
Eels and a Joint Slide Rule

Colin Barnes



FIGURE 1.
Peter Carter plying his trade on the Cambridgeshire River Ouse

Surely there is some mistake, but no. Bear with me and I will show that there really was a link between these two disparate items. Many collectors have tales to tell about finding slide rules in unusual places and this is no exception. Some little while ago I received a call from a Peter Carter who somehow had heard of my interest in slide rules. He said he had a slide rule for sale so I asked him for a description. From his rather brief description I interpreted that his example was a Bradburn made Routledge Engineer's folding rule. There was very little other information, but the rule sounded like an interesting example.

Having ascertained Carter's address as being in the village of Outwell in the Cambridgeshire fens, I arranged to visit him. A day out in the fens with my wife was quite appealing whatever the outcome. Having found the address given as opposite the church, we found what might best be described as an original "Dickensian" shop. Two large windows that had not been cleaned for years, if ever, were set into the fading painted frontage. Inside we found ourselves in a

stone floored room piled high with wicker eel traps, an old birdcage, various assorted implements, and a stuffed fish in a glass case. On the floor lay a large punt gun.

Peter Carter appeared from a back room and introduced himself as the last traditional eel catcher in the fens; being probably the final member of his family to carry on the business that he could trace back down the family tree for some 400 years.

Having taken in the surroundings and appearance of this fenman, I held little hope that his slide rule would be of great interest. I could not have been more wrong.

The offering produced was in a paper covered wooden box that was a little worn but obviously old. Opening the hinged cover displayed a pristine joint slide rule.

Here was a virtually mint example of a Routledge rule made by Bradburn (c.1850) of ivory and fully bound in German silver, a rare instrument. The front face with inch scales is marked THOMAS BRADBURN & SONS MAKERS BIRM^M. The back is engraved I ROUTLEDGE ENGINEER

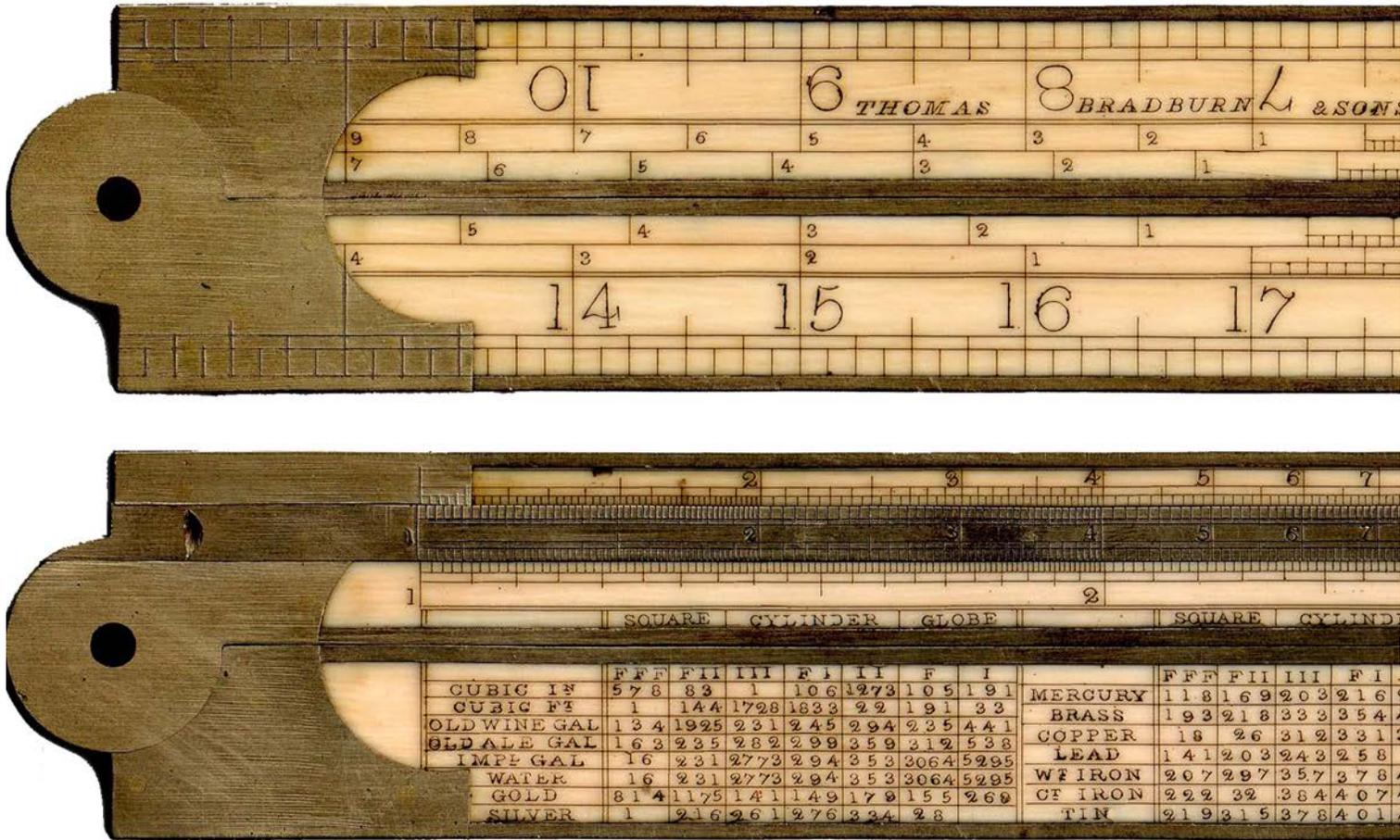


FIGURE 2.
The Bradburn rule, front and back

BOLTON with the slide, a little stiff, and also of German silver with a two-cycle log scale marked B and C. Above the slide the scale marked A is also two-cycle, while the scale below is single-cycle and marked D All much as would be expected. The back of the slide is engraved in inches and can be used as a depth gauge or as an extension to the 24 inch rule. On the back are the usual tables of gauge points. The 24 inch rule is primarily divided into eighths with the first 6 inches further divided into sixteenths. Supplementary scales give divisions of 3/4, 1/2, 5/8 of an inch, and 1/3, 1/4, 1/5, and 1/6 of an inch.

The wooden case is in good condition considering the age; one end was missing and has been replaced and the paper hinge has had to be reinforced, but the two fastenings are firm and in good working order. Peter said the rule had belonged to his great grandfather but the question is raised as to why a fenman would require an engineer's rule. One possible solution is that the rule was used in connection with the pumping engines that were, and still are, used to

drain the fens, but I suspect this rule has never been used in anger. I had little idea of the value of this rule but made an offer that I felt was reasonable, which was promptly accepted. Later I discovered that I had bought a little gem with an auction value considerably higher than the price I had paid. I admit I felt a little guilty but not for long, both parties had been quite happy with the transaction.

References

1. Google, "Peter Carter eel catcher" for more information on the man.
2. Hopp Peter M., *Joint Slide Rules – Sectors, 2-foot 2-fold and similar rules*, Hexagon Press, 2009, ISBN 978-1-906600-16-7 www.jeremymillspublishing.co.uk
3. Reprint, *Instructions for Engineers' Improved Slide Rule as arranged by J Routledge*, Ken Roberts Publishing, ISBN0-913602-57-4

