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0521473853 - Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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It is now well over a century since the appearance of Thorold Rogers' great study of English prices and wages, and fifty years since Beveridge was diverted from his study of price history to devote himself to his more famous Report.<sup>1</sup> Why, then, has there been no similar price history for Scotland?<sup>2</sup> The chief deterrent to such work has been the absence of sufficient data. While English historians are blessed with one of the largest body of surviving contemporary records in Europe, medieval Scottish documents are rare, and documents containing prices especially so. English price historians can reject large bodies of evidence, choosing instead only the best series of most reliable and comparable material, while the Scottish price historian seems in contrast often to be grasping at straws. Whereas the English evidence permits the calculation of mean prices and even of means of means, in Scotland there are often periods of years at a time for some commodities which have failed to yield a single price. The task had not been attempted in the past quite simply because it did not seem feasible. The rules drawn up by the International Scientific Committee on Price History in 1930 called for data to be collected only from a single city or limited area, with each commodity series drawn from the same set of records for the whole of the period studied.<sup>3</sup> Within the terms of this council of perfection, no Scottish medieval price history can ever be written.

<sup>1</sup> J.E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England, 1259–1793* (Oxford, 7 vols., 1866–1902). W.H. Beveridge, *Prices and Wages in England from the 12th to the 19th Century* (London and New York, 1939). More recently, of course, this field has been dominated by the work of David Farmer, culminating in his contributions to the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, II, ed. H.E. Hallam (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 716–817, and III, ed. Edward Miller (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 431–525.

<sup>2</sup> As I write T.C. Smout's study of prices in early modern Scotland approaches publication: Alexander Gibson and Christopher Smout, *Prices, Food and Wages in Scotland, 1550–1780* (Cambridge, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Summarized by Ingrid Hammarström, 'The Price Revolution of the Sixteenth Century: Some Swedish Evidence', *Scandinavian Economic History Review* (5), 1957, 118–54, reprinted in Peter H. Ramsey (ed.), *The Price Revolution in Sixteenth-Century England* (London, 1971).

Cambridge University Press

0521473853 - Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Changing values in medieval Scotland

Nevertheless, it was an English analogy which led me to explore a different approach. David Farmer's brief study of prices in Angevin England,<sup>4</sup> though lacking the massive authority of his work on later periods because of the scarcity of early data, caught my interest because it showed that important developments could sometimes be revealed, at least in outline, by even a few shreds of evidence. Accordingly, I determined to set about collecting such Scottish price evidence as I could find. I believe that the material collected here does provide enough of the picture for the major trends in Scottish medieval price movements to be discernible.

We have, however, encountered a number of major problems, and it would be foolish to underestimate them. Weights and measures caused numerous difficulties. They changed over time, and they also varied from place to place, making it difficult to be sure that we were able to compare units of equal size. The chapter on weights and measures prepared by Dr Gemmill goes some way towards clarifying and quantifying this problem, though not to eradicate it, and it is hoped that this chapter will be a useful contribution to the study of weights and measures in Scotland. Our general approach to complications of this type has been to collect the data as a first step towards increasing our knowledge and understanding of the difficulty, rather than to use the problem as an excuse to do nothing. In the same way I have devoted a chapter to the question of currency, a subject which is obviously of crucial importance for the study of prices. Both these two chapters have had to deal with somewhat technical subjects in considerable detail. Adam Smith once remarked, 'I am always willing to run some hazard of being tedious in order to be sure that I am perspicuous'<sup>5</sup> but immersed in the mass of numismatic and metrological minutiae there is some danger of tedium without its counter-balancing compensations. Less patient readers may prefer to take these sections on trust.

A further problem concerns the various different kinds of price quotation which we have encountered. Where the data permit, price historians rightly prefer to restrict their enquiry to prices of a single type; for example sale prices from one particular type of account. As has already been observed, we have had to make do with any kind of price quotation we can find, despite the distortions which this may sometimes entail. Thus in royal accounts purchases tend to give rather

<sup>4</sup> D.L. Farmer, 'Some Price Fluctuations in Angevin England', *EcHR*, 2nd ser. 9 (1956), 34–43.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (London, 1977), p. 25.

Cambridge University Press

0521473853 - Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

3

high prices,<sup>6</sup> while sales are often on the low side, yet we have had to use whatever material we can find. In any case, since one man's sale is another's purchase, our view of any transaction depends on whether the buyer's or seller's accounts survive. Moreover, sales mentioned in all kinds of accounts are sometimes little more than accounting devices. 'Sales' in the *Exchequer Rolls* could be genuine market transactions, or a money valuation set on items listed in the charge side of the account, or a commutation of a render in kind.

