

Touchbutton

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Seven tenths and the trivia of numbers

Nearly all human beings, not just mathematicians, are fascinated by numbers, and we face a barrage of them in most walks of life, especially the financial world. Some numbers are so big nowadays that we need everyday examples to help us get to grips with them. In a previous Touchbutton we helped the reader better understand the physical volume of gold bullion ever mined by comparing its volume to water in Olympic sized swimming pools: just two and a half such pools would hold all of the gold ever mined.

Now everyone is at it. Prosecuting counsel in the case against Asil Nadir, who returned to the UK in 2010 to face the music in the British courts in connection with the collapse of Polly Peck, said that the money needed to balance Polly Peck's books at the time of its collapse would need a stack of banknotes 300 times higher than Nelson's Column. This was subsequently ridiculed by Nadir's defence QC, who crammed 2 billion Turkish lira into a wheelee suitcase and produced it in court a couple of weeks ago. Turkish lira aren't worth what they once were, but the point was nevertheless made.

Also circulating last week were rumours that Samsung had paid its \$1bn fine for patent infringements to Apple nickels – 5 cents coins. This wasn't true, not least because it is only a judge's ruling at this stage, and is not yet even payable. The rumours suggested that Samsung turned up with 30 trucks full of 20 billion nickels to settle the fine. Had they done so, they would have seriously underpaid: a nickel weighs 5g and it would need 2,755 18 wheeler trucks to deliver the bounty. There are not reckoned to be that number of nickels in circulation in the US anyway! According to the US Treasury website, however, nickels would at least count as Legal Tender. In the UK, a 5p piece is only considered Legal Tender for transactions up to £5 (a handy piece of knowledge for Trivial Pursuit players).

Closer to home, what about our government spending? We all know the numbers roughly, but the one to make you wince is that our government is spending a shade over £1million a minute, night and day. Obama's original trillion dollar rescue plan, if stacked up into a pile as dollar bills, would take you 67,000 miles, which is around a quarter of the way to the moon.

Seven tenths? An easy one: it's the proportion of the earth's actual surface covered by water, and, by happy coincidence, the proportion of our bodies made up of water.



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