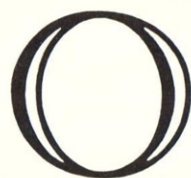


# Great Britain Goes Decimal

After 150 years' worth of proposals to convert Britain's currency to a decimal system, the change was finally effected on February 15, 1971.

by R. Bruce Korver  
ANA 72605



ON FEBRUARY 15, 1971, the United Kingdom officially adopted a decimal currency, marking the end of the pound-shilling-pence (£sd) monetary system that had developed over a millenium. The public was first alerted in 1964, when the Halsbury Committee's "favourable" report was accepted by Parliament. Over the next seven years, the competence exhibited in totally altering the monetary basis of their national economy—a change affecting every aspect of daily life—reflected well on Britain's ability to reconcile the forces of tradition and change.

Success in the long, political journey toward decimalization of coinage and metrication of measurements resulted from growing British awareness that the country could no longer stand against Europe, even on internal concerns. The decisions to "go decimal" and "go metric" were inextricably linked to the demands of participating in global markets and joining the European Economic Community (EEC, known then as the Common Market and which today is the European Community, or EC).



This 5-guinea coin from 1691 features William and Mary. There was no place in Britain's new decimal currency system, however, for the guinea or its related denominations.

## Men Grouched Passing Sore

BRITISH COINAGE HAD certainly undergone many evolutionary changes since the minting of the first pennies in the 8th century. Edward VI's monetary reforms of 1551 introduced the silver threepence, the shilling (a unit of value from Anglo-Saxon times), the halfcrown and the crown. Farthings, groats, guineas and sovereigns had come and gone. Denominations had changed in metal content, size and design, but the £sd system survived. Even the more modern currency reforms of 1817, 1920 and 1946 proceeded without decimalization.

The British long maintained a tradition of slow acceptance of change where their money was concerned. In 1464, when the gold noble was officially revalued at 100 pence of silver, "men grouched passing sore." Ed-



IT WAS SUGGESTED in print as early as 1682 that the penny be divided into five farthings instead of four to encourage "Decimal Arithmetik."

.....

ward VI's new silver coins faced serious competition from the older medieval system (based on the penny and its multiples—the twopence halfgroat and the fourpence groat) for the next 100 years, and groats continued to be minted as late as 1855.

Consideration of basing Britain's currency on the more "scientific" decimal standard, according to Sir John Craig, "was pretty well as old as the adoption of decimals in calculation." It was suggested in print as early as 1682 that the penny be divided into five farthings instead of four to encourage "Decimal Arithmetik." The famed architect Sir Christopher Wren, responsible for the rebuilding of much of London after the Great Fire of 1666, had a plan for a decimal monetary system as well: he suggested that the silver ounce be divided into 100 units.

### A Confused Embodiment of the Best Principles

POLITICS IS ARGUABLY the most important aspect of any monetary system. Coins do not get produced without governmental authorization, and they reflect the attitudes of that authority. Walter Bagehot, writing in the 19th century in support of a common European currency, noted that

The contrast between the French currencies and the English is perhaps characteristic of the two countries. The French is a symmetrical embodiment of imperfect principles; the English a confused embodiment of the best principles.

Not that the English didn't try to institute decimal coinage. During deliberations on the Silver Coinage Bill of 1816, Tory M.P. John Croker formally proposed a new decimal coinage, although his delight in the demise of the guinea was perhaps premature (they were minted until 1855, and remain a commonly used unit of value). Sir John Wrottesley tried again in 1824. A Royal Commission was appointed in 1838, but its favorable report of 1841 received no Parliamentary action. A second commission was appointed in 1843, and its report of 1847, again in favor of decimalization, was likewise ignored.

Unofficial decimal pattern coins were struck in 1846 by Marrian & Gausby, a private firm in Birmingham, including 1-, 2-, 5- and 10-cent pieces as well as a "centum," a denomination equal to one-tenth of a pound. Patterns also were struck by other firms in a cascade of new denominations: centimes, francs, decades, dimes and ducats.

