

05 Attitudes

The British, like the people of every country, tend to be attributed with certain characteristics which are supposedly typical. However, it is best to be cautious about accepting such characterizations too easily. In the case of Britain, there are three reasons for this. The first three sections of this chapter deal with them in turn, and at the same time explore some images and characteristics of the British.

Stereotypes and change

Societies change over time while their reputations lag behind. Many things which are often regarded as typically British derive from books, songs or plays which were written a long time ago and which are no longer representative of modern life.

One example of this is the popular belief that Britain is a 'land of tradition'. This is what most tourist brochures claim. It is a reputation based on what can be seen in public life, on centuries of political continuity and on its attendant ceremonies. And at this level – the level of public life – it is true. The annual ceremony of the state opening of Parliament, for instance, carefully follows customs which are centuries old (see chapter 9). So does the military ceremony of 'trooping the colour'. Likewise, the changing of the guard outside Buckingham Palace never changes.

However, in their private everyday lives, the British are probably less inclined to follow tradition than the people of most other countries. There are very few age-old customs that are followed by the majority of families on certain special occasions. The country has fewer local parades or processions with genuine folk roots than most other countries. The English language has fewer sayings or proverbs in common everyday use than many other languages. The British are too individualistic for these things.

There are many examples of supposedly typical British habits which are simply not typical any more. For example, the stereotyped image of the London 'city gent' includes the wearing of a bowler hat. In fact, this type of hat has not been commonly worn for a long time.

Food and drink provide other examples. The traditional 'British' (or 'English') breakfast is a large 'fry-up' (see chapter 20) plus cereal with milk and also toast, butter and marmalade, all washed down with tea. In fact, very few people in Britain actually have this sort of breakfast. Most just have the cereal, tea and toast, or even less. What the vast majority of British people have in the mornings is therefore much closer to what

Land of tradition

In the early 1990s, London's famous red buses were privatized – that is, they stopped being state-owned and became privately owned. The different bus companies wanted to paint their buses in their own company colours. But many people, fond of the familiar red bus, were against this change and the government ruled that all buses had to stay red, both because this is what the people of London wanted and also because it believed this would be better for the tourist trade. For the same reason, when the iconic version of the London red bus, the famous Routemaster (see chapter 17), was taken out of regular service, it became a bus for tourist trips.



they call a ‘continental’ (i.e. mainland European) breakfast than it is to a British one. The image of the British as a nation of tea-drinkers is also somewhat outdated (see chapter 20). And the tradition of afternoon tea with biscuits, scones, sandwiches, or cake has always been a minority activity, confined to retired people and the leisured upper-middle class (although preserved in tea shops in tourist resorts).

Even when a British habit conforms to the stereotype, the wrong conclusions can sometimes be drawn from it. The British love of queuing is an example. Yes, British people do form queues when they wait for something, but this does not mean that they enjoy it. In 2007, supermarkets reported that no less than 65% of shoppers in Britain had personally witnessed, or even been victims of, ‘queue rage’; that is people being abusive or violent about a delay or a perceived unfairness in a queue (because, for example, the person in front is not ready to pay when the cashier has finished, or has left goods on the conveyor belt while looking for more items). Research suggests that eight minutes is the ‘tipping point’. It would therefore seem wrong to conclude that their habit of queuing shows that the British are a patient people.

English versus British

Because English culture dominates the cultures of the other three nations (see chapter 1), everyday habits, attitudes, and values among the peoples of the four nations are very similar. However, they are not identical, so that sometimes it is hard to know whether one is describing the British as a whole or just the English. The reason why people queue so much is one example (*Why the British (or English?) queue*). Another example is notable because it is so unusual – anti-intellectualism.

Among many people in Britain, there exists a suspicion of education and ‘high culture’. This is manifested in a number of ways. For example, teachers and academic staff, although respected, do not have as high a status in society as they do in most other countries. Nobody normally proclaims their academic qualifications or title to the world at large. No professor would expect, or want, to be addressed as ‘professor’ on any but the most formal occasion.

Traditionally, large sections of both the upper and working class in Britain were not interested in their children getting to university (see chapter 14). This strange lack of enthusiasm for education has certainly decreased. Nevertheless, it is still unusual for parents to arrange extra private tuition for their children, even if they can easily afford it. And among the upper classes, too much intelligence and academic prowess in a person is still viewed with suspicion because it suggests this person might not be a ‘team player’; among the working class, such attributes in a man are still sometimes regarded as effeminate (which is probably why girls generally do better than boys at school in England).

