***The UK.***

The ***UK*** is the most interesting country for me. We have learned a lot of things about its history and culture at school. I have read a lot of books about this country besides my school program.

The ***UK*** is situated off the northwest coast of Europe between the Atlantic Ocean on the north and northwest and the North Sea on the east and is separated from the European continent by the English Channel and the Strait of Dover. Britain forms the greater part of the British Isles. The full name of the country is the United kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. GB comprises ***E***, ***S*** and ***W***. The area of the ***UK*** totals 2 hundred 44 thousand square miles.

The scenery in the Britain Isles varies greatly from region to region. There are moors and mountains, lakes and forests. The longest river in the ***UK*** is the river Severn, but the Thames is the deepest and the most important. The highest mountain in the ***UK*** is Ben Nevis in ***S***. It is 1 thousand 3 hundred 44 meters high. The British climate has three main features: it is mild, humid and changeable. The English sometimes say that they have three variants of weather: when it rains in the morning, when it rains in the afternoon, or when it rains all day long.

Over 57 million people live in ***UK***. About 48 million people live in ***E***, 5 million live in ***S***, 3 million live in ***W*** and 1,5 million people live in Northern Ireland. For centuries people from overseas have settled in Britain either to escape political or religion persecution or in search of economic opportunities.

Each country in the British Isles has a national symbol. The ***E***’s symbol is rose, ***S*** has thistle, ***W*** has daffodil and shamrock is the emblem of Ireland.

The state system of the ***UK*** is very interesting. It is a parliamentary monarchy. It means that the head of the state is a queen or a king who rains but doesn’t rule. The legislative power belongs to the parliament. The parliament consists of two houses which are the house of lords and the house of commons. The head of the house of lords is lord-chancellor. One can become a member of the house of lords by heritage or by receiving the title of “sir”, “duke” and so on by a queen or a king. The members of the house of commons are elected. The party which has the majority in the parliament forms the government. The government consists of the prime minister and his cabinet. The executive power belongs to the government. The party which has the minority in the parliament forms the shadow cabinet.

The flag of the ***UK***, known as the Union Jack, is made up of three crosses. The upright red cross is the cross of St. George, the patron saint of ***E***. The white diagonal cross (with the arms going into the corners) is the cross of St. Andrew, the patron saint of ***S***. The red diagonal cross is the cross of St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland. St. David is the patron saint of ***W***.

GB is one of the most important commercial and trading centres in the world. But Britain buys more goods then she sells. Not being a great agricultural country ***E*** has to obtain her food supplies largely from abroad. She also has to import many raw materials (wool, petrol, cotton).

***London.***

London is the capital of England. It is also the largest city in the UK. Today the metropolis of Greater ***L*** covers some 1580 square kilometers and the suburbs of ***L*** continue even beyond this area. Nearly 8 million people live in ***L***. In fact ***L*** doesn’t have just one centre, it has a number of centres, each with a distinct character: the financial and business centre called the City, the government centre in Westminster, the shopping and entertainment centre in the West End, the industrial centre in the East End.

The City is the oldest part of ***L***. Nowadays it is the centre of business, trade and commerce. The City of ***L*** is one of the major banking cintres of the world and you can find the banks of many nations in the famous Threadneedle Street and the surrounding area. Here, too, you will find the Bank of England and the Stock Exchange. A little further along in Leadenhall Street is Lloyds, the most famous insurance company in the world. Today the General Post Office is in Newgate Street, leading to the west. And not far away is Faraday Building, which links the globe by telephone, radio and cable. Fleet Street is famous as the home of the nation’s newspapers but, in fact, only two of them - The Daily Express and The Daily Telegraph - are still in Fleet Street. However, people still say “Fleet Street” to mean “the press”.

Just few people live in the city but millions of people come here to work. So during the day the streets of the City are crowded and the traffic is heavy but at nights the City is empty.

There are some historic buildings in the City. St. Paul’s Cathedral and the Tower of ***L*** are the most famous of them.

St. Paul’s Cathedral has always dominated the centre of ***L***. It is the work of the famous architect Sir Christopher Wren. Work on Wren’s masterpiece began in 1675 after the Norman church, old St. Paul’s was destroyed in the Great Fire in 1666. The building of St. Paul’s Cathedral went on for 35 years. After his death Christopher Wren was buried in the Cathedral. St. Paul’s is the largest protestant church in England. The Whispering gallery is one of the most interesting parts of St. Paul’s. You have to climb 263 steps to reach it. The slightest whisper is audible 100 feet away in this gallery.

The Tower on the north bank of the Themes is one of the mast ancient buildings of ***L***. It was founded by Julius Cesar. In 1078 it was rebuilt by William the Conqueror. It has been used as a royal palace, an observatory, an arsenal, a state prison and as a fortress. Now it is a museum of arms and armor. For many visitors the principal attraction is the Crown Jewels.

