



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Located in the British Isles, northwest of continental Europe, the United Kingdom (UK) is about the size of Oregon, at 94,058 square miles (243,610 square kilometers). The UK encompasses the entire island of Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) and an area in the northeastern part of the island of Ireland (Northern Ireland). The Republic of Ireland, an independent country, makes up the rest of the island. Scotland is home to the country's highest peak, Ben Nevis, which extends 4,408 feet (1,344 meters). The UK is bound by several bodies of water, including the North Sea, the Irish Sea, and the English Channel. Northern Ireland's coastline loses 714 acres (300 hectares) to erosion every year.

The climate, which is moderated by Gulf Stream currents, is temperate and wet. Weather changes are frequent. In the winter, temperatures rarely drop much below freezing, and summer temperatures average 60 to 70°F (15–21°C). Humidity levels, ranging from medium to high, can make it seem colder or warmer than temperatures indicate.

History

The earliest signs of human presence in Britain date back to 5000 BC; the oldest remaining structures (stone monuments, etc.) date back to 3000 BC. After reaching Britain in 55 BC and invading it in AD 43, the Romans incorporated the area into their empire and stayed until 410, when two Germanic tribes—the Angles and the Saxons—drove them out. Vikings raided the islands in the late eighth century and dominated

Britain for two centuries. Other groups also invaded. The last invasion was in 1066, when William of Normandy won the Battle of Hastings. The Norman Conquest ushered in a new period of great political and social change.

Through acts of union, Wales (1535), Scotland (1707), and Ireland (1801) joined England in a political union that became known as the United Kingdom. England established itself as a great naval power by defeating the mighty Spanish Armada in 1588. In 1689, Parliament passed the Bill of Rights, which established a constitutional monarchy with parliamentary limits on the king and queen.

The first nation to industrialize and to acquire colonies around the globe, Britain became the most powerful country in the world. Although Britain lost its U.S. colonies in 1776, it subsequently acquired new lands in the Mediterranean, North America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. The vastness of the empire during Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901) was reflected in the saying “The sun never sets on the British Empire.”

After World War I, most British colonial expansion stopped. During World War II, under the leadership of Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the British withstood intense Nazi bombings. After the war, Britain acceded to the demands of most of its colonies for independence and formed the Commonwealth. The majority of colonies remained voluntarily in the Commonwealth, and some even chose to retain Queen Elizabeth II as a nominal head of state. Britain was a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. It joined the precursor to the European Union (EU) in 1973. The UK established itself as a modern welfare state between 1945 and 1951.

In the late 1960s, Northern Ireland entered a prolonged period of violence known as “The Troubles.” Essentially, this was an intensification of a longstanding conflict between Catholics in Northern Ireland who wanted to unite with the Republic of Ireland (Irish Republicans, or Nationalists) and Protestants who supported the existing union with the UK (Unionists, or Loyalists). With no peace in sight, the British government began ruling Northern Ireland directly in 1972. After many failed negotiations between the two sides, the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 brought relative calm along with the potential of a devolved power-sharing government to the region. In 2005, the main Republican paramilitary group (the Irish Republican Army, or IRA) took the significant step of declaring an end to its armed campaign. In 2007, the IRA's political wing, Sinn Féin, and the main Unionist party, the Democratic Unionists, agreed to share power.

Under the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, the UK placed greater emphasis on the private sector. Elections in May 1997 brought Tony Blair's New Labour Party to power, ending 18 years of Conservative rule. Blair's decision to enter the war in Iraq was highly controversial in the UK. Gordon Brown took Blair's place as prime minister in 2007. The UK is still healing from the bombings of 7 July 2005, when suicide bombers with al-Qaeda connections attacked three subway trains and a bus, killing over 50 people and injuring 700. The 2008 global financial crisis hit the UK hard; in January 2009, the country's economy was officially declared to be in recession for the first time in 18 years. By the end of 2009, the economy was growing again. However, it is expected to take years to fully recover from the recession.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The population of the UK, a highly urbanized nation, is more than 62 million and is growing at 0.56 percent annually. Although the population is still predominantly Caucasian (92 percent), Britain's colonial heritage has brought many ethnicities together, especially in cities like London, Birmingham, and Bradford. However, as in other Western European countries, the government has recently passed laws to limit immigration. The biggest minority populations include black (2 percent), Indian (1.8 percent), and Pakistani (1.3 percent). More than 80 percent of the UK's inhabitants live in England. Scotland has the next largest population, followed by Wales and Northern Ireland. London is the capital of the UK, while the regional capitals are Edinburgh (Scotland), Cardiff (Wales), and Belfast (Northern Ireland).

