



UKMA news

The newsletter of the UK Metric Association
For a **single** *rational* system of measurement

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Editorial, by John Austin

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The recent government announcement of possible legislation to allow trade and commerce to use imperial units is viewed by UKMA with disdain. This has serious repercussions and a robust defence against this outcome was published on line in Metric Views. The article is here reproduced for those who have not seen it. Surprisingly, perhaps, but encouragingly, many of the readers of some of our more conservative newspapers have come out against this backwards step. For some time many people have viewed Brexit as a reason (erroneously) to justify rejuvenation of Imperial units. While we have the right now to use them more in the UK, it doesn't mean that we should do so, but as UKMA has argued throughout its history maintaining two sets of measurements its just plain confusing. It is simply untrue that the British somehow know two "sets of units". In practice the British people end up confused, not knowing either set particularly well. Of course the imperial units don't represent a set anyway as electrical units are not included. Social media has reported widely on this issue, while UKMA has repeated on BBC radio the arguments for the country having a single system of measures. See report under Association News. This issue also includes another article from Metric News about diet and weight: issues that have an uncomfortably large imperial unit usage.

UKMA is now looking for a new Secretary to replace Derek Pollard, who has been performing the role admirably since 2005. If you think you might be interested, see the item under Association News.

As Editor of the Newsletter, of course I always welcome contributions.

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Government's return to imperial set to make UK a laughing stock, Article by UKMA first published in Metric Views



Will we now see produce on sale like this again, with prices marked in pence/pound?
Image taken from <https://jooinn.com/vegetable-stall-5.html>

As previously reported by [Metric Views](#), in June this year, the Government's Taskforce on Innovation, Growth and Regulatory Reform (TIGRR) had recommended the return of imperial weights and measures, citing the inability of traders to choose which measurement system they use as being "an example of overly prescriptive EU regulation". This assessment of Weights and Measures law is of course misguided.

In order to protect consumers, the UK, and the vast majority of other countries around the world permit the use of only one system of weights and measures for trade. Any ability of traders to choose different weights and measures from their competitors will always adversely affect a consumer's ability to compare prices, and thus leave them open to unfair practices. The best way to maximise consumer protection has always been for every trader to use the same system of weights and measures. This is a principle that has been with us since Magna Carta. In what has previously been described by some, misleadingly, as "taking back control" of our laws from unelected bureaucrats, it is ironic that a statement, that included the Government's plans for weights and measures legislation, was delivered in the unelected House of Lords by the unelected Minister of State, Lord Frost.

The Government's response to the TIGRR report, entitled [Brexit opportunities: regulatory reforms](#), could be described as a solution in search of a problem. What few proposals there are have a general theme of removing consumer protections, or otherwise appear to be plans to change for the sake of change, seemingly to deliberately create divergence from common standards that we have previously agreed with our European neighbours. A short statement on weights and measures is included:

"Review EU restrictions on selling in pounds and ounces – We will review the EU ban on markings and sales in imperial units and legislate in due course."

This was reported in The Times, on the same day, in an article entitled, [Pounds and ounces return in victory for metric martyrs](#), in the following terms:

"Under plans unveiled by ministers today it will once again become legal for market stalls, shops and supermarkets to sell their goods using only Britain's traditional weighing system."

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In his statement to the House of Lords, Lord Frost spoke of introducing a “one-in-two-out system” to reduce the quantity of legislation. However, the proposal to add imperial weights and measures to existing metric measures, stands that approach on its head, with the adoption of “one-out-two-in” weights and measures legislation.

Whether the Government go through with this retrograde step in consumer protection remains to be seen. It is clear that no impact assessment of a return to imperial measures has been carried out. Inevitably, there would be considerable costs:

1. New imperial scales would need to be purchased by traders, which would in turn need to be tested and stamped by trading standards officers, who would need the necessary imperial calibration equipment.
2. Imperial scales have not been authorised since the 20th century. Trading standards officers would need to be trained in the certification of imperial scales.
3. There is a national shortage of Weights and Measures inspectors. This is a bad time to be creating needless work for existing staff.
4. Would there be a public information campaign? The majority of people in the UK have no experience of imperial units when shopping.
5. And last, but not least, our country's reputation would take a massive hit. It is clear from the enormous backlash to this proposal on social media last night, that this is already making our country a laughing stock.

