

## Did You Know?

- The London Underground, known as the Tube, was the first and largest subway system in the world.
- Windsor Castle is the oldest royal residence in the world still occupied by the royal family.
- *Big Ben*, the bell in the tower at the Houses of Parliament, was named for Sir Benjamin Hall, a public official in London.
- Bagpipes were introduced to Scotland from Ireland.
- In Wales, there are more sheep than people.
- The first Christmas card was created in England in the 19th century.
- Mary Stuart became queen of Scotland when she was only six days old.
- *Offa's Dyke*, an ancient border-wall between Wales and England, was built in the 790s. Parts of it still exist today, and one can take a walking tour of the entire original 176-mile (284 km) border.
- More redheads are born in Scotland than in any other country. More than 10 percent of the population are redheads.
- England helped develop many of the world's favorite sports, including *football* (soccer), boxing, rugby, and tennis.
- The United Kingdom has no written constitution.
- The London Eye is one of the tallest observation wheels in the world. Each rotation takes about 30 minutes.
- The Channel Tunnel (also called the Chunnel) connects the United Kingdom to France. It runs 24 miles (38 km) underwater.

## Flag

The flag of the United Kingdom is called the Union Jack. It contains three main symbols: the red cross of St. George on a white background (for England), the white diagonal cross of St. Andrew on a blue background (for Scotland), and the red diagonal cross of St. Patrick on a white background (for Ireland).



## National Image

The Houses of Parliament in London, also called the New Palace of Westminster, is where the government for the United Kingdom is located.



## People and Places

### Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.)  
94,058  
Area (sq. km.)  
243,610



Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) and Northern Ireland make up the country known as the United Kingdom (UK). The nation's territory also includes several islands off the coast of Scotland, England, and Wales. The UK is about the size of New

Zealand or the state of Oregon. England makes up just over half of the nation's total area.

The UK is surrounded by several bodies of water, including the North Sea, the Irish Sea, and the English Channel. In fact, no point in the UK is more than 77 miles (124 km) from the sea. The Thames, Severn, and Humber are three of the nation's major rivers.

Scotland's west coast and islands have many *marshes* and *bogs*, which are areas where the ground is wet and covered with grasses and other plants. The Scottish highlands are home to Ben Nevis—the highest point in the country. Wales and Scotland are more mountainous than England, and large parts of the Welsh countryside are covered in low, rolling brown hills and short brown grasses. Much of the countryside in England is green. Rolling plains cover the east and southeast. Northern Ireland is separated from Great Britain by the Irish Sea and the North Channel. It is mostly hilly and includes the largest lake in the British Isles—Lough Neagh.

Although the UK is known for clouds and rain, it only gets really cold in the mountains. Otherwise, winter high temperatures are above 40°F (4°C), and summer highs average below 72°F (22°C). The majority of the rain falls in the west. More than half the days of the year are overcast.

## Population

Population  
64,088,222



Although most people in the UK are white, Britain's colonial heritage has brought many cultures together, especially in large cities like London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds. The biggest minorities include black, Indian, and Pakistani populations. However, as in other western European countries, the government has tried to limit immigration.

More than 80 percent of the UK's inhabitants live in England. London is the capital of the UK and is home to more than 9 million people; the regional capitals are Edinburgh (Scotland), Cardiff (Wales), and Belfast (Northern Ireland). Most British live in cities and towns.

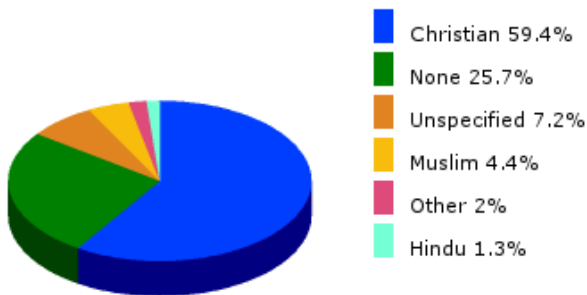
## Language

Nearly everyone in the UK speaks English, the official language. But the regional *dialects* (ways of speaking or pronouncing) can sound quite different. In addition to English, various regional languages are spoken: Welsh (*Cymraeg*) in Wales, Irish Gaelic (*Gaeilge*) in Northern Ireland, Cornish in Cornwall, and Scottish Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*) and Scots in Scotland. These regional languages are often taught simultaneously with English. In Wales, road signs and public notices are often in Welsh with English subtitles below or beside them.

