**The United Kingdom of Great Britain**

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland consists of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. All these parts of the country are represented in Parliament in London. England is noted for its "high-tech" and car industries. Scotland is a land of mountains, lakes and romantic castles. Wales is famous for its high mountains and pretty valleys, factories and coal mines, music and myths. Northern Island, with farming land, is beautiful too.

The UK lies on the British Isles. The English Channel and the Strait of Dover separate Britain from the continent. The climate on the British Isles is temperate. The Gulf Stream makes the climate warmer in winter and cooler in summer. There is much humidity in the air of England. Britain is known as a foggy country. Geographically Great Britain is divided into Lowlands, Midlands, and Highlands.

The history of the UK dates back to the ancient times. From the sixth to the third centuries BC, the British Isles were invaded by Celtic tribes. They came from central Europe, and settled in southern England. The Celts were pagans. Their priests, known as Druids, had all education in their hands. They administered justice, and made a disobedient layman an outlaw.

In AD 43, the Romans invaded southern Britain. It became a Roman colony called Britannia. The Romans set up their capital in London and built such cities as Bath, Chester and York. The Roman invasion was not peaceful. In AD 60, the Iceni, a tribe led by Queen Boadicea, destroyed three cities, including London. In AD 122, Emperor Hadrian built a long wall to defend the border between England and Scotland. In the fourth century the Roman Empire was collapsing and the Roman legions left Britain.

From about AD 350 the Saxons, Jutes and Angles began invading south-east England. The native people could not stop the new enemy. The Celts fled north and west taking their ancient arts and languages with them. Celtic languages have disappeared from most of Europe, but are still spoken in parts of Wales, Ireland and Scotland. The Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity by Saint Augustine of Rome in AD 597. As Christianity spread, churches and monasteries were built in England.

About AD 790, the Vikings started to invade England. The north and east of England were settled by the Danes. The Vikings were excellent traders and navigators. They traded in silk and furs as far as Russia. In 1016, England became part of the Scandinavian empire under king Cnut. In 1066 England was conquered by the Normans. William Duke of Normandy, known as William the Conqueror, won the battle of Hastings and became King of England. William I established a strong, centralised country under military rule. The Normans built castles all over England to control England better. Norman power was absolute, and the language of the new rulers, Norman French, had a lasting effect on English. Since 1066, England has never been invaded.

For many centuries this country was known simply as England. It had a strong army and navy. It waged numerous colonial wars.

Great Britain is a constitutional monarchy. The Queen is the head of State, but her power is limited by Parliament. The branches of government are: the legislative, the executive and the judiciary. The legislature is the supreme authority. It comprises two chambers - the House of Lords and the House of Commons - together with the Queen in her constitutional role. The executive consists of the central Government - that is the Prime Minister, Cabinet, and other ministers. The judiciary determines common law and interprets statutes and is independent of both the legislature and the executive.

The Government derives its authority from the elected House of Commons. The Government is formed by the political party in power. The second largest party becomes Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition with its own leader and 'Shadow Cabinet'. In Great Britain there is no written constitution, only customs, traditions and precedents.

London is the capital of the UK. It was founded by the Romans in the 1st century AD. In the 11-th century it became the capital of England. In 1215 its citizens won the right to elect their Lord Mayor. The town experienced tremendous growth in trade and population during the late 16th and early 17th centuries. After the Great Fire of 1666 which destroyed three-quarters of London, the town began its extensive building. London became the main centre not only of the country but of the growing British Empire. During the 19-th century London expanded into the suburbs. As a result of it new forms of transport were developed, including the underground railway system. During World War II London was heavily bombed. The reconstruction that followed was of mixed quality. Replacement of industrial enterprises and docks made London a centre of international trade, finance and tourism.

Today Greater London consists of 33 separate boroughs, including the City, the West End, and the East End. The City is the financial centre of the UK. The Bank of England, the Royal Exchange, and the Stock Exchange are located here.

The West End is noted for its historical places and parks. These are Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral, Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace, the principal government offices, New Scotland Yard, the Tate Gallery, and the National Gallery. The most celebrated parks are Kensington Gardens with the Victorian Gothic Albert Memorial; Hyde Park, with its famous Speakers' Corner; and Regent's Park, home of the Zoological Gardens and Regent's Canal. The West End is the area of wealth and goods of high quality.

London's East End is historically associated with the Cockney dialect. It was an infamous slum during the 19th century. The port of London until recently was in the East End. The area of docks played an important part in the country's commerce.

London's major cultural institutions also include the British Museum, which houses collections of antiquities, prints, and manuscripts and the national library; the Victoria and Albert Museum of decorative arts; and the music and arts complex located on the South Bank of the Thames.