References

Taskforce on Innovation, Growth and Regulatory Reform independent report – 2021-06-16

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/994125/FINAL_TIGRR_REPORT__1_.pdf

Brexit opportunities: regulatory reforms – 2021-09-16

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1018386/Brexit_opportunities-_regulatory_reforms.pdf

The Times – Pounds and ounces return in victory for metric martyrs – 2021-09-16

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/scales-of-justice-tilt-towards-the-metric-martyr-638vfn655>

Comments by Ed.

Within just a short time of the article appearing in Metric Views, the discussion has received many online comments. Many of these comments, as might have been expected given the likely audience of Metric Views, came out strongly against the proposal. Several pointed out that this wasn't the global Britain that our politicians have promised, but rather the opposite. Several gave their personal experiences of metric units in every day use in countries such as Australia and New Zealand which have maintained their national characteristics while still adopting metric units. Another reader commented that virtually all other nations are fully metric, while suggesting that the obstacle to metrication in the UK was the USA itself. However, the irony is that US Customary Units have diverged from Imperial Units. So we are unique! Further comments related to the TIGRR report may be found at the following websites:

<https://westenglandbylines.co.uk/we-need-to-talk-about-tigrr/>

<https://bylinetimes.com/2021/09/20/metrified-or-petrified-the-return-of-imperial-measures-is-the-ghost-of-a-dead-cat/>

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Mutual incomprehension in diet conversation, *Article by Ronnie Cohen first published in Metric Views*

The UK measurement muddle lingers on in the field of nutrition and diet.

I recently heard a conversation about dieting plans between my wife and her friend. At one point in the conversation, her friend said that she plans to lose 3 kilograms in weight. Then my wife asked her what that is in stones. Her friend said that she had no idea. Using two systems necessitates conversion factors between these systems to convert from one system to the other. To help my wife to comprehend body weight in kilograms, I looked for an unopened food product in my kitchen cupboard that weighs one kilogram and found a packet of rice. I showed it to my wife, telling her this weighs one kilogram and asked her to feel how much one kilogram weighs.

My wife is British. Like most Britons, she expresses her weight in stones and pounds. A lot of Britons have trouble understanding body weights in kilograms and tend to use stones and pounds. When you tell them your body weight in kilograms, they would ask you what that is in stones and pounds. This is despite almost half a century of metric education in the UK. You could be forgiven for thinking that they have never picked up a 1 kg pack of anything in a shop. My wife's friend comes from Switzerland. I believe that the Swiss use kilograms for weights in general, including body weight.

I suspect that there are countless conversations like this between Britons and other Europeans. In continental Europe and Scandinavia, people have no problems expressing their height in metres and their weight in kilograms and would have no problem understanding height and weight in metric units. In the UK, too many Britons find it incomprehensible when others tell them their height in metres and their weight in kilograms. The reasons for this phenomenon are inertia, peer pressure and custom (i.e. what you are used to).

