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12 Cultural heritage

Heritage helps people to understand who they are and where they are from. It has also become a vital part of how the British define themselves, and festivals, buildings, landscapes and artefacts are important elements of regional and national identity.

The significance of heritage means there are frequent arguments about what to save, change and demolish. But, conservation lobbies are strong, and the organisations **English Heritage** and the **National Trust** protect many aspects of the city and the countryside, enforcing conservation laws that are said to be the toughest in the world.

Festivals and celebrations also form part of Britain's heritage. But, in contrast to the conservation of buildings and landscapes, festivals and celebrations tend to change and evolve, often reflecting changes in the society that holds them. Thus, the ways in which Christmas is celebrated today are not necessarily the same as a century ago, and so on.

The ways that heritage is displayed to the public have also changed greatly. Many years ago, the main aim of museums and galleries was to collect, preserve and display objects, and visitors would amble around dusty museums passively observing artefacts in a cabinet. But today there is more emphasis on learning, on the interpretation of objects and on audience participation. Some museums are open air where the public can immerse themselves in the past, and most kinds feature imaginative displays with interactive exhibits, screen shows and costumed interpreters, which together communicate a sense of authenticity and realism.

Museums, festivals, landscapes and sites associated with historic events have become important for tourism. **Tourism** has become the fifth largest industry in the UK, and in 2013 contributed £26.4 billion to the British economy. The British Museum is the UK's most popular visitor attraction, and in 2013 it attracted 6.7 million visitors.

Origins

Acquiring and collecting historic artefacts originates in ancient times, when effigies of gods and the relics of saints were collected and displayed often in religious sites, such as churches and monasteries. They were highly valued, and were thought to have special powers to heal the sick, bring good luck and so on.

It was not until the seventeenth century that more personal collections became fashionable. On leaving the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, affluent young men would often embark on a 'grand tour' overseas, with France and Italy the most popular destinations. They would typically spend up to a year seeing the sights of Renaissance Europe and the remains of classical civilisations, while acquiring trophies and souvenirs that would be brought back to create exotic interiors in their large country houses spread across the counties of England.

At the same time, scientific progress was prompting the collection of objects from the natural world, especially zoological and geological specimens, and from the mid-eighteenth century, growing public interest was reflected in the creation of several new museums with important collections of artefacts. The British Museum (1753) was the first national public museum in the world, while the National Gallery (1824), the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) (1852), the Science Museum (1857) and the Natural History Museum (1873) were all erected to offer new ways of seeing the world. The same century also witnessed Darwin's theory of evolution which challenged religious thinking about the origins of humanity. Although the Bible claimed the Earth's age to be around 6000 years old, many fossils and bones from sites around England were shown to be much older. Consequently, it was thought they could give clues to the identity of the first Britons.

Discoveries throughout the nineteenth century also led to a growing interest in the care of ancient buildings and sites. The government realised it had an important role to play in ensuring old buildings were not crushed by the march of industrialism, and in 1882 passed new laws allowing officials to take over neglected sites of historic interest.

Philanthropists and politicians of the period recognised that conservation had not just a scientific role to improve public understanding of the past, but that it also served an important cultural function. During the nineteenth century there was industrialisation and expansion on a scale never seen before. People moved or were forced to move from the countryside to the city in search of regular work, and there was a sudden and dramatic interruption to social and cultural life. Uncontrolled urban growth led to poverty, grime, smog, insanitary conditions and social disorder. But there was a relative lack of environmental concern with the city. The rich and powerful saw it as a place to work and make money, but rarely as a place to live, and there was more interest in caring for the depopulating countryside that seemed to be increasingly subject to threats from new technology, especially the railway, which was bringing rapid change to rural communities and landscapes.

For the art critic and philanthropist John Ruskin (1819–1900), conservation of the past could help to promote a common culture and social cohesion, and it was his vision of heritage as an 'anchor' in an increasingly restive nation that began to link environmental issues to politics. His views were influential, and in the latter part of the nineteenth century various philanthropic societies were formed to preserve the countryside, such as the Commons Preservation Society (1865), the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings (1877), the Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising (1893) and the **National Trust for Places of Historical Interest and Natural Beauty (1895)**. The countryside was becoming something to aspire to, a kind of rural dream, and in 1897 the magazine *Country Life* was founded to bring visions of arcadia into middle-class city drawing rooms, as it still does today.

The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest and National Beauty was set up in 1895 by Sir Robert Hunter and Octavia Hill. It was more inclusive than previous bodies, and aimed to preserve not only grand country houses, but also rural vernacular buildings. Today, it also protects historic landscapes, such as the Lake District, as well as historic urban properties and nature reserves. Its statutory powers extend to Wales and Northern Ireland, but Scotland has a separate National Trust of Scotland, which has similar aims and was founded in 1931. The Trust's logo of an oak leaf was taken from a medieval symbol on a beam in one of the first cottages to be protected.

