



UKMA news

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

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Geoffrey Howe, Lord Howe of Aberavon, 1926 to 2015

We note with great regret the death of Lord Howe on the 9th of October 2015.

Lord Howe was a Patron of the UK Metric Association from its foundation, and campaigned in Parliament for over a decade for the completion of the UK's metric transition.

This issue's main article is a tribute to Geoffrey Lord Howe from the UKMA's immediate past Chairman, Robin Paice. Both contributed significantly to our Association. Their efforts and dedication supporting our aims will be hard to replace.

This newsletter will also explore more problems with measurement system muddles.

The Editor apologises for the absence of an Autumn newsletter. His article on home improvements on page 6 may go some way to explaining this.

Also included are articles reprinted from Metric Views and from the Denver Post.

Memories of Geoffrey

Posted originally on Metric Views

For the last 12 years of his life Geoffrey Howe was patron of the UK Metric Association. Robin Paice, who was Chair of the Association for most of this time, remembers him.



In front of UKMA's "Celsiheit" thermometer

"Most obituaries of Lord Howe of Aberavon have, understandably, concentrated on his famous resignation speech (that led to the fall of Margaret Thatcher), his 1981 budget, his agreement with Deng Xiao Ping for the handover of Hong Kong, and his consistent support for the European Union. It was probably the last of these causes that led him, in the last 12 years of his life, to identify with the campaign to complete metrication in the UK and to consent to be one of UKMA's patrons.

I had the pleasure of meeting Geoffrey several times from 2004 onwards and worked closely with him on various projects, publications and articles. The depth of his commitment to the cause was quite astonishing, as was the amount of time that he was prepared to spend on an issue which, after his outstanding political career, might have seemed comparatively minor. He explained his role in a Foreword to ["A very British mess"](#) in 2004:

"So what am I doing here? Two or three years ago, I gladly accepted the invitation to serve as UKMA's Patron. I did so because I felt ashamed of my role in allowing the present shambles to develop. Having been responsible for Britain's metrication programme when I was Minister for Consumer Affairs, I didn't challenge the decision to abolish the Metrication Board, when I was Chancellor of the Exchequer. I didn't often run away from difficult decisions – but this is one that I did duck."

[The "shambles" he was referring to was of course the muddle of incompatible metric and imperial measurements that still afflicts the UK]

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However, although Geoffrey saw himself as doing penance for not supporting metrication at a point when his intervention could have been decisive, I think the real reason behind his belated enthusiasm was his belief in Europe. He actually had surprisingly little familiarity with the details of the International System of Units (the official name for the metric system): thus he believed that his body temperature was 98.4 degrees (Fahrenheit of course), and I am sure he only knew his weight in stones and pounds and his collar size in inches. As he was a classicist and a lawyer, the relationship between joules and watts would have been quite beyond him.

I once had a minor argument with him about time zones, as he also supported the “Lighter Evenings” campaign, which advocated adopting Central European Time instead of Greenwich Mean Time. I tried to point out that time zones depend on longitude, not politics, and that numerous countries cope successfully with having several time zones, but he took the view that solidarity with “Europe” meant adopting the same time as the key EU countries. I think he felt the same way about adopting the same measurement system as other European countries.

It may well be that his known enthusiasm for “Europe” was actually a handicap in the metrication campaign, as it enabled opponents, especially on the Right of the Conservative Party, to sidestep the rational case for resolving the muddle and simply dismiss his views as those of a misguided Europhile – or worse.



Participating in a discussion at UKMA's annual conference in 2004

Whatever the reasons, Geoffrey spent an extraordinary amount of time on the campaign, sometimes telephoning several times in a day, leaving long messages on the answerphone, sending drafts of articles for comment, and attending the Annual Conference of UKMA (see picture). Because of his numerous political and other contacts, he was able to lobby at many levels, and wrote numerous letters to the great and the good seeking their support (and donations to the cause). Published articles and letters appeared in “Trading Standards Today”, the “Expert”, and “Which?”, the magazine of the Consumers’ Association, of which he was President for many years. He also made interventions in the House of Lords, notably in 2012 in the Queen’s Speech debate, which can be viewed at [this link](#).

