



# UKMA news

The newsletter of the UK Metric Association:  
campaigning for a **single** rational system of measurement

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## NEWSPAPER DID NOT OBSERVE THE FACTS

by Robin Paice, Chairman, UKMA



Many members may have been perplexed by the rash of "silly season" stories which appeared in parts of the press at the end of August - alleging that the European Commission had "ordered" the British Government to scrap miles, pints and other

imperial measurements. The subsequent denials did not of course receive the same level of publicity, leaving many readers with the impression that the original story was true. So we can thank that progressive, liberal, fair minded journal of record, The Observer, (stablemate of The Guardian) for this clever piece of anti-metric sabotage.

What actually happened was as follows.

On Thursday, 25 August, both Roz Denny (UKMA Press Officer) and I were contacted by an Observer journalist with a story that, following complaints from "unnamed groups", Commission officials had set a deadline for Britain to phase out remaining imperial units.

I was sceptical, pointing out that the Commission has no power to set such a deadline and that UKMA had not made any such complaint. The journalist refused to disclose his "source" but promised to re-check the story and get back to me. However, the next I knew was that the story had appeared in the Observer under the devastatingly witty headline: "Britain gave an inch. Now the EU wants 1.609km". A corrected version of this cliché-ridden story can be read at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/eu/story/0,,1558081,00.html>

The Sunday Times and the Financial Times both copied the story. I immediately wrote to all three papers to try to set the record straight, but only the FT printed it, including the passage:

*"The European Commission has no power to require the UK to name an early date for phasing out pints of beer or miles on road signs, and UKMA has not therefore lobbied the Commission on this point. However, we do believe the British national interest requires that the current wasteful "two systems" muddle should be ended as soon as possible, and that the UK should become fully metric within this decade.*

*It is time for the British government to stop denying the problem and to resolve the current untenable situation - without any prompting from the Commission."*

The story then went quiet for a while until the Commissioner responsible for Enterprise, Gunter Verheugen, gave a press conference which was reported in EUpolitix on 19 September at the following URL: <http://www.eupolitix.com/EN/Interviews/200509/9e5d0a26-a424-4f50-83d1-2e8dbb957d02.htm>

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## OBSERVER ARTICLE

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Amongst other things, Mr Verheugen is quoted as saying:

*"The metrics story! I am very grateful that you asked the question. I was not approached, never. I did not raise it with the British media. I haven't said a single word. The spin in one British newspaper is 100 per cent invention. I am not pressuring the UK to go metric. As long as I am in Brussels I will not touch the issue. Full stop."*

However, the damage had been done. Mr Verheugen's denial of the story received little prominence elsewhere, and where it was quoted, it was predictably along the lines of "Hands off the British pint".

An unpleasant subplot of this story is the allegation made by opponents of UKMA that, contrary to my letter in the FT, we had indeed lobbied the Commission. This was based on a misreading of a reference on the Department of Transport's website to a "complaint by the Director of the UK Metrication (sic) Association". Apart from the fact that UKMA does not have a "Director" we did not make any such complaint and so we wrote to the Permanent Secretary, David Rowlands, asking for an explanation of this reference. In reply Mr Rowlands accepted that the complaint referred to was made before UKMA was formally constituted in 2002.

UKMA's policy is **NOT** to involve the EU in pressing the British Government to complete metric conversion. This is for two reasons:

- Apart from changes already agreed and in the pipeline, the Commission has no legal power to force the issue.
- Any attempt at such pressure is counter-productive since it enables Europhobic politicians and newspapers to portray the issue as a "Brussels plot" (as the press treatment of the August "story" demonstrates)

The people we have to persuade are not in Brussels but here in Britain.

## ARM PUSHES THE BOUNDARIES



The BBC's *North West Tonight* regional news programme recently featured an item about a group of activists, calling themselves "County

Watch", who had arrived in Lancashire to remove what they regarded as incorrect road signs. It appears that this group's key activist is none other than Tony Bennett, who is also the main representative of ARM (Active Resistance to Metrication). According to the BBC Online website [\[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/2384065.stm\]](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/2384065.stm), Tony Bennett was involved in removing and defacing metric traffic warning signs.

The "Welcome to Lancashire" signs had been erected by the county council on main roads heading into their administrative area. The protesters argued that this was incorrect as Lancashire includes towns such as Bolton and Wigan which are outside the county council's jurisdiction (these two towns were historically part of Lancashire, but now fall into the Greater Manchester area). The protesters, who apparently travel the country "defending the historic counties" were keen to point out that they were not vandalising the signs but simply moving them to the "correct" places.

The web-site of the BWMA (British Weights & Measures Association) has recently hosted discussion of subjects which are beyond the remit of weights and measures, such as pre-decimal currency (£sd) and the old county boundaries, in addition to the usual anti-metric discussions.

UKMA takes no view on county boundaries, but this type of discussion and activity clearly demonstrates the mentality of those who will simply go out and remove or modify something because they don't happen to agree with its existence or status. The danger then arises if these people are not stopped: what will they turn their hand to next? Will they start demolishing modern buildings or motorways because they don't approve of them ruining the countryside?

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UKMA is soon to launch its report outlining the case for changing from imperial to metric traffic signs. The publication, entitled *Metric Signs Ahead* will be distributed to a number of MPs, Peers and other influential persons and organisations, but will not be in the public realm as with *A Very British Mess*.