This brings us to the vexed problem of valuations. The significance of accounting valuations for the price historian is likely to be highly variable. Sometimes such information can give an accurate reflection of likely average prices at any given time, possibly providing a more accurate guide than some genuine transactions which might have been distorted by particular circumstances. On other occasions valuations which have clearly become outdated continue to be applied years later.<sup>7</sup> One interesting barley price illustrates something of this: the price offered attempts to indicate the average price over a number of years – 'ilk yeir to mend uthir' – but the whole case hinges on the question of whether certain rents are too low because of valuations set long before.<sup>8</sup> Our general policy has been to try to accumulate enough instances to begin to be able to distinguish reliable valuations from fossilized ones. However, legal valuations also raise different problems from accounting valuations. The values of goods claimed in court often seem somewhat inflated, while the awards made by the courts sometimes look more moderate,<sup>9</sup> so one needs to be aware of the particular circumstance when evaluating the evidence. However, assize valuations raise still other issues. These local government attempts at price control were essentially designed to hold prices down to reasonable levels in time of scarcity, and to regulate the profits of craftsmen. Most importantly they concerned the price of bread and ale in the burghs, and the prices they ordained for these commodities though generally reliable may tend to flatten out the extremes of glut and dearth. Yet in fixing

<sup>6</sup> APS II.7 shows James I's attempt to restrict prices paid by the court to the levels which had prevailed ten days before their arrival.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the Exchequer valuations of marts. Below, pp. 232–3, and Athol Murray, 'The Exchequer and Crown Revenue of Scotland 1437–1542' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1961), pp. 83–6.

<sup>8</sup> ALCPA, p. 519.

<sup>9</sup> See SCBF. Dickinson's note on procedure shows that if spuilzie were proved the valuation was determined by the oath of the pursuer, although the sheriff did have the power to moderate either the quantity or the price claimed, in a procedure known as the taxation of the oath. For the contrast between claims and subsequent awards, see wheat 213–14, 245, 255–6, 262–3, malt 202, oats 80, 126, meal 187, cows 47, 60.

Cambridge University Press

0521473853 - Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 Changing values in medieval Scotland

bread prices, the assize often mentions the price of wheat, and this quotation is more likely to be impartially reported. The same observation may be made regarding ale, and barley and malt prices. Obviously the use of prices of various different kinds from various different sources is not straightforward. In order to keep this issue in the reader's mind, individual prices are here published with a letter code giving some indication of the type of price involved.<sup>10</sup> However, such summary classification of sometimes quite complicated transactions can only provide the crudest of indications.

Further difficulties arise from the comparison of prices from a variety of different locations in Scotland. Regional variations in weights and measures have already been mentioned, but price variation across the country was also a result of varied climatic conditions, local specializations, or the effects of war or plague which could sometimes be restricted to limited areas. Unfortunately the evidence at our disposal for the whole of Scotland is too limited to permit us to break it into its appropriate regions, but there can be no doubt that regional price variation will have affected the national picture.

In addition to these major problems we should draw attention to some of the lesser factors which will no doubt have contributed some inaccuracies. The giving of charity, i.e. generous measure, is discussed more fully in the weights and measures chapter. Long and short hundreds can confuse calculations. Although there is some consistency of practice within each commodity, livestock and fish being particularly prone to the use of the long hundred of 120, this can by no means always be assumed. Cloth transactions especially may well involve the use of both long and short hundreds. Accordingly where there is any ambiguity we have calculated unit prices for all commodities on both a 100 and 120 base; where this calculation yields a round number, it may usually be regarded as evidence for the particular hundred in use.

The dating of our evidence is often somewhat uncertain. Accounts often span more than a single year, and it has been our practice consistently to list prices under the earliest possible date, which will usually have been the year of the harvest in question. Thus prices in the account year 1328–9 are listed as 1328, if there are no other definite indications. This policy sometimes has unfortunate effects: for example some high 1481 prices probably properly belong to the notoriously difficult year 1482, but the advantages of following a consistent policy seem in this instance paramount. In addition it needs to be recognized that the dating of legal cases is often particularly difficult since the

<sup>10</sup> The key to the letter code appears in Chapter 5, p. 150.

