

# The Yardstick

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## Yellow Jackets

Some of us will have been following the Yellow Vest protests in France, this year; but Britain did it first with the Yellow Jackets, otherwise known as Active Resistance to Metrication, who defied British authorities in the arena of weights and measures. ARM operatives have recently been filmed in action by French TV, and Tony Bennett presents his written report, overleaf. *The Yardstick* will provide readers with a web link to the programme when available.

## Metric sign proliferation

Despite the best efforts of ARM and members of BWMA who write to their local councils, unlawful metric pedestrian signs are again being seen in town centres and along sea fronts. Following correspondence with the Department for Transport at the end of 2018, which elicited only indifference, we have written to a thousand councils – county, borough, district, town and city - reminding them of the law: pedestrians are regarded in law as traffic; signs for pedestrians are governed by Schedule 12 of the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016; and Schedule 18, Part 3 permits only yards and miles as units of distance on these signs.

Our letter to councils, and our correspondence with the Department for Transport, will be in *The Yardstick* in due course.

## Twitter

We are very pleased that long-term supporter Bryan Parry is stepping in to manage the @bwmaonline twitter account. Yardstick readers who are on twitter are invited to follow our account.

## Tea and Coffee

Warwick Cairns recently discovered Keepcup UK, a producer of reusable glass and plastic cups for coffee shops, as an alternative to disposable paper cups. A perusal of their website reveals the following sizes: extra-small (4 oz), six (6 oz), small (8 oz), medium (12 oz) and large (16 oz). Meanwhile, the Brew Tea Company produces loose tea in quarter-pound boxes, marked ¼ lb. Visit their website: [www.brewteacompany.co.uk](http://www.brewteacompany.co.uk)

John Gardner, Director

BWMA is a non-profit body that exists to promote parity in law between British and metric units. It enjoys support from across Britain's political spectrum, from all manner of businesses and the general public. BWMA is financed by subscriptions and donations. Membership is £12 per year. Cheques or postal orders payable to "BWMA", 29 Chart House Road, Ash Vale, Surrey GU12 5LS

## Active Resistance to Metrication (ARM) filmed in action for French television programme on the differences between British and French cultures

As readers will be aware, ARM members are known by codenames which reflect a unit of British weights, measures or coinage. The three ARM members who took part in actions in Shropshire on 30 November and 1 December 2018 were 'Hundredweight', 'Wun Tun' and 'Thruppence-ha'penny'. The following report is by Tony Bennett.

In early 2018, ARM was contacted by French freelance media company *L'Infinie Comedie* in connection with a programme they were making for the French TV station *Canal-Plus* (Channel Plus). They wanted to film the process of amending metric signs into Imperial, and discuss the extent to which the struggle over metric weights and measures symbolised differences between British and French cultures in the light of the UK's Brexit decision in June 2016.

The French freelance team came over especially from Paris for two days to film ARM; the team consisted of Benjamin (narrator), Felix (camera) and Alex (microphone and effects). Throughout, they followed the ARM team in their car. Here is an account of the filming.

**Stourport-on-Severn:** 'Hundredweight' met with the French team at The Angel Inn, Stourport-on-Severn, on Friday evening of 30 November. An ARM member in the area had two years ago reported that the Council had erected a considerable number of expensive double-sided metal finger posts in Stourport's Riverside Park and around their otherwise beautifully restored Canal Basin. All the distances were in metres. We had viewed and photographed the signs, taken measurements, and scheduled a 'raid' at some time in the future.

ARM raids require a considerable amount of equipment and preparation. For the four operations, it was necessary to have with us: a long stepladder, a short stepladder, sheets of white plastic, a Stanley knife to cut the plastic sheets to exactly the right size, a 12-inch ruler, a folder of black stick-on lettering of different sizes, another folder containing numbering in different sizes, a glue gun, several tubes of exterior glue (from B&Q) and some cloths.

On Friday night at 7pm, using the small 3-rung stepladder, 'Hundredweight' changed - in total darkness apart from some light provided by the French crew - one of the signs on the bank of the River Severn from '300 metres' to '325 yards'.

