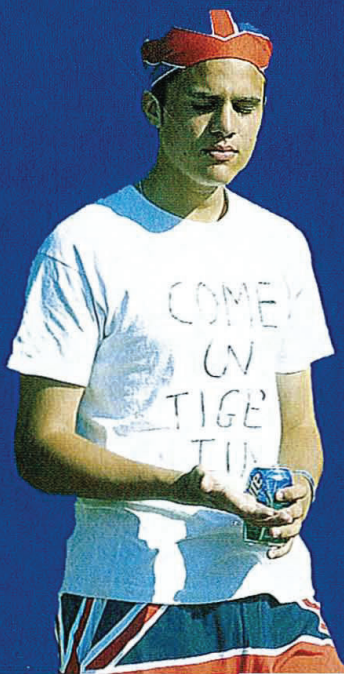
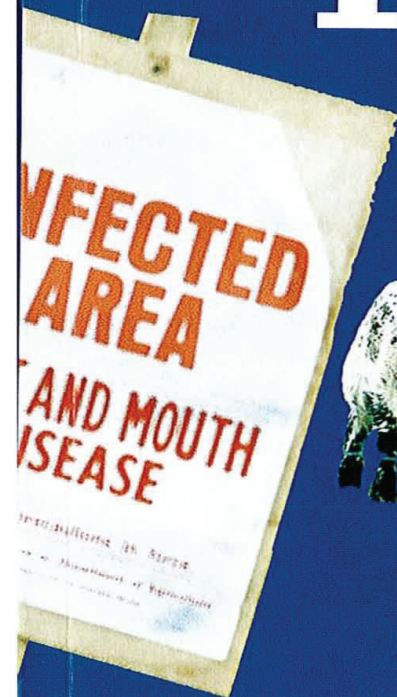


British Cultural Identities

SECOND EDITION

Edited by MIKE STORRY
and PETER CHILDS



Introduction: Britain in the modern world

Mike Storry and Peter Childs

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THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT contemporary Britain and British people. On the one hand, Britain is a country with defined boundaries, a recognisable landscape, a long history, and a position in the various international economic, social, and political league tables. On the other hand, British people are much harder to describe. To begin with, some British people do not live in Britain. Also, many people living in Britain do not think of themselves as British. Nationality is a matter of allegiance and cultural affiliation. Some people say that your nationality is indicated by where you choose to live or by the team you support at sports events; others say that it is a question of whom you would fight for. It has also been argued that nationality is no longer a powerful force in Britain, that it is simply a matter of circumstance, and that today it is far less significant than local or global identities: relatives, friends, and communities are more important to us and so is transnational culture.

Above all, nationality is a question of identity and so is crossed by other kinds of identity, such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, age, and occupation. This book aims to outline some of the kinds of identity found at those intersections in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As such, it will be implicitly questioning the difference between British cultural identities and cultural identities in Britain. Fifty years ago, T. S. Eliot famously said that 'culture' was something that included 'all the characteristic activities and interests of a people'. He thought that this meant for England: 'Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches, and the music of Elgar'. Fifty years on, conceptions of English and British identity have changed enormously and, for example, few people would attribute any significance to the twelfth of August, the opening day of the grouse-shooting season. Moreover television, which didn't feature for Eliot, would appear from Table 0.1 to be the main cultural bonding agent between British people.

The term 'British' is itself contentious. In recent years, partly as a response to the devolution of political power to Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, there has been much questioning of what it means to be British.

TABLE 0.1 Subjects of conversation with friends and family, 1991

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Percentage of people who ever talk about subject</i>
Advertising	2
Big business	2
Bringing up children	26
Clothes and fashion	19
Cost of living	43
Education	20
Gardening	16
Law and order	16
Neighbours or workmates	21
Politicians	8
Religion	6
Sport	25
Television programmes	48
The government	19
Trade unions	1
Newspaper articles	19
Health and welfare services	18
Unemployment	16
Personal health	21
None of the above/don't know	3

Source: TOM Attitudes to Advertising Survey, 1991

If we are all British, then why should people feel a need to revert to their previous 'nationalities'? And if others in the UK have power devolved to them, what becomes of the formerly dominant English?