Why the British (or English?) queue

The Hungarian humourist George Mikes once wrote that ‘An Englishman, even if he is alone, forms an orderly queue of one’. This implies a love of queuing for its own sake. But the British journalist A. A. Gill believes there is a more practical reason: ‘The English queue because they have to. If they didn’t, they’d kill each other’. In a book published in 2005, Gill argues that the English care about (un)fairness more than anything else and that therefore they are always angry about something. It is this anger, he says, which motivated so many great English engineers, inventors and social reformers in the past few centuries. And rather than let this anger turn to useless violence, he says, the English have developed ‘heroic self-control’. Queuing is just one small example.

Gill’s book brings up the English/British confusion again. Like many people who live in England, Gill considers himself to be not English but Scottish – and it is specifically the English that he is writing about. But in fact, many of those great engineers, inventors and reformers he mentions were Scottish! Even the title of Gill’s book shows the confusion. It’s supposed to be about the English but it’s called *The Angry Island*. As you know, England is not an island.



English anti-intellectualism: vocabulary

The slang word 'swot' was first used in English public schools (see chapter 14). It denoted someone who worked hard and did well academically. It was a term of abuse. Swots were not popular.

School life can still be tough for an academically minded pupil in England. If a student shows a desire to learn, they may be reviled as a 'teacher's pet'; if he or she is successful in the attempt, they may be reminded that 'nobody likes a smartarse'.

And it doesn't get much better in adult life. The word 'clever' often has negative connotations. It suggests a person who cannot quite be trusted (as in the expression, 'too clever by half'). And to refer to a person as somebody who 'gets all their ideas from books' is to speak of them negatively. It raises the suspicion that they are lacking in 'common sense', which is something the English value very highly.

Even the word 'intellectual' itself is subject to negative connotations. Here is a short extract from a diary written by a renowned (English) author and social observer (and therefore intellectual).

Colin Haycraft and I are chatting on the pavement when a man comes past wheeling a basket of shopping.

'Out of the way, you so-called intellectuals', he snarls, 'blocking the way.'

It's curious that it's the intellectual that annoys, though it must never be admitted to be the genuine article but always 'pseudo' or 'so-called'. It is, of course, only in England that 'intellectual' is an insult anyway.

Alan Bennett, *Writing Home*

Such attitudes are held consciously only by a small proportion of the population. And it isn't that people in Britain don't like to know things. They are, for example, passionate about quizzes, which are among the most popular of all TV programmes. Almost every pub and social club in the country holds regular 'quiz nights'. Factual knowledge is something to be proud of. But abstract thinking and scholarship is not. Many everyday words and expressions in the English language ([English anti-intellectualism: vocabulary](#)) testify to this anti-intellectual tendency.

Anti-intellectual attitudes can be found in all four nations of the Isles. However, they are probably better seen as a specifically English characteristic, and not a British one. The Scottish have always placed a high value on education for all classes. The Irish of all classes place a high value on being quick, ready, and able with words. The Welsh have long exported teachers to other parts of Britain and beyond.

A multicultural society

The third reason for caution about generalizations relates to the large-scale immigration to Britain from places beyond the four nations since the Second World War (see chapter 4). In its cities at least, Britain is a multicultural society. There are areas of London, for example, in which a distinctively Indian way of life predominates, with Indian shops, Indian clothes, and Indian languages.

These 'new British' people have brought widely differing sets of attitudes with them which sometimes diverge greatly from more traditional British ones. In some cases, clashes of values become apparent ([Attitudes to multiculturalism](#)). However, there is a limit to these divergences in comparison with those in the USA. There, the numbers in ethnic communities are larger and the physical spaces between them and other communities greater, so that it is possible for people to live their whole lives in such communities without ever really learning English. This hardly ever happens in Britain.

It is therefore still possible to talk about British characteristics in general (as the rest of this chapter does). In fact, the new British have made their own contribution to British life and attitudes. They have, for example, probably helped to make people more informal in their behaviour (see below) and they have changed the nature of the 'corner shop' (see chapters 4 and 15).

Conservatism

The British have rather few living folk traditions and are too individualistic to have many of the same everyday habits as each other. However, this does not mean that they like change. They don't. They may not behave in traditional ways, but they like symbols of tradition. For example, there are some very untraditional attitudes and habits with regard to the family in modern Britain (see chapter 4).

Nevertheless, politicians often cite their enthusiasm for 'traditional family values' (both parents married and living together, parents as the main source of authority for children, etc.) as a way of getting support.