[…] Very little land in Britain is completely common and accessible to all, and the growth in use of the countryside as a leisure facility by city dwellers and suburbanites led to frequent conflicts. A key moment occurred on the hill of Kinder Scout in the Peak District in 1932, when ramblers famously organised a mass trespass on the private slopes. The incident ended in violence and prison sentences, followed by a long-running campaign by the Ramblers' Association to open the countryside to the public. The campaign endured until 2000, when the Countryside and Rights of Way Act was introduced, finally allowing the public to walk in open country and public common land without using paths, even when the land is privately owned.

In the cities, a different kind of battle was fought to protect the built environment. After the Second World War many of Britain’s historical buildings were in ruins. Bombings of the historic cities of Plymouth, Exeter, Bath, Norwich and York had destroyed some of the most valuable ones. But the attacks led to a system for listing buildings of architectural merit around the UK, in order to identify those that should be restored or rebuilt if they were damaged by enemy bombs in future. Government inspectors began listing buildings, grading them as I, II or III, a system of classification that is still used today by English Heritage.

The country house

In the mid-twentieth century the National Trust became more involved with the preservation of historic country houses. These were large distinctive properties, often owned by titled landowners who in the past lived from agriculture and the rent paid by tenants. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries country houses functioned as centres for the business and administration of local affairs, as well as for social gatherings of the community. They were also a major source of employment for large numbers of cooks, gardeners, servants and so on drawn from poor rural villages.

But throughout the twentieth century the maintenance and restoration costs of these symbols of a feudal past grew astronomically, and this, coupled with high rates of taxation and death duties, led to many being sold or destroyed. Others were given to the National Trust in order to avoid the payment of death duties. The Trust opens such houses to the public, and in many cases the owners are able to continue living there, even though they no longer own the property. Art works and furnishings were sometimes loaned or given to museums. For example, tapestries and furniture at Houghton Hall in Norfolk are now owned by the Victoria and Albert Museum. This enables the former owners to offset tax, the payment of which would have required the sale of the art works to private collectors, and consequently their non-availability to the general public.

The houses that remain independent have had to adapt to survive. Some opened their doors to the general public and developed other attractions, for example Knebworth with pop festivals, Woburn and Longleat with animal safari parks, and Beaulieu with a motor museum. Tourism has led to demand for refreshment and souvenirs, and many houses opened tea rooms and gift shops, selling tea towels and other cosy, familiar, everyday objects featuring birds, flowers, cats and so on. Other houses have been converted into hotels, schools, hospitals, museums and prisons. Several country houses also hold licences for weddings and civil ceremonies, while others have become popular locations for films and TV series; for example, the successful TV costume drama *Downton Abbey* is filmed at Highclere Castle in Berkshire.

Despite its decline, the country house (sometimes called a stately home) remains a powerful symbol of national heritage. For many Britons, it represents a classical rural dream, a romantic rural retreat and an emblem of a (mythical) harmonious society in which there was a place for everyone and everyone knew their place, whether upstairs or downstairs. Its appeal lies in a longing for the past, a fascination with class and, for some, a paradise lost.

English Heritage

While the National Trust continues to conserve and manage many houses and monuments of historic importance around the UK, the home nations have separate bodies to advise on the care of environmental heritage. In England, the body **English Heritage** (which is officially known as the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England) manages the historic environment, registering listed buildings and historic sites of national importance, such as landscapes and battlefields. Although it is funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, it is a non-governmental body.

English Heritage also acts as steward to over 400 historical and archaeological sites from the stone-age circle of Stonehenge in Salisbury Plain, to the world's oldest iron bridge in Shropshire, to shipwrecks up to 12 miles from the British coast. Around Britain, the bodies Historic Scotland, Cadw (in Wales) and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency carry out similar functions.

The role of listing buildings is an important one. This refers to buildings placed on the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest. There are around half a million currently listed in the UK, which means they cannot be demolished, extended or altered without special permission from the local planning authority. Owners may also be forced to maintain and repair listed buildings, and may be prosecuted if they do not. Although most historic structures are listed, some are relatively new; for example, in 2011 the metal brutalist Lloyd's building in the City of London was given a Grade I listing when it was just 25 years old. At the time, English Heritage said it was 'universally recognised as one of the key buildings of the modern epoch'. The pedestrian crossing that appeared on the cover of the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album is also listed, which reflects the fact that almost anything can be protected as long as it can be shown to be of special historic interest.