Cambridge University Press

0521473853 - Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

disputed transaction and the law suit arising from it are often years apart. Even when both dates are known it is not always apparent to which year any valuations in the case relate. Finally on the question of dating, it should be noted that all dates have been converted as necessary to modern years commencing on 1 January.

Carriage costs sometimes affect prices, and though they can be allowed for when explicitly mentioned in the original source, they must usually have been included in the given price without any explicit reference. Variable quality will also have affected prices markedly. The Aberdeen courts talk continually of goods of sufficient merchant quality, and often accounts will explain a particularly low price by reference to poor quality. However, most price quotations make no explicit mention of the condition of the goods concerned. The reality is that a wide variety of goods will have been involved, and stinking fish will not always have been distinguished from sweet, nor fattened beef from tough old oxen. Finally one has to recognize that clerical and arithmetical errors, both medieval and modern, will have crept in, and that where the total volume of evidence is as slim as it is in Scotland the consequences of such errors will be correspondingly great. For example, the oatmeal price from Little Cumbray exceptionally occurs as 22s. per celdra instead of 32s.<sup>11</sup> In this case the details of total price and quantity make the error clear, but some other errors will certainly have slipped through unnoticed.

Further sensible reasons why this project should never have been undertaken could be discussed at length, but perhaps enough has been said to establish that few students are more aware of these problems than those who have grappled with them. However, despite the difficulties, it is our conviction that this project has been worthwhile. Despite all the factors tending to blur and distort our vision, the resultant picture has a degree of plausibility, in relation to English prices and to what else we know of Scottish medieval economic history, sufficient to render these results credible.

It may be helpful to say a few words here about the presentation of the data. In Chapter 5 there appear lists of unit prices for each commodity arranged by year, often running to several hundred prices. There is also a summary table for each commodity arranging the material to give a mean price for each of a series of time periods from the thirteenth century to 1542 (the death of James V). From the 1460s these time periods are straightforward decades, but before then the

<sup>11</sup> *ER* V. 288, 332.

Cambridge University Press

0521473853 - Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Changing values in medieval Scotland

evidence did not survive with sufficient consistency to permit the calculation of decennial means. The time periods A to I were devised to permit some sort of comparison between commodities over the first part of our period. These periods are dated as follows:

- A – thirteenth century
- B – 1300 to late 1330s
- C – late 1330s to 1340s
- D – 1350–67
- E – 1367–97
- F – 1398–1414
- G – The Hume Will of 1424
- H – 1430s to 1443
- I – mid-1440s to 1459

No great claims are being made for the exact figures produced by the calculation of means. They could be recalculated on the basis of slightly different assumptions to produce slightly different results, though the overall picture would not be much changed. Thus all that has been possible is an incomplete outline sketch. It is especially important to remember this when using these mean prices. These figures are not facts, but the result of a series of judgements, selections and interpretations which we have made to render the material more manageable. We believe these conclusions to be valid, but we recognize that scholars will wish to make their own assessments as well. This is made possible by the lists of unit prices. These are published here in summary form only, but it should be enough to give some indication of the hard evidence behind the mean prices and trends which we have calculated. Interested scholars may also make application to the ESRC data archive for access to our complete data base, which contains further information about each price quotation, together with details of additional transactions not capable of yielding the simple unit prices required for the price lists. It is on this complete data base that our calculations have been founded.

The summary table also provides the results of calculations made to convert the mean Scottish currency price to a sterling equivalent. This is necessary in order to strip out the direct effects of the depreciation of the Scots currency. A more usual procedure would have been to calculate pure silver prices, but this approach has the disadvantage of failing to recognize the changes taking place in the later middle ages right across Europe in the value of silver. The sterling equivalent calculation makes some concessions to the rising value of silver, while still providing a reliable yard-stick. This procedure is discussed more

Cambridge University Press

0521473853 - Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

7

fully below.<sup>12</sup> Finally these sterling equivalent prices are indexed on the base period B–C (1300–40s) to facilitate comparison of price trends between commodities, and with Farmer's indices of English prices. Composite indices of Scots cereal and livestock prices have been compiled for comparison with Farmer's English indices, and these appear in Chapter 1.

This book is about medieval Scotland, but neither of the authors is Scots. We can only apologize for the errors from which a Scottish upbringing would have saved us, most particularly in the matter of place-names. It has been our practice to modernize names where we have been able to identify them, leaving those not known to us in the original. Shortly before his death the late Professor Ian Cowan generously agreed to help us with this; we can only ask our Scottish readers to treat our ignorance with the good-humoured indulgence which he would have brought to our problem.

