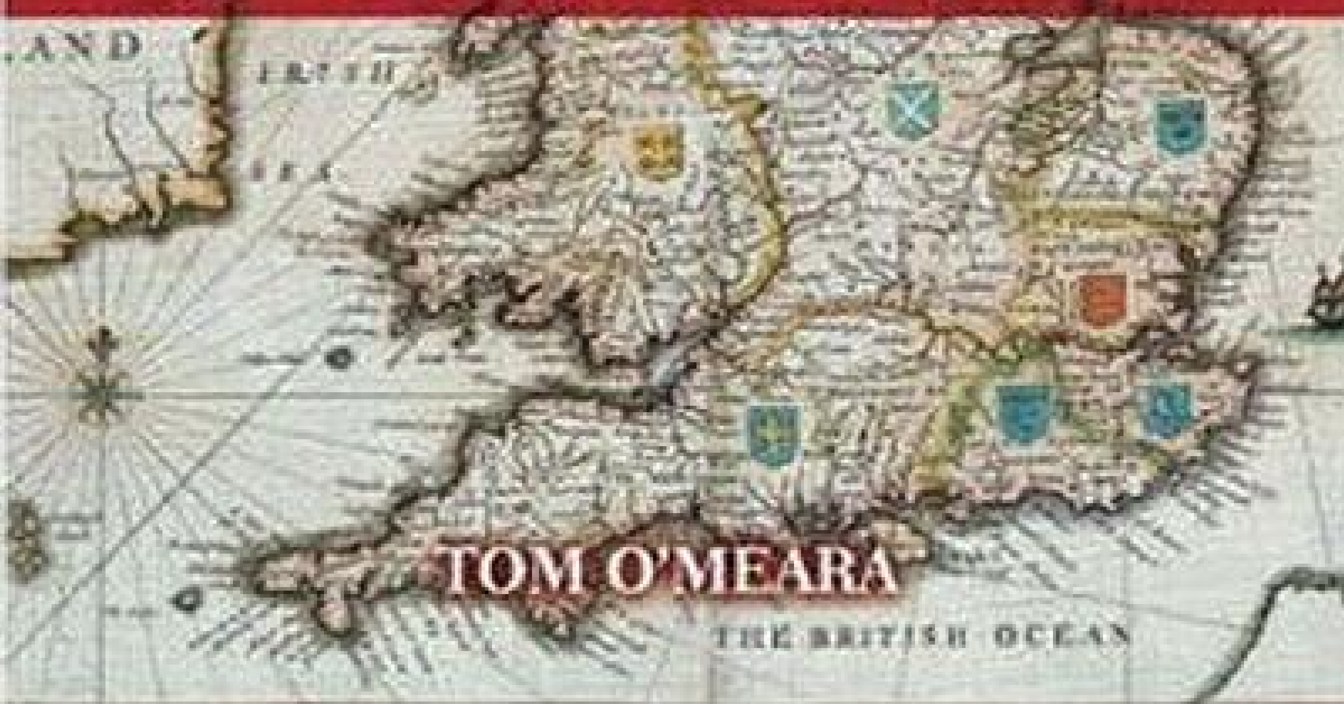
A MISCELLANY OF BRITAIN

People • Places • History
Culture • Customs • Sport



TOM O'MEARA

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People ✿ Places ✿ History
Culture ✿ Customs ✿ Sport

