

UKMAnews

UKMetricAssociation

The newsletter of the organisation campaigning for
a **single** *rational* system of measurement

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LORD HOWE ATTENDS AGM



For the first time, we were privileged to have our patron, Lord Howe, present at our Annual General Meeting, which was held at the University of Westminster, on Saturday 10 July 2004.

His opening words were: "I see there are the same number of people here as there were at the Last Supper—that small number of people went on to do great things".

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“VBM” LAUNCHED

This year UKMA launched its first major document, *A Very British Mess*, or “VBM” as it has become known within the organisation.

Its production was the result of a lot of hard work, time, energy and money—and we are very grateful to those members who generously made donations towards the cost of the publication. Thanks go to several members who kindly gave a lot of their time to distribute a share of the copies.

We are also grateful to the Institute of Physics for taking on the task of producing such a high-quality, professionally-executed publication. Members who made donations should have received a hardcopy as a token of appreciation for their support.

A Very British Mess was published to highlight Britain’s failure to complete its metric conversion programme, begun nearly 40 years ago. It summarises the history of measurements, other countries’ successful conversions compared to our own, and covers many areas such as traffic signs, shopping, education; it explains how we can get out of this mess—and complete our conversion once and for all.

The document was launched at a press conference on 8 July, and has attracted some surprising responses.



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VBM LAUNCHED

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Mixed Response to VBM

by Robin Paice, Chairman, UKMA

The launch of VBM on 8 July can be considered a partial success – with encouragement from some surprising quarters, together with some predictable disappointments and frustrations. Responses to the document are still trickling in, and a full analysis is not yet possible, but the main findings are as follows.

Approximately 950 copies of VBM were sent out by UKMA volunteers to identified targets. These were either persons with some authority to make changes or persons who are in a position to influence the decision-makers. These included media proprietors, editors and journalists; government ministers, opposition leaders and other politicians; civil service permanent secretaries; local government leaders and chief executives; university vice-chancellors and departmental heads; presidents of professional institutes; chairmen of major companies, trade associations and trade union leaders; EU Commissioners and officials; and representatives of other single issue pressure groups. About 150 copies were sent out by Lord Howe to current and former colleagues and persons whom he has worked with in the past. Lord Taverne also circulated copies to a selection of Parliamentary colleagues.

The Media

Readers of UKMA News will be aware of the media coverage which our document received around the launch date. The broadcast media – both television and radio – featured several interviews with Lord Howe, with references to VBM. This was followed by a number of radio interviews and phone-ins on local radio in the following few days, with either Roz Denny (our Press Officer) or myself, including radio stations in Essex, South Wales, Scotland, Lincolnshire and others. (I even found myself on US Public Service Radio in California!). Some of these interviews were open-minded, others clearly “knocking” or hostile, but what is important is that the issue was being discussed.

Press coverage of VBM was more disappointing. Few of the national dailies covered it

(probably because the embargo had enabled the broadcasters to get in first), although the Evening Standard ran a fairly balanced article, erring on the positive side. It was completely ignored by the left-leaning broadsheets, the Guardian, Independent and Financial Times, although the normally conservative Times printed a reasonably balanced article. There was predictable hostility from the Express, linking the issue as always to “Europe”. Perhaps the best coverage was in the influential “Economist” (UK edition only). There has been online coverage by the BBC, including 300 words contributed by me and a somewhat improbable online poll showing majority support for completing the changeover (This seemed to demonstrate that it all depends how you ask the question!)

Direct Replies

Copies of VBM were sent out with a covering letter – either from Lord Howe in his personal style or on a standard model signed by me as Chairman of UKMA. There was a small rush of immediate replies in the few days following the launch, slowing to a trickle over the holiday period in July and August. By the end of September, Lord Howe had received 33 replies and I had 69 (including acknowledgements).

Many of Lord Howe’s replies, especially those from current senior politicians, were confidential and their messages cannot be attributed to specific authors. What can be said is that there is a pleasing level of acceptance that the present situation IS a mess, and that somebody ought to do something about it. Lord Howe receives much praise and admiration for his courage in championing the issue, but as one old hand put it, “it would be very hard to get any Party to give a clear undertaking to take the matter forward in advance of the Election. The perception that it would be very unpopular runs very deep indeed”. Nevertheless, closet supporters included a sprinkling of Tory grandees and current government ministers. The most disappointing response was from the Chairman of the British Standards Institution, who stuck rigidly to their implausible line (criticised in VBM) that weights and measures “are too complex to address satisfactorily in the present document [i.e. the *National Standardisation Strategic Framework*]. [I ask myself: what is complex about saying that standardisation necessitates everybody using the same system?].