The following morning at 9.30am, 'Hundredweight' amended three signs in the small town of **Clun**, two of which gave lengths in metric (10m) for the maximum length of vehicles over the historic bridge in the town. The '10m' was a conversion from 32 feet, so 'Hundredweight' overplated the sign with a plate saying '32 ft'. The third sign changed was a metric width sign.

Later that day, at the village of **Newcastle-on-Clun**, 'Hundredweight' was joined by 'Wun Tun' and 'Thruppence-ha'penny', who, wearing ARM's trademark yellow reflective jackets and hard hats, amended a 'length of vehicle' restriction sign of '13m' to read '40 ft'.

The final filming took place Saturday midday in the busy Porthill district of **Shrewsbury**, where there was a highly placed road width sign illegally in metric only: '2.2m'. For this final filmed amendment, yellow jackets were again considered necessary to impress on shoppers that this was an official exercise.

Unusually, we were not spoken to by any members of the public at any of the four locations.

A certain 'camaraderie' developed between the French and ARM teams during the two days. This meant that during this final sign conversion, the French narrator Benjamin was filmed helping 'Hundredweight' to carry the large stepladder from the car to the sign, then holding the ladder steady for him, and finally handing him up the plate (reading 7' 2"), which 'Hundredweight' had just glued on the back - and which he was then able to place over the illegal metric width.

Relaxing at Saturday lunch, we related the British explanation of how the European Union works, namely: "Germans make the rules, Italians break the rules, the French ignore the rules, and the British apply gold plates to them". Far from taking offence, the French team cheerfully accepted this description and indeed added: "Not only do we ignore rules, in France we're proud of doing so!"

Throughout the filming, ARM members emphasised that metric-only signs were illegal under the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions.

The programme is likely to air in June. *Canal-Plus* will provide ARM with a DVD and a web link so that we can view it on the internet.

Thank you to all those who have helped with donations towards our work. Cheques should be made to COUNTY WATCH, c/o Tony Bennett, 14 Kingswood Road, Shrewsbury, SY3 8UX. Tel: 01743 249283 or mobile 07835 716537. [www.activeresistance.org.uk](http://www.activeresistance.org.uk)

## Letter from BBC Executive Complaints Unit to Stuart Newby, 4 January 2018

Dear Mr Newby,

*Complaint – Weather, use of metric measurements*

Thank you for your letter in which you reiterate your concerns over the use of metric measurements. I have examined your complaint in the light of the decision by BBC Complaints to discontinue correspondence with you. My role is to decide if their decision was the correct one. This is in line with the BBC's Complaints Framework. In coming to my decision I have re-read the correspondence and considered which if any BBC policies or guidelines may be applicable in this case.

I do not believe your complaint to be one of inaccuracy, as you do not suggest the weather forecast in itself was wrong; simply that it would not be understood by a large proportion of the audience at which it was aimed. I think it does relate, however, to one of the core editorial values set out in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines under 'Truth and Accuracy':

We seek to establish the truth of what has happened and are committed to achieving due accuracy in all our output. Accuracy is not simply a matter of getting facts right; when necessary, we will weigh relevant facts and information to get at the truth. Our output, as appropriate to its subject and nature, will be well sourced, based on sound evidence, thoroughly tested and presented in clear, precise language. We will strive to be honest and open about what we don't know and avoid unfounded speculation.

'Clear, precise language' seems to me the relevant phrase here and it is against this criteria that I have tried to judge the responses you have received so far, and whether it was reasonable for the BBC not to reply any further to you. My starting point is that the UK is now substantially metric, with the vast majority of transactions being conducted in metric units. This reflects a gradual process over many years. There is no bar on using imperial measurements including for measuring snowfall, but, as previously explained, the BBC must be mindful of what its audiences are used to, and will generally understand. In practice, that means centimetres are used as a default but inches sometimes added if the context demands and time allows. I note the Met Office uses centimetres on its website.

Looking through the previous responses I do think this largely pragmatic position has been clearly explained and that the BBC's stance is consistent with the stated wish to only use, 'clear, precise language' in our output. I should add that I understand that users of BBC weather online (as well as the app) have the choice of whether to see statistics in imperial or metric. It does not seem to me therefore that you have raised the possibility of a breach of standards and so I agree with BBC Complaints in their decision not to correspond further with you on this issue.