It is interesting that in the Tower of ***L*** there are several ravens. For many centuries they have guarded the Tower. Legends has it that should the ravens ever leave, the White tower would crumble and a great disaster would befall England. That is why the birds are carefully guarded. The security of the Tower is ensured by a military garrison and by the Yeoman Warders popularly called “Beafeaters” who still wear their Tudor uniform.

Many people think that Big Ben is the clock or the whole tower next to the Houses of Parliament. In fact, it is the largest of the five bells at the top of the tower. Parliament itself is in Westminster, a part of ***L*** that has long been connected with royalty and government. Opposite the Houses of Parliament stands Westminster Abbey. It was founded by Edward the confessor in 1050. It was a monastery for a long time. One of the greatest treasures of the Abbey is the oaken coronation chair made in 1300. The abbey is also known for its Poet’s corner. Graves and memorials to many English poets and writers are clustered round about.

The street called Whitehall stretches from Parliament Square to Trafalgar square. Downing Street, which is a small side street of Whitehall, is the home of the Prime Minister, who lives at number ten. Just around the corner in Whitehall itself are all the important ministries: the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office and the Treasury.

The most important building in Westminster is Buckingham Palace, which is the official residence of the Queen.

Hyde Park is like many other ***L*** Parks, but there is a corner of it the like of which is not to be found anywhere else the world. Here all kinds of men and women stand up and give their views on subjects that range from politics and religion to the best way of getting on with your mother-in-law. A century ago this little corner of ***L***’s largest park used to be a favourite place for duelling. Then Englishmen gave up settling their differences with sword and pistol and decided to use their tongues instead.

Three ***L***’s most interesting museums - the Victoria and Albert, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum - are also in Westminster.

The East End is the poorest district of ***L***. Its population is working class families. There are a lot of workshops, factories and docks here.

The West End is the name given to the area of central ***L*** north from the Mall to Oxford Street. It includes Trafalgar Square, the main shopping areas of Oxford Street, Regent Street and Bond Street, and the entertainment centres of Socho, Piccadily Circus and others. The West End is associated with glamour and bright lights. Trafalgar square was built early in the last century to commemorate the Battle of Trafalgar. Admiral Lord Nelson’s statue stands on top of a column in the middle of Trafalgar Square. The square makes a good place for people to meet. Behind Nelson’s Column is the National Gallery, an art gallery in which you can find many old masters. Piccadily Circus is the centre of night life in the West End. To the north of Piccadily Circus is Soho, which has been the foreign quarter of ***L*** since the 17th century. Now it has restaurants offering food from a variety of different countries.

 ***English traditions.***

There are only 8 official public holidays a year. They are New Year Holiday, Good Friday, Easter Monday, May Day Holiday, Spring Holiday, Summer Holiday, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. But there are many more unofficial holidays, with whish different traditions and customs are connected.

English people celebrate Christmas on the 25th of December. They send each other Christmas cards. Family members wrap up their gifts and leave them at the bottom of the Christmas tree, to be found on Christmas morning. Traditional English dinner on Christmas is turkey and pudding. On that day in Trafalgar Square there is a Christmas tree which is over fifty feet high It is a present from the people of Oslo. They send it to Londoners every year.

There is one interesting New Year’s tradition. It is an old custom of ***FF***ing. The first visitor who comes into a house on New Year’s morning is called the ***FF***. This visitor is very important. The English people believe that the ***FF*** brings good luck to the family for the following twelve months. The ***FF*** brings some symbolic presents: a piece of coal to wish warmth, a piece of bread to wish food, and a silver coin to wish wealth. The ***FF*** also brings an evergreen branch as a promise of continuing life. No one should go outside, nothing should be taken out of the house before the ***FF*** has come. The ***FF*** must be a man or a boy but not a woman. He must have black hair or fair hair but not red hair.

Pancake day is a gay and tasty holiday with the English. It is usually in March. People do not only eat pancakes, they run with them. In some villages and towns in England pancake races take place every year. These races are run by housewifes. There are special rules about pancake races: housewifes must wear aprons, they must put on hats or scarves on their heads. They must run about 415 yards. It is nearly 410 meters. A bell rings twice before the race. With the first bell the women must make their pancakes. With the second bell they start running with a pancake in a frying-pan. While running the race they must toss the pancake three times and catch it back on the frying-pan. If the pancake falls down the runner loose the race. The other members of the families watch the runners and cheer them up.

In 1605 King James 1 was on the throne. He was a Protestant and some of the Catholics planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament on 5th of November of that year, when the king was going to open the Parliament. Guy Fawkes’s role was to start fire. But he was discovered, arrested and executed. Since that day British traditionally celebrate 5th November by burning a dummy of Guy Fawkes.

In the ***UK*** there are four Saint’s Days: St. David’s Day is celebrated on the 1st of March. St. David is a patron saint of Wales. St. Patrick’s Day is on the 17th of March. He is a patron saint of Ireland. St. George’s Day is on 23 of April. He is a patron saint of England. And St. Andrew’s Day is on the 30th of November. St Andrew is a patron saint of Scotland.

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