



BRITISH, ENGLISH, SCOTTISH, WELSH, IRISH? THE UK

Exploring nationality & identity
through the countries of the UK

I am often asked what the difference is between English and British identity, and why such a small country has so many individual identities, languages, dialects and accents. So, what are these identities and why does it matter?

First, it is important to note that the UK has a rich and diverse multi-cultural heritage, and in this short article I am focusing on the identities associated with just the four countries of the UK. Initially we need to understand some geography, as it is a surprise for some people that the UK is both one country and four countries. There are different ways we refer to it, so geographically this is what they actually mean (although bear in mind that in everyday life the terms can be used interchangeably to mean the whole of the UK):

- United Kingdom: England, Wales, Scotland & Northern Ireland
- Great Britain: England, Wales & Scotland (often shortened to Britain)
- The British Isles: England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland

What about the languages and identities of these individual countries?

Wales is officially bilingual, and all children learn Welsh in school. However, in reality most people speak English with only 19% of the population speaking any Welsh at all. Welsh is not easily understood by an English speaker and is one of the ancient British languages, such as Gaelic and Cornish. Cardiff is the capital of Wales and has a national assembly, which can decide laws and taxes within Wales. Most people identify their nationality as Welsh (66%).

Scotland has a parliament, which has stronger powers than Wales to decide devolved issues such as health, education, law and housing. Some people speak Scots English, a language variation of English with its own words and phrases (think of Robert Burns poetry), and a very small minority (1.7%) speak

Scottish Gaelic. The majority identify their nationality as Scottish (62%) and in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum there was a narrow majority to stay in the UK. Since the Brexit referendum in 2016 there have been calls for a second Scottish independence referendum.

Northern Ireland is part of the UK, and is not to be confused with the Republic of Ireland which is an independent country, although both are located on the same island. The people of Northern Ireland may refer to themselves as British (40%), Irish (25%) or Northern Irish (21%). They speak English, with a few people speaking Irish Gaelic (6%) and there is a national assembly in Belfast, the capital, which has devolved legislative power.

The Republic of Ireland, which will soon celebrate 100 years of independence, is headed by a Prime Minister and a President, but no royalty. They have the Euro as currency, are part of the EU, speak English, however Irish Gaelic is gaining popularity again. The Irish are usually fiercely nationalistic and certainly would not want to be called British! One of the many issues with implementing Brexit is what happens to the currently soft border between Northern Ireland and Ireland to try to avoid introducing a hard border between the two.

Finally, England is the most populous country of the UK and most familiar to expats living in London. However, it is worth pointing out that London could almost be considered a “5th country”, as its people, mindset and spirit can be quite different from other parts of England.

So, what is the national identity of the people living in the UK? We have a huge diversity of identities, and we have not even touched on the regional, national, religious or ethnic identities of people living in the UK, who have arrived themselves or whose families originated from other countries. People may consider themselves primarily as one identity, or several, depending on how they feel, where they were born or have spent most of their lives.

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