

# History

It may be a small island on the edge of Europe, but Britain was never on the sidelines of history. For thousands of years, invaders and incomers have arrived, settled and made their mark here. The result is Britain's fascinating mix of landscape, culture and language – a dynamic pattern that shaped the nation and continues to evolve today.

For many visitors, this rich historic legacy is Britain's main attraction – everything from Stonehenge to Glen Coe, via Hadrian's Wall, Canterbury Cathedral, Caernarfon Castle and the Tower of London – so this History chapter concentrates on the high-profile events and the historic locations you'll see on your travels. Even if you're no fan of dates and dynasties, we hope the overview this chapter provides will help you get the most from your trip.

## FIRST ARRIVALS

Stone tools discovered near the town of Lowestoft in Suffolk show that human habitation in Britain stretches back at least 700,000 years, although exact dates depend on your definition of 'human'. As the centuries rolled on, Ice Ages came and went, sea levels rose and fell, and the island now called Britain was frequently joined to the European mainland. Hunter-gatherers crossed the land bridge, moving north as the ice melted and retreating to warmer climes when the glaciers advanced once again.

Around 4000 BC a group of migrants arrived from Europe that differed significantly from previous arrivals: instead of hunting and moving on, they settled in one place and started farming – most notably in open chalky hill areas such as the South Downs and Salisbury Plain in southern England.

Alongside their fields these early settlers used rocks and turf to build massive burial mounds, and many of these can still be seen today, including the West Kennet Long Barrow in Wiltshire (p295), the stone frame of the cromlech (burial chamber) of Pentre Ifan in Pembrokeshire (p689), and the great passage grave at Maes Howe, Orkney (p926).

But perhaps the most enduring, and certainly the most impressive, legacy left by these nascent Britons are the great stone circles such as Callanish on Lewis (p915) in Scotland, and – most famous of all – the elaborate and enigmatic sites of Avebury and Stonehenge in southern England, still clearly visible today and described on p293 and p290.

## IRON & CELTS

Move on a millennium or two, and it's the Iron Age. The population expanded and began to divide into specific groups or tribes. Across the whole island of Britain the forests were cleared with increasing efficiency as more land was turned to farming. This led to a patchwork pattern of fields, woods and small villages that still exists in many parts of rural lowland Britain. As the population grew, territorial defence became an issue, so the Iron Age people left another legacy – the great 'earthwork' castles of southern England, stone forts in northern England, and *brochs* (defensive towers) in Wales and Scotland.

*Walks Through Britain's History* (published by AA) guides you to castles, battlefields and hundreds of other sites with a link to the past. Take the air. Breathe in history!

Built around 3000 BC, Stonehenge is older than the famous Great Pyramids of Egypt.

## TIMELINE 4000 BC

Neolithic migrants arrive from Europe. Great stone circles – Callanish and Stonehenge – built

## 500 BC

Celts settled in Britain

*A History of Britain* by historian and TV star Simon Schama is a highly accessible three-volume set, putting events from 3000 BC to AD 2000 in a modern context.

As landscapes altered, this was also a time of cultural change. The Celts, a people who originally migrated from Central Europe, had settled across much of the island of Britain by around 500 BC, absorbing the indigenous people. A Celtic-British population – sometimes known as the ‘ancient Britons’ – developed, divided into about 20 different tribes, including the Cantiaci (in today’s county of Kent), the Iceni (today’s Norfolk), the Brigantes (northwest England), the Picts and Caledonii (Scotland), and the Ordovices (parts of Wales). You noticed the Latin-sounding names? That’s because the tribal tags were first handed out by the next arrivals on Britain’s shores...

## ENTER THE ROMANS

Think of the Romans, and you think of legions, centurions and aqueducts. They were all here, as Britain and much of Europe came under the power (or the yoke, for those on the receiving end) of the classical period’s greatest military empire.

Julius Caesar, the emperor everyone remembers, made forays to the island of Britain from what is now France in 55 BC. But the real Roman invasion happened a century later when Emperor Claudius led a ruthless campaign that resulted in the Romans controlling pretty much everywhere in southern England by AD 50.

Much of the occupation was straightforward: several Celtic-British tribal kings realised collaboration was more profitable than battle. For example, King Togidbnu of the Regnenses tribe changed his name to Tiberius Cogidumnus and built a Roman-style villa, which can still be seen today at Fishbourne near the town of Chichester (p229); and a historian called Nennius suggests in his *Historia Britonum* (written around AD 800) that the people of Wales revered their Roman rulers so much that one governor, Magnus Maximus, was transformed into a mythical hero called Maxen Wledig.

It wasn’t all plain sailing though: some locals fought back. The most famous freedom fighter was warrior-queen Boudicca (also known as Boadicea), who led an army as far as Londinium, the Roman port on the present site of London.

However, opposition was mostly sporadic and no real threat to the legions’ military might. By around AD 80 the new province of Britannia (much of today’s England and Wales) was firmly under Roman rule. And

### ENGLAND? BRITAIN? WHAT’S IN A NAME?

The countries of England, Wales and Scotland make up the state of Great Britain. Three countries in one might seem a strange setup, and visitors are sometimes confused about the difference between England and Britain – as are a lot of English people (although the Welsh and Scots are clear on the distinction). But getting a grip on this basic principle will ease your understanding of British history and culture, and make your travel more enjoyable too.

Just for the record, the United Kingdom (UK) consists of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The island of Ireland consists of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (also called Eire). ‘British Isles’ is a geographical term for the whole group of islands that make up the UK, the Republic of Ireland and some autonomous or semiautonomous islands such as the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

Got all that? Good. Now read on...

### LEGACY OF THE LEGIONS

To control the territory they’d occupied, the Romans built castles and garrisons across Britain, especially in Wales and England. Many of these developed into towns, later called ‘chesters’ and today remembered by names such as Winchester, Manchester, Cirencester and Chester (the remains of Roman amphitheatres can still be seen today at the latter two locations – see p363 and p570 respectively).

The Romans are also well known for the roads they built – initially so the legions could march quickly from place to place, and later so that trade could develop. Wherever possible the roads were built in straight lines (because it was efficient, not, as the old joke goes, to stop the ancient Britons hiding around corners), and included Ermine Street between London and York, Watling Street between London and Chester, and the Fosse Way between Exeter and Lincoln. As you travel around Britain today, you’ll notice many ruler-straight Roman roads still followed by modern highways, and in a country better known for old lanes and turnpike routes winding through the landscape, they clearly stand out on the map.

although it’s tempting to imagine noble natives battling courageously against occupying forces, in reality Roman control and stability was probably welcomed by the general population, tired of feuding chiefs and insecure tribal territories.

## HADRIAN DRAWS A LINE

North of the new province of Britannia was the land the Romans called Caledonia (one day to become Scotland). This proved to be a harder place for them to find a fan club, and in AD 122 Emperor Hadrian decided that rather than conquer the wild Caledonian tribes, he’d settle for keeping them at bay. So a barricade was built across northern England – between today’s cities of Carlisle and Newcastle. For nearly 300 years it marked the northernmost limit of the Roman Empire, and today a remarkably well-preserved section of Hadrian’s Wall is one of Britain’s best-known historic sites (see p632).

For comprehensive chronologies, see the European history section of [http://europeanhistory.about.com/or/monarchs\\_in\\_the\\_British\\_Isles/](http://europeanhistory.about.com/or/monarchs_in_the_British_Isles/) at <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

## EXIT THE ROMANS

Settlement by the Romans in Britain lasted almost four centuries, and inter-marriage was common between locals and incomers (many from other parts of the Empire, including today’s Belgium, Spain and Syria – rather than Rome itself) so that a Romano-British population evolved, particularly in the towns, while indigenous Celtic-British culture remained in rural areas.

Along with stability and wealth, the Romans introduced another cultural facet – a new religion called Christianity, after it was recognised by Emperor Constantine in AD 313. But by this time, although Romano-British culture was thriving, back in its Mediterranean heartland the Empire was already in decline.

It was an untidy finale. The Romans were not driven out by the ancient Britons (by this time Romano-British culture was so established there was nowhere for the ‘invaders’ to go ‘home’ to). In reality, Britannia was simply dumped by the rulers in Rome, and the colony slowly fizzled out of existence. But historians are neat folk, and the end of Roman power in Britain is generally dated at AD 410.

55 BC

Roman invaders under Julius Caesar make forays into southern England

AD 43

Full Roman invasion of Britain led by Emperor Claudius

122

Hadrian’s Wall built

410

End of Roman rule in Britain

### BRITAIN'S MYTHICAL MONARCH

It was during the Dark Ages that a particularly powerful leader, whose name just may have been Arthur, came to prominence. He may have been a Romano-Briton, he may have been a Celt. He may have come from southern England, or was maybe born in Wales. Or maybe Scotland. He might have fought against the Anglo-Saxons, or against pagan Celts. In truth, virtually nothing is known about this mythical figure from the mists of time, but King Arthur has nevertheless become the focus of many legends. Along with Merlin the magician and the Knights of the Round Table, Arthur inspired a huge body of literature, not least by the Welsh in the epic tale the *Mabinogion*, and by Thomas Malory in his masterpiece *Morte d'Arthur*. Numerous sites in Britain, from Tintagel in Cornwall to Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh, via Snowdonia, Glastonbury and Pembrokeshire, claim Arthurian links that you'll undoubtedly come across as you travel around Britain today. For more tales see the boxed text, p712.

### THE EMERGENCE OF ENGLAND

When Roman power faded, the province of Britannia went downhill. Coins were no longer minted, so the use of money dwindled and long-distance trade declined. Some Romano-British towns in England and Wales were abandoned (most of Scotland had escaped Roman control in the first place), and some rural areas became no-go zones as local warlords fought over fiefdoms. Compared with other eras, little is known about the next few centuries, so historians call them the Dark Ages.

Britain's post-Roman vacuum didn't go unnoticed and once again invaders crossed from the European mainland. Angles and Saxons – Teutonic tribes from the land we now call Germany – advanced across the former Roman turf.

Historians disagree on exactly what happened next. Either the Anglo-Saxons largely overcame, replaced or absorbed the Romano-British and Celts, or the indigenous tribes simply adopted Anglo-Saxon language and culture. Either way, by the late 6th century much of the area we now call England was dominated by the Anglo-Saxons, and divided into three separate kingdoms: Wessex (in today's southern England), Mercia (today's Midlands) and Northumbria (today's northern England).

In a number of areas the original inhabitants lived alongside the Anglo-Saxons, and remained unaffected by the incomers (records show that the Celtic language was still being spoken in parts of southern England when the Normans invaded 500 years later), but the overall impact was immense: today, the core of the English language is Anglo-Saxon, numerous place names have Anglo-Saxon roots, and the very term 'Anglo-Saxon' has become a (much abused and factually incorrect) byword for 'pure English'.

Meanwhile, back in reality, Northumbria was initially the dominant Anglo-Saxon kingdom, covering much of today's northern England and extending its power into Scotland. In the 8th century the kingdom of Mercia became stronger and its ruler, King Offa, marked a clear border between England and Wales – a defensive ditch called Offa's Dyke that can still be seen today. A century later, at the top of the league was the kingdom of Wessex, covering today's southern England, ruled by King Egbert, grandfather of the future King Alfred.

### MISSIONARY POSITIONS

On the religious front, the Anglo-Saxons were pagans, and their invasion forced the Christian religion, along with other aspects of Celtic culture, to the western edge of the British Isles – to Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The pope of the time, Gregory, decided that this was a poor show, and in AD 597 he sent missionaries to England to revive interest in the faith. One holy pioneer was St Augustine, who successfully converted Angles in Kent, and some good-looking specimens were sent to Rome as proof – giving rise to Pope Gregory's famous quip about Angles looking like angels.

Meanwhile in northern England another missionary called St Aidan was even more successful. With admirable energy and fervour, he converted the entire populations of Mercia and Northumbria, and still had time to establish a monastery at Lindisfarne, a beautiful site on a tiny island that can still be visited today (see p639).

### THE WAKING OF WALES

Meanwhile, away from the emerging kingdoms of England, the Celts on the outer fringes of the British Isles (particularly in Ireland) had kept alive their own distinct yet Roman-influenced culture, along with the ideals of Christianity. And while the Anglo-Saxons took advantage of the post-Roman void in eastern Britain, towards the end of the 5th century others played the same game on the west side of the island: the Scotti people (from today's Ireland) invaded the land of the Picts (today's Wales and Scotland).

In response to the invasion, people from the kingdom of Gododdin (in today's Scotland) came to northwest Wales. Their initial plan was to drive out the invaders, but they stayed and settled in the area, which became the kingdom of Gwynedd. (The modern county in northern Wales still proudly bears this name.)

The struggle between Welsh settlers and Irish raiders along the coast carried on for the rest of the Dark Ages. At the same time, more settlers came to Wales from today's Cornwall and western France, and Christian missionaries arrived from Ireland in the 6th and 7th centuries.

While these newcomers arrived from the west and south, the people of Wales were also under pressure to the east – harassed by the Anglo-Saxons of England pretty much constantly for hundreds of years. In response, by the 8th century the disparate tribes of Wales had started to band together and sow the seeds of nationhood. They called themselves *cymry* (fellow countrymen), and today *Cymru* is the Welsh word for Wales.

### THE STIRRING OF SCOTLAND

While Wales was becoming established in the west of the island of Britain, similar events were taking place to the north, in the land the Romans had called Caledonia. The Picts were the region's dominant tribe, and called their kingdom Alba (see Scotland's Birthplace, p827).

In the power vacuum that followed the fizzle-out of Roman rule in Britannia, Alba was being invaded from two sides: first, towards the end of the 5th century, the Scotti had crossed the sea from today's Ireland and established the kingdom of Dalriada (in today's Argyll). Then in the 7th century Anglo-Saxons from the expanding English kingdom of Northumbria had moved in to colonise southeast Alba. But by this time the Scotti were well

For full details on Britain's rulers through history, see the regal website [www.royal.gov.uk](http://www.royal.gov.uk).

*Myths and Legends of the British Isles* by Richard Barber is ideal if you want a break from historical facts. Gen up on King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, plus much more from the mists of time.

850

Vikings occupy east and northeast England, making Yorvik (today's York) their capital

927

Alhstan, grandson of King Alfred the Great, crowned first King of England

1066

Battle of Hastings: one in the eye for King Harold

1124–53

King David I of Scotland adopts Norman ways, including the feudal system

**WHOSE PATRON SAINT IS THIS?**

Along the coast of Wales, the struggle between settlers and raiding Irish pirates was a major feature of life during the Dark Ages. Even St Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is reputed to have been a Welshman, captured by brigands and taken to Ireland as a slave.

At around the same time, other visitors from Ireland to Wales were Christian missionaries. Among them was a monk named Dewi, who became known as David and later became patron saint of Wales.

So in a fair swap, the patron saint of Wales was an Irishman, while the patron saint of Ireland could well have been Welsh. It seems odd, but then the patron saint of England, St George, was a Turk, and the patron saint of Scotland, St Andrew, was a Palestinian, so maybe in the British Isles it's all par for the course.

dug in alongside the Picts, foreshadowing the time when yet another name – Scotland – would be applied to northern Britain.

**THE VIKING ERA**

Just as the new territories of England, Wales and Scotland were becoming established, Britain was yet again invaded by a bunch of pesky Continentals. This time, Vikings appeared on the scene.

It's another classic historical image: blonde Scandinavians, horned helmets, big swords, square-sailed longboats, raping and pillaging. School history books give the impression that Vikings turned up, killed everyone, took everything, and left. There's *some* truth in that, but in reality many Vikings settled for good, and their legacy is still evident in parts of northern England – in the form of local dialect, geographical terms such as 'fell' and 'dale' (from the old Norse *fjell* and *dalr*), and even the traces of Nordic DNA in some of today's inhabitants.

The main wave of Vikings came from today's Denmark, and conquered east and northeast England in AD 850. They established their capital at York (today's city of York, where many Viking remains can still be seen), then spread southwards across central England.

Standing in their way were the Anglo-Saxon armies, led by Alfred the Great – the king of Wessex, and one of English history's best-known characters – and the battles that followed were seminal to the foundation of the nation-state of England.

But the fighting didn't all go Alfred's way. For a few months he was on the run, wading through swamps, hiding in peasant hovels, and famously burning cakes. It was the stuff of legend, which is just what you need when the chips are down. By 886, Alfred had garnered his forces and pushed the Vikings back to the north.

Thus England was divided in two: north and east was Viking 'Danelaw', while south and west was Anglo-Saxon territory. Alfred was hailed as king of the English – the first time the Anglo-Saxons regarded themselves as a truly united people.

Alfred's son and successor was Edward the Elder. After more battles, he gained control of the Danelaw, and thus the whole of England. His son, Athelstan, took the process a stage further and was specifically crowned King of England in 927. But it was hardly cause for celebration: the Vikings

were still around, and later in the 10th century more raids from Scandinavia threatened this fledgling English unity. Over the following decades, control swung from Saxon (King Edgar) to Dane (King Knut), and back to Saxon again (King Edward the Confessor). As England came to the end of the first millennium AD, the future was anything but certain.

**HIGHS & LOWS IN WALES**

Meanwhile, as England fought off the Viking threat, Wales was also dealing with the Nordic intruders. Building on the initial cooperation forced upon them by Anglo-Saxon oppression, in the 9th and 10th centuries the small kingdoms of Wales began cooperating, through necessity, to repel the Vikings.

King Rhodri Mawr (who died in 878) defeated a Viking force off Anglesey and began the unification process. His grandson Hywel the Good is thought to have been responsible for drawing up a set of laws to bind the disparate Welsh tribes. Things were going well, but just as Wales was becoming a recognisable entity, the young country was faced with more destructive onslaughts than it could handle, and in 927 the Welsh kings recognised the Anglo-Saxon King Athelstan as their overlord in exchange for an anti-Viking alliance.

**SCOTLAND BECOMES A KINGDOM**

While the Welsh were forming their own nation, similar events were being played out in Alba. In the 9th century, the king of the Scotti of Dalriada was one Kenneth MacAlpin (usually anglicised to MacAlpin). His father was a Scotti, but his mother was a Pict princess, so MacAlpin took advantage of the Pictish custom of matrilineal succession to declare himself ruler of both the Scots *and* the Picts, and therefore king of all Alba.

In a surprisingly short time, the Scots gained cultural and political ascendancy. The Picts were absorbed, and Pictish culture simply – and quite suddenly – came to an end. As part of this process, Alba became known as Scotia.

In the 11th century, Scottish nation-building was further consolidated by King Malcolm III (whose most famous act was the 1057 murder of Macbeth – as immortalised by William Shakespeare). With his English queen, Margaret, he founded the Canmore dynasty that would rule Scotland for the next two centuries.

**1066 & ALL THAT**

While Wales and Scotland laid the foundations of nationhood, back in England things were unsettled, as the royal pendulum was still swinging between Saxon and Danish-Viking monarchs. When King Edward the Confessor died, the crown passed to Harold, his brother-in-law. That should've settled things, but Edward had a cousin in Normandy (the northern part of today's France) called William, who thought *he* should have succeeded to the throne of England.

The end result was the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the most memorable of dates for anyone who's studied English history – and for anyone who hasn't. William sailed from Normandy with an army of Norman soldiers, the Saxons were defeated, and Harold was killed – according to tradition by an arrow in the eye.

*Medieval Women by Henrietta Leyser looks through a female lens at the period from AD 500 to 1500: a life of work, marriage, sex and children (not necessarily in that order).*

**1215**

King John forced to sign the Magna Carta

**1240**

King Llywelyn of Wales (Llywelyn the Great) dies; his grandson (Llywelyn the Last) becomes first Prince of Wales

**1290**

Robert the Bruce crowned King of Scotland

**1296**

King Edward I invades Scotland

**LOOKING SOUTH**

The arrival of William the Conqueror was a seminal event, as it marked the end of Britain's century-old ties to the Nordic countries (only in Orkney and Shetland did the Viking presence continue, until the 15th century). The mainland's perspective turned to France, Western Europe and the Mediterranean, giving rise to massive cultural implications that were to last into our own time. In addition, the Norman landing capped an era of armed invasion. Since 1066, in the near-on thousand years to the present day, Britain has never again been seriously invaded by a foreign power.

**NORMAN WISDOM**

William became king of England, earning himself the prestigious title William the Conqueror. It was no idle nickname. To control the Anglo-Saxons, the Norman invaders wisely built castles across their new-won territory, and by 1085–86 the Domesday Book provided a census of England's current stock and future potential.

William the Conqueror was followed by William II, but he was mysteriously assassinated during a hunting trip and succeeded by Henry I, another Norman ruler and the first of a long line of kings called Henry.

In the years after the invasion, the French-speaking Normans and the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon inhabitants kept pretty much to themselves. A strict hierarchy of class (the feudal system) developed. At the top was the monarch, below that the nobles (barons, bishops, dukes and earls), then knights and lords, and at the bottom were peasants or 'serfs', effectively slaves.

The feudal system may have established the basis of a class system that still exists to a certain extent in Britain today, but intermarriage was not completely unknown. Henry himself married a Saxon princess. Nonetheless, such unifying moves stood for nothing after Henry's death: a bitter struggle for succession followed, finally won by Henry II who took the throne as the first king of the House – or dynasty – of Plantagenet.

**NORMAN IMPACT ON WALES & SCOTLAND**

By the time the Normans arrived in England, the Welsh no longer needed anti-Viking protection and had returned to their independent ways. Not if William the Conqueror had anything to do with it. To secure his new kingdom, and keep the Welsh in theirs, William built castles and appointed feudal barons along the border. The Lords Marcher, as they were known, became massively rich and powerful, and the parts of western England along the Welsh border are still called the Marches today.

In Scotland, King Malcolm III and Queen Margaret were more accommodating to Norman ways – or, at least, they liked the way the Normans ran a country. Malcolm's successor, David I (r 1124–53), was impressed too, and adopted the Norman feudal system, as well as granting land to great Norman families. By 1212, a courtier called Walter of Coventry remarked that the Scottish court was 'French in race and manner of life, in speech and in culture'.

But while the French-Norman effect changed England and lowland Scotland over the following centuries, further north the Highland clans remained inaccessible in their glens – a law unto themselves for another 600 years.

**ROYAL & HOLY SQUABBLING**

Meanwhile, back in England, the rule of Henry I had come to an end, and the fight to take his place continued the enduring English habit of competition for the throne, and introduced an equally enduring tendency of bickering between royalty and the church. Things came to a head in 1170 when Henry II had 'turbulent priest' Thomas Becket murdered in Canterbury Cathedral. (The stunning cathedral is still an important shrine and a major destination for visitors to Britain today. See p191.)

Perhaps the next king, Richard I, wanted to make amends for his forebears' unholy sentiments by fighting against Muslim 'infidels' in the Holy Land (today's Middle East). Unfortunately he was too busy crusading to bother about governing England – although his bravery earned him the 'Richard Lionheart' sobriquet – and the country fell into disarray.

Richard was succeeded by his brother John, but things got even worse for the general population. According to legend, during this time a nobleman called Robert of Loxley, better known as Robin Hood, hid in Sherwood Forest and engaged in a spot of wealth redistribution. For more on this merry tale see p434.

**KING JOHN CALLED TO BOOK**

In 1215 the barons found King John's erratic rule increasingly hard to swallow, and forced him to sign a document called Magna Carta (Latin for 'Great Charter'), limiting the monarch's power for the first time in British history. Although originally intended as a set of handy ground rules, Magna Carta was a fledgling bill of human rights which eventually led to the creation of parliament – a body to rule the country, independent of the throne. The signing took place at Runnymede, near Windsor, and you can still visit the site today (see p209).

**EXPANSIONIST EDWARD**

The next king was Henry III, followed in 1272 by Edward I, a skilled ruler and ambitious general. During a busy 35-year reign, he expounded English nationalism and was unashamedly expansionist in his outlook, leading campaigns into Wales and Scotland.

Some decades earlier, the Welsh king Llywelyn the Great (who died in 1240) had attempted to set up a state in Wales along the lines of the new feudal system in England, and his grandson Llywelyn ('Llywelyn the Last')

**DOMINATING THE LANDSCAPE**

If you're travelling through Wales, it won't take you long to notice the country's most striking architectural asset: castles. There are around 600 in all, giving Wales the dubious honour of being Europe's most densely fortified country. Most were built in medieval times, first by William the Conqueror, then by other Anglo-Norman kings, to keep a lid on the Welsh. In the late 13th century, Edward I built the spectacular castles at Caernarfon, Harlech, Conwy and Beaumaris – now jointly listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site. Other castles to see include Rhuddlan, Denbigh, Criccieth, Raglan, Pembroke, Kidwelly, Chepstow and Caerphilly. Great for visitors, of course, but a sore point for patriotic Welsh; the writer Thomas Pennant called them 'the magnificent badge of our subjection'.

**1297**

Battle of Stirling Bridge; England defeated by a Scots army under the leadership of William Wallace

**1314**

Battle of Bannockburn; England defeated by Scots under Robert the Bruce

**1337**

Start of England's Hundred Years' War with France

**1348**

Arrival of the Black Death, killing more than a third of England's population

was recognised by Henry III as the first Prince (but not King) of Wales. But Edward I had no time for such niceties, and descended on Wales in a bloody invasion that lasted much of the 1270s. In the end, Wales became a dependent principality, owing allegiance to England. There were no more Welsh kings, and just to make it clear who was boss, Edward made his own son Prince of Wales. Ever since, the British sovereign's eldest son has been automatically given the title. (Most recently, Prince Charles was formally proclaimed Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle in 1969, much to the displeasure of Welsh nationalists.)

Edward I then looked north. For the past 200 years, Scotland had been ruled by the Canmores, but the dynasty effectively ended in 1286 with the death of Alexander III. He was succeeded by his four-year-old granddaughter, Margaret ('the Maid of Norway'), who was engaged to the son of Edward I, but she died in 1290 before the wedding could take place.

There followed a dispute for the Scottish throne for which there were 13 *tanists* (contestants), but in the end it came down to two: John Balliol and Robert Bruce of Annandale. Arbitration was needed and Edward I was called in; he chose Balliol. But having finished the job, Edward then sought to formalise his feudal overlordship and travelled through Scotland forcing clan leaders to swear allegiance. In a final blow to Scottish pride, Edward removed the Stone of Scone (also known as the Stone of Destiny or Fatal Stone), on which the kings of Scotland had been crowned for centuries, from an abbey at Scone, and sent it to London (see the boxed text, p757).

That was just too much. In response, Balliol got in touch with Edward's old enemy, France, and arranged a treaty of cooperation – the start of an anti-English partnership (the 'Auld Alliance') that was to last for many centuries (and to the present day when it comes to rugby and football).

Edward wasn't the sort of bloke to brook opposition though. In 1296 the English army defeated Balliol, forcing the Scottish barons to accept Edward's rule, and his ruthless retaliation earned him the title 'Hammer of the Scots'. But still the Scottish people refused to lie down: in 1297, at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, the English were defeated by a Scots army under the leadership of William Wallace. More than 700 years later, Wallace is still remembered as the epitome of Scottish patriots (see p840).

## PLANTAGENET GLOOM

Back in England, Edward I was succeeded by Edward II, but the new model lacked the military success of his forebear, and his favouring of personal friends over barons didn't help. Edward failed in the marriage department too, and his rule came to a grisly end when his wife, Isabella, and her lover, Roger Mortimer, had him murdered in Berkeley Castle.

By this time, Robert the Bruce (grandson of Robert Bruce of Annandale) had crowned himself King of Scotland (1290), been beaten in battle, gone on the run, and while hiding in a cave been famously inspired to renew his efforts by a spider persistently spinning its web. Bruce's army went on to defeat Edward II and the English at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, another milestone in Scotland's long fight to remain independent.