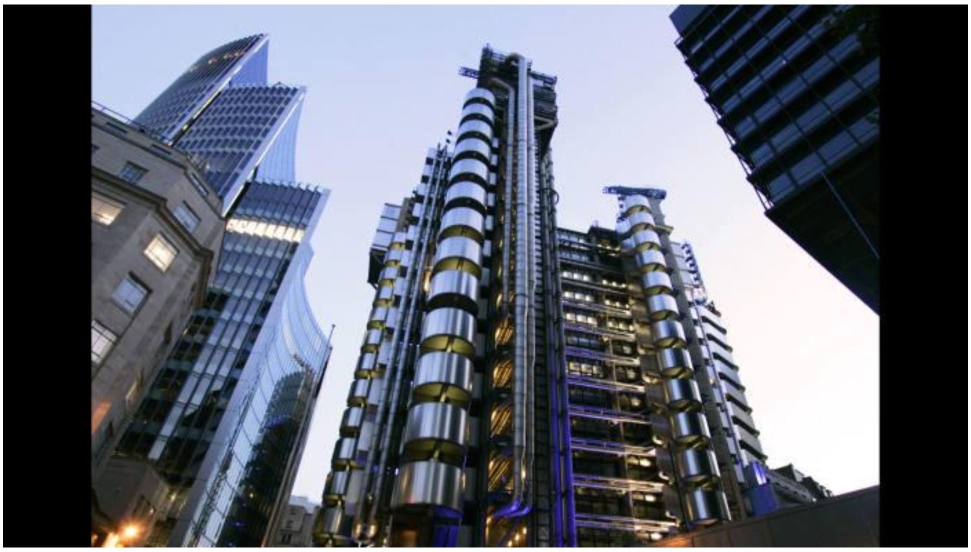

Figure 12.1 The Lloyd's Building in London – a machine for working in – was given a Grade I listing in 2011.

Another important role of English Heritage is to administer the Blue Plaque Scheme. It was started in London in 1866 by the Royal Society of Arts, and aimed to mark the connection between a particular place or building, and famous people. London now has almost 900 plaques, commemorating figures as diverse as the naturalist Charles Darwin, astronomer Isaac Newton, philosopher Karl Marx, the guitarist Jimi Hendrix and comedy actor Kenneth Williams. A panel of nine expert members of English History considers proposals from members of the public each year. The scheme has been extended to other towns and cities around Britain to stimulate public interest in local history and heritage. However, plaques are administered by different organisations, and each has its own criteria for selection.

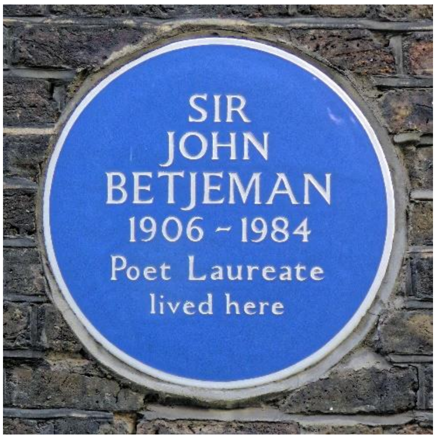

Figure 12.2 A blue plaque in the City of London, close to the Church of St Bartholomew.

Whose heritage?

The idea of heritage can be said to be more emotional and ideological than that of conservation. Conservation is about preserving what is already there, but heritage raises questions such as whose heritage is being represented, how should it be done, and whether or not it should be represented in the first place.

The kind of questions asked about heritage today are very different to those asked previously. From 1945 until the 1990s an upper-class vision of society prevailed, which emphasised imperial greatness, national triumph and deference to the ruling class. For example, fine country houses were presented as one of the great icons of British culture. Visitors looked up admiringly at their triumphal nature; that of civilised man over the environment, and of Britain over the rest of the world. But now when studying a country house, challenging new questions typically emerge, such as the origin of the enormous sums made by the owners and, for example, their role in slave labour in the Caribbean. In turn, this prompts observations about the contrast between the genteel civility of the elegant buildings and formal gardens, compared with the brutal degradation of slavery. In this way, the country house and its artefacts are reconceptualised for audiences in the twenty-first century.

Since the 1990s there has been a similar tendency to rethink collections and reconceptualise galleries. Britain is no longer a colonial power, and new stories have emerged about its ascent to greatness. New questions are being asked, such as how it was achieved and at what cost, as well as what was originally British and ‘belonged’ to Britain. Stories told in museums and galleries about British greatness in war, empire and discovery have been reconsidered and replaced by new stories about the production, acquisition and consumption of objects. This involved a refocusing on new questions of who made them, who used them, where, why, what for and so on. This change of emphasis is illustrated in many collections in museums today.

In the case of the British Museum, many of its exhibits were gathered from overseas, and some critics argue that certain pieces should be returned to their country of origin. However, defenders of its work say that the Museum does not tell the story of Britain, but presents itself as a museum of the world. Its collections are from around the world, and are skilfully preserved and presented to visitors from around the world, in an environment that is secure, protected and free to enter.

Today, museums in Britain are multifaceted. They are seen as businesses, collections, venues for education, learning and research. The stories they tell are frequently contested, and new ones are continually emerging. For example, a recent exhibition about Sherlock Holmes at the Museum of London explored how Conan Doyle's fictional character has transcended literature, and become the subject of stage and screen. Film, photography and paintings were used to re-create the Victorian London of Holmes, to enable the public to experience virtually the world he knew and investigated.