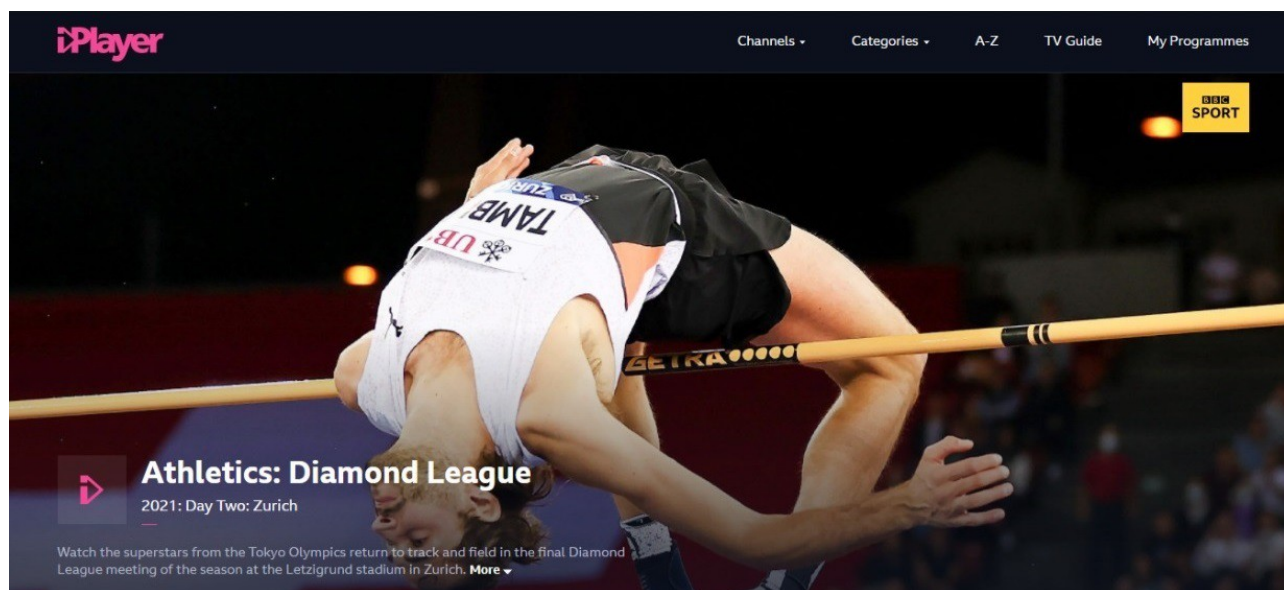
In the UK, the stone has a peculiar status. Historically, different stones were used for weighing different commodities. Stones were widely used in commerce until the adoption of the metric system in industry and agriculture as part of the Metrication Programme, which began in 1965. The stone ceased to be a legal unit for trade in the Weights and Measures Act 1985. However, the stone lingers on as a unit only to express body weight. It is not used for anything else nowadays. The use of stones and pounds also obscures the relationship between personal body weight and kilogram-based weights in a typical gym. If there is one lesson we can learn from the mutual incomprehension in the discussion about weight loss plans, it is that we all need a system of weights and measures that we can all understand and use. We do not need two systems.



If there are any readers who have trouble comprehending body weight, whether their own or someone else's, here is the example of the packet of rice I mentioned earlier in this article: Lift it up to feel how much it weighs. The number of kilograms you weigh is the same number of one kilogram packets of rice.

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Athletics Commentary on the BBC, by John Austin



I tend to watch athletics on the BBC quite often, and the coverage is excellent. It is a sport that is totally metric apart from special track and road race distances such as the mile and two miles. Even over these distances and on the road there are no "world records" only "world bests", to emphasise the metric nature of the sport. Of course this distinction is lost to the majority of the viewing public. After hours and hours of watching, though, one tends to get annoyed about small things, in particular one of the commentator's annoying lapses into imperial units for small margins of victory. I decided to follow this up by writing wrote the following comment to the BBC.