Next in line was Edward III. Highlights of his reign – actually lowlights – include the start of the Hundred Years' War with France in 1337 and

the arrival of a plague called the Black Death about a decade later, which eventually carried off 1.5 million people, more than a third of the country's population.

Another change of king didn't improve things either. Richard II had barely taken the throne when the Peasants' Revolt erupted in 1381. This attempt by commoners to overthrow the feudal system was brutally suppressed, further injuring an already deeply divided country.

## STEWARTS ENTER THE SCENE

While the Hundred Years' War raged (or rather, rumbled) between England and France, things weren't much better in Scotland. After the death of Robert the Bruce in 1329, the country was ravaged by endless internal conflicts and plague epidemics.

Bruce's son became David II of Scotland, but he was soon caught up in battles against fellow Scots disaffected by his father and aided by England's Edward III. So when David died in 1371, the Scots quickly crowned Robert Stewart (Robert the Bruce's grandson) as king, marking the start of the House of Stewart, which was to crop up again in England a bit later down the line.

## HOUSES OF YORK & LANCASTER

The ineffectual Richard II was ousted in 1399 by a powerful baron called Henry Bolingbroke, who became Henry IV, the first monarch of the House of Lancaster. Less than a year later, his rule was disrupted by a final cry of resistance from the downtrodden Welsh, led by royal-descendant Owain Glyndŵr (Owen Glendower to the English). It wasn't a good result for Wales. The rebellion was crushed, vast areas of farmland were destroyed, Glyndŵr died an outlaw, and the Welsh elite were barred from public life for many years.

Henry IV was followed, neatly, by Henry V, who decided it was time to stir up the dormant Hundred Years' War. He defeated France at the Battle of Agincourt and the patriotic tear-jerker speech he was given by Shakespeare ('cry God for Harry, England and St George') has ensured his pole position among the most famous English kings of all time.

Still keeping things neat, Henry V was followed by Henry VI. His main claim to fame was overseeing the building of great places of worship (King's College Chapel in Cambridge, Eton Chapel near Windsor – both architectural wonders can still be admired today, see p462 and p207 respectively), interspersed with great bouts of insanity.

When the Hundred Years' War finally ground to a halt in 1453, you'd have thought things would be calm for a while. But no. The English forces returning from France threw their energies into another battle, a civil war dubbed the Wars of the Roses.

Briefly it went like this: Henry VI of the House of Lancaster (whose emblem was a red rose) was challenged by Richard, Duke of York (emblem, a white rose). Henry was weak and it was almost a walkover for Richard. But Henry's wife, Margaret of Anjou, was made of sterner mettle and her forces defeated the challenger. It didn't rest there: Richard's son Edward entered the scene with an army, turned the tables and finally drove out Henry. He became King Edward IV, the first monarch of the House of York.

Shakespeare's *Henry V* was filmed most recently in 1989 – a superb modern epic, starring English cinema darling Kenneth Branagh as the eponymous king. An earlier film of the same name, starring Laurence Olivier and filmed in 1944 as a patriotic rallying cry, is also worth catching.

The story of William Wallace is told in the Mel Gibson epic *Braveheart*. In the devolution debates of the 1990s, the patriotic pride engendered by this movie did more for Scottish nationalism than any politician's speech.

1381

Richard II confronted by Peasants' Revolt

1400

Owain Glyndŵr leads Welsh rebels against English army

1459–71

Wars of the Roses

1509

Henry VIII comes to throne: goes on to marry six times, establish Church of England, dissolve monasteries

**RULING BRITANNIA**

A glance at the story of England's ruling dynasties clearly shows that life was never dull for the folk at the top. Despite immense power and privilege, the position of monarch (or, perhaps worse, *potential* monarch) probably ranks as one of history's least safe occupations. English kings have been killed in battle (Harold), beheaded (Charles I), assassinated (William II), murdered by a wicked uncle (Edward V), and knocked off by their queen and her lover (Edward II). Similarly, life was just as uncertain for the rulers of Wales and Scotland; threats came from rival warlords or ambitious clan chiefs – you only have to think of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* – and often from the English king next door. As you visit the castles and battlefields of Britain, you may feel a touch of sympathy – but only a touch – for those all-powerful figures continually looking over their shoulder.

**DARK DEEDS IN THE TOWER**

Life was never easy for the guy at the top. Edward IV hardly had time to catch his breath before facing a challenger to his own throne. Enter scheming Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, who liked to be billed as 'the kingmaker'. In 1470 he teamed up with the energetic Margaret of Anjou to shuttle Edward into exile and bring Henry VI back to the throne. But a year later Edward IV came bouncing back, and this time there was no messing about; he killed Warwick, captured Margaret, and had Henry snuffed out in the Tower of London.

Although Edward IV's position seemed secure, he ruled for only a decade before being succeeded by his 12-year-old son, now Edward V. But the boy king's reign was even shorter than his dad's. In 1483 he was mysteriously murdered, along with his brother, and once again the Tower of London was the scene of the crime.

With the 'little princes' dispatched, this left the throne open for their dear old Uncle Richard. Whether he was the princes' killer is still the subject of debate, but his rule as Richard III was short-lived. Despite another famous Shakespearean sound bite ('A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse'), few tears were shed in 1485 when he was tumbled from the top job by Henry Tudor.

**MOVES TOWARDS UNITY**

There hadn't been a Henry on the throne for a while, and this new incumbent, Henry VII, harked back to the days of his namesakes with a skilful reign. After the York-vs-Lancaster Wars of the Roses, his Tudor family name was important. He also diligently mended fences with his northern neighbours by marrying off his daughter to James IV of Scotland, thereby linking the Tudor and Stewart lines.

On top of his family links with Scotland, Henry VII was also half Welsh. He withdrew many of the anti-Welsh restrictions imposed after the Glyndŵr uprising, and his countrymen were only too grateful to enjoy new-found preferential treatment at the English court and career opportunities in English public life.

Matrimony may have been more useful than warfare for Henry VII, but the multiple marriages of his successor, Henry VIII, were a very different story. Fathering a male heir was his problem – hence the famous six wives – but the pope's disapproval of divorce and remarriage led to a split with the Roman Catholic Church. Parliament made Henry the head of the Protestant

Church of England – this was the beginning of a pivotal division between Catholics and Protestants that still exists in some areas of Britain.

In 1536 Henry followed this up by 'dissolving' many monasteries in Britain and Ireland, a blatant takeover of their land and wealth rather than a symptom of the struggle between church and state. Nonetheless, the general populace felt little sympathy for the wealthy and often corrupt abbots, and in 1539–40 another monastic land grab swallowed the larger ones as well. At the same time, Henry signed the Acts of Union (1536–43), formally uniting England and Wales for the first time. This was welcomed by the aspiring Welsh gentry, as it meant English law and parliamentary representation for Wales, plus plenty of trade opportunities. The Welsh language, however, ceased to be recognised in the law courts.

In Scotland, James IV had been succeeded by James V, who died in 1542, brokenhearted, it is said, after yet another defeat at the hands of the English. His baby daughter Mary became queen and Scotland was ruled by regents. From his throne in England Henry VIII sent a proposal that Mary should marry his son. But the regents rejected his offer and – not forgetting the Auld Alliance – Mary was sent to France instead. Henry was furious and sent his armies to ravage southern Scotland and sack Edinburgh in an (unsuccessful) attempt to force agreement to the wedding – the Rough Wooing, as it was called with typical Scottish irony and understatement.

**THE ELIZABETHAN AGE**

Henry VIII died in 1547, and was succeeded by his son Edward VI, then by daughter Mary I, but their reigns were short. So, unexpectedly, the third child, Elizabeth, came to the throne.

As Elizabeth I, she inherited a nasty mess of religious strife and divided loyalties, but after an uncertain start she gained confidence and turned the country around. Refusing marriage, she borrowed biblical imagery and became known as the Virgin Queen – perhaps the first British monarch to create a cult image. It paid off. Her 45-year reign was a period of boundless optimism characterised by the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the expansion of trade, the writing of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, and the global explorations of English seafarers Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake.

**MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS**

Meanwhile, Elizabeth's cousin Mary (daughter of Scottish King James V, and a Catholic) had become known as Mary Queen of Scots. She'd spent her childhood in France and had married the French dauphin (crown prince), thereby becoming queen of France as well. Why stop at two? After her husband's death, Mary returned to Scotland, from where she ambitiously claimed the English throne as well – on the grounds that Elizabeth I was illegitimate. But Mary's plans failed; she was imprisoned and forced to abdicate in favour of her son (a Protestant, who became James VI of Scotland).

Mary escaped to England and appealed to Elizabeth for help. This could have been a rookie error, or she might have been advised by courtiers with their own agenda. Either way, it was a bad move. Mary was seen – not surprisingly – as a security risk and was imprisoned once again. In an uncharacteristic display of indecision, before finally ordering her execution Elizabeth held Mary under arrest for 19 years, moving her frequently from

*Six Wives: the Queens of Henry VIII* by David Starkey is an accessible modern study of the multi-marrying monarch.

*Elizabeth* (1998), directed by Shekhar Kapur and starring Cate Blanchett, covers the early years of the Virgin Queen's rule – as she graduates from novice princess to commanding queen – a time of forbidden love, unwanted suitors, intrigue and death.

*What the Tudors & Stuarts Did For Us* by TV presenter and historian Adam Hart-Davis covers great achievements and innovations in this key period of history.

**1536–43**

Acts of Union, formally uniting England and Wales

**1558**

Elizabeth I comes to throne: enter stage right William Shakespeare, exit due west Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake

**1642–49**

English Civil War between the king's Cavaliers and Oliver Cromwell's Roundheads

**1665–66**

'The Great Plague' kills 100,000 people, including 20% of London's population.

house to house, so that today England has many stately homes (and even a few pubs) claiming 'Mary Queen of Scots slept here'.

## UNITED & DISUNITED BRITAIN

Elizabeth died in 1603; but despite a bountiful reign, the one thing the Virgin Queen had failed to provide was an heir. She was succeeded by her closest relative, James, the safely Protestant son of the murdered Mary. He became James I of England and VI of Scotland, the first English monarch of the House of Stuart (Mary's time in France had Gallicised the Stewart name). Most importantly, James united England, Wales and Scotland into one kingdom for the first time in history – another step towards British unity, at least on paper – although the terms 'Britain' and 'British' were still not yet widely used in this context.

James' attempts to smooth religious relations were set back by the anti-Catholic outcry that followed the infamous Guy Fawkes Gunpowder Plot, a terrorist attempt to blow up Parliament in 1605. The event is still celebrated every 5 November, with fireworks, bonfires and burning effigies of Guy himself.

Alongside the Catholic-Protestant rift, the divide between king and parliament continued to smoulder. The power struggle worsened during the reign of the next king, Charles I, and eventually degenerated into the Civil War of 1642–49. The antiroyalist forces led by Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan who preached against the excesses of the monarch and established church, and his army of parliamentarians (or Roundheads) were pitched against the king's forces (Cavaliers) in a conflict that tore England apart – although fortunately for the last time in history. It ended with victory for the Roundheads, the king executed, and England declared a republic – with Cromwell hailed as 'Protector'.

The Civil War had been a bitter conflict, but it failed to exhaust Cromwell's appetite for mayhem; a devastating rampage to gain control of Ireland – the first British colony – followed quickly in its wake. Meanwhile, the Scots suffered their own parallel civil war between the royalists and radical 'Covenanters' who sought freedom from state interference in church government.

## THE RETURN OF THE KING

By 1653 Cromwell was finding parliament too restricting and he assumed dictatorial powers, much to his supporters' dismay. On his death in 1658, he was followed half-heartedly by his son, but in 1660 parliament decided to re-establish the monarchy – as republican alternatives were proving far worse.

Charles II (the exiled son of Charles I) came to the throne, and his rule – known as 'the Restoration' – saw scientific and cultural activity bursting forth after the strait-laced ethics of Cromwell's time. Exploration and expansion were also on the agenda. Backed by the army and navy (modernised, ironically, by Cromwell), English colonies stretched down the American coast, while the East India Company set up headquarters in Bombay (now Mumbai), laying foundations for what was to become the British Empire.

The next king, James II, had a harder time. Attempts to ease restrictive laws on Catholics ended with his defeat at the Battle of the Boyne by William III, the Protestant king of Holland, better known as William of Orange.

Ironically, William was married to James' own daughter Mary, but it didn't stop him doing the dirty on his father-in-law.

William and Mary both had equal rights to the throne and their joint accession in 1688 was known as the Glorious Revolution. Lucky they were married or there might have been *another* civil war.

## KILLIECRANKIE & GLEN COE

In Scotland, things weren't quite so glorious. Anti-English (essentially anti-William and anti-Protestant) feelings ran high, as did pro-James ('Jacobite') support. In 1689 Jacobite leader Graham of Claverhouse, better known as 'Bonnie Dundee', raised a Highlander army and routed English troops at Killiecrankie.

Then in 1692 came the infamous Glen Coe Massacre. On English government orders members of the Campbell clan killed most of the MacDonald clan for failing to swear allegiance to William (see p888).

The atrocity further fuelled Catholic-Protestant divisions, and further tightened English domination of the island of Britain, although Jacobite sentiment surfaced in two rebellions (see p52) before finally succumbing to history.

## FULL FINAL UNITY

In 1694 Mary died, leaving just William as monarch. He died a few years later and was followed by his sister-in-law Anne (the second daughter of James II). In 1707, during Anne's reign, the Act of Union was passed, bringing an end to the independent Scottish Parliament, and finally linking the countries of England, Wales and Scotland under one parliament (based in London) for the first time in history. The nation of Britain was now established as a single state, with a bigger, better and more powerful parliament, and a constitutional monarchy with clear limits on the power of the king or queen.

The new-look Parliament didn't wait long to flex its muscles. On the side, the Act of Union banned any Catholic, or anyone married to a Catholic, from ascending the throne, a rule still in force today. And although the Glorious Revolution was relatively painless in Britain, the impact on Ireland (where the Protestant ascendancy dates from William's victory) sowed the seeds for division that continued into our own time.

In 1714 Anne died without leaving an heir, marking the end of the Stuart line. The throne was then passed to distant (but still safely Protestant) German relatives, the House of Hanover.

By the mid-18th century, struggles for the British throne seemed a thing of the past, and the Hanoverian kings increasingly relied on Parliament to govern the country. As part of the process, from 1721 to 1742 a senior parliamentarian called Sir Robert Walpole effectively became Britain's first prime minister.

## THE EMPIRE STRIKES OUT

Stronger control over the British Isles was mirrored by even greater expansion abroad. The British Empire – which, despite its official title, was predominantly an *English* entity – continued to grow in America, Canada and India. The first claims were made to Australia after Captain James Cook's epic voyage in 1768.

*A Brief History of British Kings & Queens* by Mike Ashley provides a concise and comprehensive overview, with timelines, biographies and family trees. Good for pub-quiz training too.

Charles I wore two shirts on the day of his execution, reputedly to avoid shivering and being thought a coward.

1692

Glen Coe Massacre; Campbell clan members kill MacDonald clan members for not swearing allegiance to King William

1707

Act of Union passed, linking England, Wales and Scotland under one parliament for the first time in history

1721–42

Robert Walpole is Britain's first prime minister

1746

Battle of Culloden; the end of the Jacobite Rebellions



### THE JACOBITE REBELLIONS

Despite, or perhaps because of, the 1707 Act of Union, anti-English feeling in Scotland refused to disappear. The Jacobite rebellions, most notably those of 1715 and 1745, were attempts to overthrow the Hanoverian monarchy and bring back the Stuarts. Although these are iconic events in Scottish history, in reality there was never much support for the Jacobite cause outside the Highlands: the people of the Lowlands were mainly Protestant and feared a return to Catholicism, which the Stuarts represented.

The 1715 rebellion was led by James Edward Stuart (the Old Pretender), the son of the exiled James II of England and VII of Scotland. When the attempt failed, he fled to France, and to impose control on the Highlands the English military (under the notorious General Wade) constructed roads into previously inaccessible glens.

In 1745 James' son Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender) landed in Scotland to claim the crown for his father. He was successful initially, moving south into England as far as Derby, but the prince and his Highland supporters suffered a catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746. For more details see p894. His legendary escape to the Western Isles is eternally remembered in the *Skye Boat Song*. And in a different way, General Wade is remembered too – many of the roads his troops built are still in use today.

The Empire's first major reverse came when the American colonies won the War of Independence (1776–83). This setback forced Britain to withdraw from the world stage for a while, a gap not missed by French ruler Napoleon. He threatened to invade Britain and hinder the power of the British overseas, before his ambitions were curtailed by navy hero Viscount Horatio Nelson and military hero the Duke of Wellington at the famous battles of Trafalgar (1805) and Waterloo (1815).

### THE INDUSTRIAL AGE

While the Empire expanded abroad, at home Britain had become the crucible of the Industrial Revolution. Steam power (patented by James Watt in 1781) and steam trains (launched by George Stephenson in 1825) transformed methods of production and transport, and the towns of the English Midlands became the first industrial cities.

This population shift in England was mirrored in Scotland. From about 1750 onwards, much of the Highlands region had been emptied of people, as landowners casually expelled entire farms and villages to make way for more profitable sheep farming, a seminal event in Scotland's history known as the Clearances (see p897). Industrialisation just about finished off the job. Although many of the dispossessed left for the New World, others came from the glens to the burgeoning factories of the Lowlands. The tobacco trade with America boomed, and then gave way to textile and engineering industries, as the cotton mills of Lanarkshire and the Clyde shipyards around Glasgow expanded rapidly.

The same happened in Wales. By the early 19th century copper, iron and slate were being extracted in the Merthyr Tydfil and Monmouth areas. The 1860s saw the Rhondda valleys opened up for coal mining, and Wales soon became a major exporter of coal, as well as the world's leading producer of tin plate.

Across Britain, industrialisation meant people were on the move as never before. People left the land and villages their families had occupied for

generations. Often they went to the nearest factory, but not always. People from rural Dorset migrated to the Midlands, for example, while farmers from Scotland and England settled in South Wales and became miners. The rapid change from rural to urban society caused great dislocation, and although knowledge of science and medicine also improved alongside industrial advances, for many people poverty and deprivation were the adverse side effects of Britain's economic blossoming.

Nevertheless, by the time Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837, Britain's factories dominated world trade and Britain's fleets dominated the oceans. The rest of the 19th century was seen as Britain's Golden Age (for some people today, it still is), a period of confidence not enjoyed since the days of the last great queen, Elizabeth I.

Victoria ruled a proud nation at home, and great swaths of territories abroad, from Canada through much of Africa and India to Australia and New Zealand – trumpeted as 'the Empire where the sun never sets'. In a final move of PR genius, the queen's chief spin doctor and most effective prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, had Victoria crowned Empress of India. She'd never even been to India, but the British people simply loved the idea.

The times were optimistic, but it wasn't all tub-thumping jingoism. Disraeli and his successor William Gladstone also introduced social reforms to address the worst excesses of the Industrial Revolution. Education became universal, trade unions were legalised and the right to vote was extended to commoners. Well, to male commoners. Women didn't get the vote for another few decades. Disraeli and Gladstone may have been enlightened gentlemen, but there *were* limits.

### WORLD WAR I

Queen Victoria died in 1901 and ever-expanding Britain died with her. The new king, Edward VII, ushered in the relaxed new Edwardian era – and a long period of decline.

In Continental Europe, four restless military powers (Russia, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Germany) focused their sabre-rattling on the Balkan states, and the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo in 1914 finally sparked a clash which became the Great War we now call WWI. When German forces entered Belgium, on their way to invade France, soldiers from Britain and Allied countries were drawn into the war – a vicious conflict of stalemate and horrendous slaughter – most infamously on the killing fields of Flanders and the beaches of Gallipoli.

By the war's weary end in 1918 more than a million Britons had died (not to mention millions more from many other countries) and there was hardly a street or village untouched by death, as the sobering lists of names on war memorials all over Britain still show. The conflict added 'trench warfare' to the dictionary, and further deepened the huge gulf that had existed between ruling and working classes since the days of the Norman feudal system.

### DISILLUSION & DEPRESSION

For the soldiers who did return from WWI, disillusion led to questioning of the social order. A new political force – the Labour Party, to represent the working class – upset the balance that had been enjoyed by the Liberal and Conservative parties since the days of Walpole. The first Labour leader was

At its height the British Empire covered 20% of the land area of the Earth and contained a quarter of the world's population.

Cook's voyage to the southern hemisphere was primarily a scientific expedition. His objectives included monitoring the transit of Venus, an astronomical event that happens only twice every 180 years or so (most recently in 2004). 'Discovering' Australia was just a sideline.

1750

Start of Britain's Industrial Age

1799–1805

Napoleonic Wars; key battles at Trafalgar (1805) and Waterloo (1815)

1837

Queen Victoria comes to the throne; rest of 19th century seen as Britain's 'Golden Age'

1914–18

WWI; Britain at war with Germany

Keir Hardie, a Scottish politician representing a Welsh constituency (the coal-mining town of Merthyr Tydfil) in the London-based Parliament.

The Labour Party won for the first time in the 1923 election, in coalition with the Liberals; James Ramsay MacDonald was the first Labour prime minister. A year later the Conservatives regained power, but the ranking 'them-and-us' mistrust, fertilised by soaring unemployment, led to the 1926 General Strike. When half a million workers marched through the streets, the government sent in the army, setting the stage for industrial unrest that was to plague Britain for the next 50 years.

Unrest at home was mirrored by unrest abroad – in Ireland, Britain's oldest colony. WWI was no sooner over than Britain was involved in the bitter Anglo-Irish War, which ended in mid-1921 with most of Ireland achieving full independence (although six counties in the north remained British). The new political entity may have been billed as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but the decision to divide the island of Ireland in two was to have long-term repercussions that still dominate political agendas in both the UK and the Republic of Ireland today.

The unrest of the 1920s worsened in the '30s as the world economy slumped and the Great Depression took hold – a decade of misery and political upheaval. Even the royal family took a knock when Edward VIII abdicated in 1936 so he could marry a woman who was twice divorced and, horror of horrors, American. The ensuing scandal was good for newspaper sales and hinted at the prolonged 'trial by media' suffered by royals in more recent times.

The throne was taken by Edward's less-than-charismatic brother George VI and Britain dithered through the rest of the decade, with mediocre and visionless government failing to confront the country's problems.

## WORLD WAR II

Meanwhile, on mainland Europe Germany saw the rise of Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Party. Many feared another Great War, but Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met Hitler in 1938 and promised Britain 'peace in our time'. He was wrong. The following year Hitler invaded Poland. Two days later Britain was once again at war with Germany.

The German army moved with astonishing speed, swept west through France, and pushed back British forces to the beaches of Dunkirk in northern France in June 1940. An extraordinary flotilla of rescue vessels turned total disaster into a brave defeat – and the events of Dunkirk are still remembered with pride and sadness in Britain every year.

By mid-1940, most of Europe was controlled by Germany. In Russia, Stalin had negotiated a peace agreement. The USA was neutral, leaving Britain virtually isolated. Neville Chamberlain, reviled for his earlier 'appeasement', stood aside to let a new prime minister – Winston Churchill – lead a coalition government. (See the boxed text, opposite, for more Churchillian details.)

In 1941 the tide began to turn as the USA entered the war to support Britain, and Germany became bogged down on the eastern front fighting Russia. The following year, British forces were revitalised thanks to Churchill's focus on arms manufacturing, and the Germans were defeated in North Africa.

By 1944 Germany was in retreat. Britain and the USA controlled the skies, Russia's Red Army pushed back from the east, and the Allies were

again on the beaches of France as the Normandy landings (D-Day, as it's better remembered) marked the start of the liberation of Europe from the west, and in Churchill's words, 'the beginning of the end of the war'. By 1945 Hitler was dead, and his country ruined. Two atomic bombs forced the surrender of Germany's ally Japan, and finally brought WWII to a dramatic and terrible close.

## SWINGING & SLIDING

In Britain, despite the victory, there was an unexpected swing on the political front. An electorate tired of war and hungry for change tumbled Churchill's Conservatives and voted in the Labour Party, led by Clement Attlee. This was the dawn of the 'welfare state'; key industries (such as steel, coal and railways) were nationalised, and the National Health Service was founded. But rebuilding Britain was a slow process, and the postwar 'baby boomers' experienced food rationing well into the 1950s.

The effects of depleted reserves were felt overseas too, as one by one the colonies became independent, including India and Pakistan in 1947, Malaya

The Normandy landings was the largest military armada in history; more than 5000 ships were involved, with hundreds of thousands of troops landed in the space of about four days.

### BRITISH HEROES – CHURCHILL

Ask any British person to name a 'great hero of British history' and Winston Churchill will be high on the list, along with King Arthur, Owain Glyndŵr, William Wallace, Admiral Nelson and the Duke of Wellington – and quite possibly Margaret Thatcher and David Beckham. More than 60 years after the end of WWII, Churchill's legacy is undeniable.

Although Churchill was from an aristocratic family, his early years were not auspicious; he was famously a 'dunce' at school, an image he actively cultivated in later life. As a young man he joined the British Army, serving mainly in India, Sudan and South Africa, also acting as a war correspondent for various newspapers, and writing several books about his exploits.

In 1901 Churchill was elected to Parliament as a Conservative MP, but in 1904 he defected to the Liberals, then the main opposition party. A year later, after a Liberal election victory, he became a government minister, then worked his way up through the ranks, including Minister of Munitions in WWI, before rejoining the Conservatives in 1922. Through the rest of the 1920s, Churchill held various ministerial positions. High points of this period included alleged plans in 1926 to combat striking coal miners with machine gun-wielding troops, and calling Mussolini a 'genius', a sobriquet trumped in 1929 by his reference to Ghandi as 'a half-naked fakir'.

The 1930s were quiet on the political front for Churchill – apart from his criticism of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's 'appeasement' of Hitler and his call for British rearmament to face a growing German threat – so he concentrated on writing. His multivolume *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* was drafted during this period; although biased and flawed by modern standards, it remains his best-known work.

In 1939 Britain entered WWII and by 1940 Churchill was prime minister, taking additional responsibility as Minister of Defence. Hitler had expected an easy victory, but Churchill's extraordinary dedication (not to mention his radio speeches – most famously offering 'nothing but blood, toil, sweat and tears' and promising to 'fight on the beaches') inspired the British people to resist. Between July and October 1940 the Royal Air Force withstood Germany's aerial raids to win what became known as the Battle of Britain – a major turning point in the war, and a chance for land forces to rebuild their strength. It was an audacious strategy, but it paid off and Churchill was lauded as a national hero, praise that continued to the end of the war and until his death in 1965, and an honour he still holds today.

1916

Welsh politician David Lloyd George becomes prime minister of Britain

1926

General Strike

1939–45

WWII; Britain at war with Germany. Again.

1952

Queen Elizabeth II ascends the British throne

*Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks is a novel partly set in the trenches of WWI. Understated and severely moving, it tells of love, passion, fear, waste, incompetent generals and the poor bloody infantry.

*Windrush – The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* by Mike and Trevor Phillips traces the history of Britain's West Indian immigrants – from 1949's first arrivals (on the ship *Empire Windrush*) to their descendants living in our own time.

in 1957 and Kenya in 1963. People from these ex-colonies – and especially from the Caribbean – were drawn to the mother country through the 1960s. In many cases they were specifically invited, as additional labour was needed to help rebuild postwar Britain. In the 1970s many immigrants of Asian origin arrived, after being forced out of Uganda by dictator Idi Amin.

