

# 04 Identity

How do British people identify themselves? Who do they feel they are? Everybody has an image of themselves, but the things that make up this image can vary. For example, in some parts of the world, it is very important that you are a member of a particular family; in other parts of the world, it might be more important that you come from a particular place; in others, that you belong to a certain social class, or are a member of a certain profession, or work for a certain company; in still others, that you belong to a certain religious group or that you always vote for a certain political party. This chapter explores the loyalties and senses of identity most typically felt by British people.

## Ethnic identity: the four nations

National ('ethnic') loyalties can be strong among the people in Britain whose ancestors were not English (see chapter 1). For many people living in England who call themselves Scottish, Welsh or Irish, this loyalty is little more than a matter of emotional attachment. But for others, it goes a bit further and they may even join one of the sporting and social clubs for 'exiles' from one of these nations. These clubs promote national folk music, organize parties on special national days and foster a consciousness of doing things differently from the English.

For people living in Scotland, there are constant reminders of their distinctiveness. First, several important aspects of public life, such as education and the legal and welfare systems, are organized separately, and differently, from the rest of Britain. Scotland even prints its own banknotes (although these are the same currency as the rest of Britain). Second, the Scottish way of speaking English is very distinctive. A modern form of the dialect known as Scots (see chapter 2) is spoken in everyday life by most of the working classes in the lowlands. It has many features which are different from other forms of English and cannot usually be understood by English or Welsh people. Third, there are many symbols of Scottishness which are well-known throughout Britain (see chapter 1).

However, the feeling of being Scottish is not that simple ([What does it mean to be Scottish?](#)). This is partly because of the historical cultural split between highland and lowland Scotland. A specifically Scottish Gaelic sense of cultural identity is, in modern times, felt only by a few tens of thousands of people in some of the Western Isles of Scotland and the adjoining mainland. These people speak Scottish Gaelic (which they call 'Gallic') as a first language.

## What does it mean to be Scottish?

On 25 January every year, many Scottish people attend 'Burns suppers'. At these parties, they read from the work of the eighteenth-century poet Robert Burns (regarded as Scotland's national poet), wear kilts, sing traditional songs, dance traditional dances (called 'reels'), and eat haggis (made from sheep's heart, lungs, and liver).

Here are two opposing views of this way of celebrating Scottishness.

### The sentimental nationalist

*That national pride that ties knots in your stomach when you see your country's flag somewhere unexpected is particularly strong among the Scots. On Burns night, people all over the world fight their way through haggis and Tam O'Shanter<sup>1</sup>, not really liking either. They do it because they feel allegiance to a small, wet, under-populated, bullied country stuck on the edge of Europe.*

*Many Scottish Scots hate the romantic, sentimental view of their country: the kilts, the pipes, the haggis, Bonnie Prince Charlie. The sight of a man in a skirt, or a Dundee cake<sup>2</sup>, makes them furious. To them, this is a tourist view of Scotland invented by the English. But I adore the fierce romantic, tartan, sentimental Scotland. The dour McStalinists are missing the point – and the fun.*

*In the eighteenth century, the English practically destroyed Highland Scotland. The normalising of relations between the two countries was accomplished by a novelist, Sir Walter Scott, whose stories and legends intrigued and excited the English. Under his direction, the whole country reinvented itself. Everyone who could get hold of a bit of tartan wore a kilt, ancient ceremonies were invented. In a few months, a wasteland of dangerous beggarly savages became a nation of noble, brave, exotic warriors. Scott did the best public relations job in history.*

*The realpolitik<sup>3</sup> Scot doesn't see it like that. He only relates to heavy industry, 1966 trade unionism, and a supposed class system that puts Englishmen at the top of the heap and Scottish workers at the bottom. His heart is in the Gorbals, not the Highlands. But I feel moved by the pipes, the old songs, the poems, the romantic stories, and just the tearful, sentimental nationalism of it all.*

A. A. Gill, *The Sunday Times* 23 January 1994 (adapted)

- <sup>1</sup> the title of a poem by Burns, and also the name for the traditional cap of highland dress
- <sup>2</sup> a rich fruit cake, supposedly originating from the town of Dundee
- <sup>3</sup> an approach to politics based on realities and material needs, not on morals or ideals

### The realist

*When I assure English acquaintances that I would rather sing a chorus of Land Of Hope And Glory than attend a Burns supper, their eyebrows rise. Who could possibly object to such a fun night out?*

*In fact, only a few Scots are prepared to suffer the boredom of these occasions. The people who are really keen on them aren't Scottish at all. They think they are, especially on January 25 or Saint Andrew's Day or at internationals at Murrayfield<sup>1</sup>, when they all make a great business of wearing kilts, dancing reels, reciting their Tam O'Shanter, and trying to say 'loch'<sup>2</sup> properly without coughing up phlegm. But these pseudo-Scots have English accents because they went to posh public schools. They are Scottish only in the sense that their families have, for generations, owned large parts of Scotland – while living in London.*

*This use of Scottish symbols by pseudo-Scots makes it very awkward for the rest of us Scots. It means that we can't be sure which bits of our heritage are pure. Tartan? Dunno<sup>3</sup>. Gay Gordons?<sup>4</sup> Don't care. Whiskey? No way, that's ours. Kilts worn with frilly shirts? Pseudo-Scottish. Lions rampant? Ours, as any Hampden<sup>5</sup> crowd will prove. And Burns suppers? The Farquhar-Seaton-Bethune-Buccleuchs<sup>6</sup> can keep them. And I hope they all choke on their haggis.*

Harry Ritchie, *The Sunday Times* 23 January 1994 (adapted)

- <sup>1</sup> the Scottish national rugby stadium
- <sup>2</sup> 'loch' is Scottish Gaelic for 'lake'
- <sup>3</sup> I don't know
- <sup>4</sup> the name of a particular reel
- <sup>5</sup> the Scottish national football stadium
- <sup>6</sup> see [What's in a name?](#)



The people of Wales do not have as many reminders of their Welshness in everyday life. The organization of public life is similar to that of England and there are not so many well-known symbols of Welshness. In addition, a large minority of the people in Wales probably do not consider themselves to be especially Welsh at all. In the nineteenth century, large numbers of Scottish, Irish and English people went to find work there, and today many English people still make their homes in Wales or have holiday houses there. As a result, a feeling of loyalty to Wales is often similar in nature to the fairly weak loyalties to particular geographical areas found throughout England (see below) – it is regional rather than nationalistic.

