

# Britain

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# Introduction

## Who this book is for

This book is for learners of English as a foreign language, at any level of proficiency from intermediate upwards, who need to know more about Britain. It will be invaluable to students on British Studies courses and to those who are studying British culture as part of a general English course. It is for all people who recognize that a knowledge of British life is necessary to improve their understanding and use of the English language as it is spoken in Britain.

How many times have you not fully understood a phrase in a British text and found that the dictionary did not help? How many times have you understood every word that a British person has said but not understood what he or she meant? In any society, writers and speakers leave some things unsaid or unexplained because they assume that their readers and listeners are equipped with the basic knowledge which comes from sharing the same cultural background. You may have reached a high level of proficiency in English, but find British people hard to understand because you lack this background knowledge. This book aims to fill in the gaps so that, when you encounter British writers and speakers, you are closer to being in the same position as an averagely educated British person would be.

Of course, it is impossible for you to put yourself in exactly the same position as natives of Britain. They have been sharing many, distinctly British, experiences and influences ever since they were born. Therefore, this book also looks behind the facts and figures, so that you can begin to understand the British approach to life in general.

## What this book is about

This book contains all the basic information you need about the structure of the British political system and other aspects of public life. But it has more than that. Throughout the book, particular attention is paid to the attitudes of British people. Knowledge of these is very important because they are what 'colour' the language used by British people. For example, to understand the word 'Catholic' as used in Britain, it is not enough to know the legal position of Catholicism and how many Catholics there are; you also have to know something about the general place of religion in British people's minds and how different religious groups in the country feel about each other (see chapter 13). Because attitudes are so important, there

are two chapters concerned entirely with them: one is about how British people feel about themselves (chapter 4) and the other is about their attitudes to certain aspects of life in general (chapter 5).

All the pieces of information in this book are included for one or both of two possible reasons. Some of them, for example the mention of the Union Jack (see page 13), are there because they form part of a British person's general knowledge. But others, for example the description of the pairing system in Parliament (see page 72), are not so well-known. They are there to serve as illustrations of more general points.

This book is not an encyclopaedia. Britain shares many characteristics with other countries. This book concentrates on what makes Britain different.

### Using this book

In each chapter there is a main text plus extra material in the margins and elsewhere, which is presented in various forms (tables, graphs, text, pictures etc). You will sometimes find an invitation in the main text to refer to this extra material, indicated by the symbol ▷.

The information provided in this way may illustrate a point made in the main text, or add some extra detail, or introduce a related issue. The two types of material can be read independently.

As you read, remember that 'facts' are relative things. For example, when you read (on page 10) that St Andrew is the patron saint of Scotland, you are getting a hard-and-fast fact. However, some of the most important aspects of life cannot be described in terms of hard-and-fast facts. For example, this book refers to the importance of privacy in Britain. This is not a fact; it is only an interpretation of the facts. Of course, such comments have not been made lightly – and in most cases other commentators on Britain have made the same ones. But it is always possible that another commentator, looking at the same set of facts, might arrive at a different conclusion.

At the end of each chapter there is a *Questions* section. The questions are intended as 'taking off' points for discussion in class, as topics for written work, or simply to get you thinking about the various aspects of British life described in the chapter, particularly in comparison with life in your own country. You will sometimes also find suggestions for further reading and other activities.

### A note on terminology

In this book you will encounter the words *state*, *country* and *nation*. These are similar in meaning but are not used interchangeably. The word *state* has a political meaning. It is used when referring to a unit of governmental authority. The word *nation* is used when referring to English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish people and when the focus is on the sense of identity which these people feel. The word *country* is used more generally, to refer to either Britain or one of its nations without specific allusion to either government or people.