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# Prehistory

Two thousand years ago there was an Iron Age Celtic culture throughout the British Isles. It seems that the Celts, who had been arriving from Europe from the eighth century BC onwards, intermingled with the peoples who were already there. We know that religious sites that had been built long before the arrival of the Celts continued to be used in the Celtic period.

For people in Britain today, the chief significance of the prehistoric period is its sense of mystery. This sense finds its focus most easily in the astonishing monumental – architecture of this period, the remains of which exist throughout the country. Wiltshire, in south-western England, has two spectacular examples: Silbury Hill, the largest burial mound in Europe, and Stonehenge. Such places have a special importance for anyone interested in the cultural and religious practices of prehistoric Britain. We know very little about these practices, but there are some organizations today who base their beliefs on them.

# London is the largest city in Europe

London dominates Britain. It is home for the headquarters of all government departments. Parliament, the major legal institutions and the monarch. It is the country's business and banking centre and the centre of its transport network. It contains the headquarters of the national television networks and of all the national newspapers. It is about seven times larger than any other city in the country. About a fifth of the total population of the UK lives in the Greater London area.

The original walled city of London was quite small. It did not contain Parliament or the royal court, since this would have interfered with the autonomy of the merchants and traders who lived and worked there. It was in Westminster, another 'city' outside London's walls, that these national institutions met. Today, both 'cities' are just two areas of central London. The square mile is home to the country's main financial organizations, the territory of the stereotypical English 'city gent'. During the daytime, nearly a million people work there, but less than 8000 people actually live there.

Two other well-known areas of London are the West End and the East End. The former is known for its many theatres, cinemas and expensive shops. The latter is known as the poorer residential area of central London. It is the home of the Cockney and in this century large numbers of immigrants have settled there.

There are many other parts of central London which have their own distinctive characters, and central London itself makes up only a very small part of Greater London. In common with many other European cities, the population in the central area has decreased in the second half of the twentieth century. The majority of Londoners' live in its suburbs, millions of them travelling into the centre each day to work. These suburbs cover a vast area of land.

Like many large cities, London is in some ways untypical of the rest of the country in that it is so cosmopolitan. Although all of Britain's cities have some degree of cultural and racial variety, the variety is by far the greatest in London. A survey carried out in the 1980's found that 37 different languages were spoken in the homes of just one district.

In recent years it has been claimed that London is in decline. It is losing its place as one of the world s biggest financial centres and, in comparison with many other western European cities, it looks rather dirty and neglected. Nevertheless, its popularity as a tourist destination is still growing. And it is not only tourists who like visiting London – the readers of Business Traveller magazine often vote it their favourite city in the world in which to do business. This popularity is probably the result of its combination of apparently infinite cultural variety and a long history which has left many visible signs of its richness and drama.

# Cultural life of London

One cannot learn or teach a language well without coming into contact with the cultural content. It is common knowledge that every country has its own national culture and heritage. So has Great Britain. This English speaking country is famous for great painters and artists, architects and composers, brilliant playwrights and poets, actors and writers. Such names as Christopher Wren, William Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, Benjamin Britten, Turner and Gainsborough are well known all over world.

The centre of cultural life in Britain is London, of course. If you stay in London for a few days, you will have no difficulty to find where to spend an evening. You will find opera, comedy, drama, variety to your taste. Some of the best known theatres in England are: the Royal Opera House, Royal Shakespeare theatre, Old Vic and others.

## The characteristics of British arts and letters

If there is one characteristic of British work in the arts that seems to stand out, it is its lack of identification with wider intellectual trends. It is not usually ideologically committed, nor associated with particular political movements. Playwrights and directors, for instance, can be left-wing in their political outlook, but the plays which they produce rarely convey a straightforward political message. The same is largely true of British novelists and poets. Their writing is typically naturalistic and is not connected with particular intellectual movements. They tend to be individualistic, exploring emotions rather than ideas, the personal rather than the political. Whatever the critics say, it is quite common for British playwrights and novelists to claim that they just record 'what they see' and that they do not consciously intend any social or symbolic message. Similarly, British work in the arts also tends to be individualistic within its own field. That is, artists do not usually consider themselves to belong to this or that' movement'. In any field of the arts, even those in which British artists have strong international reputations, it is difficult to identify a 'British school'.

The style of the arts also tends to be conventional. The avant-garde exists, of course, but, with the possible exception of painting and sculpture, it is not through such work that British artists become famous. In the 1980's, Peter Brook was a highly successful theatre director. But when he occasionally directed avant-garde productions, he staged them in Paris!

In these features of the work of British artists, it is perhaps possible to find an explanation for the apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, the low level of public support for the arts and, on the other hand, the high level of enthusiasm on the part of individuals. There appears to be a general assumption in Britain that artistic creation is a personal affair, not a social one, and that therefore the flowering of artistic talent cannot be engineered. Either it happens, or it doesn't. It is not something for which society should feel responsible.

