

THE UK

Geography

The United Kingdom is an **island country**. The full name of the country is **The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland**. It consists of four parts: **England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland**. The area of the UK is **almost 250,000 square kilometres**. The population of the UK is about **65 million**. About 55 million of them live in England, about 5,000,000 in Scotland, about 3,000,000 in Wales and almost 2,000,000 in Northern Ireland. The capital of the UK is **London**.

The Highlands are the highest mountains in the UK. They are located in Scotland. The highest mountain in the Highlands and in the whole of the UK is **Ben Nevis**. There are also quite a lot of lakes in Scotland. There are also some relatively high mountains in Wales. The highest mountain in Wales is **Snowdon**. The longest river in the UK is the **Severn**. The second longest river in the UK is the **Thames**.

The most common language in the UK is **English**. It is spoken by people in England, Scotland and Wales. Some people in Wales also speak **Welsh**. Some people in Scotland speak **Scots** and some speak **Scottish Gaelic**. Some people in Northern Ireland speak **Irish Gaelic**. There are also quite a lot of immigrants who speak their languages, for example **Polish** or **Punjabi**.

History

The history of the UK is long and complicated. The country itself is quite young. For a very long time, Scotland and England were two separate countries. They became the United Kingdom only in 1707. Here are some important events that happened in the British Isles.

About 2,000 years ago, Britain was inhabited by **the Celts**. They were not the first people to live there but the identity of the people who had lived there before them is not very clear. About 50 years before Christ, Britain was conquered by **Julius Caesar**. The Romans didn't stay there but they returned about one hundred years later. They made Britain a **Roman province** and brought Roman culture with themselves. They built a lot of important cities and roads.

The Romans stayed in Britain for about **400 years**. When the Roman Empire was invaded by the barbarians, Roman soldiers who were living in Britain had to return to the continent and fight against them. They left the local Celtic people behind. In the 5th and 6th centuries, Britain was invaded by the **Angles** and the **Saxons** – Germanic people from continental Europe. They conquered the part of the island which is today called **England**.

The Anglo-Saxons created several kingdoms in England. There were a lot of **Viking attacks** on the island and the Danes conquered about half of it but in the end, the Anglo-Saxons won. In **1066**, the country was invaded by the **Normans** and **William the Conqueror** became the king of England. The Normans were Vikings who had lived for a long time in Normandy and they spoke French. For the next 200 years, **French was the official language in England**.

After about two hundred years, the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans **became one nation**. They spoke English, but it was different from the old English spoken by the Anglo-Saxons. The English kings owned a lot of land in France. The French didn't like it and there were a lot of wars. These wars are called the **Hundred Years' War**. By the time the wars ended, the English kings had lost almost all their French territory.

In the 16th century, a great religious change was taking place in Europe. It was called the **Reformation**. The Christian Church split into two groups: the **Protestants** and the **Catholics**. In England, the Reformation was special. The king **Henry VIII** wanted to **divorce his wife** and marry a different woman. The Pope didn't like it and Henry didn't like the Pope because of that. Henry made himself the head of a **new Protestant Church**, called the **Church of England**. There were **bloody fights between Catholics and Protestants**, but in the end, England became a **Protestant country**.

One of Henry VIII's children was **Elizabeth I**. She became one of the most famous English monarchs of all time. She ruled England from 1558 to 1603. Her time is often called **the golden age of England**. There were many great poets and writers, first of all **William Shakespeare**. England also started to make **colonies** all over the world. Spain, the greatest power in the world at that time, wanted to invade England. However, the **British navy defeated the Spanish Armada** and the invasion was unsuccessful.

In the 18th century, Great Britain became **one of the most powerful countries** in the world. It lost its thirteen colonies in North America, but it still had quite a lot of colonies in other parts of the world. It took part in the **Napoleonic Wars** and defeated Napoleon in **the battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo**. It was also the first country in the world that became **industrialized**.

The most famous queen of the 19th century was certainly **Queen Victoria**. She was the queen of Britain from 1838 to 1901. This period is known as the **Victorian Era**. Britain was **the most powerful country in the world**. The **British Empire** was becoming bigger and bigger. It ruled **India, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand** and **quite a lot of countries in Africa**. A quarter of the population of the Earth lived in the British Empire.

