**The United Kingdom (Land & People)**

Official name

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Form of government

constitutional monarchy with two legislative houses (House of Lords; House of Commons )

Head of state

Sovereign: [Queen Elizabeth II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-II)

Head of government

Prime Minister: [Boris Johnson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boris-Johnson)

Capital

[London](https://www.britannica.com/place/London)

Official languages

English; both English and Scots’ Gaelic in Scotland; both English and Welsh in Wales

Official religion

Church of England “established” (protected by the state but not “official”); Church of Scotland “national” (exclusive jurisdiction in spiritual matters per Church of Scotland Act 1921); no established church in Northern Ireland or Wales.

Monetary unit

pound sterling (£)

Currency Exchange Rate

1 USD equals 0.768 British pound

Population

(2019 est.) 66,834,000

Total area (sq mi)

93,630

Total area (sq km)

242,500

Density: persons per sq mi

(2018) 709.6

Density: person per sq km

(2018) 274

Urban-rural population

Urban: (2018) 83.4%

Rural: (2018) 16.6%

Life expectancy at birth

Male: (2017) 78.6 years

Female: (2017) 83.1 years

Literacy: percentage of population age 15 and over literate

Male: (2006) 99%

Female: (2006) 99%

**United Kingdom**, island [country](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) located off the northwestern coast of mainland [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe). The United Kingdom [comprises](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprises) the whole of the island of Great Britain—which contains [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England), [Wales](https://www.britannica.com/place/Wales), and [Scotland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Scotland)—as well as the northern portion of the island of [Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ireland). The name [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Great-Britain-island-Europe) is sometimes used to refer to the United Kingdom as a whole. The capital is [London](https://www.britannica.com/place/London), which is among the world’s leading commercial, financial, and cultural centres. Other major cities include [Birmingham](https://www.britannica.com/place/Birmingham-England), [Liverpool](https://www.britannica.com/place/Liverpool-England), and [Manchester](https://www.britannica.com/place/Manchester-England) in England, [Belfast](https://www.britannica.com/place/Belfast) and [Londonderry](https://www.britannica.com/place/Londonderry-city-and-district-Northern-Ireland) in [Northern Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Northern-Ireland), [Edinburgh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Edinburgh-Scotland) and [Glasgow](https://www.britannica.com/place/Glasgow-Scotland) in Scotland, and [Swansea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Swansea-Wales) and [Cardiff](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cardiff-Wales) in Wales.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/26/4826-050-915ED74D/United-Kingdom.jpg)

**United Kingdom***Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

The origins of the United Kingdom can be traced to the time of the Anglo-Saxon king [Athelstan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Athelstan), who in the early 10th century secured the [allegiance](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allegiance) of neighbouring Celtic kingdoms and became “the first to rule what previously many kings shared between them,” in the words of a contemporary chronicle. Through subsequent conquest over the following centuries, kingdoms lying farther afield came under English [dominion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dominion-British-Commonwealth). Wales, a congeries of Celtic kingdoms lying in Great Britain’s southwest, was formally united with England by the Acts of Union of 1536 and 1542. Scotland, ruled from London since 1603, formally was joined with England and Wales in 1707 to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain. (The adjective “British” came into use at this time to refer to all the kingdom’s peoples.) Ireland came under English control during the 1600s and was formally united with Great Britain through the [Act of Union](https://www.britannica.com/event/Act-of-Union-United-Kingdom-1801) of 1800. The republic of Ireland gained its independence in 1922, but six of [Ulster](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ulster-historic-province-Ireland)’s nine counties remained part of the United Kingdom as Northern Ireland. Relations between these [constituent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituent) states and England have been marked by controversy and, at times, open rebellion and even warfare. These tensions relaxed somewhat during the late 20th century, when devolved assemblies were introduced in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Nonetheless, even with the establishment of a power-sharing assembly after referenda in both Northern Ireland and the Irish republic, relations between Northern Ireland’s unionists (who favour continued British [sovereignty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sovereignty) over Northern Ireland) and nationalists (who favour unification with the republic of Ireland) remained tense into the 21st century.