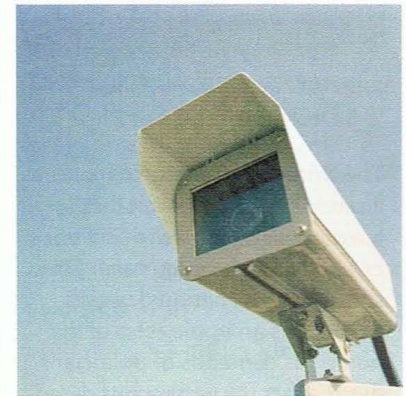
In general, the British value continuity over modernity for its own sake. They do not consider it especially smart to live in a new house (in fact, there is prestige in living in an obviously old one – see chapter 19). They have a general sentimental attachment to older, supposedly safer times. A survey conducted in 2005 found that they believed pollution was worse than it had been 50 years before (when there were killer smogs – see chapter 3) and that they worked longer hours than 50 years before (when Saturday morning work was the norm for everybody). They did not even seem aware that they were far wealthier than people in the 1950s (when an average unemployed person could survive for just one month before running out of money – now the period is seven months). The British like their Christmas cards to depict scenes from past centuries (see chapter 23); they like their pubs to look old (see chapter 20); they complained bitterly when their system of currency was changed.

Being different

The British can be stubbornly conservative about anything which is perceived as a token of Britishness. In these matters, their conservatism can combine with their individualism – they are rather proud of being different. It is, for example, very difficult to imagine that they will ever change from driving on the left-hand side of the

Big Brother is watching you

It is a curious fact that, for a people who value privacy, the British have allowed themselves to become one of the most spied-upon nations in the world. In 2007, there were around four and a half million closed-circuit TV (CCTV) cameras in Britain. That's one for every 14 people in the country. One estimate claims that Britain now has more of them than the rest of Europe combined. In London, the average person is caught on one of these cameras about 300 times a day.



Attitudes to multiculturalism

In the twenty-first century, Britain is experiencing record levels of both immigration and emigration (see chapter 1). This means that the cultural backgrounds of people living in Britain are changing fast and becoming increasingly varied. This is one reason why 'multiculturalism' is a hot topic of debate in Britain these days.

In fact, people are often unclear about what is meant when this word is used. Does it suggest a 'salad bowl', in which the different ingredients, although mixed together and making an appetizing whole, are still distinct? Or does it suggest a 'melting pot', in which the ingredients all blend together, each making their contribution to a single overall taste?

The dominant perception seems to be that it is the 'salad-bowl' model that has been applied in Britain and there is a growing perception that it has gone too far. In 2004, Trevor Phillips, the chairman

of the official Commission for Racial Equality, himself a black Caribbean, suggested that policies designed to recognize and respect different cultural groups may tend to keep these groups separate (so that they are not even in the same bowl). And of course separation leads to lack of understanding, which can lead to hostility. (Although overt racism is less common than it used to be, and probably less common than in many other parts of Europe, there are still thousands of racially or ethnically motivated attacks on people each year.)

Some members of mainstream British culture interpret 'multiculturalism' in yet another way. They seem to think it means their own cultural ingredients are simply excluded from the bowl or pot. Around Christmas time, for example, the press is full of horror stories of the cancellation of school nativity plays and the banning of appearances of Father Christmas or of 'Merry Christmas' signs in town centres. These things happen

because some people in positions of authority believe that public celebration of a Christian festival would offend non-Christians, and would also perhaps be against the law.

In most cases, both beliefs are wrong. But in response to fears of this kind – and more general concerns about the nature of 'Britishness', the government has changed the procedure for becoming a British citizen. Previously, applicants simply had to be resident for five years and have a record of good behaviour, at which point they received a naturalization certificate through the post. Now they have to study an official book called *Life in the UK* and then pass a 'citizenship test' based on it. After that, they attend a formal ceremony at which their citizenship is conferred upon them. (Interestingly, when *Life in the UK* was first published, it emerged that most British born-and-bred people could not achieve the required 75% pass mark!)

Suspicion of the metric system

Suspicion of metric measures is an undercurrent that runs through British society. Here is a very short extract from an article in the *Radio Times* (see chapter 16) commenting on a BBC documentary programme about Hadrian's Wall (see chapter 2).

[We were informed that] 'stretching from Newcastle to Carlisle for 118 kilometres, Hadrian's Wall was four metres high and three metres wide'. Are we being fed kilometres and metres by the back door? The nation deserves to know.

John Peel in *The Radio Times*
2–8 December 2000.

The writer is not trying to make a serious point here. It is just a remark in an article which is generally humorous in tone. (The statement 'the nation deserves to know' is an ironic echo of the pompous demands of politicians.) But the fact the writer considered it worth drawing attention to the measurements quoted is indicative. He knew it would resonate with his readers.

The prestige of the countryside

Most people like their cars to look clean and smart. But a surprisingly large number of car owners in Britain now spend time making them look dirty. Deliberately! These people are owners of 4x4s, those big spacious vehicles with a lot of ground clearance. They are expensive and a status symbol but when all they are used for is the school run and trips to the supermarket, other people sneer at the owners.