The greatest rival of Britain in Europe was Germany. In 1914, **World War One** broke out. Britain, France, and Russia fought against Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey. Britain and its allies won but **almost 1,000,000 British soldiers died in the war**.

In the 1930s, **the Nazis were becoming more and more powerful and aggressive**. Britain and other countries were too soft on them. They hoped that if they give Hitler what he wants, he will not attack them. This was called **appeasement**. It was very stupid. After they gave him Czechoslovakia, he attacked Poland and **World War Two** started. Great Britain had a new Prime Minister, **Sir Winston Churchill**. They used all of its empire and together with the USA, Russia, and some other countries defeated the Nazis.

After the war, Britain was weak. **The empire started falling apart**. The first country which got independence was India. It immediately split into two countries: Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India. Many people died in the fights between the two groups. Other countries got independence in the 1950s and the 1960s. Most of them became part of the **Commonwealth of Nations** – a group of countries that cooperate with each other. Many people from these countries **moved to Britain**.

In 1973, the UK became part of the European Economic Community which later turned into the **European Union**. In 2016, it decided to leave the European Union, but they haven't managed to do it by the end 2018. The process of leaving the EU is called **Brexit** by journalists.

Economy

The United Kingdom is **one of the largest economies in the world**. Most people work in services, followed by industry. Only about 2 % of the population work in agriculture. The most important trading partners of the UK are the USA and Germany. The British currency is the **pound**. Some famous companies from the UK are for example **Shell, Landrover, or Tesco**.

Symbols

The flag of the United Kingdom is called the **Union Jack**. It is red, white, and blue. The background is blue and then there are three combined crosses (**St George's cross** for England, **Saint Andrew's cross** for Scotland and **St Patrick's cross** for Northern Ireland).

The anthem of the UK is **God Save the Queen**. The Queen herself and the whole **Royal Family** are also an important symbol of the UK.

The individual countries also have their own symbols. Each country has **its own flag**. The flags of England is **white with a red cross** on it. The flag of Scotland is **blue with a white diagonal cross** on it. The flag of Northern Ireland is **white with a red diagonal cross** on it. The flag of Wales is **white and green** and it has a **red dragon** on it.

Each country has its **national flower**. The national flower of England is the **rose**. The national flower of Scotland is the **thistle**. The national flower of Wales is the **daffodil**. The national flower of Northern Ireland is the **shamrock**.

Each country has its **national animal**. The national animal of England is the **lion**. The national animal of Scotland is the **unicorn**. The national animal of Wales is the **red dragon**.

Each country has its own **patron saint**. The patron saint of England is **St George**. The patron saint of Scotland is **St Andrew**. The patron saint of Wales is **St David**. The patron saint of Northern Ireland is **St Patrick**.

Political institutions

The United Kingdom is a **constitutional monarchy**. The head of the United Kingdom is the **King or Queen**. The current Queen (2018) is **Elizabeth the Second**. She has been the Queen of the UK for **more than 60 years**. She is the head of state but she doesn't have any power to make important decisions about the state. She just **represents the country**. The head of the government is the Prime Minister. He or she is elected. He or she lives at **Downing Street 10**.

The **British Parliament** has two parts. **The House of Commons** and the **House of Lords**. There are 650 MPs (Members of Parliament) in the House of Commons. They are elected. There are about 780 people in the House of Lords. They are not elected.

The two largest political parties in the UK are the **Conservative Party** and the **Labour Party**. The Conservative party is more right-wing and the Labour Party is more left-wing.

Food

Each part of the UK has its national food. When people hear about England, they usually think about **fish and chips**. Other typical English dishes are for example Yorkshire pudding or shepherd's pie. The traditional **full English breakfast** usually includes bacon, sausages, eggs, toast, mushrooms, beans, tomatoes, and tea or coffee. English people are famous for drinking a lot of **tea**. They usually drink it with milk. Surprisingly, it tastes really good.

The Scottish national dish is **haggis**. It is a dish made of **sheep heart, sheep liver, sheep lungs, and some other sheep things**. Yummy. The Scottish salmon is famous all over the world. Traditional Scottish breakfast is **porridge**. It is made of oats, milk, and some other things. You can also buy a **fried Mars bar** in Scotland. It has been called the unhealthiest food in the world. The Scottish national drink is **whisky**. There is also a drink called Irn-Bru, which is the Scottish national non-alcoholic drink.

