

Decimals and Decimalisation

Introduction "Let me see," says the clown in Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale." "Let me see:—every 'leven wether tods; every tod yields—pound and odd shilling; fifteen hundred shorn, what comes the wool to?" Then, after a pause, he adds: "I cannot do't without counters." The sum is not a hard one now-a-days. Eleven sheep give a tod (i.e. 28 lbs.) of wool, worth £1. 1s. 0d., what will fifteen hundred yield? Evidently £1500, plus 1500s., or £75; together £1575, divided by eleven, which, in 33 figures, gives £143 3s. 7½d. In this country it would be still more simply solved. Eleven sheep produce wool worth \$5.11, so the answer comes at once, $\$5.11 \times 1500 \div 11 = \696.82 , which needs no reduction.

The young man, though "a plain fellow," and easily cozened by Autolycus, had a fair education, of a rustic kind. Indeed the implication is evident, that he could do the sum with counters, which few, if any, of us could manage. Thus, on reflection, we shall see that in these few simple words we are brought close to one of the chief reforms of recent times, viz.: the use in arithmetic, not merely of decimals, but even of the figures we now employ. They may serve then as a fitting text for a disquisition, in which, after a brief glance at the history of decimal notation, and at what has been already accomplished in light-