Many 4x4 owners have found an answer. Spray-on mud! They buy this amazing product (which has a secret ingredient to make it stick but no stones so it doesn't scratch paintwork) on the internet. This way, they can give their vehicles that just-back-from-the-country look.

road to driving on the right. It doesn't matter that nobody can think of any intrinsic advantage of driving on the left. Why should they change just to be like everyone else? Britain has so far resisted pressure from business people to adopt Central European Time, remaining stubbornly one hour behind; and it continues to start its financial year not, as other countries do, at the beginning of the calendar year but rather at the beginning of April.

Systems of measurement are another example. For decades now, British authorities have been promoting the scales that are used nearly everywhere else in the world (which in Britain are known collectively as the 'metric system'). But they have had only partial success. It is only in the twenty-first century that people in Britain have become accustomed to buying petrol for their cars in litres or have started to understand the TV weather forecasters when they mention a temperature on the Celsius scale (and many still have to 'translate' it into Fahrenheit – see chapter 3). British people continue to measure distances and themselves using scales of measurement that are not used anywhere else in Europe. (*How tall? How far? How heavy?*). British manufacturers are obliged to give the weight of their packaged goods in kilos and grams, but many also give the equivalent in pounds and ounces because they know that the latter are more likely to mean something to people (see chapter 15).

In fact, this last aspect of measurement has become a celebrated public issue in Britain. In 2001, two greengrocers in the north-east of England were prosecuted by their local government authority for selling their fruit and vegetables by the pound. The case attracted huge national publicity. They became known as the 'metric martyrs'. A Metric Martyrs Fund was set up and received so many donations that it was able to hire the country's best lawyers. Since then, the fund has supported many other traders who have fallen foul of the law regarding weights and measures. But the issue at stake for the fund is not just pounds and ounces. In 2002, it defended a restaurant which was threatened with prosecution for the opposite reason – not for refusing metric measures but for using them! British law stipulates that draught beer must be sold in pints or parts thereof, but this was an Austrian themed restaurant and so the beer was sold in one litre mugs. In 2006, the fund supported a brewing company over the same matter. What drives the Metric Martyrs Fund and its supporters, then, is not principally a love of British habits of measurement or a hatred of EU regulations in particular; it is a (characteristically British) hatred of conformist regulations in general.

Love of nature

Britain was the first country in the world to appoint a government-sponsored conservation body (the Nature Conservancy, in 1949) and it was in Britain that the first large green pressure group was founded (the World Wildlife Fund in 1961, now the Worldwide Fund for Nature). This is not a coincidence. Ever since they became a nation of city dwellers, the British have had a reverence for nature and an

idealized vision of the countryside. To the British, the countryside has almost none of the negative associations which it has in some countries, such as poor facilities, lack of educational opportunities, unemployment and poverty. To them, the countryside means peace and quiet, beauty, health, and no crime. Indeed, having a house ‘in the country’ carries prestige – see [The prestige of the countryside](#). Most of them would live in a country village if they thought they could find a way of earning a living there. Ideally, this village would consist of thatched cottages (see chapter 19) built around an area known as the ‘village green’. Nearby there would be a pond with ducks on it. Nowadays, such a village is not actually very common, but it is a stereotypical picture that is well-known to the British.

Some history connected with the building of high-speed rail links through the channel tunnel (see chapter 17) is indicative of the British attitude. On the continental side of the tunnel, communities battled with each other to get the new line built through their town. It would be good for local business. But on the English side, the opposite occurred. Nobody wanted the rail link near them! Communities battled with each other to get the new line built somewhere else. Never mind business – they wanted to preserve their peace and quiet. (That is one reason why the high-speed link on the British side was completed so much later.)

Perhaps this love of the countryside is another aspect of British conservatism. The countryside represents stability. Those who live in towns and cities take an active interest in country matters and they regard it as both a right and a privilege to be able to go ‘into the country’ when they want. Large areas of the country are official ‘national parks’ where almost no building is allowed. There is an organization called the Ramblers’ Association to which more than a hundred thousand enthusiastic country walkers belong. It is in constant battle with landowners to keep open the public ‘rights of way’ across their lands. Maps can be bought which mark the routes of all the public footpaths in the country. Walkers often stay the night at a youth hostel. The Youth Hostels Association is a charity whose aim is ‘to help all, especially young people of limited means, to a greater knowledge, love and care of the countryside’.