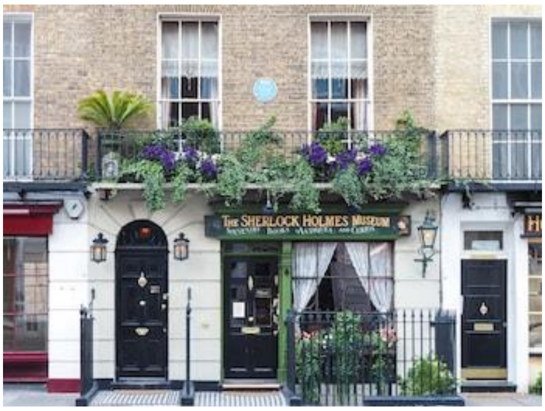

Figure 12.3 Heritage of the imagination. The address is 221b Baker St., London, residence of Sherlock Holmes, the man who never lived and never died. Yet, his fictional home is now a major attraction for overseas visitors. Note there is even a blue plaque on the wall.

Although many organisations were created to protect the landscape from industry, the railway and the motor car, paradoxically it is the industrial sector that today enjoys protection. Buildings as diverse as mines, factories, warehouses, industrial housing and railway stations have now become the objects of cultural and historic interest. Industrial heritage is highly successful, and many sites of production and manufacturing are now open-air museums, one of the first being a factory in Cumbria, which made bobbins for the cotton mills. The mills were of key importance to Lancashire's textile industry, and the growth of Manchester as the world's first industrial city. Stott Park Bobbin Mill opened in 1835 and was continuously working until its closure in 1971, prior to its restoration and reopening as a museum in 1974.

A much larger example is the open-air Beamish Museum in County Durham. It comprises the town of Beamish, a farm, a coal mine, and various forms of period transport set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Working vehicles and equipment as well as period livestock and costumed interpreters play the roles of villagers, labourers, craftsmen and so on who are seen living and working as they would have done, performing crafts and other occupations and tasks to give a sense of authenticity to the industrial and domestic scenes, which helps to communicate a sense of typical daily life for all strata of society.

Figure 12.4 A battle scene is re-enacted at the Honourable Artillery Ground, surrounded by the bastions of modern business in the heart of London.

As well as museums and galleries, other heritage centres and events help re-create elements of the country's past. These include re-enactments of battles, jousting at medieval castles and other varied activities that aim to inform, entertain and bring to life elements of British history in a colourful and engaging way. However, such presentations are sometimes criticised as an oversimplification, a 'dumbing down' of historical events, and a 'Disney-fication' of the past, in order to create spectacular light entertainment for twenty first-century non-specialist audiences.

Holy days and holidays

Although the United Kingdom has become a multi-faith, secular, post-Christian society, many of its traditional festivals such as Christmas have their origins in the country's Christian history. Indeed, the word holiday is derived from 'holy day', and in the past many public holidays were taken on days of religious importance. However, religious belief and practice have been in steady decline for many years. According to the National Census of 2011, almost 60 per cent still self-identify as Christians, although regular church attendance (an indication of the degree to which self-professed Christians actually observe and practise their religion) has fallen to just 6 per cent of the population. Some 26 per cent said they had no religion, while other religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism amounted to under 5 per cent each. Perhaps unsurprisingly, between 1969 and 2002 the Church of England closed almost 1500 churches around Britain.

Nevertheless, the Christian heritage continues to influence many aspects of daily life. The practice of taking days off work for religious occasions began with the Bank of England, which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries followed the European custom of closing on the 'name-days' of Christian saints. The closure of the principal lending bank meant other banks could not function, and many other businesses had to close too. However, in 1834 bank holidays were reduced to just four, in order to support the needs of business and commerce. These were 25 December (Christmas Day), 1 November (All Saints), 1 May (May Day) and the Friday before Easter Sunday (Good Friday). Later, in 1871 the Bank Holidays Act introduced paid holidays for employees, and today there are eight permanent ones in England and Wales, nine in Scotland and ten in Northern Ireland. Despite a general closure, many public attractions such as museums, cinemas and larger shopping centres remain open to the public.

As well as statutory bank holidays, those in work receive an additional holiday allowance, which the majority take at any time convenient to themselves and their employers. These are often taken to coincide with the main bank holidays, which are Christmas and New Year, Easter, and to a lesser extent Whitsuntide. But, the ways in which these breaks are celebrated varies considerably.

Easter is a movable holiday as it is influenced by the lunar cycle. It is often characterised by family gatherings, and special church services are held to mark the occasion. However, for many secular Britons the religious significance is neglected or ignored, although popular celebration of the occasion involving the giving of chocolate eggs and other confectionery has converted it into a kind of festival of sweets.

The next festival of note is Whitsuntide, an abbreviated form of 'White Sunday', which falls on the seventh Sunday after Easter (Pentecost). In the north of England processions through the streets occasionally take place. Known as the 'Whit Walks', they are characterised by brass bands, choirs and girls dressed in white, which it is said may have a connection with the clothes traditionally worn for baptism. Once an important festival, in recent decades it has declined in significance, partly due to secularisation, and particularly as in 1971 the movable holiday was replaced by the Spring Bank Holiday on the last Monday of May.