Language

English is the official language of the UK. It often differs from the English used in the United States in terms of spelling, pronunciation, idiom, and intonation. A standard pronunciation—what is formally known as Received Pronunciation—has become much less common, as people now feel comfortable using their regional accents and dialects, of which there are hundreds.

In addition to English, various regional languages are spoken: Welsh (*Cymraeg*) in Wales, Irish Gaelic (*Gaeilge*) in Northern Ireland, and Scottish Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*) and Scots in Scotland. In general, these are first languages only among a small percentage of the rural population, though a growing number of people are choosing to learn them as second languages. Scots, however, is spoken widely and often interchangeably with English in Scotland.

Religion

In the 16th century, during the reign of Henry VIII, England split from the Roman Catholic Church to form the Church of England (Anglican Church). The Church of England no longer has political power, but the monarch is still officially the head of the church. The monarch does not, however, head the Church of Wales (an Anglican church with its own archbishop) or the Church of Scotland (a Presbyterian church). Today Anglicans and other Christians (Northern Ireland is 44 percent Catholic) make up the majority of the population. About 3 percent of the UK's population is Muslim, 1 percent is Hindu, 0.7 percent is Sikh, and 0.5 percent is Jewish. Many people claim no religion, and few of those that do are regular churchgoers. There is no longer a significant divide between Catholic and Protestant in England and Wales, but relations between the two religions remain a point of tension in Scotland and Northern Ireland. In recent years, conflicts have also surfaced between reformed, more liberal wings of Christian churches and orthodox, more traditional congregations.

General Attitudes

In general, Britons value moderate behavior and emotional reserve. They may be embarrassed by displays of emotion or excessive enthusiasm. The British tend to be rather self-deprecating with a somewhat cynical worldview and are known for a wry sense of humor. They are inclined to be suspicious of exaggerations and absolute statements. The dominance of the UK's traditional class system has begun to decline in the last generation. Nevertheless, social class can sometimes still be observed in people's accents, manners, and homes. Social status generally is defined by one's education and profession.

Scotland and Wales exhibit a strong sense of nationalism, their identity defined against the historically dominant culture of England. For many, England's own identity is less clear, and a strong sense of nationalism is often absent from the younger generations.

Personal Appearance

The British dress much the same as people do in the United States, except that fashion trends are more closely tied to Europe. Casual dress is the norm. Dress for dining out is less formal than it is in the rest of Europe. Business attire is conservative. In Wales, the national costume, most distinct for women, includes a tall black hat, white blouse, checked wool skirt, and red flannel shawl. It is worn only on ceremonial occasions. Scottish men often wear the traditional tartan kilt on formal occasions, particularly for weddings, graduations, banquets, and dances.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

A firm, but not aggressive, handshake is the most common form of greeting, whether for formal occasions, visits, or introductions. When people are already acquainted, they will often use verbal greetings instead. Among friends, women often are kissed lightly (by men and women) on one or both cheeks, though Scots tend to be less demonstrative. When passing a stranger on the street in the countryside, it is appropriate to smile and say *Hello*, *Good morning*, *Good afternoon*, or *Good evening*, if one establishes eye contact with that person. Such exchanges occur infrequently in large cities. Most people call friends and young people by first name but use titles (*Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Dr.*, etc.) in formal situations, though there is a growing trend toward using first names even in business situations.

Gestures

The British are in general a reserved people. They do not approve of loud or demonstrative behavior (except in very informal gatherings). However, the younger generations are often perceived to be far more boisterous and uninhibited than previous generations. People respect each other's personal space and feel uncomfortable when someone stands too close to them during conversation. British people often wave and shake hands, but they are slow to resort to more intimate gestures such as squeezing an elbow or placing an arm around another's neck. Manners are important though not followed as strictly among the younger generation.