There is no provision for further appeal against this decision within the BBC. However, if you wish to pursue the matter further, it is open to you to ask the broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, to consider your complaint.

Dominic Groves, Executive Complaints Unit

## "Progressive, forward-looking"

*David Martin wrote to the Lottery-funded Connswater Community Greenway development in East Belfast, 26 August 2018:* I have just recently acquired a useful map of the Connswater Community Greenway. Its usefulness is limited, however, by the exclusive use of the rather alien, metric measures. The use of metric units of measurement shows precisely no regard for those (probably the majority of the community) who are unfamiliar with such units. I should be most grateful if you would explain why these metric signs have been erected. I should also like to know if there is particular legislation in place which dictates that such units of measurement must be used to the exclusion of any other. Is there any reason why familiar customary measures could not be used alongside metric units?

*Reply from Connswater Community Greenway Trust, 20 September 2018:* Our decision for following metric measurements on our signage and marketing material is to integrate with the existing Belfast Pedestrian Signage in the city centre and elsewhere which uses metric distance indicators. The use of kilometres and metres is also used, not only to showcase Belfast as a progressive, forward-looking city and visitor attraction, but to tie in with the NI Curriculum as young people have a poor understanding of imperial units of measurement. There is no legislation that specifies whether metric or imperial measurements must be used on pedestrian signage. I hope this is of some help. Michele Bryans, Trust Manager.

**Crossbow bolts** Terence Jones wrote to Preppers Shop UK, 7 November: I am pleased to say that my order for bolts and spare strings arrived today. They are, of course, for target shooting for amusement only. I am doubly pleased to note that despite being made in Taiwan, they were all classified in imperial measure without any sign of metric. They were supplied by the dozen, not tens, the pulls certified in lbs, not kilos, and bolt lengths in inches, not millimetres. You have no idea how much this has pleased me.

**More metric signs** David Turner writes: I visited Bournemouth [in August 2018], I was staggered at the number of metric distance signs along the prom and Overcliff Drive. Not just metres but also kilometres.

**Police questionnaire** John Gardner recently completed a police questionnaire concerning a road traffic incident; it said, "What was your distance from the collision/incident (approximately in metres)?" John crossed out metres and wrote "ten yards".

**Decimal Watch:** "Doctors' Scrawl: Handwriting on the Wall", *India Legal*, 18 October 2018 ... Decimal points are a common source of errors. They are very likely to be misinterpreted. A patient received 5 mg tablet Alprazolam (sleeping medicine) instead of .5mg written on a prescription ... Another patient was given 10 mg of tablet Larpose when the intent was to give 1.0 mg. Use of a trailing zero after a decimal often causes overdose and should be avoided ...

## Small Change, Small Nation

by **Graham Norton, graduate of the London School of Economics and Stanford University, Daily Telegraph Magazine, 12 February 1971**

Enjoy the coming weekend. It will be the last in which you will be allowed to reckon and think in pounds, shillings and pence. No longer will you put your hand in your pocket and take out a handful of British history - Queen Victoria, King Edward, the Georges, coins handed on from our parents and great-grandparents, minted before we were born.

It was Edmund Burke who said that society was a partnership between those who were living, those who were dead and those yet to be born. By a bureaucratic stroke, in which the British people were barely consulted, this link with our past is being snapped. We touched the tremendous continuity of our history every day, in those old pennies, shillings and half crowns.

Now it will go, this tangible reminder of greatness. For officialdom does not like what it calls "anomalies". It likes to feel "in line with current international trends", to be able to report that in yet another area of life, individuality has been eradicated, to conform with "standards".

Pounds, shillings and pence was very much against all that sort of thing. As a system, it was designed to suit human needs - pennies for small purchases, shillings for the shopping, pounds for greater things. The three divisions provided a barrier of their own against rising prices, compared to which a decimal point is a feeble thing: how otherwise can those strange prices like 3s 11d and 19s 11d be explained?

