History

England may be a small country on the edge of Europe, but it was never on the sidelines of history. For thousands of years, invaders and incomers have arrived, settled and made their mark. The result is England's fascinating mix of landscape, culture and language – a dynamic pattern that shaped the nation and continues to evolve today.

For many visitors, this rich historical legacy – everything from Stonehenge and Hadrian's Wall to Canterbury Cathedral and the Tower of London – is England's main attraction, so this chapter concentrates on high-profile events, and wherever possible mentions the historic locations you're likely to see on your travels. Even if you're no fan of dates and dynasties, we hope this overview will help you get the most from your trip.

Probably built around 3000 BC, Stonehenge has stood on Salisbury Plain for more than 5000 years and is older than the Great Pyramids of Egypt.

EARLY DAYS

Stone tools discovered near Lowestoft in Suffolk show that human habitation in England stretches back at least 700,000 years, although exact dates depend on your definition of 'human'. These early peoples were migrant hunter-gatherers, but by around 6000 years before our own time most had settled down, notably in open areas like Salisbury Plain in southern England. Alongside their fields they built burial mounds (today called barrows), but their most enduring legacies are the great stone circles of Avebury (p326) and Stonehenge (p320), still clearly visible today.

Move on a millennium or two and it's the Iron Age. Better tools meant trees could be felled and more land turned to farming. As landscapes altered, this was also a time of cultural change: Celtic arrivals absorbed the indigenous people, and the resulting Celtic-British population – sometimes called the 'Ancient Britons' – divided into about 20 different tribes, including the Cantiaci (in today's county of Kent), the Iceni (today's Norfolk) and the Brigantes (northwest England).

Notice the Latin-sounding names? That's because the tribal tags were handed out by the next arrivals on England's shores…

THREE IN ONE

The country of England (with Wales and Scotland) is *part of* the island of Great Britain. The words 'England' and 'Britain' are not synonymous, although visitors sometimes miss the distinction – as do a lot of English people (though never the Scottish or the Welsh). Getting a grip on this basic principle will ease your understanding of English history and culture, and make your travel here more enjoyable.

TIMELINE

4000 BC

Neolithic peoples migrate from continental Europe. They differ significantly from previous arrivals: instead of hunting and moving on, they settle in one place and start farming.

c 500 BC

The Celts, a group originally from Central Europe, have by this time settled across much of the island of Britain, absorbing the indigenous people.

c 55 BC

Relatively small groups of Roman invaders under the command of Emperor Julius Caesar make forays into southern England from the northern coast of continental Europe (today's France).

THE ROMAN ERA

Although there had been some earlier expeditionary campaigns, the main Roman invasion of England was in AD 43. These arrivals called their new-won province Britannia, and within a decade most of southern England was under Roman control. It wasn't a walkover though: some locals fought back, most famously the warrior-queen Boudica, who led a rebel army against Londinium, the Roman port on the present site of London.

Opposition was mostly sporadic, however, and no real threat to the legions' military might. By around AD 80 Britannia comprised much of today's England and Wales. And although it's tempting to imagine noble natives battling courageously against occupying forces, Roman control and stability was probably welcomed by the general population, tired of feuding chiefs and insecure tribal territories, allowing Roman settlement in England to continue for almost four centuries.

The Year 1000 by Robert Lacey and Danny Danziger looks hard and deep at English life a millennium ago. Apparently it was cold and damp then, too.

Intermarriage was common between locals and incomers (many from other parts of the empire – including modern-day Belgium, Spain and Syria – rather than Rome itself) so that a Romano-British population evolved, particularly in the towns, while indigenous Celtic-British culture remained in rural areas.

Along with stability and wealth, the Romans introduced another cultural facet: a new religion called Christianity, after it was recognised by Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. But by this time, although Romano-British culture was thriving in Britannia, back in its Mediterranean heartland the Empire was already in decline.

It was an untidy finale. The Romans were not driven out by the ancient Britons (after more than 300 years, Romano-British culture was so established there was nowhere for many to go 'home' to). In reality, Britannia was simply dumped by the rulers in Rome, and the colony slowly fizzled

LEGACY OF THE LEGIONS

To control their new territory, the Romans built garrisons across England. Many developed into towns, later called 'chesters', today remembered by names like Winchester, Manchester and, of course, Chester. ('Cester' was a variation – hence Cirencester, Bicester, Leicester etc.) The Romans are also well known for their roads, initially built so soldiers could march quickly from place to place, and later so that trade could develop. Wherever possible the roads were straight lines (because it was efficient, not – as the old joke goes – to stop Ancient Britons hiding round corners), and included Ermine Street between London and York, Watling Street between Kent and Wales, and the Fosse Way between Exeter and Lincoln. As you travel around England, you'll notice many modern highways still follow Roman roads. In a country better known for old lanes and turnpike routes winding through the landscape, these ruler-straight highways clearly stand out on the map.

AD 43

Emperor Claudius leads the first proper Roman invasion of England. His army wages a ruthless campaign, and the Romans control basically everywhere in southern England by AD 50.

122

Rather than conquer wild north British tribes, Emperor Hadrian settles for building a coast-to-coast barricade. For nearly 300 years, Hadrian's Wall marks the northernmost limit of the Roman Empire.

c 410

As the classical world's greatest Empire finally declines after more than three centuries of relative peace and prosperity, Roman rule ends in Britain with more of a whimper than a bang.

MISSIONARY ENDEAVOURS

The invasion of the 'pagan' Anglo-Saxons forced the Christian religion (introduced by the Romans) out of England to the edges of the British Isles. The pope of the time, Gregory, decided this was a poor show, and sent missionaries to revive interest in the faith in the late 6th century. One holy pioneer was St Augustine, who successfully converted Angles in Kent, and some good-looking specimens were sent to Rome as proof – giving rise to Pope Gregory's famous quip about Angles looking like angels. In northern England another missionary, St Aidan, was even more successful. With admirable energy and fervour, he converted the entire populations of Mercia and Northumbria, and still had time to establish a monastery at Lindisfarne (see p782), a beautiful site on the coast that can still be visited today.

out. But historians are neat folk, and the end of Roman power in England is generally dated at AD 410.

FLEDGLING ENGLAND

When Roman power faded, the province of Britannia went downhill. Romano-British towns were abandoned and rural areas became no-go zones as local warlords fought over fiefdoms. The vacuum didn't go unnoticed and once again invaders crossed from the European mainland – this time Germanic tribes called Angles and Saxons.

Historians disagree on what happened next; either the Anglo-Saxons largely overcame or absorbed the Romano-British and Celts, or the indigenous tribes simply adopted Anglo-Saxon language and culture. Either way, by the late 6th century much of England was predominantly Anglo-Saxon, divided into separate kingdoms dominated by Wessex (in today's southern England), Mercia (today's Midlands) and Northumbria (today's northern England).

Some areas remained unaffected by the incomers (the Celtic language was still being spoken in parts of southern England when the Normans invaded 500 years later) but the overall impact was immense. Today, the core of the English language is Anglo-Saxon, many place names have Anglo-Saxon roots, and the very term 'Anglo-Saxon' has become a (much abused and factually incorrect) byword for 'pure English'.

THE VIKING ERA

In the 9th century England was yet again invaded by a bunch of pesky continentals. This time it was the Vikings appearing on the scene, quickly conquering eastern and northeastern areas.

It's another classic historical image: blonde Scandinavians, horned helmets, big swords and rampant pillaging. School history books still give the impression that Vikings turned up, killed everyone, took everything, and left. There's some truth in that, but many Vikings settled, and their legacy

5th century

Teutonic tribes – known today as the Anglo-Saxons – from the area now called Germany migrate to England, and quickly spread across much of the country.

597

Pope Gregory sends missionary St Augustine to England to revive interest in Christianity among the southern Anglo-Saxons. His colleague St Aidan similarly converts many people in the north.

850

Vikings come from today's Denmark and conquer east and northeast England. They establish their capital at Yorvik, today's city of York.

remains throughout much of northern England – in the form of local dialect (geographical terms such as 'fell' and 'dale' come from Norse *fjell* and *dalr*), and even in traces of Nordic DNA in some of today's inhabitants.

By the middle of the century, the Vikings started to expand southwards into central England. Blocking their route were the Anglo-Saxon armies led by the king of Wessex, Alfred the Great – one of English history's best-known characters. The conflict that followed was seminal to the foundation of the nation-state of England, but it didn't all go Alfred's way. For a few months he was on the run, disguised as a commoner, wading through swamps and hiding in forests. According to later chronicles, Alfred took shelter in a peasant woman's hovel and was given the task of watching cakes cook on the fire. But he started to think about ways to defeat the Vikings, got distracted, and the cakes were burnt. Only when the scolding got too much was he forced to reveal himself as king. It was the stuff of legend, which is just what you need when the chips are down. By 886, Alfred had garnered his forces and pushed the Vikings back to the north.

Thus England was divided in two: north and east was Viking 'Danelaw', while south and west was Anglo-Saxon territory. Alfred was hailed as king of the English – the first time the Anglo-Saxons regarded themselves as a truly united people.

Alfred's son and successor was Edward the Elder. After more battles, he gained control of the Danelaw, and thus – for the first time – the whole of England. But it was hardly cause for celebration: the Vikings were still around, and later in the 10th century more raids from Scandinavia threatened the fledgling unity. Over the following decades, control swung from Saxon (King Edgar) to Dane (King Knut), and back to Saxon again (King Edward the Confessor). As England came to the end of the 1st millennium AD, the future was anything but certain.

For a well-researched and accessible, if mainstream, overview of the history of England (along with neighbouring countries), dip into *British History for Dummies* by Sean Lang.

1066 & ALL THAT

When King Edward the Confessor died, the crown passed to Harold, his brother-in-law. That should've settled things, but Edward had a cousin in Normandy (the northern part of today's France) called William, who thought *he* should have succeeded to the throne of England.

The end result was the 1066 Battle of Hastings, the most memorable of dates for anyone who has studied English history. William sailed from Normandy with an army and landed near the town of Hastings, on England's southern coast. The Saxons were defeated and King Harold was killed – by an arrow in the eye, according to legend.

William became king of England, earning himself the prestigious epithet Conqueror. His successor, William II, had a less auspicious reign; he was mysteriously assassinated during a hunting trip and succeeded by Henry I – the first of a long list of kings called Henry.

927

Athelstan, grandson of Alfred the Great, son of Edward the Elder, is the first monarch to be specifically crowned King of England, building on his ancestors' success in regaining Viking territory.

1066

Incumbent King Harold is defeated by an invading Norman army at the Battle of Hastings, and England finds itself with a new monarch: William the Conqueror.

1085–86

The Domesday Book provides a census of England's current stock and future potential.

In the years after the invasion, the French-speaking Normans and the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon inhabitants kept pretty much to themselves. A strict hierarchy of class developed, known as the feudal system. At the top was the monarch, below that the nobles (barons, bishops, dukes and earls), then knights and lords, and at the bottom were peasants or 'serfs', the basis of a class system that to a certain extent still exists in England today.

Intermarriage was not completely unknown – Henry himself married a Saxon princess. Nonetheless, such unifying moves stood for nothing after Henry's death: a bitter struggle for succession followed, finally won by Henry II, who took the throne as the first king of the House of Plantagenet.

ROYAL & HOLY SQUABBLING

The fight to follow Henry I continued the English habit of competition for the throne, and introduced an equally enduring tendency of bickering between royalty and the Church. Things came to a head in 1170 when Henry II had 'turbulent priest' Thomas Becket murdered in Canterbury Cathedral (p177), still an important shrine today.

Perhaps the next king, Richard I, wanted to make amends for his forebears' unholy sentiments by fighting against Muslim 'infidels' in the Holy Land (today's Middle East). Unfortunately, he was too busy crusading to bother about governing England – although his bravery earned him the Richard the Lionheart sobriquet – and in his absence the country fell into disarray.

Richard was succeeded by his brother John, and things got even worse for the general population. According to legend, it was during this time that a nobleman called Robert of Loxley, better known as Robin Hood, hid in Sherwood Forest (p506) and engaged in a spot of wealth redistribution…

PLANTAGENET PROGRESS

By the early 13th century King John's erratic rule was too much for the powerful barons and they forced him to sign a document called the Magna Carta ('Great Charter') at Runnymede, near Windsor; you can still visit the site today (boxed text, p272). Intended as a set of handy ground rules, the Magna Carta became a fledgling bill of human rights and eventually led to the creation of Parliament – a body to rule the country, independent of the throne.

LOOKING SOUTH

The arrival of William the Conqueror was a seminal event, as it marked the end of England's century-old ties to the countries of northern Europe. Perspective turned to France and the Mediterranean, with massive cultural implications that last into our own time. In addition, the events capped an era of armed invasion. Since 1066, in the near-on thousand years to the present day, England has never again been successfully invaded by an overseas enemy.

1095

The start of the First Crusade – a campaign of Christian European armies against the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem and the 'Holy Land'. A series of crusades continues until 1272.

12th century

Oxford University founded. There's evidence of teaching in the area since 1096, but King Henry II's 1167 ban on students attending the University of Paris solidified Oxford's importance.

1215

King John signs the Magna Carta, presented to him by powerful barons, limiting the monarch's power for the first time in English history and an early step on the path towards constitutional rule.

The next king was Henry III, followed in 1272 by Edward I – a skilled ruler and ambitious general. During a busy 35-year reign, he was a firm believer in English nationalism and unashamedly expansionist, leading campaigns into Wales and Scotland, where his ruthless activities earned him the title 'Hammer of the Scots'.

Edward I was succeeded by Edward II, who lacked his forebear's military success – his favouring of friends over barons didn't help. He failed in the marriage department, too, and came to a grisly end when his wife, Isabella, and her lover, Roger Mortimer, had him murdered in Berkeley Castle (p252).