"I refer to the last Diamond League meeting (9 Sept) but is applicable throughout the season. I have recently been watching the athletics on the BBC and the commentary by Steve Cram and Tim Hutchings has been excellent and knowledgeable. The sport is completely metric. The athletes use metric exclusively and the stadia have metric only displays. Occasionally, though, Tim lapses into medieval units. I don't know who the audience is for this lapse. I learnt about measurements entirely in metric at school, and I'm uncomfortably into my sixties. For example, any short distance, such as a long jumper leading by 4 or 5 cm, often has Tim going back to medieval units to impress I suppose. Of course 5 cm is still 5 cm, telling us it's "only 2 inches" only tells us how large medieval units are. There are alternatives: "Only half a decimetre" or to really ram it home, about how small the victory is, how about one 20 th of a metre, for a long jump winning margin? So the use of medieval units is unhelpful and perhaps Tim would do better just to use the measurement in front of him, namely 5 cm. 5 cm is still 5 cm whatever system of units is used. Another trick that BBC commentators have is to express High Jumpers' (and others) personal heights in feet and inches when the bar in front of them has been clearly stated in metric. A major communication opportunity is lost as we cannot appreciate the full extent of their athleticism. For example, we learnt that one of the women competitors was 6ft 3 in tall. That competitor successfully cleared over 2m. So? Well, her height converts to 1.90m, so she is very tall anyway, but also was jumping a full 10 cm over her head. The men regularly jump 30 to 40 cm over their own heads. For next season, the BBC could consider sending Tim on a course on the metric system and then he would perhaps not feel the need to lapse into medieval units of measurement in his commentary."

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Here was the response from the BBC complaints section

"We're naturally disappointed to learn you of your unhappiness with references to measurement made by Tim Hutchings. However, we'd explain that there's no BBC policy enforcing absolute usage of either the Metric or the Imperial measurement system - we simply aim to reflect common usage in this country today and to aid understanding for different audiences. The Metric system is becoming increasingly widespread, and has been taught in schools for many years now, but many people usually refer to their own heights, for example, in feet and inches, or their own weight in stone. Programme-makers, producers and presenters are allowed to use their own judgement to use what different audiences will find easiest to understand. Thanks again for getting in touch with your thoughts. We hope our reply here helps to clarify our approach in this area."

Final remarks

This response was entirely as expected and it is clear that the BBC is unlikely to change their view of unit usage in their reporting. To say that the metric system has been taught in schools for many years is a bit of an understatement. This situation just goes round and round in circles: we can't metricate the country until people stop using imperial, but people use imperial because it gets mentioned in commentary from the BBC and others.

Both this example and the previous article from Ronnie Cohen expose, arguably, two of the three obstacles to the UK becoming fully metric. Namely, people have a tendency to express their height in imperial and their weight in imperial. The third obstacle is measurements used in the transport system which are often expressed in imperial. The first two issues can perhaps be tackled by the medical community not providing conversions of their measurements. The third issue needs to be addressed by the Department of Transport, and sadly they seem not to be inclined to do so.