When they cannot get into the countryside, many British people still spend a lot of their time with ‘nature’. They grow plants. Gardening is one of the most popular hobbies in the country, and gardening programmes on radio and TV are also very popular. When in 2002, a well-known TV gardener called Alan Titchmarsh had his own series, sales of basic gardening tools such as rakes rose by 50%. Indeed, all he had to do was advise the use of a particular implement and within days they had sold out across Britain. The Garden Industry Manufacturers’ Association had to ask the BBC for advance warning about what would be mentioned in the following week’s show! Even those people who do not have a garden can participate. Each local authority owns several areas of land which it rents very cheaply to these people in small parcels. On these ‘allotments’, people grow mainly vegetables.

How tall?

If a British person asks you how tall you are, it would probably not help for you to say something like ‘one, sixty-three’. He or she is not likely to understand. Instead, you would have to say ‘five foot four’. This means 5 feet and 4 inches.

1 inch = 2.53 cm

12 inches = 1 foot = 30.48 cm

How far?

If you see a road sign saying ‘Oxford 50’, this does not mean that Oxford is 50 kilometres away – it is 50 miles away. All road signs in Britain are shown in miles. Similarly, for shorter distances, most people talk about yards rather than metres.

1 yard = 0.92 m

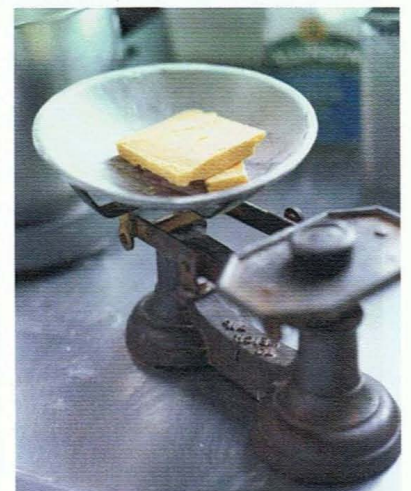
1760 yards = 1 mile = 1.6 km

How heavy?

Similarly, it would not help a British person to hear that you weigh 67 kilos. It will be more informative if you say you are ‘ten stone seven’ or ‘ten-and-a-half stone’ – that is, 10 stone and 7 pounds.

1 lb = 0.456 kg

14 lbs = 1 stone = 6.38 kg



The National Trust

A notable indication of the British reverence for both the countryside and the past is the strength of the National Trust. This is an officially recognized charity whose aim is to preserve as much of Britain's countryside and as many of its historic buildings as possible by acquiring them 'for the nation'. With more than three million members, it is the largest conservation charity in Europe. It is actually the third largest landowner in Britain (after the Crown and the Forestry Commission). Included in its property is more than 600 miles of the coastline. The importance of its work has been supported by several laws, among which is one which does not allow even the government to take over any of its land without the approval of Parliament.

 THE NATIONAL TRUST



Along with love of nature comes a strong dislike of anything that seems 'unnatural'. In the early years of this century, it was government policy to make Britain 'the European hub' of genetically modified (GM) plant technology. But opposition to GM was so strong that all GM companies withdrew their application to grow GM crops in Britain. Similarly, at the time of writing, most people are against the government's proposal to build a new generation of nuclear power stations.

Love of animals

Rossendale Memorial Gardens in Lancashire is just one of more than a hundred animal cemeteries in Britain. It was started by a local farmer who ran over his dog with a tractor. He was so upset that he put up a headstone in its memory. Now, Rossendale has thousands of graves and plots for caskets of ashes, with facilities for every kind of animal, from a budgie to a lioness. As in America, many people are prepared to pay quite large sums of money to give their pets a decent burial. The British tend to have a sentimental attitude to animals. Half of the households in Britain keep at least one domestic pet. Most of them do not bother with such grand arrangements when it dies, but there are millions of informal graves in people's back gardens. Moreover, the status of pets is taken seriously. It is, for example, illegal to run over a dog in your car and then keep on driving. You have to stop and inform the owner.

But the love of animals goes beyond sentimental attachment to domestic pets. Wildlife programmes are by far the most popular kind of television documentary. Millions of families have 'bird tables' in their gardens. These are raised platforms on which birds can feed, safe from local cats, during the winter months. There is even a special teaching hospital (called Tigglywinkles) which treats injured wild animals.

Perhaps this overall concern for animals is part of the British love of nature. Studies indicating that some wild species is decreasing in numbers become prominent articles in the national press. In 2000, for example, *The Independent* offered a prize of £5,000 for the first scientific paper which established the reason for the decline of the sparrow. Thousands of people are enthusiastic bird-watchers. This peculiarly British pastime often involves spending hours lying in wet and cold undergrowth trying to get a glimpse of a rare species.

