

As much as will lay upon a sixpence

By Laura Burnett

We are probably all familiar with the use of modern coins as adhoc scale bars in photographs of objects. A phenomenon so widespread, and accepted, that it is found in scientific journals as well as hurried snaps.¹ We are also familiar with the use of coins as weights, either reflecting their expected weights in societies where they circulated, or re-used as weights once they had gone out of use as coinage.² However, when spending a fun lunch hour taking part in the Early Modern Recipes Online transcribeathon last November I was intrigued to come across coins being used as a way to measure a quantity of ingredients, not by weight, but by area.³

Wellcome Collection MS.4054 is a late 17th to early 18th century 'receit' (recipe) book, a handwritten collection of useful recipes for use in a domestic, and possibly professional medical, context.⁴ It is digitised and available online from: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/vt9tqnmd>. Like many such books it doesn't just contain recipes for cooking food. There are recipes for preserving and stilling, cosmetic preparations, wines and syrups, and a large section headed 'Surgery and Phisick'. It is likely the many recipes in the book were copied from a variety of sources: family, friends and printed books. Some recipes were added later, and some name individuals, such as 'To make syder Mrs Ffiskes Way', but most are anonymous and were clearly written at one time, c.1690, in an ordered way with an index, perhaps copied from an older book.⁵ The original owner is not known and it is written in several hands suggesting something passed on, or curated and added to by others.

I happened to be working on transcribing a page from this recipe book where three mentions are made of using coins, one the more conventional weight measure: 'harts horn and ivory of each the weight of 2 french crowns'.⁶ However another recipe on the same page, 'A receit for the passion of the Heart', calls for someone to take 'as much as will laye upon a groate' of a given medicine and later to take 'as much pouder as will laye upon a six pence'. An image of the recipe with the coins highlighted is shown in Figure 1. From the surrounding recipes that equate passions of the heart with a surfeit, stopping of the stomach or palpitations, this seems more about curing heartburn than a modern reading of 'passion of the heart'. I was fascinated to come across this use by chance, and considered why coins might be being used in this way?

¹ G. Artner, "Coins as measure of size", *IEEE Instrumentation & Measurement Magazine* 23, no. 2, (2020): 88-93, doi: [10.1109/MIM.2020.9062695](https://doi.org/10.1109/MIM.2020.9062695).

² Christopher J. Scull, "Scales and weights in early Anglo-Saxon England", *The Archaeological Journal* 147 (1990): 183-215.

³ A transcribeathon is a mass event to work together for a day or short period to transcribe a document. Usually open to whoever wants to volunteer to help they are arranged online as well as in person and use web documents so all can see the work occurring and share the results. The organiser provides guidance and later validates the transcriptions. They aim to provide a community and event feel as well as complete a non-urgent or unfunded piece of work.

⁴ Catalogued as 4055, in S.A.J. Moorat, *Catalogue of Western Manuscripts on Medicine and Science in the Wellcome Historical Medical Library* (London: Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1962-1973), p.869.

⁵ Numbered p.192 on manuscript, p.127 on online view available from the Wellcome Collection.

⁶ Numbered p.138 on manuscript, p.100 on online view available from the Wellcome Collection. Oddly all other measurements on the recipe specifying a weight in French crowns are in grains, perhaps suggesting the recipe was very much copied out by rote rather than recorded during or after practical use.

