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IS LAUNCHED

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THE CENTIMETRE

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EU proposes allowing supplementary indications indefinitely

DUAL PRICING SETBACK

BRITAIN'S measurement muddle looks set to be prolonged thanks to a European U-turn.

The EU Commission has proposed to amend a law that would have finally put an end to products being priced in both imperial and metric units. Under an existing EU directive, dual pricing would have been phased out by the end of 2009 in favour of all-metric pricing. However, following a consultation which attracted submissions from UKMA among others, the EU decided to bow to the interests of big business and propose abolishing the directive. Big business, especially those involved in transatlantic trade, feared extra costs had the amendment come into force as they would have needed to label products differently between the non-metric US and metric EU.

UKMA had argued that a specific exemption could be made for such trade but this argument was not taken on board. UKMA will continue to press for amendments, such as prohibiting dual pricing on goods sold loose from bulk, as this would have little effect on costs for transatlantic trade. Following the announcement, the UK press went overboard claiming that Brussels had backed down and imperial weights and measures were saved. As UKMA and some Trading Standards officers pointed out, UK law has not changed. The metric system remains the official system of weights and measures in Britain; goods must be sold in metric; weighing scales must be metric only and imperial indications can only be shown in addition to metric ones but then not more prominently than the metric units.

Free-for-all on Package Sizes

Remember the furore in January 2006 over the EU abolishing the pint? Of course it was never true, and the British Retail Consortium, which had started the story with a completely inaccurate press release, was made to look foolish when it emerged that the Commission's proposal was actually to *deregulate* package sizes. This would have the effect of retaining the 568 ml size (aka the pint). On 5 September 2007, the EU finally approved the new Directive (2007/45/EU) - use the link below to see full details on the web.

EU law needed to be reviewed since case law had already established that if a package size is legal in one member state, it can be exported to any other member state. Thus jam and honey must be packed in the UK in imperial sizes (e.g. 227 g, equivalent to ½ lb), but it is legal to import honey from France in 250 g jars. The Commission consulted on the possibility of "harmonising" mandatory package sizes throughout the EU, but this met so much opposition from packers who were unwilling to change from traditional sizes, that the Commission proposed complete deregulation subject to limited exceptions where EU-wide sizes were already fairly standard. Part of the Commission's justification was that "unit pricing" (giving the price per kg, litre or metre) made standardised package sizes unnecessary. Initially, the European Parliament supported amendments which would have retained mandatory sizes for some products (including milk). However, in order to accommodate all the different sizes currently allowed in the various member states, the number of sizes would have been so great as to nullify the claimed benefits of standard package sizes.

Under the EU's byzantine "codecision" procedure, negotiations ensued between the Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the Commission, and the outcome is the Directive that was finally approved last month but largely unreported in the press.

In effect it is a classic EU compromise that deregulates package sizes, but with a delay until 2012 for milk, butter, dried pasta and coffee, and to 2013 for white sugar. However, wine and spirits are an exception, and will continue to be regulated but with a "de minimis" threshold of 100 ml, below which any size is allowed.

Whether all this is in the best interest of consumers – or whether it is simply yielding to pressure from business interests – is debatable. Be that as it may, the UK Government will now have to draft amendments to UK law. This may give a further opportunity to lobby to permit draught beer and cider in rational metric measures. It is also clearly essential that the Government should now publicise and explain the little known concept of unit pricing.

To see the full EU directive visit: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2007/l_247/l_24720070921en00170020.pdf

UKMA launches alternative metric edition of Highway Code

TIMED to coincide with the launch of the latest edition of the Highway Code, the UKMA last month launched a metric-only alternative edition to promote the benefits of having a single system of measurements on our roads.

Put together by committee member John Frewen-Lord - who went to great lengths to reproduce signage in exactly the correct fonts and formats as those currently in use - the code was launched on our website and promoted in press releases to the media, including specialist publications, as well as the mainstream press.

The new edition showed how much simpler it would be to have one system of measurements, replacing yards with metres, miles with kilometres and solving the jumble that is created by dual height and width measurements on single signs.



The above metric roadsign, which is actually illegal under current transport laws, was spotted alongside the A38 in Staffordshire recently.

Picture by Martin Ward

It also corrected some errors with current signage such as the abbreviation for tonne which is currently shown as "T" whereas the official worldwide (SI) abbreviation is "t". This may seem a minor point but it underlines the thoroughness put into the project.

Reaction to the report was initially mute within the media with the mainstream press preferring to focus on new rules within the Highway Code which for the first time specifically form a link between smoking at the wheel with driving dangerously. However, the metric report will undoubtedly have featured on the radar at the Department for Transport. But it remains to be seen to what extent future policy will change as a result.