TOM O'MEARA

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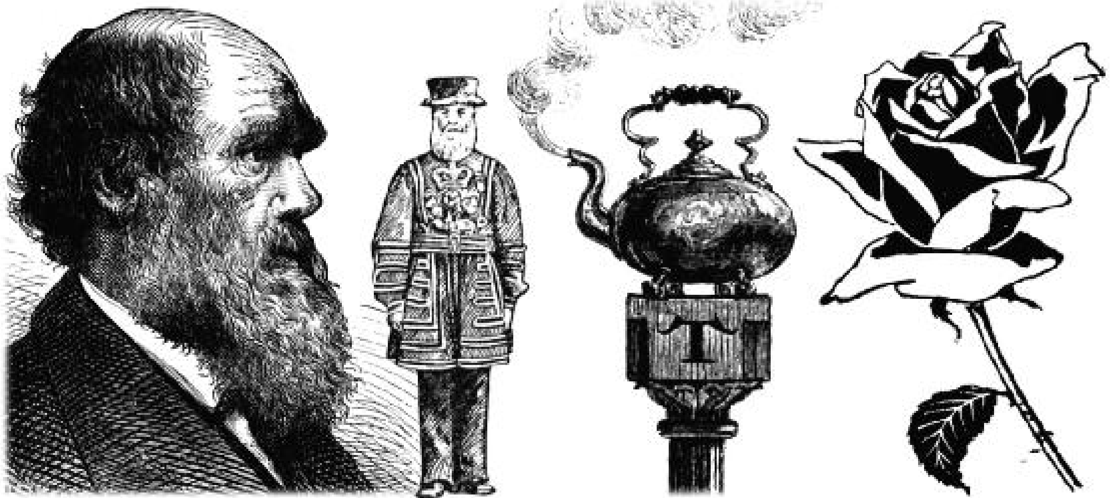
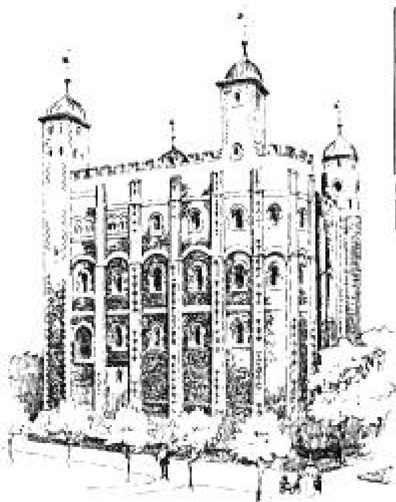
CONTENTS

Introduction — 7
This is Britain — 8
A Potted History — 20
Great Brits — 24
Bad Brits — 25
Celebrity — 26
Great British Women — 28
The Virgin Queen — 30
The Rose — 32
Royal Oddities — 34
Monarchs of England — 36
Henry VIII — 38
Elizabeth II — 40
Prime Ministers — 42
Winston Churchill — 44
Britain at War — 46
Horatio Nelson — 48
The Union Jack — 50
National Rivals — 52
The British Empire — 54
Brits Abroad — 56
Sir Francis Drake — 58
Explorers and Adventurers — 60
Charles Darwin — 64
Animal Britain — 66
Rivers and National Parks — 70
Robin Hood — 72
British Inventions — 74
The British Pub — 79
Booze Britain — 82
A Nice Cup of Tea — 86
Curried Britain — 88
Traditional British Food — 90
Haggis — 94
Fish and Chips — 96



CONTENTS

The British Seaside — 98
British Slang — 100
Rhyming Slang — 102
The English Language — 103
William Shakespeare — 107
Books and Writers — 110
Oxbridge — 114
The BBC — 118
Classic British TV — 120
Carry On Films — 124
Alfred Hitchcock — 126
Sherlock Holmes — 128
British Hats — 130
Jack the Ripper — 132
British Killers — 134
Selected British Riots — 138
London Fact File — 140
Edinburgh Fact File — 142
Cardiff Fact File — 144
The Tower of London — 146
British Buildings — 148
Westminster Abbey — 152
Patron Saints — 154
National Songs — 156
Music — 159
The Beatles — 161
Sport — 164
Bizarre Bets — 173
British Art — 174
Nude and Rude Britain 176
No Sex Please, We're British — 179
The Routemaster Bus — 182
Going Underground — 183
Weird Britain — 184
Auld Lang Syne — 191
Famous Last Words — 192



INTRODUCTION

'Without Britain, Europe would remain only a torso.'
Ludwig Erhard, German politician (1897–1977)

'Being British is about tolerance, decency and the determination to talk about the weather on all occasions as well as a tendency, when a stranger stands on one's foot, to apologize.'
Martin Bell

How do you define Britain? Encapsulating the spirit of any country is tricky, but Britain, which is made up of more than one nation and a mass of cultural idiosyncrasies and contradictions, is more difficult than most. Brits love the mix of the unpredictable and the mundane; hence the fact that, as a topic of conversation, weather is a national obsession.