### A Tenth of a Pound

IN 1847 SIR John Bowring of Bolton introduced a bill into the House of



Actual Size: 26.7mm

Even Britain's centuries-old florin, issued as the first decimal coin and having an exact new pence equivalent, lost its name under the new system.



DECIMAL PROPONENTS DAMAGED their cause by associating a new currency with the movement for a universal currency, a 25-franc international monetary unit.  
 .....

Commons to petition the Crown to issue silver coins equal to one-tenth and one-hundredth of the sterling pound. Bowring withdrew his motion after the government promised that a tenth-pound coin (the two-shilling florin) would be issued. The first florins were minted in 1849, but any controversy about their decimal nature was overshadowed by the "godless florin" crisis caused by the omission of "Dei Gratia" from the legend. The florin was a success, but, as the magazine *Punch* pointed out,

The Commons discussed a very important subject . . . namely, the decimal coinage. As most of the speakers (except Lord Palmerston), understood what they were talking about, there was a very rational debate, which ended, as Mr. Punch thinks, in a very rational manner: that is to say, in the affirmation, by a large majority, that the introduction of the decimal system, by means of the florin, had worked satisfactorily. The public (including Lord Palmerston) must be made to comprehend the subject a little better before legislation proceeds further.



Actual Size: 19.8mm

Although 1971-dated coins were not legal tender until that year, the coins were circulated as early as 1968 to permit the public to familiarize themselves with the new money.

### A Perfect Puzzle

SIR JOHN F.W. Herschel, appointed Master of the Mint at its reorganization, had testified before the Commissions of 1841 and 1847 on the many advantages of a decimal currency, and again before the Select Committee of 1853. Despite his prestige and continued support, the Third Royal Commission of 1856 declined to recommend a new decimal coinage.

Parliament's opposition did not deter agitation by such organizations as the Decimal Association. Businessmen knew from experience that British commerce was hurt by the confusion engendered by such advertisements as appeared regularly in *Morgan's British Trade Circular*, advertising prices

with sums like 44s.6d. per cwt. -2s.1 ½d. per stone. And illiterate merchants in foreign countries, not knowing our mode of reckoning, are in a perfect puzzle as to what they would get for their goods.

Decimal proponents damaged their cause by associating a new currency with the movement for a universal currency, a 25-franc international monetary unit. Asking the British to give up their beloved shilling in favor of a "French" franc merged their regard for traditional British coinage with their insistence on remaining separate from the continent.

After the rejection of decimalization by the Fourth Royal Commission in 1920, official economic attention was devoted to restoring the value of the pound at home and abroad. There was little else closer to the hearts



IT WAS BELIEVED that the unsteady pound was yet another obstacle preventing entry into the Common Market and that decimalization would help stabilize the exchange rate.  
.....

of the British than the monetary system that had carried them through adversity and served them well for more than a thousand years. It was a system that had seen the Empire embrace the globe.

### The Political Virtues of Modernization

AFTER WORLD WAR II, the realization grew that decimalization and metrication were inevitable if England was to remain a world commercial power. Private groups continued to lobby the government and place their arguments before the public. The Board of Trade proposed a new currency as early as 1951, and support came several years later from the British Association for the Advancement of Science and from the Association of British Chambers of Commerce.

The value of the pound fluctuated widely during the 1960s, and British trade suffered in relation to the growing prosperity of the EEC. It was believed that the unsteady pound was yet another obstacle preventing entry into the Common Market and that decimalization would help stabilize the exchange rate.

The Committee of Inquiry on Decimal Currency (better known as the Halsbury Committee, after its chairman) was appointed on December 19, 1961. The decision to adopt a decimal currency seems to have been made *a priori*, even before the appointment of the committee. Its deliberations, in the course of 57 meetings, were guided by the assumption that currency reform was both needed and inevitable. The committee set out to determine how decimalization could be accomplished, under what form, and how much it would cost; the question of desirability did not arise. Its biggest challenge was determining the type of decimal system to be adopted, even as the Royal Mint once more began preparing pattern coins.