## Theatre and cinema

The theatre has always been very strong in Britain. Its centre is, of course, London, where successful plays can sometimes run without a break for many years. But every large town in the country has its theatres. Even small towns often have 'repertory' theatres, where different plays are performed for short periods by the same group of professional actors.

It seems that the conventional format of the theatrical play gives the undemonstrative British people a safe opportunity to look behind the mask of accepted social behaviour. The country's most successful and respected playwrights are usually those who explore the darker side of the personality and of personal relationships.

British theatre has such a fine acting tradition that Hollywood is forever raiding its talent for people to star in films. British television does the same thing. Moreover, Broadway, when looking for its next blockbuster musical, pays close attention to London productions. In short, British theatre is much admired. As a consequence, it is something that British actors are proud of. Many of the most well-known television actors, though they might make most of their money in this latter medium, continue to see themselves as first and foremost theatre actors.

In contrast, the cinema in Britain is often regarded as not quite part of 'the arts' at all – it is simply entertainment. Partly for this reason, Britain is unique among the large European countries in giving almost no financial help to its film industry. Therefore, although cinema-going is a regular habit for a much larger number of people than is theatre-going, British film directors often have to go to Hollywood because the resources they need are not available in Britain. As a result, comparatively few films of quality are made in the country. This is not because expertise in film making does not exist. It does. American productions often use studios and technical facilities in Britain. Moreover, some of the films which Britain does manage to make become highly respected around the world. But even these films often make a financial loss.

There are many cinemas and cinema clubs in London. Some cinemas show lots of comedies and long epic films. Other cinemas show a large number of continental films or films for young people.

If you want to know which films are on, there are many publications to help you. Any daily newspaper will have a short list of films and shows. One of the newspapers which is on sale in the middle of the day, gives you the best list of films and the time they begin.

Some cinemas show films in the afternoon, early evening and late evening. Others have continuous programmes from about two o'clock in the afternoon.

## Music

Classical music in Britain is a minority interest. Few classical musicians, whether British or foreign, become well known to the general public. When they do, it is usually because of circumstances which have nothing to do with their music. For example, the Italian tenor Pavarotti became famous in the country when an aria sung by him was used by the BBC to introduce its 1990 football World Cup coverage. Despite this low profile, thousands of British people are dedicated musicians and many public libraries have a well-stocked music section. Several British orchestras, soloists, singers, choirs, opera companies and ballet companies, and also certain annual musical events, have international reputations.

In the 1960's, British artists had a great influence on the development of music in the modern, or 'pop' idiom. The Beatles and other British groups were responsible for several innovations which were then adopted by popular musicians in the USA and the rest of the world. These included the writing of words and music by the performers themselves, and more active audience participation. The words of their songs also helped to liberate the pop idiom from its former limitation to the topics of love and teenage affection. Other British artists in groups such as Pink Floyd and Cream played a major part in making the musical structure of pop music similarly more sophisticated.

Since the 1960's, popular music in Britain has been an enormous and profitable industry. The Beatles were awarded the honour of MBE for their services to British exports. Within Britain the total sales of the various kinds of musical recording are more than 200 million every year – and the vast majority of them are of popular music. Many worldwide trends have come out of Britain and British 'pop' artists have been active in attempting to cross the boundaries between popular music, folk music and classical music.

And some more about music. London is a very musical capital. Every evening you can see or hear opera, or classical music, ballet or rock music. The Royal Opera House is famous all over the world for its productions and singers, but seat prices are very high. There are three concert halls near the National Theatre. In the summer, there are sometimes one or two free open-air rock concerts in Hyde Park. An audience of a quarter of a million people is a usual thing. Every summer, from July to September, concerts are held in the Royal Albert Hall, and you can buy tickets at all prices. Serious music-lovers stand in the arena or in the top gallery, but you do not to stand because there are plenty of seats.

The largest provincial centres also have orchestras which give regular concerts. All these orchestras sometimes visit other places to give concerts.

## Literature

Although the British are comparatively uninterested in formal education, and although they watch a lot of television, they are nonetheless enthusiastic readers.

Many people in the literary world say that British literature at the end of the twentieth century has lost its way. The last British author to win the Nobel Prize for literature was William Golding, in 1983. Many others disagree with this opinion. But what is not in doubt is that a lot of the exciting new literature written in English and published in Britain in recent years has been written by people from outside Britain. The Booker Prize is the most important prize in Britain for a work of fiction. Starting with Salman Rushdie in 1981, nine of its next fourteen winners were writers from former British colonies such as Canada, India, Ireland and Nigeria.