In the Empire the sun was setting, but Britain's royal family was still going strong. In 1952 George VI was succeeded by his daughter Elizabeth II, and following the trend set by earlier queens Elizabeth I and Victoria, she has remained on the throne for more than five decades, overseeing a period of massive social and economic change.

By the late 1950s, recovery was strong enough for Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to famously remind the British people they'd 'never had it so good'. Some saw this as a boast for a confident future, others as a warning about difficult times ahead, but most probably forgot all about it because by this time the 1960s had started and grey old Britain was suddenly more fun and lively than it had been for generations – especially if you were aged over 10 and under 30. There was the music of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Cliff Richard and the Shadows, while cinema audiences flocked to see Michael Caine, Peter Sellers and Glenda Jackson.

Alongside the glamour, 1960s business seemed swinging too. But the 1970s brought inflation, the oil crisis and international competition, a deadly combination that revealed the weakness of Britain's economy, and a lot that was rotten in British society too. The ongoing struggle between disgruntled working classes and inept ruling classes was brought to the boil once again; the rest of the decade was marked by strikes, disputes and general all-round gloom – especially when the electricity was cut, as power stations went short of fuel or labour.

Even when 'local' reserves of oil and gas were discovered in the North Sea, off Britain's northeast coast, things improved only slightly. Prosperity came to the Aberdeen area and the Shetland Islands in Scotland, but most of the revenue was pipelined back to England. This, along with takeovers of many Scottish companies by English ones, fuelled increasing nationalist sentiment in Scotland.

Neither the Conservatives under Edward Heath, nor Labour under Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan, proved capable of controlling the strife. The British public had had enough, and the elections of 1979 returned the Conservatives led by a little-known politician named Margaret Thatcher.

## THE THATCHER YEARS

Soon everyone had heard of Mrs Thatcher. Love her or hate her, no-one could argue that her methods weren't dramatic. British workers were Luddites? She fired them. Trade unions archaic? She smashed them. British industry inefficient? She shut it down. Nationalised companies a mistake? She sold them off – with a sense of purpose that made Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries seem like a Sunday-school picnic.

And just in case there was any doubt about Mrs Thatcher's patriotism, in 1982 she led Britain into war against Argentina in a dispute over the Falkland Islands, leading to a bout of public flag-waving which hadn't been seen since WWII.

Against this background, Mrs Thatcher also waged a relentless assault on the power of trade unions, fronted by the closure of 'uneconomic' coal mines throughout Britain – most notably in the English Midlands, Yorkshire, south Wales and parts of Scotland. In response, the nationwide strike by miners in the early 1980s was one of the most bitter labour disputes in British history, but Mrs Thatcher was victorious: since 1984 around 140 coal pits have closed, meaning a quarter of a million jobs lost, and communities destroyed across the country.

The social costs of Thatcherism were enormous and questionable, but, in line with a global upswing, by the late 1990s the British economy was in better shape than it had been for years. In two decades the economic base has shifted away from heavy industry, and today the majority of Britons are employed in less labour-intensive light engineering, hi-tech and electronic fields (including computers and telecommunications), finance, retail and the service sectors.

But the new, competitive Britain was also a greatly polarised Britain. Once again a trench formed, but not between the classes; this time it was between the people who gained from the prosperous wave of Thatcherism and those left drowning in its wake – not only jobless, but jobless in a harsh environment. Even Thatcher fans were unhappy about the brutal and uncompromising methods favoured by the 'iron lady', but by 1988 she was the longest-serving British prime minister of the 20th century – although her repeated electoral victories were helped in no small way by the Labour Party's total incompetence and destructive internal struggles.

## STAND DOWN MARGARET, HELLO TONY

When any leader believes they're invincible, it's time to go. In 1990 Mrs Thatcher was finally dumped when her introduction of the hugely unpopular 'poll tax' breached even the Conservatives' limits of tolerance. The voters regarded Labour with even more suspicion, however, allowing new Conservative leader John Major to unexpectedly win the 1992 election.

Another half-decade of political stalemate followed, as the Conservatives imploded and Labour was rebuilt on the sidelines. It all came to a head in 1997 when 'New' Labour swept to power with a record parliamentary majority, under a fresh-faced new leader named Tony Blair. After nearly 18 years of Conservative rule, it really seemed that Labour's victory call ('things can only get better') was true – and some people literally danced in the street when the results were announced.

Under Prime Minister Blair, the government disappointed old socialist stalwarts who'd expected a swing back to the left. New Labour was a more centrist force, adopting many market reforms favoured by moderate Conservatives. Ministers kept a tight rein on public spending, much to the pleasure of financial institutions. In turn, this sometimes blurred the distinction between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, and forced the Conservatives to take a sizable jump to the right.

## NEW LABOUR, NEW MILLENNIUM

As well as fiscal prudence, the new Labour government introduced major constitutional reforms in other areas. Devolution, at least in part, was granted to Scotland and Wales, with a Scottish Parliament established in Edinburgh,

*One of Us: A Biography of Mrs Thatcher* by respected journalist and commentator Hugo Young covers the early life of the 'iron lady' and her time in power, showing that her grip on events, and on her own party, wasn't as steely as it seemed.

*Things Can Only Get Better* by John O'Farrell is a witty, self-deprecating tale of 1980s politics – the era of Conservative domination – from a struggling Labour viewpoint.

1963

The swinging '60s arrive. The Beatles become household names. Outbreak of incurable Beatlemania.

1979

Mrs Thatcher elected as Britain's first female prime minister

1982

Britain at war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands

1990

Mrs Thatcher ousted as leader of the Conservative Party

and Cardiff seeing the arrival of the Welsh Assembly, reversing some of the centuries-old unification laws introduced by rulers as far back as Edward I and Henry VII. (See p748 and p652 for more devolution details.)

A general election was called in 2001, and although the main opposition parties – the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, plus the Scottish Nationalists and Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalists) in Wales and Scotland – regained some seats, it was still pretty much a walkover for Tony Blair and the Labour party.

In response to Labour's continued success, the Conservatives had replaced John Major in 1997 with a succession of leaders, none of whom enjoyed enough support from their party or the British public to stay around for long – allowing Mr Blair to remain at the helm of government for another half-decade.

In the election of 2005, Labour won a historic third term, although with a reduced majority of around 350 seats in Parliament (to 200 for the Conservatives, 60 for the Liberal Democrats, and around 30 for the other parties), and by 2006 Tony Blair was in his 12th year as party leader, ninth as prime minister, and was the longest-serving prime minister from the Labour Party in British history. But the honeymoon years must have seemed a distant memory as Mr Blair and his ministers were forced to deal with a seemingly unending string of problems and controversies.

## LABOUR PAINS

High on the list of international issues faced by Tony Blair and his government were the ongoing war in Iraq, the legal limbo of Guantanamo Bay (called a 'symbol of injustice' by Britain's own attorney general), the conflict in Afghanistan, and the constant threat of global terrorism – the latter brought so shockingly close to home on 7 July 2005, when bombers attacked Underground trains and a bus in London, killing 52 commuters. In July 2006 these world events were topped by the conflict between the Israeli army and Hezbollah militias along the border with Lebanon, with hundreds of innocent civilians killed alongside the combatants, and Mr Blair became one of many world leaders criticised for not advocating an immediate ceasefire.

Other international issues included the expansion of the European Union to include the former Eastern-bloc countries, always linked in the British public mind to the 'threat' of economic migrants and asylum seekers coming to Britain's shores. This overlapped a controversy surrounding foreign prisoners remaining in the country on release from prison – rather than being repatriated – in turn leading to ministerial reshuffles and knee-jerk reactions that failed to get to the root of the problem: ineffective long-term 'joined-up' government.

Also on the home front, Britain's education and health systems appeared in constant crisis – despite billions of pounds of expenditure – while the controversy about the revival of Britain's nuclear power industry (promoted as a solution to the problem of global warming) gained increasing momentum. Meanwhile, revelations that civil honours, or even seats in the House of Lords, were being awarded to business leaders who just happened to be donors to the Labour Party resurrected the 'Tony's cronies' debate, although delving by the media also revealed that the Conservatives' own fundraising tactics were little different.

Entering the third quarter of 2006, Tony Blair seemed determined to face all these issues and work through to the end of his term, despite increasing discomfort (and in some cases outright criticism) among members of his own party. Political commentators frequently cite the prime minister's desire to leave a 'legacy' on his departure – be it a peaceful Middle East, a democratic Iraq, a re-energised National Health Service, or maybe the fulfilment of a vision for 200 super-schools called City Academies to be built across the country.

## LOOKING FORWARD

The calls for Tony Blair to announce a retirement date gathered momentum through August 2006, with some members of his party threatening outright rebellion during the first week of September. Finally, on 7 September, Mr Blair announced that he would resign within a year. No precise date was set, but many commentators believed it would be May 2007. Gordon Brown, the current Chancellor of the Exchequer (the British term for Minister of Finance) and so long the prime-minister-in-waiting, may finally get the top job and lead the battle to win a fourth term for Labour at the next general election, but his opportunity may have passed as other young guns are now waiting in the wings.

Outside of government, the Conservatives elected David Cameron as their party leader in December 2005, and Sir Menzies Campbell became leader of the Liberal Democrats in March 2006. Neither shone as a striking new political force, although Mr Cameron scored endless column inches in the newspapers when he tried to improve his green credentials by cycling to work (fine if he'd emphasised the health benefits, but any traffic-reducing claims were stymied when the press discovered his ministerial car followed close behind), and when he suggested the need for more understanding of teenage hooligans – a call instantly dubbed the 'hug a hoodie campaign' by the popular press.

As the final parts of this book were being written, the eyes and minds of politicians, newspaper editors and the British public – well, probably about half of them – were looking towards the next general election, expected in 2009, and due by 2010 at the latest. It remains to be seen if the voters will award Labour yet another term in office, or if the combination of terrible events overseas, mismanagement at home and Labour Party infighting at the heart of government will mean the political pendulum finally swings back the other way.

*The Unfulfilled Prime Minister: Tony Blair's Quest for a Legacy* covers the period from 1997 to 2005, one of 'huge disappointment' according to author Peter Riddell.

1997

Tony Blair and 'New' Labour Party win general election, ending 18 years of Conservative rule

1999

Devolution of power to Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly

2003

Britain joins the US-led invasion of Iraq

2005

Tony Blair and Labour re-elected for third term

# The Culture

## THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

It's difficult to generalise about a British national psyche – mainly because there isn't one! The very idea of being 'British' is still comparatively recent (it's only been used in this context for around 200 years), whereas separate national identities in England, Wales and Scotland have existed for much longer – although if you look closely, it's Welsh and Scottish identities that are strong, whereas the distinction between 'English' and 'British' is a lot more fuzzy. In fact, many people in England have only started to consider an English (as opposed to British) national identity since Wales and Scotland achieved some political autonomy through the devolution process of the late 1990s. The writer Fay Weldon, for example, on realising that other nations in the British Isles were finding institutional identity, immediately joined the Church of England as a way to express her Englishness.

So if there is a British national identity, it combines aspects of the cultures of England, Wales and Scotland, as well as the island of Ireland. In addition, 'indigenous' British culture has also been greatly influenced by peoples from all over the world – the French, Russians, West Indians, Pakistanis and Somalis, to name but a few – who have immigrated here over the centuries. Despite the claims of ethnic supremacists and excitable newspapers, the British are a mongrel race – and many are happy to revel in this diversity.

That's why today many Brits honour traditions such as Christmas trees (introduced from Germany) and maypoles (Celtic), then wash down a chicken madras curry – the nation's most popular meal – with 'foreign' lagers like Fosters or Bud. Meanwhile, their kids mix distinctive regional accents with intonations apparently perfected in Queensland or California.

Nonetheless, despite this openness to foreign influences, for many visitors there's still a preconception that the British are reserved, inhibited and stiflingly polite. Once again, it's important here not to confuse British culture with English culture, and while these characteristics may indeed apply in some parts of England (notably in the south and southeast), in general, across the whole country, they simply don't. Anywhere in Britain, if you visit a pub, a nightclub, a football match, a seaside resort or simply go walking in city parks or wild open hills, you'll soon come across other British characteristics – they're uninhibited, tolerant, exhibitionist, passionate, aggressive, sentimental, hospitable and friendly. It hits you like a breath of fresh air.

Having said all that, a major factor still running through British – and especially English – culture and society, even in these egalitarian days, is class. Although the days of peasants doffing their caps to the lord of the manor may be gone, some Brits still judge others by their school, accent or family wealth (and how long they've had it), rather than by their skills, intelligence and personality.

But dig below the class barrier, or get beyond genial banter in the pub, and you'll find more surprises. A major newspaper survey in mid-2006 revealed that 25% of the UK adult population (about 9 million men and 1.4 million women) downloaded images from pornographic websites. Apparently, Britain is the fastest growing market in the world for internet porn. But the old 'no sex, please, we're British' adage has not gone away either. Also in mid-2006, a 55-year-old woman discreetly sunbathing naked in her own garden was taken to court by a neighbour and charged with 'grossly offensive' behaviour.

Alongside this interest in virtual sex, statistics reveal other surprises, including British generosity: more than 80% donate to charity each year, and

For a deeper understanding of peculiar British sensibilities as you travel around, *Eccentric Britain* by Benedict le Vay is invaluable. In the same series are *Eccentric London*, *Eccentric Edinburgh* and *Eccentric Oxford*.

Some truly fascinating interviews with everyday people from around Britain have been compiled onto CD as radio-programme-style 'audio books', available from [www.rovingear.co.uk](http://www.rovingear.co.uk). It's like listening to an interesting local in the pub...

## QUEUING FOR BRITAIN

The British are notoriously addicted to queues, be it for buses, train tickets, or to pay at the supermarket. The order is sacrosanct and woe betide any foreigner who gets this wrong. Few things are more calculated to spark an outburst of tutting – about as publicly cross as most Brits get – than 'pushing in' at a queue.

The same applies to escalators – especially in London. If you want to stand still, then keep to the right, so that people can pass on the left. There's a definite convention here and recalcitrants have been hung, drawn and quartered (well, it's at least provoked more tutting) for blocking the path of folk in a hurry.

the annual income of the UK's charities totals almost £40 billion. There's inconsistency here as well though; people donate to Friends of the Earth but ignore their own bank's investments in the oil industry; they'll support Amnesty International but overlook their pension fund's stake in arms companies supplying the world's most brutal regimes. Fortunately, awareness is growing in Britain, and about half a million people currently have accounts with ethical banks or invest in socially responsible funds.

On a less profound level, another cultural trait that runs through British society is an obsession with hobbies and pastimes. We're not talking about obvious things like football and cricket (although fanatical supporters number in their millions), but about bird-watchers, train spotters, model makers, home improvers, pigeon fanciers, royal observers, antique hoarders, teapot collectors, ramblers, anglers, gardeners, caravanners and crossword fans. The list goes on, with many participants verging on the edge of complete madness. But it's all great, and Britain just wouldn't be the same without them.

## LIFESTYLE

When it comes to family life, many British people regard the 'Victorian values' of the late 19th century as an idyllic benchmark – a time of perfect morals and harmonious nuclear families, a high point from which the country has been sliding ever since. As recently as the 1960s, only 2% of couples would 'live in sin' before getting married, whereas by 2004 'cohabiting' (there's still not a proper word for it) was perfectly acceptable in most circles; around 60% of couples who marry are already living together, and at any given time about a third of all couples living together are unmarried.

In line with this, the number of unmarried couples having children has also increased in the last 40 years; whereas 'illegitimate' children were comparatively rare and a social stigma in the 1960s, today about 40% of births in the UK each year are to unmarried couples. The 'pro-family' lobby argues that married couples provide more stability and a better environment for children. But marriage apparently provides no guarantees: currently about one in three British marriages ends in divorce.

All the above applies to heterosexual marriage of course. It's been legal for gay or lesbian couples to get hitched only since the 2005 Civil Partnership Act came into force. This was a landmark step, but there's still a way to go before full tolerance and equality is reached.

It's a similar situation when it comes to race. General tolerance prevails in most parts of Britain, with commercial organisations and official bodies such as the police trying hard to stamp out discrimination. But bigotry can still lurk close to the surface: far-right political parties won several seats in the local council elections of 2006, and it's not unusual to hear people openly discuss other races in quite unpleasant terms – in smart country pubs as much as rough city bars. And while it's no longer OK for comedians to tell racist

Compared to the 1950s, there are now 25% fewer marriages per year, but five times as many divorces. For more fascinating figures see [www.2-in-2-1.co.uk/ukstats](http://www.2-in-2-1.co.uk/ukstats).

jokes on prime-time TV (as it was until the 1980s), this type of humour still goes down well in some quarters.

Along with race, another major issue in Britain is health – with obesity a hot topic on everyone’s lips. Currently over 60% of the adult population is overweight, and almost 25% is clinically obese. In late 2005 the UK had the fastest growing rate of obesity of all developed nations.

So while the Brits pig out on junk food, at least they’re not smoking so much. Tobacco has moved down to second on the health-risk charts, and although it’s still a major cause of disease, about 75% of the population does not smoke – the lowest figures since records began. And perhaps that’s why there’s been mostly support (albeit sometimes grudging) for the smoking ban due to be introduced in restaurants and many pubs in mid-2007. For more see p107.

Time to celebrate? Oh yes – with a big drink. Across the country, alcohol consumption is on the rise, with the relatively new phenomenon of ‘binge drinking’ among young people a major concern for doctors, police and politicians. And it’s not just the boys on the booze; thanks largely to a change in social attitudes (there’s no more stigma attached to a woman getting drunk than there is to a man) and the invention of sweet but strong ‘alcopops’, around 70% of women are drinking more than the recommended amount – up from just 10% in the mid-1990s.

And alcohol isn’t the only drug. A major survey in 2004 showed that about 20% of British people had used a recreational drug during their lifetime. More recent studies estimate that about 5% of young adults uses cocaine, and about 5% of schoolchildren use ecstasy, while at any given time around 10% of the population regularly or occasionally uses cannabis. It’s too early to say if the highly controversial 2005 decriminalisation of cannabis use will have any impact on these figures.

## POPULATION

Britain’s population is around 58 million, and growth has been virtually static in recent years (if you don’t count the annual influx of about 30 million tourists). The highest concentration is in England, which has a population of 50 million, with London the largest city in the country. The other main centres in England are Birmingham (Britain’s second-largest city), Manchester and Sheffield (ranking third and fourth in size), with Liverpool and Leeds not far away – in distance and size.

Wales has around three million people, with the population concentrated along the coast between Cardiff (the Welsh capital) and Swansea and in the former mining valleys running north from there. Scotland has around five million people, with the population concentrated in and around the cities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee. Scotland’s Highland region is Britain’s most sparsely populated area, with an average of just 20 people per sq mile, a legacy of the notorious Clearances (see p897).

A major characteristic of Britain’s population is the so-called ‘north–south divide’, in reality a split between wealthy southeast England and the rest of the UK. For example, around London there are towns where high-tech jobs are on the rise and there’s less than 1% unemployment. In sharp contrast, economic depression is a major issue in parts of the Midlands, northern England,

### POPULATION FIGURES

Throughout this book we give the population figures for towns and cities drawn from the 2001 national census. In some cases the numbers may have changed by the time you read this, but you’ll still know if a place is a tiny village or a major metropolis.

### GOING TO THE DOGS

The British are notorious for their love of animals, and this passion extends especially to pets. Foreigners may notice that while striking up a conversation with a stranger is unusual, many locals are quite happy to talk to another person’s dog.

This special affection means dogs can get away with anything. On city streets, pet dogs on leads obstruct pedestrians and crap all over the footpaths. In the countryside, pet dogs chase sheep, disturb wildlife and – you guessed it – crap all over the footpaths. Of course, we can’t blame the dog; it’s the owners who are at fault. Although pooper-scoopers have made a big impact in recent years, the antisocial habits of pet dogs are tolerated to an incredible degree by most Brits.

Such is the tolerance that many dog owners let their pets run around in blatant disregard of ‘Keep Dogs on Lead’ signs. If you’re terrified by the unwanted attentions of a poorly trained mutt while you’re out walking in a park or the countryside, be prepared for the usual response from the owner – ‘Don’t worry, he’s only being friendly’.

south and north Wales and many parts of urban and rural Scotland – an ‘archipelago of deprivation’ according to one report.

However, this split is oversimplified, and across the country there are pockets of affluence in ‘poor’ areas, and zones of poverty just a few blocks from Millionaires’ Row. But, overall, even though the cost of living in London and the southeast is much higher than elsewhere (double the price for a beer, 10 times more for a house), and despite government efforts to relocate public- and private-sector jobs to ‘the regions’, people – and the work opportunities that attract them – still seem relentlessly drawn to the capital and its environs.

Meanwhile, and contrary to expectations, an even more significant migration is under way. In the last decade, over one million people in Britain have moved from urban to rural areas. A 2004 report from the Countryside Agency says this is four times more than the number moving from north to south. The new country-dwellers seek a better standard of living, and many can work from home via phone and the internet. Others use their skills to set up small businesses, providing new employment opportunities for the locals – especially valuable in rural areas where traditional jobs such as farming are on the wane. But there are downsides, too, most notably the rise in rural house prices. This is pushing property beyond the reach of local inhabitants and forcing *them* to move to the towns that the incomers have just vacated.

## SPORT

If you want to take a short cut into the heart of British culture, watch the British at play. They’re fierce and passionate about their sport, whether participating or watching. The mood of the nation is more closely aligned to the success of its international teams in major competition than to budget announcements from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, or even the weather.

The British invented – or at least laid down the modern rules for – many of the world’s most popular spectator sports, including cricket, tennis, rugby and football. Trouble is, the national teams aren’t always so good at playing them (as the newspapers continually like to remind us), although recent years have seen some notable success stories. But a mixed result doesn’t dull enthusiasm for the fans. Every weekend, thousands of people turn out to cheer their favourite team, and sporting highlights such as Wimbledon or the Derby keep the entire nation enthralled, while the biggest sporting event of all – the Olympic Games – is coming to London in 2012.

This section gives an overview of spectator sports you might see as part of your travels around Britain; the regional chapters have more details. For information on participation sports, see p83.

## Football (Soccer)

Despite what the fans may say in Madrid or São Paulo, the English football league has some of the finest teams and players in the world. They're the richest too, with multimillion-pound sponsorship deals regularly clinched by powerful agents.

At the top of the tree is the Premier League for the country's top 20 clubs, although the hegemony enjoyed by superclubs Arsenal, Liverpool and globally renowned (and part US-owned) Manchester United has been challenged in recent years by former underdogs Chelsea, thanks to the seemingly bottomless budget of Russian owner Roman Abramovich.

Down from the premiership, 72 other teams play in the three divisions called the Championship, League One and League Two. The Scottish Premier League is dominated by Glasgow Rangers and Glasgow Celtic (p797). In Wales, football is comparatively less popular, although some of the bigger teams such as Wrexham, Cardiff City and Swansea City play in the lower English leagues.

The football season lasts from August to May, so seeing a match can easily be included in most visitors' itineraries – but tickets for the big games in the upper division are like gold dust, and cost £20 to £50 even if you're lucky enough to find one. Your best chance might be websites like [www.sportstoursinternational.co.uk](http://www.sportstoursinternational.co.uk) – offering tickets along with travel and accommodation.

If you can't get in to see the big names, tickets for lower-division games are cheaper and more easily available – either on the spot, ordered through a club website, or through a specialist such as [www.ticketmaster.co.uk](http://www.ticketmaster.co.uk) or [www.myticketmarket.com](http://www.myticketmarket.com).

## Rugby

A wit once said that football was a gentlemen's game played by hooligans, while rugby was the other way around. That may be true, and rugby is very popular, especially since England became world champions in 2004; it's worth catching a game for the display of skill (OK, and brawn), and the fun atmosphere on the terraces. Tickets cost around £15 to £40 depending on the club's status and fortunes.

There are two variants of the game: rugby union is played in southern England, Wales and Scotland, while rugby league is the main sport in northern England, although there is a lot of crossover. Many rules and tactics of both 'codes' are similar, although in rugby league (unlike rugby union) tackled players regain their feet, and heel the ball backwards to a team-mate. After six tackles, the other team gets possession of the ball. Other major differences include there being only 13 players in each team (ostensibly making the game faster), while rugby union sides have 15 players each.

The main season for club matches is roughly September to Easter, while the international rugby union calendar is dominated by the annual Six Nations Championship (England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France and Italy) between January and April. It's usual for the Scots to support Wales, or vice versa, when either team is playing 'old enemy' England. Scots will enthusiastically

### RUGBY ROOTS

Rugby traces its origins to a football match in 1823 at Rugby School, in Warwickshire in the English Midlands. A player called William Ellis, frustrated at the limitations of mere kicking, reputedly picked up the ball and ran with it towards the opponents' goal. True to the British sense of fair play, rather than Ellis being dismissed from the game, a whole new sport was developed around his tactic, and the Rugby Football Union was formally inaugurated in 1871.

For dates and details of football, cricket, horse racing and other events in Britain tomorrow, next week or next month, start with the sports pages of [www.whatsonwhen.com](http://www.whatsonwhen.com).

### THE SWEET FA CUP

The (English) Football Association held its first interclub knockout tournament in 1871. Fifteen clubs took part, playing for a nice piece of silverware called the FA Cup – then worth about £20.

Nowadays, around 600 clubs compete for this legendary and priceless trophy. It differs from many other competitions in that every team – from the lowest-ranking part-timers to the stars of the Premier League – is in with a chance. The preliminary rounds begin in August, and the world-famous Cup Final is held in May. It's been staged at Wembley for decades, with a few years out at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium while the national ground was rebuilt.

The team with the most FA Cup victories is Manchester United (a total of 10), but public attention – and affection – is invariably focused on the 'giant-killers' – minor clubs that claw their way up through the rounds, unexpectedly beating higher-ranking competitors. The best known giant-killing event occurred in 1992, when Wrexham, then ranked 24th in Division 3, famously beat league champions Arsenal. Other shocks include non-league Kidderminster Harriers' 1994 defeats of big boys Birmingham City and Preston North End, and Oldham Athletic beating premier leaguers Manchester City in 2005.

Scotland has its own FA Cup competition, first held in 1874. The cup itself is the original, making it the oldest football trophy in the world. One of the most famous giant-killings north of the border was when mighty Celtic was humbled in 2000 by lowly Inverness Caledonian Thistle, inspiring the immortal tabloid headline 'Super Caley go ballistic; Celtic are atrocious'.

In recent years, competitions such as the Premier League and Champions League (against European teams) have a higher profile, bigger kudos, and simply more money to play with. But nothing raises community spirit more than a town team doing better than expected. Gates are down, and perhaps the FA Cup will one day be consigned to history – but what a sweet and glorious history it's been!

support France too – keeping alive memories of the Auld Alliance (see p46), but it's all very good-natured, really.

## Cricket

Cricket became an international game during Britain's colonial era, when it was exported to the countries of the Commonwealth, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, the West Indies and Australasia.

To outsiders (and some locals) the rules and terminology may appear ridiculously arcane and confusing, and progress seems so *slow*. Surely, say the nonbelievers, this is the game for which TV highlights were invented, but for aficionados the game provides 'resolute and graceful confrontations within an intricate and psychologically thrilling framework'. OK, the quote is from a cricket fan. Nonetheless, at least one cricket match should feature in your travels around Britain. If you're patient and learn the intricacies, you could find cricket as enriching and enticing as all the Brits (and especially the English) who remain glued to their radio or PC all summer, 'just to see how the cricket's going'.

