

Chapter 1

So Much History, So Little Time

In This Chapter

- ▶ Listing the kingdoms that make up the United Kingdom
- ▶ Figuring out how the UK was formed
- ▶ Identifying the people who make up the UK

British history is a history of a variety of people inhabiting a variety of regions. In fact, all this variety is one of the reasons why the country's name is so ridiculously long: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It's a mouthful, for sure, but it reveals a great deal about the people – past and present – who have inhabited these islands.

When you think of history lessons at school, what comes to mind – before your eyelids droop, that is? Probably endless lists of kings or Acts of Parliament and confusing tales of people named after places (“Ah! Lancaster! Where’s Worcester?”) who spend their time swapping sides and cutting each others’ heads off. You might think of the stories: Drake playing bowls as the Spanish Armada sails up the Channel or Robert the Bruce watching a spider spinning his web, or Churchill hurling defiance at Hitler. Good stories, yes, but what’s the connection between these events and *you*? If you tend to think of history as merely a series of disconnected events, you miss the bigger picture: History is about people.



British history is full of wonderful people (quite a few of whom were clearly stark raving mad, but that’s history for you) and exciting events – all of which helped make Britain the sort of place it is today. In examining what made Britain Britain, you’ll also discover the British helped make the world. In that sense, whoever you are, British history is also probably part of your history. Enjoy.

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Where the name came from

The country's full name is The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Of course, no-one actually calls the country by that name. You hear "United Kingdom" in top international gatherings like the UN or the Eurovision Song Contest, and the only people who say "the UK" are British people working abroad. Most English people say "England" when they mean "Britain", but they're in good company: the Victorians used to do that all the time, too – even the Victorian Welsh and Scots and, yes, Irish. You might think *Britain* would be a safe term to use, but apart from the fact that using it is a good way to get yourself lynched in Glasgow or West Belfast, it's not actually accurate.

You see, *Britain* was the name the Romans gave to the whole island, which contains modern-day England, Wales, and Scotland. Ireland was *Hibernia*, so even Northern Ireland was never part of "Britain". This old Roman distinction between Britain and Hibernia (or Ireland) is why the full name of the country is so cumbersome.

For a long time after the Romans went the term *Britain* disappeared and was only used to refer to the time before the Saxons – like in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example. Educated people knew *Britain* was an ancient term for the whole island, but no-one actually used it, or if they did, they used it to mean Brittany! When

King James VI of Scotland became King of England in 1603 (see Chapter 13) he tried to revive the term *Britain*, but no-one really took him up on it.

Then, a hundred years later, England and Scotland joined together in the Act of Union, and they had to think of a name for the new joint kingdom. Someone suggested "Great Britain", which not only sounded good but was actually accurate – when England and Scotland united, they reformed the old Roman province of Britain, and the "Great" helped to distinguish it from Brittany. When, a hundred years after *that*, another Act of Union brought Ireland into the fold, they didn't just lump all three countries under the name Great Britain (because Ireland had *never* been part of Britain, great or small) so the name changed again to *the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland*. (To find out more about the Acts of Union, head to Chapter 15.)

When the Romans left, the *Britons* were the Celtic peoples they left behind. When the Angles and Saxons came raiding and settling, they subsumed the Britons of "England" into the new people who eventually got called the English. So the people with the best right to be called British nowadays are actually the very people in Wales and Scotland who object to the term most strongly!

A Historical Tin of Beans – But Not Quite 57 Varieties

British history is incredibly varied. That's partly because any country that can trace its history back to the mists of time is going to have a varied tale to tell, but it's also because of the nature of the country itself. To get a glimpse of how the union was formed, head to the section "How the UK Was Born". To find out *who* makes up the UK, see "You're Not From Round 'Ere – But Then Again, Neither Am I".

An island nation

Before the Romans came, the whole island was one big patchwork of different tribes: There was no sense that some tribes were “Scottish” and some “English”. In fact, since the Scots were an Irish tribe and the English, if they existed at all, lived in Germany, no-one would have understood what either term meant!

England

After the Romans, the Angles and Saxons set up a whole network of different kingdoms: Kent, East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex, and some other less important ones. Not until the Vikings arrived did the English start to unite under a single King. It was this united kingdom that William the Conqueror took over when he won the Battle of Hastings in 1066. He would hardly have bothered if he was only going to become King of Wessex.



After the Norman invasion, although it was easier to speak of “England”, it was much harder to talk about the English. The ordinary people were of Saxon blood, but the nobles were all French – Normans to start with and later from other parts of France. There’s a whole sweep of famous Kings of England, including Richard the Lionheart, King John, the first three Edwards, and Richard II, who would never have called themselves English. It’s not really until Henry V and the Wars of the Roses that you can talk of everyone from top to bottom being part of an English people.