Public-spiritedness and amateurism

In public life, Britain has traditionally followed what might be called 'the cult of the talented amateur', in which being too professionally dedicated is looked at with suspicion. 'Only doing your job' has never been accepted as a justification for actions. The assumption behind many of the features of public life in Britain is that society is best served by everybody 'chipping in' – that is, by lots of people giving a little of their free time to help in a variety of matters. This can be seen in the structure of the civil service (see chapter 8), in the circumstances under which MPs do their work (see chapter 9), in the use of unpaid

non-lawyers to run much of the legal system (see chapter 11) and in some aspects of the education system (see chapter 14).

This characteristic, however, is on the decline. In all the areas mentioned above, 'professionalism' has turned from having a negative connotation to having a positive one. Nevertheless, some new areas of amateur participation in public life have developed in the last decade, such as the increase in Neighbourhood Watch schemes (see chapter 11). Moreover, tens of thousands of 'amateurs' are still actively involved in charity work (see chapter 18). Indeed, such work is the basis of many people's social life. As well as giving direct help to those in need, they raise money by organizing jumble sales, fêtes and flag days (on which they stand in the street asking for money in return for small stickers which people can put onto their clothes). This voluntary activity is a basic part of British life. It has often been so effective that whole countryside networks have been set up without government help (*Self-help*). It is no accident that many of the world's largest and

The RSPCA

The general desire for animal welfare has official recognition. Cruelty to animals of any kind is a criminal offence, and offences are investigated by a well-known charity, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). It may be a typical quirk of British life for this organization to have royal patronage, while the equivalent charity for children – the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (the NSPCC) – does not.

The great foxhunting debate

Throughout the twentieth century, foxhunting was the occasional pastime of a tiny minority of the British population (no more than a few tens of thousands). Traditionally, 'hunting' (as the foxhunters call it) works like this: A group of people on horses, dressed up in special riding clothes (some of them in eighteenth-century red jackets), ride around the countryside with a pack of hounds. When these dogs pick up the scent of a fox, a horn is blown, somebody shouts 'Tally ho!' and then dogs, horses and riders all chase the fox. Often the fox gets away. But if it does not, the dogs get to it first and tear it to pieces.

As you might guess, in a country of animal lovers, where most people live in towns and cities, foxhunting is generally regarded with disgust. In fact, in 2004 Parliament voted to make it illegal.

But that is not the end of the story. In the year leading up to the ban on foxhunting, there were demonstrations in London involving hundreds of thousands of people. Blood was spilt as demonstrators fought with both anti-hunt groups and with the police. Some pro-hunt demonstrators even staged a brief 'invasion' of Parliament.

And since the ban? Well, the debate continues. At the time of writing, it is the policy of the main opposition party to lift the ban. Meanwhile, hunting

groups (known as 'hunts') have continued their activities and claim that their memberships have increased. Officially, they have turned to 'trail hunting', in which the dogs follow a scent rather than a live fox, and which therefore is not illegal. But in practice it is difficult to control dogs if they pick up the scent of a live fox and there are allegations that the spirit (if not the letter) of the law is being routinely broken.

How can all this have happened? How can such a basically trivial matter, with direct relevance to so few people, have excited such passions among so many people? And how can it be that some people are apparently willing and able to break the law? The answer is that this single issue draws together many features which are dear to British people's hearts.

Love of animals To many people, foxhunting is nothing more than barbaric cruelty to animals which has no place in a civilized twenty-first century society – and the fact that it is such a noisy and public celebration of barbarism only makes it worse. But foxhunters argue that fox numbers have to be controlled and that other methods of killing them are crueler.

Social class Foxhunting is associated with the upper class and the rich and there is anger that such people are still apparently able to indulge in organized

violence against an animal. Many feel that it proves the old saying about there being 'one law for the rich and one for the poor'. On the other hand, foxhunters argue that such a 'class-war' view is an urban-dweller's misunderstanding of the fabric of rural life, both socially and economically.

Reverence for the countryside This debate pits country people against 'townies'. Many of the former see the ban as a symbol of discrimination against them by the urban majority. And because of their romanticized idea of the countryside, some of the latter are willing to accept that they do not understand 'country ways', and so perhaps they do not have the right to oppose foxhunting, and a few have even come to view it as a symbol of an ideal, rural England.

Individualism and conservatism The British always feel a bit uncomfortable about banning anything when it does not directly hurt other people, especially if, like foxhunting, it is a centuries-old tradition. There is also a long tradition of disobedience to 'unjust' laws. Even some of those who regard foxhunting as cruel suspect this might be one of those cases and have doubts about the ban.

At the time of writing it is not clear how the situation will develop.

most well-known charities (e.g. Oxfam, Amnesty International, and Save the Children) began in Britain. Note also that, each year, the country's blood transfusion service collects over two million donations from unpaid volunteers.