However, there is one single highly important symbol of Welsh identity – the Welsh language. Everybody in Wales can speak English, but it is not everybody's first language. For about 20% of the population (that's more than half a million people), the mother tongue is Welsh. For these people, Welsh identity obviously means more than just living in the region known as Wales. Moreover, in comparison to the other small minority languages of Europe, Welsh is in a strong position. Thanks to successive campaigns, the language receives a lot of public support. All children in Wales learn it at school, there are many local newspapers in Welsh and a Welsh television channel, and all public notices and signs are written in both Welsh and English.

The question of identity in Northern Ireland is a much more complex issue and is dealt with at the end of this chapter.

And what about English identity? For the last 200 years, most people who describe themselves as English have made little distinction in their minds between 'English' and 'British'. This confusion can still be found in the press ([The bulldog spirit](#)) and in public life. For example, at international football or rugby matches when the players stand to

### The bulldog spirit

Here is an example of a point of view where England and Britain seem to be the same thing.

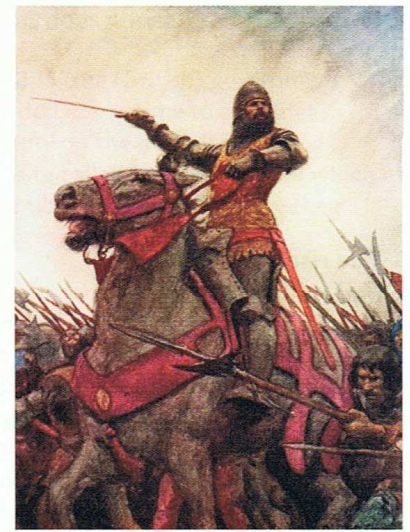
'The bulldog spirit' is a phrase evoking courage, determination and refusal to surrender. It is often brought to life as 'the British bulldog' (although this typically calls to mind an Englishman!). It was this spirit which thrilled a columnist for *The Sunday Times* newspaper when she watched a rugby world cup match in 2007. She writes that although she is not usually interested in spectator sports, she found herself gripped by the semi-final between France and England. In her opinion, England won the match as a result of:

*... dogged, unyielding courage [which] we think of as a great national virtue ... and I realised I was extremely proud of [the players] and proud of England ... it reawakened a sense of national solidarity in me [and] presumably that is what it was doing for every other Englishman and woman.*

(Minette Martin, *The Sunday Times* 21 October 2007)

However, she concludes her article by commenting that this spirit of patriotism 'is not something you can teach in Britishness lessons'. And the title of her article was 'To understand Britishness, watch rugby'!

### A national hero for the Welsh



Compared to the Scottish and the Irish, the Welsh have few national icons or heroes. So the prominence recently accorded to the memory of Owain Glyndwr (Owen Glendower in English) is a sign of the times ([The rise in ethnic and national profiles](#)). In the first years of the fifteenth century, Glyndwr captured all the castles which the English had built to help them rule in Wales, and established an independent Wales with its own parliament. No other Welshman has matched this achievement. It lasted for only five years. Inevitably, Glyndwr was defeated. However, he never actually surrendered and there is no reliable record of his death – two points which have added to his legendary status in Welsh folklore.

In the year 2000, the Welsh national assembly helped to organize countrywide celebrations to mark the six hundredth anniversary of Glyndwr's revolt. Stamps were issued with his likeness, and streets, parks, and public squares were named after him throughout Wales. In 2007, a statue of him was installed in the square of the town of Corwen in his heartland, and the Welsh band Manic Street Preachers wrote and issued a song about him. There is a campaign to make 16 September, the date Glyndwr started his revolt, a national holiday in Wales.

### The rise in ethnic and national profiles

In the twenty-first century, indigenous ethnic and national identities have become more public. The most obvious sign of this is the Scottish parliament and the Welsh assembly (see chapter 12). Here are some others:

- 1) The ten-yearly census, and other official forms, has always had a question on ethnic origin. Now it also has a question on national identity, in which people choose as many as they like from British, English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish and 'Other'.
- 2) Of the many islands off the west coast of Scotland, the best known is Skye. Its name was made famous by a song about the escaping Bonnie Prince Charlie after the battle of Culloden (see chapter 2). But in 2007, it was officially renamed. It is now called by its Gaelic name, Eilean a' Cheo, which means 'the misty isle'.
- 3) The Cornish language is a relative of Welsh. Its last few native speakers died more than a century ago. But local scholars have attempted to revive it and it is estimated that about 3,000 people in Cornwall, who have learnt the language in evening classes, can speak it with some proficiency. There has even been a full-length feature film in Cornish. And in 2002, in response to a campaign, the British government recognised Cornish as an official minority language. This means it now has legal protection under European law. It also means that when visitors to Cornwall arrive there, they see signs announcing that they have entered *Kernow*.

attention to hear the anthems of the two teams, the Scottish, Irish, and Welsh have their own songs, while the English one is just *God Save the Queen* – the same as the *British* national anthem. However, as part of the growing profile of ethnic identity generally (*The rise in ethnic and national profiles*), the 'English' part, distinct from 'British', is becoming clearer. Not so long ago, English supporters at those football and rugby matches used to wave the Union Jack flag; now they wave the cross of St. George. And at the Commonwealth Games (see chapter 12), where England and the other parts of Britain compete separately, England has even found its own anthem (*Land of Hope and Glory*). In 2004, a poll asked teenagers in England and their teachers whether they thought of themselves first and foremost as English, British or European. A clear majority chose 'British', but there was a sharp difference between the teachers and the pupils. Only 12% of the teachers chose 'English', but 25% of the pupils did so. (Very, very few chose 'European'.) Nevertheless, exactly what makes 'English' and 'British' distinct from each other is not at all clear (*What does it mean to be English?*).

### Other ethnic identities

The peoples of the four nations have been in contact for centuries. As a result, there is a limit to their significant differences. With minor variations and exceptions, they look the same, eat the same food, have the same religious heritage (Christianity), learn the same language first (English) and have the same attitudes to the roles of men and women. The same is largely true (with wider variations and exceptions) for those whose family origins lie in continental Europe, for example the hundreds of thousands who have Italian or Polish heritage (as a result of immigration in the decade following the Second World War).

The situation for the several million people in Britain whose family roots lie elsewhere in the world is different. For one thing, most of them look different, which means they cannot *choose* when to advertise their ethnic heritage and when not to. There are hundreds of different ethnicities represented in Britain. From the point of view of numbers and length of time in Britain, two major groupings may be identified.

The longest-established of these groups are black Caribbeans. Most members of this community were born in Britain. The great wave of immigration from the Caribbean began in 1948, when about 500 Jamaicans and Trinidadians, most of whom had fought for Britain in the Second World War, arrived on the steamship *Empire Windrush*. In the next 14 years, many more arrived, where they took mostly low-paid jobs. Many worked on London's buses and trains. (For a decade, London Transport actually recruited directly from the island of Barbados.) After 1962, immigration from the Caribbean slowed down, but remained significant until the mid 1970s.