Shakespeare's *Henry V* was filmed most recently in 1989 – a superb epic, starring English cinema darling Kenneth Branagh as the eponymous king. Also worth catching is the earlier movie of the same name starring Laurence Olivier, made in 1944 as a patriotic rallying cry.

HOUSES OF LANCASTER & YORK

In 1399 the last of the Plantagenets, Richard II, was ousted by a powerful baron called Henry Bolingbroke, who became Henry IV – the first monarch of the House of Lancaster. He was followed, neatly, by Henry V, who decided it was time to finally end (or stir up) the Hundred Years' War, a long-standing conflict between England and France. Henry's defeat of France at the Battle of Agincourt and the patriotic speech he was given by Shakespeare in his namesake play ('cry God for Harry, England and St George') ensured his position among the most famous English monarchs.

Still keeping things neat, Henry V was followed by Henry VI. His main claim to fame was overseeing the building of great places of worship (King's College Chapel, p430, in Cambridge, Eton Chapel, p271, near Windsor), interspersed with great bouts of insanity.

When the Hundred Years' War finally ground to a halt in 1453, you'd have thought things would be calm for a while. But no. Just a few years later, a civil conflict dubbed the Wars of the Roses flared up.

Briefly it went like this: Henry VI of the House of Lancaster (whose emblem was a red rose) was challenged by Richard, Duke of York (proud holder of a white-rose flag). Henry was weak and it was almost a walkover for Richard, but Henry's wife, Margaret of Anjou, was made of sterner mettle and her forces defeated the challenger. But it didn't rest there. Richard's son Edward entered with an army, turned the tables, drove out Henry, and became King Edward IV – the first monarch of the House of York. (For a slightly longer Wars of the Roses overview, see p657.)

DARK DEEDS IN THE TOWER

Life was never easy for the guy at the top. Edward IV hardly had time to catch his breath before facing a challenger to his own throne. Enter scheming Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, who liked to be billed as 'the kingmaker'. In 1470 he teamed up with the energetic Margaret of Anjou to shuttle Edward into exile and bring Henry VI to the throne. But a year later Edward IV came bouncing back; he killed Warwick, captured Margaret and had Henry snuffed out in the Tower of London (p122).

1337–1453

England battles against France in a long conflict known as Hundred Years' War. It was actually a series of small conflicts. And it lasted for more than a century, too...

1348

The arrival of the Black Death. Commonly attributed to bubonic plague, the pandemic killed more than 1.5 million people, over a third of the country's population.

1381

Richard II confronted by the Peasants' Revolt. This attempt by commoners to overthrow the feudal system is brutally suppressed, further injuring an already deeply divided country.

RULING THE ROOST

A glance at the story of England's ruling dynasties clearly shows that life is never dull for the person at the top. Despite immense power and privilege, the position of monarch (or, perhaps worse, *potential* monarch) probably ranks as one of history's least safe occupations. English kings to meet an untimely end include Harold (killed in battle), William II (assassinated), Charles I (beheaded by Republicans), Edward V (murdered by an uncle), Richard II (probably starved to death), John (too much eating and drinking), James II (deposed), Edward II (dispatched by his queen and her lover) and William III (died after his horse tripped over a molehill). As you visit the castles and battlefields of England, you may feel a touch of sympathy – but only a touch – for those all-powerful figures continually looking over their shoulders.

Although Edward IV's position seemed secure, he ruled for only a decade before being succeeded by his 12-year-old son, now Edward V. But the boy-king's reign was even shorter than his dad's. In 1483 he was mysteriously murdered, along with his brother, and once again the Tower of London was the scene of the crime.

With the 'little princes' dispatched, the throne was open for their dear old Uncle Richard. Whether he was the princes' killer remains the subject of debate, but his rule as Richard III was short-lived. Despite another famous Shakespearean sound bite ('A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse'), few tears were shed in 1485 when he was tumbled from the top job by a nobleman from Wales called Henry Tudor, who became King Henry VII.

MOVES TOWARDS UNITY

There hadn't been a Henry on the throne for a while, and the new incumbent harked back to the days of his namesakes with a skilful reign. Following the Wars of the Roses, Henry VII's Tudor neutrality was important. He also mended fences with his northern neighbours by marrying off his daughter to James IV of Scotland, thereby linking the Tudor and Stewart lines.

Henry VII's successor, Henry VIII, is one of England's best-known monarchs, mainly thanks to his string of six wives – the result of a desperate quest for a male heir. In terms of historical importance, he is also known for his excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church and for breaking the Church of England from Rome, followed by the 'Dissolution' – the infamous closure or demolition of many monasteries (in reality more a blatant land grab than part of the struggle between church and state).

Elizabeth (1998), directed by Shekhar Kapur and starring Cate Blanchett, covers the early years of the Virgin Queen's rule – as she graduates from novice princess to commanding monarch – a time of forbidden love, unwanted suitors, intrigue and death.

THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

Henry VIII was succeeded by his son Edward VI, then his daughter Mary I, but their reigns were short. So, unexpectedly, the third child, Elizabeth, came to the throne.

1459–71

The Wars of the Roses – an ongoing conflict between two competing dynasties: the Houses of Lancaster and York. The Yorkists are eventually successful, enabling King Edward IV to gain the throne.

1485

Henry Tudor defeats Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth to become King Henry VII, establishing the Tudor dynasty and ending York-Lancaster rivalry for the throne.

1509–47

The rule of Henry VIII. The Pope's disapproval of Henry's desire for divorce results in the Reformation. English authority is exerted over Wales; the Acts of Union (1536–43) formally tie the two countries.

As Elizabeth I, she inherited a nasty mess of religious strife and divided loyalties, but after an uncertain start she gained confidence and turned the country round. Refusing marriage, she borrowed biblical imagery and became known as the Virgin Queen – perhaps the first English monarch to create a cult image.

Highlights of her 45-year reign included the naval defeat of the Spanish Armada, the far-flung explorations of English seafarers Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake, the expansion of England's trading network, including the newly established colonies on the east coast of America – not to mention a cultural flourishing thanks to writers such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth's cousin Mary (daughter of Scottish King James V, and a Catholic) had become Queen of Scotland. She'd spent her childhood in France and had married the French dauphin (crown prince), thereby becoming queen of France as well. Why stop at two? After her husband's death, Mary returned to Scotland, and from there ambitiously claimed the English throne as well – on the grounds that Elizabeth was illegitimate.

'Elizabeth borrowed biblical imagery and became known as the Virgin Queen'

Mary's plans failed; she was imprisoned and forced to abdicate, but escaped to England and appealed to Elizabeth for help. This could have been a rookie error, or she might have been advised by courtiers with their own agenda. Either way, it was a bad move. Mary was – not surprisingly – seen as a security risk and imprisoned once again. In an uncharacteristic display of indecision, Elizabeth held Mary under arrest for 19 years – moving her frequently from house to house, so that today England has many stately homes (and even a few pubs) claiming 'Mary Queen of Scots slept here' – before finally ordering her execution.

UNITED & DISUNITED BRITAIN

When Elizabeth died in 1603, despite a bountiful reign, the Virgin Queen had failed to provide was an heir. She was succeeded by her closest relative, the Scottish King James, the safely Protestant son of the murdered Mary. He became James I of England and VI of Scotland, the first English monarch of the House of Stuart (Mary's time in France had Gallicised the Stewart name). James did his best to sooth Catholic-Protestant tensions and united England, Wales and Scotland into one kingdom for the first time – another step towards British unity, at least on paper.

But the divide between king and Parliament continued to smoulder, and the power struggle worsened during the reign of Charles I, eventually degenerating into the English Civil War. The antiroyalist forces were led by Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan who preached against the excesses of the monarchy and established church, and his parliamentarian (or Roundhead) army was pitched against the king's forces (the Cavaliers) in a war that tore England apart – although for the last time in history. It ended with victory

1558–1603

The reign of Queen Elizabeth I, a period of boundless English optimism. Enter stage right playwright William Shakespeare. Exit due west navigators Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake.

1605

King James' attempts to smooth religious relations are set back by an anti-Catholic outcry following the infamous Gunpowder Plot, a terrorist attempt to blow up Parliament led by Guy Fawkes.

1644–49

English Civil War between the king's Cavaliers and Oliver Cromwell's Roundheads, establishing the Commonwealth of England.

for the Roundheads, the king executed, and England declared a republic – with Cromwell hailed as 'Protector'.

THE RETURN OF THE KING

By 1653 Cromwell was finding Parliament too restricting and assumed dictatorial powers, much to his supporters' dismay. On his death in 1658, he was followed half-heartedly by his son, but in 1660 Parliament decided to re-establish the monarchy – as republican alternatives were proving far worse.

Charles II (the exiled son of Charles I) came to the throne, and his rule – known as 'the Restoration' – saw scientific and cultural activity bursting forth after the straight-laced ethics of Cromwell's time. Exploration and expansion were also on the agenda. Backed by the army and navy (which had been modernised by Cromwell), colonies stretched down the American coast, while the East India Company set up headquarters in Bombay, laying foundations for what was to become the British Empire.

'in 1707, the Act of the Union was passed, linking the countries of England, Wales and Scotland under one Parliament'

The next king, James II, had a harder time. Attempts to ease restrictive laws on Catholics ended with his defeat at the Battle of the Boyne by William III, the Protestant king of Holland, aka William of Orange. William was married to James' daughter Mary, but it didn't stop him doing the dirty on his father-in-law. William and Mary both had equal rights to the throne and their joint accession in 1688 was known as the Glorious Revolution. Lucky they were married or there might have been another civil war.

EMPIRE BUILDING

In 1694 Mary died, leaving just William as monarch. He died a few years later and was followed by his sister-in-law, Anne. During her reign, in 1707, the Act of Union was passed, linking the countries of England, Wales and Scotland under one Parliament – based in London – for the first time.

Anne died without an heir in 1714, marking the end of the Stuart line. The throne passed to distant (but still safely Protestant) German relatives – the House of Hanover. Meanwhile, the British Empire – which, despite its title, was predominantly an English entity – continued to grow in the Americas, as well as in Asia, while claims were made to Australia after James Cook's epic voyage in 1768.

THE INDUSTRIAL AGE

While the Empire expanded abroad, at home Britain had become the crucible of the Industrial Revolution. Steam power (patented by James Watt in 1781) and steam trains (launched by George Stephenson in 1830) transformed methods of production and transport, and the towns of the English Midlands became the first industrial cities.

The industrial growth led to Britain's first major period of internal migration, as vast numbers of people from the countryside came to the cities in

1688

William of Orange and his wife Mary, daughter of King James II, jointly ascend the throne after William defeats his father-in-law in the Glorious Revolution.

1721–42

Violent struggles for the throne are a thing of the past and the Hanoverian kings increasingly rely on Parliament to govern the country. Robert Walpole becomes Britain's first prime minister.

1749

Author and magistrate Henry Fielding founds the Bow Street Runners, cited as London's first professional police force. A 1792 Act of Parliament allowed the Bow Street model to spread across England.

search of work. At the same time, medical advances improved life expectancy, creating a sharp population increase, so for many ordinary people the effects of Britain's economic blossoming were dislocation and poverty.

Nevertheless, by the time Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837, Britain's factories dominated world trade and its fleets dominated the oceans. The rest of the 19th century was seen as Britain's Golden Age (for some people, it still is) – a period of confidence not seen since the days of the last great queen, Elizabeth I.

In a final move of PR genius, the queen's chief spin doctor and most effective prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, had Victoria crowned Empress of India. She'd never been to the subcontinent, but the British people simply loved the idea.

The times were optimistic, but it wasn't all tub-thumping jingoism. Disraeli and his successor William Gladstone also introduced social reforms to address the worst excesses of the Industrial Revolution. Education became universal, trade unions were legalised and the right to vote was extended to commoners. Well, to male commoners – women didn't get the vote for another few decades. Disraeli and Gladstone may have been enlightened gentlemen, but there *were* limits.

WORLD WAR I

When Queen Victoria died in 1901, it seemed that England's (and all of Britain's) energy fizzled out too, and the country entered a period of decline. Meanwhile, in continental Europe, other states were more active: the military powers of Russia, Austro-Hungary, Turkey and Germany were sabre-rattling in the Balkan states, a dispute that eventually culminated in WWI. When German forces entered Belgium, on their way to invade France, Britain and the Allied countries were drawn in, and the 'Great War' became a vicious conflict of stalemate and horrendous slaughter.

Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks is partly set in the trenches of WWI. Understated, perfectly paced and intensely moving, it tells of passion, fear, waste, incompetent generals and the poor bloody infantry.

By the war's weary end in 1918 over a million Britons had died (not to mention millions more from many other countries) and there was hardly a street or village untouched by death, as the sobering lists of names on war memorials all over England still show. The conflict added 'trench warfare' to the dictionary, and further deepened the huge gulf between ruling and working classes.

When the soldiers who did return from WWI found the social order back home little changed, their disillusion helped create a new political force to upset the balance long enjoyed by the Liberal and Conservative parties: the Labour Party, representing the working class.

The Labour Party came to power for the first time, in coalition with the Liberals, in the 1923 election, with James Ramsay MacDonald as prime minister, but by the mid-1920s the Conservatives were back. The world economy was now in decline and industrial unrest had become widespread.

1776–83

The American War of Independence is the British Empire's first major reverse, forcing England to withdraw – for a while, at least – from the world stage, a fact not missed by French ruler Napoleon.

1799–1815

The Napoleonic Wars. Napoleon threatens invasion on a weakened Britain, but his ambitions are curtailed by Nelson and Wellington at the famous battles of Trafalgar (1805) and Waterloo (1815) respectively.