One-day games and five-day test matches are played against sides such as Australia and the West Indies at landmark grounds like Lords in London, Edgbaston in Birmingham and Headingley in Leeds. Test match tickets cost £25 to £100 and tend to sell fast. County championships usually charge £10 to £15, and rarely sell out. Watching a local game on the village green is free of charge.

## Golf

Details on playing golf are on p89, but if you want to watch men with sticks hit little white balls (and it is mostly men's golf that draws the crowds), the main event is the British Open, known to all as simply 'the Open'. It's played every July in rotation on nine courses around the country: 2007 Carnoustie; 2008 Royal Birkdale; 2009 Turnberry; 2010 St Andrews ('the birthplace of

golf – see p846). Other important competitions include the British Amateur Championship and the Welsh Open at Celtic Manor Hotel near Newport, south Wales – the course for 2010's Ryder Cup. Spectator tickets start at about £10, going up to £75 for a good position at the major events.

### Horse Racing

There's a horse race somewhere in Britain pretty much every day, but the top event in the calendar is Royal Ascot in mid-June, when even the Queen turns up to put a fiver each way on Lucky Boy in the 3.15. For details see [www.royalascot.co.uk](http://www.royalascot.co.uk).

Other highlights include the Grand National steeplechase at Aintree in early April, and the Derby, run at Epsom on the first Saturday in June. The latter is especially popular with the masses so, unlike Ascot, you won't see morning suits and outrageous hats anywhere.

### Tennis

Tennis is widely played at club and regional levels, but the best known tournament is the All England Championships – Wimbledon – when tennis fever sweeps through the country for the last week of June and the first week of July. In between matches, the crowds traditionally feast on strawberries and cream. That's 28 tonnes of strawberries and 7000L of cream annually, to be precise.

Current British tennis darlings are Tim Henman and Andrew Murray, and demand for seats at Wimbledon always outstrips supply, but to give everyone an equal chance the tickets are sold (unusually) through a public ballot. You can also take your chance on the spot: about 6000 tickets are sold each day (but not the last four days) and queuing at dawn should get you into the ground. For details see [www.wimbledon.org](http://www.wimbledon.org).

### MEDIA Newspapers

Breakfast need never be boring in Britain. For such a small country, there's a huge range of newspapers to read over your cornflakes.

The bottom end of the market is occupied by easy-to-read tabloids, full of sensational 'exclusives' and simplistic political coverage. The *Sun* is a national institution with mean-spirited content and headlines based on outrageous puns – a good combination apparently, as it's Britain's biggest-selling paper, with a circulation of around three million and a readership of around nine million. The *Daily Mirror*, once the 'paper of the workers', tried to compete head-on with the *Sun* for a while, then rediscovered its left-of-centre, pro-Labour heritage. The *Daily Sport* takes bad taste to the extreme, with stories of aliens and celebrities (sometimes in the same report), and pictures of semi-naked women of improbable proportions.

The *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* bill themselves as middle-market, but are little different to the tabloids, both thunderously right-of-centre with a

#### SPORTING COVERAGE

Perhaps surprisingly, unlike many countries, Britain has no dedicated large-circulation sports newspaper (apart from perhaps the *Sportsman*, concentrating mainly on the betting angle). But read the excellent coverage in the back pages of the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Times* and the *Guardian* and you'll see there's no need for one. The tabloid newspapers also cover sport, especially if a star has been caught with their pants down. Talking of which, despite the name, the *Daily Sport* is not a sports paper, unless photos of glamour models wearing only a pair of Arsenal socks counts as 'sport'.

Queen Elizabeth II is a great horse-racing fan, with 19 Ascot winners to date from the royal stables. The 2005 Grand National clashed with Prince Charles' marriage; rumours abound that the start was delayed so the Queen could attend the nuptials and see the race.

steady stream of crime and scare stories about threatening immigrants and rampant homosexuals. Some may find this diet distasteful, but about eight million readers don't.

At the upper end of the market are the broadsheets: the *Daily Telegraph* is right-of-centre and easily outsells its rivals; the *Times* is conservative, Murdoch-owned, thorough and influential; the *Guardian* is left-of-centre and innovative; and the *Independent* lives up to its title. 'Tabloid' and 'broadsheet' have always referred more to substance than actual dimensions, but the distinction is now totally content-based as several serious papers are also issued in handy-to-carry sizes.

Most dailies have Sunday stablemates (the *Sunday Mirror*, *Sunday Express*, *Sunday Telegraph* and so on) and there's also the long-standing liberal-slanted *Observer*. The weekend broadsheets are filled more with comment and analysis than hot news, and on their day of rest the British settle in armchairs to plough through endless supplements; the *Sunday Times* alone comes in 12 different parts, and must destroy a rainforest every issue.

Most of the papers mentioned here are available all over Britain, but can have an English bias, so Scotland maintains a flock of home-grown dailies. These include the *Scotsman* – aligned with the Liberal Democrats – and the popular tabloid *Daily Record*. The *Herald*, founded in 1783, is the oldest daily in the English-speaking world, and the *Sunday Post* is a bestseller. In Wales, the *Western Mail* is the national daily, with *Wales on Sunday* taking over at weekends.

There are also local and regional papers throughout Britain. These range from the *Evening Standard*, London's commuter favourite, and city dailies like the *Manchester News* or *Swansea Evening Post* – the latter famous as the paper where Dylan Thomas cut his journalistic teeth – to quaint country-town weeklies.

### TV & Radio

Alongside the wide range of newsprint stands an equally wide range of TV and radio. The BBC is the country's leading broadcaster and a venerable institution, with several channels of the world's best programming dominating national radio and free-to-air TV. Foreigners are frequently amazed that public service broadcasting can produce such a range of professional, innovative, up-to-date and stimulating programmes. All this – and without adverts too! – although ever-increasing competition from cable and satellite channels means some shows tend to be dumbed down as ratings are chased, especially as the majority of households now have digital receivers, in preparation for the analogue switch-off scheduled for 2012.

The main BBC TV stations are BBC One and BBC Two; others include BBC Three, BBC Four, News24 and some children's channels. Major commercial broadcasters include ITV and Channel 4 – both with several channels. Satellite broadcasting is heavily dominated by Sky, part of the gargantuan News International Corporation.

Turning to radio, the main BBC stations include Radio 1, playing everything from syrupy pop to underground garage, with a predominantly young audience and some truly inane presenters. When you get too old for this, tune into Radio 2, playing favourites from the 1960s to today, plus country, jazz and world music, with presenters who also got too old for Radio 1. Predominantly classical music is played on Radio 3, but this station also goes into roots and world music, while media gem Radio 4 offers a mix of news, comment, current affairs, drama and humour. Other BBC stations include Radio 5 Live (a mix of sport and talk) and Radio 7 (drama and humour).

Want to scan the papers online? Find them at *Daily Express* ([www.express.co.uk](http://www.express.co.uk)), *Daily Telegraph* ([www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk)), *Guardian* ([www.guardianunlimited.co.uk](http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk)), *Independent* ([www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk)), *Mirror* ([www.mirror.co.uk](http://www.mirror.co.uk)), *Sun* ([www.the-sun.co.uk](http://www.the-sun.co.uk)), *Times* ([www.the-times.co.uk](http://www.the-times.co.uk)).



Alongside the BBC are many commercial radio broadcasters. Every city has at least one music station, while national stations include pop-orientated Virgin Radio and pleasantly nonhighbrow classical specialist Classic FM. To find the right spot on the dial, see p949.

## RELIGION

The Church of England (or Anglican Church) was founded in the 16th century at the behest of Henry VIII, and today remains wealthy and influential – even in these increasingly secular times. It's traditionally conservative, and predominantly Conservative (sometimes called 'the Tory Party at prayer'); only since 1994 have women been ordained as priests. The debate has now moved on to the rights and wrongs of gay clergy.

In the 2001 national census, around 35 million people stated their religion as Christian, and although many write 'C of E' when filling in forms, only about a million attend Sunday services. Other Christian faiths include Roman Catholic (about 10% of the population), plus sizable groups of Methodists, Baptists and other nonconformists – most notably in Wales, where the Anglican Church ceased to be the established church way back in the 1920s, and the Church–Chapel divide between the Protestant and nonconformist faiths is still clearly evident. In Scotland you'll find the (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland with its spin-off minorities, the United Free Presbyterians and the Free Church of Scotland (known as the Wee Frees). Generally, attendances are down every year at mainstream churches across Britain, with evangelical and charismatic churches the only ones attracting growing congregations.

The 2001 census also recorded around 1.5 million Muslims in Britain (about 3% of the population). Other faiths include Hindu (1%), Sikh (0.7%), Jewish (0.5%) and Buddhist (0.3%). Nowadays more non-Christians regularly visit their places of worship than do all the Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists and Baptists combined – especially if you include those druids at Stonehenge, and all those wags that amusingly wrote 'Jedi Knight' in the 'Other' category on the census form.

## ARTS Literature

Modern English literature – that is, poetry and prose in the English language – starts around 1387 (yes, that's modern in history-soaked Britain) with *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer's classic collection of fables, stories and morality tales using travelling pilgrims – the Knight, the Wife of Bath, the Nun's Priest and so on – as a narrative hook. For more background see the boxed text, p193.

Two centuries later, enter William Shakespeare. Still Britain's best known playwright, he was pretty good at poems too. The famous line 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' comes from sonnet No 18. In all he penned more than 150.

Then came the metaphysical poets of the early 17th century. Their vivid imagery and far-fetched conceits or comparisons daringly pushed the boundaries. In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, for instance, John Donne compares two lovers with the points of a compass. Racy stuff in its day.

Perhaps you're more familiar with *Auld Lang Syne*, traditionally sung at New Year throughout Britain. It was penned by prolific 18th-century poet and lyricist Robert Burns. His more unusual *Address to a Haggis* plays an important part of 'Burns Night', a Scottish celebration held on 25 January. For more on Robert Burns, see p815.

The stars of the 19th century were the Romantics. John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron wrote with emotion, exulting the senses and power

## YDACH CHI YN GALLU SIARAD CYMRAEG?

That means 'Can you speak Welsh?', and it's the widespread survival of Welsh as a national living language that marks out Wales so distinctly from the rest of Britain. Other indigenous British languages include Scots Gaelic (spoken by around 80,000 people in the Highlands and islands), Manx (on the Isle of Man) and Cornish (Cornwall), but as a tourist in Britain, it's Welsh you're most likely to come across.

The origins of Welsh go back thousands of years. It's an Indo-European language, with the same root as English (despite its weird-looking double Ls and strings of consecutive consonants), but its history is quite different. When the Acts of Union in 1536 formally linked Wales and England (see p48) officials had to speak English as well as Welsh. In other circumstances Welsh may have started to fade, but Bishop Morgan's translation of the Bible in 1588 played an important part in keeping the language alive, and during the 17th and 18th centuries the nonconformist faiths that made such headway in Wales also supported the native language.

The rot set in during the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, when a whole new ruling class of landlords and employers came from England, and from then on the number of Welsh speakers went into steep decline. In 1801 about 80% of the population spoke Welsh; by 1901 this had sunk to 50%. Through the following decades numbers continued to fall, and it wasn't until the 1960s that Welsh speakers started to make a determined fightback.

The first victory was the 1967 Welsh Language Act that ensured that Welsh speakers could use their own language in court. In the 1980s and '90s things really took off, with much revived interest across Wales, not least among incomers. In 1982 Channel 4 set up Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C – Channel 4 Wales), which still broadcasts Welsh TV programmes daily, and in 1988 a Welsh Language Board was set up to advise the secretary of state for Wales on everything to do with the language. In 1994 a new Welsh Language Act gave equal validity to Welsh as a language for use in public-sector businesses.

Today about 20% of people in Wales speak Welsh as a first language, and for many more it's a strong second tongue. As you travel around, you'll notice all road signs are bilingual – although don't be surprised if the English words have been daubed out in green paint, a sign that nationalist feelings still remain strong in some areas.

See p977 for more information about Welsh and Scottish Gaelic.

of the imagination, and were particularly passionate about nature. The best known Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, lived in the Lake District, and his famous lines from *Daffodils*, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', were inspired by a hike in the hills.

The Romantic movement produced a genre called 'literary Gothic', exemplified by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and satirised in *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen, still one of Britain's best known and best loved novelists; intrigues and passions boiling under the stilted preserve of provincial middle-class social convention are beautifully portrayed in *Emma* and *Pride & Prejudice*.

Next came the reign of Queen Victoria and the era of industrial expansion, so key novels of the time explored social and political issues. In *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens captures the lives of young thieves in the London slums, and in *Hard Times* he paints a brutal picture of capitalism's excesses. Meanwhile, Thomas Hardy's classic *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* deals with the peasantry's decline, and *The Trumpet Major* paints a picture of idyllic English country life interrupted by war and encroaching modernity. North of the border, Sir Walter Scott produced the classic Scottish novel *Waverley*, set in the time of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion. (For more on Scott, see p803.)

Other major figures from this era are the Brontë sisters. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* are classics of passion, mystery and love. Fans still flock to Haworth (p516), their former home, perched on the edge of the wild Pennine moors that inspired so many books.

Of the Brontë family's prodigious output, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë is the best known – an epic tale of obsession and revenge, where the dark and moody landscape plays as great a role as any human character.

Also popular at this time were two Scottish novelists: Robert Louis Stevenson, best known for his children's books *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*; and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, inventor of detective Sherlock Holmes who, with sidekick Watson, starred in a string of murder mysteries.

In the 20th century, the pace of writing increased. A landmark was the 1908 success of Welsh poet WH Davies, whose *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* contained the immortal words 'What is this life if, full of care/We have no time to stand and stare?'

A few years later, inspired by the tragedy of WWI, poet Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier* is romantic and idealistic, while Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* is harshly cynical about the 'glory' of war. DH Lawrence, their contemporary, picked up the theme of change and produced *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow*, novels set in the English Midlands that follow the lives and loves of generations as the country changes from 19th-century idyll to the modern world we recognise today. In 1928 Lawrence further pushed his explorations of sexuality in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* – initially banned as pornographic. Torrid affairs are no great shakes today, but the quality of the writing still shines.

Other highlights of the interwar years included EM Forster's *A Passage to India*, about the hopelessness of British colonial rule, and Daphne du Maurier's romantic suspense novel *Rebecca*, set on the Cornish coast. Evelyn Waugh gave us *Brideshead Revisited* and Richard Llewellyn wrote the Welsh classic *How Green Was My Valley*. In a different world entirely, JRR Tolkien published *The Hobbit*, trumping it some 20 years later with his awesome trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*.

After WWII, Compton Mackenzie lifted postwar spirits with *Whisky Galore*, a comic novel about a cargo of booze washed up from a sinking ship onto a Scottish island. Elsewhere, a less whimsical breed of writer emerged. George Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, his closely observed studies of totalitarian rule, while the Cold War inspired Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, in which a secret agent studies the workings of a vacuum cleaner to inspire fictitious spying reports.

Another spook of that period was Ian Fleming's full-blooded hero James Bond – better known today as a movie franchise. He first appeared in 1953 in the book *Casino Royale*, then swashbuckled through numerous thrillers for another decade. Meanwhile, TH White's *Once and Future King* covers battles of a different time – the magical world of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

The 20th century was also a great time for poets. Landmarks include WH Auden's *Funeral Blues* (still his most popular work thanks to a role in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*) and TS Eliot's epic *The Wasteland*, although he is better known for *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* – turned into the musical *Cats* by Andrew Lloyd Webber. In the 1960s writer Roger McGough and friends determined to make art relevant to daily life and produced *The Mersey Sound* – landmark pop poetry for the streets.

Different again was the harsh, gritty verse of Ted Hughes, sometimes renowned as much for the stormy relationship with his wife (American poet Sylvia Plath) as for his works, although in 1984 he became poet laureate of England, until his death in 1998. Meanwhile, Dylan Thomas, also known for his energetic social diary, came to the fore with *Portrait of The Artist As A Young Dog*, although his most celebrated work is a radio play *Under Milk Wood* (1954), exposing the tensions of small-town Wales (for more on the setting for *Under Milk Wood*, see p673).

Then came the swinging '60s and '70s. New writers included Muriel Spark, who introduced the world to a highly unusual Edinburgh school mistress in

For extra insight while travelling, the *Oxford Literary Guide to Great Britain and Ireland* gives details of towns, villages and countryside immortalised by writers.

*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and Martin Amis, who was just 24 in 1973 when he wrote *The Rachel Papers*, a witty, minutely observed story of sexual obsession in puberty. Since then Amis has published many books, including *London Fields* and *The Information*, all greeted with critical acclaim and high sales. Similarly, Ian McEwan was one of Britain's angriest young novelists, earning the nickname Ian Macabre for his early work like *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers*, but in 1998 he cracked the establishment and became a Booker Prize winner with *Amsterdam*.

In contrast, authors Sebastian Faulks and Louis de Bernières struggled for recognition, then hit the jackpot with later works. Their respective novels *Birdsong*, a perfect study of passion and the horrors of WWI, and *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, a tale of love, war and life on a Greek island, were massive sellers in the 1990s.

Contemporary novels in a different vein include 1993's *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh, a deep, dark look at Edinburgh's drug culture and the start of a new genre coined 'Tartan Noir'. Other successful modern Scottish novelists include Iain Banks (who also writes sci-fi under the cunning pseudonym of Iain M Banks) and Ian Rankin, whose Detective Inspector Rebus novels are always eagerly awaited. (For more on Rankin and fellow Scottish writers, see p753.)

Another notable work of the same era was *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi, about the hopes and fears of a group of suburban Anglo-Asians in London, and a forerunner of the many multicultural tales that dominate bestseller lists today.

As English literature entered the new millennium, two of the biggest-selling British authors were JK Rowling and Phillip Pulman; Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Pulman's *His Dark Materials* series took children's literature to a level where they could be seriously enjoyed by adults too.

Back in the real world, Zadie Smith was only 25 when *White Teeth* became a major hit of 2000. She followed it with the equally hyped, and almost as good, *The Autograph Man* and *On Beauty*, the latter winning the prestigious Orange Prize for Fiction in 2006.

Other star novelists covering (loosely defined) 'multicultural Britain' themes include Monica Ali, whose *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the 2003 Man Booker Prize, and Hari Kunzru, who received one of the largest advances in publishing history in 2002 for his debut *The Impressionist*. His second novel *Transmission* was published in 2004. The same year, *Small Island* by Andrea Levy won the Orange Prize for her novel about a Jamaican couple settled in 1950s London. The author is of Jamaican origin and draws on rich family memories of the time. Two years later, the book won the best-in-10-years 'Orange of Orange' award.

Also set in London are Alan Hollinghurst's 2004 Booker Prize winner *The Line of Beauty*, about high-society gays in the 1980s Thatcher era, and *The Book of Dave* by prolific novelist, journalist, broadcaster and social commentator Will Self, published in 2006. Although ostensibly fanciful (a new religion based on the rantings of a grumpy taxi driver), like many of Self's works it's a wonderfully incisive satire on urban lifestyles in 21st-century Britain. An earlier collection of short stories, *Grey Area*, revels in more skewed and surreal aspects of the capital. Meanwhile, Martin Amis produced the darkly stylised and frankly confusing *Yellow Dog* in 2002 and Nick Hornby left lad-lit behind and displayed a deeper maturity in 2006's darkly comic *A Long Way Down*. Other 2006 highlights included Irvine Welsh's *Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs*, a study of modern-day fixations – food, drugs, sex and celebrity – with a nod to Dorian Gray thrown in for good measure.

As the Pennine moors haunt Brontë novels, so the marshy Cambridgeshire Fens dominate *Waterland* by Graham Swift – a tale of personal and national history, betrayal and compassion, and a landmark work of the 1980s.

Nick Hornby is easily lumped in the lad-lit bracket, but *Fever Pitch* (about football and relationships) and *High Fidelity* (about music and relationships) are spot-on studies of young bloke-ishness.

On the verse front, a highlight of 2006 was long-standing and prolific poet Fleur Adcock winning the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. Although she had published at least 10 books, press attention focused on a single line in a single poem, about dreaming of kissing John Prescott, written *before* the Deputy Prime Minister's extramarital affair with an aide was made public. Spooky.

But perhaps the biggest literary highlight of the year was the record-breaking £5 million five-book autobiography deal signed by footballer Wayne Rooney, star of Manchester United and England's 2006 World Cup campaign. As more than one cynic has already noted, the signature is likely to be Rooney's only written contribution; in reality, the book will be ghosted by an experienced sports columnist.

In a world of hype, the publishing of books these days may be as much about PR and marketing as it is about the quality of the writing, but critics agree that the desire for big names and an eagerness to chase (or invent) new themes has at least revitalised the industry.

## Cinema

In the early years of the 20th century, silent movies from Britain gave the Americans a run for their money, and *Blackmail* by Alfred Hitchcock – still one of Britain's best known film directors – launched the British film industry's era of sound production in 1929.

*How Green Was My Valley*, a tale of everyday life in the coal-mining villages of Wales, was made in 1941. Still perhaps the best known Welsh film of all time, it also annoys more Welsh people than any other, as it features stereotypical characters and no Welsh actors, and was shot in a Hollywood studio. It is worth a watch, though, for a taste of the period.

After a decline in film output during WWII, the British film recovery in the 1940s and '50s was led by Ealing Studios with a series of eccentric comedies, such as *Kind Hearts and Coronets* starring Alec Guinness.

More serious box-office hits of the time included *Hamlet*, starring Laurence Olivier (the first British film to win an Oscar in the Best Picture category) and Carol Reed's *The Third Man*. An absolute classic of the era is *Brief Encounter*, directed by David Lean, who went on to make *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*.

Super-sleuth James Bond arrived on the big screen in 1962, with *Dr No* starring Scotland's very own Sean Connery. Since then about 20 Bond movies have been made, and Bond has been played by other British actors including Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton and, in 2006, Daniel Craig. More recent producers have brought a somewhat chauvinistic Bond into the modern age, with the enlightened casting of Dame Judi Dench as Bond's boss, 'M'.

By the end of the 1960s, British film production had declined again and didn't pick up until David Puttnam's *Chariots of Fire* won four Oscars in 1981.

Perhaps inspired by this success, TV company Channel 4 began financing films for the large and small screen, one of the first being *My Beautiful Laundrette* – a story of multicultural life and love in the Thatcher era. The following year, Richard Attenborough's big-budget epic *Gandhi* carried off eight Oscars including best director and best picture, while another classic of the 1980s was *Withnail and I*, starring Richard E Grant and Paul McGann.

The 1990s saw another minor renaissance in British film-making, ushered in by *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, featuring US star Andie MacDowell and introducing Hugh Grant as a likable and self-deprecating Englishman. This spearheaded a genre of 'Brit-flicks', including *Secrets and Lies*, a Palme d'Or winner at Cannes, *Bhaji on the Beach*, a quirky East-meets-West-meets-Blackpool road movie, *The Full Monty*, which in 1997 became Britain's most successful film ever, *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill and Came Down*

*a Mountain*, an affectionate story about a peak in north Wales that was too short, and *Trainspotting*, a hard-hitting film about Edinburgh's drugged-out underbelly that launched the careers of Scottish actors Ewan McGregor and Robert Carlyle. Other British stars more frequently seen in Hollywood these days include Welsh thespians Anthony Hopkins and Catherine Zeta Jones.

More great films of the 1990s include *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, going on to spawn a host of gangster copycats, *East is East*, a beautifully understated study of the clash between first- and second-generation immigrant Pakistanis in Britain, and the Oscar-winning series of *Wallace and Gromit* animations, while *Breaking the Waves* is a perfect study of culture clash in 1970s Scotland, and *Human Traffic* is an edgy romp through Cardiff's clubland. Also released was *Notting Hill*, set in one of the most multicultural suburbs in the whole of Britain, starring Julia Roberts with Hugh Grant as, yes, a likable and self-deprecating Englishman, and possibly most famous for managing to include only Caucasian extras in the street scenes. Much more enjoyable was *Sense and Sensibility*, with English doyens Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet as the Dashwood sisters, and Hugh Grant as, you guessed it, a likable and self-deprecating Englishman.

Award-winning Welsh-language films of the 1990s include *Hedd Wynn*, a heartbreaking story of a poet killed in WWI, and *Soloman and Gaenor*, a passionate tale of forbidden love at the turn of the 20th century.

A classic of the Brit-flick genre, and a great success of 2000, was *Billy Elliot*, yet another film with Britain's declining industry as backdrop, but also about people rising above it, particularly the son of a hardened coal-miner who strives to become a ballet dancer. In contrast, *About a Boy* was a feel-good movie about a dating ploy leading unexpectedly to fatherly responsibilities, starring the ever-popular Hugh Grant as (surprise, surprise) a likable and self-deprecating Englishman. Meanwhile, *Bend it like Beckham* addressed more fundamental themes: growing up, first love, sex, class, race – and football.

Despite the success stories of the 1990s, as we go through the first decade of the 21st century the UK film industry has returned to its customary precarious financial state. Advocates call for more government funding, as in reality most UK-made and UK-set films are paid for with US money – epitomised perhaps by the globally renowned series of Harry Potter adventures, starting with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 2001, with roughly a movie per year as we follow the schoolboy wizard through at least six years of education. (To visit parts of Britain where Harry Potter and many other films have been made, see [www.visitbritain.com/moviemap](http://www.visitbritain.com/moviemap) or the Britain on Location itinerary, p33.)

Other notable British films of this decade (so far) include: *Shaun of the Dead*, a great low-budget horror spoof where the hero fails to notice walking corpses because most of his neighbours are zombies at the best of times; *24 Hour Party People*, about the iconic Hacienda Club and all-round pop excess in 1980s Manchester; *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, already a cult book and radio series; *Tristram Shandy: A Cock & Bull Story*, an outrageously witty, deliberately meandering and multilayered take on the 'unfilmable' classic English novel, starring two of Britain's top comics; Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride*, animated necrophilia and Gothic fun for the whole family; *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse Of The Were-Rabbit*, another handcrafted marvel from director Nick Park; and *Confetti*, a 'mockumentary' charting three couples' attempts to win the title of 'Most Original Wedding of the Year'.

A highlight of 2006 was *Pride and Prejudice*, another Jane Austen masterpiece skillfully adapted for the silver screen, filmed in Derbyshire and Lincolnshire and starring Keira Knightly (a long way from *Bend it like Beckham*), along with fellow British stars Matthew MacFadyen, Brenda Blethyn and the perennial Judi Dench.

[www.screenonline.org.uk](http://www.screenonline.org.uk) – the website of the British Film Institute – has complete coverage of Britain's film and TV industry.

*Passport to Pimlico* is an Ealing Studios film classic, the story of a London suburb declaring independence from the rest of the country.

*Brief Encounter* is frequently cited as a milestone in British cinema – a film where the drama comes from the acting (Trevor Howard and Celia Johnstone) rather than the set (uninspiring suburbs and railway-station buffets). It's a story of unexpected love and smouldering sexual attraction that can never be fulfilled.

*Chariots of Fire* is an inspiring dramatisation of a true story: the progress of two athletes from university to the 1924 Olympics, their friendship and rivalry, and – for one of them – the conflict of sport with faith. When receiving his Oscars, the director boasted: 'the British are coming'.

A film about love, betrayal, brass bands, coal-mine closures and the breakdown of society in 1980s England, *Brassed Off* makes you laugh, then cry, and shouldn't be missed.

*Bride & Prejudice* is another Austen-inspired movie, this time with singing, dancing and outrageous Bollywood panache.

