



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Located in the British Isles, northwest of continental Europe, the United Kingdom (UK) is slightly larger than Uganda and about the same size as the U.S. state of Oregon. 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 Scottish Highlands are home to the country's highest peak, Ben Nevis, which extends 4,412 feet (1,345 meters), as well as the country's deepest lake, Loch Morar, which is 1,017 feet (310 meters) deep. The UK is bound by several bodies of water, including the North Sea, the Irish Sea, and the English Channel. About 20 percent of Northern Ireland's coastline experiences 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

Foreign Invasions and the United Kingdom

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 (UK). 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 Colonial Era and World Wars

The first nation to industrialize and one of the first 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, the UK acceded to the demands of most of its colonies for independence and formed the Commonwealth of Nations. The majority of colonies remained voluntarily in the Commonwealth, and some even chose to retain Queen Elizabeth II as a nominal head of state.

The UK 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.

Irish Conflict

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 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 to the region along with the potential of a devolved power-sharing government. 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.

Modern Politics

Despite its reduced role since World War II, the UK, with one of the world's biggest economies and most power militaries, has remained influential on the world stage in the 21st century. Yet the nation has experienced significant domestic hardships in recent years. The 2008 global financial crisis and the deep economic recession that followed hit the UK hard. In response, the government implemented a deficit-reduction program, which cut funding for social-welfare programs as well as local governments and increased taxes on most goods and services. Although the austerity measures helped stabilize the nation's finances, many people saw their quality of life deteriorate, and dissatisfaction with the UK's political establishment grew.

This public frustration also fueled bitter division over the UK's membership in the EU. Those who opposed membership saw the EU as a foreign bureaucracy threatening the UK's sovereignty, particularly in areas such as industry regulations and immigration. Those who supported membership saw the EU as vital to the health of the UK economy. In a contentious national referendum in 2016, a narrow majority of British voters supported Britain's departure from the EU, known popularly as Brexit. Following the vote, the country spent several years in political debate over the terms of a withdrawal agreement before officially leaving the EU in January 2020. After the withdrawal, the UK government continues to renegotiate its relationships with the EU and with other economic partners and to manage Brexit's economic and cultural effects at home.

THE PEOPLE

Population

The United Kingdom (UK) is a highly urbanized nation. Although the population is still predominantly Caucasian (87 percent), the UK's colonial heritage has brought many ethnicities together, especially in cities like London, Birmingham, and Bradford. The biggest minority populations

include Black (3 percent), Indian (2 percent), and Pakistani (2 percent). The UK's membership in the European Union (EU) also contributed to its diverse population; as the EU expanded to include more countries, many immigrants from Eastern Europe moved to the UK. However, as in other Western European countries, the government has recently passed laws to limit immigration. Migration from EU countries has declined since the UK initiated its plan to withdraw from the arrangement, but the number of migrants from non-EU countries has increased.

The majority 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). More than 9 million people live in London.

Language

English is the main language of the United Kingdom. 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 dozens. Many Britons have come to prefer the authenticity of a local accent.

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 make up the majority of the population. About 4 percent of the United Kingdom's population is Muslim and 1 percent is Hindu. Other religions include Sikhism and Judaism. About 26 percent 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 United Kingdom'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. However, inherited position is still an important factor; social mobility is somewhat limited by one's family history.

Scottish and Welsh people 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, and fashion is influenced by U.S. media, such as movies and TV shows, particularly among Britons in their teens and twenties.

Among other groups, 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. Hugging has become quite common between friends and family of both sexes. Younger males often greet each other with handshakes or by slapping each other's hands.

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.

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. In rural areas, many pubs are family friendly, but pubs usually require children under 16 to be accompanied by an adult.

Eating

The British 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 when eating at a friend's home. A person indicates that he or she is finished eating by placing the fork and knife together on the plate.

Because of changing work schedules and lifestyles, the English tradition of *tea* is no longer practiced widely—in some circles, the practice is obsolete. Office workers usually take a 15-minute break in the late morning and then an hour for lunch between noon and 2 p.m. Another 15-minute break is taken around 3 p.m.

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. When eating out, the person who extended the invitation usually attempts to pay for the whole meal, but friends often argue good-naturedly over who should pay.

LIFESTYLE

Family Structure

British families are normally small. The average family consists of a pair of spouses with one or two children. However, this pattern is changing as fewer people marry. Today, many children are born to single or cohabitating parents; however, the idea of a small, close-knit nuclear family remains strong in today's Britons.

Relationships with extended family vary greatly from family to family. In the United Kingdom (UK), it is very rare for three generations to live in the same home, a practice that is more common in other countries. However, 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.

Parents and Children

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. At this point, children are generally expected to leave the family home.

Grown children do not view caring for their aging parents as an absolute obligation. Although most people remain financially independent after retirement, 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.