In contrast, Christmas is the most closely observed festival in the calendar. The word comes from Christ's mass, that is the church service of mass, which is held for Christ. Most people are on holiday on 25 December, and the day is usually spent with family. Along with the giving of presents, Christmas dinner is the main event, which typically comprises turkey or goose, along with stuffing, roast potatoes, sprouts and cranberry sauce. A rich fruity pudding – Christmas pudding – is served to follow, with a sweet sauce laced with brandy. Later in the day Christmas cake may be brought out, probably topped with some edible, snow-covered imagery. However, many households now adopt a more progressive menu, for example featuring a vegetarian Christmas dish, or a meal of any kind created by one of the ubiquitous TV chefs.

Inside the home, Christmas decorations are generally green and red. Green is symbolic of life, especially in winter, and red symbolises the blood of the crucifixion. A Christmas tree (a fir tree) is the focal point of attention, under which presents may be placed. Christmas cards have been sent since the nineteenth century, and also adorn shelves and walls. Outside, some households decorate their properties with coloured lights, where gaudy dancing Santas are sometimes put on display. In the towns and cities, streets are similarly decorated to create a festive atmosphere. But decorations are normally removed before the 12th night (5 January). Since Victorian times it was believed to bring bad luck if they were left any longer. It may also be because 6 January is a Catholic festival in many European countries.

For around a week after Christmas Day the country comes to a halt (except for shopping and sporting events) until after New Year's Day. The latter is a bank holiday that is typically spent recovering from celebrations with friends the night before, and a rousing chorus of 'Auld Lang Syne' at midnight, a traditional folk song that was written in Scots by Robert Burns in 1788.

Despite the fun and feasting of bank holidays, there is a great deal of scepticism and ambivalence about their meaning on the part of many Britons. While almost everyone appreciates time off work, relatively few observe their religious significance. Children invariably enjoy the presents, food and drama of the occasions, but many adults believe celebrations are driven by pure commercialism. For example, Christmas goods appear in the shops from late September, and many families feel put under pressure to spend money they don't always have or want to spend on gifts, excursions, special foods, decorations and so on. Additionally, the diverse and fragmented nature of many British families, which are often char-acterised by step-parents and step-children from previous marriages, as well as inter-faith and LGBT relationships, means that visits to the homes of other family members can be fraught and stressful, particularly when the consumption of alcohol is involved. For these and other reasons, some prefer to spend Christmas abroad, away from commercial and domestic pressures that Yultetide can bring.

Britain is also home to a number of ethnic communities who go out onto the streets to celebrate their customs in the traditional way at certain times of the year. Two of the most notable for their public presence are Diwali and the Chinese New Year. Diwali is a Hindu festival which is held in the autumn. It is enthusiastically celebrated in Britain; lamps and candles are specially lit to decorate domestic interiors, and traditional sweets are consumed with gusto, such as laddoo, a ball-shaped sweet made from flour and sugar, and barfi, made with condensed milk and sugar and flavoured with different kinds of nuts.

In recent times Diwali has been gradually accepted and absorbed into British culture, as Prince Charles and other civic figures have attended Diwali functions. Since 2009 the festival has also been an annual celebration at the residence of the British prime minister. As with any ethnic festival, it is most widely celebrated in those areas where the community is most numerous. In this case, the east Midlands city of Leicester is home to some of the biggest celebrations outside India.

Another great festival of note is the Chinese New Year, which has a strong presence in several British cities, but particularly in London around the Chinatown area of Soho, and in Trafalgar Square. At the busiest times, crowds of up to half a million come to witness the largest spectacle outside Asia, which involves dances, parades, concerts and familiar Chinese dragons that are said to scare away evil spirits, as participants wish each other ‘Kung Hei Fat Choi’ or ‘Happy New Year’.

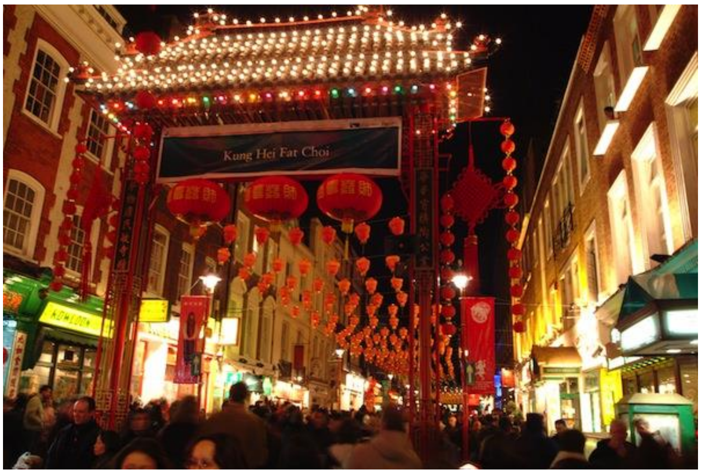

Figure 12.5 Chinese New Year in Soho, London.

Sectarian rivalry

Although the United Kingdom is a mainly secular and multi-faith country, the past rivalries between Protestants and Catholics that endured for several centuries still find expression on certain days of the year. In England and Wales anniversaries of past confrontations are largely forgotten, however in Northern Ireland and parts of Scotland they still survive and can still be a source of tension.