Sadly, his campaigning had little tangible to show for it (though of course we can’t know what might have happened without it), and I often had the feeling that the targets of his lobbying were merely humouring him. Being slightly overawed by his eminence as an elder statesman, many did not wish to refuse him but were not prepared to risk damaging their own business or political careers by publicly supporting what was perceived as an esoteric and minority cause.

As befitted an Old Wykehamist (motto: “Manners makyth man”), Geoffrey was always unfailingly courteous. Everybody liked Geoffrey – even if they deplored his monetarist economic policies, his Enterprise Zones and his anti-trade union legislation.

With the passing of Geoffrey Howe, the UK Metric Association has lost one of the few politicians with the courage to challenge the conspiracy of silence that prevents the case for completing metrication from being heard. We shall miss him.”

Milk in a muddle

By Ronnie Cohen, originally posted on Metric Views

Of all the drinks in any British supermarket or convenience store, the only product where you are likely to find the word “pint” or “pints” is on milk. In the drinks market, milk is something of an anomaly. Whereas almost all other drinks are labelled in metric units and almost all are sold in rational metric sizes, milk is sold in a mixture of litre-based and pint-based sizes. Even on the label of the odd pint-based cider or beer bottle, you are only likely to see 568 millilitres shown on the label without any imperial units shown alongside. It is hard to think of any other product that symbolises the British measurement mess more than milk, where you have two competing systems.



Milk from Tesco

I recently looked at the state of the current milk market by visiting the ten leading British supermarkets. I went to Aldi, Asda, Budgens, Co-operative Food, Lidl, Marks & Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose and recorded the milk products they sell. I present my findings here.

Asda, Co-operative Food, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Waitrose all sell own-brand milk in 1, 2, 4 and 6 pint formats. Marks & Spencer sells own-brand milk in 1, 2 and 4 pint formats. Waitrose also sells the “Duchy Originals from Waitrose” brand in 1, 2 and 4 pint formats. Of the supermarkets that do not have their own-brand milk, Aldi sells Cowbelle milk in 1, 2, 4 and 6 pint formats, Budgens sells Supervalu milk in 1, 2, 4 and 6 pint formats and Lidl sells Morning Fresh British milk in 2, 4 and 6 pint formats. These are the main independent brands sold in imperial sizes.

However, a considerable number of own-brand milk products, including regular refrigerated milk products, and own-brand milk substitute products in supermarkets come in rational metric sizes. (A full list can be seen in ronniec's article at <http://metricviews.org.uk/2015/10/milk-in-a-muddle>.)

Exceptions are some dried milk products that come in odd metric sizes, including Tesco Everyday Dried Skimmed Milk (454 g), Co-operative Food Dried Skimmed Milk (340 g) and Tesco Instant Dried Skimmed Milk (340 g). Tesco Everyday Dried Skimmed Milk showed 454 g, a pound-based size with no imperial conversion.

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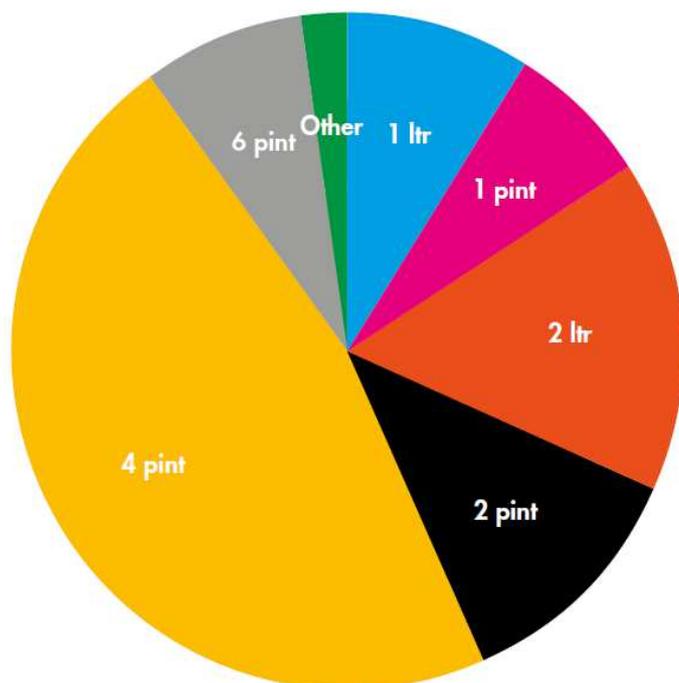
Independent brands, flavoured milk, milk substitutes and long-life formats sold by British supermarkets are overwhelmingly metric and their most common sizes are 500 millilitres, 1 litre and 2 litres. Few of them come in pint-based sizes. The one pint-based size I saw in supermarkets that I have not already mentioned is Manor Farm Organic, which comes in a 1-pint format.