Gender Roles

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. Women have a greater share of domestic responsibilities and are 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. Legally, estates and titles of nobility can only be passed down to male heirs in England, though recent legislation allows the monarch's firstborn to inherit the throne regardless of gender.

Housing

Urban

Living in apartments (*flats*) is common 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. *Bedsits* may have a fridge and freezer, as well as an oven, but some *bedsits* share a communal kitchen instead.

City planning in the United Kingdom (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. In the 1960s, a number of "new towns" (suburbs for the growing population) were built; these areas have a more organized layout.

Suburban

Most suburban and town dwellers live in *terraced* (attached) houses or in semidetached or detached houses. 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.

Exteriors

Houses are most often made of brick or cement, with a sloping, tiled roof. Some older houses are constructed of stone, and in the countryside a few still have thatched roofs. Houses are usually two storeys and have a yard and garage (pronounced "GA-ridge").

Interiors

Houses typically have two or three bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, a living room, and a *loft* (attic). 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 guests. This tradition is almost obsolete now.

Ownership

The British ideal is to have a house and garden. However, rising housing costs across the UK make it increasingly difficult for younger people to buy homes, so more of them are renting or staying with their parents longer.

Young people usually start out renting a room in a shared house or *flat*. When income allows or family situation changes, they usually move into a place of their own.

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.

Today, the majority of Britons own the home in which they live. The rate of home ownership had fallen considerably, but has been back on the rise in recent years. Affording a place to live is becoming increasingly difficult for young people and low-income families.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Individuals usually come to know each other in the context of a social circle. Social circles widen as people's mobility increases. In recent years, internet dating and social networking have become popular ways for people to meet. 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 the United Kingdom date a few different people before entering into a more committed relationship. Taking a partner home to meet the family is a sign that a relationship is becoming serious.

Marriage in Society

Most couples decide to live together before or instead of marrying. A person may legally marry at age 18, or age 16

with parental consent, but today a growing number of the population does not get married at all—at least not until they are much older and have been with a partner for several years.

Same-sex marriage has been allowed in England, Scotland, and Wales since 2014. However, it was legalized in Northern Ireland in 2020.

Weddings

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.

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.

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.

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

Birth

Some pregnant women hold a celebration similar to a baby shower; friends and family give cards or presents to celebrate the future birth. Some women, however, consider it bad luck to celebrate during a pregnancy. 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' home. Guests usually give presents to the new parents.

Although church baptisms and christenings are still popular, these rituals are no longer considered necessary by many in this increasingly secular society. 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.”

Mothers are entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave, 39 partially paid and 13 unpaid. Fathers may take up to 2 weeks of partially paid paternity leave.

Milestones

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 toward adulthood (although many youth drink illegally as young as age 14 or 15).

Death

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 is usually 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, holding 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 United Kingdom, this is not always feasible, 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 person 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. Microwave dinners can be found in grocery stores, and common choices include fish, chicken, pizza, pasta, and Indian dishes.

Traditional English dishes include roast beef and *Yorkshire pudding* (a batter mixture usually 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 the main meal.

Recreation

Sports

A variety of activities are enjoyed in the United Kingdom (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.

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.

Although *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.

Leisure

Britons rank among the highest in the world in numbers of hours spent watching television. Popular shows include soap operas, reality TV shows, game shows, and hospital and police dramas. The British soap opera *Coronation Street* is the longest running soap opera in the world. Britons also enjoy movies and televised sporting events. Young people like playing computer games and interacting on social networking web sites.

Whereas watching television and going to the cinema are popular with people of all ages and backgrounds, going to theater performances is perceived as a middle-class activity. *Pantomimes* are an exception to this rule; these lively and humorous stage plays are based on famous stories or fables and include audience participation. 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.

Vacation

People often vacation during the summer months in Spain, Portugal, Turkey, France, and Greece. Cheap flights to foreign destinations have caused a decline in British seaside holidays along the English and Welsh coasts. These seaside holidays are traditionally characterized by sunbathing on the beach, trips to funfairs, eating fish and chips and ice cream, and playing bingo.

The Arts

The United Kingdom (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, George Eliot, 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. Every summer, the British enjoy BBC Proms, a series of classical music performances held at the Royal Albert Hall. On the last night of Proms, flags are flown and patriotic songs are sung. The event is televised, and a parallel open-air concert takes place in Hyde Park.

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 (1 January), Good Friday and Easter Monday, May Day (1 May), spring and summer bank holidays, Christmas (25 December), and Boxing Day (26 December).

In Wales, Saint David's Day (which honors the patron saint of Wales on 1 March) is popular, and in Scotland, Saint Andrew's Day (which honors the patron saint of Scotland on 30 November) and Burns' Night (celebrating the birthday of Scottish poet Robert Burns on 25 January) are widely celebrated. Northern Ireland celebrates Saint Patrick's Day (17 March), as do people elsewhere in the United Kingdom (UK) and throughout the world, and observes the Battle of the Boyne (12 July), a holiday that celebrates the victory of Protestant king William of Orange over the Catholic king James II in 1690. Large immigrant communities also celebrate their own holidays, such as the Islamic holidays *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha* and the Hindu holiday *Diwali*.