VBM Feedback

What is encouraging about responses to Lord Howe is that nobody with any influence or expectation of political office has entirely rejected our arguments. There is much to play for here.

Replies to me have generally been from less exalted sources and have ranged from total support (a university vice chancellor) to outright hostility (a Conservative Council Leader). Encouraging has been the number of organisations who have said that, while they can cope with the current mess, they would be happy to co-operate with any change if it was promoted by the government (two local council leaders, an industry trade association). Less encouraging has been the number of organisations who do not perceive a problem, see no reason to change, and regard the current position not as a “mess” but as “A Very British Compromise”. Especially frustrating was the reply from the BBC’s Director-General, who implicitly rejected the educational or public service role of the BBC and reiterated that they are “a communicator not a campaigning organisation”. Mr Thompson’s letter, which goes on to try to claim that there is some rationale behind its muddle of units in weather forecasts, is reproduced below in full without comment.

The remaining 800 copies of our publication appear to have aroused no response whatever from their intended targets. This is disappointing, especially in view of the cost which we (and others) incurred in producing it, but it may well be par for the course for unsolicited publications. With the advent of e-mail and other on-line transactions, many organisations appear to have lost the capacity to reply to ordinary letters. It may be that copies were read with interest, circulated amongst colleagues but no response sent because the recipients could not see the relevance to their particular organisation or function. They may have been intercepted by over-zealous secretaries and never reached their target, or they may have been binned unread. We do not know.

What we do know is that VBM has raised the visibility of the issue by at least a notch. Many press, radio and television journalists are now aware of our existence. Many more senior politicians are now uncomfortably more aware that this is an issue which will not go away and which cannot be suppressed for-

ever – perhaps not beyond the next election. We have located a worthwhile number of closet and open supporters in key positions.

In addition, we welcome several new members whose attention was drawn to UKMA by the launch of VBM.

So the VBM exercise was well worth while. UKMA’s Committee intends to build on the foundations we have laid. We are considering both a reprint of the original VBM (which we would have to charge for) and a possible range of “daughter documents” aimed at particular sectors (e.g. retailing, pubs, road signs, property, maps and atlases).

Letter from Mr Mark Thompson, Director-General of the BBC:

“Dear Mr Paice

Thank you for your letter of 8 July, inviting the BBC to support your organisation’s campaign for complete metrication.

I must tell you that the BBC has no view on metric measurement and cannot give support of the kind you seek – we are a communicator, not a campaigning organisation. Our programme makers are therefore likely to use both metric and imperial measures in their efforts to be as clear and universal as possible when giving data. Choice of the appropriate units of measurement depends on the nature of the programme, relevant custom and practice and the target audience. Programme-makers also bear in mind the changes introduced in the UK since metrication began in 1971 and current school teaching which is conducted predominantly in metric units.

Taking weather forecasting as an example, you will be aware that for over 20 years the Celsius scale has been the international standard for temperature measurement. However, when extremes of temperature are forecast, weather presenters will invariably give a Fahrenheit comparison for absolute clarity: during last summer’s peaks of temperature, they reported “...38 degrees Celsius – that’s 100 degrees Fahrenheit”. Throughout the world, meteorologists measure rainfall in millimetres, which is why forecasters use these units. Again, though, an extreme will be highlighted by converting into imperial units – for example “...25 millimetres of rain – that’s an inch of rainfall”. But because the UK measure-

VBM RESPONSES

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ment of distance and speed is in miles, wind speed is generally given in miles per hour.

In drama programmes, for example East-Enders, units of measurement relevant to the storyline are likely to be used – because producers are aware that audiences will be familiar with both metric and imperial measures. However, as you would expect, science and technology programmes and those following the school curriculum are most likely to use metric units of measurement.

I hope you understand why the BBC cannot play an active role in your campaigning activities. That said, it is open to you to approach any BBC programme for coverage of any initiative you may arrange.

Yours sincerely

(signed)

Mark Thompson

VBM SECOND PRINT-RUN

As mentioned, we are considering a second print-run of VBM, and therefore further copies will be available - although the cover price is yet to be finalised. Alternatively, it can be downloaded as a PDF from our website.

DRAUGHT BEER AND CIDER: DO WE NEED PRESCRIBED QUANTITIES?