It was a pragmatic, flexible, sensible system. Like the British constitution, it was both picturesque and it worked. It was infinitely adaptable. You could get a clean third of a shilling - 4d. Try getting that in decimals. You could get a sixth, too - it was as easy as finding the quarters or halves. Now nothing will be easy.

Muddle and confusion began with the decision to base our decimal coinage on the pound, instead of ten shillings. Many people believed

the Chancellor of the Exchequer would think again even after he announced the decision to use the pound. During the second reading of the Decimal Currency Bill, the late Iain Macleod said: "I believe that the Chancellor of the Exchequer would gain greatly in stature by changing his mind, because I cannot believe that he does not know in his heart that what he is proposing is wrong." But the Chancellor did not change his mind.

There is more muddle ahead. Consider the new twopenny piece. It is only 0.43 millimetres larger in diameter than the old halfpenny, over five hundred million of which are still unaccounted for. No doubt plenty of them will soon be reappearing, some of them in vending machines which have not been adjusted to accept the one and reject the other; others will probably not be spotted when handed over at busy counters.

Then there is that irritating new halfpenny, so tiny it sticks to our nervous, sweaty palms, and cannot be used to turn the locks of the nation's ladies' loos; they will take the new penny piece - which is equivalent to about twopence-halfpenny.

In the banks there are bound to be delays while we amend our cheques, substituting the required hyphen for the decimal point ordinarily used to separate pounds from pence. There will be £sd shops accepting decimal money and brave new £p shops accepting the old money and giving change in the new. How many of us will be echoing Princess Margaret's reported comment: "I don't think I will ever manage to master it"?

Oh, it is going to make exporting easier, has been one argument to justify all this confusion. I wonder. Who on this earth is going to buy that many things from us at under £1? I believe a different system makes for mental dexterity, gives edge to a mind. Who make the best linguists? Why, the small minority nations, the Dutch or the Yugoslavs, because they know the world will not bother to learn their language. So they proudly keep it at home, while mastering other tongues.

What has helped to make Britain great is that

we have had a number of mental languages, ways of calculating or of measuring, which are different from other peoples. We knew that there was always another way of doing things - our way. And it worked. This gave us the confidence to stand up for what we knew was right, when everybody else was unanimous in saying: conform, bow to the inevitable, knuckle under.

£sd - libra, solidi, denarii. Latin names for things which came down to us from the Roman Empire. Now only the pound sign will remain. A bright new world is being computerised for us; it will not do to allow us these reminders of a heritage that so many of our new masters find disgustingly archaic.

Take a good look at the new coins. The proud Latin legend around the Queen's head has been cut back to a gaggle of incomprehensible initials. All the more easy to sweep them away when the time comes ... and, after all, Latin is so *undemocratic*, isn't it, a public school survival making for class distinction. And all those things the words proclaim: defending the Christian Faith, ruling by the Grace of God, and even - this must have repelled Lord Ritchie-Calder<sup>1</sup> most of all - something called the Indian Empire ... we had better eradicate or at least obscure such indecencies. The design of the new coinage also presents a timid, inoffensive face to the world. The weak head of Her Majesty is surely the most saccharine portrait of her ever. And the reverses seem to have been chosen for their anti-nationalism.

This is most apparent on that oddly shaped ten-shilling piece. Britannia sits on the ten-shilling piece now. You might think this a promotion from the penny. But in fact she is now a very different lady. She has been disarmed, and no longer bears her trident. Instead, she limply proffers a branch of leaves to the world, the olive branch of peace.

In her last years on the penny, the civil servants saw fit to make her a liar too. All pennies struck since 1967 have borne that year, by just another small act of official dishonesty, of

disregarding the truth so that, in accordance with some strange twisted system, the files are kept "straight".

Those old imperial pennies will be melted down. Ha'pennies and half crowns have gone. But the Mint say that old florins and shillings might remain, in circulation for some time, as ten and five penny pieces. Most of the florins will not be that old and evocative. For during the war, the Americans lent us 88,000,000 ounces of silver. We paid this back by melting down the real silver coinage, and substituting cupro-nickel from 1947 onwards.