Christmas

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 greeting cards and exchange gifts.

On Christmas Eve, Father Christmas brings presents after children are asleep. Father Christmas is almost identical to the U.S. American Santa Claus.

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

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. It is often unclear whether the day celebrates the plot's failure or the revolutionary sentiment behind the plot's formation. While many who celebrate Guy Fawkes' Night are not fully aware of its origins, it is a festive and widely celebrated event.

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."

English Celebrations

Boxing Day is named for the tradition of giving small boxed gifts to servants and tradesmen. Held on 26 December, it is now a day for visiting friends and family (or recovering from the excesses of Christmas Day). Saint George's Day (23 April) honors the patron saint of England. Other 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.

Additional Holidays

Although the UK is a Christian-majority country, freedom of religion allows the nation's diverse population to observe their own religious holidays. The two largest Islamic holidays are *Eid al-Fitr* (celebrating the end of the holy month of *Ramadan*) and *Eid al-Adha* (celebrating the prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son). Hindus celebrate *Diwali*, the Festival of Lights, which honors the triumph of light over darkness.

SOCIETY

Government

The United Kingdom has no written constitution. The constitutional arrangements are the result of legislation, common law, and precedent. Today, the monarch, King Charles III, is head of state but has limited 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, has several hundred members. Members of the House of Lords are not directly elected. Most are appointed, while others are elected internally or are leaders of the Church of England. 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 King). The prime minister 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. Voter turnout typically averages about 62 percent of registered voters. 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.

Economy

Public debt and the nation's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) pose major challenges for the United Kingdom's (UK) economy. Nevertheless, the UK remains a global economic power with one of the largest economies in Europe. The country serves as a global financial center and lead trading power. Most Britons enjoy a good standard of living, although there is a fairly large gap between the middle and working classes. Unemployment is lower than in many of the UK's neighbors, though inflation is slightly higher than average.

The UK does about half of its trading with the EU. Other major trading partners include the United States and China. 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. Agriculture employs less than 2 percent of the labor force but provides a majority of the UK's food needs because it is highly mechanized and efficient. The UK uses the *pound sterling* (GBP), usually just called the *pound*, as its currency.

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. Most families have at least one car, especially rural residents, who don't have easy access to public transportation. 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. 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 televisions and telephones. Most phone calls, including local calls, are billed according to the length of the call. Cellular phones greatly outnumber traditional landlines. Many homes have broadband internet. Freedom of the press is guaranteed by law and is generally respected, though incitement of religious hatred or violence is considered a criminal act. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a publicly funded

and government-regulated multimedia provider. Daily newspapers are available throughout the nation.

Education

Structure and Access

A large portion of British tax revenues goes toward education. Education is compulsory from ages 5 to 15. After that, students may choose to attend sixth form in preparation for university.

A grade level is called a *form* or, more commonly, a *year*. Most children attend at least two different types of schools: a primary school (from ages 5–10) and a secondary school (starting at age 11). As an alternative to primary school, many children attend an infants' school (ages 5–7) and then a junior school (ages 7–11). Public schools are called *state schools*, and private schools may be called *independent schools* or *public schools*. Education is free in *state schools*.

At age 16, students take an exam to earn the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). In Northern Ireland, many grammar schools have their own entrance exams. Scotland has a single set of national exams (called Highers) at the end of secondary education that play a role in university entrance.

School Life

Most instruction is given in English, but Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland also offer it in Welsh, Gaelic, and Irish, respectively. 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. The Scottish school curriculum tends to focus on a broad education, rather than specializing in a particular subject. Most schools require uniforms, which are often navy blue or gray.

Higher Education

At 18, students may take the General Certificate of Education (or *A-levels*), which is used as an entrance exam by the United Kingdom's (UK) universities and colleges. In addition to more than one hundred universities and various professional schools, the UK has an Open University, which offers correspondence and broadcast courses.

Health

The United Kingdom'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.

In early 2020, the United Kingdom reported its first cases of the coronavirus-caused COVID-19. Despite measures to control the spread of COVID-19, the pandemic greatly impacted the NHS, as demand for health care significantly increased.

Contact Information

The British Embassy, 3100 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 588-6500; web site www.gov.uk/world/organisations/british-embassy-washington. Visit Britain, phone (800) 462-2748; web site www.visitbritain.com.

Country and Development Data

Capital	London
Population	68,138,484 (rank=22)
Area (sq. mi.)	94,058 (rank=78)
Area (sq. km.)	243,610
Human Development Index	17 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	27 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$46,800
Adult Literacy	NA
Infant Mortality	3.8 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	79 (male); 83 (female)
Currency	Pound Sterling

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