In examining nationality we should add the caveat that Britishness is often used instead of Englishness. On William Gladstone's tombstone, he is described as 'Prime Minister of England' – ignoring Wales, Scotland, and Ireland! People from Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland believe that making Englishness synonymous with Britishness erases their identity. If British and English are the same, there is no room within the term for other nationalities who live in the British Isles. R. S. Thomas, the Welsh poet and clergyman, said 'Britain does not exist for me. It is an abstraction forced on the Welsh people.' For him it was just an aspect of imperialist domination and he wanted no part of it.

The debate has broadened out into questioning whether we are anyway determined by nation any longer. Some commentators suggest that it is easier to define British cultural identity by looking outside than inside. The argument goes that Britain is just another constituent of Marshall McLuhan's 'Global Village' – the product of various world influences, rather than the outcome of home-grown social developments. Doubtless there is some truth in this. One has only to see the popularity of McDonald's, American branded clothing, or the prevalence of overseas restaurant cuisines. (Britain has eight thousands Indian restaurants.) This view should certainly be borne in mind. Don't we live in a global culture, don't we enjoy influences from many geographical areas and isn't identity different for everyone? Some people are influenced by the fact of their age, by the fact that they live in a big city, are well or badly off financially. In short hasn't nationality been overridden by 'cultural' identity? This book seeks to address those questions.

Cultural identity is something which is partly imposed by one's background and partly chosen by people. All people have a number of influences bearing on them, from both Nature and Nurture. That is, they inherit their ethnicity, physical abilities, intelligence and so on, in large measure from parents. But many other 'environmental' factors affect their development: for example family, region, schooling, religion, music, etc. determine their experience. To a degree they form their own cultural identities by selection from a range of options. So for example they are Beatles fans or Manchester United supporters, or go to opera or watch films. They conform with or react against the values of their parents and accept or reject society's expectations of them. These influences, absorbed wittingly or unwittingly, determine identity.

We have used the plural 'identities' in our title to make the point that no single mould fits British people. The population is diverse in all sorts of ways and this is one of the strengths of the culture which has evolved over the past two thousands years. Many races and continents have contributed to its development. For example most people don't know that in Roman Britain a garrison of African soldiers, under Septimus Servius, guarded Hadrian's Wall. Modern Britain contains numerous elements, often in tension with one another, but more usually complementary. For example many people who elsewhere have come to blows – Hindus and Muslims; Protestants and Catholics; Greeks and Turks – in Britain have for the most part found ways of working together in peaceful co-existence. Their liking for stability, good-quality education, healthcare and robust economic conditions has overridden their ideological differences. One of the aims of our study is to identify elements of British culture which have brought about this benign effect.

British Cultural Identities describes how people in Britain see themselves. It is concerned with the culture they generate and are in turn formed

by. 'Culture' is meant in its broad sense as shared experience – that which comes out of a dynamic mix of ages, races, regions, sexes, income levels and interests. The identities which are produced by this culture are personally and collectively fluid. Because what we are examining is complex and changing, our conclusions will be tentative and general. Our constant is the fact that the people who live on the islands are the way they are, partly because they live there.

In conducting our study, we will look at specific current political, social, and cultural events. This will enable us to give basic background information on Britain: who is in power, what is the racial mix, the size of the population, the key institutions, the main sports, religions and so on. We will include some succinct contrasts with the past to fill out that background. Recent events chosen for examination reveal some basic truths about Britain in the political, social, and cultural arenas and lead us to emphasise the complexity of British society and the need for careful analysis.