The United Kingdom has made significant contributions to the world economy, especially in technology and industry. Since [World War II](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II), however, the United Kingdom’s most prominent exports have been cultural, including literature, theatre, film, television, and [popular music](https://www.britannica.com/art/popular-music) that draw on all parts of the country. Perhaps Britain’s greatest export has been the [English language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/English-language), now spoken in every corner of the world as one of the leading international mediums of cultural and economic exchange.

The United Kingdom retains links with parts of its former empire through the [Commonwealth](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Commonwealth-association-of-states). It also benefits from historical and cultural links with the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States) and is a member of the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/North-Atlantic-Treaty-Organization) (NATO). Moreover, the United Kingdom became a member of the [European Union](https://www.britannica.com/topic/European-Union) in 1973. Many Britons, however, were sometimes reluctant EU members, holding to the [sentiments](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sentiments) of the great wartime [prime minister](https://www.britannica.com/topic/prime-minister) [Winston Churchill](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Winston-Churchill), who sonorously remarked, “We see nothing but good and hope in a richer, freer, more contented European commonalty. But we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked, but not [comprised](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprised). We are interested and associated, but not absorbed.” Indeed, in June 2016, in a referendum on whether the United Kingdom should remain in the EU, 52 percent of British voters chose to leave. After much negotiation, several deadline extensions, prolonged domestic political [discord](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discord), and two changes of prime minister, an agreement on “Brexit” (British exit from the EU) was reached that satisfied both the EU and the majority of [Parliament](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Parliament). Thus, on January 31, 2020, the United Kingdom would become the first country to withdraw from the EU.

**Land**

The United Kingdom comprises four geographic and historical parts—[England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England), [Scotland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Scotland), [Wales](https://www.britannica.com/place/Wales), and [Northern Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Northern-Ireland). The United Kingdom contains most of the area and population of the British Isles—the geographic term for the group of islands that includes Great Britain, Ireland, and many smaller islands. Together England, Wales, and Scotland [constitute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitute) Great Britain, the larger of the two principal islands, while Northern Ireland and the republic of [Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ireland) constitute the second largest island, Ireland. England, occupying most of southern Great Britain, includes the [Isles of Scilly](https://www.britannica.com/place/Isles-of-Scilly-islands-England-United-Kingdom) off the southwest coast and the [Isle of Wight](https://www.britannica.com/place/Isle-of-Wight) off the southern coast. Scotland, occupying northern Great Britain, includes the [Orkney](https://www.britannica.com/place/Orkney-Islands) and [Shetland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Shetland-Islands-Scotland) islands off the northern coast and the [Hebrides](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hebrides) off the northwestern coast. Wales lies west of England and includes the island of [Anglesey](https://www.britannica.com/place/Isle-of-Anglesey) to the northwest.

Apart from the land border with the Irish republic, the United Kingdom is surrounded by sea. To the south of England and between the United Kingdom and [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) is the [English Channel](https://www.britannica.com/place/English-Channel). The [North Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Sea) lies to the east. To the west of Wales and northern England and to the southeast of Northern Ireland, the [Irish Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Irish-Sea) separates Great Britain from Ireland, while southwestern England, the northwestern coast of Northern Ireland, and western Scotland face the [Atlantic Ocean](https://www.britannica.com/place/Atlantic-Ocean). At its widest the United Kingdom is 300 miles (500 km) across. From the northern tip of Scotland to the southern coast of England, it is about 600 miles (1,000 km). No part is more than 75 miles (120 km) from the sea. The capital, London, is situated on the tidal [River Thames](https://www.britannica.com/place/River-Thames) in southeastern England.

The archipelago formed by [Great Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Great-Britain-island-Europe) and the numerous smaller islands is as irregular in shape as it is [diverse](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diverse) in geology and landscape. This [diversity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity) stems largely from the nature and [disposition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disposition) of the underlying rocks, which are westward extensions of European structures, with the shallow waters of the [Strait of Dover](https://www.britannica.com/place/Strait-of-Dover) and the [North Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Sea) concealing former land links. Northern Ireland contains a westward extension of the rock structures of Scotland. These common rock structures are [breached](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/breached) by the narrow [North Channel](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Channel-strait).