Scotland

The Romans did have a sense of “Scotland”, or *Caledonia* as they called it, being a bit different, but that was just because they were never able to conquer it completely. There were Britons in Strathclyde and Picts in most of the rest of Caledonia, and then Scots came over from the north of Ireland and settled. It took a long time, but eventually these three groups all learned to get along with each other. It was a Scottish King, Kenneth MacAlpin, who finally managed to unite the groups, so the whole area came to be called after his people – “Scot-land”.

Wales

“For Wales”, it used to say in indexes and things, “see England”! Which is desperately unfair, but for many years that was how the English thought about it. The Welsh are descended pretty much directly from the Ancient Britons, and they have kept their separate identity and language. You’ll still find Welsh being spoken in parts of North Wales today.

Ireland

Most people think of Irish history in terms of Ireland being invaded by the English, but if anything, it was the other way round in the beginning. Apart from one or two trading posts, the Romans left Ireland alone (except, that is,

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for a certain Roman Briton called Patrick, who did make something of an impact). After the Romans left Britain, the Irish started to come over as missionaries, not conquerors. They set up the great monasteries of Iona and Lindisfarne, and Irish monks and preachers like St Columba brought Christianity to Scotland and northern England. Some Irish did cross over to settle, and as we've seen, one of these tribes, the *Scotti* or *Scots*, gave their name to Scotland. Once the Normans settled in England, however, things changed.

And all those little islands

Islands play an important part in what is, after all, the story of an island people. Scottish missionaries worked from Iona and Lindisfarne, and Queen Victoria governed a worldwide empire from Osborne Palace on the Isle of Wight. The islands are a reminder of the cultural and ethnic variety that makes up the British peoples.

The Shetland Islands and the Isle of Man

The most northerly parts of Britain are the Shetland Islands. You might think of them as Scottish, but you'd be badly wrong. The Shetlanders are of pure Viking stock and proud of it. You can touch the Viking heritage in the Manx people of the Isle of Man, though ethnically they are Celtic. They say you can see five kingdoms from Man – England, Ireland, Scotland, Gwynedd (Wales), and the Kingdom of Heaven! – and the Vikings used it as a base for controlling all of them. The Isle of Man boasts the world's oldest parliament, Tynwald, a descendant of the Viking “parliament”, the *Thing*.

The Channel Islands

At least with the Shetlands and the Isle of Man, you know you are still in the United Kingdom. You can be forgiven for wondering when you drop in on the Channel Islands. The islands all look English enough, but their English road signs carry French names, the police are called the *Bureau des Etrangers*, and the money looks like British money, but isn't. The Channel Islands were part of the Duchy of Normandy, and when you look at the map, you can see that they're virtually in France. These islands have kept many of their distinctive customs and laws including, as rich people found out long ago, much more relaxed tax regulations.

The Channel Islands were the only part of British territory to fall to the Germans in the Second World War, and Hitler made full use of them for propaganda purposes. Perhaps not surprisingly, historians who have looked into the German occupation have found just as much evidence of active collaboration and collusion in the Channel Islands as anywhere else in occupied Europe. Even more tragically Alderney became a slave labour camp for prisoners from all over the Nazi empire.

The border regions

Whole areas of southern Scotland and northern England were forever changing hands. For example:

- ✓ The English Lake District isn't included in Domesday Book (explained in Chapter 7) because it was part of Scotland at the time.
- ✓ For many years, southern Scotland was colonised by the Angles – the English.
- ✓ The border city of Berwick upon Tweed actually got a sort of separate status, neither English nor Scottish, so that peace treaties and things had to be made in the name of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the City of Berwick upon Tweed!

For many years, it was more or less continual warfare all along the border. The fierce border family clans, like the Nixons or the dreaded Grahams, lived wildly, beyond anyone's control. They raided and murdered each other and stole cattle, and when wars broke out between Scotland and England, they helped whichever side they liked, regardless of which side of the "border" they actually lived on. They were known as *Reivers* – the most terrifying raiders since the Vikings: They've given us the word *bereaved* and *bereft* to mean devastated, and it's pretty appropriate.

How the UK Was Born

So how did this strange hybrid country with the long-winded name that no-one actually uses actually come into being? If you want a full answer, you'll have to read the whole book, but here's a quick overview. As you'll see, it was a mixture of conquest, immigration, Acts of Union, all going to produce a very British sort of melting pot.