There has been a survivor from this massacre, the silver shilling. It had its own deep shelter, the gas meter. Shillings emerge only to be popped back again, and that is why, when you find an old one in your change, it often has very little wear. Let us hope that a few will still be around by the end of the century, to speak of 1914 and 1940, and to remind our grandchildren that there was once a proud and eccentric nation which refused to take its orders from the World Computer Center.

*BWMA note:* from 1971 to 1982, the word "new" was incorporated into the design of the decimal halfpenny, penny and twopenny pieces; in 1983, the word was removed. The sixpence was demonetised in 1980, as was the decimal halfpenny in 1984. The shilling and florin coins remained in circulation as 5p and 10p pieces until 1990 and 1992, when the 5p and 10p coins were reduced in size. The smaller 50p coin entered circulation in 1997. The effect is that, since 1992, no coin in circulation has carried the head of a non-reigning monarch, something that has not occurred since medieval times.

To give an illustration of how much the currency has been debased since decimalisation, the price of the *Radio Times* in February 1971 was one shilling (five pence); today, 48 years later, the *Radio Times* is £3. By way of comparison, if we go backwards the same number of years, from 1971 to 1923, the year the *Radio Times* first appeared, the price was 2d. Thus, the price increased six-fold between 1923 and 1971, but *sixty*-fold between 1971 and 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> Chairman of the Metrication Board.

## British Standards Institution and 1965

*Yardstick 68* reproduced a confidential note by the Federation of British Industries in February 1965, which commenced:

“In October 1963, the British Standards Institution published a statement which concluded that there was a substantial majority view in industry that the introduction of the metric system as the primary system weights and measures in the U.K. should be effected within the shortest practicable period”.

The FBI note explained, however, that a meeting of its members in January 1964 expressed the view that metrication would present “formidable difficulties” for some industries, and that subsequent investigations found that support for metrication had become “modified in some cases”, and that some industries showed themselves “definitely opposed to any early change”.

The October 1963 BSI statement was over-zealous, but there is another point to consider; why was the BSI purporting to speak on behalf of FBI members, anyway? What business was it of theirs?

The BSI’s statement, to which the FBI note refers, was from an 8-page BSI pamphlet *British Industry and the Metric System*.

We can trace events earlier, since the October 1963 pamphlet commenced with the words, “In May 1962, a statement was issued by the BSI entitled *Change to the Metric System?*”

This May 1962 statement is a 6-page pamphlet, which starts with the sentence, “About a year ago, the BSI set up a special committee to review any trends towards the use of the metric system by British industry and to recommend action by BSI”.

“About a year ago” would put the start of the BSI’s interest in the metric system in **early to mid-1961**.

What do these two reports say? The BSI said in its May 1962 report (their own emphasis):

“It is evident that an increasing volume of opinion in this country regards a change to the metric system as essential and even inevitable ... Clearly the time required for a change would vary from industry to industry and would have to be planned and phased according to their needs, but it is only the basis of a firm assumption of a general move, *which nothing less than a Government directive could induce*, that most individual industries could or would take any decisive action, or even discuss the problem realistically with their customers and suppliers”.

It is remarkable how a change that cannot be discussed, let alone actioned, without a government directive, can be described as “essential and even inevitable”!

Citing markets such as Europe and Asia, the May 1962 report described, “... *action to be taken by BSI on the assumption of a change to the metric system within, say, 15 to 20 years*”; these actions included drawing up a plan for translating British Standards into the metric system, and showing metric values alongside existing inch/lb standards.

The report also contained a “preliminary study” for UK metric conversion: government pronouncement and consultations (0-3 years); industry bodies and individual companies make their own plans (3-5 years); industry implements their plans, and BSI converts 1,500 British Standards to metric values (5-15 years); and finally, to take stock of the position, making efforts to “convince laggards that they must move with the times”, and setting a date for making inch measure non-preferred (15-20 years).