On a global scale, this natural endowment covers a small area—approximating that of the U.S. state of [Oregon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Oregon-state) or the African country of [Guinea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Guinea)—and its internal diversity, accompanied by rapid changes of often beautiful scenery, may convey to visitors from larger countries a striking sense of compactness and consolidation. The peoples who, over the centuries, have hewed an existence from this Atlantic extremity of Eurasia have put their own imprint on the [environment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment), and the ancient and distinctive palimpsest of their field patterns and settlements complements the natural diversity.

**Relief**

Great Britain is traditionally divided into a highland and a lowland zone. A line running from the mouth of the [River Exe](https://www.britannica.com/place/River-Exe), in the southwest, to that of the Tees, in the northeast, is a crude expression of this division. The course of the 700-foot (213-metre) [contour](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contour), or of the boundary separating the older rocks of the north and west from the younger southeastern strata, provides a more accurate indication of the extent of the highlands.

[**The highland zone**](https://www.britannica.com/place/Highlands-region-Scotland)

The creation of the highlands was a long process, yet elevations, compared with European equivalents, are low, with the highest summit, [Ben Nevis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ben-Nevis), only 4,406 feet (1,343 metres) above [sea level](https://www.britannica.com/science/sea-level). In addition, the really mountainous areas above 2,000 feet (600 metres) often form elevated plateaus with relatively smooth surfaces, reminders of the effects of former periods of erosion.

[Scotland’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Scotland) three main topographic regions follow the northeast-to-southwest trend of the ancient underlying rocks. The northern [Highlands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Highlands-region-Scotland) and the Southern Uplands are separated by the intervening rift valley, or subsided structural block, called the Midland Valley (or Central [Lowlands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lowlands-region-Scotland)). The core of the Highlands is the elevated, worn-down surface of the [Grampian Mountains](https://www.britannica.com/place/Grampian-Mountains), 1,000–3,600 feet (300–1,100 metres) above sea level, with the [Cairngorm Mountains](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cairngorm-Mountains) rising to elevations of more than 4,000 feet (1,200 metres). This majestic mountain landscape is furrowed by numerous wide valleys, or straths. Occasional large areas of lowland, often fringed with long lines of sand dunes, add variety to the east. The Buchan peninsula, the [Moray Firth](https://www.britannica.com/place/Moray-Firth) estuarine flats, and the plain of Caithness—all low-lying areas—contrast sharply with the mountain scenery and show smoother outlines than do the glacier-scoured landscapes of the west, where northeast-facing hollows, or corries, separated by knife-edge ridges and deep glens, sculpt the surfaces left by earlier erosion. The many freshwater lochs (lakes) further [enhance](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enhance) a landscape of wild beauty. The linear [Glen Mor](https://www.britannica.com/place/Glen-Mor)—where the [Caledonian Canal](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Caledonian-Canal) now threads the chain of lakes that includes [Loch Ness](https://www.britannica.com/place/Loch-Ness-lake-Scotland-United-Kingdom)—is the result of a vast structural sideways tear in the whole mass of the North West Highlands. To the northwest of Glen Mor stretches land largely divided among agricultural smallholdings, or crofts; settlement is [intermittent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intermittent) and mostly coastal, a pattern clearly reflecting the pronounced dissection of a highland massif that has been scored and plucked by the [Ice Age](https://www.britannica.com/science/ice-age-geology) glaciers. Many sea-drowned, glacier-widened river valleys (fjords) penetrate deeply into the mountains, the [outliers](https://www.britannica.com/science/outlier-geology) of which rise from the sea in stately, elongated peninsulas or emerge in hundreds of offshore islands.

In comparison with the Scottish Highlands, the [Southern Uplands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Southern-Uplands-region-Scotland) of Scotland present a more subdued relief, with elevations that never exceed 2,800 feet (850 metres). The main hill masses are the [Cheviots](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cheviot-Hills), which reach 2,676 feet (816 metres) in elevation, while only Merrick and Broad Law have elevations above the 2,700-foot (830-metre) [contour line](https://www.britannica.com/topic/contour-line). Broad plateaus separated by numerous dales characterize these uplands, and in the west most of the rivers flow across the prevailing northeast-southwest trend, following the general slope of the plateau, toward the [Solway Firth](https://www.britannica.com/place/Solway-Firth) or the Firth of Clyde. Bold masses of granite and the rugged imprint of former glaciers occasionally engender mountainous scenery. In the east the valley network of the [River Tweed](https://www.britannica.com/place/River-Tweed) and its many tributaries forms a broad lowland expanse between the Lammermuir and Cheviot hills.