Although many of the best 'serious' British writers manage to be popular as well as profound, the vast majority of the books that are read in Britain could not be classified as 'serious' literature. Britain is the home of what might be called 'middlebrow' literature. For example, the distinctly British genre of detective fiction is regarded as entertainment rather than literature – but it is entertainment for intelligent readers. There are many British authors, mostly female, who write novels which are sometimes classified as 'romances' but which are actually deeper and more serious than that term often implies. They are neither popular 'blockbusters' nor the sort of books which are reviewed in the serious literary press. And yet they continue to be read, year after year after year, by hundreds of thousands of people.

In 1993 more than half of the hundred most-borrowed books from Britain's public libraries were romantic novels. Many were of the middlebrow type. The rest were more simplistic stories about romance. The British publisher which sells more books than any other is Mills & Boon, whose books are exclusively of this type.

It is more than 200 years since poetry stopped being the normal mode of literary self-expression. And yet, poetry at the end of the twentieth century is surprisingly, and increasingly, popular in Britain. Books of poetry sell in comparatively large numbers. Their sales are not nearly as large as sales of novels, but they are large enough for a few small publishers to survive entirely on publishing poetry. Many poets are asked to do readings of their work on radio and at arts festivals. Many of these poets are not academics and their writing is accessible to non-specialists. Perhaps the 'pop' idiom and the easy availability of sound recording have made more people comfortable with spoken verse then they were fifty years ago.

## The fine arts

If you are fond of painting you can visit either the National Gallery or the Tate Gallery.

The National Gallery is remarkable because all the great schools of painting represent here: Italian, Dutch, Spanish, French etc. The Gallery was founded in 1824 and many famous pictures of old masters were brought to London for everybody to see and for the painters to get their inspiration from. The truly British art of painting flourished. It contains the greatest collection of pictures in Britain by brilliant British painters such as Hogarth, Constable, Turner, Gainsborough, Reynolds and others.

The Tate Gallery has a rich collection of British painting of all periods too. It was set up by Henry Tate, a sugar manufacturer in 1897. Henry Tate was a very rich man and collected paintings. Today one can also see pictures of foreign painters of the 19th and 20th centuries impressionists and post-impressionists in particular. There are About three hundred oils and nineteen thousand water colours and drawings. There are a lot of paintings by the 16th century English artists there. You can also see many works by the English painter William Turner. Most of his paintings are connected with the sea theme.

In the Tate Gallery one can see works by modern painters, Pablo Picasso among them. There are many interesting sculptures there. The collection is rather big. Henry Moore’s works can be seen in this gallery. He was a famous British sculpture. The paintings of this gallery impress everyone who visits it.

Painting and sculpture are not as widely popular as music is in Britain. There is a general feeling that you have to be a specialist to appreciate them, especially if they are contemporary. Small private art galleries, where people might look at paintings with a view to buying them, are rare. Nevertheless, London is one of the main centres of the international collector's world. The two major auction houses of Sotheby's and Christie's are 'world-famous.

Until the i 98os, the country's major museums and galleries charged nothing for admission. Most of them now do so, although sometimes payment is voluntary. This has caused a lot of complaint that a great tradition of free education has been lost.

## Museums of London

Madame Tissues is a museum of wax figures. Outstanding politicians, sportsmen, actors, military men are represented there. There is the so-called Chamber of horrors in the museum. Criminals and scenes of murders are exhibited there. They produce a frightening impression. The museum attracts hundreds of visitors daily.

At the Science Museum one can see the first locomotive, rocket, the latest models of aeroplanes and what not.

The Museum of British transport will tell you the story of public transport in Britain.

If you have keen on sculpture, architecture and ancient things, you can visit one of the most interesting and largest museums of London and the whole world. It is the British museum. To begin with, it is famous for its library. It has a copy of every book than is printed in the English language. Therefore there are more than eight million books there. The British museum library has a big collection of old and new manuscripts which they keep in glass cases. You can also find the first English books printed by Caxton. Caxton was the first English printer. He printed his first book in 1477. In the reading hall of the British museum library many famous people read and worked. V. Lenin and K. Marx included the latter studied most of the material for his book «The Capital» their.

The British museum is famous not only for its library. It has also a priceless collection of sculptures ceramics, coins engraving and oriental art. It houses unit collection of Italian drawings. The British museum is the most important place of archaeological study in the World with unique prehistoric collections. It takes one a day or so to do the whole museum. One can’t help admiring the British museum collections. They are worth seeing.

## Parks of London

London has many parks and gardens. The best known are Hyde Park, Regent's Park and St. James's Park. They are all within easy reach of the centre of London.