It's intriguing that Brits are famed both for their manners and their bad behaviour. Outsiders laugh at the innate impulsion to queue that exists in Britain, but then cower when Brits invade their beaches during the summer months. Britain is a land where consuming copious quantities of tea is an important social convention, but Brits also binge drink and behave badly like nobody else in Europe. It may have invented the most popular sport in the world in football, but alongside it football hooliganism ranks among Britain's more infamous cultural exports.

The world's greatest writer, William Shakespeare, was a Brit and Britain boasts a long lineage of distinguished explorers, adventurers and soldiers. But its heroes tend to be complicated characters. Lord Horatio Nelson was once described as 'the greatest sailor since the world began,' but suffered all his life from seasickness. As well as being a national hero with the aura of a noble gentleman, Sir Francis Drake was a notorious pirate who built his fortune on slave trading.

And, almost nothing in Britain is entirely official: the language, the national anthem, even the constitution. It's a place where people love their pet dogs, but equally love killing foxes; a country where people enjoy a bet, but always prefer to back the underdog. In the end this book doesn't attempt to define Britain. Instead, it showcases the most interesting and illuminating of the idiosyncrasies that make up a fascinating place.

Tom O'Meara, 2007

THIS IS BRITAIN

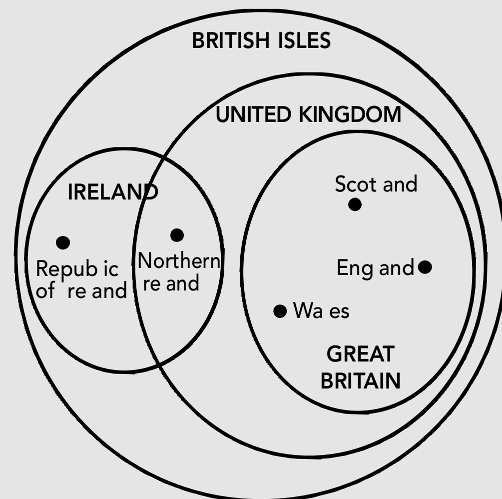
BRITAIN'S OTHER NAMES

Albion: *Thought to be Celtic in origin, it is an ancient name for Britain, although some argue it is more applicable to Scotland as Scotland's gaelic name is* Alba. *A popular term in pseudo-mythology, William Blake liked to reference Albion in his poetry, as do Pete Doherty's band Babyshambles.*
Blighty: *A slang term for Britain, derived from the Hindu word* bilayati, *meaning foreign. It originated during the time when Britain ruled India and is still used by British expats in reference to home. 'Blighty' was particularly popular as a term during World War I when soldiers spoke of 'dear old Blighty' and prayed for a 'blighty' or wound that would take them home.*

Doggerland

Rather than some modern-day swinger's paradise, this is the name given to the land mass which once connected Britain to mainland Europe, approximately 6,000 years ago. It joined Britain's east coast with what is now the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark and at one point was inhabited. When the ice age ended and the seas rose, Britain was born. But Doggerland still lives on in the form of Dogger Bank, a large sandbank in a shallow area of the North Sea about 100 km off the coast of England. The largest earthquake ever recorded in Britain, measuring 6.1 on the Richter scale, took place in 1931 below the sandbank forming Dogger Bank.

The Great British Venn diagram



JOHN BULL

John Bull is a personification of Britain, a British version of America's Uncle Sam. But whereas Uncle Sam is an authoritarian capitalist, whose main concern appears to be military recruitment, John Bull is a down-to-earth everyman, more interested in beer, bulldogs and a quiet life. Created by the political satirist Dr John Arbuthnot in 1712, his caricature continues to strike a chord of recognition. Typically, he dresses like an English country squire in a Union Jack waistcoat and squat top hat, and is often accompanied by a bulldog. Arbuthnot gave him a sister, Peg, to represent Scotland and an arch-enemy, Louis Baboon, as a symbol of France. Neither caught on like John Bull, who admittedly is far less popular in Scotland and Wales than England.