*This article is the personal (and maybe controversial) view of Roddy Urquhart and is intended to stimulate discussion. It is **NOT** an expression of UKMA policy.*

Background

When UKMA has dared to suggest that Britain should complete its metric conversion, many in the news media, politics and the anti-metric movement have said that British drinkers would never give up 'their pint'. Indeed 'the pint' is often spoken of with such reverence that it is implied that taking away 'the

pint' would be taking away the beer or cider itself.

Although much of the opposition to metrication in Britain is politically motivated, Britons tend to be very sentimental. They are easily led into thinking that changing something historic is unpatriotic.

People will therefore only embrace change if they understand why it is beneficial. A problem with us in UKMA is that we generally hold deep-seated and long-held convictions that metric is better. However to convince Mr or Ms Average to change requires explaining the benefits to them.

With regard to draught beer and cider we have often discussed "replacing the pint" on our e-mail forum. But what would convince the beer drinker to change? Replacing a pint glass with a 0.5 L or 0.6 L glass will not make the beer taste better! It would be predictable that downsizing would be criticised as depriving the drinker while upsizing would be condemned as encouraging alcohol abuse. We need some real benefit to either the drinker or the trade to effect change.

What happens abroad

Sometimes I think that our discussions have been caught in the British mindset where sizes are strictly prescribed and 'bog standard glasses' (either straight or jugs) are the norm. Similarly we are used to the Crown etching. Other countries are very different and generally have far fewer restrictions. I travel a lot within Europe and to the US and have observed that other countries do not seem to have prescribed quantities like we do.

For example, in the United States it is possible to find a wide range of fluid ounce based sizes. I have seen 6, 12, 16 and 22 US fl oz glasses. I have also bought beer in litre glasses in Dubya's hometown of Austin; and they really *were* litres despite being close to a US quart.

In Germany, the size of glass varies from region and from beer to beer. Sizes I have seen are 0.2 L, 0.3 L, 0.4 L, 0.5 L and 1.0 L. In Köln the local *Kölsch Bier* is served in 0.2 L glasses. Pils is usually either served in 0.3 L or 0.4 L and Weissbier in 0.5 L. On the Oktoberfest in Munich a one litre jug (*Maß*) is standard but controversially unmarked leading to many complaints about short measure!

In Finland the most common measures are 0.33 L, 0.4 L and 0.5 L. Glasses with multiple



markings are very common such as that shown here.

The most common glasses in Finland have 0.4/0.33 L markings or 0.5/0.4/0.33 L. Note that the marking is put in by the manufacturer (Rastal), which is German. Markings from other countries

are generally accepted.

In France most measures are 0.33 L, with 0.5 L offered at international hotels and airports.

In the Netherlands 0.2 L is standard with some 0.25 or 0.33 L glasses for beers imported from Belgium. I have seen 0.5 L at airports.

In Sweden I have seen many sizes — 0.3, 0.5, 0.6 and 0.75 L glasses.

Cases we need to cover

In proposing reform I think that we need to ensure that a number of cases are covered to avoid being shot down. The cases I can think of are as follows:

Private tankards

In small pubs it is not uncommon for regulars to leave their own tankard in the pub. Any proposal that implies a ban for such tankards would be a PR disaster for us.

Small bars

Small bars such as those in hotels often have one pump for draught beer and a range of soft drinks in cans. Standard soft drink cans are 330 ml. It would make sense to allow the possibility to use the same glass for beer and soft drinks.

Sampler glasses

US microbreweries, like many real ale pubs, offer a wide range of draught beers. A common practice is to offer small sampler selections to allow an individual to taste a wide range of the beers on offer without having a huge quantity of alcohol.

In British pubs that is not possible as even 1/3 pint is a bit large if you are having 8 or

more samples just to choose what you want to drink for the evening. British pub owners or operators of beer festivals have to offer either free samples or pint-based measures.

I hope we can find some positive reasons for British beer lovers to go away from a pint-based regime and this might be one. The picture shows an order of roughly one litre of beer served as 8 samplers.



Price Transparency, not Glass Size is the Issue

A strong argument that we have in our campaign is that for the retail sector we should have a single set of measurement units and unit pricing. Unit pricing is an instrument for consumer protection although organizations like the Consumer Association have not yet picked up on that!

In Britain, a wine drinker can order a bottle at a bar or restaurant and compare the price (obviously higher) with that of a bottle bought at a shop. With simple arithmetic the same is true of a spirits drinker comparing say the price of a glass of whisky (or whiskey!) at the bar with a bottle bought for home consumption. With beer and cider such comparisons are impossible. Indeed it is impossible for a drinker to compare the prices of bottled beer and draught beer in the same bar; unless a calculator is used.

