



COUNTING THE COST: And exactly how much is that in real money? Sorry, 'old money'

# Half a century on, I still sing a song of sixpence

It came as an unwelcome shock to learn that last week marked the 50th anniversary of the decimalisation of the currency. Where have the years gone?

I must emphasise that at the time, I was a VERY young primary school teacher with, I think, a P2 or P3 class and the 'new money' became part of the Maths curriculum. The children assimilated the system very quickly. I was the one with the difficulty. Moving from a base of 12 pence to one shilling, 20 shillings to one pound, to a base of 10 (which of course is considerably more simple) I found it psychologically impossible not to compare old and new values. I kept thinking, "How much is that in real money?" and the suspicion we were being royally rooked.

I hated the new currency. The coins were foreign-looking and tinny with no weight to them; the notes cheap and flimsy Bank of Toytown. The old coins were reassuringly heavy, which lent them a certain gravitas and had user-friendly names – the thruppenny bit, the tanner, the bob, the half-crown, the 10-bob note, the quid – and the big white fiver with its lovely calligraphy, 'I promise to pay the bearer...'

Upmarket shops sold their merchandise in guineas – a pound and a shilling. One of the memorable tragedies of my childhood was being sent on my scooter to the butcher's with a 10-shilling note which blew away. I never heard the end of it.

Bridie's wee shop at the bottom of our street was a magnet for the neighbourhood children. You could be sick for sixpence. A penny gobstopper and a penny chew, a penny Bubbly, four

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Black Jacks, four Fruit Salad – and a penny change. Alternatively, thruppence bought you two ounces of clove rock or brandy balls adhering stickily to the paper bag in a great warm clump in your pocket.

Once, a playmate and I pooled our Saturday sixpences and bought a shilling family-size block of ice-cream, divided it scrupulously fairly between two soup plates and made ourselves sick in style. It wasn't unusual for a neighbour to hail a random child in the street and dispatch it on some errand to a local shop with a note and some money. Parental permission was understood, on the grounds that you accepted no reward for 'goin' a message'. There was many an undeclared tuppence earned that way.

Visiting relatives might press a half-crown

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into your hand and fold your fingers over it with a conspiratorial wink – which didn't prevent it being wrested from you later by a suspicious parent and put in your moneybox, impregnable as Fort Knox. And so I grew in wisdom, age, a modicum of grace and no financial sense whatsoever. Daddy was always a soft touch. My mother less so, unreasonably wanting to know what the cash was for.

The first money of my very own was a student grant. One hundred and four pounds per term. Dizzy with Croesus-like riches, I walked into Robinson and Cleaver and bought an Italian leather handbag for three guineas. I have it still. Etam, Wallis and C&A got most of the rest. Were it not for the buff envelopes posted secretly by my father, I'd have starved. Thus I embarked upon my professional career at the princely salary of \$44 per month, which disappeared like snow off a ditch in a fortnight.

Meeting the Loving Spouse was the monetary making of me. A fortnight married, I went out to buy new curtains and came home with a dress. It was nearly the shortest marriage on record. A chastened woman, I became a pattern-card of financial rectitude. Alas, Daughter Dear inherited more of my genes than his. Shopping together I quote this mantra: "Let economy be your watchword." She responds with the immortal words of Dolly Levi, "Money's like manure. It ought to be spread around encouraging young things to grow."

To this day, I translate new to old currency. Seeing a chocolate muffin in a coffee shop at 75 pence, I still think, "Blimey! That's fifteen shillings – three quarters of a pound! Daylight robbery..."

## ON THIS DAY

FEBRUARY 23 1921

### Fermanagh Village Sacked

OUR Newbliss [Co Monaghan] correspondent writes: Following the shooting of George Lester, a Unionist merchant of Roslea, County Fermanagh who was fired at and wounded on Monday morning by three disguised men, wild scenes were enacted that night when the inhabitants were terrorised by shooting into houses. A large portion of the village was burned and a young man named Finegan, a member of the Ulster Volunteers from County Monaghan, lost his life by the accidental discharge of a rifle which he carried.

The trouble began about 10pm when a party of armed Volunteers from neighbouring districts entered the village and commenced firing shots. A reign of terror prevailed and matters became worse when lorries of Ulster Specials arrived some time later. The houses of prominent Catholics were visited and shots fired through the windows. Some of the terrified residents, getting out by the rear, fled to the hills and from there witnessed their houses bursting into flames. The first house set on fire was that of Philip Trainor which was burned out. Matthew Finnegan's fine drapery establishment was the next to suffer. In all, ten houses were burned.

When seen yesterday, the once neat and picturesque little mountainside town was enveloped in a blue smoke and on entering, one saw here and there a mass of smouldering ruins with bewildered inhabitants discussing the alarming happenings of the previous night. Mr Lester, who was shot and wounded, is now under treatment in Monaghan County Infirmary.

Roslea is a village of about 400 inhabitants, situated four miles from Clones, in County Fermanagh.

### Archbishop of Canterbury 'Uneasy' Over Ireland

IN the House of Lords yesterday, the Archbishop of Canterbury said that while condemning the wickedness of the murderous gangs whom the forces of the Crown had to oppose in Ireland, he was bewildered at the regular reprisals that were undertaken, not at the order of any high Government authority, but by independent bodies of inadequately-disciplined men. (The sack of Roslea on the Fermanagh-Monaghan border followed the wounding of a leading Loyalist by the IRA. It was an early warning of the violence which would flare along the new boundary as the IRA and the USC confronted each other. The Roslea burnings by UVF provoked a series of reprisal burnings of Unionist farm-houses by the IRA. Finally, the spiral of tit-for-tat attacks was ended by a peace conference of the two sides in Clones. Meanwhile the Church of England hierarchy joined Asquith in denouncing the depredations of the Crown forces in Ireland. By June, Bonar Law, the Deputy PM, could speak of "a small war which we are losing".)

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