Welsh food is not as famous as English food or Scottish food. A typical Welsh dish is the **rarebit**. It is made of bread and melted cheese. It looks like a toast. The most famous dish from Northern Ireland is probably **Ulster Fry**. It is similar to full English breakfast – there are eggs, sausages, bacon, and other things in it.

Famous places

Lake District

Lake District is **the largest national park in England**. It is located in the north-western part of England. It is famous for its **mountains and lakes**. The largest lake in Lake District is Lake Windermere. The highest mountain in Lake District and in the whole of England is **Scafell Pike**. It is almost 1,000 metres high. In the 19th century, the famous poets **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** and **William Wordsworth** lived in the Lake District. The national park is visited by almost 20 million tourists every year.

Loch Ness

Loch Ness is the most famous lake in the Scottish highlands. It is about twenty miles long, one mile wide, and there is a castle next to it. It is famous all over the world because of a legend about a **monster** living in it. The monster is usually called **Nessie**.

Stonehenge

Stonehenge is one of the most famous places in Britain. It is located in the south of England. It is a **circle of large stones**. It was built by prehistoric people. Nobody really knows why. Maybe it was a calendar. Some of the wilder theories say that it was a landing place for the aliens or a picture of female genitalia.

Cornwall

Cornwall is the south-western corner of Britain. For a very long time, people didn't speak English there. They spoke **Cornish** – a Celtic language similar to Irish and Scottish Gaelic. A popular attraction in Cornwall is the **Eden Project**. There are two very large greenhouses. One of them contains rainforest environment and the other one contains Mediterranean environment. Another popular place to visit in Cornwall is **Tintagel Castle**. It is connected with the legendary **King Arthur**.

Hadrian's Wall

Hadrian's Wall is in the north of England. It was **built by the Roman Empire** in the 2nd century to keep barbarians away. It is more than 100 kilometres long.

The Shetland Islands

The most northerly part of the UK are the Shetland Islands. You can get there by a plane or by a ferry. If you get there, you can see the **Northern Lights** and some unusual animals like **orcas and seals**.

The New Forest

The New Forest is located in southern England. One of its main attractions are **wild ponies**. You can go walking or cycling there.

Giant's Causeway

The Giant's Causeway is located in Northern Ireland. It is made up of about **40,000 massive rock columns**. It is about 60 million years old. According to a legend, it was built by a giant called **Finn McCool**.

Famous people

Isaac Newton

Isaac Newton was one of the most famous scientists of all time. He was a **physicist** and a **mathematician**. He discovered the **law of gravity** and developed the **calculus**.

Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin the most famous **biologist** of all time. He discovered the principle of **evolution by natural selection**. He published his discoveries in a book called ***On the Origin of Species*** in 1859.

Florence Nightingale

Florence Nightingale was the founder of **modern nursing**. She was born into a rich family but she decided to become a nurse and help people who were sick. She **helped a lot of soldiers** in the Crimean War and she started the **first scientifically based nursing school**.

Alexander Fleming

Alexander Fleming was a **Scottish doctor and scientist**. He is famous for discovering **penicillin**. This drug can treat many bacterial diseases, from pneumonia to syphilis.

Charlie Chaplin

Charlie Chaplin was a famous British **comedian and director**. He was one of the most popular actors of the silent movie era. His first sound film and his greatest success was a movie called ***The Great Dictator***.

Winston Churchill

Winston Churchill was a British politician. He was the British Prime Minister during World War II and he led Britain to the **victory over Nazi Germany**.

Alan Turing

Alan Turing was a British **mathematician** and **logician**. He is famous for **deciphering the German Enigma code** and helping Britain and its allies to win the war. He was a **homosexual**. At that time, homosexuality was illegal in Britain. When his homosexuality was discovered, he was chemically castrated. He killed himself a year after that.

Stephen Hawking

Stephen Hawking was a **British physicist** who studied black holes and other things. He became seriously ill and disabled when he was very young but he continued his research.

The overview is largely based on the following sources:

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