Of the major minority ethnic groups, the cultural practices of black Caribbeans are nearest to those of the white majority. For example, among them can be found the same proportion of Christian and

non-religious people (though they often retain their own churches, which tend to be evangelical in style – see chapter 13) and their distinctive language variety, known as creole or patwa, stands in the same relation to English as Scots does (see above). Several forms of Caribbean music, such as calypso, reggae and ska, have taken root in Britain and have had an influence beyond the Caribbean community. The most popular, well-attended annual street festival in the whole of Europe, the Notting Hill Carnival, was started by Caribbean immigrants.

Black Caribbeans today often take pride in their cultural roots. Like the children and grandchildren of Irish, Scottish and Welsh immigrants to England before them, this pride seems to be increasing as their cultural practices, their everyday habits and attitudes, gradually become less distinctive.

The other major grouping consists of those whose cultural roots lie in and around the Indian subcontinent. In Britain, they are known collectively as ‘Asians’. The first wave of Asian immigration to Britain took place at about the same time as that from the Caribbean. The second took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when large numbers of people of Asian origin arrived from east African countries. The following decades saw continued Asian immigration, though at a slower rate.

Members of these communities stuck closely together when they first came to Britain and now usually marry among themselves (more so than in the black Caribbean community) so that they have retained, in varying degrees, their languages (chiefly the closely related ones of Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, and Gujarati), their (non-Christian) religions, their music, and their dress and food preferences. In their culture, parents often expect to have more control over their children than most white or black parents expect to have, a fact which can make life difficult for young Asians who have been born and brought up in Britain and subscribe to the values of mainstream British culture.

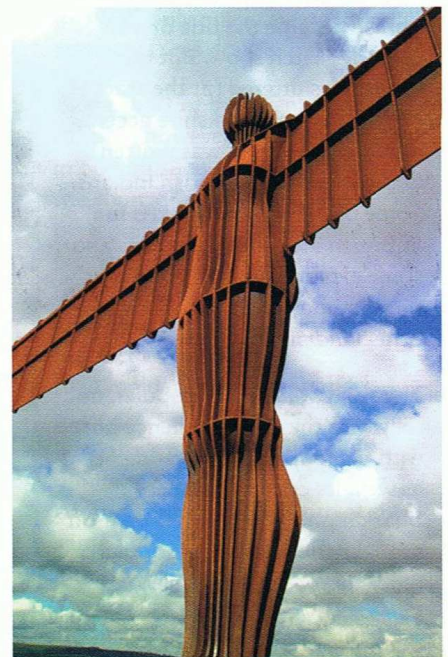
The term ‘Asian’, however, masks some significant cultural differences. For example, while average levels of education among people of Indian origin are above the British average, and many fill professional roles in society, those of people whose family roots lie in Pakistan or Bangladesh are below the national average. For many of the latter, their ethnic identity is less important than their religious one (Islam). In recent decades, some young British Muslims have reacted against their immigrant parents’ attempts to assimilate to British culture. They have made a conscious attempt to adhere more strictly to Islamic practices, some interpretations of which can alienate them from mainstream British values. On the other hand, most people of Indian origin (who are largely Hindus or Sikhs) and many of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin, have been able to forge a distinct hybrid identity as British Asians with which they feel comfortable and which has found a voice in the mainstream media (*Goodness Gracious Me*) and in the musical form of bhangra.

### What does it mean to be English?

In 2005, the (British) government decided it was time to put English identity on the map. It launched a website called Icons Online, in which the public were asked to give their ideas for English symbols.

In order to get things started, a panel of advisers drew up a first list. It included structures such as Stonehenge (see chapter 2) and the Angel of the North (see chapter 22), vehicles such as the Routemaster London bus (see chapter 17) and the *SS Empire Windrush*, small objects such as a cup of tea (see chapter 20) and the FA Cup (see chapter 21), and ‘cultural’ products such as the King James Bible (see chapter 13) and a portrait of Henry VIII (see chapter 2) by Hans Holbein.

But even in this starter list, you can see that finding distinctively English icons is difficult. Stonehenge was not built by the English, but by the ancestors of the modern Welsh; a cup of tea comes from India; King James was Scottish; Henry VIII was arguably as Welsh as he was English – and his portrait painter was, of course, German.



*The Angel of the North, a steel sculpture by English artist Antony Gormley*

## The family

With regard to family life, Britain is overall a fairly typical northern European country. That is, in comparison with most other places in the world, family identity is rather weak and the notion of family has a generally low profile. Significant family events such as weddings, births and funerals are not automatically accompanied by large gatherings of people. It is still common to appoint people to certain roles on such occasions, such as best man at a wedding or godmother and godfather when a child is born. But for most people these appointments are of sentimental significance only. They do not imply lifelong responsibility. In fact, family gatherings of any kind beyond the household unit are rare. For most people, they are confined to the Christmas period.

### Goodness Gracious Me

In the early years of mass migration to Britain from southern Asia and the Caribbean, characters from these places appeared on British TV and film only as objects of interest, and sometimes of fun. By the start of this century, they had taken control of the microphone and were able to define themselves and explore their situation as black British or British Asians. The following is one example.

In the 1960 film *The Millionairess*, the famous (white) comic actor Peter Sellers played an Indian doctor. Obviously out of place in a sophisticated European world, his character kept uttering the expression of surprise 'goodness, gracious me', in a parody of a supposedly typical Indian accent.

Four decades later, this same phrase became the title of a TV comedy sketch show. But this time it was uttered (at the start of each show) in a Yorkshire accent, and the show itself was written and performed by British Indians. Some of the sketches poked fun at British attitudes to Indians and some explored and poked fun at the attitudes and aspirations of British Indians themselves.

The show was hugely popular, not only with the Asian audience but with the majority white audience as well. Its creators, Sanjeev Bhaskar and Meera Syal, went on to make the even more popular mock interview show called *The Kumars at No. 42*. Other acclaimed examples of British Asian creativity are the films *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *My Son the Fanatic* and *Bend it Like Beckham*.

### Is there a generation gap any more?

The 'teenager' was invented in the 1950s. The concept was encouraged by advertisers who spied a new market. Awareness of it was then heightened during the social revolution of the 1960s. By the end of that decade, the phrase 'generation gap' had become a staple of the English language. It alluded to the sharply divergent attitudes of parents and their teenage children – and the conflict between them which was the expected norm. This idea of teenagers as a sort of separate species, endlessly rowing with their parents, is now part of British folklore.