Visiting

Lunch or dinner is usually by invitation. Guests may bring gifts, such as a bottle of wine, chocolates, or flowers. It is impolite to arrive more than a few minutes late to a meal. Because of work schedules, the English tradition of *tea* is no longer practiced widely, except among the older generation or when people are entertaining visitors or on vacation. Traditionally, *tea* is a 4 p.m. snack of tea, *buns* (cupcakes), or *biscuits* (cookies). The food, which sometimes includes salad or sandwiches, is often enough to constitute a meal. In Scotland, coffee at 11 a.m. has largely replaced the traditional *afternoon tea* at 3 p.m. Outside the home, most social interaction takes place in pubs (public houses). People go to pubs not only for drinks but also for meals and socializing. It is quite common for entire families to go to a pub.

Eating

The English eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Asking for and accepting second servings is appropriate. A person indicates that he or she is finished eating by placing the fork and knife together on the plate. *Dinner* refers to a large, cooked meal. Most people eat this meal in the evening, while older people eat dinner in the middle of the day. Though the traditional British breakfast is heavy, the trend has moved toward a lighter meal, often eaten on the run.

At a restaurant, diners summon a server by raising the hand or making eye contact. At the end of the meal, the server gives the bill to the person who requests it. A service charge is often added to the bill, so tipping is reserved for exceptional service. If a charge has not been added, a 10 percent tip is acceptable.

LIFESTYLE

Family

British families are small and tightly knit. The traditional family consists of a husband and wife with two or three children. However, this pattern is changing as fewer people marry. Those who do so marry later, tend to postpone parenthood, and have fewer children. Single-parent families are common, though not in Northern Ireland, where the divorce rate is very low. While reality differs from the traditional view of family, the idea of a small, close-knit nuclear family remains strong in today's Britons.

The husband is regarded as the head of the home among older couples, while younger couples are more likely to make decisions jointly and share household tasks, though women still have a greater share of domestic responsibilities and are still under more pressure to choose how they balance career and family. Since women are no longer financially dependent on men and there is little stigma associated with divorce, many people take the view that families in the UK now tend to stay together by choice rather than because they cannot afford to do otherwise or because of social pressures.

Relationships with extended family vary greatly from family to family. In some families, grandparents help look after children, particularly in families with a working single parent. Other extended families get together only for special occasions such as weddings, christenings, and funerals.

British parents tend to assume responsibility for their children, financially and emotionally, until the children have attained some independence through completing university or getting a job, typically in the late teens or early twenties. After retirement, most people remain financially independent. Grown children do not view caring for their aging parents as an absolute obligation. Elderly parents who are unable to live on their own may live with a grown child or in a retirement home. Many Britons struggle with the decision of how to care for aging parents. In general, there is no stigma associated with placing one's parents in a retirement home.

Housing

The British ideal is to have a house and garden. However, rising housing costs in England are making it increasingly difficult for younger people to buy homes, so more of them are renting or staying with their parents longer. Living in apartments (*flats*) is common only in large cities, where space is at a premium. Rows of *flats* may make up entire city blocks, or *flats* may be part of a converted house. *Flats* vary in size from one-room *bedsits* (a single room with a shared bathroom) and studios, to spacious *flats* with two or three bedrooms. Most suburban and town dwellers live in *terraced* (attached) houses or in semidetached or detached houses.

Houses are most often made of brick or cement, with a sloping, tiled roof. Some older houses are constructed of stone, and in the country a few still have thatched roofs. In towns, *terrace* houses are the most prevalent because they are the least expensive, though in Scotland *tenements* (four-storey apartment blocks) are more common. Houses are usually two storeys with two or three bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, a living room, and a *loft* (attic), as well as a yard and garage (pronounced “GA-ridge”).

Decorating trends change with the times. While in the past, floral patterns and carpeted floors were popular, present styles tend to be more modern and minimalist, heavily influenced by Scandinavian design. Furnishings tend to be bought for appearance rather than durability. Traditionally, particularly in *terraced* housing, the downstairs front room was often reserved for special occasions and receiving important guests. This tradition is less observed now.