Westminster is now the political centre of London, but originally it was a sacred place. King Edward the Confessor built a great abbey church here. It was consecrated in 1065. In 1245 Henry III replaced it with the present abbey church in the pointed Gothic style of the period. Since William the Conqueror, every British sovereign has been crowned in the abbey. Many kings and queens are buried here. There are memorials to eminent men and women. But the most popular ones are those to writers, actors and musicians in Poets' Corner. The grave of the "Unknown Warrior", whose remains were brought from Flanders in 1920, is in the centre of the west nave.

Alongside the Abbey Edward the Confessor ordered to construct a palace. The Palace of Westminster was the royal residence and also the country's main court of law. Parliament met here since the 16-th century until the 19-th century. The present Houses of Parliament, the seat of the legislative body of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, were built after the old palace burnt down in 1834. On the corner next to Westminster Bridge stands St. Stephen's Tower, which houses the famous tower clock. A light at the top of the tower at night indicates that parliament is sitting.

Saint Paul's Cathedral was designed in a classical Baroque style by Sir Christopher Wren. It was constructed between 1675 and 1710. Many famous persons are buried in the Cathedral.

Trafalgar Square was named for Lord Nelson's naval victory in the Battle of Trafalgar. In the centre of the square is Nelson's Column that includes his high statue. At the corners of the column are four sculptured lions. Trafalgar Square is the site of the National Gallery. Traditionally political meetings are held here. Each December a large Christmas tree sent from Norway is erected in Trafalgar Square.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has always played an important role in world politics.

- What is the name of the Queen of Great Britain?

- The name of the British Queen is Elizabeth II. She ascended the British throne in 1953.

- What parties are there in Great Britain?

- In Great Britain there are two major political parties - the Conservative party and the Labour party. The Labour party is in power now in Great Britain. Anthony Charles Lynton Blair who is usually called simply Tony Blair is the Prime Minister. He became Prime Minister as a result of the May 1, 1997 elections.

- Can you name the capitals of the parts of Great Britain?

- London is the capital of England. The centre of government of Scotland is Edinburgh. It is large and busy. The principal city of Wales is Cardiff. It has plenty of industry. Belfast is the seat of government of Northern Ireland. It is a large industrial city with many fine buildings and a big port.

- What do you know about Big Ben?

- Big Ben is a tower clock. It is famous for its accuracy and for its 13-ton bell, designed by Edmund Beckett, Baron Grimthorpe. Big Ben is housed in the tower at the eastern end of the Houses of Parliament. The clock was named after Sir Benjamin Hall, commissioner of works at the time of its installation in 1859. Originally applied only to the bell, eventually it came to indicate the clock itself.

- What is the Tower of London notable for?

- Many important events in the history of Great Britain are connected with the Tower of London. It has served as citadel, palace, prison, mint, and menagerie. Now it is a museum. In 1078 William the Conqueror built the White Tower to defend the city. The Tower is famous for its illustrious prisoners. Many great people lost their heads on the executioner's block. The Yeoman Warders known as 'Beefeaters' guard the Tower. They wear traditional Tudor costumes.

- What are the principal rivers in England?

- The Thames and Severn are the principal rivers in England. The Severn is the longest river. The Thames is the most important one. It should be said that a hundred years ago, the Thames was crowded with ships, leaving for Java, New Zealand and New York, but now people travel by air, and Heathrow, London's main airport, is one of the busiest in the world.

- What are the main rivers in other parts of the UK?

- The Clyde, Spey, and Tweed are the main rivers in Scotland. The major rivers in Northern Ireland are the Barm, Erne, and Foyle. The Dee, Tywi, and Teifi are the main rivers in Wales.

- What is the highest mountain in the United Kingdom?

- Ben Nevis is the highest point in the United Kingdom. It is located in the Northern Highlands in Scotland.

- Is the United Kingdom rich in mineral resources?

- The United Kingdom has very few mineral resources. The ancient tin mines of Cornwall and the iron-ore deposits of north-central England, which helped to build the Industrial Revolution, were exhausted or uneconomical to work by the late 20th century. Since the early 1950s the output of coal steadily declined. Recently deposits of oil and natural-gas have been found in the British sector of the North Sea.

- What ethnic groups constitute the population of Great Britain?

- The English, Scots, Irish, and Welsh constitute the population of Great Britain. Since the early 1950s Commonwealth immigrants, particularly from India, the West Indies, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have increased the population of the country.

- What do you know about the educational system in Britain?

- In Great Britain education is compulsory and free, in state-supported schools, between the ages of 5 and 16. General education may lead to technical or commercial study or to higher education. Internationally prominent universities include those of Oxford, which was founded in the 12-th century, and Cambridge, which was founded in the 13-th century. Today the educational system is primarily administered by elected local education officials.