

Lecture two

National Stereotypes of Great Britain

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There are certain stereotypes of national character which are well known in Britain. For instance, the Irish are supposed to be great talkers, the Scots have a reputation for being careful with money, the Welsh are renowned for their singing abilities, and the English are considered to be reserved. These characteristics are, of course, only caricatures and are not reliable description of individual people from these countries.

British people give a relatively high value to the everyday personal contacts. Some writers on Britain have talked about the British desire 'to belong', and it is certainly true that the pub, or the working man's club, or the numerous other clubs devoted to various sports and pastimes play a very important part in many people's lives. Many people make their social contacts through work and, partly as a result of this, the profession is also important aspect of their sense of identity. British people try to appear as if they belong to as high class as possible, though nobody wants to be thought of as 'snobbish'.

The British have few living traditions and are too individualistic to have the same everyday habits as each other. They are rather proud of being different. However, this does not mean that they like change. They don't. They may not behave in traditional ways, but they like symbols of tradition and stability. The British are rather conservative and their conservatism can combine with their individualism. Why should they change just to be like everyone else? Indeed, as far as they are concerned, not being like everyone else is a good reason not to change. Their driving on the left-hand side of the road is a good example to this. Systems of measurement are another example. The British government has been trying for many years to get British people to use the same scales that are used nearly everywhere else in the world. But everybody in Britain still shops in pounds and ounces.

The modern British are not really chauvinistic. Open hostility to people from other countries is very rare. If there is any chauvinism at all, it expresses itself through ignorance. Most British people know remarkably little about Europe and who lives there. The popular image of Europe seems to be that it is something to do with the French.

It is probably true that the British, especially the English, are more reserved than the people of many other countries. They find it comparatively difficult to indicate friendship by open displays of affection. For example, it is not the convention to kiss when meeting a friend. Instead, friendship is symbolised by behaving as casually as possible.

The British are comparatively uninterested in clothes. They spend a lower proportion of their income on clothing than people in most European countries do. Many people buy second-hands clothes and are not at all embarrassed to admit this. Of course, when people are 'on duty', they have to obey some quite rigid rules. A male bank employee, for example, is expected to wear a suit with a tie at work. But on Sundays the British like to «dress down». They can't wait to take off their respectable working clothes and slip into something really scruffy. In fact, the British are probably more tolerant of strange' clothing than people in most other countries.

The English people are great pet lovers. Practically every family has a dog or a cat, or both. They have special dog shops selling food, clothes and other things for dogs. There are dog hairdressing saloons and dog cemeteries. Millions of families have 'bird-tables' in their gardens. Perhaps, this overall concern for animals is part of the British love for nature.

The British are always talking about the weather. Unlike many others, this stereotype is actually true to life. But constant remarks about the weather at chance meetings are not the result of polite conventions. They are not obligatory. Rather, they are the result of the fact that, on the one hand, to ask personal questions would be rude while, at the same time, silence would also be rude. The weather is a very convenient topic with which to 'fill the gap'.