**Can You Say It in British English?**

Garbage	<i>Rubbish</i>
Cookies	<i>Biscuits</i>
Gasoline	<i>Petrol</i>
Truck	<i>Lorry</i>
Diapers	<i>Nappies</i>
Restroom	<i>Loo</i>

**Religion**




Source: *The World Factbook 2016. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2016.*




In the 16th century, during the reign of Henry VIII, England split from the Roman Catholic Church to form the Church of England (Anglican Church). Today, Anglicans and other Christians make up the majority of the population. The UK has two state churches, the Church of England and the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian Church), but freedom of religion is guaranteed. Few British Christians go to church on a regular basis. Instead they attend on special occasions, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Small percentages of the UK’s population are Muslim or Hindu. Northern Ireland is almost half Catholic. More than 25 percent of the population does not belong to any religion.

**History**

**Time Line**

3000 BC	
3000 BC	Early records provide evidence of settlements on Britain
AD 1	

AD 43	Romans invade England and stay until 410	
400s	Angles and Saxons take control of small areas	
500s	Native Celts move to Scotland and Wales as Angles and Saxons expand their territory	
865	Vikings conquer two of the three Anglo-Saxon kingdoms	
871–99	Alfred the Great, King of Wessex, defends England against the Vikings	
900		
1066	William the Conqueror defeats the English (Anglo-Saxons) at the Battle of Hastings, becoming the first Norman king of England	
1138–53	Civil war rages in England	
1154	Henry II becomes the first Plantagenet king	
1215	King John signs the Magna Carta, granting specific rights to citizens	
1337–1453	England fights the Hundred Years' War with France	
1348	The bubonic plague, or Black Death, reaches England and kills half the population	
1455–85	The Wars of the Roses take place	
1500		
1509	Henry VIII comes to the throne	
1534	Henry VIII passes the Act of Supremacy, making himself the leader of the English Church	
1536	Wales unites with England	
1558–1603	Queen Elizabeth I reigns	
1588	England defeats the Spanish Armada	

1603	James I rules both Scotland and England	
1605	The Gunpowder Plot to blow up Parliament is foiled	
1642–49	The English Civil War is fought between supporters of King Charles I and supporters of Parliament	
1649–60	The Commonwealth, established by Oliver Cromwell, briefly replaces the monarchy	
1660	The monarchy is restored under Charles II	
1666	The Great Fire of London destroys nearly 400 acres of the city	
<b>1700</b>		
1707	The Kingdom of Great Britain is created, uniting England and Scotland	
1776	The American colonies become independent from Great Britain	
1801	Ireland formally joins the UK	
1815	Napoleon is defeated by Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo	
1833	The Slavery Abolition Act makes slavery illegal throughout the British Empire	
1837–1901	Queen Victoria reigns over a huge global empire	
<b>1900</b>		
1914–18	World War I kills nearly one million British soldiers	
1916	Ireland revolts against British rule and is semi-independent by 1921	
1939–44	Britain and the Allies defeat Germany in World War II	
1947	India becomes independent of British rule	

1949	Ireland becomes independent, except six northern counties (Northern Ireland) that remain part of the UK	
1950–80	The UK grants independence to most overseas territories	
1969	Attempts by the Irish Republican Army to force the reunification of Ireland and Northern Ireland ignite decades of violence	
1979	Margaret Thatcher becomes Britain's first female prime minister	
1998	Voters in Ireland and Northern Ireland approve the Good Friday Agreement, an attempt to end the long-standing conflict in Northern Ireland	
1999	The creation of <i>parliaments</i> (lawmaking bodies) in Scotland and Wales gives them more control over their own affairs	
2000		
2003	The UK joins the United States in a war against Iraq	
2005	Four suicide bomb attacks strike London's transportation system, killing 52 people and injuring about 700 more; the Irish Republican Army announces that it will stop its armed campaign to end British rule in Northern Ireland	
2007	The UK announces that it will begin to withdraw its troops from Iraq	
2008	The economy of the UK is hit hard by the global financial crisis; the Church of England votes to allow the ordination of women bishops	
2011	Prince William and Kate Middleton marry in a ceremony watched by millions around the world; they become known as the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge	
2013	The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have a baby boy, Prince George, who is third in line to the throne	
2014	Scots vote against independence from the UK by a 10 percent margin; UK leaders promise more local power to Scots, including greater control over taxes and welfare	
2015	The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have a baby girl, Princess Charlotte, who is fourth in line to the throne; Queen Elizabeth II becomes the longest-reigning British monarch, passing the record set by her great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria	
PRESENT		

## Romans, Vikings, and Germans

Archaeological evidence shows that early peoples lived in what is now the United Kingdom thousands of years ago. Some of the most fascinating of these remains are standing stone circles, including the famous Stonehenge in Wiltshire. Most of England was once part of the Roman Empire. The Romans tried several times to take control of Scotland as well but were never successful. They built a system of roads and towns. Roman armies left by AD 410 and never returned.