You can see UKMA's metric Highway Code online at: www.ukma.org.uk/docs/metric_highway_code.pdf

Committee News

UKMA's Committee meets regularly (by telephone conference call) to plan future campaigns and respond to events. Two recent decisions will be of particular interest to members.

Work programme

Following the discussion at the 2007 Annual Conference, the Committee agreed the following work programme for the current year:

- Road Signs Working Group to pursue new initiatives on road signs, including publishing a critique of the DfT's grossly exaggerated cost estimates
- Continuing development of the websites
- Maintain and develop our blog (Metric Views)
- Revise and republish our Style Guide
- Tackle the Northern Ireland devolved administration regarding all-Ireland road signage
- Promote metric units in the medical/health/fitness area
- Pursue research application with universities and research institutes
- Develop the members' Newsletter
- Continue to lobby the EU where appropriate (but see below)
- Respond to Government consultations as they occur • Other tasks may of course emerge as events unfold.

Supplementary indications

The Committee discussed how to respond to the decision of the European Commission to propose the indefinite extension of "supplementary indications" (imperial equivalents alongside legal metric units). Although this decision is a disappointing setback, it was felt that there is no realistic prospect of persuading the European Parliament or the Council of Ministers to challenge the principle of indefinite authorisation of supplementary indications. However, it was agreed that there may still be scope for detailed amendments that could limit the damage caused by this decision. The Committee will be pursuing this possibility with sympathetic MEPs.

All aboard for the “secret” 300 km/h rail experience!

IT is perhaps the jewel in Britain’s transport system but when Eurostar trains begin running on the newly completed Channel Tunnel Rail link next month, they will be promoting speeds in measurements that can only be described as historic.

The opening of London’s new St Pancras International Station will bring to completion one of the longest running rail projects of recent times. Eurostar will connect the capital with Paris in just 2 hours and 35 minutes bringing a boost in regeneration efforts in the east of London and opening new domestic links to Kent.

Dubbed High Speed 1 by proponents, who optimistically see the rail link as just the first of further such links around the country, the line will also be instrumental in transferring competitors and supporters to the London Olympic games in 2012 on new so-called Javelin trains.

But while competitors will be running along metric tracks, Eurostar will be running on other types of metric tracks yet the rail operator will be highlighting its speed in imperial. Because despite being designed, built and operated using metric specifications, Eurostar in the UK promotes the train’s top speed as 186 mph.

This odd speed, only begins to make sense when translated into the equivalent metric speed of 300 km/h. This is a common speed on European high speed rail links, although both France and Germany are moving higher than this figure with their TGV and ICE trains. Yet this 300 km/h speed has been translated a little too literally as though that is all the train is capable of. On a test run in September, Eurostar actually reached 340 km/h and it could undoubtedly have travelled faster if it weren’t for the additional power, and hence cost, required to do so.

Alas, Eurostar seems to think that Brits haven’t a clue about metric even though all of its passengers, sorry customers, are travelling to or from a metric country. So wedded is the company’s UK arm to using 186 mph in its advertising that even their reservations’ phone number ends in 186 186.

UKMA will be releasing a press release to coincide with the opening of the new rail link promoting the 300 km/h speed. As we all know, journalists tend to like reporting high numbers. Take temperatures, for instance, where Fahrenheit tends to reappear in hot weather. Reporters believe high numbers add to the impact of a story.

We will be scanning the media to see if this weak argument holds water as far as their reporting of Eurostar is concerned and we’ll be urging the company themselves to do more to promote their sleek 300 km/h fast wonder train.



Eurostar trains like the one above (pictured at Ashford International Station in Kent) usually run at 300 km/h - not that you’d necessarily know that from this side of the Channel.

British Library archives our website

The British Library has chosen to archive UKMA’s web site as part of a national project on information history.

A snapshot of the site will be taken regularly so that future generations can see how progress on this issue was reflected on the web, and perhaps gain an insight into why such a straightforward task took so long.