1837–1901

The reign of Queen Victoria. The British Empire – 'the Empire where the sun never sets'– expands from Canada through Africa and India to Australia and New Zealand.

When 500,000 workers marched in protest through the streets, the government's heavy-handed response included sending in the army, setting the stage for the style of industrial conflict that was to plague Britain for the next 50 years.

The situation worsened in the 1930s as the Great Depression meant another decade of misery and political upheaval, and even the royal family took a knock when Edward VIII abdicated in 1936 so he could marry a woman who was twice divorced and – horror of horrors – American. The ensuing scandal was good for newspaper sales and hinted at the prolonged 'trial by media' suffered by royals in more recent times.

The throne was taken by Edward's less-than-charismatic brother, George VI, and Britain dithered through the rest of the decade, with mediocre government failing to confront the country's deep-set problems.

WORLD WAR II

Meanwhile, on mainland Europe, Germany saw the rise of Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi party. Many feared another Great War, but Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met the German leader in 1938 and promised Britain 'peace in our time'. He was wrong. The following year Hitler invaded Poland. Two days later Britain was once again at war with Germany.

The German army moved with astonishing speed, swept west through France, and pushed back British forces to the beaches of Dunkirk in northern France in June 1940. An extraordinary flotilla of rescue vessels turned total disaster into a brave defeat – and Dunkirk Day is still remembered with pride and sadness in Britain every year.

By mid-1940, most of Europe was controlled by Germany. In Russia, Stalin had negotiated a peace agreement. The USA was neutral, leaving Britain virtually isolated. Neville Chamberlain, reviled for his earlier 'appeasement' stance, stood aside to let a new prime minister, Winston Churchill, lead a coalition government. (See the boxed text, opposite, for more Churchillian details.) The new leader was welcomed by the British people, but for many the war got worse before it got better. Between September 1940 and May 1941, the German air force launched a series of (mainly night-time) bombing raids on London and several other cities and ports, with the joint aim of destroying industrial targets and lowering public morale. More than a million houses were destroyed in the capital and more than 40,000 civilians were killed. Responses during this period included turning underground railway stations into bomb shelters and the evacuation of children from the cities to country areas – as well as British bombing raids on German cities.

The Normandy landings was the largest military armada in history; more than 5000 ships were involved, with hundreds of thousands of troops landed in the space of about four days.

Morale in Britain remained strong, thanks partly to Churchill's regular radio broadcasts, and in late 1941 the tide began to turn as the USA entered the war and Germany became bogged down on the eastern front

1914

Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria is assassinated in the Balkan city of Sarajevo – the final spark in a decade-long crisis that starts the Great War, now called WWI.

1926

Increasing mistrust of the government, fuelled by soaring unemployment, leads to the General Strike. Millions of workers – train drivers, miners, ship builders – down tools and bring the country to a halt.

1939–1945

WWII rages across Europe, and much of Africa and Asia. Britain and Allies including America, Russia, Australia, India and New Zealand eventually defeat the armies of Germany, Japan and Italy.

CHURCHILL

Ask any English person to name a 'great hero of history' and Winston Churchill will be high on the list, along with King Arthur, Admiral Nelson and the Duke of Wellington – and quite possibly Margaret Thatcher and David Beckham. Sixty years after the end of WWII, Churchill's legacy is undeniable.

Although from an aristocratic family, Churchill's early years were not auspicious; he was famously a 'dunce' at school – an image he actively cultivated in later life. As a young man he joined the British Army, serving mainly in India, Sudan and South Africa, also acting as a war correspondent for various newspapers, and writing several books about his exploits.

In 1901, Churchill was elected to Parliament as a Conservative MP, but in 1904 he defected to the Liberals, the main opposition party at the time. A year later, after a Liberal election victory, he became a government minister, then worked his way up through the ranks, including Minister of Munitions in WWI, before rejoining the Conservatives in 1922. Through the rest of the 1920s, Churchill held various ministerial positions. High points of this period included alleged plans in 1926 to combat striking coal miners with machine gun–wielding troops and calling Mussolini a 'genius', an assertion trumped in 1929 by his reference to Ghandi as 'a half-naked fakir'.

The 1930s were quiet on the political front for Churchill – apart from his criticism of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's 'appeasement' of Hitler and his call for British rearmament to face a growing German threat – so he concentrated on writing. His multivolume *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* was drafted during this period; although biased and flawed by modern standards, it remains his best-known work.

In 1939, Britain entered WWII and by 1940 Churchill was prime minister, taking additional responsibility as Minister of Defence. Hitler had expected an easy victory, but Churchill's extraordinary dedication (not to mention his radio speeches – most famously offering 'nothing but blood, toil, sweat and tears' and promising to 'fight on the beaches') inspired the British people to resist. Between July and October 1940 the Royal Air Force withstood Germany's aerial raids to win what became known as the Battle of Britain – a major turning point in the war, and a chance for land forces to rebuild their strength. It was an audacious strategy, but it paid off and Churchill was lauded as a national hero – praise that continued to the end of the war, beyond his death in 1965 and up to today.

fighting Russia. The following year, British forces were revitalised thanks to Churchill's focus on arms manufacturing, and the Germans were defeated in North Africa.

By 1944 Germany was in retreat. Britain and the USA controlled the skies, Russia pushed back from the east, and the Allies were again on the beaches of France. The Normandy landings (D-Day, as it's better remembered) marked the start of the liberation of Europe from the west, and in Churchill's words, 'the beginning of the end of the war'. By 1945 Hitler was dead and his forces were defeated. Two atomic bombs forced the surrender of Japan, and finally brought WWII to a dramatic and terrible close.

1945

WWII ends, and in the immediate postwar election the Labour Party under Clement Attlee defeats the Conservatives under Winston Churchill, despite the latter's pivotal rule in Britain's WWII victory.

1946–8

The Labour Party nationalises key industries such as shipyards, coal mines and steel foundries. Britain's 'big four' train companies are combined into British Railways.

1948

Aneurin Bevan, the Health Minister in the Labour government, launches the National Health Service – the core of Britain as a 'welfare state'.

SWINGING & SLIDING

In Britain, despite the WWII victory, there was an unexpected swing on the political front. An electorate tired of war and hungry for change tumbled Churchill's Conservatives in favour of the Labour Party. But change was gradual, and improvements slow in coming; food rationing for example continued well into the 1950s.

For more on Queen Elizabeth II and the British monarchy, its history and customs, castles and art collections, see www.royal.gov.uk.

The impact of depleted reserves were felt overseas too, as parts of the British Empire became independent, including India and Pakistan in 1947 and Malaya in 1957, followed by much of Africa and the Caribbean. Through the next decade, people from these ex-colonies were drawn to the mother country. In many cases they were specifically invited; postwar England was still rebuilding and needed the additional labour.

But while the Empire's sun may have been setting, Britain's royal family was still going strong. In 1952 George VI was succeeded by his daughter, Elizabeth II, and following the trend set by earlier queens Elizabeth I and Victoria, she has remained on the throne for more than five decades, overseeing a period of massive social and economic change.

By the late 1950s, recovery was strong enough for Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to famously remind the British people they'd 'never had it so good'. Some saw this as a boast for a confident future, others as a warning about difficult times ahead. But many people didn't care either way when the 1960s arrived and grey old England was suddenly more fun and lively than it had been for generations – especially if you were over 10 and under 30. There was the music of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Cliff Richard and The Shadows, while cinema audiences flocked to see Michael Caine, Peter Sellers and Glenda Jackson.

Alongside the glamour, 1960s business seemed swinging too. But by the 1970s decline had set in once again. A combination of inflation, an oil crisis and international competition revealed the weaknesses of Britain's economy, and a lot that was rotten in British society too. The ongoing struggle between disgruntled working classes and inept ruling classes was brought to the boil once again; the rest of the decade was marked by strikes, disputes and general all-round gloom – especially when the electricity was cut, as power stations went short of fuel or workers walked out.

Neither the Conservatives – also known as the Tories – under Edward Heath, nor Labour under Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan, proved capable of controlling the strife. The British public had had enough, and the elections of May 1979 returned the Conservatives led by a little-known politician named Margaret Thatcher.

THE THATCHER YEARS

Soon everyone had heard of Mrs Thatcher. Love her or hate her, no one could argue that her methods weren't dramatic. British workers were Luddites? She

Abbey in June 1953.

1952

Princess Elizabeth becomes Queen Elizabeth II when her father, George VI, dies. She is on safari in Kenya when she hears of his passing. Her coronation takes place in Westminster

(1965) and Barbados (1966).

1960s

Overseas, it's the era of African and Caribbean independence, including Nigeria (1960), Tanzania (1961), Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago (1962), Kenya (1963), Malawi (1964), The Gambia

1960s

At home, it's the era of Beatlemania. Successful songs like 'Please, Please Me' and 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' ensure The Beatles become household

ALFRED TO ELIZABETH

Below is a brief overview of England's rulers over the past 1200 years. As you travel around the country, having this basic grasp of when their reigns started and ended (thanks to natural or unplanned events) should make your visit much more rewarding.

Saxons & Danes
Alfred the Great 871-99
Edward the Elder 899-924
Athelstan 924-39
Edmund I 939-46
Eadred 946-55
Eadwig 955-59
Edgar 959-75
Edward the Martyr 975-79
Ethelred II (the Unready) 979-1016
Knut 1016-35
Harold I 1035-40
Harthacanute 1040-42
Edward the Confessor 1042-66
Harold II 1066

Normans
William I (the Conqueror) 1066-87
William II 1087-1100
Henry I 1100-35
Stephen 1135-54

House of Plantagenet
Henry II 1154-89
Richard I (the Lionheart) 1189-99
John 1199-1216
Henry III 1216-72
Edward I (Longshanks) 1272-1307
Edward II 1307-27
Edward III 1327-77
Richard II 1377-99

House of Lancaster
Henry IV (Bolingbroke) 1399-1413
Henry V 1413-22
Henry VI 1422-61 & 1470-71

House of York
Edward IV 1461-70 & 1471-83
Edward V 1483
Richard III 1483-85

House of Tudor
Henry VII 1485-1509
Henry VIII 1509-47
Edward VI 1547-53
Mary I 1553-58
Elizabeth I 1558-1603

House of Stuart
James I 1603-25
Charles I 1625-49

Protectorate (Republic)
Oliver Cromwell 1649-58
Richard Cromwell 1658-59

Restoration
Charles II 1660-85
James II 1685-88
Mary II 1688-94
William III (of Orange) 1688-1702
Anne 1702-14

House of Hanover
George I 1714-27
George II 1727-60
George III 1760-1820
George IV 1820-30
William IV 1830-37
Victoria 1837-1901

Houses of Saxe-Coburg & Windsor
Edward VII 1901-10
George V 1910-36
Edward VIII 1936
George VI 1936-52
Elizabeth II 1952-

names in Britain, then America – then the world.

1971

Britain adopts the 'decimal' currency (1 pound equals 100 pence) and drops the ancient system of one pound equals 20 shillings or 240 pennies, the centuries-old bane of school maths lessons.

1970s

Much of the decade is characterised by inflation, inept governments (on the left and right), trade union disputes, strikes, shortages and blackouts, culminating in the 1978/79 'Winter of Discontent'.

1979

A Conservative government lead by Margaret Thatcher wins

fired them. Trade unions archaic? She smashed them. British industry inefficient? She shut it down. Nationalised companies a drain on resources? She sold them off – with a sense of purpose that made Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries seem like a Sunday-school picnic.

Looking back from a 21st-century vantage point, most historians agree that by economic measures Mrs Thatcher's policies were mostly successful, but by social measures they were a failure. The new, competitive Britain was also a greatly polarised Britain. Once again a trench formed, but not between the classes; this time it was between the people who gained from the prosperous wave of Thatcherism and those left drowning in its wake – not only jobless, but jobless in a harsh environment. Even Thatcher's fans were occasionally unhappy about the brutal and uncompromising methods favoured by the 'iron lady', but any dissent had little impact and by 1988 she was the longest-serving British prime minister of the 20th century, although her repeated electoral victories were helped considerably by the Labour Party's destructive internal struggles.

'Even Thatcher's fans were occasionally unhappy about the brutal and uncompromising methods favoured by the "iron lady"'

The pendulum started to swing again in early 1990s. When Mrs Thatcher was replaced as leader by John Major the voters regarded Labour with even more suspicion, allowing new Major to unexpectedly win the 1992 election. Britain enjoyed another half-decade of political stalemate, as the Tories imploded and Labour was rebuilt on the sidelines.

It all came to a head in the 1997 election, when 'New' Labour swept to power under fresh-faced leader Tony Blair. After nearly 18 years of Tory rule, to the majority of Brits it really seemed that Labour's victory call ('things can only get better') was true – and some people literally danced in the street when the results were announced.

NEW LABOUR, NEW MILLENNIUM

Tony Blair and New Labour enjoyed an extended honeymoon period, and the next election (in 2001) was another walkover. The Conservative party continued to struggle, allowing Labour to win a historic third term in 2005, and a year later Mr Blair became the longest-serving Labour prime minister in British history.

As the decade wore on, the honeymoon became a distant memory and the Labour government was forced to deal with a seemingly unending string of problems, controversies and international crises. Most evident were the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the threat of terrorism at home, brought shockingly to the surface in London on the 7th of July 2005, when bombers attacked underground trains and a bus, killing more than 50 commuters.

Other international issues that dominated the headlines and dogged the government included the expansion of the European Union to include the former Eastern-bloc countries, always linked in the public mind to the 'threat' of economic migrants and asylum seekers coming to England's shores.

the national election, a major milestone of Britain's 20th-century history, ushering in a decade of dramatic political and social change.