Institutional Britain

A list of traditional pillars of mainstream Britain would identify the key 'official' institutions as Parliament; a legal system which enforces the rule of law; an educational system of good quality; the Anglican Church; the Bank of England; the Stock Exchange; the BBC. These are all elements of a stable society, but examination of them doesn't really begin to tell the story of the culture, for which they are prerequisites. There are several other 'institutions' which are equally or even more influential in people's lives, and whose influence, though 'unofficial', is widespread. There is Henley Royal Regatta (rowing); cricket at Lords in London; Badminton Horse Trials; yachting at Cowes; rugby at Twickenham; the Glastonbury pop festival; the Edinburgh Festival; the Notting Hill Carnival. None of these events is 'institutional' but each figures largely on individuals' psychological calendars and forms part of the cultural menu from which some British identities are chosen. They are supplemented with numerous other sporting and social entertainments: soccer matches, greyhound and horse racing, darts tournaments, snooker matches, Townswomen's Guilds. These are all seen by their fans as indispensable to their individual cultural landscapes.

This 'semi-official' British cultural scene has a further supporting infrastructure of self-regulating organisations which serve to channel the talent which in another culture would not find an outlet. These include the Football and Amateur Athletic Associations, private art galleries promoting the likes of Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and Martin Creed with their sheep in formaldehyde, bed with used condoms, or *The Lights Going On and*

Off; publishing houses making the Harry Potter phenomenon possible; film and video production companies, which create soaps such as *Brookside* and *Hollyoaks*; the advertising and design industries; the music industry, from small recording studios to major artist recruiting houses such as EMI and HMV. These are part of Britain's cultural fabric yet they have no official status and no state funding.

Popular culture

One consequence of examining the nation through its official institutions is that large cultural areas will always be unexplored. Ethnic communities will have no place. Teenage fashions, clubbing, comics, pubs, around which many people's lives revolve, won't get a look in. The Britain covered in the myriad special-interest magazines will not feature. A more comprehensive picture of contemporary British culture is likely to emerge if we examine the experience of the man or woman in the street. By and large, he or she is exposed to the culture which has welled up from below. This experience may be read through elements of popular culture such as music, magazines, television and film, examples of which are offered throughout this book.

Popular culture, which comes from below (soaps, tabloids, 'reality television' such as *Big Brother*), can be more useful for our analysis than high culture (opera, theatre), because it reflects widespread, particularly youthful, public taste and thus enables us to explore Britons' psychology, motivation and aspirations. High culture, on the other hand, is imposed from above via school curricula, and deliberately ignores life as lived experience, and contemporary social trends. The most vibrant cultural development in Britain comes from the margins not from the centre. The following for example have become incorporated into the mainstream: in music, hip hop and rap; in fashion, saris and kimonos; in style, dreadlocks, body-piercing and tattooing; in literature, novels by Hanif Kureishi or Zadie Smith, poems by Benjamin Zephaniah.

Schooling

Concentration on popular culture also enables us to keep pace more easily with the rapid changes in society. For example there have been significant shifts in patterns of education. The fee-paying private schools have always had a disproportionately significant influence throughout British society largely through their reinforcement of class structures. Ambitious members of ethnic minorities see Britain as a place where 'the old school tie' matters and, faced with latent racial prejudice, see their way forward as through

private education. This is leading to profound cultural changes in one of Britain's dominant media for social advancement. There has always been an ethnic-minority presence in such schools, but pupils were usually sons of powerful overseas dynasties. For example, in Billy Bunter's school Greyfriars, in the 1930s *Magnet* comic, there was an Indian boy, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, who was the Nabob of Bhanipur. The featuring in popular culture of such figures has undoubtedly contributed to the mystique of the great public schools, such as Eton and Harrow, whose prevailing ethos was nevertheless predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, Establishment. Today, however, the private sector contains a much higher ethnic element than state schools. This element is 'domestic' rather than overseas and leads to the greater integration into the corridors of power of British society for some ethnic Britons.

Other factors in the current cultural transformation are: the renegotiation of the whole concept of the family; the new technology: computers, mobile phones, the internet, DVDs. People's daily lives are adapting to shifts in career patterns, new skills requirements from employers and new entertainments. The majority of those who attend university today for example are taking courses which didn't exist ten years ago. There are degree courses in fashion, tourism, nursing, film, media, football, and pop music studies, to name a few. For a conservative country such as Britain that is a fundamental change.