'One would think that in personifying itself, a nation would picture something grand, heroic and imposing, but it is characteristic of the peculiar humour of the English, and of their love of what is blunt, comic and familiar, that they have embodied their national oddities in the figure of a sturdy, corpulent old fellow.'

American writer Washington Irving

THE BRITISH BULLDOG

'*The nose of the bulldog has been slanted backwards so he can breathe without letting go*,' said Winston Churchill and it is due to this tenacity that the dog became a symbol of Britain. The British bulldog originated in England, with the ancestors of the modern breed used for bull baiting in the 16th and 17th centuries. This practice was banned in 1835.

'What is crazy, loopy and un-British? Slapping a bulldog.'

Frankie Boyle, comedian

STIFF UPPER LIP

Thanks to the over-active tearducts of footballers like David Beckham and Paul Gascoigne and the very public displays of emotion on TV shows such as *The X-Factor*, you might be forgiven for thinking that keeping a 'stiff upper lip' is no longer a British trait. Overseas, however, the British are still regarded as a reserved, unemotional people that face misfortune with resolution and without recourse to tears. Strangely, the phrase itself, which refers to keeping a trembling lip in check, isn't British at all. It's American in origin, with its first recorded usage in the Boston newspaper, the *Massachusetts Spy*, in 1815.

THE V-SIGN

The V-sign is a basic piece of British sign language. If the palm of the hand, below the raised and parted first and second fingers, faces outwards – as practised by Winston Churchill – it signifies victory or peace. If the back of the hand faces outwards, however, as practised by Oasis frontman Liam Gallagher, the signal roughly translates as 'f*** off'! Although the V for victory is self-explanatory, there are many theories but no consensus as to where the rude version originates from. The story that it was used by English longbow men during the Hunded Years' War to taunt the French who routinely amputated the fingers of English archers is an urban myth. The victory sign became popular during World War II when a Belgian refugee living in Britain called Victor De Lavelaye suggested that those fighting the Nazis and living in Nazi-occupied territories use it as a defiant gesture. The BBC took up the campaign, broadcasting the Morse code for V (dot-dot-dot-dash), followed by the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Churchill was a great supporter of this initiative and took the opportunity to flick a V-sign, in the nicest possible way of course, whenever he could.

Afternoon tea

As a British tradition, the taking of afternoon tea is beginning to take on the status of a myth. Although some Brits still stop work for a cup of tea and a snack around mid-afternoon, they are the exception rather than the rule. The foreign perception that at four o'clock on the dot the whole nation downs tools and sticks the kettle on before settling down for a cup of tea accompanied by a scone, slice of cake or cucumber sandwich is fairly wide of the mark.

THE WEATHER

'*When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather,*' wrote Dr Johnson back in the 18th century. Not much has changed. Brits seem to regard talking about the weather as an ice-breaker and no doubt foreigners would suggest it's so commonplace in Britain because its inhabitants are far too reserved and emotionally stunted to just begin chatting freely without a specific reason. The weather is an excuse to start talking, but it goes deeper than that. Living in such an unpredictable climate appears to compel Brits to speculate about what the weather is going to do next, to the point where it's a national obsession.

Why do the British drive on the left?

When the horse was king, travellers liked to keep their sword hand free to deal with hostile traffic. As most were right-handed, they kept to the left and it became the rule of the road. The Highways Bill of 1835 made it law.

So why do other nations drive on the right?

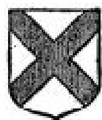
The story goes that before the French Revolution the aristocracy drove their carriages so fast and recklessly on the left that peasants clung to the right-hand side to avoid being mown down. After the Revolution, everybody kept religiously to the right to avoid standing out from the crowd and being guillotined. Soon, the rest of Europe followed suit.

THE DOMESDAY BOOK

Britain's first-ever census, commissioned by William the Conqueror in 1085, was a colossal task. Its aim was to work out exactly what the new king owned. In the end it listed details of more than 13,000 settlements.