# HOW DO YOU DATE?

*A personal view by Jon Miles, UKMA member  
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Hours, minutes and seconds. Pounds and pence. Tonnes and kilograms. Daddy bear, Mummy bear and little baby bear. Whatever we measure, we start with the largest units and end with the smallest. This is only sensible since our numbers run in the same highest-to-lowest order: hundreds, tens and units.

But there is one exception to this simple rule: dates. In Europe dates are traditionally recorded in the opposite order to all other quantities, running day (smallest), month (medium), and year (largest). It is only our familiarity with this date order that blinds us to how peculiar the system is, with the 'largest to smallest' order nested three times within a 'smallest to largest' order (i.e. 25/12/2005 rather than 2005/12/25)

The Americans, on the other hand, have adopted an utterly bizarre date order, running month, day, year, thus putting the smallest unit in the middle. With growing globalisation, the scope for dates such as 3/5/2005 on cheques, contracts and websites to cause confusion grows daily. As someone said on the UKMA discussion board, "I have a lot of friends in the hotel industry . . . Americans are always turning up, screaming they have a reservation which is confirmed - of course for an entirely different month and day!"

Computer programmers found long ago that neither the European nor the American system allowed records to be sorted correctly in date order, and pragmatically adopted the large, medium, small order. Thus if dates in file names, spreadsheets and databases are written numerically as 2005-01-25 (with or without the hyphens), they naturally sort into date order. But don't forget the leading zeroes on months and days.

The format has other advantages, too, such as being independent of language, and being a constant length, simplifying table layout. The ISO (International Standards Organisation) adopted this as the only sensible format in ISO 2014 (1976), the current version being ISO 8601 (2004).

Adoption of the ISO date order has been most

rapid in southeast Asia and in Scandinavia. To get an idea of how popular the format was, I searched Google for ISO, European and American numerical date formats. I didn't include non-numerical formats, because variations in abbreviations and languages makes this virtually impossible. I searched using country extensions, such as .cn for China. The table shows the rounded percentages of sites using the different formats, for one particular day in 2004.

	ISO 2004-12-21	European 21-12-2004	American 12-21-2004
USA	42	0	58
UK	45	50	5
China	92	0	8
Sweden	97	2	1
Japan	100	0	0
World	47	28	25

*Percentages of websites using different numerical date formats*

The results are surprising, with the ISO format being the most popular overall, and no country tested showing less than 40% of sites in this format. The American format comes out as the least popular, taking all sites into account.

As a relative youngster compared with the other metric conventions, the date format still has some catching-up to do. Websites, being by nature internationally accessible, are most vulnerable to date confusion, and so are leading the way. Isn't it about time you changed too? You know it makes sense

(There is a page on Markus Kuhn's website giving more details about the international standard date and time notation, at:

<http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~mgk25/iso-time.html>)

*It should be noted that this article is a personal view of one of the members, and that UKMA does not take a view on the standardisation of date formats. However, it is a very good example of why using standard formats can eliminate confusion and accidents, just as in the measurement of length, volume, weight etc.*

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## MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

We welcome Andrew Miller and Sean Zag into membership.

## LICENCE TO GO METRIC?

For motoring enthusiasts amongst the membership, UKMA has the perfect way for you to show the world which measurement system you prefer. A variety of metric-related combinations are possible—with a little imagination and sometimes a bit of squinting—but it's surprising what can be done. The first two plates can be made entirely legally, as long as the character spacing meets requirements:

**K1LOS L1TRE**

The following plate requires some squinting, and is also legal as it is, but be careful the 7 is not angled to look more like a T, or the full "weight" of the law could come down on you:

**70NNE**

These last five plates can only be achieved by making use of screw-caps to change numbers into letters. However, it must be noted that UKMA does not advocate employing illegal techniques to make a number appear to be a like a letter, or any other false representation of the registered licence plate. Apologies to the purists amongst you for the last suggestion.

**MET81C CELSIUS**

**GRAM**

**HEC748E MICRON**

Please note that it is also illegal to use a registration letter which makes your vehicle appear to be newer than it really is.

## WEBSITE UPDATE

Over the last few months the UKMA web site has been developed further to improve its ease of use, effectiveness and resourcefulness.

A small internal survey was carried out to identify key areas of improvement. During the course of its ongoing development these issues were taken into account. Briefly the main changes are

- An improved navigation system whereby a thread is shown at the top to keep track of one's current place in the site
- The policy section has been extended to include sections such as Advertising, Retailing, Land & Property and Weather reports
- A new section has been introduced dealing with road signage
- There is now a means of donating to UKMA via PayPal, a well-known and secure online payment handing system
- A new "What you can do" section to encourage visitors to get involved or take some action.
- An extended reference section to include more on definitions
- A revised front page designed to be more positive and inviting the user to explore the site, whatever their views on the subject.

There have been many other minor improvements too numerous to list and we have many further developments planned. The committee hopes that our members will visit the site more and not forget that many common questions of fact raised on the forum can be answered with a brief visit to our site.

Phil Hall, Web master

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*Edited and produced by Phil Durden*

Do you have any comments about this newsletter, its contents, layout, etc.?

Do you have any suggestions for articles for future newsletters?

Do you prefer postal newsletters or electronic?

Please let me know! [phil@durden.clara.co.uk](mailto:phil@durden.clara.co.uk)