I am convinced that price transparency and *not* the size of glasses is the key thing to change. At our 2004 annual conference Robin Paice has already suggested that unit pricing is the key issue and that some rational metric sizes be permitted alongside the pint. I advocate going a step further and say that we do not need prescribed sizes at all. After all if the drink is measured accurately (and I agree with CAMRA that beer should be 100% liquid) and there is a metric unit price the consumer

BEER GLASSES

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is well-served through transparent pricing.

Is this a cop-out? I think not. We think that the sale of, say, mince is metric because supermarkets are required to indicate the metric unit price. They are at liberty to pack the mince in any size whether it is 400 g, 450 g, 454 g (1 lb) or 500 g.

Being more radical (and doubtless controversial!) do we need the crown mark? Most European countries accept the markings provided by manufacturers on beer glasses even if they are from abroad. However it is expected that there is 100% liquid up to the mark. I have often wondered if an E-mark could not apply to beer glasses. If they are calibrated at the manufacturer in one country they ought to be usable somewhere else!

LORD HOWE AT AGM

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Indeed we were a slightly disappointingly-small number present at the AGM, but his words were encouraging to those of us present. Although Lord Howe was not able to stay for the whole day, he got us off to a good grounding by discussing the newly-launched Very British Mess document, and by offering his advice on our strategy as an organisation.



In brief he was arguing that we need to assemble a coalition of influential people from all walks of life to stand up and say publicly that the time has come to complete the metric changeover. Lord Howe will play his part in assembling this coalition – while at the same time lobbying behind the scenes with senior politicians in both Government and Opposition.

Formal Business

The AGM then went on to deal quickly with the formal business – the Officers' reports, including the accounts, which looked healthier than they really are as we were still awaiting the bills for VBM, and the election results (all Officers and Committee returned unopposed).

Annual Conference

Immediately after the formal business, the meeting went into "conference" mode. There were papers and much discussion on the following themes:

- UKMA strategy (Robin Paice)
- Metric crystal mark (Jonathan Miles)
- Website progress and planned enhancements (Phil Hall)
- Practical metric usage (Roddy Urquhart)

Copies of the presentations (in either Powerpoint or Word) are available from the authors and will be placed on the Smartgroups file.

Discussion was still going strong at 16:30, when we had to finish. It had been a most useful and productive day.

Latest News on Lord Howe

Lord Howe is being advised by doctors to take it easy after falling ill whilst on holiday in France. He is expected to make a full recovery soon. Robin Paice, UKMA's Chairman, has sent him a note on behalf of the association to wish him well.

O.E.D. CORRECTED BY UKMA

The latest version of the Oxford English Dictionary, which previously gave the symbol for kilometres per hour as "kph" has now replaced it with the correct reference—"km/h", following constructive correspondence from one of our members.

UKMA WEBSITE UPDATED AGAIN

The official website of the UK Metric Association www.ukma.org.uk has been updated again. May we encourage members to take a regular look at the website, and give feedback to Phil Hall at ukma@philhall.net. Again, many thanks to Phil Hall for his tireless efforts.

IRISH SPEED LIMITS TO GO METRIC

By Phil Durden

Following several postponements, the Irish government has announced the date for the changeover from miles per hour (mph) to kilometres per hour (km/h). It has been set at 20 January 2005. The outgoing Irish transport minister, Seamus Brennan, has been replaced by Martin Cullen who will be responsible for overseeing the changeover.

After a gradual conversion over a number of years of all distance signs from miles to km, and other signs from yards to metres, the change from imperial speed limits to metric ones will be the final stage in Ireland's conversion to the metric system, both on the roads, and as a whole.

The gradual change in distance signs to km, which involved all new and replacement signs being denoted in km, means that in some rural areas a handful of signs still marked in miles can be seen. In time, these too will be replaced.

The gradual approach has meant that Ireland has been able to convert at minimal cost, but for obvious safety reasons, speed limits will be very carefully coordinated and changed over within a very short period—either overnight or over a weekend.

New speed limit signs will be as before, with black text inside a white circle with a red border, but will include the symbol "km/h" within the circle, to remind drivers, particularly those entering from Northern Ireland, that the speed limits are in km/h, not mph.

This sample on the right is what UKMA believes the new -style Irish speed-limit signs will look like



The Irish government will be carrying out a public awareness and information campaign, which will include a website, and special information signs will be erected at exit roads

from ferry ports, airports and on cross-border roads, to inform drivers which units the speed limits are in.