Scots in the north, Vikings from Scandinavia, and Germanic Angles and Saxons all attacked at various times. The Germanic groups soon overpowered everyone else. They pushed the native Celts north and west (to Scotland and Wales) and established their Anglo-Saxon culture in England by the 600s.

## Magna Carta

In 1066, William of Normandy—a *province* (similar to a state) in France—invaded and conquered England. He brought with him a new ruling class and system of laws. He offered land to barons in exchange for their military service. French replaced English as the official language. The Normans ruled the land until the 12th century, when a civil war brought the French Plantagenet dynasty to power.



The Magna Carta was signed by the unpopular King John in 1215. Noblemen had rebelled against him because he was unfairly taxing them and using their lands. The Magna Carta limited what the king could take from his citizens. This was a new idea because before this, kings claimed to own everything in a kingdom. The Magna Carta became important later as a model for *democracy* (government by the people).

England and France went on to fight the Hundred Years' War over who had the right to control certain French territories. England eventually let most of these territories go, falling into a period of civil war called the War of the Roses. During this period, the York and Lancaster houses of the Plantagenet dynasty fought over the crown.

## British Empire

Between the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I (1500s) and Queen Victoria (1800s), Great Britain explored and colonized many parts of the world. The British used native people as farm workers, servants, or miners after they took over their lands. Many colonial leaders believed they were helping the natives by bringing Christianity and civilization, but the colonies often resented British control and the use of their people and resources. At the peak of Queen Victoria's reign in 1900, the British Empire was found in every part of the world. This prompted the famous saying "The sun never sets on Britain," meaning there was always at least one part of its domain in daylight.



## Alba (Scotland) and Cymru (Wales)

Scots are descendants of Britain's original Celtic people. Scottish pride in their heritage has allowed Scots to maintain their traditions and considerable independence within the UK. Wales was also independent for many centuries, but England defeated the last Welsh prince in 1282. Wales became part of Great Britain in 1536.



## Northern Ireland

In 1801, Ireland joined the UK, but many Irish fought against this union. In 1949, when the Republic of Ireland gained its independence, Northern Ireland remained part of the UK. Most Irish are Catholic, but the people in Northern Ireland are mostly Protestant. Protestants and Catholics strongly disagree over whether Northern Ireland should reunite with Ireland or stay with Britain. This disagreement led to decades of violence. After many failed attempts to negotiate an end to the fighting, a historic agreement (called the Good Friday Agreement) was signed in 1998 that marked major progress toward achieving a lasting peace. Since then, both sides have worked at resolving their remaining differences.



## Lifestyle

### Games and Sports

*Football* (soccer) is the most popular sport in the UK. International matches attract huge crowds, and top players are treated like movie stars. Rugby, golf (which was invented by Scots in the 1500s), and tennis are also popular. *Cricket* (similar to baseball) is played in the UK and many former colonies (areas that were once under British control). *Cricket* is an outdoor game played with a flat bat and a ball. Other favorite forms of recreation include swimming, *snooker* (a billiards game), darts, and squash. Certain American sports such as basketball are also becoming more popular.



### Holidays

England has the fewest public holidays in Europe. Unlike most countries, the UK does not celebrate a national holiday.

Children love Christmas, when Father Christmas brings presents after they have fallen asleep. Families traditionally eat a turkey dinner on Christmas Day and a Christmas pudding for dessert. The pudding is usually a dense fruit pudding with a sprig of holly on top. Tables are decorated with *crackers* (tubes of brightly colored paper with a gunpowder strip inside that snaps when the tube is pulled apart). Each *cracker* has a prize inside, often a small gift or a paper hat. The week between Christmas and New Year's is the most popular holiday period.



New Year's Eve is Scotland's biggest holiday. It is called *Hogmanay* and is a night for long parties. Scots also honor the Scottish poet Robert Burns each January with special dinner parties where they eat *haggis*, the Scottish national dish (made of sheep intestines and oats, which are cooked in the sheep's stomach).

Guy Fawkes Day, also called Fireworks Night or Bonfire Night, is an annual celebration held on 5 November. It commemorates Guy Fawkes' failed attempt to assassinate King James I by blowing up the House of Lords. Guy Fawkes was a member of a group of English Catholics determined to replace the Protestant King James with a Catholic king. The holiday is traditionally celebrated with huge bonfires and elaborate fireworks shows.



## Food

Traditional foods vary depending on the region. English dishes include roast beef and Yorkshire pudding (a baked batter), fish and *chips* (fries), and steak and kidney pie. Scots eat *mince* (ground meat), *tatties* (potatoes), stews, and fish and *chips*. In Wales, traditional foods include *cawl* (a soup) and *bara brith* (currant cake). In Northern Ireland, people typically eat potatoes, stew, seafood, meat pies, and various pastries.