Young people usually start out renting a room in a shared house or flat. When income allows or family situation changes, they usually move in to a place of their own. About 70 percent of Britons own the home in which they live. However, the rate of home ownership has begun to fall in recent years. Affording a place to live is becoming increasingly difficult for young people and low-income families. Until the 1980s, only a small minority of people owned their homes. The majority rented from a private landlord or lived in public housing subsidized by the local government. Since the 1980s, much of the stock of social housing has been sold off, and people have been encouraged to purchase property.

City planning in the UK sometimes appears haphazard. Most British towns and cities developed over many centuries, often growing up around a medieval road or a sea port. Consequently, the pattern of roads, lanes, and alleyways can be complex.

Dating and Marriage

Individuals usually come to know each other in the context of a social circle. Only as a relationship progresses do people begin to date apart from a group. Dating more than one person at a time is not acceptable. Most people start dating in their mid-teens. There is little expectation that these first relationships will lead to engagement or marriage. Once young people reach their late teens and early twenties, dating is seen more as an evaluation process to determine whether a relationship has long-term prospects. The majority of young people in Britain date a few different people before entering into a more committed relationship. Social circles widen as people's mobility increases. In recent years, internet dating and social networking have become popular ways for people to meet.

Taking a partner home to meet the family is a sign that a relationship is becoming serious. Most couples decide to live together before or instead of marrying. A person may legally marry at age 16, but today most people do not get married at all—at least not until they're much older and have been with a partner for several years. The wedding day is usually as lavish as the family can afford. Traditionally, the bride's family paid for the wedding, but this responsibility is now more likely to

be shared between both families and the couple themselves. If the couple is marrying in a religious ceremony, the legal and religious elements generally take place at the same time and place but are kept separate. After the religious part of the ceremony, the vows, and the exchange of rings, the couple goes to another room in the church to sign the register. Two witnesses and a registrar, representing the civil authorities, must be present. The bride generally wears a long white dress, and the groom wears a *morning suit* (a tuxedo with a top hat). Civil weddings are as common as weddings in churches or chapels. Receptions include an elaborate meal (for as many as two hundred guests), often held in a hotel, followed by dancing and speeches from the groom and the father of the bride and, last and most eagerly awaited, from the best man. The reception ends with the wedding cake—usually a rich fruitcake covered in marzipan and elaborately decorated white icing—from which the couple ceremoniously cut the first slice.

Life Cycle

The arrival of a new baby is a cause for celebration, but it is an event marked less formally than in the past. Celebrations surrounding a birth tend to be informal gatherings for family and friends. Guests are often served a *high tea* (a buffet of sandwiches, cakes, and pastries) at the new parents' house. Although church baptisms and christenings are still popular, for many in this increasingly secular society, these rituals are no longer considered necessary. The birth or christening of a baby is often marked by the newborn's father and his friends getting together to drink at a pub—a celebration sometimes called “wetting the baby's head.”

The transition from childhood to adulthood is generally recognized as occurring when a young person leaves the family home to go to university or to begin working. In recent years, those who can afford it go traveling during a *gap year* in between finishing secondary school and starting further education. Particularly for young men, the first trip to the pub is a significant step towards adulthood.

Funerals are formal, somber affairs. Mourners are generally stoic, avoiding overly emotional displays. After death, the body is taken to a funeral home, where it stays until the day of the funeral, when the coffin will usually be driven in a hearse to the home of the nearest relative. A slow procession of cars then drives to the church or crematorium where the funeral service is held.

Christian funerals are common, even for those who did not consider themselves religious. Services usually include hymns and speeches in which memories of the deceased are shared. Secular services are usually adapted to reflect the beliefs of the deceased through readings and songs. After the funeral service, relatives and friends accompany the hearse to the grave site. If the body is to be cremated, the coffin is present at the funeral and is then left at the crematorium. After the funeral, it is customary to have a small reception at a relative's home or a hotel, where guests have tea and a light buffet. In Northern Ireland, the observation of an often festive wake is common, with many families keeping the body of the deceased in the home the night before the funeral.