Formality and informality

The tourist view of Britain involves lots of formal ceremonies. Encouraged by this, some people have drawn the conclusion that the British are rather formal in their general behaviour. This is not true. There is a difference between observing formalities and being formal in everyday life. Attitudes towards clothes are a good indication of this difference. It all depends on whether a person is playing a public role or a private role. When people are 'on duty', they have to obey some quite rigid rules on this matter. A male bank employee, for example, is expected to wear a suit and tie, even if he cannot afford a very smart one.

On the other hand, when people are not playing a public role – when they are just being themselves – there seem to be no rules at all. The British are probably more tolerant of 'strange' clothing than people in most other countries (*The scruffy British*). What you wear is considered to be your own business. You may find, for example, the same bank employee, on his lunch break in hot weather, walking through the street with his tie round his waist and his collar unbuttoned. He is no longer 'at work', so he can look how he likes – and for his employers to criticize him for his appearance would be seen as a gross breach of privacy.

This difference between formalities and formality is the key to what people from other countries sometimes experience as a coldness among the British. The key is this: being friendly in Britain often involves showing that you are not bothering with the formalities. This means *not* addressing someone by his or her title (Mr, Mrs, Professor, etc.), *not* dressing smartly when entertaining guests, *not* shaking hands when meeting and *not* saying 'please' when making a request. When they avoid doing these things with you, the British are not being unfriendly or disrespectful – they are implying that you are in the category 'friend', and so all the rules can be ignored. To address someone by their title or to say 'please' is to observe formalities and therefore distancing. The same is true of shaking hands. Although this sometimes has the reputation of being a very British thing to do, it is actually rather rare. Most people would do it only when being introduced to a stranger or when meeting an acquaintance (but not a close friend) after a long time.

Similarly, most British people do not feel welcomed if, on being invited to somebody's house, they find the host in smart clothes and a grand table set for them. They do not feel flattered by this – they feel intimidated. It makes them feel they can't relax. Buffet-type meals, in which people do not sit down at table to eat, are a common form of hospitality. If you are in a British person's house and are told to 'help

Self-help

The National Trust (see page 64) is one example of a charity which became very important without any government involvement. Another is the Family Planning Association. By 1938, this organization ran 935 clinics around Britain which gave advice and help regarding birth control to anybody who wanted it. Not until ten years later, with the establishment of the National Health Service (see chapter 18), did the British government involve itself in such matters. A further example is the Consumers' Association. In 1957, a small group of people working from an abandoned garage started *Which?*, a magazine exposing abuses in the marketplace, investigating trickery by manufacturers and comparing different companies' brands of the same product. Thirty years later, 900,000 people regularly bought its magazine and it was making a ten million pound surplus (not a 'profit' because it is a registered charity). Today, *Which?* continues to campaign to protect consumers and has 650,000 members.

A recent equivalent of *Which?* is *moneysavingexpert.com*, a free-to-use, not-for-profit website. Created in 2003 with the philosophy 'A company's job is to screw us for profit; our job is to stop them', by May 2008 it was receiving ten million visits a month and over two million people were receiving its weekly email.

yourself' to something, your host is not being rude or suggesting that you are of no importance – he or she is showing that you are completely accepted like 'one of the family'.

The British, especially the English, have a reputation for being reserved in their dealings with other people, for being polite rather than openly friendly or hostile (*A hundred ways to say 'sorry'*). This reputation is probably still justified. For example, an opinion poll at the end of 2007 found that the single aspect of everyday life which worried British people more than anything else (more than immigration, terrorism, or personal debt) was 'anti-social behaviour'; that is, other people being rude or inconsiderate. The only emotion habitually displayed in public is laughter. However, there are signs that this traditional habit of reserve is breaking down. Although it is still not the dominant convention, more and more people now kiss when meeting a friend (both women and women, and men and women do this, but still only rarely men and men). Perhaps the sight of all kinds of extreme emotions on reality TV shows has made British people more comfortable with the public display of emotions. And certainly, they shocked themselves by their very public outpouring of grief following the sudden death of Princess Diana in 1997. It is possible, in fact, that the everyday behaviour of the British is returning to the more emotional tenor which it had in the centuries before the Victorian 'stiff upper lip' became dominant.

Privacy and sex

The idea of privacy underlies many aspects of British life. It is not just a matter of privacy in your own home (see chapter 19). Just as important is the individual's right to keep personal information private. Despite the increase in informality, it is still seen as rude to ask somebody what are called 'personal' questions (for example, about how much money they earn and about their family or sex life) unless you know them very well.