1982

Britain is victorious in war against Argentina over the invasion of the Falkland Islands, boosting patriotism and leading to a bout of flag-waving not seen since WWII.

1990

Mrs Thatcher ousted as leader and the Conservative party enters a period of decline, thanks partly to the introduction of unpopular 'poll tax', but remains in power thanks to inept Labour opposition.

THE FUTURE'S BROWN?

In June 2007 Tony Blair resigned as leader of the Labour Party, allowing Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer (the British term for Minister of Finance) and for so long the prime-minister-in-waiting, to finally get the top job.

Mr Brown's first three months in office were promising. The new leader seemed calm and in control, and Labour enjoyed a post-Blair renewal of public support. But then it all went wrong. Much publicised (though never officially announced) plans for a 'snap' general election were suddenly shelved in the light of weakening opinion polls. A photo-opportunity trip to Iraq timed to deflect attention from the Tory party annual conference did little to alleviate the veneer of cynicism.

Economic policy seemed to go awry too. Budgetary measures established when Mr Brown was Chancellor came into force, penalising some of the country's lowest earners with higher taxes. This was especially bizarre, given the previous decade of social policy, largely driven by Mr Brown, that focussed on alleviating poverty. An attempt to reverse the debacle, involving tax refunds costing £2.7 billion, was seen as either missing all the intended targets, or – in the light of impending by-elections – simply another opportunistic move by a prime minister once lauded for his polices of prudence and long-term fiscal planning.

Then came the by-elections. In May 2008, in the industrial town of Crewe, formerly a Labour stronghold, voters swung decisively to the Conservatives. A month later attention switched to Henley, a Tory stronghold; Labour was never going to win here, but the end result – fifth place with around 1000 votes, compared to the winning 20,000 – was simply embarrassing. Alongside these local debates, the global economic downturn and accompanying rise in fuel and food costs, and the fall in house values, was all blamed on the government, such that in late June 2008, a poll showed 74% of people thought the new leader 'a disappointment' after Mr Blair. Not the best way for Gordon Brown to celebrate his first anniversary in the top job.

Outside of government, in December 2005 the Conservatives elected David Cameron as their party leader; a charismatic figure from the beginning, his confidence and standing continued to grow thanks partly to policies based on tax cuts, capped immigration and measures to reduce crime, and partly to Labour's stream of public relations disasters under Gordon Brown. Meanwhile, Nick Clegg became leader of the Liberal Democrats in December 2007, meaning all three major parties will enter the next election (expected in 2009, and due by 2010 at the latest) with new leaders. It remains to be seen if the voters will award Labour another term in office, or if the combination of events overseas, including a global financial crisis, mismanagement at home and infighting at the heart of government will see the political pendulum swing back the other way.

For more on English history – from the Roman invasion to the war in Iraq – see the BBC's history site, www.bbc.co.uk/history.

1997

The general election sees Tony Blair lead 'New' Labour to victory in the polls, with a record-breaking parliamentary majority, ending more than 20 years of Tory rule.

2003

Britain joins the US-led invasion of Iraq, initially with considerable support from the public and the opposition. It starts to sour when Mr Blair admits weapons of mass destruction may never be found.

2005

Tony Blair and Labour re-elected for a third term (the first time in British history for a left-of-centre party), though the average Labour vote in England is down 7% on the previous election.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Everyone from Winston Churchill and George Orwell to broadcast journalist Jeremy Paxman has had a stab at defining the English character, but no one's ever managed to pin down any concrete definition of 'Englishness'. It's become increasingly important as devolution has gathered pace, but the notion of the national character remains slippery, especially since the terms England, Britain and UK are still used fairly interchangeably by foreigners and the English (our accents are English, we're British citizens but our passports belong to the UK).

Several centuries of cultural cherry-picking have given English culture a genuinely polyglot feel. The national language is peppered with ancient Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, French, Indian, Italian, German and Japanese. Factor in the global influence of TV and cinema, and the successive waves of immigration that have contributed to the multicultural melting pot of modern-day England, and you'll realise how hard it is to come up with any kind of overarching national character.

One of the more perceptive takes on the national character is *The English*, written by Jeremy Paxman, a BBC broadcaster known for his ferocious interviewing technique and razor-sharp wit.

But peek beneath the surface and you'll find a few home truths about the English. While they're not quite as inhibited, reserved or unswervingly polite as you might expect, there's still a deep-seated respect for good manners, courtesy and tolerance, coupled with a belief in a rather vague notion of 'fairness' (though no one can quite define it, everyone instinctively seems to know when the boundary's been crossed). Unsurprisingly, people tend to be friendlier outside the big cities: trying to spark up a chat on the tube is likely to win you stares of incredulous horror, while you'll often find yourself having a natter if you're held up in a northern bus queue.

Which brings us to the question of good old English reserve. While the nation has become less inhibited about expressing their emotions, there's still some deep corner of the national psyche that involuntarily winces at the spectacle of *Jerry Springer*. There's nothing that the English like better than a good moan, but watch the collective cringe when someone starts complaining too loudly in a restaurant and you'll realise that English reserve hasn't disappeared just yet.

Ever wondered about the origins of the world's first garden gnome, or the location of the world's largest bell foundry? Then you'll love Christopher Winn's *I Never Knew That About England*, a treasure trove of bizarre Blighty-themed facts.

In general the English frown on displays of public exhibitionism or overfamiliarity, but any city centre jaunt on a Saturday night will tell you that the old stereotype of a nation of buttoned-up, stiff-upper-lip intellectuals is definitely a thing of the past. The old 'no sex, please, we're British' adage hasn't entirely disappeared, either – displays of public nudity or gratuitous profanity prompt a generous round of tut-tutting and raising of eyebrows, and yet a recent survey suggested that Britain is actually the world's fastest-growing market for internet porn.

All of which goes to show what a contrary bunch the English are. They're deeply fond of championing their love of animals, their generosity towards charities and their liberal, progressive values, but ask them to abandon their imperial measurements, ditch their beloved pound or build something on green-belt land and they'll fight to the bitter end. And despite what the politicians say, the class system is still very much alive: recent studies have concluded that England has one of the widest wealth gaps and lowest levels of social mobility anywhere in the western world, and class-ridden epithets – chavs, toffs, townies, snobs, nimbies – are bandied about with relative abandon.

But if there's one thing that binds the eclectic English, it's their sense of humour. This is the nation that gave the world Spike Milligan and the Goons,

Monty Python, the League of Gentlemen and Ali G. Being able to have a laugh at things (and more importantly, at themselves) has got the English through some seriously sticky patches. Heavily ironic, sharp and self-deprecating, the English sense of humour sails over the heads of many visitors, but until you get a handle on the English habit of 'taking the mickey', you'll be missing a crucial key for understanding what makes this peculiar little country tick.

If you're flummoxed by English imperial measurements, convert them to something that makes more sense at www.metric-conversions.org.

LIFESTYLE

'An Englishman's home is his castle', runs the old saying – a reflection of the crucial importance the English place on owning a house. While many other European countries see no stigma in lifelong renting, in England owning a house is a crucial step towards health, wealth and happiness.

Unfortunately, actually trying to buy a house is unlikely to do your bank balance (or your blood pressure) any good. A decade of record price rises has placed the dreamt-of home well out of reach of most first-time buyers, with average homes outstripping average earnings by well over six times. In England, you'll need just under £200,000 to pick up the middle-of-the-road home, rising closer to £350,000 in London, or a million-plus in the most fashionable areas. But with the average national salary hovering around the £26,000 mark (£31,000 in London), most 'key workers' – including teachers, nurses, paramedics and bin collectors – find a hefty 25-year mortgage a depressing necessity if they ever want to be able to afford their own home.

So it's perhaps unsurprising that the English work the longest hours and spend more time commuting to work than practically anywhere in Europe. While their cousins across the Channel work an average of 40.3 hours, the UK working week comes in at a punishing 43.6 hours, topped only by workaholic nations such as Japan and the United States. But while the average English male slogs his guts out at work, at home he's a real couch potato: according to the Office of National Statistics, every week he spends over 56 hours asleep and 20 hours goggling in front of the TV, but just 23 minutes a day reading a book, and 13 minutes engaged in outdoor activity.

This marked lack of cardiovascular enthusiasm perhaps explains England's expanding waistlines. The UK has one of the fastest growing rates of obesity in the western world; at the last count, almost 25% of the population were classified as clinically obese, and almost two-thirds were considered overweight. Obesity is an especially serious problem among the nation's youngsters, but England's kids aren't quite the fattest in Europe just yet – the nation's girls and boys were recently placed fourth and sixth respectively in the European obesity league tables.

The average salary for a train driver in 2008 was £37,231, while library assistants earned just £10,749.

While the English are piling on the pounds, at least they're not smoking as much. Following the ban on smoking in enclosed public places that came into effect in 2007, there has been a 22% rise in the number of people successfully quitting the pernicious weed, and incidences of smoking-related illnesses and chronic heart disease have both taken a dip (although they're still among the UK's top killers).

But while they may be stubbing out their fags (that's cigarettes in England), the English don't seem all that keen on cutting back on the booze. Alcohol consumption and binge drinking have become major public-health issues. A 2005 survey revealed that 31% of men and 22% of women aged 16 to 24 were regularly exceeding the recommended daily dose of alcohol, while 22% of pupils in England aged 11 to 15 confessed to having drunk alcohol in the last week. The extension of licensing hours to promote a more European 'cafe culture' seems to have done little to change the nation's intractable drinking habits; many commentators have laid the blame on supermarkets and nightclubs selling cut-price booze and 'alcopops'.

THE GREAT ENGLISH CUPPA

Nothing sums up the English more than their favourite tipple. Nationwide the English get through an astonishing 165 million cups of tea a day; 70% drink it on a regular basis, with an average daily consumption of three cups.

It's been popular since the 18th century, when the British East India Company established trading links with tea plantations on the Indian subcontinent. But in the early days it was far from a working-class drink; tea was considered a luxury commodity and heavily taxed, initially making it the preserve of upper-class coffee houses. Tea was one of the most important contrabands for Britain's smugglers – at one time around four-fifths of all the tea drunk in England had escaped official duty. But eventually – in part prompted by the infamous Boston Tea Party, which began as a protest against punitive British duties on tea, and helped light the fuse for the American War of Independence – the government relaxed duty restrictions, and tea steadily percolated down through the English classes. Tea-drinking quickly gained many devotees – Dr Samuel Johnson was a particularly staunch advocate – but not everyone was a fan. The Methodist preacher John Wesley swore that the drink induced 'paralytick disorders', licentiousness, intemperance and generally loose morals.

But within the space of a few decades, the English had taken tea firmly to their hearts. By the mid-19th century it was being drunk across all echelons of English society – several of Dickens' penurious characters warm themselves over a steaming tea kettle, while Jane Austen described the elaborate ritual of afternoon tea in high society. During the World Wars tea was rationed by the government to ensure a steady supply (in order to prevent widespread panic and moral collapse); George Orwell even published his 'eleven golden rules' for making the perfect cuppa in the *Evening Standard*. One of his more controversial suggestions – that the milk should be poured *after* the tea – remains a matter of heated debate among the English, with the 'tea after' and 'tea before' camps defending their positions with an intensity usually only reserved for discussing the merits of Marmite.

Ironically, one of the great modern innovations in tea-drinking was an American invention – the first tea bags were accidentally invented in 1908 by a New York tea merchant called Thomas Sullivan, who sent out samples to his customers in small silken bags. Today tea bags account for 96% off all the tea drunk in England.

Drinking isn't the nation's only vice. According to the recent Home Office figures, a quarter of 16 to 24 year olds admitted to using drugs in the last year; around 18% had smoked a joint, while 7% had taken cocaine. The government's flip-flopping on the classification of cannabis hasn't helped; having downgraded the drug from Class B to C, the decision was reversed in 2008, against the recommendations of government scientific advisers. But despite bad habits and ballooning waistlines, life expectancy in England continues to creep upwards: boys and girls born in the UK in 2007 could expect to live an average of 76.9 years and 81.3 years respectively, the highest figures so far recorded.

Though they're living longer, the English aren't statistically likely to pass away married to their childhood sweetheart; currently about one in three marriages in England ends in divorce. But while the divorce rate has rocketed, the social stigma that was once attached to 'living in sin' has long since fallen by the wayside. It's perfectly acceptable these days for unmarried couples to live together, and even have kids; around a third of couples choose to live together without tying the knot, and around 40% of children are born to unmarried parents. There's also been a major rise in people choosing to live on their own – around seven million people now live on their lonesome, nearly four times as many as in 1961. Gay and lesbian relationships have also steadily become more acceptable, especially since the implementation of the Civil Partnership Act in 2005.

POPULATION

In a country as small as England, population is a perennial topic. At last count, 50.76 million people lived in England, accounting for 83.8% of the UK's population. Since 2001 the population has grown by an average of 0.5% every year, helped by falling-infant mortality rates and increased life expectancy.

More recently, immigration has caused a record spike in England's population growth. According to the Office for National Statistics, the UK's population grew by 2.5% between 2001 and 2006, the fastest rate since the 1960s.

Over one in five people in the UK are currently employed in the financial-services sector, compared with about one in 10 in 1981.

Over a quarter of England's population is crammed into the southeast, indicative of a general trend of north-to-south migration that's been in action since the late 19th century. But despite the spiralling cost of living and sky-high house prices down south, it's proved difficult to convince people to try out life up north: attempts to shift civil service and BBC jobs from London (several key departments of the BBC now operate from Manchester) have met with resistance from trade unions and employees.