Hindus are cremated, not buried. The body is prepared at

the home of the nearest relative. Traditionally, Hindu cremations were required to take place within 24 hours of death. However, in the UK, this is not always possible, so cremations are scheduled for as soon as possible. The ashes are generally scattered over a local river or sent to India to be scattered on one of the sacred rivers. A 13-day mourning period follows the cremation.

After a Muslim dies, the body is wrapped in a clean, white sheet and prepared according to Islamic rites. Bodies are not embalmed or cremated. Mourners recite certain prayers, called *salat-al-janazah*, at the funeral to seek pardon for the deceased. Only men attend the burial. Graves may be marked, but decoration and any other construction at the grave is not permitted. After the burial, a three-day mourning period is observed.

Diet

A full traditional breakfast consists of bacon, sausages, baked beans, grilled or fried tomatoes, mushrooms, eggs, and bread fried in fat or oil. Fewer people now eat this heavy meal on a regular basis, preferring to stick with various combinations of cereal, toast, juice or fruit, and tea or coffee. Many traditional foods such as beef and potatoes have given way to poultry and pasta dishes. Fast food has also become more prevalent, and hamburger restaurants now rival the traditional *fish-and-chip* shops in popularity. Numerous Chinese and Indian restaurants and pizza houses provide *take-away* (take-out) service. Traditional English dishes include roast beef and *Yorkshire pudding* (a batter mixture baked in muffin form), as well as steak and kidney pie. Native to Wales are *cawl* (a soup) and *bara brith* (currant cake). The Scottish national dish is *haggis*, ground sheep entrails mixed with oats and spices, tied in a sheep's stomach, and cooked. In Northern Ireland, Irish stew, homemade tarts, and *pasties* (small meat pies) are traditional dishes. Dessert, commonly referred to as a *sweet* or *pudding*, is almost always served after a main meal.

Recreation

A variety of activities are enjoyed in the UK, where many of the world's favorite sports were developed. Although *football* (soccer) may have been invented elsewhere, English college students created the first standardized rules for the game, which is now the most popular sport in the UK. Most people have an allegiance to a professional *football* team, and *football* is a common conversation topic. *Football* transcends most social divides. Other sports are more closely aligned with class. *Snooker* (similar to pool), greyhound racing, and darts are considered more working-class sports, while tennis, cricket, and golf tend to be largely middle- and upper-class pursuits. Modern lawn tennis was first played in England, and modern boxing rules were developed there. The Scots invented golf in the 1500s. Rugby, the national sport of Wales, is also enjoyed. *Gaelic football* is popular in Northern Ireland and is a cross between soccer and rugby.

Young people enjoy playing computer games and interacting on social-networking websites. Watching television and going to the cinema are popular with people of all ages and backgrounds, whereas going to theater

performances is perceived as a middle-class activity. *Pantomimes*, lively stage plays with audience participation, are an exception to this rule. Families from all backgrounds attend these uniquely British performances in the months around Christmas. Gardening is a very popular leisure-time pursuit, particularly for the older generations. People take great pride in their garden's appearance and the quality of the things they grow. In some areas, people without their own space to garden can sign up for *allotments* (patches of land allocated by local government). Social drinking is common, particularly in pubs. The British pub is still a central part of leisure time.

Britons rank among the highest in the world in numbers of hours spent watching television. Movies, DVDs, and computer games are also popular. People often vacation during the summer months in Spain, France, and Greece. British seaside holidays are still common but less so than they once were. These holidays, at resorts on the English and Welsh coasts, are traditionally characterized by sunbathing on the beach, trips to funfairs, eating fish and chips and ice cream, and playing bingo.

The Arts

The UK has made significant and varied contributions in the arts. William Shakespeare is the most recognizable name from a long list of famous British authors, including Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Dylan Thomas, Robert Burns, Seamus Heaney, J. K. Rowling, and others. In the performing arts, the UK is widely recognized for its theater. London boasts some of the world's premier theaters, art galleries, and concert halls. British music has crossed a variety of time periods, styles, and genres, with works by artists such as Henry Purcell, Sir Edward Elgar, Benjamin Britten, and Brian Eno. Since the Beatles in the 1960s, British rock music has maintained a worldwide influence, with bands like Queen, Oasis, and Coldplay. Folk music is popular and is played with the following instruments: drums, pipes, violins, and accordions (Northern Ireland); bagpipes, the fiddle, the *clarsach* (a small harp), and the tin whistle (Scotland); and the harp (Wales). Scottish dances (the Eightsome Reel, the Gay Gordons, Strip the Willow, and others) are also prominent.