For those readers who are not Scottish, or not familiar with some of the terms, especially those employed as units of weight or measure, it should be pointed out that a glossary appears on pp. 382–409 containing a full explanation of such terms. Those most commonly encountered are the chaldron (celdra), the boll and the firloft, all units of volume usually employed in measuring grain. These terms have often been abbreviated to c., b., and f.: thus the expression 10d.b. stands for 10d. per boll. All sums of money are in Scots currency unless otherwise stated. Before 1367 this is indistinguishable from sterling, but after that date English or sterling money is specifically so designated. Equally Flemish money is often distinguished by the abbreviation g. for groot, while French coin occurs either as sous and denier tournois (s.d.t.) or as francs.

In all we have assembled almost 6,000 prices for twenty-four commodities dating from the thirteenth century to 1542. So meagre an offering cannot be judged by the standards of English, or of early modern, price history. Nevertheless, it is our contention that even so modest a collection does add something to our understanding of medieval Scottish history.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 4, pp. 137–40 below.



# 1 Price trends in medieval Scotland

Scotland is half the size of England and Wales, but because of its relief, soil and climate, the area of Scottish arable and good pasture land is only about a fifth or sixth the size of England's.<sup>1</sup> Rough grazing in Scotland is three times as plentiful as arable land, ensuring a pastoral bias in its agriculture and economy which has left its mark on Scottish prices. Scotland was always a country 'more gevin to store of bestiall than ony production of cornys'<sup>2</sup>, making grain correspondingly dear there and livestock cheap. Geographical factors also encouraged the consumption and even the export of fish.

Estimates of the population supported on this land have varied widely, from about a million to less than half that, but the most recent work on English population, estimates of which have also fluctuated widely, now suggest that the larger figures look the more reliable.<sup>3</sup> A figure of

<sup>1</sup> These introductory remarks owe much to the essays on the Scottish economy in Alexander Grant, *Independence and Nationhood: Scotland 1306–1469* (London, 1984), pp. 61–88, and Ranald Nicholson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1978), pp. 1–26. For the physical geography of Scotland see Peter McNeill and Ranald Nicholson (eds), *An Historical Atlas of Scotland c.400–c.1600* (St Andrews, 1975), maps 1 and 2 and text 1. See also *Agricultural Statistics United Kingdom 1988* (HMSO, 1990). The figures for land use in the 1980s may be summarized, in millions of hectares, as follows:

	Total agricultural land	Arable	Pasture	Rough grazing
England	9.9	5.3	3.1	1.2
Scotland	6.0	1.1	0.6	4.1

<sup>2</sup> A sixteenth-century observation cited by Nicholson, *Scotland*, p. 4.  
<sup>3</sup> For example, John Hatcher, *Plague, Population, and the English Economy 1348–1530* (London, 1977), pp. 13, 68, and for the most up-to-date statement by a demographic specialist, R. Smith, 'Demographic Developments in Rural England, 1300–48: A Survey', in B.M.S. Campbell (ed.), *Before the Black Death: Studies in the Crisis of the Early Fourteenth Century* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 25–78. Estimates of English urban populations are also under-going a process of marked upward revision. See D. Keene, 'A New Study of London before the Great Fire', *Urban History Yearbook* (1984), p.



Cambridge University Press

0521473853 - Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

about 6 million for England now commands widespread respect, if not universal agreement, and that in turn might imply about a million for Scotland.

The six to one ratio with England recurs with disconcerting frequency, but the upper population estimate for medieval Scotland is also supported by what we know of early eighteenth-century Scottish population totals. In England and very probably in Scotland too, it was not until after 1700 that population recovered to the levels achieved before the Black Death, so the figure of 1.1 million for Scotland in 1707 has implications for medievalists. The eighteenth-century data<sup>4</sup> also show that this population was much more evenly distributed across the whole country before the clearances and industrialization, and this is borne out by the 1366 valuations which were higher for the land north of the Forth than for that south of it. A similar mental adjustment needs to be made in favour of the west, which was probably more densely settled than the distribution of urban settlements, which is strongly eastern in character, would suggest.<sup>5</sup>