Methodology

In this period of flux, where the only constant is change, what it means to be British today is markedly different from what it meant ten years ago. Enduring stereotypes are not a great deal of help. For example a 1999 poll of young Europeans associated five elements with Britain: Shakespeare, London, the BBC, The Beatles, and the Royal Family. This is very out of date. Any single snapshot of British identity will also be blurred. So what we have chosen to do is to look at a number of recent studies of the way people live, and to see how helpful they are in explaining the way our society works. A number of sources have recently offered their particular take on areas which they think are important. We shall look later at four specific examples. Firstly, every year *The Sunday Times* publishes a list of the thousand richest people in Britain. This is one way of making a judgement about the people who live here. It assumes that their wealth reflects not only their commitment and work but also their aspirations, their values, and their outlook. Secondly, in March 2001 *The Observer* Sunday newspaper published a study 'Britain Uncovered' dealing with 'the way we live now: Money, work, love, sex, crime, youth, race, religion, education and

ignorance'. It contains an eclectic mix of things happening on the cultural scene which represent significant trends. Thirdly, Channel 5 produced *An A-Z of Britishness* which was another attempt to pin down the essence of contemporary British culture. We will, fourthly, look at a list of 'Quintessences of Englishness' offered in Julian Barnes's 1998 novel *England, England*. We will examine each of the above attempts to describe the moving target of British culture and will see how useful their various approaches can be, but first a look at a number of political, social, cultural, and sporting events and incidents will let us see how people reflect and inform the culture around them.

Politics

The General Election of June 2001 gave Labour a second term of office with 413 MPs to the Conservatives' 166. This is an astonishing majority. It is 31 per cent greater than Margaret Thatcher's landslide second victory in 1983. So today, ostensibly, 'New' Labour, which came into power in 1997 on a wave of euphoria, appears to be very firmly in control and to have the broad support of the people. However, a better indication of how people feel about their country and their politicians might be the fact that in both the 2001 and the 1997 elections, two single-issue mavericks, standing as Independents, were elected without the benefit of any elaborate party machine. These were: in 1997 Martin Bell; in 2001 Richard Taylor. Bell, a former war correspondent, stood as an Independent on a 'decency' manifesto, and defeated the sitting Tory MP Neil Hamilton, who had become embroiled in accusations of sleaze. Taylor, a retired hospital consultant standing on the single issue of the downsizing of his local Kidderminster hospital, unseated a Labour junior minister by 17,630 votes! Both Bell and Taylor countered elaborate, sophisticated and expensive political machines, during electoral landslides. Meanwhile young voters are so disaffected from the whole political process that, to try to secure their votes, the parties resorted to texting them on their mobile phones during the last election.

Conclusions we can draw from this are that, although Labour is in power, and although Parliament is sovereign and elected by the people, British voters are still wary of having their lives determined by professional politicians and are prepared to drop them instantly when opportunity knocks. This signals a long-standing distrust, by British people, of professionals (Disraeli was Britain's first full-time Prime Minister, only in as late as 1868) and professionalism (Rugby Union retained its amateurs-status only, until the 1990s). People have in the past preferred to be governed by the 'gifted amateur' or the aristocrat whose inherited wealth made him

(rarely her) less likely to be corruptible. Now, when professionalism is more accepted, they are still prepared to elect people who operate without the benefits and constraints of a party machine.

Society

In the social arena, when the Queen Mother celebrated her 101st birthday in 2001, the Royal Family gathered around for the happy occasion. The Queen Mother was personally popular with all social classes. Hitherto Buckingham Palace has not handled public relations well, but now, trying to be 'user-friendly', the Royals organised a photo opportunity for the benefit of the media. However an unplanned outcome of the event was that newspapers took the Royal Family to task for literally wheeling out Princess Margaret, the Queen's sister, in an invalid chair. She was clearly seriously ill and it was seen as inhumane – a violation of her rights as an individual, to display her to the masses. So what was meant to be an orchestrated moment of celebration became an opportunity for anti-monarchists to express their reservations about royalty and the Royal Family.