Some of the most visible displays involve the Orange parades by Protestant lodges. These are brotherhoods, with names such as the Orange Order, the Order of Hibernians and the Apprentice Boys, who assemble and march through the streets on certain days between April and August, celebrating important days in Protestant history. The most important date is 12 July, the anniversary of Prince William’s victory over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne on the east coast of Ireland in 1690. It is recognised as one of Britain’s most significant battles, and one that marked the rise of Protestantism in Ireland, and is known as Orangemen’s Day or Orange Day, which is a bank holiday.

But the Orange walks are controversial. Among those who hold religious beliefs, Catholicism is the main faith in Northern Ireland today. The census of 2011 found a majority of almost 41 per cent claimed to be Catholic. It is also the most religiously observant part of the UK with 45 per cent of the population attending church regularly. Parades and marches are thus seen as triumphalist and provocative by many Northern Irish, especially when they pass through predominantly Catholic areas.

In Scotland there are similar marches. However, the majority of the general public are opposed to them, even though they commonly take place in the weekends of the summer months in Glasgow and some other regions. They claim they are an incitement to violence and hatred, as well as being expensive to police.

Another event that has its origins in the rivalry and, at times, hostility between Protestant and Catholic communities is Guy Fawkes Night, or *Bonfire Night*, a rare example of an indigenous British festival that is still celebrated around the country, although in parts of Scotland and Northern Ireland its observance can still be controversial. It recalls events in 1605 when a group of Catholic conspirators planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament and the Protestant King, James I, with the intention of replacing him with a Catholic monarch. However, one of the conspirators – Guy Fawkes – was discovered, and the 'gunpowder plot' was foiled. Fawkes was tortured and executed, and soon afterwards the King ordered a day of celebration to be held on 5 November. This has evolved into one of fire, immolation and colourful explosions. Today, the occasion is still marked, although due to secularisation and a much less zealous Protestantism in England, the religious origins of the festivities are largely ignored. Moreover, ubiquitous health and safety regulations have also led to the cancellation of many civic celebrations.

Typically, a bonfire is lit as part of a local, community occasion, and fireworks are set off into the night sky. Domestic versions of the event may include an effigy of the Catholic terrorist – 'the Guy' – being made from old clothing packed with newspapers or straw, which is tossed on top of the bonfire. Children collecting wood for the bonfire was once a common sight in the week before 5 November, as was street begging. Children would sit on the pavement accompanied by their home-made effigy, calling out 'Penny for the Guy' to passers-by, to raise funds for fireworks. However, this is rarely seen or heard today. Although the event has changed little over the years, a more recent interpretation involves the burning of celebrities and politicians in place of a 'Guy'. Another recent trend is the wearing of 'Guy Fawkes' masks at political demonstrations.

Penny for the Guy.

Figure 12.6 A scene more usually associated with medieval barbarism, yet this could be a garden in suburban Britain on Bonfire Night.

Like many historic festivals, festivities, celebrations and entertainments, the story and origins of Guy Fawkes have been marginalised, but the spectacle is still widely observed and enjoyed.

Music festivals

The countryside is still a dominant influence in British heritage, in conservation, in sport, recreation, entertainment and celebration, and it holds a magnetic influence on those living in towns and cities, each year drawing millions to take part in events and activities around the counties of the UK.

Some of the largest and best-known events have a focus on music, and in recent times these have grown sharply in number and popularity. In 2004 there were around 100 music festivals held around the UK, but by 2014 this had grown to over 900. The top 200 festivals contribute £450 million to the economy in ticket sales, travel, accommodation and food, and attract many visitors from overseas. Larger ones, such as Glastonbury, regularly attract over 120,000 campers and are broadcast internationally. At times, they have been a vehicle for counter-culture, alternative lifestyles and explicitly political causes. But today they have become more corporate in nature, and highly profitable forms of mass entertainment for their organisers and sponsors.

Some of the earliest festivals were of classical music and opera. The Glynde-bourne Festival Opera is held near Lewes in Sussex, and has taken place almost every year since the original two-week festival began in 1934. Today, it takes place over four months from May to August each year, when the resident London Philharmonic Orchestra assists with some 76 performances, which are presented to a total audience of over 85,000. The location is an important element of Glynde-bourne's appeal, as many artists and spectators are attracted by the verdant elegance of the remote country setting.

[…] Pop and rock were beginning to replace jazz in festival programmes, and one of the highlights was Glastonbury Fair. It began in 1914 when classical music concerts and lectures took place around a summer school at Glastonbury in Somerset, until 1926. However, it was not until 1970 that the Festival started again, when local farmer Michael Eavis organised the Pilton Pop, Blues and Folk Festival. It was attended by around 1500 fans, who paid an entrance fee of £1 to see T. Rex, among others. The following year it was named the Glastonbury Fair, with David Bowie, Joan Baez and Hawkwind headlining. Like many other open-air festivals of the period, it also offered dance, poetry readings, theatre and other sideshows.