The change to km/h in the Republic has given the government the chance to reassess the suitability of many speed limits. For instance, the current limit on motorways is 70 mph (113 km/h), but the revisions will increase this to 120 km/h, a perfectly safe speed for modern cars, especially considering Ireland's small population and relatively empty roads.

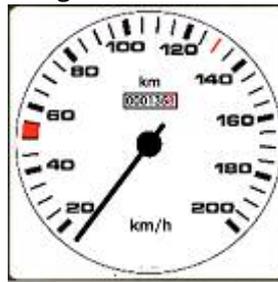
The present default speed limit of 60 mph (97 km/h) on all other roads will be marginally increased to 100 km/h on national routes, but reduced to 80 km/h on non-national routes where the roads tend to be of a lower standard.

The total cost of converting the speed limits will be in the region of €9 million.

The Irish changeover will leave the UK as the only country in Europe and one of only two countries in the world which still uses miles, yards, feet and inches on its traffic signs.

Visitors from the continent who drive in their own cars to Ireland via the UK will start their journey using km and km/h, then have to cope with speeds and distances in miles and mph in Britain, and revert to km and km/h again upon arriving in Ireland.

As Northern Ireland is part of the UK, the British Department for Transport can no longer claim that the UK is not bordered by countries which use metric on their roads.



New cars will be fitted with metric-only speedometers, rather than the dual -scale dial familiar in the UK

METRO GOES METRIC

UKMA has given a cautious welcome to the news that the free newspaper, *Metro*, has taken the decision to go metric at last. After many letters from members, UKMA was surprised at the paper's decision, considering it is part of the same news organisation which also publishes a somewhat less than metric-friendly paper...

NIGELLA LAUNCHES NEW BOOK

Nigella Lawson has recently released a new cookery book, *Feast: Food to Celebrate Life*. The recipes are totally metric—with no imperial equivalents. In the book it says that Nigella works entirely in metric.

If you wish to order a copy, the ISBN is 1401301363, and the published price is £25. Happy cooking!

“CLUB” SCAM- TRIES TO AVOID USING KILOS

By Robin Paice, Chairman, UKMA

The Mail on Sunday ran a recent article on a fishmonger in Hertfordshire who is reported to have turned his shop into a “members club” which trades exclusively in pounds and ounces. In order to purchase from this fishmonger, customers have to join his “club”, which costs one penny for life membership. He argues that Trading Standards Officers have no jurisdiction over the “club” and he can therefore use any units of measurement which he chooses.

However, the law is quite clear on the matter. The Price Marking Order defines a “trader” as “any person who sells or offers or exposes for sale products which fall within his commercial or professional activity”; it also defines a “consumer” as “any individual who buys a product for purposes that do not fall within the sphere of his commercial or professional activity”. So, regardless of his so-called club, the fishmonger is still a trader selling to consumers. It is his business. He owns it and is entitled to the profits from it.

Edited and produced by Phil Durden

As we have introduced postal membership this year, the committee has decided to experiment with posting the newsletter to *all* members, rather than send it out electronically to some and by post to others. We are conscious that not all members may read/receive an electronic version for whatever reason, and would appreciate feedback on whether you would be more likely to read a hardcopy delivered to your door rather than printing your own to read.

Do you prefer postal newsletters or electronic? Let me know! phil@durden.clara.co.uk

Club Rules

In order for it to be a genuine club, the members would need to have a share in the business. For example, if they joined together to bulk buy from a wholesaler and then shared out the goods amongst themselves, there would be no sale since they already jointly own the goods. That would probably qualify as a club. Clearly, this is not the case in question.

Customers of such “clubs” should also beware. Since the trader is not weighing and pricing in legal measures, his scales cannot be tested, and will not have been verified and stamped by Trading Standards Officers for nearly five years. It is therefore quite likely that they are inaccurate – with every chance that the fishmonger is giving short measure.

UK MOTORWAYS DISPLAYING KM?

Over the past few months, signs have appeared on some of the UK’s motorways—most notably the M25—which give the same information as the small marker posts—the distance from the start of the motorway in kilometres. These additional



signs are large, and are intended to be highly visible to emergency services and readable from the monitoring cameras. The top line gives the motorway number, the middle line denotes the direction (in the case of the M25, “A” means clockwise, “B” means anti-clockwise), and the bottom line gives the distance in km from the start of the motorway, which for the M25 is the Dartford Crossing.