In contention for the standard unit were the traditional pound and the equally traditional 10-shilling note; other systems were discounted as impractical. The committee ultimately backed the pound unit on a four-to-two vote, "mainly because of Britain's position in international financing as head of the Sterling area. It was suggested that abandoning the pound would damage our position."

In March 1966 the Chancellor of the Exchequer officially announced that in 1971 Britain would convert to a decimal currency system based on a pound divided into 100 pennies. The florin, after a century, would finally take its place as an integral part of a British decimal coinage; the shilling would survive in theory as one-twentieth of a pound. The commit-

*continued on page 1165*



Actual Size: 16mm

Beginning with 1982 issues, the British Royal Mint no longer included the word "new" on its coinage. Since 1971 the word had appeared on new decimal coins to avoid confusion with Britain's out-dated currency.



## Great Britain Goes Decimal

*continued from page 1105*

tee's decision was reaffirmed in the Government White Paper of December 12, 1966.

The intimate connection between decimalization and entry into the EEC was lost on few Britons. Prime Minister Edward Heath considered it critical that Britain gain entrance to the EEC, even planning another overture at the time of decimal conversion, ironically known as "D-Day." It was even suggested that decimalization would "help us get into Europe by showing that the British are willing to conform even at great inconvenience," and that the very term D-Day was appropriate.

Voicing an opinion for the other side, Mrs. Isabel Merrett, writing to

*The Times* in October 1969 to complain about the the anticipated increase in laundry prices under decimalization, noted that

The Changeover to the metric system is going to cost a vast sum, which will, of course, be recouped by increasing the cost of everything. This is all a part of the Campaign to get Britain into the Common Market—but the electorate has not been given a single opportunity of expressing an opinion on these matters.

... When the leaders of the three main parties seem hell-bent on getting us into Europe (and the decimal system), which, to many of us, is the first step towards completely destroying our British identity, how do those of us who totally disagree ... vote when the next General election comes?

The topic of EEC membership was studiously avoided by decimal proponents because of political implications. A century earlier decimalization had foundered on the issue of a common European currency. Decimalization and metrication by themselves continued to draw sufficient opposition without arousing the hostility of all Britons opposing connections with the Continent.

The Report of the Royal Commission in 1859 had rejected even considering the benefits enjoyed by other governments that had adopted decimal currencies, because "in almost every instance they were driven to a decimal system by the excessive confusion of their former coinage, or by desire of assimilating their practice to that of important contiguous states ..."

The cover of *Seaby's Coin and*

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*Medal Bulletin* in 1973 celebrated British entry into the EEC with photographs of coins from each member nation. It is no coincidence that every coin represented a decimal-denominated system.

### The Bureaucracy of Change

HALSBURY HAD CALLED for the creation of a Decimal Currency Board (DCB) in 1966 to direct the change and work out the myriad of details. The DCB was empowered to make decisions of timing, organization and direction of the government effort, as well as to advise the private sector. Lord Fiske, appointed DCB chairman, had been with the Bank of England and was now in private enterprise; Lord Erroll of Hale was a former president of the Board of Trade; Lord Halsbury was chancellor

of Brunel University; J.G. Bothwell was vice-chairman of the National Dock Labour Board; and H.G. Conway was a director of Rolls Royce, Ltd. With a staff of *only* 50, they directed the entire process of decimalization in England.

Empowered only to advise, the DCB was dependent on effective communications. Without enforcement authority, their charge to totally change national commercial habits was accomplished through existing organizations. The DCB also kept the public informed of the latest plans and developments. Their carefully controlled program of news releases kept decimalization in public view, but avoided a barrage of information too early in the process.

Every article repeated that February 15, 1971 (chosen in accordance

with Halsbury's conclusion that February was the quietest time for financial transactions), was to be the conversion date. The main educational effort was scheduled to follow Christmas 1970, when £800,000 would be spent on an advertising campaign that included mailing some 22 million pamphlets to British households.