Brief comments

Measuring jugs from my local hardware store, *by John Austin*



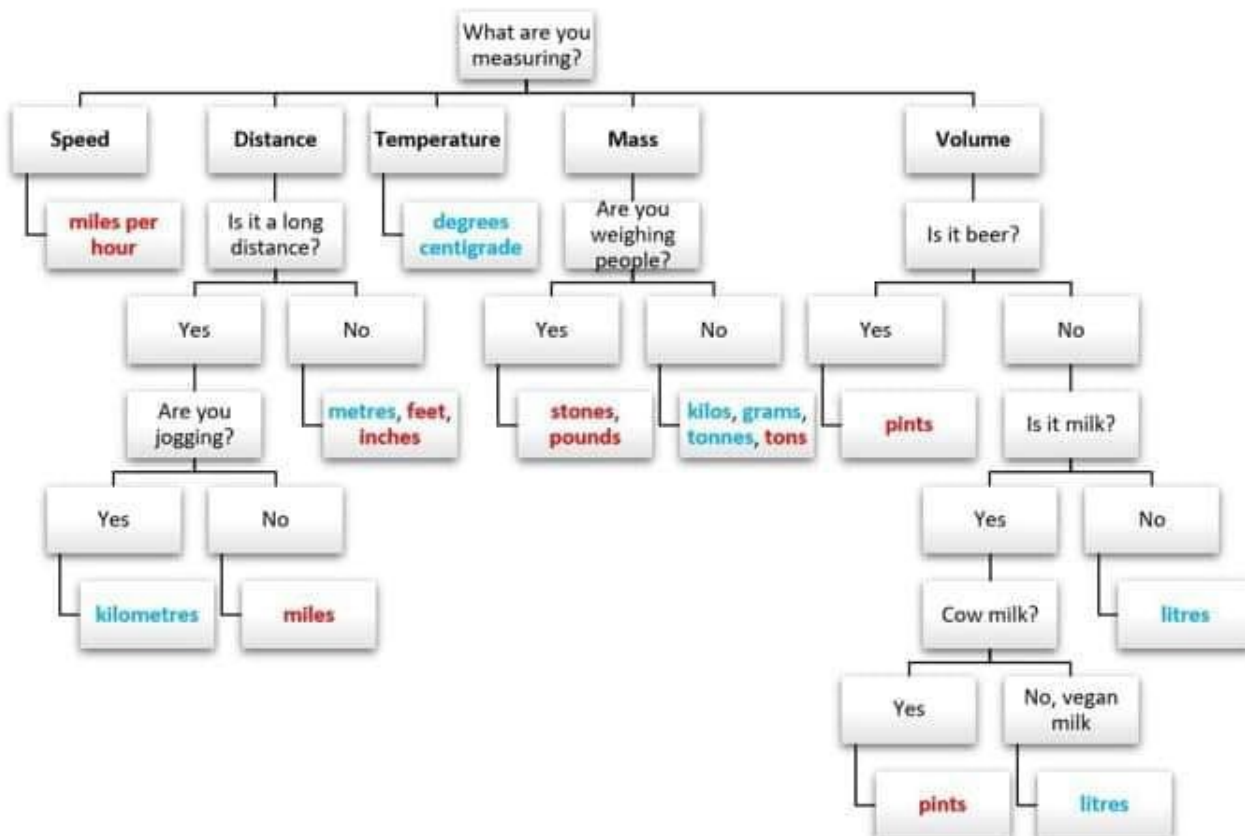
I was wandering around the local B&Q earlier in the summer and I spotted these measuring jugs. They were going cheap and sometimes I can't resist a bargain! The jugs were labelled as 0.5L, 1L and 2L capacities, and that's what they are. Although they are marked in imperial fluid ounces as well as litres, several things point to the design as metric. Firstly, the smallest jug isn't large enough for a full pint, but stops slightly short. Likewise with the other two. Secondly, the graduations are finer in metric than in fluid ounces. So, for the largest jug, for example, the largest graduations are every 100 mL and 5 fl. oz. (approx. 140 mL).

The jug labelling may be considered a minor issue, but it can influence the choice of units. For example, my mother has a very old measuring jug which I use to heat up a little milk for her coffee when I visit. It is only a half-pint jug, but the first graduation in metric is at 100 mL. What I want to do is heat 50 mL but I can't do that easily, so I just use the imperial measurement of 2 fl. oz. instead as a guide. By having twice as many graduations in imperial, the jug tends to encourage one to use imperial, even when metric is available.

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UK Measurement muddle

This time last year, we published a chart showing the Canadian measurement muddle. Of course we are no better. So here is a chart, kindly supplied by Andrew Lohmann, more appropriate to our own sorry state in the UK.



Height and width restriction signs

When height and width restriction signs are erected on public highways, either in new locations or as replacements for life-expired signs, the traffic sign regulations require that the new sign must show dual measurements, both metric and imperial.



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(continued from page 7)

If you know of a newly-erected sign that does not meet this requirement or a life-expired imperial-only sign, such as those shown in the photos on the previous page, you may wish to report it to your local highway authority suggesting that the sign be replaced with a dual-unit sign. UKMA does not believe in direct action, unlike a number of imperial enthusiasts whose antics have seen them prosecuted. The Committee believes that working with highway authorities is the best way to ensure compliance with the law.

Five tomatoes and a drunken lobster

Last, but not least, the following image has been doing the rounds on Facebook and I thought that some readers would find it amusing.