Hyde Park is a royal park since 1536. It was once part of the forest where Henry VIII hunted wild animals. Hyde Park now has 146 hectares of parkland, and people are allowed to walk or sit and lie on the grass. The Serpentine is a lake in the middle of the park. In summer you can swim in the Serpentine or go out in a boat. It is a custom for some people to swim in it on Christmas Day. Hyde Park is famous for its Speaker's Corner, where people go when they want to tell other people about their political opinions.

Regent's Park is in the north-west of London. It is the home of the London Zoo. There are more than six thousand animals and birds in the Zoo. One can reach the Zoo by boat that goes along the Regent's canal. In summer one can visit an open-air theatre and enjoy a play by Shakespeare. There are also children's playgrounds and tennis courts.

St. James's Park is the oldest and the smallest of the royal parks. It is near Buckingham Palace. There is a lake in St. James's Park which is famous for its water-birds. The pelicans were originally given to Charles n by a Russian ambassador. Hundreds of people who work in the offices nearby come to this park to rest and eat their lunch.

# Housing

Almost everybody in Britain dreams of living in a detached house; 'that is, a house which is a separate building. The saying, 'An Englishman's home is his castle' is well-known. It illustrates the desire for privacy and the importance attached to ownership which seem to be at the heart of the British attitude to housing.

A large, detached house not only ensures privacy. It is also a status symbol. At the extreme end of the scale there is the aristocratic 'stately home' set in acres of garden. Of course, such a house is an unrealistic dream for most people. But even a small detached house, surrounded by garden, gives the required suggestion of rural life which is dear to the hearts of many British people. Most people would be happy to live in a cottage, and if this is a thatched cottage, reminiscent of a pre-industrial age, so much the better.

Most people try to avoid living in blocks of flats. Flats, they feel, provide the least amount of privacy. With a few exceptions, mostly in certain locations in central London, flats are the cheapest kind of home. The people who live in them are those who cannot afford to live anywhere else.

The dislike of living in flats is very strong. In the millions of poorer people lived in old, cold, uncomfortable nineteenth century houses, often with only an outside toilet and no bathroom. During the next twenty years many of them were given smart new 'high rise' blocks of flats to live in which, with central heating and bathrooms, were much more comfortable and were surrounded by grassy open spaces. But people hated their new homes. They said they felt cut off from the world all those floors up. They missed the neigh-burliness. They couldn't keep a watchful eye on their children playing down there in those lovely green spaces. The new high-rise blocks quickly deteriorated. The lifts broke down. The lights in the corridors didn't work. Windows got broken and were not repaired. There was graffiti all over the walls.

In theory, there is no objective reason why these high-rise blocks could not have been a success. In other countries millions of people live reasonably happily in flats. But in Britain they were a failure because they do not suit British attitudes. The failure has been generally recognized for several years now. No more high-rises are being built. At the present time, only 4% of the population live in one. Only 20% of the country's households live in flats of any kind.

# Traffic

Public transport services in urban areas, as elsewhere in Europe, suffer from the fact that there is so much private traffic on the roads that they are not as cheap, as frequent or as fast as they otherwise could be. They also stop running inconveniently early at night. Efforts have been made to speed up journey times by reserving certain lanes for buses, but so far there has been no widespread attempt to give priority to public transport vehicles at traffic lights.

An interesting modern development is that trams, which disappeared from the country's towns during the 1950's and 1960's, are now making a comeback. Research has shown that people seem to have more confidence in the reliability of a service which runs on tracks, and are therefore readier to use a tram than they would be to use an ordinary bus.

Britain is one of the few countries in Europe where double-decker buses are a common sight. Although single-deckers have also been in use since the 1960's, London still has more than 3,000 double-deckers in operation. In their original form they were 'hop-on, hop-off' buses. That is, there were no doors, just an opening at the back to the outside. There was a conductor who walked around collecting fares while the bus was moving. However, most buses these days, including double-deckers, have separate doors for getting on and off and no conductor.

The famous London Underground, known as 'the tube', is feeling the effects of its age. It is now one of the dirtiest and least efficient of all such systems in European cities. However, it is still heavily used because it provides excellent connections with the main line train stations and with the suburbs surrounding the city.

Another symbol of London is the distinctive black taxi.

According to the traditional stereotype, the owner-drivers of London taxis, known as cabbies, are friendly Cockneys who never stop talking. While it may not be true that they are all like this, they all have to demonstrate, in a difficult examination, detailed familiarity with London's streets and buildings before they are given their licence. Normally, these traditional taxis cannot be hired by phone. You simply have to find one on the street. But there are also many taxi companies who get most of their business over the phone. Their taxis are known as 'minicabs'. They tend to have a reputation, not always justified, for unreliability as well as for charging unsuspecting tourists outrageous prices. However, taxis and minicabs are expensive and most British people rarely use them, except, perhaps, when going home late at night after public transport has stopped running, especially if they have been drinking alcohol.

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