A growing counter-culture was beginning to attach itself to the festival scene. In the southern English countryside, a growing number of small events offered the opportunity to raise awareness of alternative issues, celebrate arts, crafts, experimentation, environmentalism, and a chance to meet like-minded individuals who shared a similar disenchantment with conventional politics. In East Anglia, local fairs reinvented seasonal gatherings in the countryside, imbuing them with an environmental awareness and early 'green' politics. […] Large festivals often raised funds for and awareness of political causes; however, unlike at the smaller events, the politics tended to be more mainstream than alternative. Having seen the massed crowds at the American festival of Woodstock in 1969, and around 200,000 music fans at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970, in 1971 the former Beatle George Harrison, together with Eric Clap-ton and Ringo Starr, staged the Concert for Bangladesh in New York, raising $250,000 to aid war casualties in the war-torn nation. It was the first of its kind, and provided the inspiration for other large, politicised concerts and festivals in Britain later in the decade, such as the Rock Against Racism concert supported by the Anti-Nazi League in 1978 at Victoria Park in London, which featured the Clash, Steel Pulse, X-Ray Spex and others, and was attended by over 100,000. Rock Against Racism was aimed at promoting racial harmony through music, and was one of the first organisations to mix black and white bands at a concert. It worked closely with the Anti-Nazi League to organise gigs around Britain, and helped to build support for anti-racism in schools, workplaces and the community in general, as well as exposing far-right, neo-Nazi groups such as the National Front and the British National Party.

At a time of escalating Cold War tension, the Glastonbury Festival continued to support various charitable and political causes such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. But throughout the decade both large and small music festivals became increasingly divorced from political causes and more charity focused; for example, in 1985 the Live Aid concert at Wembley Stadium in London helped to raised funds for a famine in Ethiopia. It was broadcast live on television, and was seen by an estimated 1.9 billion viewers in around 150 countries.

[…] With the advent of the twenty-first century, public demand for festivals has seen the number and variety increase almost exponentially. But unlike those of previous decades, there has been a marked shift away from political awareness-raising, from charitable causes and from counter-culture, towards corporatism and profit. Festival goers have become customers with expectations, and the experience has changed from one of camping in a field with a poor sound system and low standards of food and hygiene, to one of clean toilets, international cuisine, no queues, a high fidelity sound, facilities for children, and in place of a damp, smelly tent, high-quality accommodation is often available for hire.

Glastonbury remains the benchmark for many large mainstream festivals. Despite its origins in the free festival and counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, it has grown to a five-day event, with a capacity of 135,000, attracting some of the most notable pop and rock artists, along with hundreds of other acts. The event helps to raise millions of pounds for good causes, including Oxfam, Greenpeace and WaterAid, who also assist by offering their services as volunteers. Nevertheless, it is sometimes criticised for ‘selling out’; for becoming a major corporate event characterised by expensive tickets, online ticketing systems, security guards and commercialisation, plus, for those able to afford its hire, even the luxury of an on-site Winnebago, or an air-conditioned yurt.

Elsewhere in Britain, the festival scene has been characterised in recent years by the arrival of smaller, ‘boutique’ events, such as Kendal Calling in Cumbria and LeeFest in Surrey, and many others that offer high-quality accommodation on site, fewer queues and other events such as comedy, theatre and tutorials on photography. Trends are clearly moving towards a rebranding of festivals in terms of exclusivity and conformity in events which are clean, well ordered and about as subversive as a Glyndebourne opera. The business model is also being exported, as larger events look to franchise their festivals overseas. In 2013, the organisers of Field Day and The Warehouse Project staged an event The Unknown Festival in Croatia, in 2014 Wonderfruit launched in Thailand and Bestival organisers expect to launch an event in the USA in 2015.

[…] There is also the World of Music and Dance (WOMAD) in Malmesbury, Wiltshire, which was first held in 1982, organised by musician Peter Gabriel and others.

Figure 12.7 Glastonbury Festival – the largest event of its kind in the world.

Notting Hill Carnival

Notting Hill Carnival is the biggest street festival of its kind in the UK, and one of the largest in the world. It takes place over two days of the August Bank Holiday weekend. It began quite modestly in 1964 as an attempt to showcase to the general public the steel bands who played in the London district of Earls Court each weekend. Today, the carnival attracts over one million visitors to the streets of the London suburb, and makes an important contribution to the West Indian heritage in the UK. It is said to include more whites and Europeans than native British-Caribbeans, and includes rapping, performance poetry and steel bands. Soca and calypso are the most traditional kinds of music played, although in recent years these have been eclipsed by the powerful sound systems, which blast reggae, R&B, dub and other styles into the crowds passing by.

The festival has its origins in nineteenth-century Trinidadian festivals that celebrated the abolition of slavery, and participants would dress in costume to hide their real identities as they mimicked and satirised the dress and manners of their former European masters. Today, the costumes are elaborate confections worn by the ‘Mas’ dancers who perform in the street and on floats which pass along the carnival route. Apart from the look and sound of the carnival, there is the characteristic aromas emanating from the numerous food stalls, which include barbecued jerk chicken, curries, patties and fried bananas or plantain.