The same year saw the release of the massively hyped *Stormbreaker*, dubbed by some as 'Harry Potter meets James Bond meets Bruce Lee', and (with a slightly smaller budget) *Love + Hate*, a quintessential Brit-flick sharing some themes with *Pride and Prejudice*, although forbidden passions run across race lines rather than class, and instead of the scenic Peak District in 1803 the setting is the modern-day post-industrial landscape of northern England.

## Music POP & ROCK

Since the dawn of the swinging '60s, Britain has been firmly on the main stage – with access all areas – of pop and rock music's colourful history. Major early exports were the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, the Kinks, and Welsh soul man Tom Jones, followed in the 1970s by stardust-speckled heroes like the Bay City Rollers, Marc Bolan and David Bowie. Other big-name artists of the time – in some cases even still performing – include Cream (featuring Eric Clapton), the Faces (starring Rod Stewart), Genesis (initially fronted by Peter Gabriel and later by Phil Collins) and Roxy Music (featuring for a while the highly influential Brian Eno), plus Pink Floyd, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Queen and Elton John – all very different but all globally renowned, and with some, such as Bowie, still producing decent material today.

In the late '70s and early '80s, the self-indulgent 'prog rock' of the 'dinosaur bands' was replaced by punk music. It was energetic, anarchic ('here's three chords, now form a band' ran a famous fanzine quote) and frequently tuneless, but punk was great fun and returned pop to grass-roots level – at least for a while. The infamous Sex Pistols produced one album and a clutch of (mostly banned) singles, while more prolific were the Clash, the Damned, the Buzzcocks, the Stranglers and the UK Subs.

Punk begat 'New Wave' (ie everything that was a bit punky), with leading exponents including the Jam, the Tourists and Elvis Costello. This merged briefly with the ska revival of the 1980s led by the Specials, influencing bands such as Madness and the Beat. Meanwhile, a punk-and-reggae-influenced trio called the Police – fronted by bassist Sting – became one of the biggest names of the decade, and gothic lost boys the Cure carved their own existential post-punk path.

Around the same time, heavy metal enjoyed an upsurge, with bands like Black Sabbath (featuring once-again-famous Ozzy Osbourne) and Judas Priest exporting soulful melodies and intriguing interpretations of established religion to concert halls worldwide.

## LIVE & KICKING

In Britain you're never short of live music. London and several other cities have stadiums and world-class concert halls for major pop, rock, jazz and classical events, and across the country there's a massive choice of smaller venues where the less-well-known do their thing. Bands large and small are pretty much guaranteed to play in London, but often tour extensively, so a weekend break in Blackpool, Sheffield or Glasgow could include seeing a band at the Tower Ballroom, the legendary Leadmill or King Tut's. Down the scale again, you can hear great sounds (and some really dire stuff) in pubs and small clubs everywhere. As well as local listings, countrywide agencies like **See** ([www.seetickets.com](http://www.seetickets.com)) are useful for planning, while the **Indie Travel Guide** ([www.indietravelguide.com](http://www.indietravelguide.com)) features local bands, venues and clubs across Britain (and beyond). North of the border, **Gigs in Scotland** ([www.gigsinscotland.com](http://www.gigsinscotland.com)) is the absolute authority. Options for live music are of course more restricted in the countryside – but then you're in the wrong place for bright lights and decibels anyway...

## WAIT, THERE'S MORE

This section concentrates on pop and rock. Of course, Britain enjoys many other rich and diverse musical genres – jazz, folk, roots, fusion, banghra, R&B, drum'n'bass, dance, techno, chill-out, dub, gospel, urban, hip-hop and so on – but we simply haven't got the space to cover them here.

The ever-changing 1980s also saw a surge of electronica with the likes of Depeche Mode and Cabaret Voltaire, and the rise of New Romantic bands such as Spandau Ballet, Duran Duran and Culture Club – all frills and fringes, and a definite swing of pop's pendulum away from untidy punks. More hits and highlights were supplied by the Eurythmics, Texas, and Wham! – a two-piece boy band headed by a bright young fellow called George Michael.

Meanwhile, a whole new sound was emerging in northwest England. Fusing elements of punk, rock and dance music, the pioneering Joy Division (later evolving into New Order), the Stone Roses and Happy Mondays epitomised the late-'80s/early-'90s Madchester Sound (p566).

Concurrently, the painfully morose but curiously engaging Smiths, fronted by Morrissey (also enjoying a comeback), enjoyed world fame, while on the other side of the Pennines, Leeds-based the Wedding Present championed guitar- and frustration-driven melodies that still influence many bands today.

Dance music and superclubs did their best to dominate the scene but the '90s also saw the renaissance of British indie bands, with the likes of Blur, Elastica, Suede, Supergrass, Ocean Colour Scene, Manic Street Preachers, the Verve, Pulp, Travis, Feeder, Super Furry Animals, Stereophonics, Catatonia, Radiohead and, above all, Oasis reviving the guitar-based format. Heralded as the 'Britpop' revolution, part of the even bigger Cool Britannia phenomenon that combined new music, new art, new fashion and New Labour politics, it is largely thanks to these bands that the indie guitar sound remains such a major feature of British pop music today.

By the cusp of the millennium, Cool Britannia's shine had predictably faded, but a host of bands such as Coldplay, Franz Ferdinand, Badly Drawn Boy, Snow Patrol and Razorlight played on, and spawned a wave of imitators. Perhaps one of the more successful Britpop survivors was Damon Albarn of Blur, now conquering the charts again with Gorillaz. The Libertines similarly influenced music and fashion, although ex-frontman Pete Doherty is now more famous for drug-and-supermodel scandals than his subsequent band Babyshambles.

As we complete research on this book, halfway through the first decade of the 21st century, British pop and rock have divided into a host of genres mixing a wide range of influences including glam, punk, electronica and folk (while British folk itself, thanks largely to the rise of world music, enjoys its biggest revival since the 1960s). Worth a listen are atmospheric and eclectic British Sea Power, the energetic and nostalgic Go! Team, internet-download heroes Arctic Monkeys and Sandi Thom, plus Belle & Sebastian, the Guillemots, Editors, Kaiser Chiefs, Bloc Party, Interpol, Hard Fi, the Streets, the Zutons, Muse, Kasabian, Embrace, Keane, KT Tunstall, Mylo, Orson, Idlewild, the Delgados, James Yorkston, Seth Lakeman, Jim Moray and King Creosote. For more, see p656 and p666. As we go to press, tips for The Next Big Thing include My Latest Novel, Paolo Nutini, the Fratellis and Biffy Clyro.

The list goes on, and there will no doubt be more exciting names to add by the time you read this. If you get the chance to enjoy Britain's live-music scene (see Live & Kicking, opposite, as well as the boxed texts on music in the city sections throughout this book), you'll not only enjoy a good night out, with a bit of luck you'll also get the chance to feel smug about seeing unknown bands before they achieve world domination.

*24 Hour Party People* is a totally irreverent, suitably chaotic film about the 1990s Manchester music scene – the Hacienda, Factory Records, Joy Division, Happy Mondays, the lot.

### SOUNDS OF SUMMER

If you're a fan of the performing arts, some fine productions are staged outdoors from May to September, in castle grounds (where plays like *Macbeth* at dusk are pure magic) or purpose-built venues such as Regent's Park Theatre (p148) in London and cliff-edge Minack Theatre (p326) in Cornwall. The best known open-air music event is Glyndebourne (p957) – a programme of world-class opera in the spectacular setting of a country-house garden.

Summertime also inspires villages, towns and cities across the country to stage arts and music festivals – everything from small-scale weekend shows to massive spectacles like the Bath International Music Festival, via specialist events like Buxton Opera Festival, Whitby Folk Festival, Cheltenham Jazz Festival and the Three Choirs Festival (held once every three years at the cathedrals of Gloucester, Hereford or Worcester).

And finally there's the open-air long-weekend pop and rock extravaganzas, such as the Big Chill (in the genteel grounds of Eastnor castle), the endearing and increasingly popular Truck (near Abingdon), the colourful Womad global music gathering in Reading, and of course the daddy of them all, Glastonbury (p269). For more festival ideas see our Top Tens on p26 and for more information see p956 or [www.efestivals.co.uk](http://www.efestivals.co.uk).

### CLASSICAL MUSIC & OPERA

The country that gave you the Beatles, Rod Stewart and the Manic Street Preachers is also a hive of classical music, with several professional symphony orchestras, dozens of amateur orchestras, and an active National Association of Youth Orchestras. England, Wales and Scotland each have a national opera company, and the recent multimillion-pound renovation at the Royal Opera House in London's Covent Garden is bringing in big crowds. Such enthusiasm is all the more remarkable given Britain's small number of well-known classical composers, especially compared with countries like Austria, Germany and Italy.

Key figures include: Henry Purcell, who flourished in the Restoration period but is still regarded as one of the finest English composers; Thomas Arne, best known for the patriotic anthem 'Rule Britannia'; Edward Elgar, famous for his 'Enigma Variations'; Gustav Holst, from Cheltenham, who wrote 'The Planets' (everyone knows the Mars, Bringer of War bit); Ralph Vaughan-Williams, whose London Symphony ends with chimes from Big Ben; and Benjamin Britten, perhaps the finest British composer of the last century, best known for the 'Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra' and the opera *Peter Grimes*. Also of note are Welsh composers William Mathias, Alun Hoddinott and Karl Jenkins; and Scotland's Alexander Campbell Mackenzie and Oliver Knussen.

More recently, the works of Sir Michael Tippett, Peter Maxwell Davies, John Tavener and Harrison Birtwhistle have found international fame, while the music of composer William Lloyd Webber has been brought to public attention by his sons Julian and Andrew.

Best known of all British classical music concert programmes is The Proms (short for 'promenade' – because people used to walk about, or stand, while they listened) – one of the world's greatest music festivals, held from mid-July to mid-September each year at the Royal Albert Hall in London, and widely broadcast on radio and TV.

### Architecture

One of the many good reasons to visit Britain is to savour its rich architectural heritage – everything from 5000-year-old Bronze Age burial mounds to the stunning steel-and-glass constructions of the 21st century.

Perhaps the best known construction of prehistoric times is the mysterious stone circle of Stonehenge (p289) – top of the highlight hit list for many

See [www.bbc.co.uk/proms](http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms) for full details of dates, tickets and when to sing 'Land of Hope and Glory'.

visitors – although the Callanish Standing Stones on Scotland's Isle of Lewis are even older. The Scottish islands also hold many of Europe's best surviving remains of Bronze Age and Iron Age times, such as the stone villages of Skara Brae in Orkney and Jarlshof in Shetland.

Other highlights for most visitors are the ramparts of Hadrian's Wall (p632) and the well-preserved Roman swimming pools and saunas that gave the city of Bath its name. Bath is also top of the hit lists for most visitors thanks to architecture from a later time – the 18th- and early 19th-century Georgian period that produced grand houses, squares, parades and the famous Royal Crescent. But if we turn the clock back, it's clear that for much of the past millennium architecture has been dominated by two aspects: worship and defence. This gave Britain its incredibly diverse and truly magnificent collection of cathedrals, minsters, abbeys and monasteries dotted across the country, and an equally diverse collection of forts and castles – from evocative ruins such as Helmsley Castle (p546) and Richmond Castle (p523) via the dramatic battlements of castles such as Stirling (p839) in Scotland and Conwy (p737) in Wales, and the finely maintained 'modern' classics like Leeds Castle (p202) and Windsor Castle (p206), to the iconic Tower of London (p142) itself, with walls and moats, battlements and ramparts from every century since the Norman Conquest.

Castles were good for keeping out the enemy, but there were few other benefits of living in a large damp pile of stones, and as times grew more peaceful from around the 16th century, the landed gentry started to build fine residences – known simply as 'country houses'. There was a particular boom in England, Wales and parts of Scotland in the 18th century, and one of the most distinctive features of the British countryside today is the sheer number (not to mention size) of these grand and beautiful structures.

But it's not all about big houses. Alongside the stately homes, ordinary domestic architecture from the 16th century onwards can also still be seen in rural areas: black-and-white 'half-timbered' houses still characterise counties such as Worcestershire, brick-and-flint cottages pepper Suffolk and Sussex, and hardy, centuries-old farms built with slate or local gritstone are a feature of areas such as Derbyshire, north Wales and the Lake District.

In our own era, the rebuilding that followed WWII showed scant regard for the aesthetics of cities, or for the lives of the people who lived in them, as 'back-to-back' terraces of slum houses were demolished and replaced by tower-blocks (simply transposing horizontal rows of deprivation with vertical, according to some critics). Public buildings of the 1960s were often little better; heavy concrete 'brutalism' was much beloved by architects of the time – a style epitomised by London's South Bank Centre, although even this monstrosity has its fans today.

Perhaps the insensitivity of the 1960s and '70s is why, on the whole, the British are conservative in their architectural tastes and often resent ambitious or experimental designs, especially when they're applied to public buildings, or when form appears more important than function. But a familiar pattern often unfolds: after a few years of resentment, first comes a

### LISTED BUILDINGS

As you travel around Britain you'll often see churches, castles, great houses, tiny cottages and even 20th-century apartment blocks referred to as 'listed', because they're included on the list of buildings of historic or cultural importance, and therefore protected from development, demolition and so on. There are three main types of listed building: Grade I for the most important, down to Grade III for those of less significance.

### BUILDING ON SUCCESS

Two men have dominated modern British architecture for the last 30 years: Sir Norman Foster and Lord Richard Rogers. Both have designed numerous landmark buildings in Britain, and around the globe – they will each be designing towers to replace the World Trade Centre in New York – although their styles are quite distinct.

Foster favours clean designs with flowing lines. Key works in London include the conical Swiss Re Tower (known universally as the Gherkin), winner of the prestigious Stirling prize, the sensuous Great Court glass roof at the British Museum (p139), and the sinuous Millennium Bridge between St Paul's and the Tate Modern. Other splendid recent examples of his work include the Imperial War Museum North (p560) in Manchester, and the Sage concert hall (p625) in Newcastle-Gateshead.

In contrast, the work of Rogers is technical and intricate. Perhaps his best known work was the Millennium Dome (p151), a tent-like structure with vast curving white fields held aloft by cables and spindly yellow towers. A more recent work is the massive Paddington Basin complex, near the London train station of the same name. Rogers has also worked for Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, on 20,000 new homes.

Meanwhile, Foster's project for Mayor Ken was City Hall (p143; properly known as the Greater London Authority Building), which opened in July 2002. It looks like a tilted beehive, and the glass walls mean you can see everyone inside, hard at work – a deliberate symbol of local-government transparency – while at the top there's the spectacular Londoner's Lounge where you can admire the panoramic views and buy a traditional British cappuccino.

nickname (in London, the bulging cone of the Swiss Re building was dubbed 'the Gherkin', and the near-spherical City Hall was called 'Livingstone's Ball' by some, a reference to London's high-profile mayor), then comes grudging acceptance, and finally comes pride and affection for the new building. The Brits just don't like to be rushed, that's all.

With this attitude in mind, over the last 15 years or so British architecture has started to redeem itself, and many big cities now have contemporary buildings their residents can enjoy and admire. Highlights include Manchester's theatrical Imperial War Museum North (p560), the soaring wood and glass arcs of Sheffield's Winter Gardens (p504), Birmingham's chic new Bullring (p417), The Deep aquarium in Hull (p525), the Welsh National Assembly building, the Senedd (p652), and the Wales Millennium Centre (p650), both on the Cardiff waterfront, the interlocking arches of Glasgow's Scottish Exhibition & Conference Centre (p797; already affectionately called 'the armadillo') and the Sage concert hall (p625) of Newcastle-Gateshead.

### Painting & Sculpture

For centuries, artists in Britain were influenced by the great European movements, and in the days before cameras, portrait-painting was a reliable if unadventurous mainstay. Top names include Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose portraits in the 'grand style' include *Lady Anstruther* (on view today in London's Tate Britain gallery, p136), and his rival, Thomas Gainsborough, who produced informal works with subjects at ease in a landscape, such as *Mr & Mrs Andrews* (at the National Portrait Gallery, p135).

In the 18th century, William Hogarth was a breakaway figure from the comfortable world of portraits, producing a series of paintings which satirised social abuses. His most celebrated work is *A Rake's Progress*, displayed today at Sir John Soane's Museum (p140), London.

Two other key figures of the 18th-century British art scene were Joseph Wright, whose interest in science inspired the oddly titled but beautifully executed *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, and George Stubbs, whose

As well as the grand cathedrals, England has over 12,000 parish churches – many packed with historical or architectural significance. Wales and Scotland have many more.

passion for animal anatomy, particularly horses, is evident in many works at Tate Britain, and in countless prints on countless country pub walls.

Gainsborough's landscape tradition was continued by John Constable, who painted mainly in Suffolk (still billed as 'Constable Country' by the local tourist board). His most famous work is *The Haywain* (National Gallery, p134) – an idyllic rural scene.

Constable's contemporaries include poet, painter and visionary William Blake, and JMW Turner, whose works increasingly subordinated picture details to the effects of light and colour. By the 1840s, Turner's compositions became almost entirely abstract and were widely vilified. Both artists have rooms dedicated to their work at Tate Britain.

In 1848 Sir John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which combined the simplicity of early Italian art with a closely observed realism. Millais' *Ophelia*, showing the damsel picturesquely drowned in a pool, is an excellent example of their style, and can be seen at the Tate Britain gallery. However, one of the best collections of Pre-Raphaelite art is in the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery (p411). A good friend of the Pre-Raphaelites was William Morris; he saw late-19th-century furniture and interior design as increasingly vulgar, and with Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones founded the Arts and Crafts movement. This movement encouraged the revival of a decorative approach to features such as wallpaper, tapestries and windows. Many of his designs are still used today.

North of the border, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, fresh from the Glasgow School of Art, fast became a renowned artist, designer and architect. He is still Scotland's greatest Art Nouveau exponent, and much of his work remains in this city (see p789 for more details). Mackintosh influenced a group of artists from the 1890s called the Glasgow Boys, among them James Guthrie and EA Walton, who were also much taken with French impressionism. Perhaps inevitably, another group of decorative artists and designers emerged called the Glasgow Girls.

In the 20th century, the place of British art in the international arena was ensured by Henry Moore's and Barbara Hepworth's monumental sculptures, Francis Bacon's contorted paintings, David Hockney's highly representational images of – among other things – dachshunds and swimming pools, and the works of a group known as the Scottish Colourists – Francis Cadell, SJ Peplow, Leslie Hunter and JD Ferguson. Much of Hockney's work can be seen at Salt's Mill gallery (p514) in Bradford (his hometown); some of Moore's work can be seen at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (p514), between Sheffield and Leeds; Hepworth is forever associated with St Ives in Cornwall (p328); while the colourist seascapes of Peplow and Cadell have been turned into the type of prints and postcards eternally favoured by Scottish souvenir shops.

Paul Nash, an official war artist in WWI and WWII, and Graham Sutherland, Nash's counterpart in WWII, followed in the Romantic and visionary tradition of Blake and Turner. Between the wars, Welsh sister-and-brother artists Gwen and Augustus John flourished; Gwen John painted gentle, introspective portraits of women friends, cats and nuns – and famously became the model and lover of French artist August Rodin. Augustus was Britain's leading portrait painter, with such famous sitters as Thomas Hardy and George Bernard Shaw. One place to admire works by the Johns is the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery (p668) in Swansea.

The Scottish Colourists were followed in the interwar years by a group known as the Edinburgh School. This group included William MacTaggart, who was much influenced by the French expressionists and went on to become one of Scotland's best known painters. His rich and colourful

'George Stubbs' passion for animal anatomy is evident in many works at Tate Britain, and in countless prints on countless country pub walls.'

landscapes can be seen in the National Gallery, and in the Hunterian Art Gallery (p788) in Glasgow.

After WWII, Howard Hodgkin and Patrick Heron developed a British version of American abstract expressionism. At the same time, but in great contrast, Manchester artist LS Lowry was painting his much-loved 'matchstick men' figures set in an urban landscape of narrow streets and smoky factories. A good place to see his work is in the Lowry centre (p561), Manchester.

In 1956 a young artist called Richard Hamilton created a photomontage called *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* as a poster for the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. It launched the pop-art movement in Britain, and the style was loved by millions when Peter Blake designed the record cover for the Beatles' seminal album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. This influenced Scottish artists Alan Davie and Sir Eduardo Paolozzi, who became leading figures in the world of pop art and abstract expressionism. Their works can be seen in Edinburgh's Dean Gallery.

The Whitechapel Art Gallery also helped launch the career of sculptor Anthony Caro, with a ground-breaking exhibition in 1963. Creating large abstract works primarily in steel and bronze, Caro has become a highly influential figure, considered by many to be Britain's greatest living sculptor. For more heavy metal see [www.anthonycaro.org](http://www.anthonycaro.org).

Moving towards our own era, the British art scene of the 1990s was dominated by a group of young artists championed by advertising tycoon Charles Saatchi, and displayed at his eponymous gallery ([www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk)). As 'Britpop' developed in the music industry, so the paintings, sculptures and installations of these artists became known as 'Britart'. As notorious as they were talented – some would say more of the former, less of the latter – the group included Damien Hirst, infamous for his use of animals, alive and dead, Tracey Emin, most famous for *My Bed*, a combination of soiled sheets and 'sluttish detritus' (according to one review), and Rachel Whiteread, initially best known for her resin casts of commonplace objects.

The early years of the 21st century have, inevitably, been dubbed the 'post-Britart' era. A body of less obviously shocking artists is emerging, although none has become a household name yet – not even Simon Starling, winner of the 2005 Turner Prize. Of the previous generation, Whiteread is still a major figure on the art scene today: in 2006 she created a massive labyrinthine installation called *Embankment* for the equally gigantic Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern (p144) in London, a fitting work for one of the world's most impressive galleries. For more see [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk).

Other key artists of today include the sculptor Antony Gormley, whose *Angel of the North* overlooks the city of Gateshead near Newcastle. A massive steel construction of a human figure with outstretched wings, more fitting on a 747 than a heavenly being, it was initially derided by the locals, but it is now an instantly recognised symbol of northeast England.

## Theatre

However you budget your time and money, make sure that you see some British theatre as part of your travels. It easily lives up to its reputation as the finest in the world. The Edinburgh Festival is globally renowned (even though Glasgow is the heart of Scottish theatre), Cardiff has a new top-class venue, and London's West End is the international centre for theatrical arts – whatever New Yorkers say.

But first, let's set the stage with some history. Britain's best known theatrical name is of course William Shakespeare, whose plays were first performed in the 16th century at the Globe Theatre. His brilliant plots and sharp prose,

and the sheer size of his canon of work (including classics such as *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*), have turned him into a national icon (see p422). The Globe has now been rebuilt (see p144), so you can see the Bard's plays performed in Elizabethan style – in the round, with 'groundlings' in the audience heckling the actors and joining in the bits they know.

Britain's theatres were firmly closed as dens of iniquity in Oliver Cromwell's day, but when Charles II returned from exile in 1660 he opened the doors again, and encouraged radical practices such as actresses (female roles had previously been played by boys) – an innovation loved by London audiences, along with humorous plays known as Restoration comedies, delighting in bawdy wordplay and mockery of the upper classes. The leading lady of the day was Nell Gwyn, who also became Charles II's mistress.

In the 18th century, theatres were built in the larger British cities. The Bristol Old Vic and The Grand in Lancaster date from this time, along with plays such as Oliver Goldsmith's uproarious *She Stoops to Conquer*. Top of the bill was actor David Garrick, who later gave his name to one of London's leading theatres.

The innovation of gas lighting at London's Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres set the 19th-century stage for some wonderful shows, including the brilliant comedies of Oscar Wilde (everyone's heard of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, even if they haven't seen it). And the quality continued into the 20th century, with the 1950s a particularly rich era, when Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft were at their professional peak.

The 1950s also marked the emergence of new playwrights with new freedoms, such as John Osborne, whose best known work is *Look Back in Anger*. A contemporary was Harold Pinter, who developed a new dramatic style and perfectly captured the stuttering illogical diction of real-life conversation.

In the 1960s and 1970s, plays by Tom Stoppard (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*), Peter Shaffer (*Amadeus*), Michael Frayn (*Noises Off*) and Alan Ayckbourn (*The Norman Conquests*) took the country by storm – and famous British actors such as Helen Mirren, Glenda Jackson, Judi Dench and Tom Courtenay did justice to them on stage.

In the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, big names in British theatre include Brenda Blethyn, Charles Dance, Judi Dench (still!), Ian McKellen, Anthony Sher, Simon Callow, Toby Stephens, Jane Horrocks, Ewan McGregor, Rhys Ifans and Ralph Fiennes – although most perform in stage productions only once or twice a year, combining this with more lucrative appearances on the small or silver screen.

In London, other stars of the stage these days are the directors, especially Nicholas Hytner at the National Theatre, whose 2006 successes included *The History Boys* by the perennially dour playwright Alan Bennett. After winning numerous accolades in Britain, the play transferred to Broadway – where it charmed the notoriously tough New York critics and eventually scooped six Tony awards (the most for any production since Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in 1949). Another hit of 2006 was *Rock 'n' Roll*, a multi-themed play by Tom Stoppard about the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia, directed by award-winning Trevor Nunn at London's Royal Court Theatre. As the title suggests, rock music also features in the play, and Mick Jagger has reportedly already bought the film rights.

It's thanks to the quality and success of British drama that native actors are frequently joined by colleagues from across the pond, as the likes of Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow, Matthew Perry, Macaulay Culkin, Christian Slater, Kim Cattrall, Gael Garcia Bernal, David Schwimmer and Kevin Spacey have performed in London productions in recent years, exchanging Hollywood glamour for pay-cuts and the genuine cred that only treading

England's first theatre was built in 1576 on the northern outskirts of London and was called – rather unimaginatively – 'The Theatre'. Shakespeare's famous Globe Theatre came a little later.

Harold Pinter wrote numerous plays but is probably still best known for his landmark work *The Birthday Party* – a study of sinister figures and shady untold pasts.

*Look Back in Anger* launched the career of playwright John Osborne and actor Alan Bates, with rebellious lead character Jimmy Porter perfectly capturing the spirit of an unhappy and frustrated postwar generation.

The *Angel of the North* is one of the most viewed works of art in the world. It stands beside the busy A1 highway and millions of drivers each year can't help but see this huge sculpture. See [www.gateshead.gov.uk/angel](http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/angel).

### IT'S ALL A BIT OF A PANTOMIME

If any British tradition seems specially designed to bemuse outsiders, it has to be pantomime, performed in theatres all over the country, usually in January and February. Essentially a pantomime is a comedy play or review, with dialogue, routines, songs, dances and lots of custard-pie humour (and – despite the name – no mime) loosely based on stories such as *Cinderella* or *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

Pantomime's roots go back to Celtic legends, medieval morality plays and the art of mummung, but the modern version is a post-Christmas ritual, with people packing out theatres to see old favourite 'pantos' updated to touch on recent political scandals or celebrity gossip, and always featuring a star from a TV soap or game-show, or from the world of pop or sport. Pantos also feature routines that everyone knows and joins in ('Where's that dragon/wizard/pirate/lion?' – 'He's behind you!') and tradition dictates that the leading 'boy' is played by a woman, and the leading lady, or 'dame', played by a man. It may be bizarre, but for kids and families it's a great evening out. Oh no, it isn't. Oh yes, it is. Oh no, it isn't.

West End boards can bestow. (For more cues on the capital's current drama scene see p171.)

And while there's often an urge among producers to stick with the big names and safe (and profitable) productions, the risk and innovation normally more associated with fringe events does sometimes filter through too, making London's theatre arguably more innovative and exciting than it's been since the Restoration, and certainly – according to some critics – since the angry postwar era of Osborne and company. Only London could produce an entirely new genre by turning a TV talk-show for losers, misfits, weirdos and gender-benders into the wonderfully perverse, and highly controversial, *Jerry Springer – the Opera*.

