

## Taking an Ell...

Some time ago Gill Pinn had an ell measure that she sold to Jane Downey. A fascinating correspondence about the ell, as interpreted both in Britain and other parts of Europe, ensued. Here are some of the contributions.

The 18th century *Chambers Encyclopaedia* gave the following definition:

'**Ell**, Ulna, a Measure, which obtains under different Denominations in most Countries. The Ell is the Standard, or Measure, whereby Cloths, Stuffs, Linnens, Silks &c. are usually measur'd or estimated; answering, in good Measure, to the Yard of England, the Canna of Italy, the Varre of Spain, the Palm of Sicily, &c. Servius will have the Ell to be the Space contain'd between the two Hands when stretched forth: But Suetonius makes it no more than a Cubit. The Ells which occur most frequently in England, are English and Flemish: The Ell English contains three Foot nine Inches; or one Yard one Quarter English Measure: The Ell Flemish; 27 Inches, or three Quarters of a Yard; so that the Ell English is to the Flemish Ell as five to three. M. Ricard, in his Treatise of Commerce, reduces the Ell thus: an hundred Ells of Amsterdam, are equal to ninety eight, three Quarters, of Brabant, Antwerp and Brussels; to fifty eight and a half of England and France: To an hundred and twenty of Hambourg, Francfort, Leipsic and Cologne: An Hundred twenty five of Breslaw; An Hundred and ten of Bergen and Drontheim: And an Hundred and seventeen of Stockholm.'

Jane Downey commented:

A cubit is the distance from the elbow to the wrist: 18 - 22in., ie. the forearm. I think the ell is the full length of the arm, shoulder to wrist or hand. Hence we have an elbow (which bows the ell). The yard was traditionally measured from the hand to the nose with the head turned away from the hand. The traditional way of folding cloth makes the connection. I was always taught to fold sheets from the washing line with two people standing with the fabric taut between them. One stays still while the other walks towards her/him folding the fabric with an outstretched arm, folding from the shoulder to the hand and back for the length of the fabric. Counting the folds would give the number of ells.

The variation in the length of the ell from place to place may be to do with the cloth produced there. As with skeins, the length varied with the thickness of the yarn, so it will be the same with the thickness of the cloth. The length of skeins was regulated by law in about 1700.

\* A more modern source, the website for the University of North Carolina (2004), gives this rather confusing definition: 'ell a traditional unit of length used primarily for measuring cloth. In the English system, one ell equals

20 nails, 45 inches, or 1.25 yards; in metric terms, and English ell equals exactly 1.143 meters. The word comes from the Latin *ulna*, which originally meant the elbow and is now the name of the bone on the outside of the forearm. Unfortunately, the same word *ulna* was also used for the yard, creating frequent confusion between the two units in medieval documents.

Probably the ell originated through a custom of measuring lengths of cloth using two forearms, with the hands touching or overlapping. The ell was used with a similar length in France (where it was called the *aune*). In Scotland, the ell was practically the same as the yard, being equal to 37 Scots inches or 37.2 English inches (94.5 centimeters). This Scottish length appears to reflect an old practice of cloth merchants in giving an extra inch with each yard, to allow for an irregular cutting at the ends of the piece. In eastern Europe, the ell was a shorter distance.

**Elle** a traditional unit of distance in German speaking countries. The *elle* varied considerably, but it was always shorter than the English ell or French *aune*. A typical value in northern Germany was exactly 2 *fuss* (German feet), which would be close to 24 inches or 60 centimeters. In the south, the *elle* was usually longer, about 2.5 *fuss*. In Vienna, the *elle* was eventually standardized at 30.68 inches (77.93 centimeters).

Although the German word *elle* is often translated "yard" in English, this is not a very good equivalent.'

Jane Downey is surprised that there are no references to the measurement being standardised by law. There must have been numerous miscalculations and sales of short lengths. Perhaps the standardisation came in the use of the yard as the measurement for cloth.

A further contribution to the discussion came from Birgitta Martinius of the Swedish National Museum, Stockholm, via Sarah Medlam:

'Until 1878 we used the ell-measure system in Sweden. Ell is called *aln* in Swedish, which means the forearm. 1 ell (*aln*) = 2 feet ( *fot*) = 4 quarters ( *kvarter*) = 24 thumbs ( *tum*) = 0.5938 meters.'

*Aln* is also the name of the stick which is the actual measuring instrument (called *alnsticka* or *alnkäpp*). The Danish-Norwegian *aln* is somewhat longer, about 0.628 meters.

At Nordiska Museet there is a curator, Dan Waldetoft, who has worked on these measure questions, and was the editor of the new edition of Sam Owen Jansson's very extensive book on old measures, *Mattordboken*, published at Nordiska Museet in 1995 and 1998.'

Further information from Mike Dalton and Tom Clark, *The Dent Dictionary of Measurement* (1994) and Edward Pinto, *Treen and Other Wooden Bygones* (Bell 1969).