### Proper Dividend for a Medium of Exchange

BRITISH CIRCULATING COINAGE in 1970 consisted of the following denominations:

Halfpenny	= 1/2 penny	= £ 1/480
Penny	= 1 d.	= £ 1/240
Threepence	= 3 pence	= £ 1/80
Sixpence	= 6 pence	= £ 1/40
Shilling	= 12 pence	= £ 1/20
Florin	= 24 pence	= £ 1/10
Halfcrown	= 30 pence	= £ 1/8

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Five-shilling crowns were last minted in 1960 and 1965. Gold sovereigns continued to be minted, but their intrinsic value made their legal-tender value irrelevant.

The public remained unconvinced that the proper decimal system had been chosen. Disagreement found expression in *The Times* and other newspapers until well after the new coins were in circulation. Letter writers complained about every aspect of the conversion to decimal coinage, but especially that the wrong standard had been chosen.

The Anti-Decimal Group Committee, led by economist/artist Elizabeth Abraham, distributed a pamphlet charging that decimalization was a ploy to mask inflation. The Duodecimal Society of Great Britain, concerned about the lack of public input, echoed the

fears of the Decimal Coinage Commissioners in 1859 that

Parliament has "decided" on what will prove to be the clumsiest currency in the world. . . . If there had been any concern at all for user interests it would have been realized that . . . a divisible number such as 12 is the proper dividend for a medium of exchange.

#### An Unpopular Name

EVEN AFTER THE decision was made to retain the pound as the decimal standard, the issue of naming the fractional units remained. There was some evidence that "cent" would not be a popular name in Britain, leading some to conclude that decimalization might be less acceptable if the minor unit of new currency had an unpopular name. The alternative name

chosen was "penny."

To avoid confusing the new decimal penny unit with the old sterling penny unit, the minor coins were to be denominated in "new pence." Traditionalists, however, were aghast that the wonderfully durable names of coins were being replaced by something as decidedly unromantic (albeit accurate) as "new pence." Even the worthily named florin, issued as the first decimal coin and with an exact new-pence equivalent, was to lose its name.

Cooler heads recognized that regardless of the system proposed, the advantages of decimalization, in any form, were obvious and welcomed by the majority of people in Britain. Parliament stood firm initially, having codified the recommendations of the

*continued on page 1173*

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## Great Britain Goes Decimal

*continued from page 1167*

Halsbury Committee in the Currency Acts of 1967 and 1969, and appointed standing committees for the exchange of information.

### Old Landmarks

THE SIXPENCE WAS perhaps the DCB's most formidable obstacle. Parliament's member from South Bedfordshire, Gwilym Roberts, pleaded for retention of the sixpence as an indispensable, humble coin that "played an important part in everyone's life." The move to save the sixpence at first was supported by vending machine companies, although they withdrew their support once actual conversion of coin mechanisms

began. Support for the sixpence also came from the masses, demonstrating the pervasive effect decimalization would have on every aspect of daily life, however mundane:

In their deliberations about the fate of the sixpence, have the government given any thought of the predicament of the hoards of people who save sixpences in whisky bottles? Do the Decimal Currency Board's plans include the cost of supplying us with replacement bottles of scotch with 5p-wide necks?

Such public backing forced the government in 1969 to request the DCB to reconsider the issue. Editorially, *The Times* supported the sixpence:

In spite of all Lord Halsbury's advice "not to look back nostalgically on the old duo-decimal system, but to

learn to think and plan decimally," there will still be need for old landmarks in the Brave New World of decimalization.

The DCB yielded to this demonstration of public pressure and announced that the sixpence would not be demonetized immediately after D-Day. The popular coin would circulate at a converted 2½ new pence.

### Designing the New Coins

THE DCB SOLICITED public input for the designs of the coming decimal coinage. In early 1967 the following advertisement appeared in several journals:

The Royal Mint, on behalf of the Royal Mint Advisory Committee, is inviting a number of artists of estab-

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lished reputation in coin and medal work to submit drawings and subsequently, if called upon, models for reverse designs for the forthcoming decimal coinage of the United Kingdom. The Advisory Committee will also welcome sketches from any artists, including those who have not yet done work for the Mint. . . .

