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1 Identity: the foundations of British culture



1.1 Geography

It's the original island nation.

Standing aloof on Europe's western fringe,

battered by some of the world's roughest

seas, Britain has clung to its detachment

for centuries. From outside it looks

homogenous, defiantly separate from

continental Europe in body and soul.

However, step ashore and it dissolves into a

stew of landscapes, people and cultures.

1.1.1 Britain: what is it and what does it look like?

Table for four please

The British state harbours four nations – Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland – each with its own distinct culture. All four nations can be broken down further, into regions where landscape, language and lifestyle vary markedly. And then there's the dense historical jigsaw, from stone circles to ruined abbeys, each corner of Britain has its story to tell. Surely no other country so modest in scale is so regionally pronounced, so packed with cultural variety, so connected to its past yet steadfastly modern.

So, is it Britain, the United Kingdom or the British Isles?

The term Great Britain, or just Britain (or *Breatainn Mhòr* in Scottish Gaelic and *Prydain Fawr* in Welsh), is usually taken to mean England, Wales and Scotland. The United Kingdom throws Northern Ireland into the mix. The British Isles includes the Republic of Ireland and any island lumps surrounding mainland Britain. Informally – and for most Brits – the term Britain is taken to mean England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and is used as such throughout this book.

Small but beautiful: the lie of the land

Britain squeezes a pleasingly diverse landscape into its modest frame. Emily Brontë's feral moorland with its 'bare masses of stone' might sound a long way from William Blake's 'pleasant pastures', but they coexist closely and comfortably. If we're looking for a vague rule, the further north and west you travel the lumpier Britain gets. Fertile lowlands in south-eastern England are relieved by soft hills before the West Country breaks out into stretches of moorland. In northern England the Pennine hills form a spine running from the Peak District through the Dales up to the border country with Scotland, while the winsome peaks of the Lake District cover England's north-west. Much of Wales, to the west of England, and

Scotland, to the north, are mountainous. Scotland harbours the Highlands and Islands, rare in Britain for retaining an element of wilderness. Only these northerly uplands, rugged, boggy and cold, escaped the centuries of farming that tamed Britain's countryside, native deciduous forests included. Across the Irish Sea, west of southern Scotland, lies Northern Ireland, a land of bare, peaty hills encircling Lough Neigh, the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles.

Counting counties

Britain breaks down into a complex map of regions, counties, boroughs, districts, unitary authorities and parishes. Some are historic and familiar but unofficial; others are new and sanctioned by government but rarely used in conversation. Each of the four British nations has been divided into counties (so called because local regions were once controlled by counts (or earls)) for hundreds of years. England has 39 'historic' counties, each with its own cultural identity shaped by customs, accents and sporting teams. However, for the purposes of local government, the old, geographical arrangement of counties has been sliced and diced to accommodate metropolitan counties (urban zones that spread, connected, across the old boundaries) and unitary authorities. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have been similarly affected by modern reshuffling. In Wales the 13 historic counties were reduced to eight in the 1970s and then carved into 22 unitary authorities in 1996. In Northern Ireland the ratio is six old counties – still used in everyday chat by the majority – to 26 new district council areas. Scotland's current set up accommodates 32 council areas, although, again, the map of 34 old counties has more day-to-day resonance for most people.

Dear old Blighty

Blighty, a kindly term for Britain, was used first by soldiers in the Indian Army. It corrupts an Urdu word for 'foreigner', itself derivative of an Arabic term. Blighty entered common usage in the First World War, popularised in music hall songs like *Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty*.

The mother of all ditches

The borderlands between England and Wales are sometimes called the Welsh Marches. The term more often refers to the counties on the English side, namely Herefordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire. Offa's Dyke, the deep physical groove cut between England and Wales by Mercia's king in the eighth century, still runs through much of the Marches.

Iron in the soul

Northern Ireland is sometimes referred to as Ulster, one of the four aged provinces of Ireland (sharing its island with Leinster, Munster and Connacht). Ulster is actually larger than Northern Ireland, with only six of its nine counties falling within the state. 'Norn Iron' is a more informal, affectionate name for the province, a phonetic homeland homage made with a thick Ulster brogue. "We're not Brazil, we're Norn Iron," chant the sagacious football fans at Windsor Park.