However, a 2002 study in Britain indicated that this stereotype may be outdated. The study found that four out of five British teenagers living at home said they were happy with family life and that they got on well with their parents; a third had not had a single argument with them in the past year (and in any case most arguments were

about mundane things like 'tidying up'); only 10% said they definitely did not get on with their parents. In the long term, therefore, the rebellious teenager may turn out to have been a short-lived phenomenon of a few decades in the twentieth century.

And here is another indication of these improved relations. In the late twentieth century, young people in Britain used to fly the family nest and set up house by themselves at a much earlier age than in most other countries. The average age at which they leave home these days, although still lower than the European average at the time of writing, is rising fast. This trend may also be the result of the high cost of housing, so they just can't afford to live away from the family home. But part of the reason must be that they just like living there.



Of course, the family unit is still the basic living arrangement for most people. But in Britain this definitely means the nuclear family. There is little sense of extended family identity, except among some ethnic minorities. This is reflected in the size and composition of households. It is unusual for adults of different generations within the family to live together. The average number of people living in each household in Britain is lower than the European average; the proportion of people living alone is higher.

Even the stereotypical nuclear family of a married father and mother and their children became much less common in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The proportion of children born outside marriage has risen dramatically and now accounts for more than 40% of births. However, these trends do not necessarily mean that the nuclear family is breaking down. There is much talk in Britain of 'single-parent families' as a social problem, but in fact 85% of children are born to parents who, married or not, are living together, and about half the children in Britain live with the same two parents for the whole of their childhood. It is just that many people have less respect for the formalities of marriage than they used to. Indeed, many adults now routinely refer to their regular sexual partners as their 'partner', rather than 'husband', 'wife', 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend', thus avoiding any indication of whether they are married or not.

## Geographical identity

A sense of identity based on place of birth is, like family identity, not very common or strong in most parts of Britain – and perhaps for the same reason. People are just too mobile and very few live in the same place all their lives.

There *is* quite a lot of local pride, but it arises because people are happy to live in what they consider to be a nice place and often when they are fighting to preserve it. It does not usually mean that the people of a locality feel strongly that they *belong* to that place (*Crap Towns*).

There is somewhat more of a sense of identity with a larger geographical area. In some cases, there is quite a strong sense of identification with a city. One notable example is Liverpool, whose people, known as Liverpudlians or Scousers, are very conscious of the distinct identity of their city, the result of a long history as an international port and consequent cultural and ethnic mix (with a strong Irish component). The same is true of the people of Newcastle, (known as Geordies) partly because of the position of their city in the far north of England, far away from most other centres of population. In addition, Mancunians (from Manchester), Glaswegians (from Glasgow), and Londoners are each often proud to be identified in this way (*What is a Cockney?*). In other cases, identity is associated with a county. These are the most ancient divisions of England. Although they often have little administrative significance these days (see chapter 8), they still claim the allegiance of some

### What's in a name?

In England, the notion of the honour of the family name is almost non-existent (though it exists to some degree in the upper classes, in the other three British nations and among ethnic minorities). In fact, it is very easy to change your family name – and you can choose anything you like. In the 1980s, one person changed his surname to Oddsocks McWeirdo El Tutti Frutti Hello Hippopotamus Bum. There was no rule to stop him doing this. All he needed was £5 and a lawyer to witness the change.

There are also no laws in Britain about what surname a wife or child must have. Because of this freedom, names can be useful pointers to social trends. The case of double-barrelled names is an example. These are surnames with two parts separated by a hyphen: for example, Barclay-Finch. For centuries, they have been a symbol of upper-class status (originating in the desire to preserve an aristocratic name when there was no male heir). Until recently, most people in Britain have avoided giving themselves double-barrelled names – they would have been laughed at for their pretensions. In 1962, only one in every 300 surnames was double-barrelled.

By the start of the twenty-first century, however, one person in 50 had such a name. Why the change? Are lots of people pretending to be upper-class? No, the motivations for the new trend are different. One of them is feminism. Although an increasing number of women now keep their maiden name when they marry, it is still normal to take the husband's name. Independent-minded women are now finding a compromise by doing both at the same time – and then passing this new double-barrelled name onto their children. Another motive is the desire of parents from different cultural backgrounds for their children to have a sense of both of their heritages.

### Crap Towns

British people rarely feel a sense of loyalty to the place where they live. At Christmas 2003, there was an unexpected bestseller in the bookshops. It was called *Crap Towns: the 50 worst places to live in the UK*. It consisted, simply, of 50 essays, each saying horrible, insulting things about a particular town somewhere in Britain.

Now, since this list of shame included many large towns, the book was nasty about the homes of a sizeable chunk of the British population. So you might think that a lot of people in the country would have taken offence. Well, some did. But in fact, the book sold especially well in the towns that featured in it. One bookshop in Oxford (ranked the thirty-first worst) picked a particularly vicious quote from the essay on this town, blew it up and stuck it in the window. And when the editors turned up there to sign copies, rather than being booed and driven out of town with pitchforks, they were cheered and feted. It was the same all over the country. One of the very few negative reactions was from the people of Slough (between London and Oxford), renowned in Britain as an especially unglamorous place. They seemed insulted by their town's ranking as only the forty-first worst. Why, they wanted to know, wasn't it number one?

people. Yorkshire, in the north of England, is a notable example. Another is Cornwall, in the south-western corner of England. Even today, some Cornish people still talk about 'going to England' when they cross the county border – a testament to its ethnic Celtic history.

At the larger regional level, there is one well-known sense of identity. Many people in the north of England are very conscious that they are 'northerners' – and proud of it. Stereotypically, they see themselves as tougher, more honest and warmer-hearted than the soft, hypocritical and unfriendly 'southerners'. This feeling was stronger in the industrial past (see chapter 3), so that northerners saw the rich southerners as living off the sweat of their labour. But a strong sense of difference remains. Take the example of the popular TV chef Jamie Oliver, with his informal, vibrant Cockney personality, and Sainsbury's. In 1999, Jamie Oliver's success persuaded the supermarket chain, Sainsbury's, to hire him for an advertising campaign. This was a great success – Sainsbury's food sales rocketed. But only in the south of England. There, Oliver's 'cheeky-chappy' Cockney-ness went down very well. But up in the north of England, it left the viewers cold. There, many people claimed they couldn't understand him and Sainsbury's sales actually *decreased* for a while.

### Class

Historians say that the class system has survived in Britain because of its flexibility. It has always been possible to buy, marry or work your way up, so that your children will belong to a higher social class than you do. As a result, the class system has never been swept away by a revolution and an awareness of class forms a major part of most people's sense of identity.

People in Britain regard it as difficult to become friends with somebody from a different 'background'. This feeling has little to do with conscious loyalty, and nothing to do with a positive belief in the class system itself – most people say they do not approve of clear class differences. It results from the fact that the different classes have different sets of attitudes and daily habits. Typically, they eat different food at different times of day (and call the meals by different names – see chapter 20), they talk about different topics using different styles and accents of English, they enjoy different pastimes and sports (see chapter 21), they have different values about what things in life are most important, and different ideas about the correct way to behave.

