

Have you fathomed the roots of our measurements?

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Our word “foot” comes from Anglo-Saxon *foet*, and is related to Norwegian and Swedish *foet*, Danish *foed*, Dutch and Afrikaans *voet*, West Frisian *foet*, North Frisian *fōtj*, German *fuss*, and Low German *foot*. It’s an ancient Germanic word for an important part of our anatomy.

It is also an ancient natural unit of measurement, based on the length of the foot of a typical adult male. And a twelfth of a foot is called an inch, which is often taken to be equivalent to the width of a man’s thumb.

Another natural unit of measurement is the fathom, which was originally the length of the outstretched arms, from fingertip to fingertip. A fathom is equivalent to six feet, and these days it’s mostly used in measuring the depth of water. It, too, is an old Germanic word, and is related to the modern Swedish verb *famna*, which means to embrace.

In western Europe, natural measurements of this type disappeared in those countries which were conquered by Napoleon, who imposed the new and more logical – but less natural – metric system on them. In Britain we were not conquered, and so we could choose to stay



■ Some of us talk in feet and inches - others have embraced millimetres and metres.

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with the same natural measurement system which had served us so well for more than a thousand years.

But even in many of those nations which were not able to hold out against Bonaparte, the foot and inch and fathom as units of measurement still survive today, 200 years after Waterloo. Scandinavian carpenters may still talk in “thumbs” or inches. In Norway, the length of a boat is always still quoted in feet. In Sweden, the depth of the sea is often measured in fathoms. Internationally, too, it is still widespread practice to give the height at which aeroplanes are flying in feet.

It is the intuitive naturalness of measurements like inch, foot and fathom which make them hard to get rid of. We like them because we can relate to them.

The other day I was in a stationery shop in Norway, buying some folders.

The young woman serving me showed me the folders they had, and I wanted to know if they were the right size. I asked how many inches wide they were. She said “I don’t know anything about feet and inches” and gave me the dimensions in millimetres.

Then I asked her how tall she was. “Five foot seven,” she replied.