Meanwhile, England's rural corners are booming. The southwest is the fastest growing of any of England's regions, with an increasing number of people quitting the city in search of a better quality of life. Good news for cash-strapped rural economies, where the traditional industries of farming, fishing and manufacturing are on the wane; not such good news for local residents struggling to get onto the housing ladder.

SPORT

The English may have dreamt up many of the world's favourite sports – including cricket, tennis, rugby and football – but unfortunately the national teams aren't very good at playing (or at least winning) them. Despite a few standout success stories, including victories at the Rugby World Cup in 2004 and a long-awaited win against the Aussies in the 2005 Ashes series, England has a poor track record in most sporting tournaments, especially in football (the last major tournament win was the 1966 World Cup, a hallowed date that's enshrined in the brains of every self-respecting footy fan).

Cricket

Starched whites, village greens and the knick of ball on willow – what could be more English than a cricket match? Cricket's origins stretch back to the 14th century (Edward I played a bat-and-ball game known as *creag*, an early forerunner of cricket). During the colonial era, cricket spread throughout the Commonwealth: Australia, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent took to the game with gusto, and a century on Britain's former colonies still delight in giving the old country a good spanking on the cricket pitch.

In 2007, the most popular boys' name in the UK was Jack, while the most popular girls' name was Grace.

To the uninitiated, cricket is a pretty impenetrable spectacle. Spread over one-day games or five-day 'test matches', and dominated by arcane terminology like googlies, outswingers, leg-byes and silly mid-offs, cricket

QUEUING FOR ENGLAND

The English are notoriously addicted to queues – for buses, train tickets, or to pay at the supermarket. The order is sacrosanct and woe betide any foreigner who gets this wrong! Few things are more likely to spark an outburst of tutting – about as publicly cross as most English get – than pushing in at a queue.

One notable exception is the capital, where queue-jumping is pretty common – although it's worth remembering the accepted etiquette on the tube escalators, where it's polite to stand on the right-hand side so that people in a hurry can climb past on the left. You can expect rather more than a bit of furious tutting if you get in the way of a Londoner in a hurry.

THE ASHES

The historic test cricket series between England and Australia known as the Ashes has been played every other year since 1882 (bar a few interruptions during the World Wars). The contest's name dates back to the landmark test match of 1882, won (for the very first time) by the Australians. Defeat at the hands of the all-conquering Aussies is a depressingly familiar feeling for the modern-day English cricket fan, but at the time the Australians' win was a source of profound national shock: a mock-obituary in the *Sporting Times* lamented the death of English cricket and referred to the sport's ashes being taken to Australia.

According to cricketing legend, the name also refers to a 6in-high terracotta urn presented to the English captain Ivo Bligh (later Lord Darnley), purportedly containing the cremated ashes of a stump or bail used in the match. Since 1953 this hallowed relic has resided at the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) Museum at Lord's, and is a source of considerable controversy between the two nations. Having repeatedly won the tournament over recent decades, Australia feel they've earned the right to retain the Darnley Urn, while the English cricketing authorities are adamant that the urn should remain in the MCC Museum.

England's cricket team isn't doing much to ease the situation: after eight straight defeats, England won the Ashes in 2005, only to hand them straight back again after another humiliating 5-0 thrashing in 2007.

is tantamount to a religion for certain sectors of English society. One-day games and international tests are played at grounds including Lords in London, Edgbaston in Birmingham and Headingley in Leeds. Tickets cost from £30 to well over £200.

The County Championship pits the best county teams against each other. Tickets cost £15 to £25, and only the most crucial games tend to sell out. The new boy on the pitch is the Twenty20 Cup, in which each side is limited to a single innings and 20 overs, laying the emphasis on big batting scores rather than careful run-building. While many traditionalists think this crowd-pleasing new format is changing the character of the game, there's no doubting its popularity – most Twenty20 matches sell out.

Football (Soccer)

The English Premier League is up there with the big boys of European football (please don't call it soccer in front of the English), with some of the best players and richest clubs in the world – not to mention the recent European champions, Manchester United. The league's recent history has been dominated by the four top teams – Arsenal, Liverpool, Chelsea and Manchester United – all (with the notable exception of Arsenal) owned by multimillionaire foreigners, whose limitless transfer budgets have allowed the clubs to attract many of the world's best players.

A notch down in quality (and a hefty notch down in spending power) are England's other domestic leagues – the Championship, League One and League Two. The football season is the same for all divisions (August to May), but tickets for the Premier League are like gold dust – your chances of bagging a ticket are pretty much zilch unless you're a club member, so you're better off trying for a ticket at one of the lower-division games. Try the club websites or online agencies like www.ticketmaster.co.uk and www.myticketmarket.com.

For the latest low-down on everything relating to the national 11, consult the Football Association's website at www.thefa.com.

One of the nation's great footballing spectacles is the annual FA Cup, a knock-out competition that has been in existence since 1871 and is contested every year by teams drawn from across the nation's professional leagues (meaning top-flight teams often find themselves playing against tiny teams from the lowliest echelons of English football).

Rugby

A wit once said that football is a gentlemen's game played by hooligans and rugby is the reverse. Whatever the truth of the adage, rugby remains a popular sport, especially since England's historic World Cup win against Australia in 2004 (the national team unexpectedly reached the final in the 2008 World Cup, only to be beaten by South Africa).

There are two versions of rugby in England: Rugby Union, traditionally played in southern England, Wales and Scotland, and Rugby League, favoured in the north. Both trace their roots back to Rugby School, in Warwickshire, where in 1823 a young lad called William Webb Ellis, frustrated at booting a football around the pitch, picked up the ball and charged towards the opponents' goal, unwittingly spawning an entirely new sport. The Rugby World Cup is named the Webb Ellis trophy after this enterprising young tearaway.

League and Union in England are divided into several divisions. Top-flight union teams include Bath, Gloucester, Leicester and recent champions London Wasps. On the League side look out for the Wigan Warriors, Bradford Bulls, St Helens and 2008 Super League winners, Leeds Rhinos.

As well as the various club competitions, international matches include the Six Nations Championships, contested by England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France and Italy every spring.

Tennis

Tennis is a popular summertime sport, especially around the time of the All England Championships – otherwise known as **Wimbledon** (www.wimbledon.org) – held in the last week of June and first week of July. Famous for its impeccably trimmed grass courts, all-white dress code and historic champions, Wimbledon is also notorious for rain delays (during one famous episode, Cliff Richard crooned to the crowd on Centre Court during an extended bad-weather break). Stoppages are due to be a thing of the past after 2009 with the installation of a sliding roof on Centre Court, but there's little sign of an end to England's long wait for the next home-grown champion: the last British winner was Virginia Wade in 1977, and after the retirement of England's top player Tim Henman in 2007, the nation's hopes rest on up-and-coming Andy Murray (even though he's actually a Scot). The 2008 champion was Rafael Nadal, who ended a run of five straight victories for Swiss champion Roger Federer.

Over 27 tonnes of strawberries and 7000L of cream are consumed every year during the two weeks of the Wimbledon Tennis Championships.

Demand for Wimbledon tickets is huge, but tickets are (unusually) allocated through a public ballot to ensure fairness. Around 6000 tickets are available each day (except the last four) for punters willing to brave the queues, but you'll need to be an early riser: dedicated fans start queuing before dawn.

Horse Racing

The tradition of horse racing in England stretches back centuries. The most prestigious event is **Royal Ascot** (www.royalascot.co.uk) in mid-June, where the fashion is almost as important as the fillies. Other highlights include the Grand National steeplechase at Aintree in early April, and the Derby, run at Epsom on the first Saturday in June.

MULTICULTURALISM

Few topics stir up as fierce a debate in England as the issue of multiculturalism, but despite what you might read in the tabloids, Britain's always been a nation of immigrants. The island's original settlers, the Celts, were supplanted by successive waves of invaders, including the Angles and Saxons (from Germany), Vikings (from Denmark) and Romans (from Italy), and then the Normans (from France) in 1066. Throughout the Middle Ages, England was

influenced by all the great cultures of Europe – especially French, Dutch, Italian and Spanish – and the nation's colonial heritage ensured another wave of new arrivals, especially from India, Pakistan and the Caribbean. The process is still at work today – walk into any London pub and your pint may well be poured by a Kiwi or an Aussie; stop off for a check-up and you might find your doctor trained in India, Pakistan or Asia.

In the 2001 census, around 8% of the UK's population identified themselves as 'ethnic minority'. Four per cent described themselves as Asian or Asian British, 2% as Black or Black British, and 1.2% as mixed race. The largest ethnic centres are in London, Birmingham and Bradford, and England's most multicultural city is Leicester, where around one-third of the population is from ethnic minorities.

Immigration is a perennially hot topic, especially thanks to the massive influx of migrants from Eastern Europe following the expansion of the EU in 2004 (giving rise to a much-bandied media stereotype about Polish plumbers). About one million Eastern Europeans arrived in Britain between 2004 and 2008, in stark contrast to the 15,000-per-year figure projected by the government, causing major headaches for hospitals, schools and social services, and prompting the right-wing media to run a series of stinging headlines. But the papers often fail to distinguish the differences between long-term immigrants seeking citizenship, and temporary migrants on short-term job contracts; recent estimates suggest that of the million-odd migrants who arrived in Britain in the last four years, around half have already left to find work elsewhere. The government has introduced a 'points' system for immigration similar to that employed by Canada, Australia and the US, as well as an English-language exam and a 'citizenship test' (including questions that many current English citizens might struggle to answer).

Beside the issue of immigration are those of integration and inclusion. The 7/7 tube bombings brought home the dislocation between many of England's ethnic communities and its wider society when it was revealed that the suicide bombers were young British-born men. The government has implemented a raft of new policy measures to try to improve relations between communities (including a new Community Cohesion minister), but there are still some huge sticking points: a recent survey suggested that one in seven primary-school children and one in 10 secondary-school children speak a language other than English at home, while statistics show that black people are seven times more likely to be stopped by police than whites. Recent rows over Muslim hijabs, the role of sharia law in British society and the part played by extremist mosques in radicalising young British Muslims have shown there's still a long way to go before Britain can truly call itself a multicultural society.

If you want the inside story on the nation's peculiar habits, bone up with Kate Fox's fascinating field guide, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour.*

But despite the problems and tensions, England's diverse communities manage to rub along together pretty well, although racism is certainly not a thing of the past. Commercial organisations and official bodies (such as the police) are trying hard to stamp out discrimination, but bigotry can still lurk close to the surface. Far-right parties continue to nab seats in local council elections, and it's still not unusual to hear plenty of racist language on the nation's streets.

MEDIA

Newspapers

You'll need a month of Sundays to get through all of England's newspapers. At the bottom end of the market are the tabloids, colloquially known as the 'red-tops' due to their red banners. Sensationalist, shouty and obsessed by the twin staples of modern British society – sport and celebrities – these papers specialise

ONLINE NEWS

You can check out all the latest headlines without ever leaving the house.
Daily Express (www.express.co.uk)
Daily Mail (www.dailymail.co.uk)
Daily Telegraph (www.telegraph.co.uk)
Guardian (www.guardian.co.uk)
Independent (www.independent.co.uk)
Mirror (www.mirror.co.uk)
Sun (www.thesun.co.uk)
Times (www.timesonline.co.uk)

in scandalous stories, paparazzi snaps and lowbrow political coverage. Top of the pile is the *Sun,* Britain's biggest-selling tabloid with a circulation of around three million, famous for its topless 'Page Three' stunners and extravagantly punned headlines. Other tabloid titles include the *Mirror,* formerly the 'paper of the workers' and now one of the country's most salacious tabloids, and the *Daily Star,* specialising in celebrity scandals and scantily clad beauties.

Often touted as the papers of 'Middle England', the best-selling *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* can be just as sensationalist as the tabloids. Belligerent and unashamedly right-wing, both papers are obsessed by issues of immigration, plummeting moral standards and the general degradation of English society: scan a few stories and you'll be convinced the country is teetering on the verge of collapse.

At the upper end are the broadsheets and the compacts (more serious papers with the same dimensions as the tabloids), known for serious journalistic coverage and balanced editorial perspective (although in reality all the papers have their own political affiliations). The *Daily Telegraph* is right-of-centre and easily outsells its rivals, while Britain's oldest journal, the *Times,* is now owned (like many papers) by media magnate Rupert Murdoch, so expect a few populist stories mixed in with the more serious think-pieces. The most left-wing paper is the *Guardian,* closely followed by the left-leaning *Independent,* while the *Financial Times* is increasingly making forays into journalistic territory. It's also one of the few papers to have retained its original broadsheet dimensions: many of the serious papers have switched to tabloid sizes in an effort to steal back market share.

Most papers have Sunday stablemates (*Sunday Mirror, Sunday Express, Sunday Times*); the *Guardian*'s Sunday edition calls itself the *Observer,* while the Sun becomes the *News of the World*. Once known for breaking journalistic exclusives, the weekend papers now lean more towards comment and analysis than piping-hot news: wading through the Sunday supplements is something of an English tradition.

In addition to the nationals, England has a wealth of regionally based titles including London's *Evening Standard,* the *Liverpool Echo,* the *Manchester Evening News* and the *Bristol Evening Post*.

Magazines

England has magazines covering everything from toy collecting to caravanning. For serious political coverage, many readers turn to the *Spectator* and the *New Statesman,* while economic issues take top billing at the *Economist*. For a less reverential take on current affairs, *Private Eye* mixes spoof, satire, and blisteringly accurate cartoons. It's the latest in a long line of satirical magazines stretching back to *Punch* in the 19th century. It's also one of the most sued magazines in Britain.

