. q.

When for 6s., then for 22s. 8d.

When for 6s. 6d., then for 20s. 11d.

When for 7s., then for 19s. 1d.

When for 7s. 6d., then for 18s. 1d. ob.

When for 8s., then for 17s.

When for 8s. 6d., then for 16s.

When for 9s., then for 15s. q.

When for 9s. 6d., then for 14s. 4d. ob. q.

When for 10s., then for 13s. 7d.

When for 10s. 6d., then for 12s. 11d. q.

When for 11s., then for 12s. 4d. q.

When for 11s. 6d., then for 12s. 10d.

When for 12s., then for 11s. 4d.

When for 12s. 6d., then for 10s. 10d. _

When for 13s., then for 10s. 5d. _

When for 13s. 6d., then for 10s. 0d. _

When for 14s., then for 9s. 8d.

When for 14s. 6d., then for 9s. 2d. _

When for 15s., then for 9s. 1d.

When for 15s. 6d., then for 8s. 9d. _

When for 16s., then for 8s. 6d.

When for 16s. 6d., then for 8s. 2d. _

When for 17s., then for 8s.

When for 17s. 6d., then for 7s. 9d. _

When for 18s., then for 7s. 6d. _

When for 18s. 6d., then for 7s. 4d. _

When for 19s., then for 7s. 2d.

When for 19s. 6d., then for 6s. 11d. _

When for 20s., then for 6s. 9d. _

And it is to be known, that then a Baker in every Quarter of Wheat, as it is proved by the King's Bakers, may gain 4d. and the Bran, and Two Loaves for advantage [for the furnage?] for Three Servants, 1d. ob. for Two Lads, ob. in Salt, ob. for kneading, ob. for Candle, q. for Wood, 2d. for his Bultel ob.¹

¹ A. Luders, ed., *The Statutes of the Realm: Printed by Command of His Majesty King George the Third, in Pursuance of an Address of the House of Commons of Great Britain, From Original Records and Authentic Manuscripts, 11 vols.*, (London: Record Commission, 1810-1828), Vol. I, pp. 199-200. Courtesy of the Internet Medieval Sourcebook

An *assize* or *assise* law was one which sought to regulate the weight, quality, or price of bread or beer in a community. These two items were specifically legislated because, from very early on in an urban setting, everyone needed them, but very few made their own, preferring to buy them from professional vendors. To ensure that the same money bought a fair product everywhere, the government stepped in, creating three main types of laws: an individual Assize of Bread, Assize of Beer, or a combination Assize of Bread and Beer. Together or separately, these three instruments of law appear in over half of all statute books written in medieval England.

This particular Assize of Bread appeared in law books for only about fifty years, although the law books make it sound more impressive by saying that this law lasted "all the way from the reigns of Henry II to Edward II." It assigns prices based on quality and weight of bread. Keep in mind that pounds (£), shillings (*s.*) and pence (*p.*) are actual measuring units of silver coinage in the medieval English monetary economy, so there's a real weight attributable to each currency. The weighing of these materials was so exact that the laws specify amounts down to the half- (*ob.*) and quarter (*q.*) penny. *Wastel* and *Simmel* bread are of the highest quality, while *Cocket* bread is lower quality, because it includes some of the *bultel*, that is, what was sifted away from the finest flour, probably bran. And *Treet* is exactly what it sounds like -- a treat, or dessert!

Notice that the law also specifies what the baker and his workers may keep aside for themselves -- in a bartering economy, it's important to be specific about what "taking from the cash register" looks like. The servants don't even get baked loaves -- part of their stipulation mentions "*furnage*," or the price paid for baking time in the baker's oven, which they might have had to pay back out of their wages.

Pleas for the Manors in England of the Abbey of Bec for the Hokeday Term, 1246 -- Ruislip [Middlesex]. Tuesday after Ascension Day.