The modern British attitude to sex is an example of how, while moral attitudes have changed, the habit of privacy is still deeply ingrained. British (like American) public life has a reputation for demanding puritanical standards of behaviour. Revelations about extra-marital affairs or other deviations from what is considered normal in private life have, in the past, been the ruin of many public figures. This would seem to indicate a lack of respect for privacy – that the British do not allow their politicians a private life. However, appearances in this matter can be misleading. In all such cases, the disgrace of the politician concerned has not been because of his sexual activity. It has happened because this activity was mixed up with a matter of national security, or involved breaking the law, or the abuse of his position. The scandal was that in these cases, the politician has not kept his private life and public role separate enough. When no such connections are involved, there are no negative consequences for the politician. In 2004, there were no calls for a top government minister to resign when it was

A hundred ways to say 'sorry'

People from other countries often comment on how polite the English (or do they mean the British?) are. And it is true that they say 'thank you' more often than the people of other countries. They also say 'sorry' a lot. But 'sorry' can mean an awful lot of different things. Here is a list (adapted) from A. A. Gill.

I apologize.
I don't apologize.
You can take this as an apology but we both know it isn't one.
Excuse me.
I am sad for you.
I can't hear you.
I don't understand you.
You don't understand me.
I don't believe it.
I don't believe you.
I'm interrupting you.
Will you (please) shut up!
I am angry.
I am very angry.

It all depends on the way you say it. But why are there so many ways? Gill comments:

Being able to apologize without meaning it – and so without losing face – but at the same time allowing the other person, having got their apology, to back down is a masterfully delicate piece of verbal engineering.

The scruffy British

Although the British are much more interested in clothes than they used to be, they are still, by the standards of other western European countries, not very good at wearing them. If you are somewhere in a Mediterranean holiday area, it is usually possible to spot the British tourist from other European tourists – he or she is the one who looks badly dressed! And although they spend more money on clothes than they used to, many people get some of their clothes from second-hand charity shops – and are not at all embarrassed to admit this.

Supporting the underdog

Some customs of road use illustrate the British tendency to be on the side of 'the underdog' (i.e. the weaker side in any competition). On the roads, the underdog is the pedestrian. The law states that if a person has just one foot on a zebra crossing, then vehicles must stop. And they usually do. Conversely, British pedestrians interpret the colour of the human figure at traffic lights as advice, not as instruction. If the figure is red but no cars are approaching, they feel perfectly entitled to cross the road immediately. In Britain, jaywalking (crossing the road by dodging in between cars) has never been illegal.



Lovely weather we're having

The well-known stereotype that the British are always talking about the weather can be explained in the combination of the demands of both privacy and informality. Unlike many others, this stereotype is actually true to life. But constant remarks about the weather at chance meetings are not the result of polite conventions. They are not obligatory. Rather, they are the result of the fact that, on the one hand, personal questions would be rude while, at the same time, silence would also be rude. The weather is a very convenient topic with which to 'fill the gap'.

revealed he was having an affair with a married woman. But after it was revealed that he had used his position to secure this woman certain advantages, there were, and eventually he was forced to do so.

At the public level, Britain seems to have dispensed with sexual puritanism almost completely. Until quite recently, references to sex in popular entertainment were clothed in innuendo and clumsy double entendre. These days they are explicit. However, at the personal level, it seems that sex is still treated as an absolutely private matter. Sex may no longer be 'bad' but it is still embarrassing. In 2002, a survey found that only a minority of the children who phone a child-support line are seeking help because of bullying or physical abuse (which was why such lines were set up); almost half were from children seeking the most basic advice about sex and pregnancy. It also found that only one in three teenagers said they felt able to talk to their parents about sex. Sex education in schools remains only partial, largely because teachers are too embarrassed to deal with it. The Victorian undercurrent remains, and this may explain why Britain has the highest rate of unwanted teenage pregnancies in Europe.

The same mixture of tolerance and embarrassment can be seen in the official attitude to prostitution in Britain. It is not illegal to be a prostitute in Britain, but it is illegal to publicly behave like one. It is against the law to 'solicit' – that is, to do anything in public to find customers.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Frequent reference is made in this chapter and the previous one to British individualism. How many examples can you find? Can you think of any others?
- 2 In what sense is the Metric Martyrs Fund in Britain misleadingly named? Can you think of any similar organization in your country?
- 3 Is privacy a value which is respected in your country as much as it is respected in Britain? And in the same way?
- 4 Which, if any, of the British characteristics described in this chapter would you regard as also characteristic of people in your country?

SUGGESTIONS

George Mikes' humorous books about the English, such as *How to be an Alien*, *How to be Inimitable*, and *How to be Decadent* (Penguin) are easy and fun to read. As they span 30 years, they offer insights into how attitudes in Britain changed in the final decades of the twentieth century.

Read *Notes from a Small Island* by Bill Bryson, a humorous and perceptive tour around Britain by an 'outsider' who has lived there for many years.

Try *The Angry Island* by A. A. Gill and see what you think.