An interesting feature of the class structure in Britain is that it is not just, or even mainly, relative wealth or the appearance of it, which determines someone's class. Of course, wealth is part of it. But it is not possible to guess a person's class just by looking at his or her clothes, car or bank balance. The most obvious sign comes when a person opens his or her mouth, giving the listener clues to the speaker's attitudes and interests.



But even more indicative than *what* the speaker says is the *way* that he or she says it. The English grammar and vocabulary used in public speaking, radio and television news broadcasts, books, and newspapers (and also – unless the lessons are run by Americans – as a model for learners of English) is known as ‘standard British English’. Most working-class people, however, use lots of words and grammatical forms in their everyday speech which are regarded as ‘non-standard’.

Nevertheless, nearly everybody in the country is capable of using standard English (or something very close to it) when the situation demands it. They are taught to do so at school. Therefore, the clearest indication of a person’s class is often his or her accent, which most people do not change to suit the situation. The most prestigious accent in Britain is known by linguists (though not by the general population) as ‘Received Pronunciation’ (RP). It is the combination of standard English spoken with an RP accent that is usually meant when people talk about ‘BBC English’ or ‘the Queen’s English’.

RP is not associated with any particular part of the country. The vast majority of people, however, speak with an accent which is geographically limited. In England and Wales, anyone who speaks with a strong regional accent is automatically assumed to be working class. Conversely, anyone with a ‘pure’ RP accent is assumed to be upper or upper-middle class. (In Scotland and Northern Ireland, the situation is slightly different; in these places, some forms of regional accent are almost as prestigious as RP.)

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the way that people identify themselves with regard to class changed. In Britain, as in many other places, a certain amount of ‘social climbing’ goes on; that is, people try to appear as if they belong to as high a class as possible. These days, however, the opposite is more common. By the conventional criterion of occupation, there are more middle class adults in Britain today than working class ones. And yet surveys consistently show that more people describe themselves as working class! This is one manifestation of a well-known phenomenon known as ‘inverted snobbery’, whereby middle-class people try to adopt working-class values and habits. They do this in the belief that the working classes are in some way ‘better’ (for example, more honest). Nobody wants to be thought of as snobbish. The word ‘posh’ illustrates this opposite tendency. It is used by people from all classes to mean ‘of a class higher than the one I (the speaker) belong to’ and it is normally used with negative connotations. To accuse someone of being posh is to accuse them of being distant and/or pretentious.

In this climate, the unofficial segregation of the classes in Britain has become less rigid than it was. A person with a working-class accent is no longer prohibited from most high-status jobs by that reason alone. Nobody takes elocution lessons any more in order to sound more upper class. It is now acceptable for radio and television presenters to speak with ‘an accent’ (i.e. not to use strict RP). It is also notable that, at the time of writing, only one of the last seven British Prime Ministers went to a school for upper-class children – while almost every previous Prime Minister in history did.

### What is a Cockney?

Traditionally, a true Cockney is anybody born within the sound of Bow bells (the bells of the church of St. Mary-le-Bow in the city of London). In fact, the term is commonly used to denote people who come from a wider area of the innermost eastern suburbs of London and also an adjoining area south of the Thames.

‘Cockney’ is also used to describe a strong London accent and, like any such local accent, is associated with working-class origins.

A notable feature of Cockney speech is rhyming slang, by which, for example, ‘wife’ is referred to as ‘trouble and strife’, and ‘stairs’ as ‘apples and pears’ (usually shortened to ‘apples’). Some rhyming slang has passed into general informal British usage: examples are ‘use your loaf’ meaning ‘think’ (from ‘loaf of bread’ meaning ‘head’) and ‘have a butcher’s’ meaning ‘have a look’ (from ‘butcher’s hook’ meaning ‘look’).

### The three classes



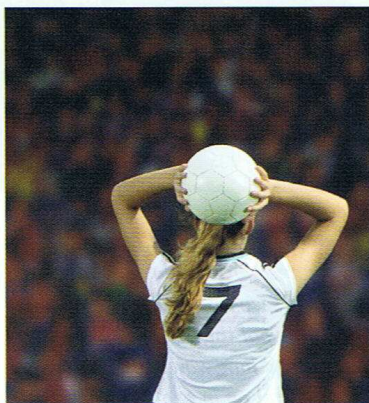
*A stereotype view of the upper, middle and working classes (left to right), as seen in a satirical television programme of the 1970s. This view is now quite a long way from the reality, but still lives on in people’s minds.*

### Women's football

In most areas of public life, in theory if not always in practice, women in Britain have gained parity with men. But there is one area that has been lagging behind: sport. Take a look at the sports pages of any British newspaper and you will find approximately ten per cent of the space devoted to sport played by women; watch TV sports coverage and you will see that women only appear in individual sports such as athletics or tennis.

But women's team sports are now catching up. At the turn of the century, football overtook netball as the most popular sport for British women. In 1993, there were only 500 female football teams in the whole country; by 2007 there were more than 7,000. A few of them are semi-professional and are beginning to get media coverage. (This increased coverage has been assisted by the fact that in recent years the England women's team has been more successful in international competitions than the England men's team.)

This new development is partly the result of women wanting to play sports that give them more exercise than 'gentler' sports formerly thought more suitable. But it is also the result of the rise of male football stars such as David Beckham whose images are far less aggressively masculine than they were in the past. These changed attitudes mean that women football players are no longer vulnerable to the stigma of being 'un-feminine'.



In general, the different classes mix more readily and easily with each other than they used to. There has been a great increase in the number of people from working-class origins who are home owners (see chapter 19) and who do traditionally middle-class jobs (see chapter 15). The lower and middle classes have drawn closer to each other in their attitudes. And the relation between wealth and perceived social class seems to be even looser than it used to be. One survey in 2006 concluded that a large minority (more than three million) of the wealthiest 20% of people in the country regard themselves as working class, while almost as high a proportion (almost two million) of the poorest 20% regard themselves as middle class.

### Men and women

Generally speaking, British people invest about the same amount of their identity in their gender as people in other parts of northern Europe do. On the one hand, society no longer overtly endorses differences in the public and social roles of men and women, and it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of sex. On the other hand, people still (often unconsciously) expect a fairly large number of differences in everyday behaviour and roles.