The announcement was accompanied by a list of desired design characteristics and a chart showing the size of the anticipated denominations. Since the accepted definition of "artist" remains elusive, the public felt compelled to offer their suggestions.

Regardless, the eagerly awaited final designs were the work of the two Royal Mint engravers who had created the pattern coins prepared for the Halsbury Committee in 1962. Arnold Machin's portrait of Queen

Elizabeth II would grace the obverse, while the chosen reverse designs were the work of Christopher Ironside. The designs for the ½ new pence through 10 new pence were made public on February 15, 1968, exactly three years before D-Day.

Ironside employed traditional motifs for the coins, including the royal crown on the ½ new pence; a crowned portcullis, the badge of Henry VII, on the 1 new pence; three ostrich feathers, the badge of the Prince of Wales, on the 2 new pence; the Scottish crowned thistle on the 5 new pence; and the lion, part of Britain's coat of arms, on the 10 new pence. Bearing a large numeral as well as the legend NEW PENCE, the coins could not be mistaken for those of the old system.

*continued next month •*

*R. Bruce Korver has been involved in numismatics as both a hobbyist and a professional for more than 20 years. Under sponsorship of the American Bankers Association, he conducted research at the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Numismatics for an exhibit and book about American banking. He earned a master's degree in American history from the University of Colorado and recently was awarded a master of business administration from the University of Virginia. Currently, Korver is director of marketing for the COIN DEALER NEWSLETTER.*

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# Great Britain Goes Decimal

After 150 years' worth of proposals to convert Britain's currency to a decimal system, the change was finally effected on February 15, 1971.

by R. Bruce Korver  
ANA 72605



Actual size: 22mm

Following the decision to convert Britain's monetary system to a decimal one, the pound was retained as the basic unit of currency.



ON FEBRUARY 15, 1971—popularly known in Britain as “D-Day”—the United Kingdom officially adopted a decimal currency, marking the end of the pound-shilling-pence (£sd) monetary system that had developed over a millenium. The public was first alerted in 1964, when the Halsbury Committee's “favourable” report was accepted by Parliament. Over the next seven years, the competence exhibited in totally altering the monetary basis of their national economy—a change affecting every aspect of daily life—reflected well on Britain's ability to reconcile the forces of tradition and change.

In this second part of a two-part article (for Part 1, see July 1989, p. 1102), the author examines the obstacles facing the Decimal Currency Board (DCB), the organization officially charged with preparing the public for the conversion to a decimal monetary system, as Great Britain moved closer to D-Day.

## Clearly Labeled Decimal Prices

WITH PLANS FOR public awareness established, and with confidence that the Royal Mint could produce sufficient quantities of new coins, the DCB turned its principal attention to the business community. Corporations large and small were continually urged to plan ahead. Between April 1967 and January 1970, DCB staff members made 601 speaking engagements to commercial groups, with the pace quickening as D-Day approached.

DCB speakers reminded firms that new cash registers, adding machines and other calculators capable of recording decimal transactions would have to be procured well in advance of D-Day. The Halsbury Committee had estimated the cost of the entire conversion at £128 million, of which £80 million was allotted to machinery modification or replacement. Businessmen were warned that last-minute conversion costs would probably be





The British Royal Mint's Deputy Master, Dr. Jeremy Gerhard, looks on as Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales unveils a commemorative plaque marking the Mint's 1100th anniversary of coin production in 1986. Great Britain successfully converted to a decimal monetary system in 1971, gaining entry into the European Economic Community (now the European Community) shortly afterward.

much greater, and that laggards would doubtless find themselves at a commercial disadvantage.

Without the power to coerce businesses to develop any plan, much less a comprehensive one, the DCB expected intimations of lost profits to inspire timely action. In a warning delivered to a British Institute of Management conference, DCB Secretary Noel Moore predicted that companies with insufficient plans could suffer financial losses to their competitors. Lord Fiske reminded commercial audiences that during the Australian and New Zealand decimal conversions, shoppers showed a distinct preference for the well-organized shops having trained and informative staffs and clearly labeled decimal prices.