The [Midland Valley](https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Lowlands) lies between great regular structural faults. The northern boundary with the Highlands is a wall-like escarpment, but the boundary with the Southern Uplands is sharp only near the coast. This vast trench is by no means a continuous plain, for high ground—often formed of sturdy, resistant masses of volcanic rock—meets the eye in all directions, rising above the low-lying areas that flank the rivers and the deeply penetrating estuaries of the Firth of Clyde and the Firth of Forth.

In [Northern Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Northern-Ireland), structural extensions of the Scottish Highlands reappear in the generally rugged mountain scenery and in the peat-covered summits of the [Sperrin Mountains](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sperrin-Mountains), which reach an elevation of 2,241 feet (683 metres). The uplands in the historic counties Down and [Armagh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Armagh-Northern-Ireland) are the western continuation of Scotland’s Southern Uplands but reach elevations of more than 500 feet (150 metres) only in limited areas; the one important exception is the [Mourne Mountains](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mourne-Mountains), a lovely cluster of granite summits the loftiest of which, [Slieve Donard](https://www.britannica.com/place/Slieve-Donard), rises to an elevation of 2,789 feet (850 metres) within 2 miles (3.2 km) of the sea. In the central region of Northern Ireland that corresponds to Scotland’s Midland Valley, an outpouring of basaltic lavas has formed a huge plateau, much of which is occupied by the shallow [Lough Neagh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lough-Neagh), the largest freshwater lake in the [British Isles](https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Isles).

The highland zone of [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England) and [Wales](https://www.britannica.com/place/Wales) consists, from north to south, of four broad upland masses: the [Pennines](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pennines), the Cumbrian Mountains, the Cambrian Mountains, and the South West Peninsula. The Pennines are usually considered to end in the north at the [River Tyne](https://www.britannica.com/place/River-Tyne) gap, but the surface features of several hills in [Northumberland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Northumberland-county-England) are in many ways similar to those of the northern Pennines. The general surface of the asymmetrically arched backbone (anticline) of the Pennines is remarkably smooth because many of the valleys, though deep, occupy such a small portion of the total area that the windswept moorland between them appears almost featureless. This is particularly true of the landscape around Alston, in [Cumbria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cumbria) (Cumberland), which—cut off by faults on its north, west, and south sides—stands out as an almost rectangular block of high moorland plateau with isolated peaks (known to geographers as [monadnocks](https://www.britannica.com/science/monadnock)) rising up above it. Farther south, deep and scenic dales (valleys) dissect the Pennine plateau. The dales’ craggy sides are formed of millstone grit, and beneath them flow streams stepped by waterfalls. The most southerly part of the Pennines is a grassy upland. More than 2,000 feet (610 metres) above sea level in places, it is characterized by the dry valleys, steep-sided gorges, and underground streams and caverns of a limestone drainage system rather than the bleak moorland that might be expected at this elevation. At lower levels the larger dales are more richly wooded, and the trees stand out against a background of rugged cliffs of white-gray rocks. On both Pennine flanks, older rocks disappear beneath younger layers, and the uplands merge into flanking coastal lowlands.

The [Cumbrian Mountains](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cumbrian-Mountains), which include the famous [Lake District](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lake-District-region-and-national-park-England) celebrated in poetry by [William Wordsworth](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Wordsworth) and the other [Lake poets](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lake-poet), [constitute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitute) an isolated, compact mountain group to the west of the northern Pennines. Many deep gorges, separated by narrow ridges and sharp peaks, characterize the northern Cumbrian Mountains, which consist of tough slate rock. Greater expanses of level upland, formed from thick beds of lava and the ash thrown out by ancient volcanoes, lie to the south. The volcanic belt is largely an irregular upland [traversed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/traversed) by deep, narrow valleys, and it includes England’s highest point, Scafell Pike, with an elevation of 3,210 feet (978 metres), and Helvellyn, at 3,116 feet (950 metres). Nine rivers flowing out in all directions from the centre of this uplifted dome form a classic radial drainage pattern. The valleys, often containing long, narrow lakes, have been widened to a U shape by glacial action, which has also etched corries from the mountainsides and deposited the debris in moraines. Glacial action also created a number of “hanging valleys” by truncating former tributary valleys.