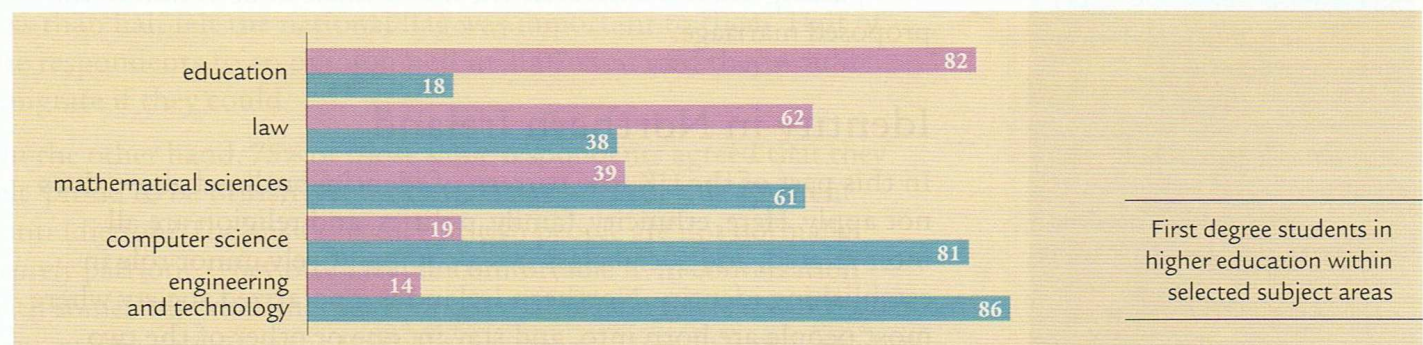
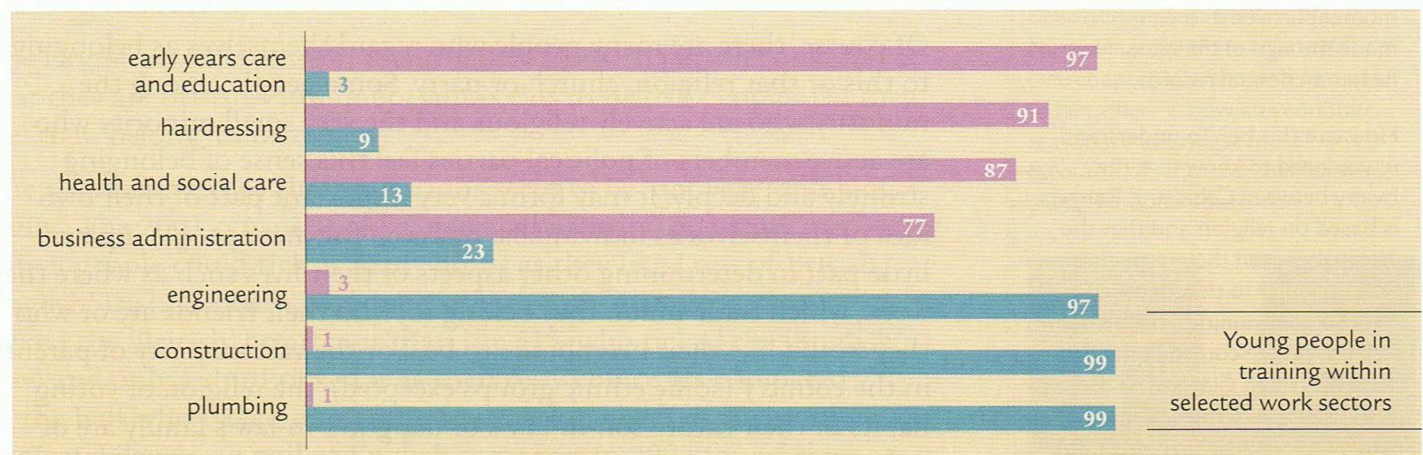
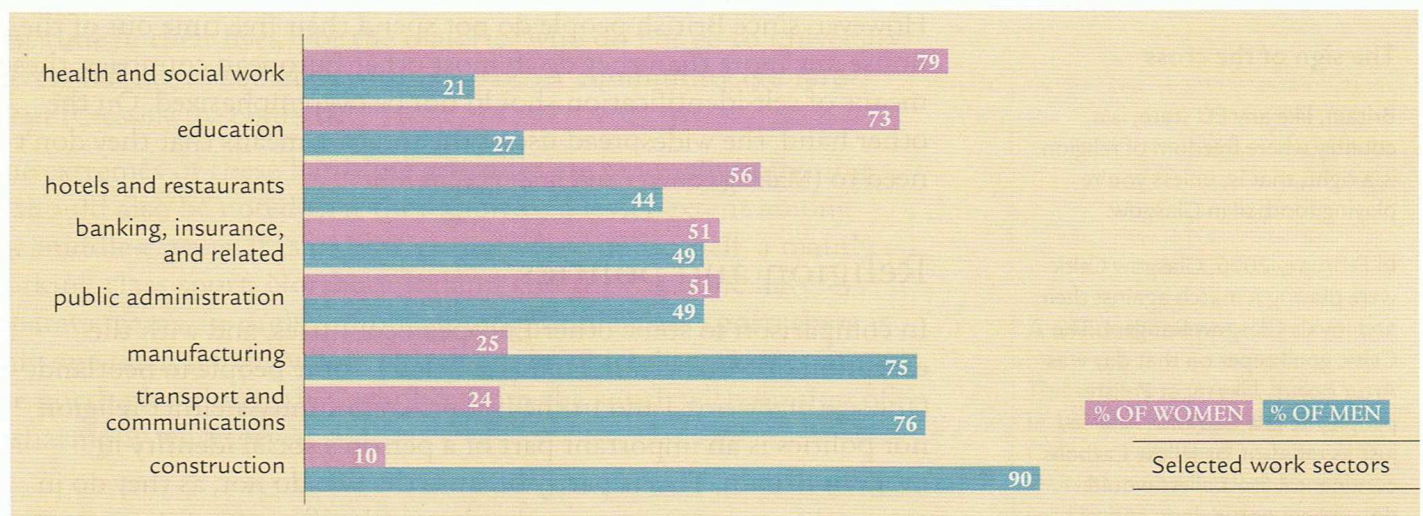
In terms of everyday habits and mannerisms, British society probably expects a sharper difference between the sexes than most other European societies do. For example, it is still far more acceptable for a man to look untidy and scruffy than it is for a woman; and it is still far more acceptable for a woman to display emotions and everyday affection than it is for a man. But the number of these differences is being reduced. For example, it is no longer considered effeminate for men to get professional grooming services such as manicures. Conversely, large numbers of British women now regard getting drunk occasionally just as much a part of everyday life as most British men.

