

BRITISH CULTURE & SOCIETY I

An Introduction to Great Britain

Great Britain, officially United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, constitutional monarchy (2011 pop. 63,181,775), on the British Isles, off W Europe. The country is often referred to simply as Britain. Technically, Great Britain comprises England (1991 pop. 46,382,050); Wales (1991 pop. 2,798,200); and Scotland (1991 pop. 4,957,000), on the island of Great Britain, while the United Kingdom includes Great Britain as well as Northern Ireland (1991 pop. 1,577,836), on the island of Ireland. The Isle of Man (1991 pop. 69,788), in the Irish Sea and the Channel Islands (1991 pop. 145,821), in the English Channel, are dependencies of the crown, with their own systems of government. The capital of Great Britain and its largest city is [London](#).

People

Great Britain is the fourth most populous country in Europe. Those of English descent constitute about 77% of the nation's inhabitants. The Scottish make up 8%, and there are smaller groups of Welsh (about 4.5%) and Irish (2.7%) descent. Great Britain's population has shown increasing ethnic diversity since the 1970s, when people from the West Indies, India, Pakistan, Africa, and China began immigrating; in the early 21st cent., and these groups accounted for more than 5% of the population. There is also a significant minority of Poles, who arrived after Poland joined the European Union. English is the universal language of Great Britain. In addition, about a quarter of the inhabitants of Wales speak Welsh and there are about 60,000 speakers of the Scottish form of Gaelic in Scotland.

The Church of England, also called the Anglican Church, is the officially established church in England (it was disestablished in Wales in 1914); the monarch is its supreme governor. The Presbyterian Church of Scotland is legally established in Scotland. There is complete religious freedom throughout Great Britain. By far the greatest number of Britons (some 27 million) are Anglicans, followed by Roman Catholics and other Christians. There are smaller minorities of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and Buddhists.



Government

Great Britain is a constitutional monarchy. The constitution exists in no one document but is a centuries-old accumulation of statutes, judicial decisions, usage, and tradition. The hereditary monarch, who must belong to the Church of England according to the Act of Settlement of 1701, is almost entirely limited to exercising ceremonial functions as the head of state.

Sovereignty rests in Parliament, which consists of the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and the crown. Effective power resides in the Commons, whose 650 members are elected from single-member constituencies. The executive—the cabinet of ministers headed by the prime minister, who is the head of government—is usually drawn from the party holding the most seats in the Commons; the monarch usually asks the leader of the majority party to be prime minister. Historically, the hereditary and life peers of the realm, high officials of the Church of England, and the lords of appeal (who exercised judicial functions until a Supreme Court was established in 2009) had the right to sit in the House of Lords, but in 1999 both houses voted to strip most hereditary peers of their right to sit and vote in the chamber. Most legislation originates in the Commons. The House of Lords may take a part in shaping legislation, but it cannot permanently block a bill passed by the Commons, and it has no authority

over money bills. The crown need not assent to all legislation, but assent has not been withheld since 1707.

Since 1999 both Scotland and Wales have assumed some regional governmental powers through the institution of a parliament and an assembly, respectively. In addition, Northern Ireland has had home rule through a parliament or assembly at various times since the early 20th cent. The introduction of Scottish and Welsh representative assemblies has raised the question of whether England should have its own parliament, separate from that of the United Kingdom, with powers similar to those of the Scottish body, or of whether Scottish and Welsh members of the British parliament should be barred from voting on matters that affect England only. The issue is controversial, with some fearing that the establishment of a parliament for England would ultimately lead to the dissolution of the United Kingdom.

The two main parties are the [Conservative party](#), descended from the old Tory party, and the [Labour party](#), which was organized in 1906 and is moderately socialist. The [Liberal Democrats](#), formed by the merger of the [Liberal party](#) and the [Social Democratic party](#), is a weaker third party. Both Scotland and Wales have nationalist parties whose goal is the independence of those respective regions.



Economy

About 25% of Britain's land is arable, and almost half is suitable for meadows and pastures. Its agriculture is highly mechanized and extremely productive; about 2% of the labor force produces 60% percent of the country's food needs. Barley, wheat, rapeseed, potatoes, sugar beets, fruits, and vegetables are the main crops. The widespread dairy industry produces milk, eggs, and cheese. Beef cattle and large numbers of sheep, as well as poultry and pigs, are raised throughout much of the country. There is also a sizable fishing industry, with cod, haddock, mackerel, whiting, trout, salmon, and shellfish making up the bulk of the catch.

Great Britain is one of the world's leading industrialized nations. It has achieved this position despite the lack of most raw materials needed for industry. It must also import 40% of its food supplies. Thus, its prosperity has been dependent upon the export of manufactured goods in exchange for raw materials and foodstuffs. Within the manufacturing sector, the largest industries include machine tools; electric power, automation, and railroad equipment; ships; aircraft; motor vehicles and parts; electronic and communications equipment; metals; chemicals; coal; petroleum; paper and printing; food processing; textiles; and clothing.

During the 1970s and 80s, nearly 3.5 million manufacturing jobs were lost, but in the 1990s over 3.5 million jobs were created in service-related industries. By the early 21st cent., banking, insurance, business services, and other service industries accounted for almost three fourths of the gross domestic product and employed 80% of the workforce. This trend was also reflected in a shift in Great Britain's economic base, which has benefited the southeast, southwest, and Midlands regions of the country, while the north of England and Northern Ireland have been hard hit by the changing economy.

The main industrial and commercial areas are the great conurbations, where about one third of the country's population lives. The administrative and financial center and most important port is Greater London, which also has various manufacturing industries. London is Europe's foremost financial city. Great Britain has abundant supplies of coal, oil, and natural gas. Production of oil from

offshore wells in the North Sea began in 1975, and the country is self-sufficient in petroleum. Other mineral resources include iron ore, tin, limestone, salt, china clay, oil shale, gypsum, and lead.

The country's chief exports are manufactured goods, fuels, chemicals, food and beverages, and tobacco. The chief imports are manufactured goods, machinery, fuels, and foodstuffs. Since the early 1970s, Great Britain's trade focus has shifted from the United States to the European Union, which now accounts for over 50% of its trade. The United States, Germany, France, and the Netherlands are the main trading partners, and the Commonwealth countries are also important.

Vocabulary Check

Write the English meaning for the following words taken from the text:

- a) accumulation _____
- b) sovereignty _____
- c) controversial _____
- d) barred _____
- e) diversity _____
- f) abundant _____
- g) foremost _____
- h) chief _____
- i) prosperity _____
- j) arable _____
- k) originates _____
- l) populous _____
- m) assent _____

Comprehension Questions

Write the answer to the following questions in your own words with a sentence:

- 1) What 2 recent changes has there been to the British population?

2) How has the British constitution been made?

3) How has Britain changed since 1999?

4) Why is the subject of an English parliament so controversial?

5) How are Scottish & Welsh political parties different to those in England?

6) How was the British economy able to prosper?

7) How is London important outside UK?

8) How has employment in UK changed?

9) How have British trade & exports changed? Why do you think so?