Holidays

The British have the fewest number of public holidays in Europe. They include New Year's Day, Good Friday and Easter Monday, May Day (1 May), spring and summer bank holidays, Christmas, and Boxing Day (26 Dec.).

One of the most important holidays in the UK is Christmas. Homes are decorated with holly, mistletoe, and Christmas trees a week or so before Christmas. The whole country virtually shuts down from Christmas Eve until 2 January. People send out greetings cards and exchange gifts. On Christmas Eve, Father Christmas brings presents after children are asleep. Father Christmas is almost identical to the American Santa Claus but also embodies some characteristics from Scandinavian *tomte* (elves). Traditionally, a turkey dinner was eaten on Christmas Day, though today it's common to serve other meats or fish. The table is decorated

with *crackers* (tubes of brightly colored paper with a gunpowder strip inside that snaps when the tube is pulled apart). Each *cracker* contains a paper hat, a small gift, and a joke, which people read aloud over dinner. For dessert, most families have Christmas pudding, a rich, solid fruit pudding. A sprig of holly is stuck into the pudding, which is then topped with brandy and set on fire.

Guy Fawkes' Night, or Bonfire Night, is celebrated on 5 November. The holiday commemorates the failure of a 1605 plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament and the subsequent execution of the plot's ringleader, Guy Fawkes. On the night of 5 November, bonfires are built in backyards and public parks. Fireworks are lit after dark. Effigies of Guy Fawkes are made and later burned on the bonfires. Traditionally, children took the effigies door to door, asking for "a penny for the Guy." While many who celebrate Guy Fawkes' Night are not fully aware of its origins, it is a festive and widely celebrated event. It is often unclear whether the day celebrates the plot's failure or the revolutionary sentiment behind the plot's formation.

In Wales, St. David's Day (which honors the patron saint of Wales) is popular, and in Scotland, St. Andrew's Day (which honors the patron saint of Scotland) and Burns' Night (celebrating the birthday of Scottish poet Robert Burns) are widely celebrated. Northern Ireland celebrates St. Patrick's Day (17 March), as do people elsewhere in the UK and throughout the world. St. George's Day (23 April) honors the patron saint of England. The last night of the Proms (a series of classical performances held in London) is a nationwide celebration. On this night, flags are flown and patriotic songs are sung. The event is televised, and a parallel open-air concert goes on in Hyde Park.

Northern Ireland observes the Battle of the Boyne (12 July), a major part of week-long Orange Day festivities. Boxing Day is named for the tradition of giving small boxed gifts to servants and tradesmen. It is now a day for visiting friends and family. English holidays that are celebrated but not treated as days off from work include the Queen's Birthday (second Saturday in June) and Remembrance Day (the closest Sunday to 11 November), which celebrates the end of World War I.

SOCIETY

Government

Britain has no written constitution. The constitutional arrangements are the result of legislation, common law, and precedent. Today, the monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, is head of state but has no real political power. The House of Commons is the main legislative body. It has 650 members elected by popular vote to five-year terms. Parliament's upper chamber, the House of Lords, currently has more than 700 members. Members of the House of Lords are not directly elected. Most are appointed, while others are elected internally or are leaders of the Catholic Church. The number of members varies because some members are appointed as life peers, meaning they serve until their death. The chamber's chief legislative role is to send problematic legislation back to the

House of Commons for a second look. After an election, the party with the most members of Parliament (MPs) forms the government. That party's leader becomes the prime minister (who is officially appointed by the Queen). The prime minister (currently David Cameron) and cabinet govern as the executive body. Elections take place at least every five years but can be called by the prime minister at any time before that. There are no limits to the number of terms the prime minister can serve. The voting age is 18.

In 1999, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland set up their own governments with limited powers over issues such as health and education. The Northern Ireland Assembly was reopened in 2006 after a four-year suspension.

