Let me tell you how it will be
There's one for you, nineteen for me
Cos I'm the taxman, yeah, I'm the taxman

Should five per cent appear too small
Be thankful I don't take it all
Cos I'm the taxman, yeah I'm the taxman

- George Harrison, “Taxman” 1966

For most of us, the opening lines to George Harrison’s Beatles song “Taxman” appear a bit obscure: “… one for you, nineteen for me …” In 1966, the allusion was utterly apparent to a pre-decimal Britain. Harold Wilson’s Labour government had just instituted a 95% supertax. In the days of shillings and pence a tax of 95% would have been clearly stated and understood as 19 shillings in the pound—19 for the taxman with one shilling remaining with the tax payer. Later on in the song, so as to accommodate those living in a decimal world, the conversion was made easier, “… should five per cent appear too small…” This “peculiar” structure of British currency, comprised of 12 pence to the shilling and 20 shillings to the pound, would remain in place until February 15, 1971 replaced with a decimalized pound with 100 new pence.

The pre-decimal system was both ancient and quite well suited to a pre-digital age. It was remarkably simple and efficient in transacting daily tasks in the local marketplace. First, we must understand that the pound sterling was a very considerable amount of money until quite recently. The actual means of daily exchange with shopkeepers and the like was most commonly the shilling. 12 pence to the shilling made daily market math simple. Half, quarter and thirds of a shilling were quickly calculated at 6 pence, 3 pence and 4 pence. In contrast, despite all of its digital finesse, a third-of-a-dollar has never been fully satisfactorily transacted.

Whatever its advantages, pre-decimal systems had been disappearing from the world’s economies, the United States being the first English speaking nation to decimalize in 1792. Canada followed in the mid-19th century. The South African rand was decimalized in 1961, Australia in 1966, and New Zealand following in 1967.

Prior to 1971, the UK certainly did entertain the possibility of decimalization. There were numerous commissions and proposals to evaluate the change as long ago as the 1820s. But no meaningful progress was made until the 1960s following the successful transition to decimal in South Africa. Since the South African transition went quite smoothly, there was added impetus back in the UK. The (Halsbury) Committee for the Inquiry on Decimal Currency was formed in 1961. After its report was rendered in
1963, Parliament approved the Decimal Currency Act in May 1969. The Decimal Currency Board was formed to manage the transition, the date for the switch-over being set for February 15, 1971, thereafter known as Decimal Day or more simply, D Day.

When we as philatelists and postal historians approach this transition, we must understand that this impending change in currency was no triviality. Age-old custom would change along with the intuitive understanding regarding money and value on the part of the populace. People instinctively understood the worth of half a crown (two shillings and sixpence or 2/6) or the relative value of the airmail rate to North America at 1/6, or to Australia at 1/9 versus the inland 1st class rate of 5d. This may appear hard for us, in today’s digital world, to understand, but for years afterward many Britons would ask “how much is that in the old money?”

The issues that confronted postal authorities ranged from transition dates, consideration relating the possibility of revision of stamp design, public and post office staff education and, not least of all, rate setting within a decimal context.

It was clearly inadvisable to totally switch the postal system over to decimal on a single day. That would have been an invitation for chaos. Instead there would be a transition over a 20-month period of time with three distinct phases. The intent was to help the public and the system adjust and adapt to the new currency.

Consequently there were three critical dates:

- June 17, 1970 — a set of high-value large-format Machins would be issued. These would be directly equivalent to pre-decimal values. Pre-Decimal rates and values would prevail across the system
- February 15, 1971 — a complete set of decimal stamps would be issued and rates would switch to a decimal basis. Pre-Decimal stamps would remain valid but their value would be calculated on a decimal basis
- February 29, 1972 — last day of pre-decimal validity. After this date all pre-existing pre-decimal denominated stamps would be demonetized and their use invalidated. With this, the changeover would be complete.

Given that all the planning for D Day was occurring in the late 1960s, we must recall that the new series of GB definitives, the Machin series, had just been introduced in 1967. If this design were retained, it would necessitate a revision sufficient such that inadvertent error would be minimized. Consequently, the decision was made to fundamentally change the color scheme of the stamps, including not only the colors themselves but also, in many instances, graduating the color in the background from left to right. By doing so, the new decimal range of Machins could be made sufficiently distinct from the preceding pre-decimals so as to forestall confusion and mistaken use.

The UK General Post Office (GPO) took the opportunity in the period leading up to decimalization to research a range of new colors for the decimal definitives. The Applied Psychology Unit of the Medical Research Council at Cambridge University was asked to help define the parameters for a new palette of colors. At least 61 trials were printed and evaluated. All the colors used in the new decimal range were selected from
these trials. Some trial colors appeared of issued stamps immediately, others only years afterward, some were discarded and never used. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1:** Three examples of Cambridge color trials prepared during the two years prior to decimalization. The 8d values were reserved for solid colors, the 1/- for light and graduated backgrounds and the 1/6 values for bi-colored proofs. Some of the colors tested were issued as part of the initial decimal sets, others much later and some colors were never use. The 8d Deep bright mauve shown here was “finally” issued in 1991 as a 39p. The 1/- Pale chestnut was part of the initial decimal set as a 7½p. The 1/6 deep ultramarine and pale bright blue color combination was never issued.