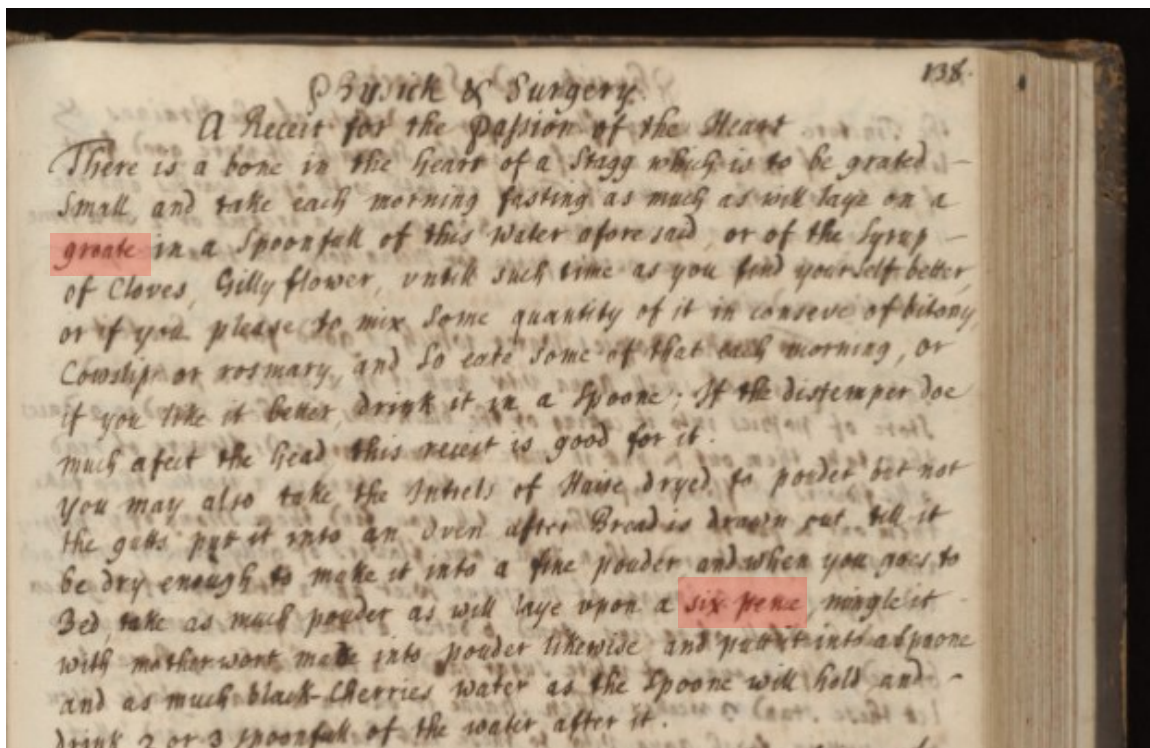


Figure 1: 'A receipt for the Passion of the Heart' with mentions of coins highlighted – groat and sixpence. From the digitised, handwritten, recipe book Wellcome Collection MS.4054. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.

In the same manuscript, other recipes call for quantities as small as 8 grains (c.0.5 grams), suggesting the use of coins was not solely due to this being the only available method of measurement for small quantities of dry substances.⁷ It is also a slightly imperfect measurement. Given the date of writing, the reference to a groat (a fourpence piece), and that this section clearly copies older recipes, we can assume it was written before the great recoinage of 1697. While milled groats and sixpences of more standardised diameter had been produced since 1670 and 1674 respectively, these were often pulled out of circulation as bullion and a lot of the coinage circulating would still have been old, hammered issues, often clipped. Quick practical experiments with a 1990 American cent, similar in diameter to the groat of 1690, and flour, granular sugar, and small barley, to mimic different grain densities and sizes, found 'as much as would lay' (by implication heaped) equated to between 0.5 and 0.9 grams (Figure 2)⁸. Earlier groats, and a sixpence, would only be larger. This is larger than the amount expected to be weighed accurately in grains elsewhere.

⁷ See P. 192 for the use of 8 grains.

⁸ There was quite a lot of variation from repeated experiments.

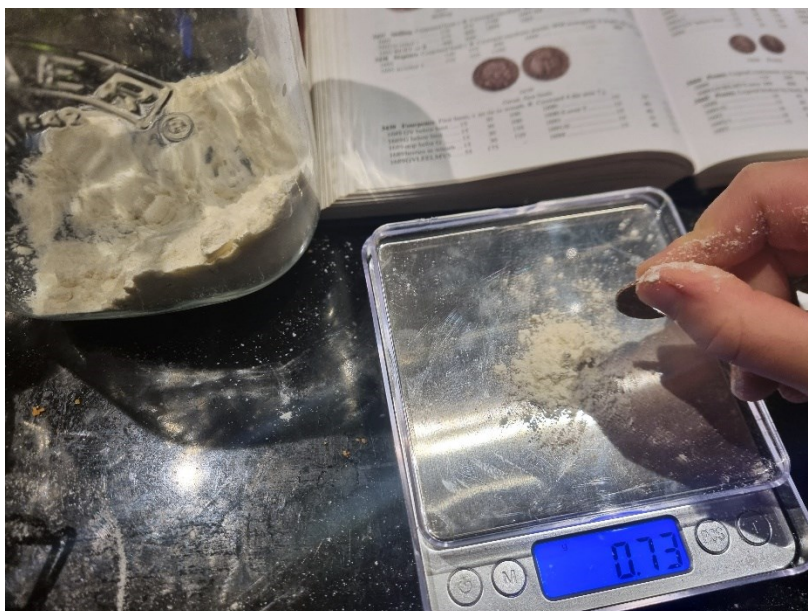


Figure 2: Experiments weighing as much flour as would lie upon a groat of 1690 (represented by an American cent)