Here we can conclude that once again characteristic British individualism kicked in. People do not like their emotions and responses to be stage-managed. One of the effects of Britain's Protestant Reformation was that the individual retains his or her right to a personal view. This Protestant tradition of independence is linked to ideas of egalitarianism and fair play. It favours the views and behaviour of the individual over those of the herd. Consequently people resent attempts to manipulate and orchestrate their private views. They want to accord themselves and others freedom, and that includes the freedom of privacy when necessary.

Culture

The building of the Millennium Dome at Greenwich was an attempt by the government to showcase aspects of Britain which it felt were important. It was also undoubtedly meant to lend authority to the government which produced it – a precedent set by the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park. Tony Blair called the Dome 'a triumph of confidence over cynicism'. The government spent £1 billion of taxpayers' money erecting a tent at Greenwich and filling it with amusements. There were several 'zones' including a 'Faith Zone' and a 'Body Zone' which were meant to inform and to entertain.

However, from the beginning the project was a disaster. It was intended to represent Britain, but the people weren't consulted and didn't

feel they had any stake in it. Target visitor figures of 12 million materialized as 5.4 million. People contrast the Dome with the Eden Project in Cornwall (a huge biodiversity project under geodesic domes), which thrives and which started as a community project. People saw the Dome as a further example of money being syphoned from the regions to be spent in London. They didn't like being managed into visiting it, and, the more they were hectored by government ministers to attend, the more reluctant they were to go.

The low attendance figures illustrate two things: firstly, the mixture of elements chosen to be celebrated was awry (the Faith Zone was partly financed by the subsequently disgraced Hinduja brothers), secondly, people do not like to be told, least of all by government, what they should like, or what they should do. This rejection of the authority of government is a major aspect of British cultural identity. People will not be bullied. (The song 'Rule Britannia' contains the line: 'Britons never never never shall be slaves'.) The failure of the Dome project illustrated the powerlessness of government in a democracy.

Sport

Taking pride in the sporting achievements of one's nation is clearly a significant indicator of one's attachment to one's homeland. That this persists, and even increases, despite political devolution to the regions and Britain's integration within Europe, is a conundrum which will be examined later on. (The *Daily Telegraph* still reports Europe under 'Foreign News' three decades after Britain became a member of the European Economic Community.)

Britain is a country where interest in sport has always flourished. Traditionally its sports stars have been lionised: W. G. Grace the nineteenth-century cricketer; Roger Bannister, the first four-minute miler; Linford Christie, the sprinter, and so on. Britons particularly welcome the success of sporting heroes in football, or soccer, as it is known. The game of soccer is central to Britain's view of itself and is supported fanatically by people of both sexes, from all social classes, ages, and regions, so for example any soccer match between England and Germany assumes more than sporting importance. There is national glee in remembering England's 4–2 defeat of Germany in 1966. The commentator's 'They think it's all over . . . it is now' became a famous *Sun* newspaper headline after that match (and is the name of a popular BBC sports quiz programme). After England's 5–1 victory over Germany in 2001 (following a 1–0 defeat at Wembley nine months earlier) all sorts of genies good and bad came out of the bottle. Even people who don't normally follow football were exultant. This was

reflected on television and radio where newsreaders, male and female, did not even try to appear dispassionate. The so-called 'black-edged voice', reserved for describing the normal disasters of the news, disappeared in the reporting. Sport here proved cohesive and positive. The fact that one section of British society, rampaging English hooligans, went round Munich after the match chanting 'there's only one Bomber Harris' went largely unnoticed in the British media. Overnight there was a shift from middle-class apprehension about the prospective behaviour of British hooligan-fans overseas, to a display of triumphalism where 'a few hotheads' must not be allowed to detract from the very real victory which took place.

