

MONEY MYTHS

THE MYTH: ACCORDING TO SOME US FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANS, THE RETAIL BARCODES USED ON CONSUMER PRODUCTS ALL CONTAIN THE DIGITS 666 – THE BIBLICAL NUMBER OF THE BEAST. THIS, THEY CLAIM, FULFILLS A PROPHECY IN THE BOOK OF REVELATIONS.

THE REALITY: Turn to the front of this issue and direct your eyes to the bottom right-hand corner.

There you will find a barcode setting out *Inside Money's* particulars in machine-readable form. At the beginning, middle and end of the code, as with all barcodes, you will find three double lines which are longer than their companions.

According to some fundamentalist Christians in the US, these lines read electronically as 666 – the number of the beast. They base this view on Revelations 13:17, which says: "And that no man shall buy or sell, save that he had the mark, or the name of the Beast, or the number of his name . . . and his number is six hundred, threescore and six."

This, the theory's supporters would have you believe, firmly establishes either (a) that late 20th century capitalism is underpinned by dark Satanic forces, or (b) that we are living in the last days before armageddon.

Peter Hicks, managing director of barcode equipment manufacturer Axicon says the story of what he calls "the hex" has been doing the rounds ever since he can remember. In fact, Hicks explains, the three sets of longer lines on a barcode perform no more sinister a function than to divide the code in half.

The seven digits to the left of the central dividing line carry details of product's manufacturer, while the six which appear to the right concern that specific product.

The longer lines simply tell the scanner it has reached the beginning and end of each section, and have no numerical meaning.

The barcode rumours provide a bizarre echo of an earlier scare, when fundamentalists claimed to detect the figures 666 in the curls of the old man's beard which appears in consumer products giant Proctor & Gamble's corporate logo. P&G's products include Crest toothpaste, Pampers nappies and Tide detergent.

The rumours started in 1982, when leaflets started to appear around the USA claiming that P&G's chairman had appeared on a TV chat show discussing his support for satanism and announcing that the company had donated 10 per cent of its profits to satanist causes. A series of consumer boycotts of P&G products followed.

According to Jan Harold Brunvand,

the world's leading authority on urban myths, calls to the company's Cincinnati head office enquiring about the rumour peaked at 500 a day during June 1982, when 15 telephone operators were employed full time just to deal with them.

Brunvand explains that the P&G trademark actually dates back to 1851, when it started life as a crudely-drawn cross inside a circle, and was used to mark shipments of the company's Star Candles.

This evolved into a fully-drawn star, which later became 13 stars to represent the original 13 colonies. The man-in-the-moon figure was added at about the turn of the century, when it was as popular a design as the smiley face became in the 1960s. The modern version of the logo, incorporating all these elements, was designed in 1930.

Paul Slade

● For more details of the P&G logo row, see Jan Harold Brunvand's *The Choking Doberman* (Penguin 1987).