'After this had the king a large meeting, and very deep consultation with his council, about this land; how it was occupied, and by what sort of men. Then sent he his men over all England into each shire; commissioning them to find out "How many hundreds of hides were in the shire, what land the king himself had, and what stock upon the land; or, what dues he ought to have by the year from the shire." … ***So very narrowly, indeed, did he commission them to trace it out, that there was not one single hide, nor a yard of land, nay, moreover (it is shameful to tell, though he thought it no shame to do it), not even an ox, nor a cow, nor a swine was there left, that was not set down in his writ. And all the recorded particulars were afterwards brought to him.'***

Source: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, annals narrating the Anglo-Saxons' history



NATIONAL EMBLEMS

THE ST GEORGE'S CROSS

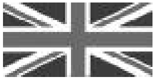
Officially adopted as the national flag of England during the 13th century, having previously adorned English soldiers during the Crusades, it is unclear whether or not the symbol actually predated its association with the saint in England. Overshadowed as a flag by the Union Jack for much of British history, the St George's Cross has recently enjoyed a renaissance, thanks in the main to sporting events where England competes separately. During the 2006 World Cup, 1,500,000 St George's flags were sold.

The Welsh Dragon

Although the red dragon has been associated with Wales for many centuries, the Welsh flag was only granted official status in 1959. The Romans may have introduced the dragon design to Wales or it may have emerged even earlier. The green and white stripes were added by the House of Tudor during the Middle Ages. When flown, the dragon should face the flagpole. Currently, Bhutan is the only other nation in the world to have a dragon on its flag.

FLAG OF SCOTLAND

Dating back to the 9th century, the Scottish flag is thought to be one of the oldest modern flags. The white cross, known as a 'saltire' represents the patron saint of Scotland, St Andrew. There has been much debate over what constitutes the correct blue for the Scottish flag and its colour has ranged from a bright sky blue to a deep navy. In 2003, following a petition to the Scottish Parliament, it was recommended that Pantone 300 blue be used as the standard hue. This is different to how the Scottish flag appears in the Union Jack, where it is Pantone 280.



The first use of the thistle as a royal symbol of Scotland was on silver coins issued by James III in 1470.

THE THISTLE

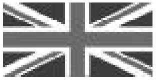
Legend has it that the Scots adopted the thistle as their national flower in the 13th century after a Viking invader who had removed his footwear to move more stealthily stepped on one at night. He cried out, alerting the guards of a Scottish castle to the threat. Forewarned, the Scots repelled the invaders.

THE ORDER OF THE THISTLE

Created in 1540 by King James V, the Order of the Thistle claims to be the second oldest order in Britain. Consisting of the King and 12 knights in imitation of Jesus Christ and the 12 apostles, its motto is *Nemo me impune lacessit*, meaning 'no-one harms me without punishment'. The modern-day equivalent would be the Scotsman in his local pub who warns strangers or enemies to 'nae mess wi me'.

The leek and the daffodil

Both the national flower of Wales (the daffodil) and the national emblem (the leek) are traditionally worn by the Welsh on St David's Day (March 1). According to legend, Welsh soldiers were ordered to identify themselves by wearing the vegetable on their helmets in an ancient battle against the Saxons, which took place in a leek field. Although there is speculation that this story was made up by the English poet Michael Drayton, the leek has been used as a national emblem in Wales since at least 1536. Both the daffodil and the leek share the same Welsh name – *ceninen*.



A new variety of daffodil, *Narcissus 'Cardiff'*, was specially bred in 2005 to commemorate Cardiff's 50th year as the capital of Wales.

The oak tree

The oak is an impressive tree, so it's perhaps not surprising that it is not just the national tree of England, but of Estonia, France, Germany and the US as well. In Britain the oak tree boasts an impressive and useful history. In Celtic mythology the oak was seen as a sacred tree, which provided a gateway between worlds. Nelson's ships were built of oak, as was the structure of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. Later, oak was used not just to build houses, ships and bridges, but also as a source of charcoal. Perhaps the most famous use for an oak tree in Britain, however, was when King Charles II hid in one from Parliamentarian soldiers in 1651 following the Battle of Worcester. It is thanks to this oak tree, which stood in Boscobel Wood, that so many pubs in Britain are called 'The Royal Oak'. Other famous oaks in Britain include the Major Oak in Sherwood Forest, which is associated with Robin Hood, and the Queen Elizabeth Oak in the grounds of the Royal Palace of Hatfield in Hertfordshire, which is supposed to be where Elizabeth was told she was Queen in 1558.

