

Topic Page: [British](#)

Definition: **British** from *Collins English Dictionary*

adj

1 relating to, denoting, or characteristic of Britain or any of the natives, citizens, or inhabitants of the United Kingdom

2 relating to or denoting the English language as spoken and written in Britain, esp the S dialect generally regarded as standard See also Southern British English Received Pronunciation

3 relating to or denoting the ancient Britons

4 of or relating to the Commonwealth: *British subjects* ▷*n*

5 (*functioning as plural*) the natives or inhabitants of Britain

6 the extinct Celtic language of the ancient Britons See also Brythonic

> 'Britishness *n*

Summary Article: **BRITISH**

From *Cassell's Peoples, Nations and Cultures*

The legal identity of the population of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The sense of Britishness is strongest in England, where a majority identify themselves as being British first and ENGLISH second. In Wales and Scotland Britishness is usually considered a secondary identity. Attitudes to Britishness are most polarized in Northern Ireland, where it is totally rejected by the large nationalist minority and often passionately espoused by the unionist majority.

The stiff upper lip and *sang froid*, among other stereotypical attributes of Britishness, were largely products of the Victorian public-school system which sought to inculcate the virtues (real or imagined) of the martial peoples of classical antiquity, such as the Romans and Spartans, and the medieval code of chivalry. These were the virtues thought essential for a race of empire-builders who felt confident that they were bringing the benefits of civilization to the lesser breeds of humanity. A gift for spontaneous organization, improvisation and 'muddling through' have also been seen as British virtues. This is exemplified by the 'Dunkirk spirit' the extraordinary mood of popular resolution which prevailed after the fall of France in 1940, when Britain had hurriedly to prepare itself for the threat of a GERMAN invasion. In reality, however, there was little that was spontaneous about Britain's successful response to World War II: it was the result of the most efficient centralized government planning seen in any of the combatant nations. Today the 'Dunkirk spirit' is still regularly invoked, for troubles small and large: it stands for a sense of community and common purpose, which, except in occasional conditions of adversity, the British know they do not really now possess.

British identity – origins

The origins of the modern British identity date to the Union of the Crowns of England and Scotland in 1603, when King James VI of Scotland also became King James I of England. James promoted the idea of Britishness as part of his campaign to persuade the English and Scottish parliaments to agree to a

full political union. Although the SCOTS were willing, the English were not. By the time a political union was finally achieved in 1707, it was the English who were more in favour of it than the Scots. England's economy had leapt ahead during the 17th century, and it was apparent to most Scots that they were going to be junior partners in this relationship. The promotion of Britishness was an attempt to create a new identity that was neither English nor Scottish. However, England's dominance of the union meant that 'Great Britain' and 'England' became virtually synonymous, not only abroad but also in England. This made it impossible for Scots to identify themselves wholeheartedly as British. Britishness was also a challenge for the Welsh identity. As the descendants of the ancient BRITONS, the Welsh had always considered themselves to be *'the British'* so these developments threatened an important part of their non-English identity. One response was that the Welsh increasingly identified themselves with the ancient CELTS.

In 1801 the IRISH parliament was dissolved and Ireland too became part of the United Kingdom. One of the motives behind the Act of Union of 1707 had been to guarantee a Protestant succession, and this guarantee was desired by all three peoples of Great Britain. Because of this, anti-Catholicism was an important part of the early British identity. Relaxation of anti-Catholic legislation came too late to persuade Irish Catholics that they were equal citizens. The British government's failure to provide relief during the Great Famine of the 1840s confirmed that they were not. The growth of the nationalist movement in the later 19th century showed that a majority of the Irish had emphatically rejected Britishness and, increasingly, British rule itself. However, Catholic domination of the nationalist movement alienated Irish Protestants and drove them to identify themselves increasingly as British, leading ultimately to the present division of Ireland.

Britishness, empire and multiculturalism

The British identity was spread through Britain's empire by emigrants during the 19th century. Identification with Britain was naturally strongest in the white colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and it persisted even after those countries had been given their independence. The harsh experience of World War I affirmed the national identities of CANADIANS, AUSTRALIANS and NEW ZEALANDERS, and identification with Britain gradually declined thereafter, hastened in the later 20th century by increasing numbers of non-British immigrants to these countries. The British monarch is still head of state in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but this is not so much a sign of continuing identification with Britain as of a lack of consensus about what might replace the monarchy. AFRO-CARIBBEANS in Britain's WEST INDIAN colonies also developed a close identification with Britishness in the first half of the 20th century as a result of an education system that emphasized British cultural values and loyalty to the Crown. Afro-Caribbeans who emigrated to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s were disillusioned to find that they were regarded as racially inferior aliens in what they had been taught to regard as their motherland. The impact of Britishness in Africa and Asia was more limited. There, British settlers were relatively few in numbers and were always a minority among native populations who continued to maintain their traditional cultures and values. The Asians who identified most closely with the British were those, mostly Indian Hindus, who left their own communities and emigrated to Uganda and Kenya as indentured labourers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Expelled from these countries in the post-colonial era, their descendants settled in Britain, where they have become the most prosperous and integrated of recent immigrant communities. Since the 1960s Britain has also experienced substantial immigration of Asians from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Although both British Afro-Caribbeans and British Asians have a sometimes problematic relationship with the British

identity, their cultural impact, especially in music, fashion and cuisine, have been considerable: curry rather than roast beef is now Britain's most popular food.

In Great Britain, the prestige of being partners in the world's greatest empire made Britishness acceptable to the vast majority of the Scots and Welsh until after World War I. In fact, the Scots were arguably even more enthusiastic imperialists than the English. The postwar period saw the growth of Welsh and Scottish nationalism, calls for devolution and even independence, and an increasing rejection of any degree of British identity. Britain's membership of the EEC (now the European Union) took away some of the fear of independence, especially in Scotland, by offering an alternative economic safety net. The introduction of devolved governments for Wales and Scotland in 1999 have led to more self-confident expressions of national identity there, which have not gone unnoticed by the English, some of whom have begun to re-assert their national and regional identities over their Britishness. In these developments some commentators have anticipated the beginning of the end of the British identity. Others argue that Britishness will continue to have value as a uniting civic identity in what is, because of Commonwealth and other overseas immigration, an increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural society.

In the 2001 census the UK population was 58.8 million, of whom about 4.5 million were in non-white ethnic groups. In terms of religion, while Christianity predominates (about 77% of the population), almost 20% profess to no religion, while 3% are Muslims. English remains the official language, although where there are concentrations of minorities, in London and several other urban areas, South Asian and other languages are commonly used domestically and in local-government publications.

"May we be Brittain's and down goe old ignominious names of Scotland and England.

George Mackenzie, Earl of Cromarty, 1707

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