WEB WOES

The BBC's online service, the **BBC iPlayer** (www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer), allows viewers to watch the last seven days of BBC TV and radio via the internet. Launched at Christmas 2007, the iPlayer's massive success took everyone (even the BBC bigwigs) by surprise. Within the space of a few months, the service accounted for 5% of the UK's total internet traffic, with exponential growth projected over the coming years. The service has led to heated wrangles between the BBC and the nation's internet service providers, who want the corporation to stump up some of the estimated £831m required to upgrade the network. So far the Beeb has shown no sign of budging, but with dire predictions about the net grinding to a halt under the influence of the iPlayer, it might only be a matter of time before they have to reach a deal.

Celebrity-obsessed England has plenty of gossipy rags dishing the dirt on the country's WAGs (Wives and Girlfriends, generally of football stars), Z-listers and soap stars: titles range from bottom-of-the-barrel *Heat* to high-society *Hello*. The late 1990s saw a brief flourish of 'lad's mags', epitomised by titles such as *Loaded, Nuts* and *Zoo*. One of England's other classic magazines, the *New Musical Express,* is still going strong after five decades of covering the country's shifting musical trends. It might not be the hallowed journal it once was, but it's still required reading for the nation's teens; it joined forces with long-term rival *Melody Maker* in 2000.

TV & Radio

Compared to many nations, the UK has a limited line-up of channels, but this is set to change with the switch-over from analogue to digital TV (the first all-digital signal was beamed to Whitehaven in Cumbria in 2007, with the wider UK due to follow suit by 2012).

Popularly referred to as the Beeb or Auntie, the **British Broadcasting Corporation** (BBC; www.bbc.co.uk) remains the top broadcaster. It's one of the few broadcasters that remains advertising-free: its services are financed by an annual licence fee paid by every UK household with a TV (blind people only get a 50% discount). The BBC has a deserved reputation for world-class TV, especially in news and current affairs, though many think the increasing reliance on reality TV and 'dumbed-down' programs has resulted in a decline in standards. The BBC has also been rapped over the knuckles for its London-centric focus: a stinging 2008 report concluded that the corporation failed to accurately reflect devolved modern Britain and must improve its regional coverage in future years.

The main BBC channels are BBC One and the more eccentric BBC Two, supplemented by digital channels BBC Three (aimed at under-25s), BBC Four (arts, history and documentaries) and the BBC News Channel. The BBC's main rivals are ITV and its subsidiary Channel Four, known for its provocative programming. The baby of the bunch is Five, launched in 1997, which is slowly shifting from cheap, trashy programming to more highbrow content. All the channels have digital counterparts: one of the most popular is ITV2; E4 grabs viewers with high-profile US shows and series; and Film4 specialises in cult films. Satellite broadcasting is dominated by Sky, part of the Murdoch-owned News International Corporation.

The main radio stations are provided by the BBC. Radios 1 to 5 are analogue and digital, but the others are digital-only, so you'll need a DAB receiver to hear them. Radio 1 is the main music station, playing everything from banging house to chart-topping pop. Older listeners graduate to Radio 2, known for its eclectic playlist and vintage line-up of DJs (most of whom got too long in the tooth for Radio 1). Radio 3 specialises

in classical, jazz and world music, while Radio 4 (formerly the Home Service) is a very British blend of current affairs, comedy, documentaries and radio plays. Sport and chat dominate Radio 5 Live, Radio 6 broadcasts alternative music, Radio 7 is arts and classic comedy, while Radio 1 Xtra and the BBC Asian Network are aimed at Britain's black and Asian communities respectively.

Alongside the Beeb, you'll find lots of commercial stations, including poppy Virgin Radio and classical specialist Classic FM. To find the right spot on the dial, see p788.

Shameless has been one of the biggest hits for Channel 4 over the last few years, following the trials and tribulations of a deeply dysfunctional northern family and its alcoholic patriarch, Frank Gallagher.

RELIGION

The Church of England (C of E, or Anglican Church) was founded in the 16th century at the behest of Henry VIII (who wanted to marry his mistress Anne Boleyn but couldn't get the Pope's permission, so decided to form his own church instead). The church is overseen by the Archbishop of Canterbury, a position currently held by Dr Rowan Williams; it's traditionally seen as a conservative force in British society (hence its unofficial pseudonym, 'the Tory Party at prayer'), although it has recently moved towards a more liberal stance thanks to its decision to allow the ordination of women and gay bishops (a cause of much controversy in the wider Anglican community).

Though church attendance is falling across the country – only about one in 50 people now attend Sunday services – Christianity is by far the UK's dominant religion. At the last census, 35 million people described themselves as Christian, with around 10% describing themselves as Roman Catholic and the majority of the rest falling under the auspices of the Church of England. Around 15% of the English population have no religion, 3% are Muslims, followed by Hindus (1%), Sikhs (0.7%), Jews (0.5%) and Buddhists (0.3%) – plus around 390,000 Jedis (apparently even the official census isn't immune from the British sense of humour).

ARTS

Literature

England's literary heritage stretches back for over eight centuries. The nation's first literary giant was Geoffrey Chaucer, who strung together a series of fables, stories and morality tales in his medieval 'road movie' *The Canterbury Tales* (p180), published in 1387.

But it was during the late 16th century when English literature truly exploded onto the stage, thanks to a clutch of Elizabethan and Jacobean writers – like Christopher 'Kit' Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Thomas Kyd and a certain William Shakespeare – who forged new dramatic ground with their hard-hitting themes, poetic dialogue and often shocking subject matter, while English myths and fables informed Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Hot on their heels came the 17th-century metaphysical poets, including John Donne and Andrew Marvell, who used everyday objects as a springboard to explore deep philosophical conceits – a drop of dew as an allegory for the human soul, or the points of a compass to symbolise conjoined lovers.

Following the carnage of the Civil War, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* turned the tale of Adam and Eve into an epic poem, and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did the same for the everyday Christian struggle. On a rather more prosaic level, everyday London life provided the material for the wonderful *Diaries* of Samuel Pepys.

During the early 18th century, English literature took on a new political edge. Writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift delighted in attacking

WHITHER THE WEATHER?

It was Dr Johnson who noted that 'when two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather'. Two centuries later, little has changed: weather is an enduring English obsession. According to the **UK Meteorological Office** (www.metoffice.gov.uk) – known to all as the Met Office – weather reports are the third-most watched TV broadcasts, and when BBC Radio 4 proposed cutting the late-night shipping forecast ('warning of gales in North Atlantic; Viking, Forties, good' etc) there was a huge outcry from listeners – most of whom never went anywhere near the sea.

This fascination with the weather is part of a long tradition, and ancient folklore is full of mantras for second-guessing the moods of the elements. Snow on St Dorothea's Day (6 February) means no heavier snowfall that year, while rain on St Swithin's Day (15 July) means it'll continue for the next 40 days. The slightest tinge of a pink cloud can cause locals to chant 'red sky at night, shepherd's delight' like a mantra.

But despite this obsession, the weather still keeps the English on their toes. A few weeks without rain and garden-hose bans are enacted; too much rain and rivers burst their banks, flooding low-lying towns. Similarly, a fall of snow (the amount that in Germany or Switzerland would be brushed off without a second thought) often brings English motorways to a standstill. The rail network is particularly susceptible to weather delay – trains have been cancelled for everything from leaves on the track to the wrong kind of snow.

the mores of contemporary society through their allegorical tales, while Daniel Defoe wrote the original desert-island story, *Robinson Crusoe*, a literary blockbuster since its publication in 1719.

As the Industrial Revolution took hold in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a new generation of writers drew inspiration from the natural world and the human imagination (in many cases helped along by a healthy dose of laudanum). Keats, Shelley, Byron and Coleridge became the figureheads of the Romantic movement, alongside William Wordsworth, who composed much of his poetry wandering about the high hills of the Lake District (p704).

For a taste of surreal humour, try two of England's funniest (and most successful) writers: Douglas Adams *(The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy)* and Terry Pratchett (the *Discworld* series). Pratchett was the best-selling author in the UK for the 1990s.

Gothic literature represented the Romantic flipside – the power of the imagination to create horror rather than joy. A favourite Gothic text is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a cautionary tale about the dangers of human ambition and perverted technology, and a meditation on a post-Enlightenment society facing up to a godless world.

As the 19th century dawned, many writers began to use the trials and tribulations of everyday English society as the basis for their novels. Jane Austen's exquisitely observed tales of class, society, love, friendship and buttoned-up passion are fascinating social documents of their day; later writers, including George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell, continued Austen's fascination with the minutiae of English society. The three Brontë sisters combined Gothic mystery and repressed sexuality with a good old-fashioned yarn; fans still flock to their Haworth home (p602) in the Yorkshire Dales.

As the Industrial Revolution steamed along, writers increasingly used their novels to comment on the social and political ills of Victorian society. Charles Dickens tackled practically all the prevailing issues of his day: from poverty and crime in *Oliver Twist* and the Byzantine English legal system *(Bleak House)* to the terrors of public-school education *(Nicholas Nickleby)*. Thomas Hardy continued the Dickensian tradition, examining the impact of war, industrialisation and social change on ordinary people in the fictionalised county of Wessex (largely based on his home in Dorset, p297). Other writers explored Britain's rapidly expanding frontiers, notably Rudyard Kipling, perhaps the classic chronicler of empire, in works such as *Kim, Gunga Din* and *The Jungle Book*.

England – and its literature – changed forever following the devastating carnage of WWI, which unpicked the stitches that had hitherto held British

society together: class, government, aristocracy and empire. Patriotic poems such as Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier* ('If I should die, think only this of me…') gave way to excoriating dissections of the false glory of war in the work of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Even Kipling recanted his unquestioning devotion to the English cause following the death of his only son, John, killed at the Battle of Loos in 1915. Kipling's devastating refrain 'If any question why we died/Tell them, because our fathers lied' has since become a mantra for the anti-war movement.

The ideological chaos and social disruption of the postwar period fed into the fractured narratives of modernism. Perhaps the greatest domestic writer of the interwar period is DH Lawrence, who charted changing Britain in novels including *Sons and Lovers, The Rainbow* and the controversial *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* for which the publishers were prosecuted in 1960 under the recently introduced Obscene Publications Act (they were found not guilty by showing the work was of 'literary merit'). Other writers ploughed a similar course: EM Forster's *A Passage to India* depicted the downfall of British colonial rule, while Evelyn Waugh explored moral, social and political disintegration in *A Handful of Dust, Vile Bodies* and *Brideshead Revisited*. The interwar period also spawned a generation of gifted poets – WH Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, Robert Graves – who collectively documented the crumbling pillars of British (and European) society.

Brighton Rock by Graham Greene is a classic account of wayward English youth. For an even more shocking take, try Antony Burgess' novel *A Clockwork Orange,* filmed by Stanley Kubrick in 1971 and withdrawn in the UK by the director following a spate of copycat acts.

The chaos of WWII led to a new wave of self-examination and paranoia. George Orwell made his name with semidocumentary novels such as *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Coming Up for Air,* and later with classic books such as the antitotalitarian fable *Animal Farm* and *1984*, the novel that gave Big Brother to the wider world. The Cold War inspired other writers, too – notably Graham Greene, whose *Our Man in Havana* follows a hapless vacuum salesman turned secret spook, and Ian Fleming, who introduced the world to the sexed-up, licensed-to-kill secret agent James Bond (who first appeared in 1953's *Casino Royale*).

Several of the major novelists of the 1970s and '80s remain key figures in the English literary scene. Martin Amis was 24 when he published his debut, *The Rachel Papers,* in 1974, and has been getting up the noses of the establishment ever since. Meanwhile Ian McEwan debuted with *The Cement Garden* in 1978 and has found critical acclaim with finely observed studies of the English character such as *Enduring Love, Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*. Kazuo Ishiguro penned perhaps the finest tale of English repression, *The Remains of The Day,* which follows the doomed love affair between a butler and his housekeeper.

The nature of multicultural Britain has provided a rich seam for contemporary novelists. Hanif Kurieshi sowed the seeds with his ground-breaking 1990 novel *The Buddha of Suburbia,* which examined the hopes and fears of a group of suburban Anglo-Asians in London. Multicultural themes have informed the work of Andrea Levy, Monica Ali, Hari Kunzru and Zadie Smith, who published her acclaimed debut *White Teeth* when she was 25, and has since followed with a string of literary best sellers, including *The Autograph Man* and *On Beauty*.

Other contemporary writers worth seeking out are Will Self, known for his surreal, satirical novels, including his most recent book, *Liver*, a typically imaginative tale that explores the livers of four London characters in various stages of disease, decay and disintegration; David Mitchell, whose multilayered, time-bending *Cloud Atlas* marked him out as a writer to watch; and Sarah Waters, a gifted novelist who often places lesbian issues at the core of her work, in books including *Tipping the Velvet* and *Night Watch*.

At the more popular end is the best-selling author Nick Hornby, who's carved out a niche chronicling the fragilities and insecurities of the English middle-class male in novels like *Fever Pitch* and *High Fidelity*. Louis de Bernières penned a best-selling tale of wartime love in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin,* but has struggled to match his earlier success, while Sebastian Faulks established himself with his wartime novels *Birdsong* and *Charlotte Gray,* and was recently chosen to write the first new James Bond novel in over 50 years to mark the centenary of Ian Fleming's birth (*Devil May Care* has since become one of the fastest-selling hardbacks ever published, shifting 44,093 copies in its first four days).

Money by Martin Amis is a freewheeling romp through the seedier side of 1980s capitalism, centring on the fat, unscrupulous and (occasionally) filthy rich businessman John Self.