As far as domestic roles are concerned, differentiation between the sexes has decreased sharply in the past few decades. Although they would still normally complement the woman, not the man, on a beautifully decorated or well-kept house, most people assume that a family's financial situation is not just the responsibility of the man. And although everyday care of the children is still generally seen as mainly the woman's responsibility (this is probably why nearly half of the jobs done by women are part-time – for men, the figure is 10%), it is generally expected that men should play their full part in chores such as changing babies' nappies, putting the children to bed, dressing them, feeding them and helping them with homework. Indeed, in a 2003 study of attitudes towards these matters across Europe, British men scored an 'egalitarianism rating' of 94 – second only to Danish men, and higher than the men of countries traditionally regarded as strong on gender equality such as the Netherlands and Norway.

As for public roles, a large number of occupations have ceased to be associated with either men or women. But there are some notable

exceptions, even among young people (*Men, women, and work*). Look at the table below. With regard to positions of power and influence, there are contradictions. Britain was one of the first European countries to have a woman Prime Minister and a woman chairperson of debate in its parliament. However, at the time of writing only one in five MPs is a woman, only one in nine university heads is a woman, and of the executive directors in Britain's top 100 companies, fewer than five per cent are women. In 2007, there were slightly more female medical students than male ones; and yet only 12% of the professors at Britain's medical schools were women.

Men, women, and work



## Social and everyday contacts

British people give a relatively high importance to the everyday personal contacts that they make. Some writers on Britain have talked about the British desire to 'belong', and it is certainly true that the pub, or the working man's club, or the numerous other clubs devoted to various sports and pastimes play an important part in many people's lives. In these places, people forge contacts with other people who share some of the same interests and attitudes. For many people, these contacts are an important part of their social identity. Another factor is work, which is how many people make their social contacts. Partly as a result of this, some people's profession or skill is also an important aspect of their sense of identity.

However, since British people do not spend their free time out of the house any more than they do in most other European countries, these means of self-identification should not be overemphasized. On the other hand, the widespread use of the internet means that they don't need to ([Making contact and finding your roots](#)).

### The sign of the cross

Britain, like any EU state, is a country where freedom of religion is a right, that is, unless you're playing football in Glasgow.

In February 2006, Glasgow Celtic were playing a match against their arch rivals Glasgow Rangers. The Celtic goalkeeper on that day was Artur Boruc. Like most Polish people, he is a Catholic. And so, just as many of his fellow Catholic continental footballers would do, when a particularly critical moment arrived in the match, he made the sign of the cross. Now he has a criminal record.

How can this be? To understand it, you need to know that the rivalry between Celtic and Rangers is based on religion and that the enmity between their respective fans is similar to that between the two communities in Northern Ireland. (One Scottish comedian once described Glasgow as 'Belfast Lite'.) At local derbies, Celtic fans sing rousing choruses of IRA anthems, while Rangers fans sing of being up to their ears in Fenian (Irish Republican) blood.

To counter this outpouring of sectarian hatred – which frequently leads to violence at Celtic-Rangers matches, Scotland had introduced a law criminalizing behaviour which could aggravate religious prejudice. And in this context, even crossing yourself was deemed such behaviour.

## Religion and politics

In comparison to some other European countries, and with the exception of Northern Ireland (see below), some people in Scotland ([The sign of the cross](#)) and in the Islamic community, neither religion nor politics is an important part of a person's social identity in modern Britain. This is partly because the two do not, as they do in some other countries, go together in any significant way.

Of course, there are many people who regard themselves as belonging to this or that religion, church or party. Some people among the minority who are actively religious and the very small minority who are active members of political parties feel this sense of belonging strongly and deeply. It may form a very important part of their own idea of themselves as individuals. But even for these people it plays little part in determining other aspects of their lives such as where they work, which trade union they belong to, who their friends are or who they would like their neighbours to be. For the vast majority of parents in the country (some ethnic groups excepted), the religion or voting habits of their future son-in-law's or daughter-in-law's family are of only passing interest and rarely the major cause of objection to the proposed marriage.

## Identity in Northern Ireland

In this part of the UK, the pattern of identity outlined above does not apply. Here, ethnicity, family, politics, and religion are all inter-related, and social class has a comparatively minor role in establishing identity. Northern Ireland is a polarized society where most people are born into, and stay in, one or other of the two communities for the whole of their lives.

On one side of the divide are people whose ancestors came from lowland Scotland or England. They are self-consciously Protestant and want Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK. On the other side are people whose ancestors were native Irish. They are self-consciously Catholic and would like Northern Ireland to become part of the Irish Republic.

Although the two communities live side by side, their lives are segregated. They live in different housing estates, listen to different radio and television programmes, register with different doctors, take prescriptions to different chemists, march to commemorate different anniversaries and read different newspapers. Their children go to different schools, so that those who go on to university often find themselves mixing with people from the 'other' community for the first time in their lives. For the majority who do not go to university, merely talking to somebody from the other community is a rare event ([Crossing the borders](#)).

The extremes of these hard-line attitudes are gradually softening. It should also be noted that they apply to a lesser extent among the middle-classes. It is indicative that while in football, a mainly working-class sport, Northern Ireland and the Republic have separate teams, in rugby union, a more middle-class sport, there is only one team for the whole of Ireland, in which Protestants from the north play alongside Catholics from the south with no sign of disharmony whatsoever.

## Being British

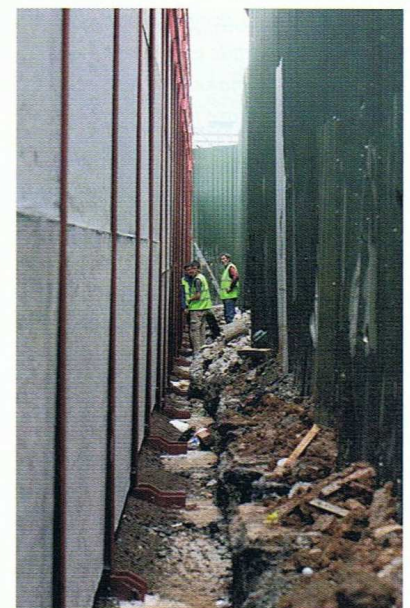
The largest possible sense of identity that a British person could feel is that they are British. How important is this to British people? Do they feel they 'belong' to Britain?

The short answers to these questions seem to be 'not very' and 'not really'. The 2001 census asked a 'national identity' question, in which people could tick as many boxes as they liked out of British, English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh or 'other'. Only 46% altogether ticked the 'British' box (fewer than the 51% who ticked the 'English' box) and only a third ticked it as their only choice (as compared to the half who ticked one of the four nation boxes as their only choice). Likewise, a poll of English teenagers in 2002 found that less than half felt the national flag was important to them. Half of the respondents to an opinion poll in 2007 even said they would emigrate if they could.