The Cambrian Mountains, which form the core of Wales, are clearly defined by the sea except on the eastern side, where a sharp break of slope often marks the transition to the English lowlands. Cycles of erosion have repeatedly worn down the ancient and [austere](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/austere) surfaces. Many topographic features derive from glacial processes, and some of the most striking scenery stems largely from former volcanism. The mountain areas above 2,000 feet (610 metres) are most extensive in North Wales. These include [Snowdonia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Snowdonia-National-Park)—named for [Snowdon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Snowdon) (Yr Wyddfa), the highest point in Wales, with an elevation of 3,560 feet (1,085 metres)—and its southeastern extensions, [Cader Idris](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cader-Idris) and Berwyn. With the exception of [Plynlimon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Plynlimon) and the Radnor Forest, central Wales lacks similar high areas, but the monadnocks of South Wales—notably the Black Mountains and the [Brecon Beacons](https://www.britannica.com/place/Brecon-Beacons-National-Park)—stand out in solitary splendour above the upland surfaces. There are three such surfaces: a high plateau of 1,700 to 1,800 feet (520 to 550 metres); a middle peneplain, or worn-down surface, of 1,200 to 1,600 feet (370 to 490 metres); and a low peneplain of 700 to 1,100 feet (210 to 340 metres). These smooth, rounded, grass-covered moorlands present a remarkably even skyline. Below 700 feet (210 metres) lies a further series of former wave-cut surfaces. Several valleys radiate from the highland core to the coastal regions. In the west these lowlands have provided a haven for traditional Welsh [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture), but the deeply penetrating eastern valleys have channeled English culture into the highland. A more extensive lowland—physically and structurally an extension of the English lowlands—borders the [Bristol Channel](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bristol-Channel) in the southeast. The irregularities of the 600-mile (970-km) Welsh coast show differing adjustments to the pounding attack of the sea.

The [South West](https://www.britannica.com/place/South-West)—England’s largest peninsula—has six [conspicuous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspicuous) uplands: [Exmoor](https://www.britannica.com/place/Exmoor), where Dunkery Beacon reaches an elevation of 1,704 feet (519 metres); the wild, granite uplands of [Dartmoor](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dartmoor-region-England), which reach 2,038 feet (621 metres) at High Willhays; [Bodmin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bodmin) Moor; Hensbarrow; Carn Brea; and the [Penwith](https://www.britannica.com/place/Penwith) upland that forms the spectacular extremity of [Land’s End](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lands-End). Granite reappears above the sea in the [Isles of Scilly](https://www.britannica.com/place/Isles-of-Scilly-islands-England-United-Kingdom), 28 miles (45 km) farther southwest. Despite the variation in elevation, the landscape in the South West, like that of so many other parts of the United Kingdom, has a quite marked uniformity of summit heights, with a high series occurring between 1,000 and 1,400 feet (300 and 430 metres), a middle group between 700 and 1,000 feet (210 and 300 metres), and coastal plateaus ranging between 200 and 400 feet (60 and 120 metres). A network of deep, narrow valleys alternates with flat-topped, steplike areas rising inland. The South West derives much of its renowned physical attraction from its peninsular nature; with both dramatic headlands and magnificent drowned estuaries created by sea-level changes, the coastline is unsurpassed for its [diversity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity).