Interestingly, some brands of milk (e.g. Freshways, Watsons) sold by small independent stores come in 1-pint, 1-litre and 2-litre sizes.

The market share of doorstep milk continues to decline. It was 4.3% in 2012, 3.9% in 2013 and just 3.4% in 2014.

Market shares for different sizes of milk can be seen in the following image, from Dairy statistics an insider's guide 2012, published by DairyCo, a division of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board.

Milk purchases (%) by container size for year ending May 2012



The image shows that rational litre-based sizes of milk make up around a quarter of milk sales. (Notice that Ltr is used instead of the SI standard l or L. A common mistake but not one that should be made by a government-based organisation, Editor)

If you looking for value for money for milk, it is quite challenging to compare prices of litre-based and pint-based sizes. Unit pricing helps where it is available but it is not always easy to distinguish between 1-litre and 2-pint bottles or between 2-litre and 4-pint bottles without looking at the labels because their sizes are so similar. However, unlike wine, there is no requirement to sell milk in rational metric sizes so we have ended up in a situation where we find the following common sizes of milk:

500 mL	568 mL
1 L	1.136 L
2 L	2.272 L
3.408 L	

It might look odd to tourists visiting the UK who are unfamiliar with the British measurement muddle. Nothing seems to illustrate this better than the retail sale of milk.

The case of a little light DIY

Your Editor has been occupied recently by a project to completely re-build the family kitchen.

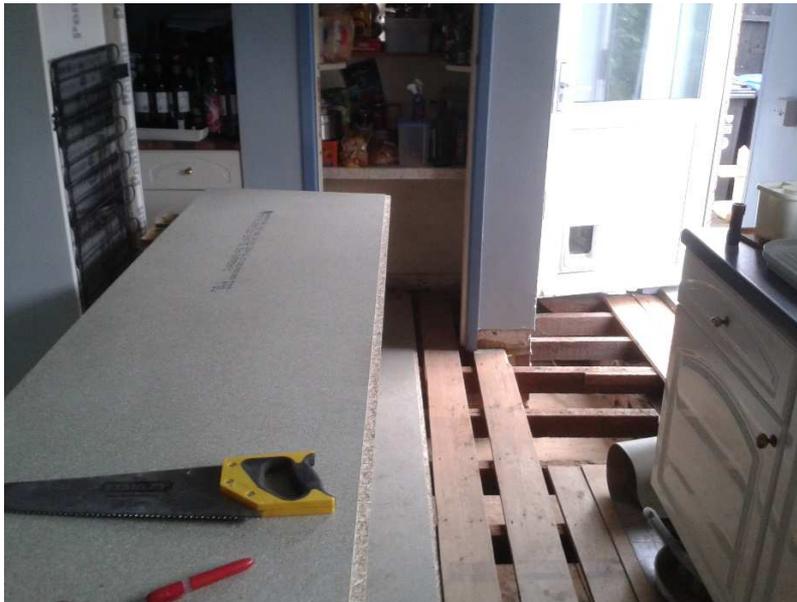
The previous kitchen, also a DIY job lasted for 23 years. Hopefully, this one will last at least as long - I don't want to repeat the operation!

