

The origins of shoe sizes

It is widely assumed that the first shoe-sizing system began in 1324, when King Edward II of England decreed three barleycorns laid end to end made an inch and each barleycorn (one-third of an inch) was to equal one shoe size. In truth, Edward had nothing whatever to do with shoe sizes or sizing systems. It was not until centuries later that the one-third inch barleycorn measurement was officially adopted as a full shoe size.

The first recorded description of a shoe sizing system was in 1688, by British genealogist Randle Holme, in his book *The Academy of Armoury and Blazon*. In it, he refers to 'a guild of shoemakers' which had agreed on a common shoe size scale to replace individual systems previously used by each shoemaker and lastmaker. But, quite significantly, the system was based on a quarter-inch scale rather than thirds of an inch. The next recorded description of a shoe sizing system did not appear until 1856, in *The Illustrated Handbook of the Foot*, by Richard Gardiner of London. And here we find the first mention of sizes using the one-third-inch scale.

The first full-fledged shoe sizing system, charted in detail, was introduced in 1880 by an American, Edwin B. Simpson of New York. This was officially accepted by the footwear industry in 1888 and, at about the same time, was also adopted by the British. However, it still required a further twenty years before American manufacturers and retailers were making and selling their shoes based on this 'official' sizing system. Thus the first full-fledged shoe sizing system with detailed and proportional measurements for lasts and shoes is of American origin.

The Barleycorn Myth

Edward actually decreed that three barleycorns placed end to end would measure one inch and thirty-nine would be one foot—which also happened to be the length of an average man's 'foot'. It is easy to see how the story came about.

The barleycorn as a measurement can be traced back at least as far as the 7th century but was not in universal use. Then, in 1324, under pressure from scholars and tradesmen, Edward established the three-barleycorn inch as an official measurement. Shoemakers began to adopt it and so it was they, and not Edward, who gradually came to the agreement that one-third of an inch (or a barleycorn) should be the accepted measurement for a full shoe size.

But surely there must have been shoe sizing systems long before 1688, for how could shoemakers have made and fitted their shoes? The truth is that, for centuries prior to that date, there was no widely accepted system. Each shoemaker used his own method, based on an outline of the foot, plus the width of his hand for girth measurements. Such methods, however, were used for made-to-order shoes for affluent customers and a large proportion of the people either made their own shoes or bought them second hand. A few shoemakers did make shoes for stock, but usually in two sizes only—small for women and large for men.

The idea of full shoe sizes has therefore been around for a very long time and one would think half sizes would automatically follow. In fact, they did not appear officially until 1888, when the first standardised last measurement and shoe size chart was adopted by America and Great Britain. Despite receiving industry approval, the one-sixth of an inch half size was by no means easy to implement as a stock size. In fact, half sizes only began to appear in shops after 1900, and it took a further fifteen years before they were widely available. Half sizes are therefore an even more recent phenomena.

Resistance was mainly due to inventory costs for both manufacturers and retailers alike. It meant at least a doubling, or more, of the inventory on any given shoe or style in stock. Many retailers felt that customers had lived without half sizes up to then, so why should they not continue to do so! More aggressive retailers, however, were successfully advertising 'a selection of half sizes for better fit' and competitors were eventually compelled to fall into line.

Thus, throughout most of recorded history, shoe sizes and shoe fit have been very much a private affair, with each shoemaker having his own personal measuring or size system. In America, with the coming of factory-made or stock shoes, which dates back less than 175 years, it became necessary to offer shoes in different sizes. But, here again, each manufacturer would use his own sizing method, and it was not until almost 1900 that there was some semblance of at least rough uniformity in shoe sizes. Even today, there are still variations of size measurements among manufacturers. Hence, a genuine shoe sizing system is a relatively modern concept and only a century old. 🌐

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