

# 1 THE BRITISH ISLES

GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION AND LANDSCAPE, CLIMATE, THE WEATHER



**THE BRITISH ISLES** is the name of a group of about 4,000 islands lying in the north-west of Europe between the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

*The White Cliffs of Dover*

In the south, the British Isles are separated from continental Europe by the English Channel. The narrowest point between Great Britain and France is called the Strait of Dover. The British Isles are washed by the North Sea in the east and the Atlantic Ocean in the west and north. The Gulf Stream, passing the western coast, brings some tropical warmth to Britain.

The British Isles today are shared by two separate and independent countries: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (usually shortened to the United Kingdom or UK), with London as its capital, and the Republic of Ireland (capital: Dublin). *Britain* and *British* may refer to Great Britain alone, but sometimes also to the UK. The use of *England* and *English* referring to the whole of Great Britain is incorrect.

All the islands have administrative ties with the mainland, except the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, which are largely self-governing but under British control. These territories have their own legislative assemblies and systems of law. The UK Government is responsible for their international relations and defence.

**GREAT BRITAIN**, consisting of England, Scotland and Wales, is 350 miles across at its widest point and 600 miles long at its longest, traditionally described as follows: “from Land’s End at the south-western tip of Cornwall to the tiny locality of John o’Groats near the northernmost point of mainland Scotland”.

Great Britain is tiny in world terms, being only a dot on the map: it covers just one third of the state of Texas in the USA, for example. They say that Britain has about one acre of dry land for every one of its inhabitants. And millions of visitors find more than standing room there. In addition, for those who do not mind getting their feet wet, there are some 600,000 acres of inland bodies of water — lakes, rivers and canals.

Great Britain offers superb variety. Though the biggest of the British Isles, it is actually a fairly small island with the sea always somewhere round the corner. Its scenic contrasts are often within easy reach.

Its beaches, bays, inlets, cliffs and rocky headlands are scoured clean by the tidal system twice a day. Britain has about 6,000 miles of coastline and everybody has access to it: there is virtually no private foreshore in the



They consist of the following: **GREAT BRITAIN** (the largest island, the 7th largest in the world), **IRELAND** (the second largest island) and several groups of islands and separate smaller islands, such as

- **the Isle of Wight** (off the southern coast of England)
- **Anglesey** (off the north-west coast of Wales, connected to the rest of Wales by the Menai Bridge)
- **the Channel Islands** (in the English Channel)
- **the Isles of Scilly** (west of the Peninsula of Cornwall)
- **the Isle of Man** (in the Irish Sea)
- **the Inner and Outer Hebrides** (off the west coast of Scotland)
- **the Orkney Islands** (to the north of Scotland)
- **the Shetland Islands** (the northernmost group of islands) and others.

country. The coast occupies an exceptional position in the recreational life of the people.

Britain's speciality (except in the Scottish Highlands, Snowdonia and around the Cumbrian lakes) is the man-made scenery: the ordered landscape, the compact views, the happy juxtaposition of church and village green, wood and hillside, house and park. Many British country houses are bordered by beautiful parks. The country owes much to Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, the famous British garden designer (1716–1783). One of his masterpieces is at Blenheim Palace.

Great Britain is completely different from other European countries. "That strange island, so close, yet so remote, so like any country, yet so unlike — called England" (the author of this saying, Catherine Drinker Bowen, an American writer, probably meant Great Britain as a whole). Each part of the country has its peculiar geographical features.



**ENGLAND** features mostly low hills and plains. Its indented coastline of bays, caves and estuaries is 3,200 km long. The Pennine Chain (popularly known as the *Backbone of England*), running from the English-Scottish border as far south as Derbyshire, splits northern England into western and eastern parts. It forms the main watershed for the rivers flowing east and west. The Lake District (also called *Lakeland*, *Cumbria* or *Cumberland*) in the north-west features some of England's most beautiful landscapes, and includes Scafell Pike — at 978 m, the highest point in England.

The north-east boasts the Northumbria National Park and the rugged landscape of the lonely Yorkshire moors among many of the places worth visiting.

East Anglia offers large areas of flat countryside, rivers and canals.

To feel warm, fresh winds and a sense of spaciousness, and to even see some tropical trees, you should visit the Peninsula of Cornwall in summer. It is the sunniest and warmest part of England.