The sizable costs to be incurred by the business community were a matter of great concern to the Standing Committee on the Decimal Currency Bill of the House of Commons. Dick Taverne (Minister of State, Treasury) promised that an examination of tax relief for business would be made, but Parliament followed DCB's recommendation that businesses should absorb their own costs.

Retailers, meanwhile, had specific logistical concerns. Clerks had to be competent in both the old and new monetary systems, interchangeably for a time. Also, during the transition period, clerks would play a major role in educating any customers who were still confused. In a practical experiment conducted by the Fine Fare Supermarket Group in 1969, the check-out operation took 90 percent longer at first. Only familiarity could bring more acceptable results, and that meant practice before D-Day.

A survey taken in early 1969 revealed that approximately 20 percent of small shopkeepers still were not aware that D-Day would occur in Feb-



THE NATIONAL CHAMBER of Trade felt that businesses were properly preparing for conversion and that the small shops would soon "fall into line."

.....

Seaby's  
COIN & MEDAL  
Bulletin February 1973



The cover of *Seaby's Coin and Medal Bulletin* in 1973 celebrated British entry into the EEC with photographs of coins from each member nation. It is no coincidence that every coin represented a decimal-denominated system.

ruary 1971. To reinforce advance preparation, the DCB designated 1969 as the "Year of the Retailer." Films and booklets were made available, as were additional public speakers. The DCB film *All Change* and its pamphlets "Points for Businessmen," "New Money in Your Shop," "Cash Transactions During the Changeover," "Facts and Forecasts" and "Britain's New Coins" were all quite popular. Larger institutions, such as Sainsbury's, made their own training films for their employees, but the National Chamber of Trade criticized unauthorized booklets and films as inaccurate.

Some businesses used public interest in the new coinage to advantage, staging "Decimal Evenings." Specially invited customers were given plastic, decimal "coins" with which they could purchase products marked with decimal prices. Clerks obtained needed practice and stores gained valuable publicity.

A new survey taken in September 1970 showed that 20 percent of smaller companies were still unprepared for conversion. With D-Day less than six months away, *The Times* editorially condemned unreadiness as antisocial action. The Retail Distributors Association (RDA), however, believed that most department stores would be absolutely ready on D-Day. The RDA repeated its warning that the small shopkeeper would suffer the consequences of inaction. The National Chamber of Trade felt that businesses were properly preparing for conversion and that the small shops would soon "fall into line."

### Confusion You Could Bank On

A MAJOR PROBLEM facing the DCB was London's role as a world financial center. The large number of daily transactions necessitated a meticulously planned and executed conversion. The British Banker's Association (BBA) devised its plan with the DCB: banks would be closed from February 11-13, 1971, to all normal business, during which time the last of the remaining £sd checks would clear. After February 15, all checks were required to be drawn in decimal amounts.

To explain the process to banking customers, the BBA issued a series of four pamphlets, with the approval of the DCB. Seventeen million copies of "Your Bank Account and Decimal Currency," the most popular of the four, were distributed.

The bankers' plan, relatively logical and requiring little action from the public, still met with opposition. Alistair MacDonald, Parliament member

*continued on page 1349*



## Great Britain Goes Decimal

*continued from page 1272*

from Chislehurst, expressed the concern that the bank closings would increase burglaries against workers unable to quickly deposit their earnings. This, in turn, would be a concern for police, who had already predicted a rise in pedestrian deaths during the transition as a result of a general preoccupation with the examination and counting of change.

The DCB estimated that decimalization would cost the banking community £8 million for labor and machinery conversion. The use of computers alleviated much of the logistical burden of converting account balances. Computers also eased the process for the London Stock Exchange, whose tests were completed in January 1971.