But even James Bond can't hold a candle to the literary phenomenon that is the *Harry Potter* series, the magical adventures that have entertained millions of children (and a fair few adults too) over the last decade. JK Rowling's Potter series is the latest in a long line of English children's classics, stretching back to the works of Lewis Carroll *(Alice's Adventures in Wonderland)*, E Nesbit *(The Railway Children, Five Children and It)*, AA Milne *(Winnie-the-Pooh)*, JRR Tolkien *(The Hobbit)*, TH White *(The Once and Future King)* and CS Lewis *(The Chronicles of Narnia)*, and continued by (Welsh-born but English-schooled) Roald Dahl and most recently Philip Pullman, with his controversial *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

Not all English books are quite so praiseworthy. The recent trend for scurrilous celebrity memoirs – penned by everyone from footballer Wayne Rooney to Tony Blair's wife, Cherie Blair – is a reminder of the increasing importance placed on marketing hype over literary merit in the modern book market. Whatever you make of their literary qualities, it's hard to argue with the figures – the British public buys them by the bucket load.

Cinema

England had a number of successful directors in the early days of cinema. Many famous directors cut their cinematic teeth in the silent-film industry – including Alfred Hitchcock, who directed *Blackmail,* one of the first English 'talkies' in 1929 (marketed as the first British 'all-talkie'), and went on to direct a string of films during the 1930s before migrating to Hollywood in the early 1940s.

Roald Dahl's autobiographical novel *Boy* explores the author's own early childhood, including his eye-wateringly excruciating experiences of English public-school discipline at Repton.

During WWII, British films were dominated by patriotic stories designed to keep up morale on the Home Front: films like *Went the Day Well?* (1942), *In Which We Serve* (1942) and *We Dive at Dawn* (1943) are classics of the genre. The war years also marked the start of one of the great partnerships of British cinema, between the English writer-director Michael Powell and the Hungarian-born scriptwriter Emeric Pressburger. Jointly they produced some of the most enduring British films ever made, including *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1941), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and *The Red Shoes* (1948).

Following the hardships of the war, English audiences were in the mood for escape and entertainment. During the late 1940s and early '50s, the domestic film industry specialised in eccentric English comedies epitomised by the work of Ealing Studios: notable titles include *Whisky Galore!* (1949), *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) and *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953). During this period the precocious young director David Lean directed a series of striking Dickens adaptations and the classic tale of buttoned-up English passion, *Brief Encounter* (1945), before graduating to Hollywood epics including *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*. And in an England still struggling with rationing and food shortages, tales of heroic derring-do such as *The Dam Busters* (1955) and *Reach for The Sky* (1956) helped lighten the national mood.

HAMMER HORROR

The low-budget horror flicks produced by Hammer Film Productions are revered among horror fans across the globe. Founded in 1934, the company was best known for its string of horror flicks produced in the 1950s and '60s, starting with the science-fiction thriller *The Quatermass Xperiment* in 1955 and the landmark Hammer horror *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957). The two stars of the latter – Peter Cushing as Dr Frankenstein and Christopher Lee as the Monster – would feature in many of Hammer's best films over the next 20 years.

Hammer produced some absolute classics of the horror genre, including a string of nine *Dracula* films (most of which star Lee as Dracula and Cushing as Van Helsing or his descendants) and six *Frankenstein* sequels. The studio launched the careers of several other notable actors (including Oliver Reed, who made his film debut in *The Curse of the Werewolf,* 1961) and inspired a legion of low-budget horror directors – Wes Craven, John Carpenter and Sam Raimi have all acknowledged Hammer films as an early influence. The studio even spawned its very own Carry On spoof, *Carry On Screaming* – the ultimate English seal of approval.

Find out all about the history of Hammer at www.hammerfilms.com.

In the late 1950s 'British New Wave' and 'Free Cinema' explored the gritty realities of British life in an intimate, semidocumentary style, borrowing techniques from the 'kitchen-sink' theatre of the '50s and the vérité style of the French New Wave. Lindsay Anderson and Tony Richardson crystallised the movement in films such as *This Sporting Life* (1961) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961). At the other end of the spectrum were the *Carry On* films, the cinematic equivalent of the smutty seaside postcard, packed with bawdy gags and a revolving troupe of actors including Barbara Windsor, Sid James and Kenneth Williams. The 1960s also saw the birth of another classic English hero: James Bond, adapted from the Ian Fleming novels and ironically played by a Scotsman, Sean Connery – the character was later given a Scottish heritage.

After a brief boom during the swinging '60s, English cinema entered troubled waters in the '70s. Dwindling production funds and increasing international competition meant that by the mid-1970s the only films being made in England were financed with foreign cash. Despite the hardships, new directors including Ken Russell, Nic Roeg, Ken Loach and Mike Hodges emerged, and the American director Stanley Kubrick produced some of his films in Britain, including *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).

A survey by the UK Film Council concluded that Britain's film industry contributed £840.1m to the nation's coffers in 2006.

But it wasn't until 1981, when David Puttnam's *Chariots of Fire* scooped four Oscars, that the British industry rediscovered its sense of self. The newly established Channel Four invested in edgy films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), and exciting new talents including Neil Jordan, Mike Newell and American-born (and member of the Monty Python team) Terry Gilliam. Meanwhile, the British producing duo of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory played Hollywood at its own game with epic tales including *Heat and Dust* (1983) and *A Room With A View* (1986), riding on the success of Richard Attenborough's big-budget *Gandhi* (1982), which bagged eight Academy Awards.

The 1990s saw another minor renaissance in English films, ushered in by the massively successful *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), introducing Hugh Grant in his trademark role as a bumbling, self-deprecating Englishman, a character type he reprised in subsequent hits including *Notting Hill, About a Boy* and *Love Actually*. All these films were co-financed by Working Title, a London-based production company which has become one of the big players of British cinema (and also unleashed Rowan Atkinson's hapless Mr Bean onto the global stage).

The British Film Institute (BFI; www.bfi.org.uk) is dedicated to promoting film and cinema in Britain, and publishes the monthly academic journal *Sight & Sound*.

English cinema refocused its attention on domestic issues in the late 1990s. *Brassed Off* (1996) related the trials of a struggling colliery band; the smash-hit *The Full Monty* (1997) followed a troupe of laid-off steel workers turned male strippers; and *Billy Elliott* (2000) charted the story of an aspiring young ballet dancer striving to escape the slag-heaps and boarded-up factories of the industrial north. Films including *East Is East* (1999) and *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) explored the tensions of modern multicultural Britain, while veteran British director Mike Leigh, known for his heavily improvised style, found success with *Life Is Sweet* (1991), *Naked* (1993) and the Palme d'Or winning *Secrets and Lies* (1996), in which an adopted black woman traces her white mother.

So far this decade, literary adaptations have continued to provide the richest seam of success. Following a disappointing big-screen version of the massive-selling *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (2001), more recent literary hits include blockbuster adaptations of the *Bridget Jones* and *Harry Potter* books, as well as 2005's *The Constant Gardener* (based on a John Le Carré novel), and Ang Lee's interpretation of *Sense and Sensibility*, 2007's *The Last King of Scotland* (featuring Forest Whittaker as Ugandan dictator Idi Amin) and *Atonement* (2008), a big-budget adaptation of Ian McEwan's novel.

The Ladykillers (1955) is a classic Ealing comedy about a band of hapless bank robbers holed up in a London guest house, and features Alec Guinness sporting quite possibly the most outrageous set of false teeth ever committed to celluloid.

Biopics are also a perennial favourite: recent big-screen subjects include Ian Curtis from Joy Division (*Control,* 2007), Elizabeth I (*Elizabeth: The Golden Age,* 2007), Dylan Thomas (*The Edge of Love,* 2008) and even the Queen (in, erm, *The Queen,* 2006).

But life remains tough for the British filmmaker, especially those at the low-budget end. Many talented names – including Paul Greengrass, Stephen Daldry, Stephen Frears, Danny Boyle and Andrew Macdonald – often take better-paid work abroad in order to finance their British ventures. Genuinely British films about genuinely British subjects tend to struggle in an over-saturated marketplace: two of Britain's best directors, Shane Meadows (*Dead Man's Shoes, This is England*) and Michael Winterbottom (*9 Songs, 24 Hour Party People*) are both yet to score a big splash at the box office.

But while it's Hollywood money that keeps Britain's three main studios (Pinewood, Shepperton and Elstree) ticking over, Britain's small but dedicated cinematic community soldiers on. The comedy trio of Simon Pegg, Edgar Wright and Nick Frost have had worldwide success with their zombie homage *Shaun of The Dead* (2004) and its cop-flick follow-up, *Hot Fuzz* (2007), while music-video director Garth Jennings followed his adaptation of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (2005) with a low-budget tale of youthful friendship and shoestring moviemaking in *Son of Rambow* (2007).

The UK's biggest film magazine is *Empire* (www.empireonline.co.uk), but for less mainstream opinion check out *Little White Lies* (www.littlewhitelies.co.uk).

Veteran directors like Mike Leigh and Ken Loach are still going strong: Leigh's *Vera Drake* (2004), about a housewife turned backstreet abortionist in 1950s Britain, won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, while Loach's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), a hard-hitting account of the Irish struggle for independence, scooped the Palme d'Or at Cannes. And there still seems to be life in even the oldest of English franchises: a tough, toned 21st-century James Bond appeared in 2006 courtesy of Daniel Craig and the blockbuster *Casino Royale,* followed by 2008's *Quantum of Solace.*

Television

If there's one thing the English excel at, it's the telly. Over the last 80-odd years of broadcasting, England has produced some of the world's finest programming, from classic comedy through to ground-breaking drama;

THE PLASTICINE MAN

One of the great success stories of English television and cinema has been Bristol-based animator Nick Park and the production company Aardman Animations, best known for the award-winning animations starring the man-and-dog duo Wallace and Gromit. This lovable pair first appeared in Park's graduation film, *A Grand Day Out* (1989), and went on to star in *The Wrong Trousers* (1993), *A Close Shave* (1995) and their feature debut, *Wallace & Gromit in The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (2005). Known for their intricate plots, film homages and amazingly realistic animation, the Wallace and Gromit films scooped Nick Park four Oscars. Aardman Animations has also produced two successful animated features, *Chicken Run* (2000) and *Flushed Away* (2006), in partnership with Hollywood's DreamWorks studios.

many of the world's most popular formats have their origins in English broadcasting (including the phenomenon known as reality TV).

The BBC is famous for its news and natural-history programming, symbolised by landmark series such as *Planet Earth* and *The Blue Planet* (helmed by the reassuring presence of David Attenborough, a national institution on British screens since the 1970s). The big-budget costume drama is another Sunday-night staple; British viewers have been treated to adaptations of practically every Dickens, Austen and Thackeray novel in the canon over the last decade. More recently ITV has been making inroads into costume-drama territory, notably with Jane Austen's *Persuasion, Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*. Both channels are also known for their long-running 'soaps' – *Eastenders* (BBC), *Emmerdale* and *Coronation Street* (both ITV), which have collectively been running on British screens for well over a century.

Britain's longest running soap is *Coronation Street*, which has charted everyday life in the fictional northern town of Weatherfield since 1960.

Reality TV has dominated many channels in recent years, although the popularity of shows such as *Big Brother* and *I'm a Celebrity – Get Me Out of Here!* seems to be on the wane. On the flipside, talent and variety are making a big comeback, with programs like *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Britain's Got Talent* being syndicated all over the world. Game shows are another big success story, with *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and *The Weakest Link* spawning countless foreign versions.

BBC2 and Channel 4 tend to produce edgier and more experimental content. Both channels are known for their documentaries – Channel 4 has a particular penchant for shocking subject matter (one of the channel's most controversial recent programs was *Autopsy,* which did exactly what it said on the label). Comedy is another strong point – the satirical news quiz *Have I Got News For You* is still going strong after 15 years, while classic British comedies such as *Monty Python, Steptoe & Son* and *Only Fools & Horses* have more recently been joined in comedy's hall of fame by cult hits *The Mighty Boosh, The League of Gentlemen, I'm Alan Partridge, Ali G, Spaced* and Ricky Gervais' double-whammy, *The Office* and *Extras*.

Music

POP & ROCK

England's been putting the world through its musical paces ever since a mop-haired four-piece from Liverpool tuned up their Rickenbackers and became 'bigger than Jesus', to quote John Lennon.

While some may claim that Elvis invented rock and roll, it was the Fab Four who transformed it into a global phenomenon, backed by The Rolling Stones, The Who, Cream, The Kinks and the other bands of the 'British Invasion'. Glam rock swaggered in to replace peace and love in the early seventies, with Marc Bolan and David Bowie donning spandex and glittery guitars in a variety of

chameleonic guises, succeeded by art-rockers Roxy Music and anthemic popsters Queen and Elton John. Meanwhile Led Zeppelin laid down the blueprint for heavy metal and hard rock, and 1960s psychedelia morphed into the spacey noodlings of prog rock, epitomised by Pink Floyd, Genesis and Yes.

By the late 1970s the prog bands were looking out of touch in an England wracked by rampant unemployment, industrial unrest and the three-day week. Flicking a giant two fingers to the establishment, punk exploded onto the scene in the late '70s, summing up the general air of doom and gloom with nihilistic lyrics and short, sharp, three-chord tunes. The Sex Pistols produced one landmark album (*Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*), a clutch of (mostly banned) singles, and a storm of controversy, ably assisted by other punk pioneers such as The Clash, The Damned, The Buzzcocks and The Stranglers.

While punk burned itself out in a blaze of squealing guitars and earsplitting feedback, New Wave acts including The Jam and Elvis Costello took up the punk torch, blending spiky tunes and sharp lyrics into a poppier, more radio-friendly sound. A little later The Specials, Selecter and baggy-trousered rude boys Madness mixed punk, reggae and ska into Two Tone (a nod to the movement's cross-racial ethos).

The classic English youth movie is *Quadrophenia,* a visceral tale of Mods, Rockers, and pimped-up mopeds, with a top-notch soundtrack courtesy of The Who.