17 months later, the BSI released the October 1963 report which summarised the views of industry in six points (excerpts):

- i) “Though recognising the size and complexity of the task, the great majority of industries accept that a change is inevitable”.
- ii) Nationalised industries have “little urge to change”.
- iii) “Certain industries could only contemplate a move if it were to be made concurrently by the corresponding industries in the USA”.
- iv) “The Export Panel of the BSI is confident that, from the point of view of exports, there would be a definite advantage in making the change”.
- v) “There is a widely-held opinion that some drastic changes in the existing Imperial system of weights and measures (including adoption of the U.S. gallon, short ton, etc.) would be imperative if it is to remain the primary system”.
- vi) “A notional period of twenty years for the change as a whole - suggested in B.S.I.’s earlier statement - is generally regarded as realistic”.

Points (ii) and (iii) count against metrication, (v) is mischievous, and (vi) is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Regarding (iv), the report also said:

It has, of course, always been open to particular Industries or firms to work to metric standards either for their entire production or to satisfy the requirements of export markets. In some cases metric and inch/lb standards, often based on an international recommendation, are substantially the same and only the presentation of the dimensions needs to differ in the two systems. But in any extensive move to the metric system by industries in this country, it cannot be left to individual industries to plan a change in isolation, since each industry must be dependent on acceptance of metric standards by its customers and suppliers.

In other words, if left to private choice, the export industry could have converted any time it wanted to, so that reduces the value of point (iv).

The report's conclusion therefore hinges on (i). Of course, BWMA has no access to the original responses from industry, nor to the questions put, but one wonders whether the BSI's enquiries were along the lines of, "Would you go metric if everybody else went metric?"

The report's credibility is further affected by the omission of business sectors such as retail and small business, let alone consumers.

What did the BSI report say regarding costs?

"BSI has not attempted to deal with the financial aspects of the change, which are not its primary concern".

But the report did advise in relation to the BSI's *own* financial situation:

"... a substantial move to the metric system must also involve BSI in much additional work at national and international levels. Its resources will need to be expanded to meet the new situation".

Here is the October 1963 BSI report's conclusion, in full:

In spite of a large number of indefinite and sometimes divided views which the BSI statement "Change to the Metric System?" has elicited from U.K. industries, there emerges a substantial majority view that changes are inevitable and that they should be directed towards

the introduction of the metric system as the primary system of weights and measures in the United Kingdom within the shortest practicable period. The timing of the change must clearly vary from industry to industry and must be left to individual industries to work out. In general, however, it is accepted that the longer a move is delayed the more costly and complicated the operation will be.

There is an almost unanimous desire for a decision one way or the other. Indecision is undoubtedly acting as a curb to industrial progress; it is also a serious obstacle to the further development of national standards which are themselves an essential part of an efficient and expanding national economy.

There is another aspect: if the BSI agitated for change in 1961, what were we, *the British People*, told? We reproduce the government's 24 May 1965 metrication announcement, with our own underlining.

Douglas Jay's statement suggests that industry put its own case to the government, and that the government *in turn* approached the British Standards Institution.

Yet, as the documents above indicate, the BSI was agitating for metrication four years before the Federation of British Industries approached the government.

## House of Commons, 24 May 1965

John Horner (Labour, Oldbury and Halesowen) asked the President of the Board of Trade if he will make a statement on the adoption in Great Britain of metric weights and measures.

*Douglas Jay, President of the Board of Trade* The Government are impressed with the case which has been put to them by the representatives of industry for the wider use in British industry of the metric system of weights and measures. Countries using that system now take more than one-half of our exports; and the total proportion of world trade conducted in terms of metric units will no doubt continue to increase. Against that background the Government consider it desirable that British industries on a broadening front should adopt metric units, sector by sector, until that system can become in time the primary system of weights and measures for the country as a whole.

One necessary condition for advances in this field will be the provision of metric standards, wherever possible internationally recognised, which will enable particular sectors of industry to work in metric units. The Government have therefore asked the British Standards Institution — and the Institution have agreed — to pay special attention to this work and to press on with it as speedily as possible. The Government will, of course, take this new commitment into account in determining the amount of future grants-in-aid to the Institution. We are also considering how we can best encourage the educational work to familiarise future school generations and students in technological establishments with working in terms of metric units.

We shall also encourage the change to the metric system as and when this becomes practicable for particular industries, by seeking to arrange that tenders for procurement by the Government and other public authorities shall be in terms of metric specifications.