The changes to color were fundamental on several levels. The most common stamps used were those for inland 1st and 2nd class use. The color for these uses, in the pre-decimal range, were Stewart Blue (5d), a very dark, almost black blue, and Vermillion (4d). The new colors for the same classes of service, in the new decimal range, would be Ultramarine (3p) and Pale Magenta (2½p). The distinctiveness in these stamps is immediately apparent. And, to make this distinctiveness even more evident, the 2½p Pale Magenta has its color graduated in the background, serving to significantly lighten the overall appearance of the stamp. (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 2:** 1st and 2nd class stamps, in their last pre-decimal and first decimal form. The color transition was intended to be immediately apparent.
One of the consequences of all these color changes is that the entire Machin range was lightened and the colors appear brighter and more vibrant in the new decimal form than had been the case with the pre-decimals. The pre-decimals have an overall dark aspect to them. When there was a paper change shortly after decimalization, this color change is even more evident given the heightened whiteness aspect of the paper on which they were printed having been enhanced with more fluorescence in its composition.

![Figure 3: Typical mixed currency franking cover of the period with the machine cancel slogan urging postal patrons to prepare for decimal currency and to “Take a Leaflet”.

The impending change in currency did not occur in a vacuum. The entire country was changing, and the postal affairs were merely one part of the operation. Publicity and efforts to educate were wide-spread. A postal booklet was widely distributed, its purpose was to educate the public on the changes to postal currency, rates and new stamps. There was more to this educational process than just leaflets. Machine cancels would trumpet out the admonition “Postal Currency/in the Post Office/TAKE A LEAFLET”. This machine cancel is extremely common amongst covers from the period immediately prior to and after D Day (see Figure 3).

There was more than the British public that needed to be educated. Postal clerks needed training and a set of postal training labels, printed in the new decimal colors was produced in the values of 2p, 2½p, 3p, 3½ and 4p (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4: A marginal block of 4 of the Post Office training stamp for the new 1st class inland decimal rate.
Figure 5: Official GPO prepared FDC for the first issuance of UK decimal stamps, prior to D Day.

On 17 June 1970, the first step in postal decimalization occurred with the issuance of a set of high denomination (10p, 20p, and 50p) stamps in large format form as part of the Machin series. (see Figure 5) All three of these stamps had values that were simply and directly convertible into pre-decimal values. With a conversion rate of 100 new pence to 240 old pence, 10p is directly equivalent to 2/-, 20p to 4/- and 50p to 10/-.

Figure 6: Use of the new decimal high value stamps was largely confined to special services, heavier packets and the like. This item, used prior to D Day, required total franking of 7/6 (7 shillings and sixpence) comprised of a special delivery fee of 3/- and 4/6 for parcels weighting between 6 and 10 pounds. The three 10p stamps were worth in 6/- in combination, please note the pencil notation to this effect next to the 6d stamp.
As had always previously been somewhat of a convention, GB high-denomination stamps were not necessarily issued for "a purpose," at least explicitly. With the pre-decimal 1st class inland rate set at 5d and airmail to Australia at 1/9, there are no "simple" single uses for these stamps. They served to facilitate postage needs for double-rated use under registration, or heavy parcels and the like, and that is how we typically see them on cover prior to D Day. (see Figure 6) Consequently, "proper" commercial uses of these first GB decimal stamps are not easily found.

Figure 7: The pre-decimal airmail rate to North America being set at 1/6, the new 10p decimal could be used for a double rated cover sent airmail to the US. The 10p stamp here was equivalent to 2/- which in combination with the 1/- pre-decimal combines to fulfill the 3 shilling rate.

With the airmail rate to North America set at 1/6 (7½p), a double-rated cover comes to 3/- (15p), such could be franked with the 10p in combination with a 1/- stamp. (see figure 7) Double-rated airmail covers to the Pacific, mostly Australia and New Zealand can be seen. The single rate to the Pacific was 1/9 (9p), double rating coming to 3/6 (17½p), clearly permitting use on the 10p in combination with existing pre-decimals (see Figure 8).

At the time, the registration rate was 3/- (15p) which, if combined with airmail to either North America (1/6 or 7½p) or the Pacific (1/9 or 9p), can provide a use for the 20p. (See Figure 9.)

Given the rate structure at the time, uses for the 50p would be truly exceptional and this writer has yet to see a valid use for the 50p prior to 1971. Even heavy parcels would not come close to needing a 50p stamp. The rate for a parcel between 6 and 10 pounds was "only" 4/6 (22½p), and we would still have a long way to go to make 50p.