The first job was to remove the existing floor covering and original boards. The boards had warped over the years and caused the covering to wear unevenly.

The solution was to replace with 22 mm thick chipboard, available in 600 mm x 2400 mm sheets. These were ideal as the thickness matched that of the original boards and two new boards side-by-side were equivalent to seven old boards.

Perfect, it just shows that a 1930s house is compatible with modern rounded metric sized building products.

So why aren't all similar products sold in similar sizes? Hardboard, for example is still sold in converted imperial sizes such as 1220 mm x 2440 mm.



There is a strange mix of measures used for similar products sold by the major DIY stores. For example, why are some woodscrews sold as, for example, 4x50 mm for one type and No. 8x2" for another, described as size (mm) in the Wickes catalogue!

When asking the Wickes salesperson for a ceiling light rose, the reply was "Do you want a 6-inch or 9-inch one?"

"Confusing to use inches", I said, to which the sales guy replied, "We give customers the choice but I would prefer to use metric only".

Usage of metric measures appears to be 'normal', for example the plasterer replacing old plaster with new plaster-boards only called out metric dimensions to his mate who cut the new boards to fit.

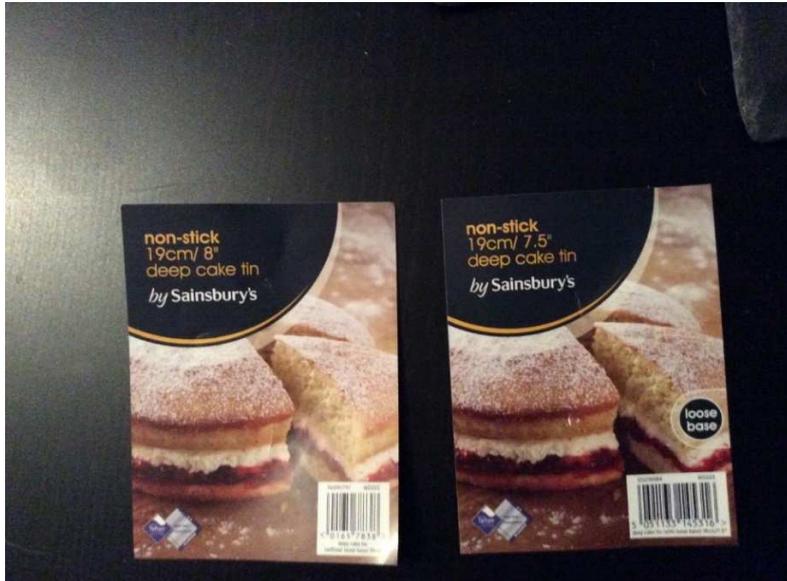
All kitchen units are in metric-only sizes as are the tiles to complete the decoration. This has changed since installing the last kitchen when inch-sized tiles didn't quite line-up with the metric-only cabinets!

Britain may not be completely metric yet but this project has shown that we are moving steadily in the right direction!

Conversion confusion

Look closely at the packaging for the two similar items.

Which dimension do you believe?



Opinion

From The Denver Post, Colorado, USA, dated 25 June 2015

By Randy Bancroft

Few Colorado residents have ever heard of John F. Shafroth (1854-1922). He was governor of Colorado, a U.S. senator and representative, Denver resident, and perhaps the most fervent champion of the metric system in the history of U.S. politics.

What strikes one about Shafroth, who interviewed Lord Kelvin concerning the adoption of the metric system, is that in that era, Shafroth did what he could to educate himself about the metric system. Recently announced presidential candidate Lincoln Chafee mentioned he wants the metric system, but seems ill-informed about why.

There are many reasons to adopt the metric system in the U.S. Here are a few:

1. Building construction is 10 to 15 percent more costly in the U.S. because we do not use the metric system.
2. An estimated 98,000 deaths occur in the U.S. health care system each year because we do not use the metric system.
3. When added up, the inefficiencies and errors associated with the lack of the metric system costs each person in the U.S. at least \$15 per day.
4. The most important issues of the day, from Climate Change to resource depletion, involve measurement and are best understood, and are most intuitive, when expressed properly with the metric system.