Association News

UKMA Secretary

Derek Pollard, who has been secretary of UKMA since 2005, has indicated his intention to retire at the AGM in 2022. A handover period is desirable, so if you feel you would like to take on the role, please contact Derek, secretary@metric.org.uk

The primary task of the secretary is to assist with the functioning of the Committee: calling meetings, and preparing agenda, minutes and an action item list for each meeting. The secretary is also normally the first point of contact for those who wish to get in touch with UKMA.

Over the year the role of the secretary has grown to include, for example, the recruitment of new members, the circulation of documents to the membership, and the distribution of publications.

These are not central to the role of the secretary, and if you would prefer to take on only the primary role described above, this could easily be arranged.

If you are uncertain and would like to discuss the matter before proceeding further, please do not hesitate to email Derek or any other member of the Committee.

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UKMA Committee Member Peter Burke

Peter was co-opted onto the Committee a short time before the last newsletter went out. He came to the UK from Ireland in 1982 and after 7 years lecturing at Southampton University moved to a medical practice in Oxford from which he retired as senior partner in 2017. He still practices and is also involved in teaching, examining and appraisal. In his career he has worked entirely in metric units and has found patients' requests for conversions to imperial units a source frequently of frustration and occasionally of risk. His European background (Irish father, German mother) has also made him aware of the advantages of using metric units in everyday use.

As a member of the Committee, he sees his goal as helping the UKMA further its aims to bring the UK into line with the rest of the Commonwealth, indeed most of the world. He would like to see 'Global Britain' as a reality rather than just an empty phrase.

Annual Conference 2021

The Annual Conference was held on Sunday 4 July, beginning at 10:30 and concluding at about 12:45. We were fortunate to be able to use the Zoom account of one of the Committee members, so we were limited neither by numbers attending nor by time. Fifteen members participated, more than any previous event.

The discussions followed closely the programme distributed beforehand.

During the Members' Forum at the end of the Conference there were discussions on a range of topics. These included:

1. The need and quest for a patron or patrons, and their role
2. Celebrities who may help our campaign
3. The possible formation of an All-party Parliamentary Group on measurement
4. Our response to the report of the Taskforce on Growth, Innovation and Regulatory Reform

Terry Simpson said he would welcome assistance with his work of reviewing new standards, for example those of the British Standards Institute, to identify and report questionable use of measurement units.

There is a video recording the proceedings. The Committee has decided not to publish the link to this, but to limit access to members. If you would like the link, please email secretary@metric.org.uk. The recording runs for about two hours.

Your opinions on Metric Views

UKMA's blog, Metric Views, is almost 15 years old. During that time, there have been hundreds of articles published and these have received thousands of comments. The Committee would like to hear your opinion about the site. Are articles published too frequently? Not frequently enough? Does it cover the topics you are interested in? What topics have been neglected? Your opinions please to secretary@metric.org.uk

If you would like to contribute an article please email your draft to the secretary.

A summary of the most recent articles posted on Metric Views appears below.

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UKMA on radio

The Task Force on Innovation, Growth and Regulatory Reform (TIGRR) completed its report in May 2021. Its proposal to “Amend the Weights and Measures Act 1985 to allow traders to use imperial measurements without the equivalent metric measurement” is the subject of an article in this edition of UKMA News (reproduced from the Metric Views website). The proposal produced a brief storm in the media, and a Committee member, Peter Burke, participated in discussions.

The first programme was during the Jeremy Vine (JV) show on 17 September and can be listened in full here: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/vi89u4o2hmwreo2/PB%20on%20Jeremy%20Vine%20BBC%20R2%20on%20imperial%20vs%20metric.mov?dl=0>

The second programme was on the Radio 5 show, later on the same day, with Stephen Nolan: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/qke3qj6wtwd11w8/PB%20on%20Stephen%20Nolan%20BBC%20R5%20with%20Neil%20Heron%20on%20metric%20martyrs%2020210917.m4a?dl=0>

The segment on the JV show was short, but Peter was able to get across some important remarks. JV showed himself to be well-informed of the measurement muddle facing the country. Unfortunately, as reported by JV, the Brexit minister added to the muddle by compounding Brexit with our use of multiple units. Peter found himself on one side of the discussion with Warwick Cairns of the British Weights and Measures Association. The website of the organisation contains factual inaccuracies, so one could not expect a meeting of minds here. Certainly Warwick made a good point in principle that the choice of units should be up to the individual. That appears to be against the ethos of the organisation he was representing, but of course we already have some semblance of choice of units in UK society and it isn't working. As Peter pointed out, nobody any more uses the old LSD currency, and governments since Magna Carta have usually aimed to provide a single set of measurement units. Many of these issues are well known to UKMA members, and Peter did a good job in bringing them to the fore.