This variation in techniques for measurement may reflect different sources for the recipes in the book, with the author simply copying the suggested measuring methods given in the original. The use of coins as a measurement in a recipe to be used in conjuncture with the following recipe which uses weights in grains suggest this is not the only reason. The recipe the measurements appear in is slightly fantastical, starting as it does with ‘a bone found in the heart of the stag’.⁹ We could speculate there was some slight protective or curative element being added by using silver coins. The use of coins and silver in charms, amulets and healing is well attested in the period, from the Angels used in the King’s Evil ceremony to bent silver coins.¹⁰ While this might be an influencing factor, the same way of measuring appears in much simpler medicines in this book.¹¹ Lucy Havard, examining the utensils and units used in Early Modern cookery, suggests standardised measuring in the kitchen ‘was often achieved by using coins’.¹² A more functional reason for the use sometimes of a small weighed quantity and sometimes a coin may be that 8 grains, a drachm, or other tiny quantities of purchased ingredients might be expected to be measured by the apothecary from which they were requested. The apothecary would have access to the necessary finely calibrated scales and weights.

⁹ This is to be taken with a much nicer sounding cherry, wine, spice and herb preparation from the previous recipe in the book.

¹⁰ Lauren Kassell, “The Economy of Magic in Early Modern England”, in *The Practice of Reform in Health, Medicine, and Science, 1500–2000: Essays for Charles Webster*, ed. Margaret Pelling and Scott Mandelbrote (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 43–57; Alex Wong, “Uttering angels and minting metaphors: some numismatic tropes in early modern British poetry”, *British Numismatic Journal* 82 (2012), 121–32. For the use of silver see: MS Ashm 1494, pp. 483–44 as cited in A. Cummins, “Textual Evidence for the Material History of Amulets in Seventeenth-Century England”, in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain*, ed R. Hutton, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 164–187. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137444820_10; Joan Evans *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance Particularly in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), p.148. Recipes do specify silver basins in places (see p.58 in this recipe book) but they also specify other vessels material, recognising how different metals might react with the ingredients: Lucy J Havard “Almost to Candy Height: Knowledge-Making in the Early Modern Kitchen, 1700-1850” *Cultural and Social History* 19:2 (2002), 119-139, DOI: [10.1080/14780038.2022.2033148](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2022.2033148), p. 122.

¹¹ p.153, a simple recipe for a cough medicine using egg, honey and flowers of sulphur, the last measured on a coin.

¹² Havard, “Almost to Candy Height”, p. 126.

In contrast, coins could be used at home when the reader, or patient, needed to measure powders they had made themselves, or been given or sold, even in the absence of such precise scales.

This use of coins provides insight into how people were using and interacting with coins in 17th to 18th century Britain. Despite the clear variation in coins in the late 17th century, a period of heavy clipping, the recipe compiler expected coin sizes would be standardised enough to be suitable for this use. Beyond this, the casual use of coins in home recipes provides more evidence for the widespread availability of coinage. It demonstrates an expectation that coins would be readily to hand in the kitchen and stillroom for use as measurement tools. Historical studies of the later 17th century often focus on widespread complaints that coins are not available in the quantity or quality desired. It has been suggested that, even beyond the crisis years of the Recoinage period, they were rare overall or within most households.¹³ These recipes demonstrate medium to low value coins were an everyday object that fell readily to women's hands when measurement, or nowadays a photo scale, was needed.



¹³ Craig Muldrew, “‘Hard food for Midas’: cash and its social value in Early Modern England”, *Past & Present* 170, Issue 1, (2001): 78- 120, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/170.1.78>. For a focus on the particular crises of the recoinage years see: Brodie Waddell, “The Economic Crisis of the 1690s in England.” *The Historical Journal* 66, no. 2 (2023): 281–302. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X22000309>.