

## BRITISH

### Background

There is a considerable diversity of culture among British people. British does not equal English! The British people are made up of Scots, Welsh and English, and react a little sensitively to being lumped together as 'English'! Northern Ireland is also part of the United Kingdom. Being a small nation with many different accents and expressions, it is hard to define national characteristics. The following are some generalisations, which may help in understanding problem areas when a Briton encounters someone of a different culture. It needs to be remembered though that each individual Briton is different. Amongst non-Christians there can be quite a strong nationalistic tendency. Britain has a strong history of colonising many areas of the world and maintains good relations with many with the Commonwealth and the monarchy. Many from the commonwealth and Europe live in Britain so in many ways it is multicultural, and tolerance to minority views is strong though has in some places caused a backlash of nationalism.

### Characteristics

*Independent.* The British favour individualism rather than group orientation. A modern trend of thought is, 'If it feels good to me, I will do it' - without consideration for others. However many still hold to the sense of fairness and tolerance.

*Privacy.* Britons like privacy. 'An Englishman's home is his castle'. This old saying sums up a fairly widespread tendency. Much of daily life is carried on indoors with the door shut. Doubtless the climate has played a part in this! Probably ninety per cent of visits are pre-arranged, rather than just casually dropping in on friends. Some people may feel embarrassed by not being prepared for unexpected visitors. However, amongst Christians there is usually more freedom, and to some it can be an encouraging sign of acceptance to find that friends are happy to 'drop in' and visit on a casual basis. Certain information is thought of as private. This information is normally about personal details; e.g. older people would probably still not like being asked a direct question about their age. It is not acceptable to ask a childless couple why they have no children. People do not like to be asked how much money they earn.

*Reservation.* Most Britons tend to be reserved until they get to know someone. They do not quickly share their deeper feelings. Many would disassociate themselves from loud extrovert types, especially in public. British people often do not find it easy to try new things like food (though this is gradually changing). This would probably be truer of people from the north of the country than those from the south. A general tendency is to think before making decisions rather than acting on impulse.

*Self-effacing.* The British do not like boasting in any form. They prefer instead to denigrate themselves and their country. Healthy self-mockery and cynicism is highly regarded in British culture. If the Apostle Paul were British he would never have written, 'From Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.' Instead, meaning the same thing, the British would say, 'From Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum I was booted out of synagogues, misunderstood, laughed at, and I made all kinds of mistakes, but by the grace of God a few people somehow managed to get saved.'

However, take note: They may still be offended if you as an outsider join in with the joking about themselves or their country unless you know them well.

If you boast about your country, your academic achievements, your anointing or whatever, they will smile and nod politely but inwardly they will think you are being rather arrogant. The British prefer people who keep quiet about their praise points and laugh about their faults. If you must praise a Briton, make it heartfelt, true, and short.

*Language.* Britons are fairly tolerant of the misuse of the English language. They seem to prefer hearing someone speak English badly, rather than making the effort to learn a foreign language themselves. Perhaps the biggest problems with the use of English come with Americans who ought to speak English, but then use different words!

*Punctuality and timing.* This is a virtue for most British people. People are expected to arrive on time, or early, for meetings and meals. For parties however, it is best to arrive on time or a little late.

Britons do not like to be asked to do something at the last minute unless it is a real emergency. They like to be organised and plan ahead, both in personal matters, and in the administration of their work/ministry. This, however, depends on personality, as some are more spontaneous than others.

Britons also prefer speedy, concise explanations of situations or requests. For example, bad news should be broken fairly quickly. If a death has to be announced, no more than a minute or two at the most should elapse between saying 'I have bad news for you' and telling of the death.

*Queuing.* The queue is typically British, even if they borrow a French word to describe it. One is expected to queue in shops and for transport. Someone who 'jumps' a queue is engaging in uncivilised behaviour and will be made to realise it.

*Disability and Death.* The average person is unfamiliar with death at close quarters. Many Britons have never seen a dead person. Specialists deal with dying and dead people. People with severe physical and mental handicaps are also frequently kept apart from the general population. Lack of familiarity leads to a feeling of uneasiness when confronted with the severely disabled. It is expected that grief will be expressed quietly. This is especially true for men. Men do not cry, and the 'stiff upper lip' mentality has been greatly admired by the British. Amongst younger people however, there is more understanding of the need for men to express grief too, and that within reason it is alright for men to cry.

*Finance.* Standards of living in Britain have increased considerably in recent years. Many people have 'luxuries' which they see as 'necessities'. Young people expect to start married life with everything rather than gradually acquiring their household needs. Sometimes this leads to debts, which then have to be paid off in instalments. People are not used to 'making do' any more. As missionaries, most Britons would probably tend to live fairly carefully and simply. They could be judgemental of others who are seen to be more extravagant.

*Family.* The immediate family consists of mother, father and children. Many children move away from home around the age of eighteen. Newly married couples rarely live with their in-laws. Elderly parents either live alone for as long as they are able or enter a home for the aged. An adult child will oversee such an arrangement but does not feel an obligation to take the parent into his own home. Because of the country's National Benefit Scheme, children are not financially responsible for their elderly parents.

In recent years a decline of moral standards has eroded family life. The divorce rate is high. There are many extra-marital relationships and many choose not to legally marry but rather live together as 'partners'. There are also a number of homosexual partnerships and marriages.

*Children.* General tendencies are for insufficient parental discipline and family togetherness. Television has played a big part in the decline of family pursuits and many children watch for many hours per week. The once common phrase, 'Children are to be seen and not heard' no longer applies. Children in some homes can dominate all that is taking place! Parents would not usually take kindly to other people disciplining their children if they were present themselves. Some would not be happy for others to discipline their children even if they weren't present! Physical punishment is viewed by many as unacceptable in all forms. Although in general, boarding schools are still widely accepted, missionary parents are generally not ready to contemplate separation from their children while they are young. Most would consider it right to come back from the field with their family once the options for education overseas had been exhausted.

*Relationships.* Life experience can have a considerable effect on people's interpersonal relationships. Many become Christians from broken homes and childhood traumas. Britain is no longer a 'Christian country', and most today are growing up with little or no knowledge of God or of His Word. In some homes there are few, if any, moral guidelines. Schools no longer teach the Christian faith and moral standards as they used to.

Though this is a generalisation, there are clear differences in attitudes between the north and the south of Britain. The location of your upbringing affects not only accent, and social background, but also your attitudes to money, humour, nationalistic tendencies, and your expectations of other people. Northern people are more open and blunt but also more friendly to strangers. Southerners are more reserved in expressing their opinions, and generally less ready to open up conversations with people they do not know, unless something unusual has happened. An example of this would be if a heavy fall of snow caused travelling difficulties for southerners, a sense of camaraderie could arise amongst people trying to get to work.

*Religion.* Britain was once considered a 'Christian country'. Religion generally has little place these days. Church-going is not fashionable and Christian teaching, once accepted so readily in schools, is no longer welcome.

*Miscellaneous.* Handshaking is no longer typically British. Sometimes, especially with older folk, this is still done when being introduced to strangers. In some churches the leader will still shake hands with everyone after the service. With friends it is not normal to shake hands, usually a smile and a question as to how they are is sufficient. With a close friend greeting with a hug is usual, though not among men.

Social space is important. A Briton would start to feel uncomfortable when standing face to face with someone at less than about a metre distant. (This would not apply in a crowded situation where closeness is unavoidable.) When travelling on public transport a Briton would normally only sit next to a stranger when no other seat is available.

A degree of resentment may be felt if well-meaning advice is offered without it being asked for, especially in the sensitive areas of family, husband/wife relationships, et cetera.