

Tuppence

Tuesday, 1st August 2017

Quite a few years ago I arrived back in England after a long stay overseas. As I left the airport I went into a newsagent's and picked up a newspaper and a magazine to read on the train and I took them to the cash desk. The total came to £4.02. As I handed over a ten pound note, I said to the man at the till, "I can give you the odd tuppence, if you like". A man standing behind me, waiting to pay for his evening paper, chuckled and said, "It's many years since I've heard someone use the word **tuppence**."



I had to laugh too. When you live overseas—I lived in Africa for about twenty years, with only brief visits to the UK—you end up using some words and expressions that people in general no longer use.

But what is this word **tuppence**, and why don't people use it these days?

To answer that question you need to go back to the time before 15th February 1971. That day, known as Decimal day, was when we in the UK changed from a complex currency system to a 'decimal' one. I won't go into the details now, but there are two important things to note: firstly, the pound itself didn't change and, secondly, pennies *did*. Before decimal day there were **two hundred and forty pennies**—or pence—in a pound and since then there have been **one hundred new pence** in a pound.

The old penny was not only smaller in value than the new penny, but the coin was also much larger in size. To avoid confusion between the two kinds of penny, they used different symbols. The symbol for the new penny, the one still in use today, is **p**. For example, a copy of the **i** newspaper currently costs **50p**.

The symbol for the pre-1971 penny was **d**. That may seem odd, but apparently it came not from the English word **penny** but the Latin word **denarius**.

During my time in primary school I learned the old, complex, system. Part of that was how we talked about money. For the small amount of **2d** (two old pence) we used the name **twopence**. The word **twopence** was pronounced **tuppence**, and sometimes it is written that way too.

In general people have stopped using the word **tuppence**, and in the UK you are now more likely to hear people saying **two p** ("two pee").



Why am I talking about tuppence now?

Not many people use the word tuppence to talk about money these days, but the word **tuppence** does have another meaning. You use it to talk about **something small and insignificant**, especially in these phrases:

“**This thing’s not worth tuppence**” = This thing has almost no value.

“**I don’t care tuppence about his problems.**” = I am really not interested in his problems.

This was brought home to me today when I checked my bank account online. Each month I record the amount of interest the bank pays me, and these figures go onto my tax returns at the end of the year. We’ve all been frustrated by the falling interest rates paid by banks, but today it really struck me: on the first of August my English bank credited me with the princely sum of **tuppence**! No further comment.

The tuppenny stop

When I was at primary school we used to travel to school in the next village by bus. The bus fare used to cost **3d** each way. (And, if you’re interested, that amount of money was called **Threepence** or **Thruppence**).



But sometimes when I went to play with friends after school, we used to get off the bus one stop earlier—what we used to call the **tuppenny stop**. By walking a few hundred yards we managed to save a penny and that was enough to buy us a few sweets at the newsagent’s near my friend’s house.



Recently the word **tuppence** has come back into circulation. Over the last few years the actress **Tuppence Middleton** has been appearing on our screens in films like **The Imitation Game (2012)**. Apparently the name came from a nickname which her mother had had when she was a child.