

# WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

## Is Britain Metric?

Yes.

No.

Britain's relationship with the metric system is much like an old lady's relationship with a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman. Wait, I haven't finished. After peering suspiciously at him through the spy-hole for some minutes, she listens to the first part of his sales pitch through the letter box. Tired after a day of dusting, she resignedly unhooks one of many chains on the door and warily hears out the second segment of his routine through the inch of doorway she's made available. As she begins to unbolt the second chain, she knows in her heart of hearts that within ten minutes he's going to be making himself a cup of tea and strolling around her living room demonstrating the wonders of the Electrolux 5000. It's probably a fine device but oh, why all this change. Why all this upheaval? What was *wrong*?

The salesman has been strolling around the living room for several hundred years now, and Britain is pretty much metric apart from large distances, which are still measured in miles. There is also a large worn patch on the carpet. The food Brits buy in supermarkets is labelled in kilograms, although often they will show supplementary text showing the weight in pounds. Road signs, speed limits and such are measured in miles, but shorter distances are often measured in metres. Temperature is universally measured in Celsius, although people over fifty will quite often be more familiar with Fahrenheit.

It's more a question of when Britain will change to kilometres than whether they will, but it's quite possible that isn't going to be very soon. Swapping everything over is a considerable expense and given the British public's normal conservative reaction to change, it's going to be tough for any government to make a case for spending millions of pounds on messing around with road signs instead of finding a cure for cancer, doing something bad to the French or helping friendless despots invade other countries.

Weight for food and other household-type things is measured fairly ubiquitously in kilograms (kilos). Larger weights (cars and such) are measured in "tons." I put this in quotes because I think most Brits who use the term are unaware of whether they mean metric tonnes (1000kg) or imperial tons (2240lbs, or 1016kg). Weight of human beings, and only human beings, is measured in stones (14 lbs).

The curious end result of this semi-metric state is that British children learn all of the short distances in metric units and all of the long distances in miles. So whilst little Jimmy would know that his average stride took him 0.7 metres and that his house was a mile away, he'd sadly not have the faintest idea how to tell you how many steps it would take him to get home.