

Unit 4 - Britain



The objectives for this unit are:

- reading: read a text about British stereotypes.
- colloquial English: learn some idiomatic expressions.

Unit 4 - Britain - Reading: Key phrases

The following words and phrases appear in the text you are going to read in this section:

quirk an aspect of somebody's personality or that is a little strange.

He has the quirk of staring at his food before he eats it.

preserve an activity, job or interest that is thought to be suitable for one particular person or group.

Free time is no longer the preserve of the rich.

rank and file the ordinary members of an organization.

The rank and file of the workforce need to be consulted about this.

pragmatism thinking about solving problems in a practical and sensible way.

Her pragmatism is a real asset to the company.

proliferation a large number or sudden increase of something.

The proliferation of crime in this city needs to be dealt with.

nuanced slightly differentiated in meaning or quality.

The report is complex and finely nuanced.



Drinking tea and queuing: British stereotypes

You may arrive in the UK thinking you know all about British people. If we're not queuing then we're drinking tea and talking about the weather, right? But do these stereotypes really hold up on closer examination? Let's take a look at the nation's quirks and habits and see if we can dispel some of the myths once and for all.

We drink tea all the time

Tea first arrived in Britain in the middle of the 16th century and started out as the preserve of the rich upper classes. It wasn't until the 18th century that it became the infusion of the rank and file, and since then it's gone from strength to strength. More than 170 million cups of tea are drunk in the UK every day, equating to about 2.5 kg of tea per person per year. So if you visit Britain, in all likelihood you'll be offered a cup of tea at some point. Don't worry if you don't like the stuff, though; it's not compulsory and large quantities of coffee and herbal infusions are also drunk. And if you do drink tea in the UK, you may be surprised to find that it's not a refined cultural ceremony like it is in many other countries. 'Builder's tea', strong black tea in a mug usually served with milk and sugar, is commonly drunk and in very large quantities.

Verdict: True

We are obsessed by class

A three-tier class system is synonymous with the UK to outsiders. But, says cultural commentator Peter York, it's much more nuanced than that. The British, he believes, are simply experts at chronicling each stratum's many sub-divisions. Nancy Mitford categorised words as 'U' (upper-class) or 'non-U' (aspirational middle-class) and found that your use of the word 'napkin' or 'serviette' to describe the same thing said a lot about you. Despite this York believes the UK is no more bound by class than, say, the US. We're simply better at signifying how the system works. The paradox, he adds, is that as the gap between rich and poor has increased over recent decades, so too have the number of flat vowels among the super-rich as pop stars and footballers joined the elite. 'The assumption is that we are uniquely class-divided, whereas that is of course nonsense,' York says. 'Everywhere has a class system. But it's our obsession in the sense that race is the American obsession.'

Verdict: True

We talk about the weather all the time

On the face of it, if you live in a country where the weather is basically the same every day, there doesn't seem much sense in chatting about it: 'Hot, isn't it?'

'Yes, just like yesterday and the day before.' In the UK, the weather can change drastically from one hour to the next, so obviously the British must talk about it all the time simply because they have so much opportunity, right? Well, yes, we do talk about the weather a lot, but it turns out so does everybody else. Even if it doesn't change from day to day, talking about the weather is effortless, obvious and a topic which affects people directly. Whether it's the cold of Canada or the humid heat of Honduras, the locals talk about it. It's one of the few things in life which affects everybody equally and there is no better way of opening a dialogue and making a connection with someone.

Verdict: True (but so does everybody else)

Our food is awful

People say that British food is terrible. The proliferation of foreign restaurants might at first seem to bear this out but it's actually due to our history of invading countries with interesting cuisines. Eating out in Britain can be a truly cosmopolitan experience. You'll easily find French, Lebanese, Japanese, Mexican, Thai, Chinese, Indian, or any other type of restaurant that you can think of. Of course, that's all foreign food and while we are the first to admit that fish and chips is not exactly the height of culinary sophistication, we have to say that British food, British ingredients and, most importantly, British people's ideas about what constitutes good food has been steadily improving for decades. You only have to turn on a television in the UK and note the quantity and quality of programmes dedicated to cooking to appreciate our newfound love of all things gastronomic.

Verdict: False

We queue for everything

Many British people believe queuing is peculiarly British, or even English, and that if it were an Olympic sport we would take the gold medal. Its first appearance in the Oxford English Dictionary, however, refers to it as a French custom.

The British like to think they stand in line with patience and humour. At Wimbledon, at the January sales, and in front of toilets in the theatre, queuing has almost become the point rather than merely a means to an end. No matter how dull the wait, the British keep on queuing. The Hungarian-born satirist George Mikes wrote in 1946: 'An Englishman, even if he is alone, forms an orderly queue of one,' and in so doing helped create the myth of our Olympian queuing abilities. But there is really very little evidence that we are better at it than anyone else. Queuing simply fits in with our self-image of pragmatism and politeness. Perhaps the lesson for any visitor then, is to be aware that the British think they are good at queuing. And if you are going to push in, try to do it subtly.

Verdict: True (but we're not as good at it as we think we are)

Stereotypes: check your understanding: Practice

Decide if the statements from the text are **true**, **false**, or **not mentioned**...

1. The British don't drink much coffee.
2. The British think of themselves as practical and sensible.
3. The author thinks it's natural to talk about the weather.
4. British people aren't interested in food.
5. Chefs are treated like pop stars in Britain.
6. Britain has more classes than other countries.

Stereotypes: skill transfer: Practice

Write a short paragraph to answer each of these questions:

What are the stereotypes about your country?

Why do we use stereotypes?

What dangers do using stereotypes bring?

Unit 4 - Britain - Idiomatic expressions

These idiomatic expressions are taken from the text you read in the previous section:

once and for all conclusively, finally

Let's see if we can dispel some of the myths once and for all.

go from strength-to-strength progress with increasing success.

Since then, the annual event has gone from strength to strength.

in all likelihood very probably

In all likelihood you'll be offered a cup of tea.

stuff (informal) things or material of an indeterminate kind.

Don't worry if you don't like the stuff.

a means to an end a thing not valued in itself but useful for achieving an aim.

Queuing is a means to an end.

on the face of it apparently; without knowing all the relevant facts.

On the face of it, there doesn't seem much sense in chatting about the weather.

it turns out it transpires; it proves to be.

It turns out everyone talks about it.

be the first to admit willingly accept that something is true.

The British are the first to admit that fish and chips is not exactly the height of culinary sophistication.

Colloquial expressions: Practice

Correct the mistakes in the following sentences:

1. The new regulations are just an end to a means.
2. If I'm wrong, I'll be the first to concede it.
3. It turns up she wasn't at the restaurant after all.
4. In all likely we will have to buy a new one.
5. Our loft is full of stuffs nobody uses anymore.
6. Let's get to the bottom of this for once and all.
7. In the face of it, these improvements seem to be quite minor.
8. Tom has gone from strength since school.