England: Head Honcho

England was bound to play the leading role. It's much bigger than any of the other parts of Britain, and closer to the Continent. It had been part of the Roman Empire, and the Viking invasions gave the English a strong sense of unity against a common enemy. The English didn't consciously set out to conquer their neighbours: They had been fighting the Welsh on and off since Saxon times, so when King Edward I finally conquered Wales in 1284 it seemed a natural conclusion to a very long story. With Scotland, despite all those battles the English were never trying to overrun the country: They simply wanted a pro-English monarch on the Scottish throne for their own safety's sake.

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The real problem for the English was Ireland, because they were never able to control it. England's great worry was always that the Irish or the Scots would ally with the French – and they often did. The English managed to persuade the Scottish parliament to agree to an Act of Union in 1707 (which, as it turned out, enabled the Scots to benefit to the full from England's Industrial Revolution!) The English imposed direct rule in Ireland in 1801, but mainly as a security measure: Ireland never benefited from union with England to the same degree as Scotland did.

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the English took their commanding position within the United Kingdom more or less for granted. England was what counted; the rest were the “Celtic fringe”. But by the 1990s that confidence had gone. After years of having no governing body of their own, the “Celtic fringe” once again had their own parliaments and assemblies; England was beginning to look like the Rump of the United Kingdom. So the English began to rediscover a national sense of their own: They began to fly the flag of St George at football matches, and there was even talk of setting up special assemblies for the English regions. Watch this space.

The conquest of Scotland

Like England, Scotland began as a collection of different tribes, which slowly and painfully began to form themselves into a nation. Of course hostility to the English was a great help, and it's no coincidence that Scotland's most important statement of national identity, the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, dates from the period of the fiercest wars for independence from England. Well into the sixteenth century the Scots maintained an anti-English alliance with France – the “Auld Alliance” as it was called – which was guaranteed to stop the English government from sleeping at night.

But although there was always plenty of fighting between Scotland and England, by no means were all Scots anti-English. The English negotiated marriage alliances with the Scots – Henry VIII's sister became Queen of Scotland – so there was usually a pro-English faction somewhere at court. When the Protestant Reformation took hold in the sixteenth century, Scottish Protestants naturally looked to Tudor England for support against the Catholics of the Highlands, and especially against the Catholic and very accident-prone Mary, Queen of Scots. People usually know that it was the English who cut Mary's head off; they often forget that the Scots had already overthrown her and locked her up themselves.

In the end, it wasn't the English who got their own man on the throne in Edinburgh, but the Scots who got their man on the throne in London. When Elizabeth I died childless in 1603, King James VI of Scotland inherited the

English throne. It was a Union of the Crowns but not yet of the nations: That had to wait a hundred years until the Act of Union of 1707. From then on Scotland played an active role in the United Kingdom: The British Empire could hardly have carried on without the large number of Scottish missionaries, doctors, soldiers and administrators who served it. But the Scots kept their strong sense of separate identity, and in 1997 they finally got their parliament back.

The conquest of Wales

The Normans began the conquest of Wales, and for many years, parts of Wales were ruled by the powerful Norman “Marcher Lords” (see Chapters 8 and 9 for a bit more on this). The Welsh princes Llewellyn the Great and Llewellyn ap Gruffyd fought back, but in the end King Edward I conquered Wales and planted massive big castles all over it. Owain Glyn Dwr had a good go at pushing the English out, but it was not to be.

Ironically the people who finally snuffed out Welsh independence were themselves Welsh: the Tudors. Henry Tudor landed at Milford Haven to challenge King Richard III and become King Henry VII, and it was his son, Henry VIII, who got Parliament to pass an Act of Union making Wales, in effect, a province of England. And Wales stayed like that until Tony Blair agreed to a Welsh Assembly in 1997. A long wait!

The conquest of Ireland

Ireland’s great Christian heritage was to prove her undoing. Pope Adrian IV (who also happened to be the only English pope there’s ever been) gave King Henry II permission to go over to Ireland and bring the Irish church into the Roman fold whether the Irish liked it or not. So a great wave of Anglo-Norman knights crossed the Irish Sea and claimed Ireland for the English crown.

Religious strife

When the Reformation started in the sixteenth century, the descendants of those Anglo-Norman knights went along with the new Protestant religion, but the Celtic Irish stayed Catholic. Queen Elizabeth I and her ministers came up with a clever solution: “plant” Scottish Protestants in Ireland. Hey presto! The Catholic province of Ulster became the most fiercely Protestant and loyal area in the kingdom.