The whole of England resembles a park in the hands of a skilful landscape gardener. The hedges separating fields and meadows contribute to this appearance.

ENGLAND IS TERRIFIC!





**SCOTLAND** covers about one-third of Great Britain. It has large areas of untouched and wild landscapes.

Britain's highest peak, Ben Nevis (1,343 m), lies not far from Fort William.

Scotland may be divided into two parts:

- 1) the Lowlands (an area of gentle hills, fields and woodlands, more densely populated than other parts, they also include plenty of wild upland country);
- 2) the Northern Highlands (which are considered by many people, especially mountain-lovers, to be the most picturesque part of Scotland and a real tourist Mecca; they say that there may even be small patches of land on which nobody has ever set foot).



The Great Glen, also called the Caledonian Canal (97 km), cutting across the Highlands, is a string of lochs and canals, including the well-known Loch Ness and the deepest lake in the UK, Loch Morar (310 m).

**WALES** is also a mountainous country covering an area of over 8,000 sq miles. Surrounded by the sea on three sides, its border to the east with England still roughly runs along Offa's Dyke, the giant earthwork constructed in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

About a quarter of the land is about 300 m above sea level. Wales has two major mountain systems: the Black Mountains and the Brecon Beacons in the south, and the mountains of Snowdonia in the north-west. The highest peak, Snowdon, lying in the Snowdonia National Park in the north, rises to 1,085 m. Wales has a long coastline with many bays, peninsulas, cliffs and beaches of different types, stretching for almost 2,000 km.







There is a large number of fast-flowing rivers bearing a wide variety of fish, including salmon. The longest river in the UK, the Severn (322 km), rises in central Wales and flows through England into the Bristol Channel. Wales also has many caves, the deepest of which is Ogor Flynnon Powys (308 m).

Wales' appeal lies in its countryside. Therefore the best way to appreciate the Great

Welsh Outdoors is by walking, canal boating, cycling, or using some form of private transport.

The climate is generally the same as anywhere else in Britain, although it perhaps gets a bit more rain. The mountains are close to the coast, which means that you can encounter very different climatic conditions within a relatively short geographical distance.



**IRELAND** is the second largest of the British Isles. By way of comparison, it is slightly smaller than Portugal. People call it the 'Emerald Isle'. Ireland is so green, partly because it rains so much, that they say your eyes may start aching due to its intensity. The island has a spectacular landscape of high mountains, fine lakes and different kinds of beaches. Its two great rivers are the Liffey in the east, on which Dublin lies, and the Shannon, which descends into the sea on the west coast. Lough Neagh is the largest stretch of inland water in the British Isles. Ireland offers outstanding natural beauty and tranquillity. Many visitors go there in search of peace and quiet, and they are not disappointed. Horse-drawn caravans are used for sightseeing in a relaxed way. The magnificent Cliffs of Moher, extending for some five miles along the coast, are considered one of Ireland's major scenic attractions. It draws ornithologists and geologists in particular from all over Europe. Ireland is noted for its pastures and the world's best dairy products.





Scampix

## CLIMATE

The climate in the British Isles is generally mild and temperate. It has a continuous influence on everything — as they say — “it greens the fields, weathers the stone, shapes the hills and ripens the crops”. And people talk about it all the time.

The climate is greatly influenced by the surrounding seas. Prevailing winds usually move in from the Atlantic, bringing dampness and rain. Rainfall is greatest in western and upland parts of the islands. The south-eastern part of England and East Anglia receive much

less precipitation. The wettest period lasts from October to January, though rain is fairly well distributed throughout the year.

The duration of sunshine varies from five hours in northern Scotland to eight hours on the Isle of Wight in May, June and July. These are the months of longest daylight in Great Britain. In November, December and January there is an average of only an hour of sunshine a day in the north of Scotland and two hours on the south coast.

## THE WEATHER

The English often say, “Other countries have a climate, in England we have the weather”. In no other country, it has been said, you can experience four seasons in the course of a single day! For example: a day may break as a sunny morning, while a few hours later dark clouds may have gathered from nowhere and the rain may soon be pouring down. At noon it may be really wintry, with the temperature dropping quickly. By late afternoon the sky may be clear again with bright sunshine until darkness falls. Therefore you rarely hear “It’s a nice day” from the lips of the English. They wisely say, “It’s a bright morning” and so on. The British can never be sure when different types of weather may set in — they may get a spell of wintry weather in summer and a couple of very warm days in early spring, for example.