Naturally, prepared first day covers were made available by the GPO. British convention is for all the issues in a set to be present on prepared FDCs. Hence a FDC would have had the 10p, 20p and 50p stamps, aggregating to a face value of 80p. To-
day, 80p is not a terribly significant amount of money. But in 1971, a pint of beer in Central London would have cost roughly 2/- or 10p. Eighty new pence was equivalent to 16/-, or the cost of 8 pints of beer. At today’s typical price in London of £4.50 a pint, the franking value on these FDCs could be construed as equivalent to £36 in today’s money.
As D Day approached, many practical issues needed to be confronted. First amongst these was how to “translate” the soon be “old” pre-decimal values to decimal. Going from a pound of 240 old pence to 100 pence meant that the old pence would be worth 100/240 in new pence. As a practical matter, no value less then six old pence could be converted to new pence without truncation and loss of value. A shilling is equal to 5p, 6 pence to 2½p (the UK having a ½p coin at the time), but 5d is equal to 2.08333p and as a practical matter the fractional value is dropped. In the new decimal world, an old 5d stamp would be worth only 2p. The Post Office booklet provided extensive conversion tables for postal patrons. (See Figure 10.)

Figure 10: The GPO decimal currency leaflet had an easy to use chart to help postal patrons adjust to mixed currency use.
Figure 12: A FDC marking Decimal Day prepared by the Randall Postal Service, one of the many private carriers operating during the 1971 postal strike.

Figure 13: The only “official” UK postal system that continued to operate unimpeded during the 1971 postal strike was that operating by the British military. This is an officially prepared FDC marking D Day.

offices open, privately prepared FDC were produced and postmarked “on the day” by these small offices. (See Figure 14)

Given the strike situation which had been extended for seven weeks, upon their return, postal workers were presented with a literal mountain of mail and they had to cope with a fundamental change in currency. Postal patrons were asked to not only be patient as service was returned, but to defer asking the post office to handle troublesome pieces. In some instances, particularly with regard to misfranked pieces, the GPO delayed delivery until it could cope with the backlog and these pieces may lack a date and time stamp in the cancel, very unusual for UK mail. (See figure 15.)
Figure 14: The small Tayport station in Fife, Scotland. One of a relatively few number of small sub-offices that remained opened, most of which were operating by local grocery stores and the like.

Figure 15: Following the resolution of the 1971 postal strike, the authorities requested that patrons limit their mailings and seek not to overtax the system as work returned to normal. This cover having been posted bore insufficient postage as the two 2d stamps, now worth 1½p, in combination with the decimal ½p, did not yield sufficient value to make even a 2nd class rate.

Once back to work after the strike, postal clients and workers needed to contend with the new decimal denominated rates. Clearly, the new supplies of decimal stamps on hand for sale made this simple. Straight forward 1st and 2nd inland letters franked with the new 3p and 2½p stamps presented few issues for all involved. But what of the pre-decimals laying in desk drawers across the Nation? To run down already sold supplies of pre-decimals, the pre-decimals could be used either on their own (presuming sufficient franking) or in combination with new decimals. The most typical frankings to be seen are a 1p plus the old 5d 1st class stamp yielding a total franking of 3p, (see fig-
ure 16) or either the 1p with the 4p, or a ½p with the 5d to fulfill the 2nd class rate. Similar combinations would be suitable for overseas frankings and these are now most common in the country of their destination. Given the extent of the change, based on the relative lack of misfranked covers, the entire operation appears to have gone very smoothly.

Figure 16: A ‘classic’ example of a decimal transitionary mixed franking. The old 1st class stamp, the 5d in combination with a decimal 1p to make the new 3p 1st class rate.

Figure 17: We have a FDC canceled on the date in a small Welsh sub-office, the only stamp being the new 5p. The new decimal 1st class rate is 3p, the old pre-decimal rate having been 5d, is it possible that the postal patron got confused and thought that the value merely switched from “d” to “p”, or was it merely an accidental over franking?

Misfrankings there were. At this date, it is difficult to completely discern the intent of the postal client, but these range from confusing a decimal stamp for a pre-decimal stamp, using insufficient make-up value to achieve a rate, or the occasional use of obsolete rates. (See figure 17.)
Most remarkably, the Nation was in a position to demonetize the pre-decimals 12½ months after the introduction of decimal rates. From March 1, 1972, pre-decimal denominations would be marked as invalid. For inland mail, the GPO would process and charge the recipient at the 2nd class inland rate plus an equal amount as a penalty. Pre-decimals continued to show up in the mail stream for years thereafter, but now, so many years later, it would not be surprising for a pre-decimal to slip through given the lack of familiarity by postal workers today.

All in all, despite many potential obstacles, the long hoped for process of decimalization in the UK was conducted with efficiency and was swiftly executed and brought to a conclusion.

References:


Johnson, Ben, Decimalisation in Britain http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Decimalisation-in-Britain/


Lawrence Haber, a retired Swiss banker, is a member of too many of the principal philatelic societies both in the US and UK. In addition to his interest in UK decimalization, he collects and has exhibited across a wide variety of interests ranging from plate XI of the penny black, to the United States stamps and postal history of 1909, and to the pre-1996 range of GB Machins.