

What is a quarter of sweets?

From the sweeties.net wiki

A quarter of sweets is a quarter of a pound: 4 ounces, or about 113 g. The phrase comes from the days when loose goods were weighed in pounds and ounces. It has outlived the pound in the shops, and the story of why is more dramatic than you might expect.

How much is a quarter?

A quarter is a fourth part of a pound, about 113 grams. The pound was fixed by the Weights and Measures Act 1963 at exactly 0.45359237 kilograms, so a quarter pound works out at 113.4 g. In ounces it is 4, because there are 16 ounces in a pound and an ounce is exactly 28.349523125 g.

So a quarter is a little more than 100 g. In our shop, where sweets are sold by the 100 g, a quarter is roughly one 100 g portion and a bit more.

Why shops went metric

Britain moved gradually to metric units for trade. Metric units became compulsory for retail sales of packaged goods in 1995, and in 2000 for goods sold loose by weight, such as loose sweets, fruit and vegetables. Imperial units could still be shown alongside as supplementary indications, but only for a limited time. After repeated public resistance, in 2009 the requirement to eventually stop using imperial units alongside metric ones was removed altogether.

That means a sweet shop can still sell you a quarter, as long as it weighs and prices in grams and kilograms.

The Metric Martyrs

The change to metric for loose goods caused an unusual legal battle. A group of market traders who kept selling in pounds and ounces were prosecuted, and the newspapers called them the Metric Martyrs.

The combined appeal was named after Steve Thoburn, a greengrocer in Sunderland. In 2001 he was convicted of two offences of using weighing scales that had not been stamped by an inspector. The stamps had been removed because his scales could only weigh in imperial units, so they were no longer allowed for trade. Other traders were convicted in Hackney and Cornwall of failing to show prices per kilogram.

The traders appealed together, arguing that the law allowing both pounds and kilograms had quietly overridden the rules they were prosecuted under. The court rejected the argument. The judge, Laws LJ, held that the European Communities Act 1972 was a constitutional statute that could not be repealed by accident, only by express words. The case, *Thoburn v Sunderland City Council*, began with market stall scales but became a landmark in English constitutional law. Steve Thoburn died of a heart attack in March 2004.

Still a quarter, in spirit

In a government consultation on the choice of units, whose results were published in December 2023, 98.7 per cent of more than 100,000 responses preferred to keep metric units, most of them with optional imperial equivalents alongside. So the quarter lives on as a phrase, even if the scales now read in grams: see [why is pick and mix sold by weight?](#)

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