Over the years the Carnival has become an institution that cuts across age, gender, class ethnicity and sexual orientation to bring generations of performers and festival goers together in a musical and cultural event that is unique in the world. Nevertheless, despite the positive image, at times the Carnival has been tainted by violence, but given the size of the crowds, the number of incidents is relatively low. Media interest in such a large gathering is inevitably high, and tends to report every incident, which leads to a misconception about the frequency and seriousness of any misdemeanors.

Popular country events

As well as music festivals, the British countryside is also home to a variety of other kinds of events, entertainments and shows. Many village festivals are focused on country crafts and skills. High-quality agricultural produce, fine livestock, and traditional rural arts, crafts and skills are often on display, while others have a greater focus on engineering, especially classic automobiles and traction engines. The latter are steel behemoths, massive coal-fired machines on wheels which were once used to drive agricultural machinery and fairground rides, but are now living museum pieces that appeal to a broad range of enthusiasts. The Lincolnshire Show offers a good combination of all these elements in an annual event that began in 1883.

Inevitably, some of the less conventional are the most historic, for example the Royal Annual Shrovetide Football Game, which takes place each year on Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday in Ashbourne, Derbyshire. The town becomes the pitch, and two teams of over 100 players, each composed of men, women and children, participate in games lasting around eight hours. Football games on these dates go back to the twelfth century, during the reign of Henry II, and the game at Ashbourne has been played since the mid-seventeenth century. This game is said to be the origin of the expression ‘a derby game’, which today refers to a game between two local rivals, or two teams from the same town.

Others include the festival of cheese rolling at Cooper’s Hill in Gloucester-shire, the festival of Up Helly Aa at Lerwick in Shetland, the Nutters’ Dance at Bacup in Lancashire, Fireball Whirling at Stonehaven in Aberdeenshire, and the summer and winter solstices at Stonehenge, Wiltshire. Several have their origins in pre-Christian times and remain local in nature, although one exception is Hallowe’en on the eve of All Hallows (31 October), a national event when children delight in dressing up as witches and wizards influenced by gothic horror films and literature, in order to imitate evil spirits and to ‘trick or treat’ unsuspecting members of the public.

A feature of some British country festivals is the presence of Morris dancers. This is a type of English folk dancing by choreographed participants, who often perform over swords or sticks. Clothing is predominantly white, and adorned with red sashes, coloured waistcoats and bells on the shins. The earliest written mention of them is in the mid-fifteenth century, and it is thought the name Morris is a corruption of the word ‘Moorish’, since the dances, costumes and music have much in common with those still found in Spain (and western France) today. A dance team is known as a ‘side’ and has between six and eight dancers. There are six dominant styles of Morris dancing, with variations possible within each style. Participants can be male or female, and music is supplied from a pipe and tabor (drum), a fiddle, a melodeon or accordion. Songs are usually about the rhythms of rural life, with the performers’ dance led by a squire, while others in the role of fools and beasts may mingle with the crowd, amusing the children and others.

As with many modern customs and practices, there is a tension between those ‘sides’ who wish to keep faithful to the music and dance of the nineteenth century and earlier, and others who reinvent and reinterpret music and dance to embrace modern influences. Some sides even embrace the internet, maintaining a web presence with blogs, forums and so on, keeping the public updated about their tours and other activities.

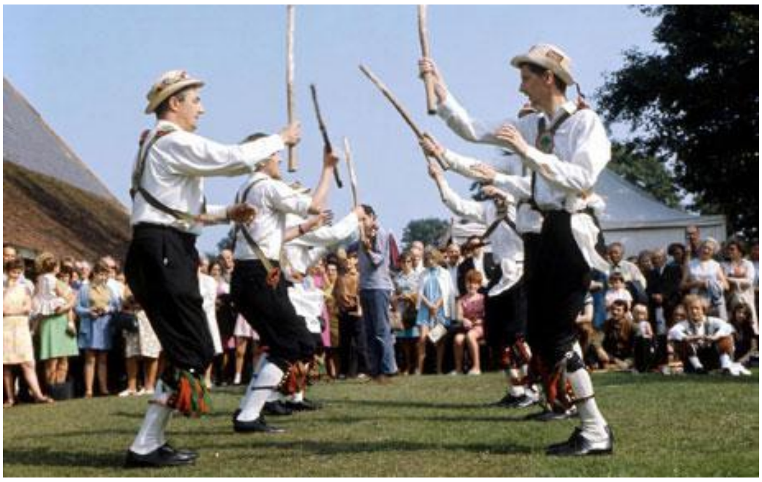

Figure 12.8 Morris men in action.

Other well-known festivals are more urban in nature. Some of the largest are funfairs, such as Hull Fair and Nottingham Goose Fair, which have their origins in the early medieval period. Today, they offer popular rides, attractions, games and amusements not unlike those that can be seen at most seaside towns around Britain, such as Blackpool, Margate and Scarborough, where gaudy art works inspired by American youth culture of the 1950s provide the anachronistic backdrop to rides that include a big wheel, big dipper, dodgems and merry-go-round. In sum, sensational rides and side shows are designed to offer a brief thrill to the youth of the locality, in a garish spectacle that recalls the eighteenth-century English tradition of carnival, with its atmosphere, noise and colour.