

Cost of Living Over Two Hundred Years

Money is not, and has never been, worth the same over the whole country, wages and goods were always higher in the south. Therefore, absolute accuracy is impossible. The price of food varied with the changing of the seasons and the weather.

Bread was the staple food in any household, and the price of a quarter of grain was 3s 4d (16½p) in 1245; 6s 5d (32p) in 1250, while famine conditions could raise it to 13s 8d (68½p) as in 1315. Between 1760 and 1792, a quarter of wheat varied between 43s (£2.15p) and 126s (£6.30p), due to the rapidly rising population, the Industrial Revolution and foreign wars. The 1815 Corn Law introduced a sliding scale. Finally in 1828 there was a duty of 1s (5p) a quarter when the price was 73s (£3.65p). Between 1828 and 1831, the harvests were bad and corn was imported. The Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 allowed foreign corn into Great Britain free of duty.

During the 17th century the general wage for an agricultural labourer was 8d (3½p) a day, his wife might get 6d (2½p) and children 3d (1p) a day. In 1795 the Speenhamland system was adopted by the overseers of the poor as a method of supplementing low wages with an allowance paid out of the rates. This allowance varied according to the cost of bread: 'When the gallon loaf (8½lb) shall cost 1s 4d (6½p) then every poor man shall have 4s (20p) weekly for his own and 1s 10d (9p) for the support of other members of his family'. The system was discredited in the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834.

In 1852 a clerk received 10s 9d (54p) for an 11 hour, 6 day week, and was expected to wear clothes of a 'sober nature', (though neck scarves and headgear could be worn in inclement weather). He was also expected to bring 4 lb of coal with him each day in the winter to use in his workroom.

Certain commodities such as coal varied greatly in the price charged not only at the pithead, but also in all parts of the country owing to differing costs of transport. In one area per ton was:

| | | | | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1915-20 | 1921-30 | 1931-40 | 1941-44 | 1945-50 | 1951-60 | 1961-70 |
| £1.35p | £1.50p | £1.35p | £1.70p | £3.60p | £7.66p | £15.00 |

Coal was the main means of cooking and heating in most of the poorer homes for many years.

The 20th century saw more changes than any other in the amount of goods which can be bought. At one time, a working class family could live comfortably on a wage of less than £2 a week, his rent would be five to six shillings (25 to 30 new pence), and a joint of beef could be bought for 10d (4p).

Comparative prices for a standard loaf of bread weighing 41b 5½oz

The price would vary according to district and quality of flour.

| | | | | | | |
|------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|
| 1700 | 1757 | 1801 | 1812 | 1841 | 1887 | 1914 |
| 6½ d | 10d | 15½ d | 17d | 8½ d | 6d | 5¾ d |

| | | | | | | |
|---------|------|------|------|-------|------|--|
| 1919-20 | 1950 | 1960 | 1961 | 1964 | 1969 | |
| 12¼d | 5d | 8½d | 9½d | 10¼ d | 13½d | |

During 1946-49 a 1¼ lb loaf cost 4½d and the 14oz cost 2¾d. After decimalisation in 1971 the 1¼lb loaf of white bread, not sliced or wrapped cost:

| | | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1972 | 1973 | 1974 | 1975 | 1976 | 1977 | 1978 |
| 10p | 11½p | 14p | 15p | 21p | 28p | 30p |

Contemporary Values of the Pound

The following shows the amount of money required as at October 2000 to equal £1 at the date shown. This does not take into consideration the cost of real property, or the level of wages. The figures are derived from the Retail Prices Index, based at January 1987 = 100.

The RPI is based on the combined cost of a number of specific goods and does not take into account other factors relevant to a comparison of values.

Thus, £74.61 would have been required in October 2000 in order to have the same purchasing power as £1 in 1700.

£1 was worth in

| | | | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1500 | 1550 | 1600 | 1650 | 1700 | 1750 |
| £429.00 | £286.00 | £122.57 | £71.50 | £74.61 | £81.71 |

| | | | | | |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|
| 1850 | 1900 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 |
| £49.03 | £55.35 | £20.43 | £13.84 | £9.28 | £2.57 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 1971 | 1972 | 1973 | 1974 | 1975 | 1976 | 1977 | 1978 |
| Gas Cooker | £55.00 | £65.00 | £75.00 | £80.00 | £90.00 | £100.00 | £110.00 | £130.00 |
| Sewing Machine | £45.00 | £45.00 | £55.00 | £55.00 | £70.00 | £75.00 | £85.00 | £90.00 |
| Refridgerator | £60.00 | £70.00 | £75.00 | £80.00 | £85.00 | £90.00 | £90.00 | £100.00 |
| Electric Fire | £25.00 | £28.00 | £35.00 | £38.00 | £45.00 | £53.00 | £59.00 | £70.00 |

The Tax Year

Why April 5 as the end of the tax year? In the Middle Ages the English Calendar ran from Lady Day, March 25, chosen by the Church as the beginning of its year. All official years ran from the same New Year's Day. The financial year remained at that date, but by the eighteenth century, January 1 had become generally regarded as the beginning of the year. "Time was measured by the Julian calendar which, since its inception in 46 BC, had 'lost' a number of days, when the country adopted the Gregorian Calendar in 1752, 11 lost days had to found. So 2 September 1752, was followed by 14 September. The authorities then thought that 11 days' revenue could be lost if nothing was done about the missing days. So 11 days were tacked onto the end of the financial year - the date was moved from March 25 to April 5. In 1854, the financial year was changed to 31 March, but for some reason the tax year (or fiscal year) continued to run from 6 April to 5 April.

Civil Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths

This began on 1 July, 1837.