On the other hand, 75% of those same respondents agreed that they felt 'proud to be British'. How can we make sense of this apparent contradiction? The answer is that British people are not normally *actively* patriotic. They often feel uncomfortable if, in conversation with somebody from another country, that person refers to 'you' where 'you' means Britain or the British government. They do not like to feel that they are personally representing their country.

### A divided community

This is the 'peace wall', built in 1984, which separates the Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill Road – a vivid sign of segregation in Belfast. Although the troubles in Northern Ireland are at an end (see chapter 12), the wall remains. In fact, there is now an economic reason for keeping it there – it is a favourite of visitors to Belfast who want 'Troubles Tourism'.



### Crossing the borders

*Schools Across Borders* is an educational project based in Ireland which encourages secondary school pupils from divided or different communities to communicate with each other. In May 2007, it organized a Cross-Border Weekend, in which a small number of students from both communities in Northern Ireland and also some from Dublin participated. Here is an edited extract from a report of the weekend's activities:

*Walking together as a group through the Springfield and Falls areas, our Belfast Protestant friends felt uneasy, but safe with the group! Then it was the turn of the Belfast Catholic and Dublin friends to sense similar levels of quaking in their boots, as we were brought through the Shankill by our Protestant friends! This was the first time any of the Belfast students had actually walked through these streets 'on the other side'. Everyone admitted that there was no real risk of intimidation, but it still felt intimidating! The exercise focused minds on what is needed to make progress: more walking, more friends, more reasons to visit these areas!*

*We will continue to carry the message that these students have started: to cross borders and to celebrate the role that all young people have in opening up the city to each other ... We encourage all young people in Belfast to do the same: keep crossing the borders. Get out there, make it go around!*

Source: [www.schoolsacrossborders.org/cross\\_border.html](http://www.schoolsacrossborders.org/cross_border.html)

Notwithstanding this low-key approach to being British, the turn of the millennium saw the subject of 'Britishness' become a topic of great public concern in the country. There are several possible reasons for this explosion of interest. Perhaps it reflects the need to find common values in a multicultural society (see chapter 5). Perhaps it is the realization that the UK by itself now has far less influence on the rest of the world than it used to have, or perhaps it is the fear that the UK might actually break up (for both of these, see chapter 12).

However, it is not clear how much this concern for Britishness is felt by individual British people. Some feel that it is merely something encouraged in official circles and that the concern itself is actually very un-British! When in 2006, the government suggested there should be a British national day, many people scoffed at the idea; the fact that Britain does *not* have such a day is, they said, a perfect sign of Britishness – only younger, less stable nations have to bother with all that flag-waving rubbish! (There is actually a lot of support for the idea, but this is just because people would like another public holiday, which is something that Britain has very few of – see chapter 23).

The only time that public opinion really becomes patriotic is when it is felt that British identity – whatever that may be – is threatened from the outside, for instance through the activities of the European Union (see chapter 12). This is perhaps why the British cling so obstinately to certain distinctive ways of doing things (see chapter 5).

### Personal identity: a sense of humour

Finally, how do British people think of themselves as individuals? What sort of a person does he or she like to think of himself or herself as? It is difficult to generalize. But if there is one personal quality which most British people cling to above all others, it is a sense of humour. Of course, most people in Britain, like most people in the world, would not like to be thought of as dishonest, cowardly, unkind, ugly, stupid, or just generally insignificant. But perhaps the worst shame of all for them would be to be regarded as a person with no sense of humour.

In Britain, you do not have to tell the best jokes to be humorous. Nor is there a proper time and place for humour. A mildly funny remark is appreciated in all but the most formal situations. It does not have to be especially clever. It is just an everyday way of talking. People expect it. Raising a smile or getting a laugh is a good enough reason for saying anything, even if it is something you don't mean. (It is for this reason that some people see the British as hypocritical.) And if the 'joke' is at your own expense, so much the better. The ability to laugh at yourself and to 'take a joke' is highly prized. The imperative to present yourself as having this quality is amazingly strong. A doctor was once asked how patients reacted to being told they had cancer. He said that, after the initial shock, their most common reaction was to make a joke out of it!

You may notice in the above comments two other personal qualities which are generally highly prized in Britain: bravery in the face of misfortune (sometimes known as the ‘stiff upper lip’) and modesty. The quality which connects these two is the sense of humour.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 This chapter considers several factors that go towards creating a person’s sense of identity. Some of these are more important in Britain and some not so important. Are the same factors the important ones in your country?
- 2 In the early years of the twentieth century, the playwright and social commentator George Bernard Shaw remarked that an Englishman only had to open his mouth to make another Englishman despise him. What was he talking about? Would he say the same thing today?
- 3 Do the social classes in your country define themselves in the same way as they do in Britain? Do language, accent, clothes, money, habits, and attitudes play the same roles in your country?
- 4 If you had been born and brought up in Britain, what ethnic identity would you prefer to have?

## SUGGESTIONS

If you are interested in the different types of English spoken in Britain, *English Accents and Dialects* by Hughes and Trudgill (Edward Arnold) is an academic but accessible book with long example texts, which are available on recordings.

*Pies and Prejudice: In Search of the North* is an amusing book which says a lot about how (different kinds of) northern English people feel about themselves - and about the South.

Many comedy TV programmes depend for their humour on senses of identity and/or habits and values indicative of a certain identity. For British Asians, watch on TV or find DVDs of *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No. 42*. For social class in England, *Only Fools and Horses* portrays Cockney values and *Keeping Up Appearances* makes fun of the pretensions of some middle-class people. For professional identities, there is *The Office* and *The IT Crowd*.

A very readable study of how English people identify themselves by the way they behave is *Watching the English* by the anthropologist Kate Fox (Hodder & Stoughton). Also very readable is *Native Land* by another anthropologist, Nigel Barley (Penguin).

### Making contact and finding your roots

Britain is a geographically mobile society. People’s lives take them in such different directions that they meet and talk to thousands of people in their lives. Some of them become friends, but often only temporarily, as they then move on again. And, because extended family gatherings are rare, even family members can lose touch.

Doesn’t this make British people lonely? Perhaps it does, if we are to believe evidence from the internet. In the year 2000, in the spare room of their north London house, Julie and Steve Pankhurst set up a website called *Friends Reunited*. They only did it because Julie was pregnant and wanted to trace any old school friends who had already had babies. But they had tapped into something big. The website took off like a rocket. Five years later, it had 12 million registered users and the Pankhursts set up *Genes Reunited*, which rapidly became the country’s largest ancestry site.

Websites of this kind have become enormously popular in Britain. In particular, tracing family roots is a booming activity. From being an arcane pastime for a few amateur historians, genealogy has entered the mainstream. It is so popular that when, in 2001, the complete data for the 1901 British census went online, the huge number of visitors made the site crash!