

1.10 METRICATION

When the UK joined the EEC, one of the obligations it took on was to implement the EC Directives relating to units of measurement. The EC produced a number of Directives on this subject, culminating in Council Directive of 20 December 1979 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to units of measurement (No 80/181/EEC).

This Directive made it compulsory for EC Member States to use only metric units of measurement “for economic, public health, public safety or administrative purposes”.

A number of derogations were negotiated by various UK Governments, but finally, on 1st January 2000, it became mandatory to only use metric units for trade purposes. At first, enforcement of this compulsory metrication was patchy to say the least, and a number of high profile Court cases challenging the legality of compulsory metrication clouded the issue. Finally, however, on 3rd February 2004, the European Court of Human Rights issued a judgment that made it clear that compulsory metrication was lawful and that no individual had suffered a violation of the rights and freedoms set out in the European Convention on Human Rights. This ended any opposition and since then enforcement of metrication has gone ahead quietly and generally quite efficiently.

There is a little confusion still existing, due to one final concession negotiated in 1999. Under the concession, prepackaged goods marked with the quantity in metric units can also carry a “supplementary indication” of quantity in other units, such as the “lb” or the ounce. This was agreed basically to allow packers to dual mark products for sale in both Europe and USA, as the USA still requires pre-packs to be marked with quantity in imperial units. The concession for supplementary indications also means that it is possible for weighing instruments that indicate quantity in both metric units and imperial units **at the same time** to be Type Approved and then verified. What is clear is that weighing instruments that primarily indicate in Metric units, but can, by means of a push button or other command, indicate in Imperial units as an alternative, do not fulfill the supplementary indication criteria, and as such cannot be Type Approved or verified. The European Commission has now indicated that the concession to allow the use of supplementary units, which was due to end in 2010, will be made permanent.

As most beer drinkers will know, there is a notable exception to the compulsory use of metric units for trade purposes; the pint is still a legal unit for dispensing draught beer and cider, and strangely, it can still be used for selling pre-packed milk in returnable containers (bottles to you and me).