'Mighty oaks from little acorns grow.'
British proverb

The oldest tree in Europe is thought to be the Fortingall Yew, a yew tree in Perthshire, which is estimated to be around 4,000 years old.

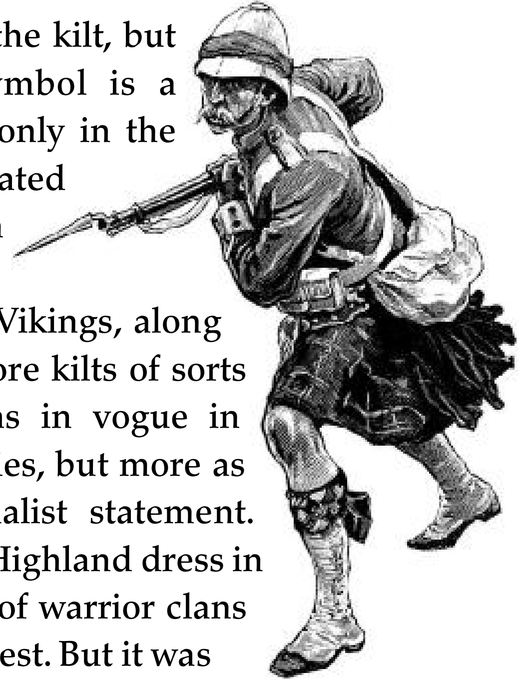
THE RED TELEPHONE BOX

The red telephone box is a symbol of Britain, which due to modernization and the growth of mobile phone usage, is fast disappearing from Britain's streets. Originally designed by Giles Gilbert Scott (who also designed Liverpool Cathedral) in the 1920s, the red booth replete with royal insignia is one of those icons like the bowler hat and Big Ben that foreigners associate with Britain. But, by the latter part of the 20th century, incessant vandalism and the persistent tendency for people to use them as urinals persuaded British Telecom to modify its approach to public telephone boxes and replace them with modern designs that are easier to maintain. There are still a few red boxes in working order and some have been given listed status, but many more have been sold off. These refurbished phone boxes, which cost between £800 and £5,000, have various new uses as shower cubicles, greenhouses, giant goldfish bowls and garden shed and bar features.

Five facts about British telephone boxes

✻ **Working red telephone boxes can be found on the Mediterranean islands of Malta and Gozo, thanks to the colonial legacy.** ✻ Hollywood actor Michael Madsen, who starred in *Reservoir Dogs*, has an old British telephone box in his front garden. ✻ **Australia and New Zealand once had similar telephone boxes and some have been preserved as historic sites down under.** ✻ A phone box marking the spot which is supposedly the very centre of the British Isles can be found in the Lancashire village of Dunsop Bridge. ✻ **Kingston upon Hull never possessed any of the iconic boxes as at one point it was the only area of the UK not under the Post Office monopoly. Instead public telephones were under the control of Hull's city council and were painted cream and had no royal insignia.**