## A Sneaking Feeling

THE PUBLIC VOICED concern that the inevitable confusion of conversion would be used to mask inflation or price gouging, assuming that merchants would consistently round prices up during repricing. The DCB expected prices to be rounded down as often as up, but the Trade Union Congress urged careful study of wage and dues conversion. Stockholders carefully watched the activities of the Stock Exchange for the reporting of dividend figures.

Numismatist Howard Linecar neatly summarized public feelings about decimalization in 1969, predicting that

once the British get used to the idea, it will make monetary life and international trading much more simple. It will also make life much more simple for the increasing number of

visitors to Britain. Even so, there is still a sneaking feeling in the back of the British mind that decimalization will result in an increase in the cost of living.

The DCB recognized public concern over this issue in its White Paper of January 22, 1969, but still did not feel it necessary to request enforcement powers. It was thought sufficient that

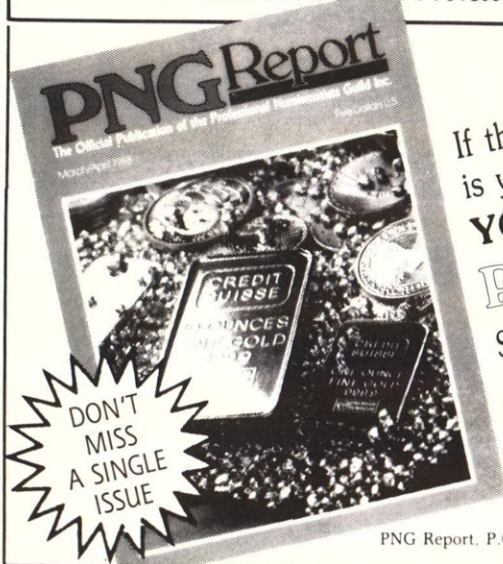
Businessmen and wage earners are sternly warned . . . that the Government will not tolerate the exploitation of decimalization by unjustified price and wage increases. . . . the changeover to a decimal currency will lead inescapably to adjustments in the price structure of some goods and services, but the Decimal Currency Board and the Government are satisfied that deci-

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malization need not lead to [an] overall increase in price levels.

### Handling and Distribution

TO ASSURE PUBLIC familiarity with all the new coin designs, the DCB announced that Royal Mint specimen sets dated 1971 would be available for sale on June 11, 1968. These first sets did not contain the 50 new pence coin, since its design had not yet been finalized, and three of the coins (the ½ new pence, 1 new pence and 2 new pence) would not be legal tender until D-Day.

The 5 new pence and 10 new pence pieces were placed in circulation during 1969 alongside their sterling equivalents, the shilling and the florin. In January 1970, fully one year before D-Day, bulk quantities of the non-legal-tender coins were made

available to commercial enterprises. Perhaps the DCB also was heartened by the news that decimal coins were so acceptable that counterfeits began appearing the year before D-Day.

(DCB concerns about inflation may not have extended to the pricing of the sets: the converted face value of the coins was just under 3s.8½d., and the set sold for 5s.6d. When challenged on the "excessive" markup, the DCB attributed it to "the cost of producing the wallets and card inserts, handling and distribution." Six million sets were sold, producing a tidy profit for the royal coffers.)

These specimen sets were obviously intended to be saved as souvenirs. However, businesses anxious to provide their clerks with practice in handling the new coins needed a more practical supply. In 1969 Invicta Plas-

tic, a private firm in Oadby, Leicester, began minting six million plastic replicas of the new coins every week, filling orders from educational authorities, industrial firms and retail establishments. Toy and game manufacturers also began stockpiling the plastic tokens, ensuring that board games for Britain would also go decimal on D-Day.

As D-Day neared, the Royal Mint stockpiled 3.4 billion decimal coins, including the 50 new pence piece featuring Britannia. Nearly all large businesses and most small ones were ready. A DCB survey in January 1971 showed that 73 percent of the population had no fears about the conversion, and 85 percent knew that 10 new pence equaled 2 shillings. Twenty-five million copies of the

*continued on page 1359*

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## Great Britain Goes Decimal

*continued from page 1350*

pamphlet "Your Guide to Decimal Currency" were printed, stockpiled and ready for posting.