**The lowland zone**

Gauged by the 700-foot (210-metre) [contour line](https://www.britannica.com/topic/contour-line), the lowland zone starts around the [Solway Firth](https://www.britannica.com/place/Solway-Firth) in the northwest, with a strip of low-lying ground extending up the fault-directed [Vale of Eden](https://www.britannica.com/place/Vale-of-Eden) (the valley of the River Eden). Southward the narrow coastal plain bordering the [Lake District](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lake-District-region-and-national-park-England) broadens into the flat, glacial-drift-covered [Lancashire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lancashire-county-England) and [Cheshire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cheshire-county-England) plains, with their slow-flowing rivers. East of the Pennine ridge the lowlands are continuous, except for the limestone plateau north of the [River Tees](https://www.britannica.com/place/River-Tees) and, to the south, the North York Moors, with large exposed tracts that have elevations of more than 1,400 feet (430 metres). West of the North York Moors lies the wide Vale of York, which merges with the east Midland plain to the south. The younger rocks of the [Midlands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Midlands) terminate at the edge of the Cambrian Mountains to the west. The lowland continues southward along the flat landscapes bordering the lower [River Severn](https://www.britannica.com/place/River-Severn), becomes constricted by the complex Bristol-Mendip upland, and opens out once more into the extensive and flat plain of [Somerset](https://www.britannica.com/place/Somerset-county-England). The eastern horizon of much of the Midland plain is the scarp face of the [Cotswolds](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cotswolds), part of the discontinuous outcrop of limestones and sandstones that arcs from the [Dorset](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dorset-county-England) coast in southern [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England) as far as the [Cleveland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cleveland-former-county-England) Hills on the north coast of [Yorkshire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Yorkshire-former-county-England). The more massive limestones and sandstones give rise to noble 1,000-foot (300-metre) escarpments, yet the dip slope is frequently of such a low angle that the countryside resembles a dissected plateau, passing gradually on to the clay vales of [Oxford](https://www.britannica.com/place/Oxford-England), White Horse, Lincoln, and Pickering. The flat, often reclaimed landscapes of the once-marshy [Fens](https://www.britannica.com/place/Fens) are also underlain by these clays, and the next scarp, the western-facing chalk outcrop ([cuesta](https://www.britannica.com/science/cuesta)), undergoes several marked directional changes in the vicinity of the Wash, a shallow arm of the [North Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Sea).

**The People**

The **British people**, or **Britons**, are the citizens of the [United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom), the [British Overseas Territories](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Overseas_Territories), and the [Crown dependencies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crown_dependencies). [British nationality law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_nationality_law) governs modern British citizenship and nationality, which can be acquired, for instance, by descent from British nationals. When used in a historical context, "British" or "Britons" can refer to the [Celtic Britons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_Britons), the indigenous inhabitants of [Great Britain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Britain) and [Brittany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brittany), whose surviving members are the modern [Welsh people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_people), [Cornish people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornish_people), and [Bretons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bretons). It also refers to citizens of the former [British Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire), who settled in the country prior to 1973, and hold neither UK citizenship nor nationality.

Though early assertions of being British date from the [Late Middle Ages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Late_Middle_Ages), the [Union of the Crowns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_of_the_Crowns) in 1603 and the creation of the [Kingdom of Great Britain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Great_Britain) in 1707 triggered a sense of British national identity. The notion of [Britishness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Britishness) and a shared British identity was forged during the 18th century and early 19th century when Britain engaged in several global conflicts with France, and developed further during the [Victorian era](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_era). The complex [history of the formation of the United Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_formation_of_the_United_Kingdom) created a "particular sense of [nationhood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationhood) and belonging" in Great Britain and Ireland; Britishness became "superimposed on much older identities", of [English](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_people), [Scots](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_people), [Welsh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_people), and [Irish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_people) cultures, whose distinctiveness still resists notions of a [homogenised](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homogeneity_(ecology)) British identity. Because of longstanding ethno-sectarian divisions, British identity in [Northern Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Ireland) is controversial, but it is held with strong conviction by [Unionists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unionism_in_Ireland).

Modern Britons are descended mainly from the varied ethnic groups that settled in [Great Britain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Britain) in and before the 11th century: [Prehistoric](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prehistoric_Britain), Brittonic, [Roman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Britain), [Anglo-Saxon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxons), [Norse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norsemen), and [Normans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normans). The progressive political unification of the British Isles facilitated migration, cultural and linguistic exchange, and intermarriage between the peoples of England, Scotland and Wales during the late Middle Ages, [early modern period](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_modern_Britain) and beyond. Since 1922 and earlier, there has been [immigration to the United Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_the_United_Kingdom_since_1922) by people from what is now the [Republic of Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Ireland), the [Commonwealth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth_of_Nations), mainland [Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe) and elsewhere; they and their descendants are mostly British citizens, with some assuming a British, dual or [hyphenated identity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyphenated_identity). This includes the groups [black British](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_British) and [Asian British people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asian-British_people), which constitute around 10% of the British population.