Alongside the frivolity, perhaps the most notable, and possibly most predictable, trend in recent times has been the upsurge in political theatre in the wake of the Iraq war. The satire and analysis spread all the way from the fringe – where plays such as *Justifying War*, *The Madness of George Dubya* and *A Weapons Inspector Calls* were on show – to the West End, where political drama *Guantanamo* deeply moved and impressed audiences, although it has to be said that in many cases there was an element of preaching to the converted.

Despite the vital message of *Guantanamo* and *Jerry's* much-deserved success, for many visitors to London the theatres of the West End mean one thing: musicals, from *Jesus Christ Superstar* in the 1970s, to *Bollywood Dreams* and *The Woman in White* in 2006, via *Cats*, *Les Mis*, *Chicago*, *Phantom* and all the rest. Many of today's shows are based on the pop lexicon, with singalongs from *Mamma Mia* to *Fame*, proving that – just like in Shakespeare's day – all we want to do really is join in.

A London tradition is the 'long run' – plays that are performed season after season. The record holder is *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie; the play has been running at London's St Martin's Theatre for more than 50 years.



# Outdoor Activities

What's the best way to get off the beaten track as you travel around Britain? Simple: enjoy some outdoor activity. Fresh air is good for your body and soul, of course, and becoming *actively* involved in the country's way of life is much more rewarding than staring at it through a camera lens or car window.

Walking and cycling are the most popular and accessible of all outdoor activities, and open up some beautiful corners of the country. You can enjoy short rambles or long tours, conquer mountains or cruise across plains. There's something for young and old, and these activities are often perfect for families. Whatever your budget, it's a wonderful opportunity to get out and explore, and a walk or ride through the British countryside could be a highlight of your trip.

## Information

Throughout this book, the start of each regional chapter gives an overview of the best opportunities for outdoor activities in that area. For more ideas and inspiration, your first stop should always be a tourist office, where you can pick up free leaflets on local walks and rides, or places to climb, fish, surf, ride or play golf in the surrounding region. Tourist-office staff can also tell you where to hire bikes or surf gear, find local guided walks or riding stables, or join organised groups for activities such as caving. For walkers and cyclists, tourist offices also sell booklets (for a nominal fee), plus detailed guidebooks and maps (around £4 to £8) describing everything from half-hour strolls to week-long expeditions. In rural areas, books and maps are also available in local newsagents and outdoor-gear shops.

The list of activities following starts with walking and cycling – stuff you can do virtually on a whim – then covers other activities that are a bit more structured or need some advance preparation.

## WALKING

Perhaps because Britain is such a crowded place, open areas are highly valued, and every weekend millions of British people get their boots on and take to the countryside. You could do a lot worse than join them!

Every village and town is surrounded by a web of footpaths, while most patches of open country are crossed by paths and tracks, so the options are limitless. You can walk from place to place in true backpacking style, or base yourself in an interesting spot for a week or so and go out on day-walks to explore the surrounding countryside.

## Access & Rules

The joy of walking in Britain is due in no small part to the 'right of way' network – public paths and tracks across private property. Nearly all land in Britain (including in national parks) is privately owned, but if there's a right of way, you can follow it through fields, woods, even farmhouse yards, as long as you keep to the route and do no damage.

The main types of rights of way for walkers are footpaths and bridleways (the latter open to horse riders and mountain bikers too). You'll also see 'byways', which due to a quirk of history are open to *all* traffic, so don't be surprised if you have to wade through mud churned up by chunky tyres, or if you're disturbed by the antics of off-road driving fanatics as you're quietly strolling along enjoying the countryside.

Thanks to the landmark Countryside Act of 2004, walkers (not bikes and other vehicles) in England and Wales can now move freely *beyond* rights of

The first stop for outdoor fans should be [www.visitbritain.com](http://www.visitbritain.com) – then follow links to Holiday Ideas and Outdoor Activities for details about walking and cycling routes, maps and tours, plus walking and cycling festivals around the country.

[www.walkingworld.com](http://www.walkingworld.com) offers downloadable maps and descriptions of thousands of routes around Britain, plus other services for walkers.

Britain's right-of-way network has existed for centuries (some paths literally for millennia), so single trails slicing through the wilderness, as found in Australia or the USA, simply don't exist here. Even famous long-distance routes such as the Coast to Coast simply link many shorter paths.

way in some mountain and moorland areas – but not in enclosed fields or cultivated areas. Where this is permitted, it's clearly shown on maps and by 'Access Land' or 'Open Access' notices on gates and signposts. The land is still privately owned, and occasionally Access Land is closed, for example if wild birds are nesting, or if the farmer is rounding up sheep, but the so-called 'right to roam' or 'freedom to roam' legislation opens up thousands of square miles of landscape previously off limits to walkers – a milestone ruling resulting from more than 70 years of campaigning by the Ramblers Association and other groups. For more information see [www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk](http://www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk).

Scotland has a different legal system to England and Wales, with fewer rights of way, but has a tradition of relatively free access in mountain and moorland areas (although there are restrictions during the grouse- and deer-hunting seasons).

### Where to Walk

Here's a quick rundown of some great British walking areas, with everything to tempt you, from gentle hills to high summits, whether you're a casual rambler or an energetic peak-bagger. With a map and a sense of adventure, the rest is up to you!

#### SOUTHERN ENGLAND

Within striking distance of London are the South Downs (p183) and the coast of Norfolk (p479), but the emptiest, highest and wildest area in southern England is Dartmoor (p311), where the rounded hills are dotted with granite outcrops called 'tors' – looking for all the world like abstract sculptures.

Also in the southwest, Exmoor (p271) has grassy, heather-covered hills cut by deep valleys and edged by spectacular cliffs, great beaches, quiet villages and busy seaside resorts.

In the deep south lies the New Forest. Visitors to Britain love this name, as the area is more than 1000 years old and there aren't *that* many trees – it's mainly conifer plantation and great open areas of gorse and heath. But apart from these minor details, it's a wonderful place for easy strolls.

And just over the water is the Isle of Wight (p222). If you're new to walking in Britain, or simply not looking for high peaks and wilderness, this is a good first choice. The local authorities have put a lot of effort into footpaths and signposted routes; most are linear and can be done in a day, and you can always get back to your starting point using the island's excellent bus service.

#### CENTRAL ENGLAND

The gem of central England is the Cotswold Hills (p356). This is classic English countryside, with gentle paths through neat fields and mature woodland, or pretty villages with churches, farms and cottages of honey-coloured stone.

#### NORTHERN ENGLAND

In the northwest of the country, the Lake District (p590) is the heart and soul of walking in England – a wonderful area of soaring peaks, endless views, deep valleys and, of course, beautiful lakes. There's a great selection of country hotels, B&Bs and camp sites too.

Further north, keen walkers love the starkly beautiful hills of Northumberland National Park (p641), while the nearby coast is less daunting but just as dramatic.

For something a little gentler, the valleys and rolling hills of the Yorkshire Dales (p518) makes it one of the most popular walking areas in England.

The website of the Ramblers' Association ([www.ramblers.org.uk](http://www.ramblers.org.uk)), the country's leading walking organisation, has comprehensive information on routes, areas and services.

#### SOUTH & MID WALES

The Brecon Beacons (p696) is a large group of mountains, forming a natural border between the central and southern parts of Wales. You won't find pointy peaks here; this is a range of gigantic rolling whalebacks, with broad ridges and table-top summits, cut by deep valleys.

Out in the wild west of Wales is Pembrokeshire (p677), a gem of an area, with one of the most beautiful stretches of coastline in Britain – a wonderful array of beaches, cliffs, rock arches, stacks, buttresses, islands, coves and harbours. You have to go to Cornwall to get anything like this and to northwest Scotland for anything better. The relatively mild climate means you can walk here year-round, although the coast gets hammered by some spectacular gales, especially in winter.

#### NORTH WALES

For walkers, North Wales is Snowdonia (p721), where the remains of ancient, eroded volcanoes bequeath a striking landscape of jagged peaks, sharp ridges and steep cliffs. There are challenging walks on Mt Snowdon itself – at 1085m, the highest peak in England and Wales – and many more on the surrounding Glyders or Carneddau ranges.

#### SOUTHERN & CENTRAL SCOTLAND

This extensive region embraces several areas just perfect for keen walkers, including Ben Lomond, the best-known peak in the area, and the nearby Trossachs range, now within the new Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park (p825). Also in this area is the splendid Isle of Arran (p817) – 'Scotland in miniature' – with a great choice of coastal rambles and high-mountain hikes.

#### NORTH & WEST SCOTLAND

Another large and truly excellent walking area, where complex geology and the forces of nature have created scenery that really lives up to the postcard images. Here you'll find two of Scotland's most famous place names, Glen Coe (p887) and Ben Nevis (p885), Britain's highest mountain at 1343m, while off the west coast lies the dramatic mountains of the Isle of Skye (p907).

Keep going north and west, and things just keep getting better. For serious and experienced mountain walkers, Scotland's northwest Highlands region is sheer paradise: a remote and beautiful area, sparsely populated, with scenic glens and lochs, and some of the largest, wildest and finest mountains in Britain.

#### Long-Distance Walks

Many walkers savour the chance of completing one of Britain's famous long-distance routes. There are over 500 walks in all, including around 20 official National Trails (in England and Wales) or Long Distance Routes (in Scotland) with better signposting and maintenance than many other long routes, making them ideal for beginners or visitors. Other long walks such as the Dales Way are not national trails, but are just as popular. You don't have to follow these routes end-to-end; you can walk just a section for a day or two, or use the route as a basis for loops exploring the surrounding area. Here's a short list of our favourites to get you started:

**Coast to Coast Walk** The number-one favourite. A top-quality hike across northern England, through three national parks and spectacular scenery of valleys, plains, mountains, dales and moors; 190 miles. See p501.

**Cotswold Way** A fascinating walk through classic picture-postcard countryside with smatterings of English history; 102 miles. See p356.

**Cumbria Way** A fine hike through Lake District valleys, with breathtaking mountain views; 68 miles.

The Ramblers' Association's *Walk Britain* is an invaluable annual publication, outlining routes and walking areas, with handy lists of walker-friendly B&Bs and hostels all over Britain.

Many long-distance routes are served by baggage-carrying services, ideal if you don't want to lug heavy gear. For about £5 to £10 per day, your bags will be delivered to your next B&B by dedicated van or local taxi. See [www.carrylite.com](http://www.carrylite.com), [www.cumbria.com/packhorse](http://www.cumbria.com/packhorse), [www.pikedaw.freemove.co.uk/walks](http://www.pikedaw.freemove.co.uk/walks) or [www.sherpavan.com](http://www.sherpavan.com).

**THERE'S COLD IN THEM THERE HILLS**

The British countryside can appear gentle and welcoming, and often is, but sometimes the weather can turn nasty. If you're walking on the high hills or open moors, at any time of year, it's vital to be well equipped. You should carry warm and waterproof clothing (even in summer), good maps and a compass, some drink, food and high-energy stuff like chocolate. If you're really going off the beaten track, leave details of your route with someone. Sounds a bit extreme, but carrying a whistle and torch – in case of an emergency – is no bad thing either.

**Dales Way** A great walk through the farmland and valleys of the Yorkshire Dales, leading into the Lake District; 84 miles. See p519.

**Glyndŵr's Way** A long loop through the beautiful and remote rolling hills of Mid Wales, the land of 15th-century Welsh freedom fighter Owain Glyndŵr; 132 miles. See p705.

**Great Glen Way** A nonarduous route along the geological fault that splits Scotland, including a section beside famous Loch Ness; 73 miles. See p884.

**Hadrian's Wall Path** In the footsteps of the legions, an epic stride across northern England; 84 miles. See p633.

**Offa's Dyke Path** A historical hike along the ancient defensive ditch marking the border between England and Wales, through a tremendous range of scenery; 177 miles. See p663.

**Pembrokeshire Coast Path** An awe-inspiring walk along one of the finest coastlines in Britain, and best-loved long route in Wales; 186 miles. See p677.

**Pennine Way** The granddaddy of them all, along the mountainous spine of northern England; 256 miles. See p446.

**South West Coast Path** A roller-coaster romp round the southwest tip of England, past beaches, bays, shipwrecks, seaside resorts, fishing villages and clifftop castles; 610 miles. See p244.

**Southern Upland Way** Striding through the heart of Scotland's Southern Uplands, an extremely remote and challenging route, with some very long daily sections; 212 miles. See p783.

**Speyside Way** Billed as a walk that 'captures the spirit of Scotland', this scenic riverside route links the Cairngorm foothills to the sea – and passes several whisky distilleries; 84 miles. See p824.

**Thames Path** A journey of contrasts beside England's best-known river, from rural Gloucestershire to the heart of London; 173 miles. See p343.

**West Highland Way** Scotland's – and Britain's – most popular long-distance path, leading walkers from the outskirts of Glasgow to Fort William in the highlands, past mountains, lochs and fast-flowing rivers; 95 miles. See p824.

For details on national trail options in England and Wales stroll over to [www.nationaltrail.co.uk](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk). For long-distance routes in Scotland see [www.snh.org.uk](http://www.snh.org.uk). Some of the best guidebooks to individual national trails are produced by Trailblazer ([www.trailblazer-guides.com](http://www.trailblazer-guides.com)) and Cicerone ([www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk)). For more information on other long walks in Britain see [www.ramblers.org.uk](http://www.ramblers.org.uk).

**CYCLING**

A bike is the perfect transport for exploring back-road Britain. Once you escape the busy main highways, a vast network of quiet country lanes leads through fields and peaceful villages, ideal for touring on a road bike or mountain bike. Off-road riders can go further into the wilds on the many tracks and bridleways that cross Britain's farmlands, forests and high moors.

The opportunities are endless. Depending on your energy and enthusiasm you can amble along flat lanes, taking it easy and stopping for cream teas, or thrash all day through hilly areas, revelling in steep ascents and swooping downhill sections. You can cycle from place to place, camping or staying in B&Bs (many are cyclist-friendly), or you can base yourself in one place for a few days and go out on rides in different directions.

For comprehensive coverage of a selection of walking routes and areas, we (naturally) recommend Lonely Planet's *Walking in Britain*, also covering places to stay and eat along long-distance walks and in popular walking areas, plus detailed information on what to take and what to see along the way.

Cyclists' Touring Club (☎ 0870 873 0060; [www.ctc.org.uk](http://www.ctc.org.uk)) is the UK's leading recreational cycling and campaigning body. The website lists suggested routes, local contacts, cyclist-friendly accommodation and organised holidays, plus a cycle-hire directory and mail-order service for maps and books.

**Access & Rules**

Bikes aren't allowed on motorways, but you can cycle on all other public roads, although main roads (A-roads) tend to be busy and should be avoided. Many B-roads suffer heavy motor traffic too, so the best places for cycling are the small C-roads and unclassified roads ('lanes') that cover rural Britain, especially in lowland areas, meandering through quiet countryside and linking picturesque villages.

Cycling is *not* allowed on footpaths, but mountain bikers can ride on unmade roads or bridleways that are a public right of way. For mountain biking it's often worth seeking out forestry areas; among the vast plantations, signposted routes of varying difficulty have been opened up for single-track fans.

For transporting bikes on trains, see p973.

**Where to Cycle**

While you can cycle anywhere in Britain, some places are better than others. In popular spots, car traffic can be a problem on summer weekends, and if you're not a regular cyclist, the hills in some areas can be daunting. This section gives a brief overview, but (just as with walking) all you need is a map and a sense of adventure, and the highways and byways of Britain are yours for the taking.

**SOUTHERN ENGLAND**

Down at the southwest tip of the country, Cornwall and Devon are beautiful, and enjoy the best of the English climate, but the rugged landscape makes for tough days in the saddle. Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire have more gentle hills (plus a few steep valleys to keep you on your toes) and a beautiful network of quiet lanes, making them perfect for leisurely cycle touring. In Hampshire, the ancient woodland and open heath of the New Forest (p219) is especially good for on-road and off-road rides, while in Sussex the South Downs have numerous mountain-bike options.

**EASTERN ENGLAND**

The counties of Norfolk and Suffolk (see p458) are generally low-lying and flat, with quiet lanes winding through farmland and picturesque villages, past rivers, lakes and welcoming country pubs – great for easy pedalling.

**CENTRAL ENGLAND**

The Cotswolds (p356) offer good cycling options, with lanes through farmland and quaint villages. From the western side of the hills you get fantastic views over the Severn Valley, but you wouldn't want to go up and down this escarpment too often! The Marches area (p382), where England borders Wales, is another rural delight, with good quiet lanes and some off-road options in the hills.

**SUPERIOR RACE**

This section covers touring by bike, but Britain also boasts an active cycle-racing scene, especially enhanced in July 2007 with the start of the Tour de France in London. Super-human riders in the world's biggest bike race (and the world's biggest annual sporting event) already take in Luxembourg, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and Germany (plus France, of course) and now add Britain to the three-week 2200-mile loop. Mere mortals looking for something in between touring and racing should check out Britain's programme of challenge rides. For details see [www.britishcycling.org.uk](http://www.britishcycling.org.uk), [www.tourdefrancelondon.com](http://www.tourdefrancelondon.com), [www.ctc.org.uk](http://www.ctc.org.uk) and [www.audax.uk.net](http://www.audax.uk.net)

*Cycling in the UK* is an excellent handbook, covering more than 40 day-rides and a range of longer 'holiday routes'. For off-roading, the best book is *Where to Mountain Bike in Britain*, or see [www.wheretomb.com](http://www.wheretomb.com).

The Cyclists Touring Club is the oldest cycling organisation in Britain. It was founded in 1878, when the bike of choice was the penny-farthing, and the national scandal of the day was 'lady bicyclists' wearing trousers.

### THE NATIONAL CYCLE NETWORK

Anyone riding a bike through Britain will almost certainly come across the National Cycle Network, a UK-wide 10,000-mile web of roads and traffic-free tracks. Strands of the network in busy cities are aimed at commuters or school kids (where the network follows city streets, cyclists normally have their own lane, separate from motor traffic), while other sections follow the most remote roads in the country, and are perfect for touring.

The whole scheme is the brainchild of Sustrans (derived from 'sustainable transport'), a campaign group barely taken seriously way back in 1978 when the network idea was first announced. But the growth of cycling, coupled with near-terminal car congestion, has earned the scheme lots of attention – not to mention many millions of pounds from national government and regional authorities.

Several long-distance touring routes use the most scenic sections of the National Cycle Network and, it has to be said, a few less-than-scenic urban sections. Other features include a great selection of artworks to admire along the way. In fact, the network is billed as the country's largest outdoor sculpture gallery. The whole scheme is a resounding success and a credit to the visionaries who persevered against inertia all those years ago. For more details see [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk).

### NORTHERN ENGLAND

It's no accident that many of England's top racing cyclists come from northern England – the mountain roads make an excellent training ground. The North York Moors (p545) offer exhilarating off-road rides, while the Yorkshire Dales (p518) is great for cycle touring. These areas are hilly and some routes can be strenuous, but the scenery is superb and it's all well worth the effort.

Derbyshire's Peak District (p446) is a very popular area for mountain biking and road cycling, although the hills are also quite steep in places. More leisurely options are excellent cycle routes cutting through the landscape along disused railways – dramatic and effortless at the same time.

### WALES

The varied Welsh landscape, crossed by a wonderful network of lanes and forest tracks, makes an excellent place to cycle, although much of it is hilly so low gears will often be the order of the day.

In the north, the rugged peaks of Snowdonia (p721) provide a dramatic backdrop to any cycling trip, although some ascents can be stiff. An easier option is the nearby Isle of Anglesey (p741).

Mid Wales offers quiet cycling in a scenic and surprisingly little-visited region, while the area around Brecon Beacons (p695) is popular for tourists and off-roaders. Finally, out to the west, lovely Pembrokeshire (p676) is also excellent on a bike – although the hills go all the way to the sea!

### SCOTLAND

The Scottish Borders (p801) is an excellent area for touring by bike. It offers a combination of rolling farmland, lochs, glens and hills, all easily accessible, with a peaceful, intimate charm. For off-road fans, there's a fantastic range of specially constructed routes in the Galloway Forest Park in Dumfries and Galloway, and several other sites across the southern part of the country. See [www.7stanes.gov.uk](http://www.7stanes.gov.uk) for more details.

Cyclists in search of the wild and remote will love the Highlands (p878). There are not many roads, but traffic is usually light. As you pass majestic mountains, beautiful lochs and coasts with views of mystical islands, it won't just be the pedalling that takes your breath away.

If you really want to get away from traffic, head for the islands. Ferries (which carry bikes) go from the mainland to the Western Isles (p824) – wonderful getaway options for two-wheeled travel.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES Coasteering

If a simple walk along the clifftops admiring the view just doesn't cut the mustard, and you'd like to combine elements of rock climbing with the element of water, then the wacky activity of coasteering might appeal. It's like mountaineering, although instead of going up a mountain, you go along the coast – a steep rocky coast, often with waves breaking around your feet. And if the rock gets too steep, you jump in and start swimming. You need a wetsuit, an old pair of shoes, buoyancy aid, helmet – and a sense of adventure. The birthplace (and best place) for coasteering is Pembrokeshire (p677), although Cornwall and Devon are gaining popularity. It's not something you should go off and do on your own; ask at tourist offices about specialist local operators.

### Fishing

Fishing is enormously popular in Britain, but in many areas it's highly regulated, with prime stretches of river privately owned and angling rights fiercely protected. There's a fishing club on the idyllic trout-filled River Itchen in Hampshire, where it's rumoured even Prince Charles had to join the waiting list.

Fly fishers in Britain mainly catch salmon, brown trout and rainbow trout, while coarse fishing is principally for perch, carp, bream and the occasional oversized pike. There are plenty of well-stocked rivers and reservoirs, as well as stretches of wild waterway, but wherever you fish in England and Wales, you'll need to obtain a licence – available from post offices (from £3 per day to £60 for the season) or from the website of the **Environment Agency** ([www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)).

The fishing-licence situation in Scotland is more complicated, as you may need separate permits for different rivers. They can be very costly. For more details, check the website of the **Scottish Federation for Coarse Angling** ([www.sfca.co.uk](http://www.sfca.co.uk)).

If you want to try your luck, tourist-office staff can direct you to local clubs or places offering a day or two's fishing, such as stocked reservoirs that allow public access or smart hotels with private lakes or stretches of river.

On the sea, it's a different story. At resort-towns around the coast of Britain, you can easily find skippered boats offering angling trips, usually with tackle, bait (and lunch) included in the fee. Details are given in the individual town sections.

### Golf

Britain, and particularly Scotland, is the home of golf, with around 2000 private and public golf courses in Britain, and 500 in Scotland alone. There are, in fact, more golf courses per capita in Scotland than any other country in the world.

Golf courses fall into two main categories: private and public. Some exclusive private clubs admit only golfers who have a handicap certificate from their own club, but most welcome visitors. Public courses run by town or city councils are open to anyone.

A round on a public course will cost around £10 (more at weekends). Private courses average around £40. Top-end hotels may have arrangements with nearby courses, which get you reduced fees or guaranteed tee-off times. If you need to hire, a set of golf clubs costs from £10 per round.

Anyone planning a cycle tour in Britain should check out Sustrans (☎ 0845 113 0065; [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)); as well as providing general information, cycling tips and useful contacts, it has a shop area (also available as a printed catalogue) with a huge range of dedicated cycling maps and guidebooks. Also worth checking is [www.thenationallybyway.org](http://www.thenationallybyway.org).

'Britain, and particularly Scotland, is the home of golf, with around 500 private and public golf courses in Scotland alone.'

A very good starting point for golfers from overseas is the **Golf Club of Great Britain** (☎ 020-8390 3113; [www.golfdubgb.co.uk](http://www.golfdubgb.co.uk)); this friendly organisation can advise on where to play and arranges regular tournaments. For serious information, the **English Golf Union** (☎ 01526-354500; [www.englishgolfunion.org](http://www.englishgolfunion.org)) can, among other things, provide a list of affiliated clubs. The **Welsh Golfing Union** (☎ 01633-430830; [www.welshgolf.org](http://www.welshgolf.org)) is similar. The **Scottish Golf Union** (☎ 01382-549500; [www.scottishgolf.com](http://www.scottishgolf.com)) is much more useful as it also has lots of detail aimed specifically at visitors.

### Horse Riding & Pony Trekking

There's a theory that humans are genetically programmed to absorb the world at a horse's walking pace. It's all to do with our nomadic ancestors, apparently. Add the extra height, and seeing Britain from horseback is a highly recommended way to go.

Across Britain, especially in rural areas and national parks such as Dartmoor and Northumberland, the Cambrian Mountains of Mid Wales, and the Galloway Hills in Scotland, riding centres cater to all levels of proficiency. Generally, pony trekking is aimed at novice riders. If you're more experienced in equestrian matters, most centres have horses available.

Many riding centres advertise in national-park newspapers (available free from hotels, tourist offices and local shops). A half-day pony trek costs around £15, a full day £20 to £30. Serious riders pay higher rates for superior mounts. The website of the **British Horse Society** (☎ 0870 120 2244; [www.bhs.org.uk](http://www.bhs.org.uk)) lists approved riding centres and – if you fancy a few days in the saddle – outfits offering riding holidays.

### Kitesurfing

If regular surfing just doesn't offer enough airtime, here's an easy solution: strap yourself to a board and an enormous parachute (technically a parafoil), and let the wind do the work. It's called kitesurfing, and combines elements of windsurfing, wakeboarding, surfing and kite-flying. It's also one of the fastest-growing water sports in the world. Brisk winds, decent waves and great beaches make Cornwall and Pembrokeshire favourite spots, but it's possible on other beaches along the British coastline. There are several schools which can show you the ropes. Contact the **British Kite Surfing Association** (☎ 01509-856500; [www.kitesurfing.org](http://www.kitesurfing.org)) for more information.

### Kiteboarding & Kite Buggy

If you like the idea of kites but don't fancy getting wet, you can experience wind-fuelled thrills on dry land too. Instead of balancing on a surfboard, you can pick up serious speed standing on an oversized skateboard or sitting on a specially-built kite buggy. The latter option, also known as para-karting, is similar to land yachting, but with a parafoil instead of a sail. Both activities are usually available on beaches where surfers lurk, and any other big stretch of flat sand, notably Pembrey in Carmarthenshire and Burnham Deepdale in Norfolk, a great backpacker-friendly base for other activities too.

### Mountainboarding

Imagine hurtling down a rough grassy hillside at horrendous speeds on a gigantic skateboard equipped with four oversized wheels, and you've pretty much got mountainboarding. This exhilarating activity combines elements of surfing, snowboarding and mountain biking, and is rapidly picking up momentum across the country since it's relatively simple to get started – all you really need is a board, a few hills and some sympathetic friends who can drive you to hospital once your ride is over. There are mountainboarding

'If regular surfing just doesn't offer enough airtime, here's an easy solution: strap yourself to a board and an enormous parachute and let the wind do the work.'