The British postal system would convert to decimal-denominated stamps on D-Day, and adequate stocks of stamps were printed and distributed. The DCB had worked closely with postal authorities in planning for the massive mailing of pamphlets. For all of their reliance on the pamphlets, the DCB had never considered the possibility that their most important educational tool might be rendered useless.

The first real crisis facing the DCB occurred with an unanticipated postal workers' strike on January 20, 1971—less than one month before D-Day. Delivery of 20 million of the pamphlets was seriously delayed, and 5 million remained undelivered. The DCB was forced to increase its media expenditures, and *The Times* assumed an even more important communications role. On February 1, in an act of desperation, the DCB made the undelivered pamphlets available for public pickup.

### The Non-Event of 1971

LORD FISKE REMAINED confident that conversion would go smoothly. The public apparently shared the pride in an effortless conversion; according to *The Times*, it appeared that the decimalization program was "quite likely to go off without a hitch in the crucial final days," and in January 1970 was "already showing some pleasantly beneficial side effects."

On the day before D-Day, the DCB was happy to confirm that it knew of "no hitches. Nobody seems to be worried. We have had a few people ringing in, but it has been much

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Businesses, banks, post offices and rail service all went decimal on schedule. The terrorist action promised by the Anti-Decimal Group Committee consisted of pasting signs on buses. In its D-Day edition, *The Times* carried numerous articles and editorials concerning decimalization, but treated it as something less than the major news event of February 15, 1971. Calm acceptance was reported by banks, post offices, gas and electricity councils, retailers and industry.

On February 16 Lord Fiske reported that "the general picture is quite clear and . . . the smooth and efficient changeover [that] so many people have worked for is now in fact being achieved." *The Times* carried his statement on its front page, along with stories more concerned with the latest developments in the postal strike. By February 17 decimalization did not even make the front page. It appeared that Lord Fiske had accurately predicted that D-Day would be "the non-event of 1971."

British pride in having carried out such a monumental task was evidenced by their desire to view it as unnewsworthy. Other than a few complaints about clerks pocketing the new pound notes (instead of the traditionally stolen 10-shilling notes), and the failure to convert the mechanisms on some pay toilets, D-Day did in fact go off without a hitch.

#### A Lively Argument

AFTER THE SMOOTH passing of D-Day, the DCB's next concern was the length of the transition period, an issue over which there had been earlier speculation. Some felt that two years was an appropriate length of time, while others argued for a much shorter period. In Australia, for example, the change took 18 months instead of

the expected 2 years.

At the time of conversion, an enormous amount of £sd coinage was quickly removed from circulation, and, except for old shillings and sixpences—which the DCB allowed to remain in circulation—conversion from £sd to £p officially ended on August 31, 1971. It was commonly acknowledged, too, that the transition had been virtually completed by April, after only six weeks. The DCB dissolved itself on September 30, 1971, with great pride.

Certainly some Britons remained dissatisfied with their new currency, finding it hard to accept more than a year after the fact. In "Some Thoughts on Our Decimals," Robert Blackmore wrote, "Although they have been in circulation for about 15 months now, our decimal coins can still produce a lively argument in any bar. Feelings about them still run very high, and they seem to have very few defenders, being generally despised for their style and dimensions."

In the intervening years, British coinage designs have undergone minor changes. Meanwhile, the calls continue from the EC for a common European coin. Having survived conversion to a decimal monetary system, will it take the United Kingdom another millenium to heed the calls for decimalizing juries and time? •

*R. Bruce Korver has been involved in numismatics as both a hobbyist and a professional for more than 20 years. Under sponsorship of the American Bankers Association, he conducted research at the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Numismatics for an exhibit and book about American banking. He earned a master's degree in American history from the University of Colorado in 1973 and recently was awarded a master of business administration from the University of Virginia. Currently, Korver is director of marketing for the COIN DEALER NEWSLETTER.*