Practical difficulties attending the change-over will, of course, mean that this process must be gradual; but the Government hope that within ten years the greater part of the country's industry will have effected the change. To this end they propose to establish a small standing joint committee of representatives of Government Departments and industry to facilitate the removal of obstacles and to keep under constant review the progress which is being achieved.

The Government will keep in touch with Commonwealth Governments on this matter.

# Timber trade in a metric mess

*Industry Week, 21 November 1969*

"AT the moment metrication is a total non-starter for the vast majority of Britain's smaller builders." The indictment comes from one of the country's largest softwood importers and merchants. The timber trade can see nothing but confusion ahead for at least the next two years. It feels that it may well have tried to go metric too early: by April next year.

Last month, at the annual conference of European Softwood Importers and Exporters in Bremen, the shippers' delegates unanimously reaffirmed their decision to supply only metric sizes from next April. But it is understood that there was "heated" argument in committee over Britain's metrication. It is thought that our delegates may even have asked for the change to be postponed.

In the conference proper, Mr. L. A. Woodburn-Bamberger, chairman of the UK Timber Trade Federation's joint committee on softwood statistics, was blunt about the situation at home. He said of metrication: "There is an almost universal lack of interest in any change on the part of consumers, and it is therefore difficult, to put it mildly, to advise shippers what sizes will be wanted."

Britain is in an embarrassing situation. Exporting countries have traditionally cut in Imperial sizes, because of Britain's predominance as a buyer. We still take a third of Europe's softwood imports, so when we went metric the shippers were obliged to follow suit. And as it turns out, they have beaten us to it - most of their programmes are far ahead of ours.

The British timber industry is full of praise for the way builders of the size of John Laing, Wimpey, and Wates are handling metrication. But as William Hannaford of Denny, Mott & Dickson, softwood stockholders, says: "90 per cent of the trade are putting their heads in the sand." Hannaford says that to add to the confusion the Polish government has recently said all shipments to the end of next July will still be in Imperial sizes, while the Czechs have said that for the whole of 1970 importers can have either Imperial or metric sizes. In addition there will be over 600,000 stds. in Imperial sizes in Britain. So the incentive for the smaller builder to go metric has been weakened.

The advantages of metrication for the timber industry was that sizes could be standardised and rationalised. But it is now being said that there could be as many metric variations as there were in Imperial. Take the problem of cross-section equivalents: the approximate metric equivalent to 1¼ inches is 32mm and to 1½ inches is 38mm, but the Czechs insist on cutting 35mm. And the timber merchants will have to take it.

For the time being the chief difficulty for timber importers and merchants will be the duplication of stocks. The Timber Trade Federation says: "The builders will just have to take what is offered them. The chances are some builders will not be able to get the timber they ask for." As it is not commercially possible to carry double stock, the importers will just do straight conversions of Imperial into metric sizes to begin with. Then they hope builders will more easily accept metric dimensionally co-ordinated sizes.

The builders' organisations feel the timber merchants are exaggerating the extent of the problem. The National Federation of Building Trades Employers says: "On the whole metrication is going reasonably to plan, although some small builders will get a shock." The Federation of Master Builders feels the chief problems of metrication will be in maintenance-fitting a metric door to an Imperial doorway. But it could see few difficulties as most timber is cut to length on site.

It seems that many small builders are hoping that metrication will just go away. But the changes demanded of them are not as fundamental as would first appear. In the trade, a customer who asks for a lorry-load of 16ft. lengths expects to be given timber in a range from 15ft. 8 inches to 16ft. 5 inches. Historically, timber merchants have been given a fair amount of licence on length. The builder makes sure he has plenty of margin for variations.

As regards cross-sectional dimensions, hardly any changes are required at all. The actual conversion of the popular 2 inches x 4 inches is 50.8mm x 101.6mm, yet the metric equivalent will be 50mm x 100mm. But as a ⅛ inch difference is tolerable in Imperial sizes the change is negligible. If the builders are finding it difficult to go metric in something as versatile as timber perhaps it will be no surprise if they fall behind in metricating many other supplies.

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