15. Breakers of the assize [of ale and bread]: Alice Salvage's widow (fined 12 d.), Agnotta the Shepherd's mistress, Roger Canon (fined 6 d.), the wife of Richard Chayham, the widow of Peter Beyondgrove, the wife of Ralph Coke (fined 6 d.), Ailwin (fined 6 d.), John Shepherd (fined 6 d.), Geoffrey Carpenter, Roise the Miller's wife (fined 6 d.), William White, John Carpenter, John Bradif.²

Those who chose to ignore the laws of assize were subject to justice of the king. However, in most parts of the kingdom, justice was far from swift. The court system was entirely mobile, riding an assigned circuit through the countryside, with scheduled trial dates in each village on which pleas could be brought before the king's judge. In the village of Ruislip, County Middlesex, one such day in the "early part of the year", or *Hokeday Term*, was the Tuesday after the Feast of the Ascension, which falls on the fortieth day after Easter. Since Easter is a moveable holiday, dependent on the cycles of the moon each year, we would have to look back at charts of the lunar cycles to determine when Easter fell in the year 1246, then figure out when this court was held.

Other interesting facts can be noted in this court record. It appears that men and women are equally guilty of breaking the bread and beer laws. Strangely, though, only certain people appear to have been fined for the infraction, and Alice Salvage's widow was fined twice as much as anyone else. Are these people, perhaps, repeat offenders? Or had they made more money from their cheating? Another observation worth noting is proof of an old stereotype about the greedy, cheating miller -- sure enough, here we find the miller's wife among the guilty; worse yet, she stands among the fined.

² Maitland, F.W., ed. *Select Pleas in Manorial and Other Seignorial Courts* (Publications of the Selden Society: London, 1889), pp. 6-9, 11-13, from Margaret L. King, ed., *Western Civilization: A Social and Cultural History*, v. 1 (Documents Set, eds. Arlene M. W. Sindelar and Mary E. Chalmers) (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), p. 120

Charter of Winchester (1203)

"Know that we have appointed, by the common counsel of our barons, that white bread made in our city of Winchester shall weigh thirty shillings, but black bread sixty-five shillings."³

Bread was especially important in urban life, where it was the staple of everyone's diet across socio-economic lines. This importance can be seen by the inclusion of a clear, simple assize law in the founding charter of the city of Winchester, England, written in 1203. Rather than waiting for the leaders of the city to get around to legislating the different types and weights of bread, the basic guidelines are established at the moment of the city's birth, so that good bread can be guaranteed to everyone at a fair price, a certain enticement to newcomers. In this law, however, only the weight is specified -- while white bread weighs significantly less than black bread, it would be sold for much more, due to the perceived purity of the sifted white flour from which it had been made.

Town Charter of Jaca, Spain

6. I give and concede to you and your successors with good will that you not go in the army unless with bread for three days. And this should be in the name of battle in the field or where I or my successors are surrounded by our enemies. And if the lord of the house does not wish to go there, let him substitute one armed footman.

21. All that all men should go to mill in mills where they wish, except Jews and those who make bread for sale.⁴

Often, town charters read like a list of promises made between a nobleman and the townspeople living in the city under his protection. In the charter of the city Jaca, in Spain, we see another sign of the importance of bread and grain mills in medieval daily life. The nobleman guarantees at least three days' salary to the townsmen who go into battle for him. However, instead of being paid in currency, which can fluctuate in value depending on the outcome of that war, the soldiers will be paid in bread. Also, the charter ensures most people's right to freely choose which mill they take their grain harvest to for milling into flour. Only bakers, who would be using flour in vast quantities and making a profit from its use, and Jews, who were a restricted population in many ways, had to follow different rules.

Town Charter of Lorris, France

24. There shall be at Lorris no duty paid for using the oven.⁵

Towns frequently suspended common fees associated with village or manor living, as a way to encourage people to help populate new urban areas. Here, the city of Lorris includes one such enticement in its town charter, by making access to all communal ovens free, rather than a pay-by-the-loaf or by-the-minute charge as it was in most places.

³ Ballard, *British Borough Charters*, from William Ashley, *The Bread of Our Forefathers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), p. 150.

⁴ *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim and Jewish Sources*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1997), pp. 123-25 from Margaret L. King, ed., *Western Civilization: A Social and Cultural History*, v. 1 (Documents Set, eds. Arlene M. W. Sindelar and Mary E. Chalmers) (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), p. 147-48.

⁵ *Heritage of Western Civilization, Seventh Edition*, ed. John L. Beatty and Oliver A. Johnson (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991), pp. 304-306, from Margaret L. King, ed., *Western Civilization: A Social and Cultural History*, v. 1 (Documents Set, eds. Arlene M. W. Sindelar and Mary E. Chalmers) (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), p. 149.