



## CONFERENCE 2007

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# UKMA News

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*Campaigning for a single rational system of measurement*

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## Surprise claim that Metric system “originated in UK”

# MADE IN ENGLAND?

CRITICS who have long dismissed the Metric system as nothing more than a “foreign racket” were given a rude awakening after the surprise discovery that it was no less an Englishman who was first behind the idea of a “universal measure”.

John Wilkins, who was founder of the Royal Society, published his description for an international system based on decimal numbers in 1668, more than 120 years before the French adopted the Metric system. Wilkins proposed a system which would be based on an internationally agreed measure which would become the basis for other measures. The details of his proposals show a strong correlation to the International System of Units (SI) adopted by France in the 1790s, and which today is used in nearly all countries of the world.

Wilkins' role resurfaced during research carried out by Australian metrication specialist, Pat Naughtin, who was guest speaker at UKMA's Annual Conference, held in London, in July.

### *Media pick up the story*

The UKMA's media machine swung into action and the story even made it onto the BBC's *Six O' Clock News*. For once the sceptics were not the imperialists, who were largely absent, but the French. Needless to say, they were not so bowled over, with one asking if

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this was true, then why hadn't the UK adopted such a system?

### *An academic*

It's a good question and there are probably a number of reasons. Wilkins' proposal was only four pages out of a very long volume mainly about definition of words and so was overlooked. He had a reputation for somewhat unrealistic or at least *avante garde* ideas and he did not actively campaign for his ideas which were essentially academic. Some argue that having been a supporter of Oliver Cromwell during the Civil War (he'd even married Cromwell's sister), he fell out of favour after the restoration of the monarchy. But this is less likely a reason as his subsequent promotion to the significant role of bishop after the Restoration shows.



*John Wilkins*

### *The Legacy*

Our modern measuring methods now use all of Wilkins' ideas: we use prefixes to go from millimetres via metres to...

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# Upbeat mood at Annual Meeting despite setbacks

UKMA's AGM and Annual Conference, which took place on 14 July at the University of London Union, ended on an optimistic note after a somewhat sombre opening.

Chairman, Robin Paice, rattled through the formal business of the AGM in 23 minutes, including a constitutional amendment to allow the Committee to co-opt up to two additional members. In addition to the elected committee (see panel opposite), Chris Keenan was subsequently co-opted back on to the Committee. It was reported that funds in hand were in the region of £2300.

Following the AGM the Chairman reviewed the previous year's projects, drawing attention to the lack of progress on key projects such as the style guide, the research application, and above all the setback of the decision of European Commission officials to recommend that "supplementary indications" should be prolonged indefinitely. On the positive side he noted the successful launch of UKMA's blog, Metric Views, and the Cooking in Metric website. He posed the question whether, in the light of politicians' and opinion leaders' unwillingness to speak out, we should concentrate more effort on the media and public opinion.

Next followed the star attraction of the Conference - the talk by Pat Naughtin, a metrication specialist from Australia, dealing with the topic "Metrication in Australia - what we did right". It is hoped that a separate, fuller report of his talk will be available shortly, but the highlight was his revelation of his research at Oxford and Cambridge Universities and at the Royal Society, showing that in 1668 an English bishop, John Wilkins had proposed a system of measurement embodying many of the features of the modern metric system 120 years before its formal adoption in France (see front page story). This discovery is powerful ammunition to show that, far from the metric system being "foreign", it was actually devised by an Englishman in the 17th century and further developed in the 19th century by British scientists.

After a short lunch break, Tony Wilson presented a paper suggesting alternative approaches to the conversion of

road signs to metric units. Noting the obdurate resistance of the DfT to any progress on this front and their attempt to silence the debate by producing inflated cost figures, he outlined a possible more gradual approach, combining adoption of metres (in place of yards) while retaining miles until kilometres were more acceptable. Given that the cost of the actual hardware was a small proportion of the total conversion cost, signs could gradually be replaced with dual measure or convertible signs as the old ones wore out. In discussion, some members felt that to combine metric and imperial units would simply entrench the "two systems" approach and do little to further the objective of a single, rational system understood and used by everybody for all purposes.