Building construction in Australia and the UK is done with millimetres alone (no centimetres!). This allows all dimensions to be expressed as integers, without any decimals. These simple numbers decrease the errors and in turn the amount of scrap generated at a construction site.

The confusion between teaspoons and tablespoons has been the source of mis-dosages in the U.S. since their adoption. This confusing problem has been lamented for over 100 years, and nothing has been done. The late metrication expert Pat Naughtin cited a Swedish Study which estimated about 98,000 deaths occur in the U.S. healthcare system that are directly attributable to the lack of the metric system.

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Naughtin estimated that, when all added up, the lack of the metric system in the U.S. costs each citizen about \$15 per day. I suspect it is higher. Clearly, if we had adopted the metric system in 1903 when Shafroth was at his most influential, we could have saved 10 percent per year on building construction costs over the last century. When counted up over the entire economy, the savings that could have been achieved to date is staggering.

Pat Naughtin demonstrated the utility of using whole numbers with metric prefixes to present scientific concepts so they are intuitive to everyone. I offer my own examples in my internet blog. My favorite is changing over monthly utility bills to metric so we can directly compare electricity and natural gas costs. Kilowatt-hours and therms are not comparable directly, nor proper measurement units. The cost difference becomes obvious when the energy of each is expressed in Gigajoules.

Lincoln Chafee argued that we should become metric to become more international. He indicated that metric is easy, and then gave perhaps the least intuitive example possible by citing a Celsius temperature. He threw in, almost as an afterthought, that the metric system would help our economy. Chafee was in the Senate and did not sponsor a single metric bill. John Shafroth sponsored a bill calling for mandatory metrication at every opportunity over many years. Chafee's feckless endorsement of the metric system makes me long for the days of politicians like Colorado's own "Honest John" Shafroth, who was a true metric advocate.

(Randy Bancroft is a professional engineer who practices in Denver, Colorado, USA. He blogs as the Metric Maven - www.thetricmaven.com).

Report from the UKMA Annual General Meeting and Conference, 2015

from Derek Pollard, UKMA Secretary

This year's Conference took place on the day Americans were celebrating their independence from Britain. And here is a paradox. Independence did not lead to independent thinking on measurement systems, but to the retention of Britain's irrational, eighteenth-century measurement system long after it had ceased to be the primary system in Britain itself and, more surprisingly, while its importance in the modern world declined.

Needless to say, this issue was far from the minds of our members at the Conference, which began with a presentation and discussion about the new Consumer Rights Act. This followed on from Lord Taverne's work during the passage of the Bill through Parliament and subsequently with the Trade Minister, and will be the subject of a future article in UKMA News.

Following a short discussion on the political outlook, one of our seasoned campaigners talked of his work with local Councils and the law on measurement. He explained how to track local authority activity, and outlined possible pitfalls.

The proposed revision of the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions (TSRGD) did not survive the change of government, and a fresh consultation was under way. A presentation provided details. The Committee has now responded to the consultation).

There was a lengthy discussion of communication within UKMA and externally, and the issues raised will be taken up by the Committee. In particular, it was said that our web presence must be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure it appears fresh and relevant. This will be a priority for the revived Web Working Group.

During a discussion about UKMA's work programme, members made suggestions on the value of research including the policies of supermarkets, on ideas for leaflets and a video presentation, and on making our responses to government consultations more widely known. These issues, too, will be pursued by the Committee.

The Conference concluded with the Members' Forum, during which details were provided by one of our members about his work on media monitoring with suggestions for future action.

The thoughtful and occasionally lively discussions during the day provided the Committee with much to consider and act upon. UKMA News will be passing on details of progress.

And finally



Thanks to Google search and a cartoonist from the USA.

We don't know whether Santa and Rudolf are using the same measurements and Santa has grown or that one has a metric ruler and the other has one of those other types!

Whatever, here's wishing all our members and readers a very Happy Christmas and prosperous New Year.