During the second programme, the Stephen Nolan show on Radio 5, much of the first part of the programme was taken up with the "Metric Martyrs" who were a major consideration for the recent news in the first place. Neil Heron put the historical event into context and it was clear that the authorities may have gone too far in prosecuting traders for using untested scales. Since that time, illegal trading has continued, but Weights and Measures Standards Officers have generally abandoned enforcement. In the second part of the programme, Peter was able to divert the discussion away from the Metric Martyrs towards the advantages in general of a single system of measurement, and readers may consider this came over as a very interesting discussion.

The news of this proposed step back into the past spread far and wide, and Peter was also invited to give an interview for Czech TV.

Can you help?

The Committee is looking for volunteers who may be able to help in the following areas:

- Responding to technical consultations by ISO and BSI.
- Preparing web-friendly versions of UKMA News for PCs, i-pads, i-phones and android devices such as tablets and mobile phones.
- Reviewing printed media for stories to link to our Twitter and Facebook pages.
- Assisting with the production of material for uploading to YouTube.

If you think you may be able to help, please contact secretary@metric.org.uk

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Have I Got News For You

Earlier in the year, the Committee declined an invitation for UKMA News to appear as the “guest publication” in a programme in the series of HIGNFY then in production. Some would see this as a compliment. And there are those who think that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Do readers agree with the Committee’s decision? Comments please to: editor@metric.org.uk.

“A very British mess”

This report, published by UKMA in 2004, looked at the UK’s measurement muddle. The report was drafted by a group of Committee members. The 62-page report includes chapters on “How did we get into this mess?” and how we can get out of it, with many illustrations in full colour. Hard copies of the report are still available, price £2.00 including p&p. Please email the Secretary if you would like a copy.

Recent articles posted on Metric Views

You may have missed the following articles posted on Metric Views since the last newsletter:

"Multiple conversions for same social distances". Posted on 14 October. 6 comments.
"Government's return to Imperial set to make UK a laughing stock". Posted on 17 September. 36 comments.
"Mutual incomprehension in diet conversation". Posted on 20 August. 9 comments.
"Metres and miles mix-up again". Posted on 5 August. 5 comments.
"Retrograde step proposed for retail trade". Posted on 9 July. 19 comments.
"Two surprises from 1970". Posted on 1 July. 30 comments.
"Imperial dimensions of British exceptionalism". Posted on 24 June. 22 comments.
"Stuck in an imperial past". Posted on 28 May. 20 comments.

Draft articles for Metric Views are welcome and should be e-mailed to: secretary@metric.org.uk

Where to find UKMA on the internet

UKMA began as an internet forum, and the internet is our principal vehicle for carrying our message to the public.

We now have:

- The main UKMA web site, <https://ukma.org.uk>.
- A factual web site, <https://thinkmetric.uk>.
- A blog, <https://metricviews.uk>.
- A Twitter page, <https://twitter.com/UKMetric>.
- A YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/UKMetric>.
- and a Facebook page, <https://www.Facebook.com/UKMetric>.

These are available to all, not just members.

About this newsletter

UKMA News is published by the UK Metric Association, the object of which is to promote the full adoption of the International System of Units (SI), commonly known as ‘the metric system’, as the single legal and default system of weights and measures throughout society in the UK. The editor welcomes your feedback and comments on UKMA News or on the UK’s stalled metric changeover. If you no longer wish to receive UKMA News, please email secretary@metric.org.uk