Urban legends: British cities

Britain's cities are the product of organic growth, of building, demolition and rejuvenation over the course of centuries. Each has its personality, rapidly recognised through buildings, accents and vistas. London, the most multifaceted city and the biggest by impressive proportions (nearest rival Birmingham is a seventh of the size), is among the most multicultural cities on Earth, a flurry of ethnicities, creeds and nationalities. They're here because, most of the time, Europe's second largest city (Moscow is bigger) is a tolerant, rewarding place. Of course, like anywhere else it has its darker side – London's mixed cultural milieu doesn't translate to some social utopia, and deprivation can be high, often in areas where migrant communities reside in greatest number.

Some British cities – notably Bristol, Liverpool, Glasgow, Cardiff and Belfast – are defined by their waterside location. Built on maritime trade (including the profits of slavery), they've endured years of decline to resurface afresh, and now buzz with cultural life.



Only Belfast lags slightly behind. In the former engine room of industrial Britain, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle reinvent themselves with gentrification and cultural credibility yet retain something of the atmosphere that first made them great. In the West Midlands, Birmingham and Coventry were torn apart by the Luftwaffe in the Second World War before their architecture compounded their woe in the 1960s. Money is pouring in to make up for lost charm but it's slow going.

Where do the British live?

Over 80 per cent of Britain's inhabitants live in England. Around a third squeeze themselves into the south-eastern corner of England, and a snug 20 per cent or so live in or around London. As a whole, England has a population density of 984 sq/mile (380 sq/km) (three times the EU average); Scotland's is around 168 sq/mile (65 per sq/km) (one of Europe's lowest); Wales' comes in at 361 sq/mile (140 per sq/km); and Northern Ireland's is 315/sq mile (122 sq/km). Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Britain's

London in five songs

Waterloo Sunset

(1967) The Kinks.

I Don't Want to Go to Chelsea

(1978) Elvis Costello and the Attractions.

Down in the Tube Station at Midnight

(1978) The Jam.

Baker Street

(1978) Gerry Rafferty.

A Rainy Night in Soho

(1986) The Pogues.



predominantly urban population (four out of five people live in towns and cities) is seeping out to rural areas, reversing the migratory trends of the 19th and early to mid 20th centuries.

Cultural differences between town and country remain and mild sniping still occurs: 'townies' are rude and self-important; rural folk are unsophisticated bumpkins (these are the stereotypes). Occasionally the differences get drawn into wider spats. The debate over a ban on fox hunting with dogs (outlawed in 2005) was used by pro-hunt campaigners to shout about urbanites (and Westminster in particular) killing off the 'rural way of life'. Other episodes have brought a more balanced reflection on the urban/rural relationship: the foot and mouth crisis of 2001 found city, town and country folk alike in sympathy with rural communities, and reminded British people of the old, inescapable bonds between rural and urban life.

The island nation's main islands

Britain works to keep its myriad small islands in the fold, from the southerly Isle of Wight (where genuine natives are called Caulkheads) to the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland (closer to the Arctic Circle than London). Two island groups boast significant autonomy, claiming the status of Crown Dependencies, a standing that distinguishes them from overseas territories and colonies, and which allows them to pass their own laws, mint their own coins and to excuse themselves from being in both the UK (but not the British Isles!) and the EU.

The first, the Isle of Man, is an ancient Celtic outpost in the Irish Sea. It has its own parliament, the Tynwald (the longest running in the world) and gave the Bee Gees their first breath. The second, the Channel Islands, comprising Jersey, Guernsey and the rest are just off the coast of Normandy, France. Strange to think that Victor Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* in the British Isles whilst exiled on Guernsey.

What's the weather like?