The UK also has a wide variety of European and ethnic foods. In fact, curry is one of the most popular foods in the country. Many in the UK enjoy fast food, but its popularity has declined somewhat because the government has strongly encouraged people to eat healthier food.



## Schools

In the UK, kids start *primary* (elementary) school by age four or five, and they wear uniforms in every *form* (grade). The first year of school is called *reception* (kindergarten). At age 11, children move on to *secondary* (high) school. At age 16, students take a test called the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) to earn a sort of graduation diploma. If they want to go to university, they stay in school for two more years at a separate sixth *form* college and take another test, called *A-levels*, to get in.

The school day generally starts at 9 a.m. and finishes at 3:30 p.m. In the *primary forms* (K–6), students learn many basic subjects, including math, English, social studies, spelling, art, and so on. The school year is split into three terms: September to Christmas, January to Easter, and Easter to July. *Primary* school teachers are addressed by their last name by both *pupils* (students) and parents. *Secondary* school teachers are addressed as "Miss" or "Sir." The principal of a school is called the *headmaster* or *headmistress*.

## Life as a Kid

Kids in the UK go to school, do homework, help with household chores, and spend time with friends. Many children play sports and are big sports fans as well. They have favorite *football* (soccer) teams and wear jerseys and scarves with their team's colors on them. Computer games are another popular pastime. Kids in the UK enjoy pop music from the United States as well as England and Europe. When they go on vacations with their families, many kids like to go someplace warm and dry, such as the Mediterranean coast.



## Society

### Government

Capital

London

Head of State

Queen Elizabeth II

Head of Government

Prime Minister David Cameron



The queen of England is the head of state, but she has only limited political power.

Instead, an elected Parliament governs the country. The 650-member House of Commons is the main house of Parliament. There is also a 780-member House of Lords. Elections are held at least every five years. The political party with the most seats in the House of Commons chooses the prime minister, who leads the government. The prime minister can be elected an unlimited number of times. The prime minister traditionally lives behind the world-famous black door at Number 10 Downing Street in London. Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have their own governments with limited powers over issues such as health and education. The voting age is 18.

## Money and Economy

Currency  
 Pound sterling



The UK has one of the strongest economies in Europe, and most Britons live comfortably. However, there is a growing gap between the rich and the poor. Some of the country's most important natural resources are oil, natural gas, iron ore, and salt. Major industries in the UK include machinery and tools, ships, and cars. Many people work in service industries, such as tourism and education. London is one of the world's most important financial centers. Despite being a member of the European Union, the UK does not use the *euro* as its currency. The currency of the UK is the *pound sterling*, usually just called the *pound* or *quid*.

## Getting Around

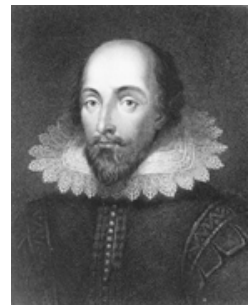
People in the UK drive on the left side of the road, and a car's steering wheel is on the right side of the car. Cars, buses, and trains are all common ways for people to get around in the UK. There also are subways in big cities like London (where the subway is called the Tube or the Underground). Taxis are also popular for getting around. They are called *hackneys*, or just *hacks*, and are usually black. London's Heathrow Airport is the world's busiest international airport. The Channel Tunnel (or Chunnel) connects England and France by rail under the waters of the English Channel.



## Culture Facts & Contacts

### Author! Author!

The United Kingdom is the birthplace of some of the world's best-known writers. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) wrote 38 plays between 1590 and 1611. Millions still love to read his plays or see them performed. Almost four hundred movies have been based on them. Other famous authors from the UK include Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, C.S. Lewis, Jane Austen, Lewis Carroll, Roald Dahl, Beatrix Potter, and many more. J. K. Rowling, creator of the Harry Potter series, also lives in the UK.



**Learn More**

Contact the British Embassy, 3100 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 588-6500; web site [www.gov.uk/government/world/usa](http://www.gov.uk/government/world/usa). Or contact the British Tourist Authority, web site [www.visitbritain.com](http://www.visitbritain.com).

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# United Kingdom



The UK's largest lake is Loch Ness in Scotland; yes, that is where the famous Loch Ness monster supposedly hides.

It rains more than two hundred days a year in Scotland.

Ben Nevis (4,406 feet, or 1,343 m) in Scotland is the highest peak in the British Isles.

Northern Ireland is slightly cooler on average than the rest of the UK.

The UK, at 94,247 square miles (244,820 sq km), is about the size of Oregon.

Ireland is not part of the UK; it is a separate country.