Xenophobia

The way in which news is reported reveals much about British readers and viewers. The coverage of refugees and asylum seekers for example has revealed sharp differences in British attitudes to foreigners and in generally accepted notions of what it means to be British. Former Tory Party leader William Hague applied the phrase 'bogus asylum seekers' to refugees, presumably in the belief that it would endear him to his followers. In practice it raised the anger of opponents and supporters alike. For the former it was evidence of Tory racism, for the latter it failed to distance him from the lack of compassion of his predecessor-but-one, Margaret Thatcher.

Events like this can enable a latent nationalism to arise. This happens instantly, and newspapers can rally support against an 'enemy' overnight. In 1981 the *Sun* orchestrated hatred for 'the Argies' over the Falklands conflict. Most *Sun* readers were unaware where the Falkland Islands were, but they rose to the invitation to be xenophobic anyway. That Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, the Serb Slobodan Milosevic, or Zimbabwean Prime Minister Robert Mugabe could equally be vilified at a moment's notice indicates a xenophobia always ready to be ignited in certain sections of the British public. Even the 2001 Royal Variety Performance featured a comedian who centred his act around the British hatred of the French! Dislike of other nationalities is not far beneath the psyche particularly of some of the older generation. Meanwhile the young and the educated look for their values towards Europe and the USA.

The above examples from current affairs show how complex a country Britain is. It is difficult to make generalisations about because Britain is an amalgam of paradoxes. It is generally conformist and conservative but is also in a constant state of change. It is governed by Parliament, but the people's voice is strong. It has a monarch but many people are

republicans. It generates a lot of popular and much 'high' culture, but also philistinism and hooliganism. Constituency of its population also is in flux. The majority of the population is Caucasian, but 6.8 per cent of people are now from ethnic minorities – predominantly from the Caribbean, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent. It is hard to embrace such contradictions and tensions. It is much easier to talk about 'Britains', or for that matter the 'Identities' of our title.

Postmodernism

It might also be argued that modern Britain is no different from any other developed state. In a postmodern world of surfaces, public relations, stylistic fusions, and so on, new urban developments are the same everywhere. Manchester's Trafford Centre shopping mall, for example, is a collage of global culture. It has *trompe l'oeil* artwork, Greek statuary, Art Deco mouldings, Whistleresque murals, Venetian frescos, a mock-up of the deck, deck-furniture, and lifeboats of the *Titanic* (presumably designed to dredge up images of upper-class travel, as well as of the teenage, heart-throb film *Titanic*, from shoppers' unconscious). There is also a fibreglass statue of Sammy Davis Jr! This shopping mall and others like it, steeped in global 'culture' (or kitsch?), are now firmly entrenched on the cultural map for British young and old alike. Are these people 'consumers' defined by the products they are made to buy, or Britons who assert their multicultural identities and individuate themselves by shopping? That is where our debate lies.

Media

More important perhaps than global influences is the role played in British life by home-grown media. Everything is now played out on television. Moral and ethical dilemmas, from gay rights and cosmetic surgery to euthanasia and abortion, are illustrated and aired in soap operas. Everyone in the public eye, all organisations, and corporate Britain have P(ublic) R(elations) people to help to manage information flow. Politicians are forced to resign in time for *The Six O'clock News*. Ministers must act quickly in order to seem decisive, rather than wisely, having considered in depth. The medium dominates the message. Nobody in Britain can claim to be unaffected by the barrage of noise coming from these external influences. However, people do discriminate between what they tolerate, what they accept, and what elements of the culture (or counterculture) they choose for themselves as a buffer against the outside world.

Language

We should also be careful with language. In any discussion of nationalism, identity, or current affairs, language is never ‘innocent’. The choice of words reveals the underlying outlook of the speaker. So for example the word ‘foreign’ in English is much more hostile than the *étranger/estrangeiro* found in most romance languages or than the German *ausländer*. Latent British xenophobia is revealed in the offensive tabloid expression ‘Johnny Foreigner’. Our chapter ‘Language and Ethnicity’ says a lot more about this, but for now think about the impact on national relations and culture of the following uses of language: To welsh is to cheat or renege; to scotch is to thwart, to squash, to prevent; an Irish lanyard is an untidy rope. In other words the names of the three ‘subsidiary’ nations in the British Isles have negative connotations in the language of the dominant one. Thus national prejudice is encoded in the English language.