The weather is subject to frequent changes, but extremes of heat or cold are rare and hurricanes are virtually unknown. The average temperature is +15–20°C in summer and –5–7°C in winter. It often rains and you must have warm, waterproof clothing on hand at all times, to say nothing of an umbrella. Anyway, weather conditions are so localised that the forecast may be hopelessly wrong in one place, but perfectly accurate a few kilometres away.

This unstable weather has a definite effect upon the national character. They say that it has made the British both cautious and easily adaptable. Everybody leaving home in the morning sunshine must be prepared for afternoon showers.



**THERE ARE MANY POPULAR SAYINGS ABOUT THE BRITISH WEATHER:**

- People who can endure British weather can endure and accomplish anything.
- A period of as long as three weeks without rain is exceptional.
- The English summer is made up of three fine days, followed by a thunderstorm. *(King Charles I)*
- Guests in British hotels must be prepared at all times to discuss the shocking weather of the day with the hired help.
- The rapid changes of weather and temperature in Britain, a source of bitter merriment to its inhabitants in every age, stimulate the physical and mental energies and make us Englishmen. *(G. M. Trevelyan, a British historian)*

The following shows the diversity of the British people's answers to the question ARE YOU HAPPY ABOUT THE BRITISH WEATHER?

**POSITIVE:**

- Britain wouldn't be Britain without its bad weather. It gives the British people something to moan and talk about.
- I love it because plants need rain and so do we.
- I don't like it too hot or too cold. The rain keeps the air fresh.
- It's full of variety — often in a single day!
- It is a source of endless conversation.
- It is better than in the Netherlands.
- It's OK on the whole, but more snow would be nice in winter.
- We are able to grow a great variety of plants, fruit, crops and vegetables.
- We experience all the seasons in a relatively mild tone and there are no major natural disasters.
- Although we sometimes complain about the rain, I love our seasons: Spring is best, lovely and fresh, Summer is often warm, Autumn all yellow and golden, Winter hopefully short, so Spring returns quickly.
- I love that we have the ever changing variety of the weather and seasons: every day is different and the views from my window are ever changing.
- Yes, I prefer a mixture of sunshine and rain. The climate helps us to have fine gardens and lush scenery.
- Mildness of the British weather makes us happy and able to go for walks and outings anytime of the year.

**NEGATIVE:**

- It's desperately unpredictable. You cannot plan outdoor activities without calculating in a 'if it rains' alternative.
- The weather changes every 5 minutes. I don't know how to dress.
- It is so wet.
- Rain and fog and wind are depressing, it also means you can't go out!
- No, I don't like it: British weather is generally the same all year round, warm and wet and the seasons can sometimes just run together.
- I do not like it at all! Too wet and windy, no proper summer or winter.
- Summers are not dry and hot enough.
- Of course I don't like our weather! Too much rain. It spoils summer events and is rather depressing in the winter if we have no snow. But it keeps our country green!

Perhaps the 'best' answer is the last: We have to live with what comes.



I LOVE WANDERING IN THE RAIN...



### TASKS FOR PAIR/GROUP WORK AND DISCUSSION:

- To start with, do you know the answers to the following important questions:  
What do the British Isles consist of?  
What does Great Britain consist of?  
What are the full names of the countries which make up the British Isles?
- Find the islands and groups of islands listed at the beginning of the unit on the map.
- Compare the geographical positions of Great Britain and Estonia.
- Man-made landscapes are typical in Britain. What about Estonia in this respect?
- Find at least five things from the text (or your own knowledge) that characterise England / Scotland / Wales / Ireland.
- In what ways do the British and Estonian climates differ?
- The British have many sayings about their weather. Do you know any about the weather in Estonia?
- Is it right to say, "The weather is bad"? Some people like to walk in the rain, for example. Perhaps people should learn to accept and enjoy all types of weather, as in any case they cannot change it. What do you think?
- Why do the British often talk about the weather? What about Estonians?
- How has the British weather affected the national character?

