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Britain's Decimal Currency Title 216

On 15 February 1971, decimal coinage became (for the second time) legal tender in Britain, and four days earlier my historic article, entitled "A spot of trouble?" appeared in the *New Scientist* on page 320. It gave the history of the decimal point, from the earliest place notation and the invention of the figure '0' by an unknown Indian mathematician, through Napier's use of the decimal point in his *Constructio* of Logarithms (1619), through the establishment of the Metric System during the French Revolution, to the first English metric coin, the florin [one tenth of the Pound Sterling] permitted by the Metric Act of 1864, repealed after 14 years, and allowed again in 1897.

As a scientist I had of course used the metric system all my life in all my work, and I was an ardent supporter of its introduction to Great Britain, particularly as my friend and colleague, a science writer, Ritchie Calder (later Lord Ritchie-Calder) had been appointed Chairman of the Metrication Board in England. What interested me most was the history of the Metric System, and I was able to collect the primary literature on the subject.

As for example an original copy, 4 pages, of the French Law of 22 August 1790, when the King, Louis XVI, invited the King of England to support him in asking the British Parliament and the Royal Society to collaborate with the National Assembly of Paris and the French Academy of Science, jointly to fix the eternal standard for all weights and measures. Unfortunately this invitation was never accepted, and so French scientists alone measured carefully the length of a quarter of the meridian and laid down that one ten millionth of this length should be the meter. This original document was one of the most precious items in my collection of books on the history of science.

The conclusion of my article was an attempt to derive a lesson from this 200 year long struggle to introduce a new and better system of calculation to the people of Europe. (In France it had only taken 50 years!) It became quite obvious that men, and women are extremely reluctant to change anything, and if this change costs money, they will bitterly oppose it.

I then foresaw that a long-drawn out struggle would loom ahead for the introduction of an international European currency and that it would be quite impossible to use one of the existing currencies for it as the new unit. It had been equally impossible to use one of the many existing weights and measures in 1790 as the new standard, and a novel unit, the meter, had to be invented. At the time of writing these lines, the long struggle seems to come to a successful end and the invention of the new currency unit, the *Euro,* is simply repeating history. Instead of using gold for the security backing of the new currency, I even suggested that Plutonium, the most valuable of all man-made materials, should replace it!

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