Britain's climate can be a disappointingly tepid affair. It's often cited as unpredictable, and it is – rain and sun come in quick succession – but it's unpredictable within a rather predictable range. As an island lodged in the Gulf Stream's mild westerly flow, Britain is warmer than its northerly latitude would otherwise allow. It never gets painfully cold (winter temps rarely drop below minus ten Celsius), nor does it become truly hot (anything over 30 degrees is a rarity). In general, the west is wetter than the east, and also milder in winter and cooler in summer, although the differences aren't large. The further south you go the more sun you'll see, although if you get the right June day in northern Scotland you can enjoy a whopping 18 hours of sunshine. Upland areas, as you would expect, are colder and wetter: the very tops of the Scottish Highlands may retain snow throughout the year, although this is increasingly unusual. Snow can fall anywhere in winter but rarely stays for more than a couple of days at lower levels where it inevitably evokes media hysteria and transport chaos. But even while the weather isn't biblical, the British talent for talking about it surely is: it's the default icebreaker in conversation with friends or strangers.

Defoe's tour de storm force

Daniel Defoe's first book, *The Storm* (1704), reflected on the most severe storm ever recorded in Britain. With 120mph winds the Great Storm of November 1703 destroyed 13 Royal Navy ships, killed 8,000 people and deposited cows up trees.

Rivers of crud

The unusually hot summer of 1858 created The Great Stink, when the Thames, then recipient of London's untreated sewage (and the source of its drinking water), became a fetid, faeces-clogged hazard. The House of Commons soaked their curtains in chloride of lime to try and quell the stench. The city's modern sewerage system was duly initiated in the same year.

"THERE ARE TWO SEASONS IN SCOTLAND: JUNE AND WINTER."

Billy Connolly

Britain's vital statistics

Area 94,248 square miles (244,101 sq/km) (about half the size of France).

Length 840 miles (1,350km) from Lands End, Cornwall, to John O'Groats in Scotland.

Width just under 300 miles (480km) (and this is the widest point – you're never more than 77 miles (125km) from the sea).

Coastline 7,723 miles (12,429km).

Highest mountain Ben Nevis (Scotland) at 4,406ft (1,343m).

Population approximately 61 million (roughly 52 million in England, five million in Scotland, three million in Wales and 1.7 million in Northern Ireland).

Life expectancy 76 for men and 81 for women.

Hebrides, Bailey,
variable becoming south-
westerly three or four...

The shipping forecast drifts from the radio four times a day. It serves anyone brave enough to navigate the waters around the British Isles, yet has a mystical appeal that reaches well inland. With only 370 words to play with (including intro), the forecast sounds like a coded incantation (read slowly so that mariners may write it down) with its

outline of wind speed, sea state, weather and visibility (good, moderate, poor and fog). The region names, from Dogger to Lundy to German Bight (there are 31 in all, read in a set order), are strange but familiar to British ears, absorbed on childhood journeys in the back of the car, radio on. Many claim a haunting poetry for the shipping forecast, and its undulating metre has absorbed the great and the good of modern

lyricism, from Seamus Heaney (who wrote a sonnet, *The Shipping Forecast*) to Radiohead (they referenced the forecast on *Kid A*). The day's final reading of the forecast, delivered at 12.48am, is usually preceded by *Sailing By*, a dreamy string piece by Ronald Binge intended as an airwave beacon to sailors in search of the right radio frequency.

Local boys done good: extraordinary folk from ordinary places

Eric Clapton God to some, Slowhand to others and 'Our Eric' to the residents of Ripley, Surrey.

Anthony Minghella The late Oscar-winning director of *The English Patient* grew up above an ice cream shop on the Isle of Wight.

Dudley Moore The comedian, pianist and Hollywood star no doubt found his roots in Dagenham, Essex, useful for the Derek and Clive routines.

Bryan Ferry The Roxy Music frontman is a farmer's son from Washington, Tyne and Wear.

Richard Burton The boy from Pontrhydyfen, South Wales, became Hollywood's highest earner.

Billy Connolly Scotland's biggest comedian was a shipyard welder in his native Glasgow before turning entertainer, initially as a folk singer, in 1965.

Van Morrison The son of a Belfast shipyard worker and a singing tap dancer, George Ivan (van) worked as a window cleaner before climbing fame's ladder.