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When the English threw out their Catholic King James II in 1688, the Irish rallied to help him, but the Ulster Scots were having none of it: They defied King James, thrashed him at the Battle of the Boyne and sent him packing. Their descendants in modern-day Ulster have never forgotten it, and they make sure their Catholic neighbours don't forget it either.

Famine and Fenians

After the seventeenth century, the British brought in all sorts of laws to take away Catholics' civil rights, which in effect kept Ireland in poverty for generations. Pockets of affluence existed – Dublin was a very elegant eighteenth-century city – but Ireland was a bit like modern-day India in its mixture of extreme poverty and great wealth. Even the Protestant Irish were beginning to feel that the laws against Catholics were unfair and dragging the whole country down, and they began to argue for *Catholic Emancipation*, especially the right to vote. By the time emancipation came, the British had closed Ireland's parliament down, then governing Ireland directly from London. Then, in the 1840s, the potato crop in Ireland failed and produced one of the worst famines of modern times. Those who could got out of Ireland and spread around the world, taking their hatred of England and the English with them. Those who stayed in Ireland campaigned all the more vigorously for self-government, or *Home Rule*, while armed groups like the *Fenians* turned to bombings and shootings. Finally, in 1922 the British had to agree to grant Ireland its independence. The Ulster Protestants weren't having any of it, and immediately voted to stay in the United Kingdom, which is why part of the ancient province of Ulster is still within the United Kingdom. Many Irish saw this as a stop-gap measure, and the violence that erupted in the 1960s was all about trying to get – or to resist – a united Ireland. In the end neither side would surrender, and the different parties had to agree to a compromise peace settlement, but it's a story that shows no sign of ending quite yet.

You're Not From Round 'Ere – But Then Again, Neither Am I

Working out exactly who the “native” peoples of Britain are is very difficult. The Victorians used to talk about the “British race”, but that's silly: By definition there's no one British race, but a collection of different ethnic groups.

Any such thing as a native Briton?

The closest anyone can come to being an “original” native must be the Celts: the Welsh, the Scottish Gaels, the Irish, and the Cornish – though there are

people of Celtic origin throughout Britain. But even the Celts weren't originally native to Britain; they came from the continent, as did the Romans, the Angles and Saxons, and the Normans.

The Scots and the Irish have a better claim to be "natives", but it's complicated because of all the swapping they've done over the years. The Celtic Irish are certainly native to Ireland, but on the other hand, just how long do you have to be settled in a place before you can call yourself a native? Ulster Protestants have been in Ireland for as long as whites have been in America, and a lot longer than the Europeans have been in Australia and New Zealand, yet some people still have a problem calling them "Irish".

Immigrants

As if it's not complicated enough working things out between the English, Welsh, Irish and Scots, Britain has long been a country of immigrants, from all parts of the globe.

Asylum seekers

During all the religious wars of the seventeenth century large numbers of Protestants took shelter in England because it was the largest and most stable of the Protestant powers. French *Huguenots* fleeing Louis XIV settled in London and made a very prosperous living as craftsmen and traders. The Dutch had started coming over in Elizabethan times during their long war of independence from Spain, and many others came over when William of Orange ousted James II in 1688. Some of these immigrants were nobles, like the Bentincks, who became Dukes of Portland. Others were ordinary folk brought over to help drain the fens of East Anglia, and you can still see their Dutch-style houses to this day. Britain did very well out of welcoming these asylum seekers.

A right royal bunch of foreigners

Of course, if you want a good example of a family with very little English – or even British – blood in its veins, then look at the Royal Family. The Normans and Plantagenets were French, the Tudors were Welsh, the Stuarts were Scots, the Hanoverians were German, and, until George III, they couldn't even speak the language properly. Victoria's family was the union of one German family with another, and its name was the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha – doesn't sound very English, does it? They changed the name to Windsor during the First World War (and their relatives the Battenbergs anglicised theirs to Mountbatten), but the British have never entirely forgotten that their royal family is not quite as Made in Britain as it may look. That's probably why they liked Diana, the Princess of Wales so much: She was indisputably *English*.

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There should be black in the Union Jack

People often assume that the first black faces appeared in Britain after the Second World War. Not a bit of it! Black people were in Britain in surprisingly large numbers from Tudor times, though, of course, most of them were slaves (many society portraits of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have a small black child in the corner). By Queen Victoria's time, whole communities of black people existed, perhaps because, by then, Britain had abolished the slave trade.