The Scottish medieval urban population is usually guessed to have been about 10% of the total, a figure reached in England by the eleventh century. Very little work has so far been done on this topic, but an urban population of some hundred thousand people living in about fifty burghs c. 1300 would give an average of 2,000, with most of the burghs falling well below that figure. Such evidence as we possess from burghs lists, tax rolls, or estimates of house and burgage plot numbers has led a leading student of fourteenth-century Scottish urban life to speak of most burgh populations in hundreds rather than thousands.<sup>6</sup> Scottish lists of burgesses and tax payers need to be treated with great caution, as they seem to require larger multipliers than corresponding English lists. Edinburgh certainly exceeded 12,000, plus the suburbs and Leith and Canongate, in the later sixteenth century, despite a 1583 tax roll listing only 1,245 payers.<sup>7</sup> On this reckoning the top ten medieval Scottish burghs may have ranged from as much as 10,000 down to

20; D. Keene, *Survey of Medieval Winchester* (Oxford, 1985), I, pp. 367–8; E. Rutledge, 'Immigration and Population Growth in Early Fourteenth-Century Norwich: Evidence from the Tithing Roll', *Urban History Yearbook* (1988), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Grant, *Independence and Nationhood*, pp. 72–3.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.S. Barrow, 'The Sources for the History of the Highlands in the Middle Ages', in Loraine Maclean (ed.), *The Middle Ages in the Highlands* (Inverness, 1981), pp. 11–22.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Ewan, *Townlife in Fourteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *SMT*, p. 12. See also Michael Lynch, 'The Social and Economic Structure of the Larger Towns, 1450–1600', in *SMT*, p. 285 n. 82, for a summary of evidence and opinion relating to sixteenth-century Scottish urban populations.

Cambridge University Press

0521473853 - Changing Values in Medieval Scotland: A Study of Prices, Money, and Weights and Measures

Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 Changing values in medieval Scotland

something under 5,000 inhabitants, compared with recent estimates for London of 80,000, Norwich of 25,000, Winchester of 10,000, and Dublin of 11,000.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the size of the Scottish burgh, it seems probable that town life and international trade occupy a larger place in this study than they did in reality. Elsewhere I have estimated England's buoyant exports *c.* 1300 at as little as 4% of GNP<sup>9</sup>, and it seems unlikely that the corresponding Scottish figure was greater. The core of the Scottish economy was built up of thousands of men and women eking a living from the land. This truth notwithstanding, the survival of export data and the Aberdeen council records have guaranteed towns and foreign trade a larger than life role in this study. Yet rural evidence is not totally absent. The *Exchequer Rolls* provide much information about the remoter royal estates, as well as about high life at court, while the legal records of the Lords Auditors and of the Lords of Council are a (largely unexplored) mine of information on fifteenth-century agriculture and rural life. These sources show plainly that in the country as well as in the town a market was in operation drawing supply and demand into equilibrium through the mechanisms of money and adjustable prices. This is not to suggest that we do not meet barter, or fossilized, prices, for both these phenomena are met frequently. But it is equally true that ancient prices were recognized and understood as such, while transactions in kind were usually valued, and often actually carried out, in coin. Although no medieval market can be called free, market forces were operating strongly as the movement of prices demonstrates. Even in the highlands, where the sources are lacking, evidence of medieval fairs and markets survives<sup>10</sup> as a witness to the extent of internal trade, carried on independently of the burghs. Equally medieval coins have been found all over Scotland, both north and south, and in town and country.<sup>11</sup> This evidence, which has been increasingly commonly found

<sup>8</sup> See n. 3, and for Dublin, J.C. Russell, *Medieval Regions and their Cities* (Newton Abbot, 1972), pp. 136–7.

<sup>9</sup> N.J. Mayhew, 'Modelling Medieval Monetisation' in B.M.S. Campbell and R.H. Britnell (eds.), *A Commercialising Economy* (Manchester, 1995) forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> Barrow, 'Highlands'.

<sup>11</sup> D.M. Metcalf, 'The Evidence of Scottish Coin Hoards for Monetary History, 1100–1600', in *Coinage in Medieval Scotland*, pp. 1–60. For single finds see J.D. Bateson, 'Roman and Medieval Coins Found in Scotland, to 1987', *PSAS*, 119 (1989), 165–88, which also usefully up-dates Metcalf's paper. Metal detectors and much more careful archaeological excavation have dramatically extended our knowledge since 1977. This point is most vividly illustrated in J.D. Bateson, *Coin Finds from Cromarty* (Cromarty, 1993). This evidence for medieval monetization is all the more telling because of the remoteness of such sites from the usual centres of trade, such as Berwick, Edinburgh, Perth, and Aberdeen. Similar evidence is emerging from Llanfaes, on Anglesey (information kindly supplied by Edward Besly of the National Museum