### SCRAMBLING

Scrambling seems to be another outdoor activity invented in Britain – covering the twilight zone between serious hiking and rock climbing. Scrambling definitely involves using your hands, as well as your feet – and often involves a little rush of adrenaline now and again too. While experienced climbers may cruise effortlessly up a scramble, someone new to the game may need a rope and a lot of encouragement. Classic scrambles in Britain include Bristly Ridge and Crib Coch in Snowdonia, Jack's Rake and Striding Edge in the Lake District, and the Aonach Eagach Ridge in Glen Coe. Local guidebooks can suggest many more. It's great fun, as long as you know what you're doing.

centres in Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Shropshire and Cornwall, in the Brecon Beacons (p696) in Wales and near Helensburgh in Scotland (among other places), but you can do it practically anywhere there's a grassy slope – as long as you've got the landowner's permission of course. For more information see [www.atbauk.org](http://www.atbauk.org)

### Rock Climbing & Mountaineering

Britain is the birthplace of modern rock climbing, and there are few places in the world that offer such a wide range of mountains, cliffs and crags in such a compact area – not to mention an ever-growing number of indoor climbing walls.

Areas for mountaineering in Britain include, naturally enough, the high mountains of Scotland (especially the northwest), with favourite spots including Glen Coe, the area around Ben Nevis and the Cuillin Ridge (p907) on Skye. In Wales, Snowdonia (p721) offers long and short routes, while England's main centre for long routes is the Lake District (p591), and there are some fine short routes here as well. Other popular areas for short or single-pitch climbing are the Peak District and Yorkshire Dales. In southern England, good climbing areas include Cheddar Gorge and the tors (rocky outcrops) of Dartmoor (p311). Britain also offers the exhilaration of sea-cliff climbing, most notably in Pembrokeshire and Cornwall; nothing makes you concentrate more on finding the next hold than waves crashing 30m below!

The website of the **British Mountaineering Council** (☎ 0870 010 4878; [www.thebmc.co.uk](http://www.thebmc.co.uk)) covers indoor climbing walls, access rules (don't forget, all mountains and outcrops are privately owned), competitions and so on. In Scotland, the main bodies are the **Scottish Mountaineering Club** ([www.smc.org.uk](http://www.smc.org.uk)) and the **Mountaineering Council of Scotland** ([www.mountaineering-scotland.org.uk](http://www.mountaineering-scotland.org.uk)).

UK climbing grades are different to those in the USA and continental Europe; there's a handy conversion table at [www.rockfax.com/publications/grades.html](http://www.rockfax.com/publications/grades.html).

### Sailing & Windsurfing

Britain has a nautical heritage and sailing is a very popular pastime, in everything from tiny dinghies to ocean-going yachts. In recent years there's been a massive surge in windsurfing too. Places to sail in Britain include the coasts of Norfolk and Suffolk, southeast England (eg, Brighton, Eastbourne and Dover), Devon, Cornwall, and the Solent (the stretch of water between the Isle of Wight and the south coast – and one of the most popular sailing areas in Britain). In Wales, places include the Gower Peninsula and Pembrokeshire. In Scotland, head for the Firth of Forth near Edinburgh, the area north of Largs (west of Glasgow), or Inverness. There are also many inland lakes and reservoirs, ideal for training, racing or just pottering.

### CANAL & WATERWAY TRAVEL

Britain's inland waterways consist of rivers and lakes plus a surprisingly extensive canal network. Built in the early Industrial Revolution, canals were the country's main form of transport until railways boomed in the 19th century. Today, canals are alive again, part of a booming leisure-boat industry, dubbed the 'New Canal Age'. Mile-for-mile, canals are being restored and reopened at the same rate they were built in their 1790s heyday.

Travel by boat reveals a hidden side of Britain, as canals lead through a Britain of idyllic villages, pretty countryside and colourful waterside pubs. It also offers an unexpected view of cities like London and Birmingham. With 2000 miles of navigable canals and rivers, there's plenty to explore. Across the waterway network, boats are easily hired (for a few hours, a day or a week, or longer – no special skills are needed), and exploring Britain this way can be immensely rewarding. For families or groups it's a fascinating, fun and economical combination of transport and accommodation.

For more information see [www.britishwaterways.co.uk](http://www.britishwaterways.co.uk) and [www.waterscape.com](http://www.waterscape.com).

Your first port of call for any sailing or windsurfing matter should be the **Royal Yachting Association** (☎ 0845 345 0400; [www.rya.org.uk](http://www.rya.org.uk)). This organisation can provide all the details you need about training centres where you can learn the ropes, improve your skills or simply charter a boat for pleasure.

### Surfing

If you've come from the other side of the world, you'll be delighted to learn that summer water temperatures in Britain are roughly equivalent to winter temperatures in southern Australia (approximately 13°C). But as long as you've got a wetsuit, there are many excellent surfing opportunities. Britain's huge tidal range means there's often a completely different set of breaks at low and high tides. Look for beaches that have been awarded 'blue flags', which means the local town authority is taking sea (and sand) cleanliness seriously.

The best places to start are Cornwall and Devon, where the west coast is exposed to the Atlantic; from Land's End to Ilfracombe there's a string of surf spots. Newquay (p332) is the British surf capital, with all the trappings from Kombi vans to bleached hair. In 2006, a national newspaper carried a story about two guys from Hawaii who spent a year in Cornwall because the surf was more intriguing and challenging. Away from the southwest hotspots, there are smaller surf scenes in Norfolk and in Yorkshire on the east coast of England.

Southwest Wales has many good surfing spots, including Manorbier, Newgale and Whitesands near St David's (p684). It's easy to hire boards and gear, or arrange lessons. In the south, conditions at Porthcawl are also very good and the Gower Peninsula has a lively scene, especially at Rhossili Bay (p672).

Scotland's west coast is mainly sheltered by islands, and on the east coast the swells are unreliable, so it's the north, particularly around Thurso (p899), which has outstanding world-class possibilities, and a surprisingly large and lively surf scene.

The main national organisation is the **British Surfing Association** (☎ 01637-876474; [www.britsurf.co.uk](http://www.britsurf.co.uk)); its website has news on approved instruction centres, courses, competitions and so on. Another good site is [www.a1surf.com](http://www.a1surf.com), with comprehensive links and weather forecasts. Combine these sites with *Surf UK* by Wayne Alderson, a comprehensive guidebook covering almost 400 breaks, and you're sorted.

Surfers Against Sewage ([www.sas.org.uk](http://www.sas.org.uk)) is an active campaign group whose name says it all.

Although the situation is improving, some British towns still discharge a fair amount of crap into the sea.

# Environment

The island of Britain consists of three nations: England in the south and centre, Scotland to the north and Wales to the west. Further west lies the island of Ireland. Looking southeast, France is just 20 miles away.

## THE LAND

Geologically at least, Britain is part of Europe. It's on the edge of the Eurasian landmass, separated from the mother continent by the shallow English Channel. (The French are not so proprietorial, and call it La Manche – the sleeve.) About 10,000 years ago, Britain was *physically* part of Europe, but then sea levels rose and created the island we know today. Only in more recent times has there been a reconnection, in the form of the Channel Tunnel.

When it comes to topology, Britain is not a place of extremes. There are no Himalayas or Lake Baikals here. But there's plenty to keep you enthralled, and even a short journey can take you through a surprising mix of landscapes.

Southern England is covered in a mix of cities, towns and gently undulating countryside. East Anglia is almost entirely low and flat, while the Southwest Peninsula has wild moors, granite outcrops and rich pastures (Devon's cream is world famous), plus a rugged coast with sheltered beaches, making it a favourite holiday destination.

In the north of England, farmland remains interspersed with towns and cities, but the landscape is noticeably more bumpy. A line of large hills called the Pennines (fondly tagged 'the backbone of England') runs from Derbyshire to the Scottish border, and includes the peaty plateaus of the Peak District, the wild moors around Haworth (immortalised in Brontë novels), the delightful valleys of the Yorkshire Dales and the frequently windswept but ruggedly beautiful hills of Northumberland.

Perhaps England's best-known landscape is the Lake District, a small but spectacular cluster of mountains in the northwest, where Scafell Pike (a towering 978m) is England's highest peak.

The landscape of Wales is also defined by hills and mountains: notably the rounded Black Mountains and Brecon Beacons in the south, and the spiky peaks of Snowdonia in the north, with Mt Snowdon (1085m) the highest peak in Wales. In between lie the wild Cambrian Mountains of Mid Wales, rolling to the west coast of spectacular cliffs and shimmering river estuaries.

Ever wondered about the origin of Hastings, Stratford or Thorpe? *Place Names in the Landscape* by Margaret Gelling is a fascinating study of the geographical roots of Britain's town and village titles.

## COMPARING COVERAGE

Statistics can be boring, but these essential measurements may be handy for planning or perspective as you travel around:

**Wales** 8000 sq miles

**Scotland** 30,500 sq miles

**England** 50,000 sq miles

**Britain** 88,500 sq miles

**UK** 95,000 sq miles

**British Isles** 123,000 sq miles

For comparison, France is about 210,000 sq miles, Texas 260,000 sq miles, Australia nearly 3 million sq miles and the USA more than 3.5 million sq miles. When Britain is compared with these giants, it's amazing that such a small island can make so much noise.

For real mountains, though, you've got to go to Scotland, especially the wild, remote and thinly populated northwest Highlands – separated from the rest of the country by a diagonal gash in the earth's crust called the Boundary Fault. Ben Nevis (1343m) is Scotland's – and Britain's – highest mountain, but there are many more to choose from. The Highlands are further enhanced by the vast cluster of beautiful islands that lie off the loch-indented west coast.

South of the Scottish Highlands is a relatively flat area called the central Lowlands, home to the bulk of Scotland's population. Further south, down to the border with England, things get hillier again; this is the southern Uplands, a fertile farming area.

## WILDLIFE

Britain is a small country, and some native plant and animal species are hidden away. However, there are undoubted gems, from woods carpeted in shimmering bluebells to a stately herd of deer in the mountains. This wildlife is part of the fabric of Britain, and having a closer look will enhance your trip enormously.

### Animals

When strolling through farmland and woodland areas, you'll easily spot birds such as the robin, with its red breast and cheerful whistle, and the yellowhammer, with its 'little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese' song. You might also hear the warbling cry of a skylark as it flutters high over the fields – a classic, but now threatened, sound of the British countryside.

Between the fields, hedges provide cover for flocks of finches, but these seedeaters must watch out for sparrowhawks – birds of prey that come from nowhere at tremendous speed. Other predators include barn owls, a wonderful sight as they fly silently along hedgerows listening for the faint rustle of a vole or shrew. In rural Wales or Scotland you may see a buzzard, Britain's most common large raptor.

Also in fields, look out for brown hare, another increasingly rare mammal species; they're related to rabbits but are much larger, with longer legs and ears. Males who battle for territory in early spring are, of course, as 'mad as a March hare'.

A classic British mammal is the red fox. You may only see one in the countryside, but these wily beasts adapt well to any situation, so you're just as likely

For more in-depth information on the nation's flora and fauna, [www.wildaboutbritain.co.uk](http://www.wildaboutbritain.co.uk) is a comprehensive, accessible, interactive, award-winning site.

## WILD READING

To further your enjoyment of wildlife-watching, here are some useful guidebooks:

- *Complete Guide to British Wildlife* by Arlott, Fitter and Fitter is a highly recommended, portable single volume covering mammals, birds, fish, plants, snakes, insects and even fungi.
- *British Isles: Wildlife of Coastal Waters* by world-famous film-maker Tony Soper beautifully covers the birds, mammals and jellyfish you'll see from beach, boat and cliff-top.
- *Birds, Trees, Fish and Wild Flowers* are part of the Gem series of books. They fit in your pocket, cost about £5 and are often sold at tourist offices.
- *Complete British Birds* by Paul Sterry is full of excellent photographs and handy notes, ideal for identifying anything feathered you may see on your travels.
- *Where to Watch Birds in Britain* by Simon Harrop and Nigel Redman is ideal if you need more detail about specific destinations.
- *Wildlife Walks* edited by Malcolm Tait (with a foreword by the nation's favourite ecologist, David Bellamy) suggest days out in more than 500 wildlife reserves across the country.

## SEEING RED

The red squirrel used to be commonplace in many parts of woodland Britain, but it's now one of the country's most endangered mammal species. Where they once numbered in millions, populations have declined significantly over the last 50 years to about 150,000 – confined mainly to Scotland, with isolated groups in the Lake District, Norfolk and the Isle of Wight. The simple reason for this is the arrival of larger grey squirrels from America.

The problem isn't that grey squirrels attack their red cousins. The problem is food. Greys can eat hazelnuts and acorns when they are still tough, whereas reds can only eat these nuts when they're soft and ripe. So the greys get their fill first, and there's not much left for the reds. So thorough are the greys in cleaning up that, once they arrive in an area, the reds are usually gone within about 15 years.

One place where reds can do well is pine plantations, as they are more adept than greys at getting the seeds out of pine cones. However, even this advantage is threatened, as in recent years the indomitable and adaptable greys have started learning the cone seed-popping technique.

to see them scavenging in towns, and even in city suburbs. A controversial law banning the hunting of foxes with dogs was introduced in 2005, but it's too early to see what impact this has had on population numbers.

Another well-known British mammal is the black-and-white-striped badger. You'll probably only see the burrows of this nocturnal animal, but if you're driving at night you might catch sight of 'old Brock' in your headlights. Farmers believe badgers spread tuberculosis to cattle, although the evidence is inconclusive, and the debate rumbles on between the agricultural and environmental lobbies.

In woodland areas, mammals include the small white-spotted fallow deer and the even smaller roe deer. If you hear rustling among the fallen leaves it might be a hedgehog – a cute-looking, spiny-backed insect-eater – but it's an increasingly rare sound these days; conservationists say hedgehogs will be extinct in Britain by 2025, possibly due to increased building in rural areas, the use of insecticides in farming, and the changing nature of both the countryside and the city parks and gardens that once made up the hedgehog's traditional habitat. You're much more likely to see grey squirrels; introduced from North America, this species has proved so adaptable that native British red squirrels are severely endangered (see above). Much larger are pine martens, seen in some forested regions, especially in Scotland. With beautiful brown coats, they were once hunted for their fur, but are now fully protected.

Out of the trees and up in the moors, birds you might see include the red grouse, and the curlew with its elegant curved bill. Golden plovers are beautifully camouflaged so you have to look hard, but you can't miss the show-off lapwings with their spectacular aerial displays.

The most visible moorland mammal is the red deer. Herds survive on Exmoor and Dartmoor, in the Lake District, and in larger numbers in Scotland. The males are most spectacular after June, when their antlers have grown ready for the rutting season. The stags keep their antlers through the winter and then shed them again in February.

Mountain birds include red kites (in Wales there has been a successful project to reintroduce these spectacular fork-tailed raptors; see p706), while on the high peaks of Scotland you may see the grouse's northern cousin, the ptarmigan, dappled brown in the summer but white in the winter. Also in the Scottish mountains, keep an eye peeled for golden eagles, Britain's largest birds of prey, as they glide and soar along ridges.

If there's water nearby you have a chance of spotting an osprey; the best places in Britain to see this magnificent bird include Rutland Water (p434)



and the Cairngorms (p883). You could also look along the riverbanks for signs of water voles, endearing rodents that were once very common but are now all but wiped out by wild mink, another American immigrant (first introduced to stock fur farms).

In contrast to water voles, the formerly rare otters are beginning to make a comeback after suffering from polluted water, habitat destruction and persecution by anglers. In southern Britain they inhabit the banks of rivers and lakes, and in Scotland they frequently live on the coast. Although their numbers are growing, they are mainly nocturnal and hard to see, but keep your eyes peeled and you might be lucky.

On the coasts of Britain, particularly in Cornwall, Pembrokeshire and northwest Scotland, the dramatic cliffs are a marvellous sight in early summer (around May), when they are home to hundreds of thousands of breeding seabirds. Guillemots, razorbills and kittiwakes, among others, fight for space on impossibly crowded rock ledges. The sheer numbers of birds makes this one of Britain's finest wildlife spectacles, as the cliffs become white with droppings and the air fills with their shrill calls.

Another bird to look out for in coastal areas is the comical puffin (especially common in Shetland), with its distinctive rainbow beak and 'nests' burrowed in sandy soil. In total contrast, gannets are one of the largest seabirds and make dramatic dives for fish, often from a great height.

And finally, the sea mammals. The grey seal and the common seal are two species of seal that frequent British coasts. Dolphins, porpoises, minke whales and basking sharks can all be seen off the west coast, particularly off Scotland, and especially from May to September when viewing conditions are better. Whale-watching trips (which are also good for seeing other marine wildlife) are available from several Scottish harbour towns, and we give details throughout this book.

## Plants

In any part of Britain, the best places to see wildflowers are in areas that evade large-scale farming. For example, in the chalky hill country of southern England and in limestone areas such as the Peak District and Yorkshire Dales, many fields erupt with great profusions of cowslips and primroses in April and May. Some flowers prefer woodland, and the best time to visit these areas is also April and May. This is because the leaf canopy of the woods has at that time not fully developed, and this allows sunlight to break through to encourage plants such as bluebells (a beautiful and internationally rare species).

Another classic British plant is gorse – you can't miss the swathes of this spiky bush in heath areas, most notably in the New Forest in southern England. Legend says that it's the season for kissing when gorse blooms. Luckily, its vivid yellow flowers show year-round.

In contrast, the blooming season for heather is quite short. On the Scottish mountains, the Pennine moors of northern England, and Dartmoor in the south, the wild hill-country is covered in a riot of purple in August and September.

Britain's natural deciduous trees include oak, ash, hazel and rowan, with seeds and leaves supporting a vast range of insects and birds. The New Forest in southern England and the Forest of Dean on the Wales-England border are good examples of this type of habitat. In some parts of Scotland, stands of indigenous Caledonian pine can still be seen. As you travel through Britain you're also likely to see non-native pines, standing in plantations empty of wildlife – although an increasing number of deciduous trees are also planted these days.

A great series of handy wildlife guides (*Trees, Birds, Wild Flowers, Insects* etc) is produced by the Wildlife Trusts ([www.wildlifetrusts.org.uk](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org.uk)). Proceeds from sales support environmental and educational campaigns.

Britain has about 8% tree cover (3% non-native conifers, 5% native and mostly deciduous) – one of the lowest in Europe. In comparison, Italy has 22% tree cover, France 27%.

## NATIONAL PARKS

Way back in 1810, poet and outdoors-lover William Wordsworth suggested that the Lake District should be 'a sort of national property, in which every man has a right'. More than a century later, the Lake District became a national park (although quite different from Wordsworth's vision), along with the Brecon Beacons, Cairngorms, Dartmoor, Exmoor, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, New Forest, Norfolk and Suffolk Broads, Northumberland, North York Moors, Peak District, Pembrokeshire Coast, Snowdonia and Yorkshire Dales. A new park, the South Downs in southern England, is in the process of being created.

Combined, Britain's national parks now cover over 10% of the country. It's an impressive total, but the term 'national park' can cause confusion. First, these areas are not state owned: nearly all land is private, belonging to farmers, companies, estates and conservation organisations. Second, they are not total wilderness areas, as in many other countries. In Britain's national parks you'll see roads, railways, villages and even towns. Development is strictly controlled, but about 250,000 people live and work inside national-park boundaries. Some of them work in industries such as quarrying, which ironically does great damage to these supposedly protected landscapes. On the flip side, these industries provide vital jobs (although sometimes for people outside the park), and several wildlife reserves have been established on former quarry sites.

Despite these apparent anomalies, national parks still contain vast tracts of wild mountains and moorland, rolling downs and river valleys, and other areas of quiet countryside, all ideal for long walks, cycling, easy rambles, sightseeing or just lounging around. To help you get the best from the parks, they all have information centres, and all provide various recreational facilities (trails, car parks, camp sites etc) for visitors.

It's worth noting also that there are many beautiful parts of Britain that are *not* national parks (such as Mid Wales, North Pennine in England, and many parts of Scotland). These can be just as good for outdoor activities or for simply exploring by car or foot, and are often less crowded than the popular national parks.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

With Britain's long history of human occupation, it's not surprising that the land's appearance is almost totally the result of people's interactions with the environment. Ever since Neolithic farmers learnt how to make axes, trees have been cleared so that crops could be planted – a trend that has continued into our own time. In Scotland particularly, the Clearances of the 18th century (see p897) meant that people were moved off the land to make room for sheep, which nibbled to death any saplings brave enough to try growing on the mountainsides. Today, the Highlands is undoubtedly a wilderness, a place of stunning and rugged beauty, but don't be under any impression that it's 'natural' or 'unspoilt'.

Even more dramatic environmental changes hit rural areas after WWII, especially in England, when a drive to be self-reliant in food meant new

Although national parks are not owned by the state, large sections of several national parks are owned by the National Trust (NT) – one of the largest charities in Britain – but the NT has no formal link with national park administrative bodies.

### ACTING THE GOAT

Perhaps unexpectedly, Britain is home to herds of wild goats. They've gambolled on the moorland near Lynmouth in Devon for almost 1000 years, although they narrowly escaped a cull in 2005. Wild goats can also be seen on the Great Orme peninsula in North Wales, but these are new kids on the block, having been introduced only a century ago.

## NATIONAL PARKS

Park	Features	Activities	Best time to visit	Page
Brecon Beacons	great green ridgelines, waterfalls: Welsh mountain ponies, red kites, buzzards, peregrine falcons, otters, kingfishers, dinosaurs	horse riding, cycling, caving, canoeing, hang-gliding	Mar & Apr - spring lambs shaking their tails	p693
Cairngorms	soaring snowy peaks, pine forests: ospreys, pine martens, wildcats, grouse, capercaillies	skiing, bird-watching, walking	Feb - for the snow	p879
Dartmoor	wild heath, marshy moorland: Dartmoor ponies, deer, otters, badgers, rabbits, buzzards, peregrine falcons, sheep	walking, horse riding	May & Jun - wildflowers in full bloom	p309
Exmoor	craggy sea cliffs, sweeping moors: red deer, Exmoor ponies, horned sheep	horse riding, walking	Sep - heather in bloom	p269
Lake District	majestic fells, rugged mountains, glassy lakes: ospreys, red squirrels, waterfowl, sparrowhawks, sheep, England's only golden eagles	walking, cycling, water sports	Sep & Oct - autumn colours abound & summer crowds have left	p591
Loch Lomond & Trossachs	sparkling lochs, brooding mountains: deer, squirrels, badgers, foxes, buzzards, otters	climbing, walking, cycling	Sep & Oct - after the summer rush	p825
New Forest	woodlands & heath: wild ponies, otters, owls, Dartford warblers, southern damselfly	walking, cycling, horse riding	Apr-Sep - wild ponies grazing	p219
Norfolk & Suffolk Broads	expansive shallow lakes & marshlands: water lilies, wildfowl, otters	walking, boating	Apr & May - birds most active	p484
Northumberland	wild rolling moors of heather & gorse: black grouse, red squirrels, sheep	walking, climbing, cycling	Mar, Apr & Sep - spring lambs & heather in bloom	p641
North York Moors	heather-clad hills & deep green valleys with lonely farms & isolated villages: curlews, golden plovers	walking, cycling	Aug & Sep - purple heather in bloom	p544
Peak District	high moors, tranquil dales, limestone caves: jackdaws, kestrels, grouse, rabbits, foxes, badgers &, of course, sheep	walking, cycling, hang-gliding	Apr & May - newborn lambs everywhere	p444
Pembrokeshire Coast	wave-ravaged shoreline of cliffs & beaches: puffins, fulmars, shearwaters, grey seals, dolphins, porpoises	walking, kayaking, coasteering, mountain biking, horse riding	Apr & May - spring flowers clinging to clifftops	p675
Snowdonia	major mountain ranges, lakes & estuaries: wild goats, choughs, red kites, curlews, Snowdon lilies, buzzards, polecats	walking, cycling, canoeing, sailing, horse riding	May-Sep - summit temperatures melt low out	p720
Yorkshire Dales	limestone hills & lush valleys (dales) cut through by rugged stone walls & spotted with the faded, spectral grandeur of monastic ruins	walking, cycling	Apr & May	p517

farming methods. This changed the landscape from a patchwork of small fields to a scene of vast prairies as walls were demolished, trees felled, ponds filled, wetlands drained and, most notably, hedgerows ripped out.

For many centuries, these hedgerows had formed a network of dense bushes, shrubs and trees that stretched across the countryside protecting fields from erosion, supporting a varied range of flowers and providing shelter for numerous insects, birds and small mammals. But in the postwar rush to improve farm yields, thousands of miles of hedgerow were destroyed. And the destruction continued into our own time; from 1984 to 2002, another 25% disappeared. However, farmers are now encouraged to 'set aside' hedges and other uncultivated areas as havens for wildlife, so the tide might be turning – albeit very slowly.

Ironically, despite the increased farm yields, the food produced is often of dubious quality, as simple realities such as tasteless carrots or national emergencies like the 'mad cow' disease of the 1990s clearly show. But you can't blame the farmers – well, not all of them. They have a living to earn, and are often encouraged to act in environmentally irresponsible ways by misguided directives (and vast subsidies) from the UK government and the EU.

Of course, environmental issues are not exclusive to rural areas. In Britain's towns and cities, topics such as air pollution, light pollution, levels of car use, road building, airport construction, public-transport provision and household-waste recycling are never far from the political agenda, although some might say they're not near enough to the top of the list. Over the past decade, the main political parties have lacked engagement, although in 2006, David Cameron, the new leader of the opposition Conservatives, declared that sustainability would henceforth be a major tenet of his party. His PR staff made a big deal of him cycling to work, which looked good (and would have been fine if they'd emphasised the health benefits of cycling) until it came to light his chauffeur still drove his official car to parliament, carrying a huge stack of paperwork and a change of clothes. But political point-scoring aside, when it comes to real issues, apathy still abounds in most areas; for example, the Green Party enjoyed only modest support in the 2006 council elections – an increase of 20 councillors nationally, compared with a 300 swing from Labour to the Conservatives.

Meanwhile, back in rural Britain, in addition to hedgerow clearance, hot environmental issues include farming methods such as irrigation, monocropping and pesticide use.

The results of these unsustainable methods, say environmentalists, are rivers running dry, fish poisoned by runoff, and fields with one type of grass and not another plant to be seen. These 'green deserts' support no insects, which in turn means populations of some wild bird species dropped by an incredible 70% from 1970 to 1990. This is not a case of old wizened peasants recalling the idyllic days of their forebears; you only have to be over 30 in Britain to remember a countryside where birds such as skylarks or lapwings were visibly much more numerous.

But all is not lost. In the face of apparently overwhelming odds, Britain still boasts a great biodiversity, and some of the best wildlife habitats are protected to a greater or lesser extent, thanks to the creation of national parks and similar conservation zones – often within areas privately owned by conservation campaign groups such as the **Wildlife Trusts** ([www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)), **Woodland Trust** ([www.woodland-trust.org](http://www.woodland-trust.org)), **National Trust** (NT; [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)) and **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds** ([www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)). Many of these areas are open to the public – ideal spots for walking, bird-watching or simply enjoying the peace and beauty of the countryside.

Britain's new 'hedgerows' are motorway verges. Totalling almost 116 sq miles, these long strips of grass and bushes support many rare plant species, insects and small mammals – that's why kestrels are often seen hovering nearby.

*The Great Food Gamble*, by well-known hard-hitting writer and broadcaster John Humphrys, studies the past 50 years of British agriculture, decaying factory farming, international subsidies, pollution and poor-quality food – among many other ills.

Britain buries most of its rubbish in 'landfill sites'. By 2015, say environmental campaigners, these will all be full. Options will then be more recycling, or more controversial methods such as incineration.