Other ethnic groups

Victorian Limehouse in London's docklands was a regular Chinatown and, as Britain extended her rule in India, more and more Asians came to London: Gandhi trained as a barrister in the Middle Temple in London and Nehru studied at Cambridge. Duleep Singh, the exiled Maharajah of the Punjab, was a frequent visitor to Queen Victoria's court (okay, it was because of the British that he was exiled in the first place). Victoria also took on an Indian manservant known as the *Munshi*, who wasn't at all the high caste sage he claimed to be, but what the heck.

Whose History Is It Anyway?

Most history books tell you a lot about what the kings and queens and leaders all got up to. For many years British historians thought the only point of reading history was to find out about how the British constitution developed, so they concentrated on parliaments and laws and pretty much ignored everything else. More recently, historians have pointed out that there's a lot more to history than that, and there are all sorts of people whose history has a right to be heard.

Kings and queens

You can't entirely get away from it: Kings and queens were important, and it would be an odd book of British history which left them out altogether. But beware of the "Fairy Tale" approach to these people. Kings couldn't just give away half their kingdoms to young men who came and married their daughters, and the kings who *did* try to divide up their realms among their sons, like William the Conqueror and Henry II, found it didn't work. Even the most powerful rulers relied heavily on their ministers' advisers. Some advisers like Sir William Cecil with Queen Elizabeth, gave good advice (in fact, some historians reckon it was really Cecil who was ruling England); some advisers were disastrous, like Charles I's ministers, Strafford and Archbishop Laud.

Spreading Britain's Wings

There's a famous Victorian painting by Ford Madox Brown called *The Last of England* which shows a couple looking thoughtfully at the disappearing English coastline as they set off for – well, maybe America, maybe Australia or South Africa or Argentina or any of the other places where the British emigrated in such large numbers. The Welsh populated Patagonia in the Argentinean pampas, and one of Chile's great national heroes has the distinctly Irish name of

Bernardo O'Higgins. Plenty of Brits settled in the American West, including a large number who responded to Brigham Young's mission to Liverpool and went out to settle at Salt Lake City. British engineers and navvies went all over Europe designing railways and laying the tracks: The lines in northern Italy were all the work of British engineers. The British have always been a people of immigrants – and emigrants.

By the time you hit the Georges, working out exactly how much is being done by the King and how much by his ministers is very difficult. "This house believes the power of the crown has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished" ran one famous parliamentary motion in 1780, and three years later George III, completely on his own initiative, dismissed a ministry which had a big parliamentary majority – and got away with it. But on the whole, the power of the crown had decreased, was decreasing and was going to go on decreasing, too, whatever Queen Victoria or Prince Albert might think about it.

What about the workers?

History isn't just about the people at the top. Sure, these folks have left lots of evidence behind them – all their writings and their houses and their furniture – so finding out about them is easy. But a lot of people worked hard to keep the people at the top in the style to which they were accustomed, and these working people have a history, too.

An English historian called EP Thompson showed how to discover the history of ordinary people when he constructed his *Making of the English Working Class*. He used all sorts of source material, including ballads and posters and court cases (a lot of working people ended up in front of a magistrate) to trace how the working people of industrial England developed a sense of identity. Many stately homes open up the kitchens and the servants' quarters to visitors, and if you really want an idea of how the other half lived, go to Henry VIII's palace at Hampton Court and have a look at the Tudor kitchens. Think how much *work* it took to keep him so fat!

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My grandfather was . . .

If you go into any archive or records office in Britain, you'll find it surprisingly busy with ordinary people researching their family history. It's difficult to explain exactly why family history has taken off in the way that it has in recent years, but it's phenomenally popular. People learn how to use censuses and parish registers and hearth tax assessments to work out who their ancestors

were and where they came from. You may be surprised how far back you can go if you know what you're doing – and if the records have survived. Most people get back to Victorian times, and some trace the line to Tudor times and beyond. These family history searches are a sign of just why history is important: It helps us work out exactly who we are.

A global story

"What should he know of England," asked that great poet of Empire, Rudyard Kipling, "who only England knows?" Allowing for that Victorian use of "England" to mean "Britain", he had a point, though not perhaps in the way he expected. To know the story of Britain and the British, you ought really to look at the story of Britain's Empire and at how all these different places – Canada, Jamaica, Tonga, Malta, the Punjab, Kenya, Aden (Qatar) – were brought into the British story. Their histories are part of Britain's history, and British history is part of theirs, especially for the descendants of people from these parts of the world who are at school in Britain now. Okay, there's a limit to what I can do in this book, but bear this in mind: If you know British history (and by the end of this book you'll have a pretty good idea of it) you only know half the story of *Britain's* history.