## *Future strategy*

Derek Pollard then pursued some of the morning's themes on future strategy, concluding with a SWOT analysis. Recurrent themes were:

- The irrefutable logic of our campaign
- Underlying metric usage throughout industry
- Identification with unpopular EU issues (but could this change following the recent moves on the Units of Measurement Directive?)
- Emotional reactions of people based on myths and misrepresentation
- Hostile or indifferent media (including BBC)
- Our limited resources
- The John Wilkins discovery
- 2012 Olympics
- Would the new Prime Minister's administration be more sympathetic?
- Schoolteachers' (alleged) lack of commitment to metric (outside the maths or science lesson)
- Influence of American culture - e.g. default for most computer and internet applications.

A reassuring conclusion was that - rather than dwelling on short term setbacks - we should be stressing that we are talking about completion of the metric changeover and should stress what has already been achieved.

# UKMA AGM AND CONFERENCE '07

In the final session, our webmaster Phil Hall demonstrated various features of a revised version of the web site. The new version is a web application based on a server-side technology known as ASP.NET that allows programmatic control of web page content. The front page for example has news items that are removed automatically on a predetermined expiry date and side column features that change according to a scheduled rotation. Other developments included a sitemap, improved display methods for pages containing multiple articles and a generally improved navigation system. The changeover will enable greater scope for interactive content and the inclusion of a members-only section.

Attendance at the conference was 16 members - a slight drop on previous years as some members were away on business or had already started their holiday. A subsequent suggestion was that members in Scotland and the north of England are deterred from attending because of the travelling involved. Would it therefore be better to vary the venue - e.g. York or Glasgow - so that other members could attend? A further suggestion is that the timetable of the conference - roughly 6 hours, including 45 min lunch break - leaves little opportunity for informal discussion and "networking". If we were to move to alternative venues (such as Glasgow or York), particularly if budget accommodation could be obtained, would it be worth making it a 2-day event, with more time for discussion and socialising, perhaps a site visit to a local metric site - partners and spouses welcome? Or, given that central London actually is the most accessible place in the UK, would this simply ensure that our AGM would be inquorate? Members' views are requested.

## COMMITTEE 2007-08

FOR the first time since elections were held at UKMA's inauguration in 2002, there were more nominations for committee places this year than there were positions. Therefore an election was held and the following members were elected to serve for the next 12 months.

- Chairman, Robin Paice
- Secretary, Derek Pollard
- Treasurer, Tony Wilson

Ordinary members; Phil Hall, Martin Ward, Keith Hodgkin and John Frewen-Lord. Following an amendment to the constitution, Chris Keenan was subsequently co-opted back onto the Committee.

## A view from Down Under

PAT Naughtin, guest speaker at this year's AGM is a metrication expert from Australia where he was involved in that country's successful, and almost overnight conversion to the Metric system in the 1970s.

UKMA members will be only too aware that Australia's metric conversion was a text book case of how to go switch in a way which contrasts sharply with the situation in the UK.



*Pat Naughtin*

A couple of years ago, Naughtin launched a useful website where he outlined the four different approaches to Metrication. The first one is the "ignore it, and it will go away approach" Referring to a company in the state of Victoria that kept designing, manufacturing and selling products to the public using only old measures, Naughtin said that this and every other company that followed such an approach in Australia soon went out of business. Doubtless, good enforcement of metric laws helped.

The second approach is one we're probably familiar with which Naughtin describes as "dumbing down at the door". A business or government agency will use metric in the design and production of something, but then convert to imperial when interfacing with the public. The Department for Transport comes to mind here, which stipulates that UK roads are designed in metric only for Imperial signs to be erected for the public.

The third approach is to design something in old measures but to then convert them to soft metric measures. And the fourth is to plan, build and design in metric and communicate to the public in the same. Naughtin calls this "total immersion" and it has proved the quickest and most successful method.