THE KILT

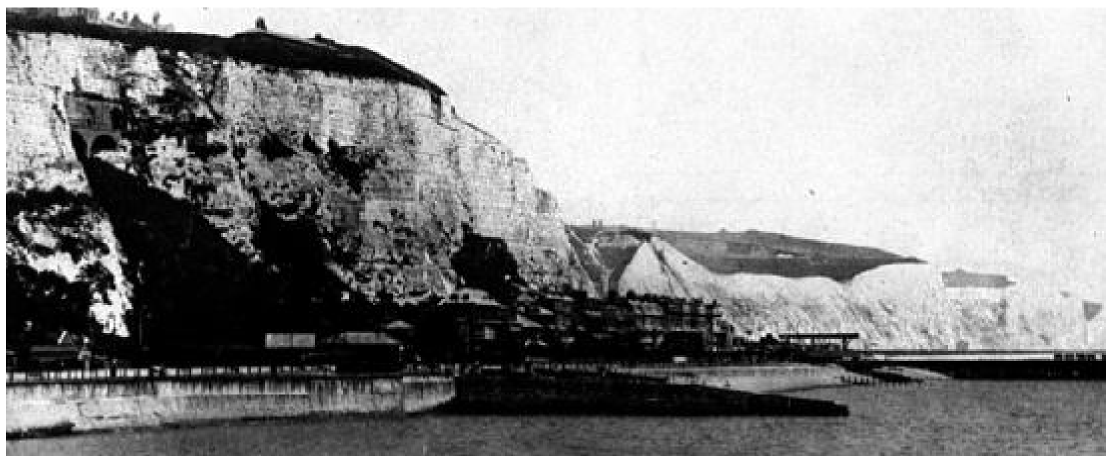


There's nothing more Scottish than the kilt, but its iconic status as a national symbol is a relatively recent occurrence. It was only in the 19th century that it became associated with Scotland in this sense. A man wearing a skirt is not an exclusively Scottish phenomenon, after all, and Vikings, along with Gauls and Anglo-Saxons, all wore kilts of sorts back in ancient times. The kilt was in vogue in Scotland in the 17th and 18th centuries, but more as a fashion statement than a nationalist statement. Banning it along with other items of Highland dress in 1746 in an effort to break the power of warrior clans led some to wear it in a romantic protest. But it was in 1822, some 30 years after the ban was lifted that the kilt was elevated to the status of national symbol. When King George IV visited Scotland in 1822, the event was organized by Sir Walter Scott and kilts, tartan and Highland dress were presented in the pageantry as motifs with deep Scottish roots. Before this, the kilt was not associated with Scotland's national identity. Nowadays, the kilt is worn as part of Scotland's ceremonial dress along with a belt, jacket, sporran and, perhaps, underwear. There is no rule that states that a Scotsman should wear nothing under his kilt, but it has become a tradition of its own. Shunning underwear is known as 'going regimental' or 'military practice', so it may stem from the armed forces, but there is no official policy regarding the wearing of kilts and underwear in the Scottish military.

Scottish soldiers wore kilts in combat during WWI, leading German troops to nickname them the *'Ladies from Hell'.*

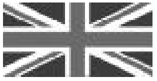
BAGPIPES

The bagpipes are one of the instruments that certain people hate, likening the sound to a tortured cat or a foghorn with Tourette's. But don't blame the Scots. The bagpipes may be associated more closely with Scotland than any other country, but they were most probably invented in the Middle East, with mentions in the Old Testament and Greek poetry from 400BC onwards. They almost certainly arrived in Britain with the Romans and didn't become popular in Scotland until the 12th century. Even then, they weren't seen as 'Scottish' and it wasn't until pipers began to displace harpers in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the Great Highland Bagpipe emerged, that the bagpipes came to be intertwined with Scotland's national identity. The Great Highland Bagpipe is the one most likely to be played in Scotland today.



'No promontory town or haven of Christendom is so placed by nature and situation both to gratify friends and annoy enemies as this your Majestie's Town of Dover.'

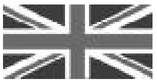
Walter Raleigh to Queen Elizabeth about Dover



The faces of the white cliffs of Dover erode at an average rate of 1cm per year.

The white cliffs of Dover

Rising 350 feet high, the white cliffs of Dover are the physical face that Britain presents to continental Europe at the narrowest point of the English Channel. Known as the 'lock and key of England', before air travel, the primary route between Britain and the Continent was the crossing at Dover. The impressive white cliffs were the first thing that greeted visitors to Britain and the last thing travellers saw as they left on board ship. And, on a clear day, you can still see the coast of France from the white cliffs of Dover.



There is a hidden network of tunnels behind the cliff face that was first created during the Middle Ages.

'(There'll Be Bluebirds Over) The White Cliffs Of Dover'

'There'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover
Tomorrow, just you wait and see
There'll be love and laughter and peace ever after
Tomorrow when the world is free'

Vera Lynn had a huge hit with this song during World War II. But while Lynn was born in East Ham in London, the words were written by an American, Nat Burton, who'd never even been to Dover, perhaps explaining why he imagined the unlikely sight of bluebirds circling above the cliffs.