Bearing these points in mind, we will now turn to examine the approaches of the four recent studies referred to earlier, each of which uses a list or key words to identify salient characteristics of British people.

The *Sunday Times* rich list

Financial status is clearly one determinant of cultural outlook. The *Sunday Times* evidently believes that, as F. Scott Fitzgerald, said: ‘the rich are different’. Wealth affects culture because, even if they are philistines individually, the rich collectively tend to be patrons of the arts. For decades Maurice Saatchi has been buying the work of contemporary British artists. As often as not the rich are distinguished by the flamboyant garishness of their taste, rather than by their discernment. Ruby Wax conducted viewers around the Duchess of York’s ‘distinctive’ home in a famous television programme. Their sense of identity is determined by the fact that they *are* rich and therefore insulated from the constraints and inconveniences of the poor – which is the rest of the country. Many of the latter will be public servants – teachers, social workers, postal employees, workers in the civil service – people defined by their usefulness. However the rich, as a group, would rarely claim that their chief aim is public service. So, in the *Sunday Times* richest thousand list we see forty-one people who made their money in fashion companies, including familiar high-street names such as Joseph, French Connection (now FCUK) and Russell & Bromley. The aim of these companies is the continued creation of wealth for the benefit of the families which own them and of wages for the people who work for them, rather than public service.

In 2001, after the dotcom bubble burst, old money continued to do rather well. The land-owning Duke of Westminster (300 acres of Mayfair and Belgravia) was the richest man in Britain. But that does not mean that the rise of Britain's meritocracy is faltering. In 2001 there was another drop in the proportion on the list of those who inherited their wealth. Only 241 of the thousand in the list inherited their fortunes. This is the smallest proportion since the list was first drawn up in 1988. Then about 70 per cent of the two hundred entries had inherited their money. This represents a significant shift in a culture in which inherited wealth plays such a major part. Financial change fuels the process of social and cultural change. The *Sunday Times's* focus on money reveals very little about the rich people profiled or the lives of the mass of the population however, the fact that most of those on the list are 'household names' indicates that they are part of a social community, as well as a purely financial British hierarchy.

The Observer: Britain uncovered

Whereas the *Sunday Times's* list offers a snapshot of a segment of British society whose primary motivation and identity is fiscal, *The Observer's* 'Britain Uncovered' supplement takes a 'sociological' approach to contemporary culture and covers a broader spectrum. It contains a survey of public attitudes (69 per cent are against same-sex marriage; the most popular European country is Spain; only 19 per cent of people would not take out private healthcare or educate their children privately, if they had plenty of money) and behaviour (37 per cent would keep a wallet they found with £200 in it). It also looks at people's activities across the age range from deprived teenagers to pensioners; attitudes to work; drug culture; education and finally eccentricity. Two sections deal with the spiritual state of the nation – broadly speaking, the decline of institutional religion in favour of 'house churches' and the appeal to young Muslims of traditional Islam.

As a barometer of 'the health of the nation,' the supplement is quite hopeful. Society is changing, but the fixed standards from which people are straying hover in the background. For example the journalist Burhan Wazir complains about the severity of his own upbringing in Pakistan, but reports that young British Muslims are managing to combine the practice of their religion with the freedom to go clubbing if they want to. The film *East Is East* (1999) highlights similar dilemmas. The section on eccentricity suggests the impossibility of pigeonholing people. Miranda Sawyer, author of a book on suburbia, *Park and Ride* (2001), meets a pensioner who is feeling wobbly 'because he'd taken two Es' (Ecstasy tablets). In her view, eccentricity is what keeps the culture vibrant and makes Britain interesting, because unpredictable.

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?