The first snapshot was now been taken, and can be seen at www.webarchive.org.uk – search for ‘UKMA’

Welcome new members

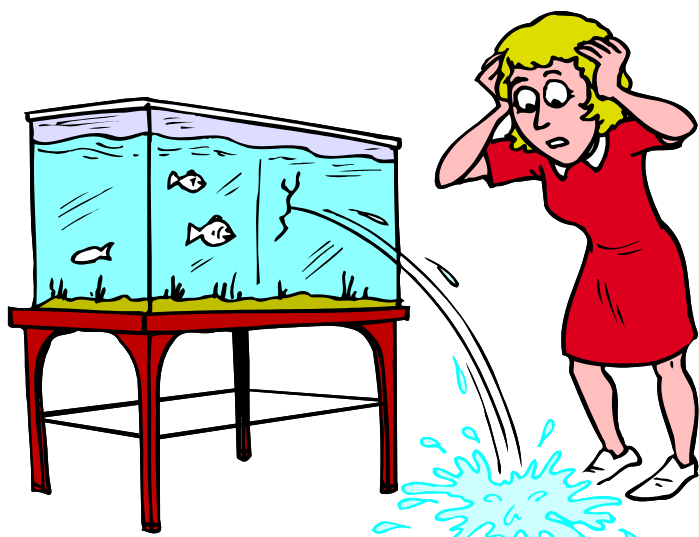
We welcome the following new members to UKMA:
Dr Henrik Blank, Jim Bloomer, Richard Blundell, Anthony Titley, Robat ap Tomos and Andrew Tucker

Want to add your comments? E-mail: ukma.news@googlemail.com

Getting everyday people to use metric – the case for the centimetre

By John Frewen-Lord

One of the arguments that non-technical people use for not embracing the metric system is that often the scale of the units used in everyday measure is too inconvenient. They cite the millimetre as being too small compared to the inch (even though splitting the inch up brings its own problems), while the jump to the metre is too large (which of course is what happens when using 1000-increment SI rules). There is some logic in wanting something in between, and the centimetre can fill that gap



The centimetre is not only a 'human' scale unit in its own right – it can be a powerful tool in getting people to use metric rather than Imperial units for quite ordinary situations. The following is a real life example.

An American colleague put a rather large aquarium in his 10th floor high rise apartment in Chicago. One day the aquarium collapsed its stand, and crashed on to the apartment's reinforced concrete floor, badly damaging it. In the ensuing investigation, he'd somehow made a wrong conversion in his calculations, and had underestimated the aquarium's weight.

When you look at the calculations you have to make using Imperial units, you can see why it's all too easy to make a big error. My colleague's aquarium was 40 inches long by 24 inches wide by 16 inches high. How much would the water weigh?

The calculation starts off as $40 \times 24 \times 16 = 15,360$ cubic inches – which then has to be converted to cubic feet. How many cubic inches in a cubic foot? 1728. Our first conversion factor. That will give us 8.89 cubic feet. The next conversion factor is for cubic feet to gallons, which

is 7.48 for US gallons. Um, multiply or divide? It must be multiply (I'm pretty sure of that). So $8.89 \times 7.48 = 66.49$ US gallons (or 55.25 Imperial gallons if you're Canadian or Australian or British). Water in Imperial units weighs 8.345 lbs a US gallon (or 10 lbs an Imperial gallon) – our third conversion factor. The water in this aquarium weighed 555 lbs (66.49×8.345).

That's a lot of very difficult calculations, and no less than three unrelated and impossible to remember conversion factors (and you have to know whether to multiply or divide). Conversion factors are dangerous things, and can easily introduce major errors.

In metric, the calculation becomes so easy when you use centimetres. That same aquarium would measure 100 cm x 61 cm x 40 cm (I've rounded the numbers slightly). That equals 244 000 cm³, which is the same as 244 000 mL, which equals 244 L. And will weigh 244 kg. This is as simple as it gets. Not a conversion factor anywhere. Virtually no chance of making an error.

You can now see why I think the centimetre has a place in our every day non-technical metric world, and how it can persuade everyday people to 'think metric'.

Top students fail the Imperial test

In a recent edition of "University Challenge" (BBC2) between St Cross College, Oxford and Trinity Hall, Cambridge, the following question came up:

"Imperial measures. How many ounces in two and a half pounds?"

After a slightly long pause ...

Team A's Answer : "20". Jeremy Paxman : "No"

Team B's Answer : "40". Jeremy Paxman : "Correct"

Perhaps the students' mental arithmetic skills let them down or maybe it's an indication of just how irrelevant imperial weights have become in modern Britain .

Subscription renewal reminder

Members are reminded that subscriptions for 2007/08 are now overdue. Annual rates remain unchanged at £15, or £5 for concessions. Life membership is £150.

In light of the postal strike, which will result in large backlogs of mail beyond the actual strike dates, members who have not yet paid are requested, if possible, to pay online into the bank account or via Paypal, rather than rely on the post for the time being.

For Internet banking, direct into UKMA's bank account, please e-mail secretary@metric.org.uk for a/c details.

For Paypal, follow the link from 'donation' in the last paragraph of the home page of www.ukma.org.uk indicating in the Paypal comment box that this is your subs renewal.

Thank you in advance for supporting UKMA.