**LOCAL VOICES – VOLUNTEERING** *Fayette Fox*

Britain boasts many excellent, affordable volunteering opportunities for folks who enjoy working outdoors with their hands, learning new skills and meeting people. So what are you waiting for? Get out your wellies and go volunteer! Here are a few ideas:

**Wwoof (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms)**

The premise is simple: Wwoofers offer their services to help on a farm, and in return stay as a guest with free room and board. There are thousands of Wwoof farms globally, but the organisation's roots are British. Londoner Sue Coppard started Wwoof in 1971, to get out into the countryside and support the organic movement. Today, underneath the agricultural exterior, **Wwoof** ([www.wwoof.org/wwoof\\_uk](http://www.wwoof.org/wwoof_uk)) is also a cultural exchange, attracting international volunteers of all ages. Wwoofers usually help for a week or two, but they can stay longer or shorter by arrangement. Annual membership is a mere £15.

**BTCV (British Trust of Conservation Volunteers)**

**BTCV** ([www.btcv.org.uk](http://www.btcv.org.uk)) volunteers work in the countryside on tasks such as removing invasive bracken, maintaining paths and repairing bridges. And it's not *all* donkey work; BTCV teaches traditional land-management methods such as dry stone walling and coppicing. No experience is necessary, just a willingness to muck in. Groups stay in basic accommodation and cook meals together. It's a great way to meet people from all over the UK. Weekend and week-long projects across Britain are offered year-round, the cost is about £65 and £150 respectively. If time is short, day-long conservation activities are free of charge.

**Other Options**

Other options include working holidays with the **National Trust** (NT; [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)); this organisation offers a range of volunteering trips catering to different ages and interests. For something wilder, in Scotland the **John Muir Trust** ([www.jmt.org](http://www.jmt.org)) runs activities and conservation projects from April to October, typically at the weekend. Volunteering is free, but you have to arrange your own food and accommodation. There are sometimes opportunities for camping.

*Fayette Fox – Wwoof and BTCV volunteer*

Also on the plus side, and especially important for an island such as Britain, sea protection is better than it's ever been. Major efforts have been made to stem the flow of sewage into the sea. Oil spills still occur, but the clean-up process is quick and efficient. While some coastal areas may still be dirty and polluted, there are many other areas (around southwest England, and much of Wales and Scotland, for example) where the water is clear and many popular holiday beaches are proud holders of 'blue flag' awards. These awards show they meet international standards of cleanliness – on the sand and in the waves. The birds and whales like clean water too, the tourists are happy, the locals make some money and the scenery is stunning. Everybody wins!

# Food & Drink

Britain once boasted a cuisine so undesirable that there's still no equivalent in the English language for the phrase *bon appétit*. But today the tide has turned: in 2005, food bible *Gourmet* magazine said London has the best restaurants in the world, and it's now easy to find good food in other cities, towns and villages as you travel around the country. And while epicures can splash out big bucks on fine dining, tasty eating in Britain definitely won't break the bank for more budget-conscious visitors either.

Having said that, Britain's culinary heritage of ready-sliced white bread, fatty meats and vegetables boiled to death, all washed down by tea with four sugars, remains firmly in place in many parts of the country. And that's before we get on to treats like pork scratchings and deep-fried Mars bars.

Why the improvement? Reasons include the infamous outbreaks of foot-and-mouth and 'mad cow' disease. They're history now, and British beef is once again exported to the world, but an upside of the bad press was a massive surge in demand for better quality food, so there's now a plethora of natural, unadulterated, chemical-free products available in shops, markets and restaurants across the country.

For locals and visitors alike, better food often means organic food, but there are some anomalies: those organic tomatoes taste good, but is it environmentally friendly to fly them in from Spain? Same goes for organic avocados from Thailand, or organic peas from Kenya (where, incidentally, local people see their crops and cattle die as large-scale market gardens dam rivers and take all the water). Meanwhile, it seems impossible to buy British apples in supermarkets during the autumn cropping season, although you can always chose between 10 different varieties flown in from New Zealand, Chile or South Africa.

But despite 'food miles' and other dilemmas, British food continues to change for the better. Another reason for the improvement is outside influence. For decades most towns have boasted Chinese and Indian restaurants, so chow mein is no longer considered exotic and it's quite usual for British people to cook up chicken tikka masala, whatever their racial heritage. And out on the street, curry is the most popular takeaway food in Britain, outstripping even fish and chips.

Alongside the food in 'Indian' restaurants (in many cases actually owned and staffed by people from Pakistan or Bangladesh), dishes from Japan, Korea, Thailand and other countries east of Suez have become readily available too. From the other side of the world, there's been a growth in restaurants specialising in South American, African or Caribbean cuisine. Closer to home, pastas and a wide range of Mediterranean specialities – from countries as diverse as Morocco and Greece – are commonplace not only in decent restaurants, but also in everyday cafés and pubs.

Good food in pubs? Yes indeed. Not so many years ago if you felt peckish in your average British boozery, your choice would be a ham or cheese roll, with pickled onions if you were lucky. These days, pubs are a good-value option whether you're looking for a toasted sandwich or a three-course meal.

'Gastropubs' specialise in truly excellent food, but still maintain a relaxed informal atmosphere. You'll find mismatched cutlery, no tablecloths and waiters in T-shirts, and you pay at the bar along with your drinks, but nothing beats the luxury of a wholesome shepherd's pie washed down by a decent real ale without the worry of guessing which fork to use. This in turn is part of a growing trend in Britain to order good beer to accompany food, rather than automatically turning to the wine-list.

According to leading organic-food campaign group the Soil Association ([www.soilassociation.org](http://www.soilassociation.org)), three out of four households in Britain buy organic food.

## VEGETARIANS

It's official – vegetarians are no longer weird. Many restaurants and pubs in England have at least a token vegetarian dish (another meat-free lasagne, anyone?), but better places offer much more imaginative choices. Vegans will find the going more tricky, except of course at dedicated veggie/vegan restaurants – and where possible we recommend good options throughout this book. For more ideas see [www.happycow.com](http://www.happycow.com).

Of course, there's more to eating than restaurants and gastropubs. Lavishly illustrated food sections in weekend newspapers indicate that cooking at home is now officially fashionable. Feeding on this is the current phenomenon of 'celebrity chefs', including Hugh Fernley-Whittingstall who famously scored a £2 million deal with his publishers in early 2006, and Gordon Ramsay who featured in a list of Britain's richest self-made entrepreneurs a few months later. They are not alone. Every night, on a TV channel near you, a star of the kitchen demonstrates imaginative and simple techniques for producing stylish, tasty and healthy food.

But behind the scenes, the Brits still have an odd attitude to eating at home. They love to sit on the sofa and *watch* TV food shows. Inspired, they rush out and buy all the glossy cookery books. Then on the way back home, they pop into the supermarket and buy a stack of ready-made meals. Freshly created food sounds great in theory, but in reality the recipe for dinner is more likely to be something like this: open freezer, take out package, bung in microwave, ping, eat.

In fact, more junk food and ready-made meals are consumed in the UK than in the rest of Europe put together. So it's no surprise that the British are getting increasingly heavy, with over 60% of the adult population overweight, and almost 25% clinically obese. But despite the vast intakes, average nutrition rates are lower now than they were in the 1950s when postwar rationing was still in force. Yes, without doubt, you can find great food in Britain. It's just that not all the Brits seem to like eating it.

## STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

In the view of many outsiders, a typical British dinner is a plate of roast beef. It's more of an English tradition than a British one (and is also why the French call English people *'les rosbifs'*), but good-quality roasts from well-reared cattle grace menus everywhere from Cornwall to the Highlands. Perhaps the most famous beef comes from Scotland's Aberdeen Angus cattle, while the best-known food from Wales is lamb (although a lowly vegetable, the leek, is a national emblem). Venison – usually from red deer – is readily available in Scotland, as well as in parts of Wales and England, most notably in the New Forest.

The traditional accompaniment for British beef is Yorkshire pudding. It's simply roast batter, but very tasty when properly cooked. In pubs and cafés – especially in northern England – you can buy big bowl-shaped Yorkshire puddings filled with meat stew, beans, vegetables or – in these multicultural days – curry.

Particular English specialities include Melton Mowbray pork pies (motto: 'gracious goodness for over 100 years'), cooked ham compressed in a casing of pastry – always eaten cold, ideally with pickle. A legal victory in 2005 ensured that only pies made in the eponymous Midlands town could carry the Melton Mowbray moniker – in the same way that fizzy wine from other regions can't be called Champagne.

Then there's rhubarb, the juicy stem of a large-leaved garden plant, best eaten in a 'crumble' – a topping of mixed flour, butter and sugar – served

with custard or ice cream. For much of the 20th century, rhubarb was a very popular food, with overnight trains dubbed the 'rhubarb express' bringing tons of the stuff to London and the cities of the south from the main growing area in Yorkshire, between the towns of Leeds, Wakefield and Morely, known – inevitably – as the 'rhubarb triangle'. It fell out of fashion around the 1980s but is currently enjoying a renaissance, in gourmet restaurants as well as humble kitchens.

Perhaps less appealing, another English speciality is black pudding, effectively a large sausage made from ground meat, offal, fat and blood, and traditionally served for breakfast. It's known in other countries as 'blood sausage', but the English version has a high content of oatmeal so doesn't fall apart in the pan when fried.

Moving onto an altogether sweeter pudding, Bakewell pudding is an English speciality that blundered into the recipe books around 1860 when a cook at the Rutland Arms Hotel in the Derbyshire town of Bakewell was making a strawberry tart, but mistakenly (some stories say drunkenly) spread the egg mixture on top of the jam instead of stirring it into the pastry. Especially in northern England, the Bakewell pudding (pudding, mark you, not 'Bakewell tart' as it's sometimes erroneously called) features regularly on local dessert menus and is certainly worth sampling.

Also in the pudding club is plum pudding, a dome-shaped cake with fruit, nuts and sometimes brandy or rum, traditionally eaten at Christmas, when it's called – surprise, surprise – Christmas pudding. This pudding is steamed rather than baked, cut into slices and served with brandy butter. It's eaten after the equally traditional Christmas lunch of turkey and Brussels sprouts, and shortly before the traditional sleep on the sofa when the Queen's speech is on TV. Watch out for the small coins inserted in Christmas pudding by superstitious cooks – if you bite on one it means good luck for the following year, but may play hell with your fillings.

Staying with the sweet stuff, international favourite banoffee pie, a dessert made from bananas, boiled condensed milk and whipped cream, was first developed in a pub in Sussex in southern England in the early 1970s. A plaque on the wall commemorates this landmark culinary event.

Back to the meat, and a local speciality in northern England is Cumberland sausage, a tasty mix of minced meat and herbs so large it has to be spiralled to fit on your plate. Bring sausage and Yorkshire pud together and you have another classic British dish: toad-in-the-hole.

Alongside meat options, a classic British staple is fish and chips – often served in pubs and cafés, or available from the local 'chippie' (takeaway). Sometimes it's greasy and tasteless, especially once you get far from the sea, but at towns with salt in the air this deep-fried delight is always worth trying. Yorkshire's coastal resorts are particularly famous for huge servings of cod – despite it becoming an endangered species thanks to overfishing. Other seafood specialities include Norfolk crab and Northumberland kippers,

In Yorkshire, the eponymous pudding is traditionally eaten *before* the main meal. This harks back to days when food was scarce. The pudding was a stomach-filler, so you didn't worry so much about a tiny main course.

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## LES ROSBIFS RESPOND

British meat consumption – and British farming – took a nose-dive in 2001 following outbreaks of 'mad cow' and foot-and-mouth disease. These events were notoriously recalled in 2005 by France's President Jacques Chirac: joking with fellow leaders at an international conference, he reportedly quipped about the British, 'The only thing they have done for European agriculture is mad cow', and 'You can't trust people who cook as badly as that...it's the country with the worst food'. Mr Chirac's comments are based, we assume, on the food he'd been served at state banquets rather than a steak pie he'd bought in a local gastropub.

### NAME THAT PASTY

A favourite in Southwest England is the Cornish pasty – originally a mix of cooked vegetables wrapped in pastry – now available in many parts of Britain and often including meat varieties (much to the chagrin of the Cornish people). Invented long before Tupperware, the pasty was an all-in-one-lunchpack that tin miners carried underground and left on a ledge ready for mealtime. So pasties weren't mixed up, they were marked with owners' initials – always at one end, so the miner could eat half and safely leave the rest to snack on later without it mistakenly disappearing into the mouth of a workmate. And before going back to the surface, the miners traditionally left the last corner of the pasty as a gift for the spirits of the mine known as 'knockers', to ensure a safe shift the next day.

while restaurants in Scotland, west Wales and Southwest England regularly conjure up prawns, lobsters, oysters, mussels and scallops.

Another British staple – found especially in pubs at lunchtime – is the ploughman's lunch. This is essentially bread and cheese, and although hearty farm-workers carried their lunch to the fields (probably wrapped in a red spotted handkerchief) over many centuries, this meal is actually a modern phenomenon, invented in the 1960s by the national cheesemakers' organisation to boost consumption, cashing in on public nostalgia and fondness for tradition – even if it was fake.

You can still find a basic ploughman's lunch in some pubs – and it undeniably goes well with a pint or two of local ale – but these days it's usually been smartened up to include butter, salad, pickle, dressings and a selection of cheeses. You'll also find other variations, such as farmer's lunch (bread and chicken), stockman's lunch (bread and ham), Frenchman's lunch (brie and baguette) and fisherman's lunch (you guessed it, with fish).

For cheese and bread in a different combination, try Welsh rarebit – a sophisticated variation of cheese on toast, seasoned and flavoured with butter, milk and sometimes a little beer. Other traditional Welsh dishes include *bara brith* (spicy fruit loaf), *cawl* (a thick broth) and *laverbread* – not a bread at all, but seaweed, often served with oatmeal and bacon on toast, a very tasty combination.

In Scotland, instead of toast at breakfast, you might get oatcakes – in sweet and salty varieties. Scones are larger, and Scottish bakeries usually offer milk scones and griddle scones as well as plain varieties. Other sweet temptations include *bannocks* (half-scone/half-pancake), shortbread (a sweet biscuit) and Dundee cake (a rich fruit mix topped with almonds). While you're at the bakery, you'll see *stovies* (tasty pies of meat, mashed onion and fried potato) and Scotch pies (hard-cased pies of minced meat, sometimes eaten cold). In restaurants and cafés, look out for Scotch broth (a thick soup of barley, lentils and mutton stock), sometimes offered as a starter, but filling enough as a meal in itself.

Of course, the Scottish food that everyone knows is haggis, Scotland's national dish, essentially a large sausage made from a sheep's stomach filled with minced meat and oatmeal. Some restaurants in Scotland serve haggis and it's also available deep-fried at takeaways. If you're wary of a full helping of the Scottish national dish, search the menu for Highland chicken, a meal that stuffs portions of haggis mix into baked chicken – that way you can sample a small serving.

Scottish salmon is also well known, and available everywhere in Britain smoked or poached, but there's a big difference between bland fatty salmon from fish farms and the lean tasty wild version. The latter is more expensive, but as well as the taste, there are sound environmental reasons for preferring

the nonfarmed variety. Other British seafood includes herring, trout and haddock; in Scotland the latter is best enjoyed with potato and cream in the old-style soup called *cullen skink*.

And finally, if you feel like something more fundamental, more earthy, to spread on your toast, look no further than Marmite – a dark and pungent yeast extract that generations of Britons either loved or hated with a passion through childhood. Similar to the Australian favourite, Vegemite (but not the same – oh no, sir!), it's popular at breakfast and especially great for late night munchies. In 2006, when the manufacturer of Marmite moved from selling the stuff in a near-spherical glass jar to a (much more practical) plastic tube, much was the consternation across the land, and even before this dreaded event conspiracists quickly noticed that the consistency of Marmite had changed – presumably so it would flow better through the new-fangled plastic tube.

### DRINKS

If you're from overseas and a local asks 'would you like a drink?', don't automatically expect a gin and tonic. They may mean a 'cuppa' – a cup of tea – Britain's best-known beverage, sometimes dubbed the 'national drink'. In reality, coffee is equally popular these days; Brits consume 165 million cups a day and the British coffee market is worth £700 million a year – but with the prices some coffee shops charge, maybe that's not surprising.

Among alcoholic drinks, Britain is best-known for its beer. Typical British beer is technically called ale, dark brown to brick red in colour, and generally served at room temperature. It's more commonly called 'bitter' in England and Wales. This is to distinguish it from lager – the drink that most of the rest of the world calls 'beer' – generally yellow and served cold. (In Scotland, ales are designated by strength – light, heavy, export and strong – or by a notional 'shilling' scale; so you'd order a 'pint of heavy' or a 'pint of eighty shilling' rather than simply a 'pint of bitter'.)

International lager brands such as Foster's and Budweiser are available in Britain, but as you travel around the country, you should definitely try some traditional beer, also known as real ale. But be ready! If you're used to the 'amber nectar' or 'king of beers' a local British brew may come as a shock. A warm, flat and expensive shock. This is partly to do with Britain's climate and partly to do with the beer being served by hand pump rather than gas pressure. Most important, though, is the integral flavour: traditional British beer doesn't need to be chilled or fizzed to make it palatable. (Drink a cheap lager that has sat in its glass for an hour and you'll see it has very little actual taste.)

### CLASSIC BREWS

For students of real ale, classic brewery names to look out for and beers to sample as you travel around Britain include Adnams (eastern England), Arkells (south, Southwest England), Belhaven (Scotland), Black Sheep (northern England), Brains (Wales), Caledonian (Scotland and northern England), Felinfoel (Wales), Fullers (southeast England), Greene King (Eastern, central, southern England), Hardys & Hansons (central England), Hook Norton (English Midlands), Jennings (northwest England), Marston's (central, northern England), Orkney Brewery (Scotland), St Austel (western England), Shepherd Neam (southeast England), Timothy Taylor (northern England) and Wadworth (western England). For more ideas, tipplers' favourite tomes include the annual *Good Beer Guide to Great Britain*, produced by the Campaign for Real Ale, steering you to the best beers and the pubs that serve them, and the *Good Pub Guide*, detailing thousands of fine establishments across the country. Look out too for the wonderful *300 Beers to Try Before you Die* by Roger Protz; unashamedly jumping on the current trend for lists, this homage to British beers (and a few from other countries) is educational and jolly good fun.

Like the taste of meat, but don't like the idea of battery pens? Lamb, beef, chicken and salmon producers approved by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) are listed at [www.farmgate-direct.com](http://www.farmgate-direct.com).

The Campaign for Real Ale ([www.camra.org.uk](http://www.camra.org.uk)) promotes the understanding of traditional British beer – and recommends good pubs that serve it. Look for endorsement stickers on pub windows.

Another key feature is that real ale must be looked after, meaning a willingness on the part of pub landlords to put in extra effort – usually on food and atmosphere, as well as beer. Beware of places promising real ale where bar staff give the barrels as much care as the condom machine in the toilets. There's nothing worse than a bad pint of real ale.

If beer doesn't tickle your palate, try cider – available in sweet and dry varieties. In western parts of England, notably Herefordshire and the counties of the Southwest Peninsula, you could try 'scrumpy', a very strong dry cider traditionally made from local apples. Many pubs serve it straight from the barrel.

On hot summer days, you could go for shandy – beer (lager or bitter) and lemonade mixed in equal quantities – an astonishing combination for some visitors, but very refreshing and, of course, not very strong. Another hybrid is 'snakebite' – an equal mix of cider and lager, favoured especially by students, as it reputedly gets you drunk quickly – thanks to the lager's bubbles and the cider's strength.

The usual arrays of gin, vodka, rum and so on are served in pubs and bars, but the spirit most visitors associate with Britain – and especially Scotland – is whisky (spelt without an 'e' if it's Scottish). More than 2000 brands are produced, but the two main kinds are single malt, made from malted barley, and blended whisky, made from unmalted grain blended with malts. Single malts are rarer (there are only about 100 brands) and more expensive.

When ordering a dram in Scotland remember to ask for whisky – only the English and other foreigners say 'Scotch' (what else would you be served in Scotland?). And if you're bemused by the wide choice, ask to try a local whisky – although if your budget is low, you might want to check the price first. A measure of blended whisky costs around £1.50 to £2.50, a straightforward single malt around £2 to £3, while a rare classic could be £10 or more.

## WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's a huge choice of places to eat in Britain, and this section outlines just some of your options. For details on opening times, see p953. See p961 for details of the tricky issue of tipping, or p954 for some information on restaurants' attitudes to kids.

For picnics or self-catering, markets can be a great place for food bargains – everything from dented tins of tomatoes for 1p to home-baked cakes and organic goat cheese. Farmers markets are always worth a browse; they're a great way for producers to sell good wholesome food direct to consumers, with both sides avoiding the grip of the supermarkets.

### Cafés & Teashops

The traditional British café is nothing like its Continental namesake. For a start, asking for a brandy with your coffee may cause confusion, as most British cafés don't serve alcohol. Often pronounced 'caffy', or shortened to 'caff', most are basic places serving basic food. Meals like meat pie or omelette with chips cost around £3. Sandwiches, cakes and other snacks are £1 to £2.

Some cafés definitely earn their 'greasy spoon' handle, while others are neat and friendly. Smarter cafés are called teashops, and you might pay a

### EATING INTO THE FINANCES

Most of the Eating sections throughout this book are divided into three price bands: budget (meals under £10 per person), midrange (£10 to £20) and top end (over £20). In London the breakdown is budget – under £15; midrange – £15 to £40; top end – over £40. For more guidance, see Costs, p24.

For tasty details on the whereabouts of farmers markets see [www.farmersmarkets.net](http://www.farmersmarkets.net).

### WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

For years, the regulations concerning smoking in restaurants in Britain have been vague or non-existent. Some places provided nonsmoking areas, while others didn't bother – meaning the smokers at the next table wouldn't hesitate to spark up even if you were halfway through your meal. 'It's my right to smoke,' they might say, and then look hurt if other diners said, 'it's my right not to breath your fumes, go home smelling like an ashtray and risk contracting cancer'. But the days of such disputes are over: a new Health Act will be enforced in summer 2007, banning smoking in 'all enclosed public places apart from licensed premises that do not serve or prepare food' throughout England and Wales, replicating a similar law already in force in Scotland. In short, this means all restaurants in Britain are completely nonsmoking, as are pubs serving food. Pubs that make most of their money from beer, as opposed to food, will probably stop offering dodgy pies and cheese rolls, and allow smoking to continue. Throughout 2006 a fascinating debate raged: does a packet of peanuts count as 'food'? And what about pickled eggs? By the time you read this book, we'll know.

bit extra for extras like twee décor and table service. In country areas, many villages have cafés catering for tourists, walkers, cyclists and other outdoor types, and in summer they're open every day. Like good B&Bs, good cafés are a wonderful institution and always worth a stop during your travels.

As well as the traditional establishments, in most cities and towns you'll also find American-flavoured coffee shops – there seems to be a Starbucks on every corner – and Euro-style café-bars, serving decent lattes and espressos, and offering bagels or ciabattas rather than beans on toast (and you'll probably be able to get that brandy too). Some of these modern places even have outside chairs and tables – rather brave considering the narrow pavements and inclement weather much of Britain enjoys.

### Restaurants

London has scores of excellent eateries that could hold their own in major cities worldwide, while places in Bath, Cardiff, Leeds, Edinburgh and Manchester give London a run for its money (actually, often for rather less money). We've taken great pleasure in seeking out some of the best and best-value restaurants in Britain, and recommending a small selection throughout this book.

Prices vary considerably across the country, with a main course in a straightforward restaurant around £7 to £10, rising to £15 or £20 at good-quality places. Utterly excellent food, service and surroundings can be enjoyed for £30 to £50 per person – although in London you can, if you want, pay double this.

### Pubs & Bars

The difference between pubs and bars is sometimes vague, but generally bars are smarter, larger and louder than pubs, with a younger crowd. Drinks are more expensive too, unless there's a gallon-of-vodka-and-Red-Bull-for-a-fiver promotion – which there often is.

And while we're serving out warnings, here are two more. First, if you see a pub calling itself a 'free house' it's simply a place that doesn't belong to a brewery or pub company, and thus is free to sell any brewer's beer. Unfortunately, it doesn't mean the beer is free of charge. Second, please remember that drinks in British pubs are ordered and paid for at the bar. If the pub serves food, that's usually ordered and paid for at the bar as well. You can always spot the out-of-towners – they're the ones sitting forlornly at a bare table wondering why a waiter hasn't arrived.

Since the major coffee-shop chains arrived in Britain in the 1990s, around 80% of local cafés have closed. *Eggs, Bacon, Chips & Beans* by Russell Davies celebrates this dying breed.

### DRINKING IN HISTORY

As you travel around Britain, in between visits to castles and cathedrals you'll probably visit a few pubs, where you can't fail to notice the splendid selection of pub names, often illustrated with attractive signboards. In days gone by, these signs were vital because most of the ale-swilling populace couldn't read. In our more literate era, pub signs are still a feature of the landscape, and remain as much a part of British history as medieval churches or fine stately homes.

Many pub names have connections to royalty. The most popular is the Red Lion, with more than 500 pubs in Britain bearing this title. It dates from the early 17th century, when King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. Lest the populace forget his origin, he ordered that the lion, his heraldic symbol, be displayed in public places.

The second most popular pub name is the Crown, which has more obvious royal connections, while the third most popular, the Royal Oak, recalls the days when King Charles II escaped Cromwell's republican army by hiding in a tree. (Look hard at most Royal Oak pub signs and you'll see his face peeping out from between the leaves.)

The King's Arms is another popular pub name with clear royal connections, as is the Queen's Head, the Prince of Wales and so on. Less obvious is the White Hart, the heraldic symbol of Richard II, who in 1393 decreed that every pub should display a sign to distinguish it from other buildings. The decree rounded off by saying anyone failing in this duty 'shall forfeit his ale', so many landlords chose the White Hart as a sign of allegiance, and an insurance against stock loss.

Another common pub name is the Rose and Crown. Again, the regal links are obvious, but look carefully at the colour of the rose painted on those signs, especially if you're in the north of England. West of the Pennine Hills it should be the red rose of the House of Lancaster; east of the Pennines it's the white rose depicting the House of York. Woe betide any pub sign that is sporting the wrong colour!

While some pub names crop up in their hundreds, others are far from common, although many still have links to history. Nottingham's most famous pub, Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem, commemorates knights and soldiers departing for crusades in the Holy Land in the 12th century. Pub names such as the George and Dragon may date from the same era – as a story brought back from the East by returning crusaders. Move on several centuries and pub names such as the Spitfire, the Lancaster or the Churchill recall the days of WWII.

For a more local perspective, the Nobody Inn near Exeter in Devon is said to recall a mix-up over a coffin, a pub called the Hit or Miss near Chippenham in Wiltshire recalls a close-run game of village cricket, while the Quiet Woman near Buxton in Derbyshire, with a sign of a headless female, is a reminder of more-chauvinistic times.

When it comes to gratuities, it's not usual to tip bar staff, as it is in America. However, if you're ordering a large round, or the service has been good, you can say to the person behind the bar 'and one for yourself'. They may not actually have a drink, but they'll add the monetary equivalent to the total you pay and keep it as a tip.

Apart from good service, what makes a good pub? It's often surprisingly hard to pin down, but in our opinion, the best pubs follow a remarkably simple formula: they offer a welcoming atmosphere, pleasant surroundings, and in villages where pubs have been the centre of the community for centuries, they often offer a sense of history too (see the boxed text, above). The best pubs also offer a good range of hand-pulled beer, and a good menu of snacks and meals, cooked on the premises, not shipped in by the truck-full and defrosted in the microwave. After months of painstaking research, this is the type of pub that we recommend throughout this book. Of course there are many more pubs in Britain than even we could sample, and nothing beats the fun of doing your own investigation, so, armed with the advice in this book, we urge you to get out there and tipple your tastebuds.

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