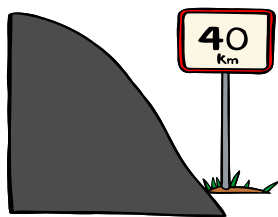


Naughtin believes that full metrication around the world is a given. It will happen. And he urges, not surprisingly, the total immersion approach. He has advised many businesses around the world on how to carry out metrication and has a very good website which is an invaluable tool for organisations to use.

Visit **[www.metricationmatters.com](http://www.metricationmatters.com)** to find out more.

# What's so special about miles?

**John Frewen-Lord**



THE UK is almost unique in the world in clinging to imperial measures on its highways. Even Canada, with its close proximity to, and domination by, the US, switched to metric speeds and distances, almost 30 years ago. When I lived in Canada, I got to like kilometres. They made my journeys seem shorter! Sure, on a long journey, there were more of them at the beginning, but they went down much quicker. It gave the illusion of the journey taking less time (it didn't of course – the journey was exactly the same length, and took exactly the same time, regardless of what measurement system you used). But I used to like that illusion, nonetheless. With miles, my journeys really do seem longer!

Now a lot of people will say – ah, but when you're driving at 60 mph, that's a mile a minute. How convenient! You don't have that in metric. Sorry – you do. Three times over, in fact. And better. Let us count the ways!

On short journeys, you usually measure your journey in minutes – the superstore is 15 minutes away, or whatever. Now for most people, a good rural/suburban average is 60 km/h. If 60 mph is 1 mile a minute, then 60 km/h must be 1 km a minute. Your Aunt Maude lives in the next town 25 km away? Expect it to take about 25 minutes. Neat.

But for long distances, we usually measure our journey time in hours, and on a long journey we can probably average 100 km/h (62 mph). My mother lives in Bournemouth, almost exactly 400 km away from where I'm currently living. The journey from my house to her house is mostly dual carriageway or motorway. I usually do the 400 km journey in around 4 hours. 100 km/h average. Neat again.



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And the third neat thing? If you can maintain an average of 100 km/h (including stops, slow downs and so forth), you are probably driving at around – ahem – 120 km/h (75 mph, which is a typical motorway speed). Now 120 km/h is of course 2 km per minute (just as 60 km/h was 1 km/minute). You're on the motorway and the next exit is 12 km away? You will reach it in 6 minutes. To paraphrase an old song: "Anything Imperial can do, metric can do better..." (apologies to the original song's author!).

Metric measurements on our roads ARE easier! The time has come for a big push to bring this country into line with the rest of the world.

**>> It's Membership Renewal time again**

ANOTHER year has passed and it's time to ask members to once again renew their subscriptions. Annual rates remain unchanged at £15, or £5 for concessions. Life membership is £150.



There are three ways to pay

1. Cheque payable to 'UK Metric Association' by post to the Treasurer - Tony Wilson, 1 Isambard Place, London, SE16 7DA
2. Internet banking, direct into UKMA's bank account (please e-mail [secretary@metric.org.uk](mailto:secretary@metric.org.uk) for a/c details)
3. By Paypal - follow the link from 'donation' in the last paragraph of the home page of [www.ukma.org.uk](http://www.ukma.org.uk) indicating in the Paypal comment box that this is your subs renewal.

Thank you in advance for supporting UKMA.

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*Continued from Front Page...*

...kilometres. We have a universally agreed definition of a metre, and a litre of water has a mass of a kilogram.

Wilkins' "universal measure" worked out to be: 38 Rhineland inches, or (which is all one) 39 inches and a quarter according to our London standard.

Pat Naughtin says, 'In modern terms this is equivalent to 997 millimetres or quite close to the modern metre'

Although Wilkins did not use the word 'metre', its use became common after Tito Livio Burattini translated Wilkins' 'universal measure' to its Italian equivalent, 'metro catholico' and, it seems that this was later translated, and shortened, to the French word, metre.