The British are a diverse, [multinational](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multinational_state), multicultural and multilingual society, with "strong regional accents, expressions and identities". The [social structure of the United Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_structure_of_the_United_Kingdom) has changed radically since the 19th century, with a decline in religious observance, enlargement of the [middle class](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_class), and [increased ethnic diversity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_groups_in_the_United_Kingdom), particularly since the 1950s, when citizens of the [British Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire) were encouraged to immigrate to Britain to work as part of the recovery from [World War II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II). The population of the UK stands at around 66 million, with a [British diaspora](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_diaspora) of around 140 million concentrated in the [United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States), [Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australia), [Canada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada), and [New Zealand](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand), with smaller concentrations in the [Republic of Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Ireland), [Chile](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chile), [South Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa), and parts of the [Caribbean](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caribbean).

**Demography of the United Kingdom**

In the 2011 [UK Census](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Census_in_the_United_Kingdom), the total population of the [United Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom) was about 63,182,000. It is the [21st most populated country in the world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_and_dependencies_by_population). Its [population density](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population_density) is 259 people per square kilometre (671 people per square mile), with [England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England) having significantly greater density than [Wales](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wales), [Scotland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scotland), and [Northern Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Ireland). Almost a third of the population lives in England's southeast, which is predominantly urban and [suburban](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suburban), with about 9,000,000 in the capital city, [London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London), whose population density is just over 5,200 per square kilometre (13,468 per sq mi). The population of the UK reached 66.4 million in mid-2019, with growth slowing in the last few years.

The population of the United Kingdom has undergone [demographic transition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographic_transition)—that is, the transition from a (typically) pre-industrial population, with high [birth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birth_rate) and [mortality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mortality_rate) rates and slow population growth, through a stage of falling mortality and faster rates of population growth, to a stage of low birth and mortality rates with, again, lower rates of growth. This growth through 'natural change' has been accompanied in the past two decades by growth through net [migration into the United Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_immigration_to_the_United_Kingdom), which since 1999 has exceeded natural change.

The United Kingdom's high [literacy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literacy) rate (99% at age 15 and above) is attributable to [universal public education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_United_Kingdom), introduced at the primary level in 1870 ([Scotland 1872, free 1890](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_education_in_the_nineteenth_century)) and at the secondary level in 1900. Parents are obliged to have their children educated from the ages of 5 to 16 years (18 in England as of 2013), and can continue education free of charge in the form of [A-Levels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A-Levels), [vocational training](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocational_training), and [apprenticeship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apprenticeship) until the age of 18.

The [Church of England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_England) and the [Church of Scotland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_Scotland) are the national churches in their respective countries ([Wales](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wales) has had no established church since [disestablishment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_in_Wales) (1920)), and all the major religions found in the world are represented in the United Kingdom.

The United Kingdom's population is predominantly [White British](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_British). Lying near [continental Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continental_Europe), the countries that formed the United Kingdom were subject to many invasions and migrations from the continent, especially from [Scandinavia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scandinavia), and including [Roman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Empire) occupation for several centuries. Historically, British people were therefore thought to be descended mainly from the different ethnic stocks that settled there before the 11th century: [pre-Celtic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pre-Celtic), [Celtic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celts), [Anglo-Saxon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxons), [Viking](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vikings), and [Norman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normans). Modern genetic testing has revealed the complexity of the [British gene pool](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genetic_history_of_the_British_Isles); recent studies have suggested that the prehistoric [Bell Beaker influx](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bell-Beaker_Culture) and the [Anglo-Saxon migrations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_settlement_of_Britain) have had particularly significant effects on the genetic makeup of modern Britons.

[Celtic languages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_languages) are spoken in [Scotland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scotland), [Cornwall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornwall), and [Northern Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Ireland); the predominant language overall is English. [Welsh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_language) is widely spoken as the first language in [North](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Wales) and [West Wales](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Wales), and less so in the [South East](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_East_Wales) of the country, where English is the dominant first language