Economy

Despite the recent recession, the UK remains a global economic power with one of the largest economies in Europe. Most Britons enjoy a good standard of living, although there is a fairly large gap between the middle and working classes. Inflation and unemployment are low. Britain does most of its trading within the EU. Natural resources include oil, natural gas, iron ore, and salt. Crude oil (from the North Sea), manufactured goods, and consumer items make up major exports. The service sector is now more dominant than manufacturing, and London is one of the world's most important financial centers. When major British banks were hurt by the 2008 global financial crisis, the government responded with a US\$64 billion rescue package, among other measures. The UK's currency is the *pound sterling* (GBP), usually just called the "pound." British people remain divided over whether to adopt the European Union's monetary unit, the euro.

Transportation and Communications

Outside of cities, travel by road is the most favored method of transportation. The British drive on the left side of the road, and a car's steering wheel is on the right side of the car. Taxis are common in the cities. Public transportation is well developed in most urban areas. London's subway is called the *Tube* or the *Underground*. Buses and trains service major cities, but public transport in rural areas is not as extensive. Domestic and international air travel is well developed. London's Heathrow Airport is one of the busiest in the world. The Channel Tunnel (or Chunnel) connects England and France by rail under the English Channel. The tunnel offers a three-hour ride between London and Paris (about 35 minutes in the actual tunnel) for passengers, freight, and private cars.

Telecommunications are advanced, with fiber optic cable links and satellite systems. Nearly all British homes have telephones and televisions, and many have broadband internet. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a publicly funded and government-regulated multimedia provider. Daily newspapers are available throughout the nation. Most phone calls, including local calls, are billed according to the length of the call. Mobile phones now outnumber traditional land lines.

Education

A large portion of British tax revenues go toward education.

Education is free until the age of 18 and compulsory for students between ages 5 and 16. A new law plans to raise the age of students leaving school from 16 to 17 by 2013 and to 18 by 2015. In Northern Ireland, performance on a difficult government-sponsored exam at age 11 largely determines whether students will begin preparing for university or for a profession or trade. Most instruction is given in English, but Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland also offer it in Welsh, Gaelic, and Irish, respectively.

A grade level is called a *form* or, more commonly, a *year*. Most children will attend three different types of schools: an infant or primary school (ages 5 to 7), a junior or middle school (ages 8 to 11), and a senior or secondary school (ages 12 to 16). Public schools are called *state schools*, and private schools may be called *independent schools* or *public schools*. At age 16, students take an exam to earn the General Certificate of Secondary Education. Scotland has different examinations as part of its separate education system. Many schools receive special funding in order to develop an area of specialty, such as music or technology. Students may apply to go to certain schools in whose specialty they are particularly interested. At 18, students may take the General Certificate of Education (or *A-levels*), which is used as an entrance exam by Britain's universities and colleges. In addition to more than 80 universities and various professional schools, the UK has an Open University, which offers correspondence and broadcast courses.

Health

Britain's National Health Service (NHS) provides free medical treatment and many other social services funded by the central government. Individuals only pay for prescriptions and some dental services. Though the increasing cost of financing the NHS is in some ways a burden for the country, high quality care and facilities are available and most Britons feel a certain pride in the NHS. Private care is also available, and some people now have private insurance to avoid long waits for surgical treatment covered by the NHS. Waiting times for hospital treatment are some of the longest in Europe.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

The British Embassy, 3100 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 588-6500; web site <http://ukinusa.fc.gov.uk>. Visit Britain, phone (800) 462-2748; web site www.visitbritain.com.

POPULATION & AREA

| | |
|---------------|----------------------|
| Population | 62,348,447 (rank=22) |
| Area, sq. mi. | 94,058 (rank=79) |
| Area, sq. km. | 243,610 |

DEVELOPMENT DATA

| | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Human Dev. Index* rank | 26 of 182 countries |
| Gender inequality rank | 32 of 155 countries |
| Real GDP per capita | \$34,200 |
| Adult literacy rate | 99% (male); 99% (female) |
| Infant mortality rate | 5 per 1,000 births |
| Life expectancy | 78 (male); 82 (female) |

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).



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 789 East Eisenhower Parkway
 Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
 Toll Free: 1.800.521.3042
 Fax: 1.800.864.0019
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