

Contemporary British culture: history, politics, and society

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Britain in the twenty-first century is a country looking for an identity. Having left the European Union in January 2020 Britain needs to find new policies at home and a new role abroad. Having 'regained our national sovereignty', as Brexit supporters put it, Britons now need to decide how to make use of that sovereignty. Covid-19 has forced further reappraisal of what matters to Britons: should the country return as soon as possible to how things were before, or is this a singular opportunity to reimagine polity and society, giving priority to the things which lockdown showed us were valuable?

This course takes a succession of British tropes to probe what they tell us about contemporary Britain and how they shape discussions of the nation's future. What, for example, does the Union Jack (strictly speaking the Union flag) reveal about the constituent parts of the United Kingdom and their relationship with the whole? What does the British cup of tea tell us about the nation's role in global trade and colonisation? What does the queen tell us about Britain's version of democracy? What can we learn from the James Bond novels and films about Britain's fear of international decline and its sense of superiority? In what way are soccer, cricket, and Wimbledon windows on to British class, ethnic, and regional cultures? What does Britain's 'green and pleasant land' reveal about conservation, rural life, and leisure in Britain? What does Westminster Abbey, the national pantheon, reveal about Britons' relationship to the past? What does a country church tell us about religion in Britain? Why on earth do Britons talk about the weather all the time? What does the BBC reveal about the English language, Britain's role in the world, free speech, and British values? What does the Channel Tunnel tell us about Britain's relationship to Europe?

With these and other tropes we explore Britain and its inhabitants, searching for explanation rooted in the past, and considering what the nation might look like in the future.

General reading

In this course we try to base our discussions on primary data and, once we have some understanding of those, we look for interpretations of them.

Look at the statistical data at <https://ourworldindata.org/>, which aims to produce 'research and data to make progress against the world's largest problems' and which is based at the University of Oxford: see <https://ourworldindata.org/about>. All of their data are freely available to use. Look for UK data and compare them with countries with which you're familiar.

Read a British source of news and comment each day. By far the best free source is the BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news> which has a statutory responsibility to be impartial and which covers the whole of the UK. The BBC news's daily 'What the papers say' page gives you an idea of the range of British newspaper opinion.