

Understand Great Britain

GREAT BRITAIN TODAY 970

Around the globe, the early years of the 21st century have been tumultuous, to say the least. How was it for Britain?

HISTORY 972

From ancient civilisations to contemporary characters, Britain's history is varied – and certainly never dull.

THE BRITISH TABLE 988

Fish and chips, haggis or chicken tikka masala? Real ale, whisky or fine wine? We will tickle your taste buds.

ARCHITECTURE IN BRITAIN 993

In Britain you're never far from an ancient castle, soaring brooch or graceful cathedral, while modern buildings continue to impress.

THE ARTS IN BRITAIN 997

Everyone knows Shakespeare. We showcase some other leading characters from the British canon of poetry and prose.

THE BRITISH LANDSCAPE 1008

A geographical variety pack, from sandy beaches to high mountains, with surprisingly diverse wildlife and stunning national parks.

SPORTING BRITAIN 1014

Where to see football, rugby, cricket, golf and more.

Great Britain Today

For Britain and the British, the first 15 years of the 21st century has been a time of change, controversy and national soul-searching. Despite a boost to the national mood from the successful London Olympics and Glasgow Commonwealth Games, and signs of the economy emerging from recession, there is a nagging uncertainty about the future. Can Britain survive in its present form?

Best on Film

Brief Encounter (1945)
Under Milk Wood (1972)
Trainspotting (1996)
Sense & Sensibility (1996)
The Full Monty (1997)
Elizabeth: The Golden Age (2007)
War Horse (2011)

Best Music

God Save The Queen by The Sex Pistols
Teardrop by Massive Attack
Town Called Malice by The Jam
Sultans of Swing by Dire Straits
Waterloo Sunset by The Kinks
Patience of Angels by Eddi Reader
Ghost Town by The Specials
Bonkers by Dizzee Rascal
Hounds of Love by Kate Bush
A Design for Life by Manic Street Preachers
I Predict a Riot by Kaiser Chiefs
Common People by Pulp
Down By The Water by PJ Harvey
Shipbuilding by Elvis Costello

The End of the UK?

Where once the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was a single political entity, it's now anything but united. From 1999 onwards, the process of devolution has seen the nations of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland get their own ruling bodies – the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff, and the Northern Ireland Assembly in Belfast – with power over domestic affairs such as health and education.

However, when the Scottish National Party won a surprise majority in the Scottish Parliament elections of 2011 they went further, and pledged to hold a referendum on full Scottish independence in 2014. The implications of Scotland breaking away from the UK were hotly debated. Would an independent Scotland need a new currency, or be able to continue using the pound? Would there be border controls with England? Would Scotland be able to remain in the EU? Would the Queen still be head of state?

The referendum took place on 18 September 2014, posing the question: 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' The result was that 55% voted to maintain the status quo (with a turnout of 85%). What this means for the future of Scotland – and Britain – remains unclear. Will there be increased powers for the Scottish Parliament? Will there be increased devolution to the English regions? Will the UK become a federal state?

This questioning of the balance of power across Britain has led to a reassessment – both by politicians and the people themselves – of what it actually means to be British. This has occurred especially in England where for centuries 'British' and 'English' have meant essentially the same thing. While Wales and Scotland, as smaller nations, have always been more aware of the institutions that bind the countries together – and the tensions