

The Observer's approach is trying to present a snapshot of the real Britain as opposed to that of the tourist brochures. It is partly limited by factors surrounding any inquiry based on questionnaires. Questions and the scope for replying to them can be limited. Respondents do not always tell the truth. The funky and the bizarre sell newspapers etc. and hence figure larger than life. But by and large we are given a dispassionate overview, within the constraints of *The Observer's* liberal, left-wing leanings.

Channel 5 An A-Z of Britishness

In 2001, Ian Russell produced a programme called *An A-Z of Britishness* for Channel 5. Using twenty-six headings, the programme-makers looked at various aspects of contemporary Britain. Their list of topics was random and eclectic, and the tone flippant, with, for example, taxi drivers from the North and South voicing prejudices about either side of the divide. However, most viewers of a programme intended for home consumption could relate to the items raised. The list is reproduced in Table 0.2 and might be used for a classroom brainstorming exercise. Many of these items are obvious, but a few require explanation. Deep-fried Mars Bars and fluorescent green peas are northern food delicacies; Britons are evidently the highest *per capita* consumers of jigsaw puzzles; there is an attempt to introduce the kilt as a fashion garment for men; the pedestal water-closet was

TABLE 0.2 An A-Z of Britishness

Alcohol	North-South divide
Bingo	Older people
Cockney	Pantomime
Dome	Queue
Eccentricity	Routemaster
Food – peas, Mars Bars	Saucy postcards
Gnomes	Thatcher
Housing crisis	Union Flag
Inventors	Victory
Jigsaw	Weather
Kilt	X-rated
Lavatory	Yobs
Manners	Zebra crossings

Source: *An A-Z of Britishness*, Channel 5, March 2001

pioneered in Britain, by Thomas Crapper in the nineteenth century; Routemasters are red London buses; 16 million saucy postcards were sold in 1963 – the company is now defunct; the rating ‘X’ for films, which gave them a forbidden-fruit status, was abandoned in 1981; yobs are thugs – the cartoonist Tony Husband got his own back on his muggers by drawing ‘Yobs’ cartoons for *Private Eye* for fifteen years; the idea of black-and-white zebra street crossings was exported around the world.

The programme was a lighthearted venture, but made some telling points. For example it interviewed three people, Scottish, Irish, and English respectively. The two former knew the dates of their respective national saint’s days (St Andrew: 30 November, St Patrick: 17 March), but the English person did not know that St George’s Day is on 23 April. This tends to support the idea that it is English people who are least aware of their nationality and whose sense of identity is now most in crisis.

The programme included a comment from the writer Ross Benson that Britons have good manners in order to mask their underlying violence. He said that during the Falklands conflict the Argentines found it very difficult to deal with the good manners of British diplomats. ‘They subject you to their charm, and if you don’t agree with them, they kill you.’ The programme concentrated on some of the more outrageous elements of Britain. Many of the people featured were ‘oddballs’ – a Cockney Pearly King; a garden gnome collector; a man who walked the length of the country barefoot, and lived in a cave.

The limitations of the approach in this case are: programme time constraints; the appeal of the bizarre rather than the ordinary – presenting a wackier Britain than the norm; the absence of all the ‘ordinary’ features of British life – work, sport, family, landscape and perhaps the most dominant element of British culture: television itself. However, largely because of its idiosyncratic approach, this was a successful programme bearing a message, broadly speaking celebrating eccentricity, which British people wanted to hear about themselves.

England, England

In Julian Barnes’s 1998 novel *England, England*, a powerful businessman plans to turn the Isle of Wight into a theme park, so that tourists will not have to traipse from Buckingham Palace to Stratford-upon-Avon to Chester and so on. His business blueprint lists the following ‘Fifty Quintessences of Englishness’. Some of these items are tongue-in-cheek, and one could argue about the order in which they are prioritised, but they represent some common perceptions and will be familiar to many within and outside the United Kingdom.

TABLE 0.3 Quintessences of Englishness

Royal Family	London taxis
Big Ben / Houses of Parliament	Bowler hat
Manchester United FC	TV classic serials
Class system	Oxford / Cambridge
Pubs	Harrods
A robin in the snow	Double-decker buses / red buses
Robin Hood & Merrie Men	Hypocrisy
Cricket	Gardening
White cliffs of Dover	Perfidy / untrustworthiness
Imperialism	Half-timbering
Union Jack	Homosexuality
Snobbery	Alice in Wonderland
God Save the King / Queen	Winston Churchill
BBC	Marks & Spencer
West End	Battle of Britain
<i>Times</i> newspaper	Francis Drake
Shakespeare	Trooping the Colour
Thatched cottages	Whingeing
Cup of tea / Devonshire cream tea	Queen Victoria
Stonehenge	Breakfast
Phlegm / stiff upper lip	Beer / warm beer
Shopping	Emotional frigidity
Marmalade	Wembley Stadium
Beefeaters / Tower of London	Flagellation / Public schools
	Not washing / bad underwear
	Magna Carta

Source: Julian Barnes, *England, England* (1998)

Examining the list we can see that it contains some physical monuments, some historical figures, some works of the imagination, some ceremonials. Most people can easily relate to these elements of Englishness even if they don't apply them to themselves.

The monarchy, for example, is a common topic of conversation, though most Britons have never seen the Queen in person. Members of all social classes, and older people especially, support the monarchy but draw the line at the minor royals who they see as contributing nothing to the welfare of Britain. They point for example to the moral lead meant to come

from royalty. The marital breakdown rate of the present Queen's children, at three out of four, is worse than the national average of one in three. Despite this disillusionment, 70 per cent of Britons say they prefer to live as subjects under a monarch rather than as citizens in a republic. However, 68 per cent of them believe that we will not have a monarchy fifty years from now.

As regards the classic serials category listed above, most people could name *The Forsyte Saga*, or Jane Austen adaptations, but they would be just as likely to include preferred television sitcoms such as *Blackadder*, *Fawlty Towers*, or *Rising Damp*, as well as detective series such as *Inspector Morse* and *Midsomer Murders*. Much of British culture is based on the supposed essential rurality of the country. John Major referred to 'warm beer, cricket and ladies cycling' as essences of Englishness. These are country pursuits. television series such as those above trade on this rural myth. Set in beautiful locations, they are essentially about restoring order and calm to an idyllic place whose waters have been ruffled by the odd murder or two.

Partly because of its context in a nostalgic novel, Barnes's checklist has an historical bias. Past glories overshadow such present-day banalities as 'whingeing', 'emotional frigidity', and 'shopping', and this list, more than the others, records the traditional British vices of snobbery, hypocrisy, and perfidy. There is a dated feel to such an approach. The tenor of the items is before the past half-century. It is Britain in aspic, disabled by its past, and really has little relevance for the contemporary British student population for example, who are more tuned in to travelling through Europe, music, and the drink and drugs culture.

Individualism

One thing all these studies have in common is their admiration for British individualism. They praise British people's dissent, scepticism, lack of conformity, the ability to set rather than follow fashion trends, and individuality over the herd instinct. Eccentricity is one stage further on from this and is admired even more. Undoubtedly for a country of eccentrics to thrive, fundamental tolerance of dissent or difference is necessary, and clearly this exists in Britain. Environmental protesters such as Swampy become national heroes, through media exposure. Ken Livingstone was elected mayor of London despite the government's best efforts to thwart him. It would be nice to think that Britain supplies a model of diversity which could be exported to other post-industrial democracies. However, many people ask the question: how long can Britain remain an oasis of diversity and tolerance of difference in the face of the homogenising forces of globalisation?