The big money and conspicuous consumption of Thatcherite Britain in the early 1980s bled over into the decade's pop scene. Big hair, shiny suits and shoulder pads became the uniform of New Romantics such as Spandau Ballet, Duran Duran and Culture Club, while the advent of synthesisers and processed beats led to the development of a new electronic sound in the music of Depeche Mode and Human League. But the glitz and glitter of '80s pop concealed a murky underbelly: bands like The Cure, Bauhaus, and Siouxsie and the Banshees were employing doom-laden lyrics and apocalyptically heavy riffs, while the rock heritage of Led Zeppelin inspired the birth of heavy-metal acts such as Iron Maiden, Judas Priest and Black Sabbath. The arch-priests of 'miserabilism', The Smiths – fronted by extravagantly quiffed wordsmith Morrissey – summed up the disaffection of mid-1980s England in classic albums such as *The Queen is Dead* and *Meat is Murder*.

The beats and bleeps of 1980s electronica fuelled the burgeoning dance-music scene of the early '90s. Pioneering artists such as New Order (risen from the ashes of Joy Division) and The Orb used synthesised sounds to inspire the soundtrack for the new, ecstasy-fuelled rave culture, centred on famous clubs like Manchester's Haçienda and London's Ministry of Sound. Subgenres such as trip-hop, drum and bass, jungle, house and big-beat cropped up in other UK cities, with key acts including Massive Attack, Portishead and the Chemical Brothers.

Manchester was also a focus for the burgeoning British 'indie' scene, driven by guitar-based bands such as The Charlatans, The Stone Roses, James, Happy Mondays and Manchester's most famous musical export, Oasis. In the late 1990s indie segued into Britpop, a catch-all term covering several bands including Oasis, Pulp, Supergrass and Blur, whose distinctively British music chimed with the country's new sense of optimism following the landslide election of New Labour in 1997 (Noel and Liam Gallagher were even invited for afternoon tea at Number Ten). But the phenomenon of 'Cool Britannia' was short-lived; by the millennium, most of Britpop's big acts had self-destructed. Damon Albarn later went on to create a new virtual band, Gorillaz, in partnership with cult cartoonist and illustrator Jamie Hewlett.

So where does that leave us in the noughties? In many ways, the era of MySpace, iTunes and file sharing has seen Britain's music scene become more diverse and divided than ever. Jazz, soul, R&B and hip-hop beats have fused into a new 'urban' sound (summed up by artists like Jamelia, The

Streets and Dizzee Rascal), while dance music continues to morph through new forms. On the pop side, singer-songwriters have made a comeback: Katie Mellua, Duffy and self-destructive songstress Amy Winehouse are flying the flag for the female artists, while Damien Rice, Ed Harcourt and ex-soldier James Blunt croon for the boys. The spirit of shoe-gazing British indie is alive and well thanks to Keane, Foals, Editors and world-conquering Coldplay; traces of punk and postpunk survive thanks to Franz Ferdinand, Razorlight, Babyshambles, Muse, Klaxons, Dirty Pretty Things and download phenomenon Arctic Monkeys; and the swagger of the Manchester sound still echoes through the music of Primal Scream, Kaiser Chiefs, Kasabian, Doves and The (reformed) Verve.

And as ever, alternative music continues to push the nation's musical boundaries: names to look out for include British Sea Power, The Ting Tings, Guillemots, Elbow, The Hoosiers and Young Knives, not to mention the most eclectic band at work in Britain today: Radiohead.

Some movies worth checking out to understand England's modern music scene: *Backbeat* (1994), a look at the early days of The Beatles; *Sid and Nancy* (1986), following The Sex Pistols bassist and his American girlfriend; *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), a tawdry glimpse of the glam-rock scene; and *24 Hour Party People* (2002), tracing the Manchester scene.

CLASSICAL MUSIC & OPERA

The country that gave us The Beatles and Oasis is also a hive of classical music, with several professional symphony orchestras, dozens of amateur orchestras and an active National Association of Youth Orchestras. Such enthusiasm is all the more remarkable given England's small number of well-known classical composers, especially compared with Austria, Germany and Italy.

Key figures include Henry Purcell, who flourished in the Restoration period and is still regarded as one of the finest English composers; Thomas Arne, best known for the patriotic anthem 'Rule, Britannia!'; Edward Elgar, famous for his 'Enigma Variations'; Gustav Holst, from Cheltenham, who wrote 'The Planets'; Vaughan Williams, whose 'A London Symphony' ends with chimes from Big Ben; and Benjamin Britten, perhaps the finest English composer of the last century, best known for 'The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra' and the opera *Peter Grimes*. More recently, the works of Sirs Michael Tippett, Peter Maxwell Davies, John Tavener and Harrison Birtwhistle have found international fame, while the music of composer William Lloyd Webber has been brought to public attention by his sons, cellist Julian and composer Andrew.

Best-known of all English classical-music concert programs is The Proms (short for 'promenade' – people used to walk about, or stand, while they listened) – one of the world's greatest music festivals, held from mid-July to mid-September each year at the Royal Albert Hall in London and widely broadcast on radio and TV.

Architecture

With an architectural heritage stretching back for millennia, England's architecture is an obvious highlight. The country's oldest landmarks are the stone circles and megaliths left behind by neolithic (if not older) builders: dolmens, burial mounds and menhirs are dotted from Cornwall to Cumbria, but the most upstanding examples are the iconic stone rings of Stonehenge (p320) and Avebury (p327) in Wiltshire. Newer, but no less dramatic, are the chalk figures gracing many of England's hilltops. Some, such as the Uffington White Horse (p239), date from the Bronze Age, but most are more recent; the formidably endowed Cerne Abbas Giant (p307) is often thought to be an ancient pagan figure, but recent research suggests it was etched sometime in the 17th century.

During the Iron Age, hill forts were built to protect against seaborne raiders and inter-tribal conflict. A famous example is Maiden Castle (p307) in Dorset. Some of the rapists and pillagers even put down roots: York's

fascinating Jorvik (p626) is home to one of Europe's best-preserved Viking settlements.

Roman remains litter many cities, including Chester (p670), Exeter (p373) and St Albans (p263), as well as the lavish Roman holiday complex in Bath (p342). But the nation's most obvious Roman relic is the 73-mile sweep of Hadrian's Wall (p769), built in the 2nd century AD to stop marauding Pictish warriors (from modern Scotland) from plundering England's northern cities.

Once the political scene settled down following the coronation of Alfred I, England saw an explosion of architecture inspired by the two most pressing concerns of the day: worship and defence. Churches, abbeys, monasteries, minsters and feudal castles sprang up during the early Middle Ages, including many landmark cathedrals, such as York Minster (p622), Salisbury (p315) and Canterbury (p177). As for castles, you're spoilt for choice: the nation's strongholds range from the atmospheric ruins of Tintagel (p398) and Dunstanburgh (p780) and the feudal keeps of Lancaster (p692) and Bamburgh (p781) to the fortresses of Warwick (p544), Windsor (p269) and the Tower of London (p122).

London: A Biography by Peter Ackroyd is a fascinating and encyclopaedic overview of how a tiny harbour on the Thames turned into the nation's great metropolis.

While castles were excellent for keeping out the riff-raff, they were too draughty to make comfortable homes. Following the Civil War, the landed gentry developed a taste for fine 'country houses' designed by the most famous architects of the day. These grand country piles litter the English landscape: among the most extravagant are Holkham Hall (p466), Chatsworth House (p525) and Blenheim Palace (p236). All display the proportion, symmetry and architectural harmony so in vogue during the Georgian era over the 18th and 19th centuries, styles reflected in the fashionable houses of the era (most notably in Bath's stunning Royal Crescent, p344).

The Victorian era left perhaps the most enduring mark on the English landscape. Massive 'red-brick' terraces transformed the face of many English cities, built to accommodate the massive influx of workers needed to man the country's factories. Meanwhile the newly moneyed middle classes built street upon street of smart, solid, well-to-do town houses, and engineers embarked on an astonishing range of bridges, stations, museums, railways and public buildings, from the Clifton Suspension Bridge (p333) and the Natural History Museum (p128) to the Houses of Parliament (p116) and St Pancras Station (p130).

Many of the nation's major roads trace the course of old Roman thoroughfares.

The rush to reconstruct the nation's shattered cities after WWII left England with its fair share of postwar carbuncles. Entire terraces were swept away in favour of high-rise tower blocks, while the 'brutalist' architects of the 1950s and '60s fell head over heels for the cheap, efficient materials of steel and concrete, showing scant regard for the aesthetic appeal of the nation's cities. London's Southbank Centre (p164) is a typical example of brutalism; love it or loathe it, it certainly makes a statement.

Still stinging from the architectural misfires of the 1960s and '70s, the modern-day English remain a somewhat conservative bunch in terms of the houses they choose to inhabit. The traditional 'two rooms upstairs, two rooms downstairs' is still the ideal home for many people, and overly ambitious or experimental buildings (especially ones financed with public money) tend to receive rather short shrift. But as ever, the English are a contrary lot, and even the oddest buildings can find a place in their affections. London's Swiss Re building (aka 'the Gherkin') has journeyed from architectural eyesore to local landmark, and the disastrous Millennium Dome (now rebranded as the O2 arena, p132) has been transformed from a source of national embarrassment into one of the capital's leading live-music venues.

The last decade has seen many areas of England place a new importance on progressive, popular architecture as a part of wider regeneration: just

look at Newcastle's Sage Gateshead (p755), Manchester's Imperial War Museum North (p659), Birmingham's Bullring (p540) and Cornwall's futuristic Eden Project (p406). Skyscrapers also seem to be all the rage in many of England's cities: Leeds, Manchester, Brighton and Birmingham have all announced plans for a rash of new 200m-plus buildings, while Liverpool has put forward proposals to reinvent its historic waterfront with over 50 high-rise towers. Top of the heap, however, is the London Bridge Tower (aka 'the Shard'), which, at 306m, is set to become one of Europe's tallest buildings when it's completed in around 2012. And the trend for ecofriendly homes looks set to become an increasingly important part of England's architectural landscape over the coming decades: the government recently announced plans for 10 new 'eco-towns' (designed to showcase environmentally friendly and sustainable construction principles) around England by 2020.

Painting & Sculpture

Until the 18th century, continental Europe – especially Holland, Spain, France and Italy – set the artistic agenda. The first artist with a truly English style and sensibility was arguably William Hogarth, whose riotous (and deeply rude) canvases exposed the vice and corruption of 18th-century London. His most celebrated work is *A Rake's Progress,* displayed today at Sir John Soane's Museum (p121) in London, kick-starting a long tradition of British caricatures that can be traced right through to the work of modern-day cartoonists such as Gerald Scarfe and Steve Bell.

While Hogarth was busy satirising society, other artists were hard at work showing it in its best light. The leading figures of 18th-century English portraiture are Sir Joshua Reynolds; his rival, Thomas Gainsborough; the Cumbrian-born George Romney; and George Stubbs, known for his intricate studies of animal anatomy (particularly horses). Most of these artists are represented at Tate Britain (p117) or the National Gallery (p115).

BANANA is an acronym for 'Build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything (or anyone)' – a sly dig at the average English attitude to town planning.

The English landscape was the main preserve of the 19th-century painters, especially John Constable, whose idyllic depictions of the Suffolk countryside are summed up in *The Haywain* (National Gallery, p115) and JMW Turner, who was fascinated by the effects of light and colour on English scenes. Turner's paintings became almost entirely abstract by the 1840s; though widely vilified, in many ways they were ahead of their time, prefiguring the Impressionist movement of the late 19th century. Meanwhile poet, painter and visionary William Blake occupied a world of his own, mixing fantastical landscapes and mythological scenes with motifs drawn from classical art, religious iconography and English legend.

While Turner was becoming more abstract, the Pre-Raphaelite movement harked back to the figurative style of classical Italian and Flemish art, tying in with the prevailing Victorian taste for English fables, myths and fairy tales. Key members of the movement included Dante Gabriel Rosetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt, all represented at either Tate Britain (p117) or the Victoria & Albert Museum (p128).

The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA; www.ica.org.uk) in London is a great place to find out about the movers and shakers of contemporary British culture.

In the tumultuous 20th century, English art became increasingly experimental. Francis Bacon placed Freudian psychoanalysis on the canvas in his portraits, while pioneering sculptors such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth experimented with natural forms and all kinds of new materials. Some of Moore's work can be seen at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (p601), and Hepworth is forever associated with St Ives (p416). Other artists including Patrick Heron and Terry Frost developed their own version of abstract expressionism, while amateur artist LS Lowry was setting his strange 'matchstick men' among the smokestacks and terraces of northern England.

The mid-1950s and early '60s saw an explosion of English artists who plundered adverts, TV, music and pop culture for inspiration. The new pop-art movement was summed up by young artists such as Bradford-born David Hockney, who used bold colours and simple lines to depict his dachshunds and swimming pools, and Peter Blake, who designed the cut-up collage cover for the Beatles' landmark *Sergeant Pepper* album. The '60s also saw the rise of sculptor Anthony Caro, who held his first ground-breaking exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1963. Creating large abstract works in steel and bronze, he remains one of England's most influential sculptors.

But England had to wait a while for its next big splash. 'Britart' exploded onto the scene (thanks to advertising tycoon Charles Saatchi) through a series of provocative and playful exhibitions in the 1990s. The figureheads of the movement include Damien Hirst, famous for his pickled sharks, enbalmed cows and more recently a diamond-encrusted skull; Tracy Emin, whose work has ranged from confessional videos to a tent entitled *All The People I Have Ever Slept With;* and the Chapman Brothers, known for their deformed child mannequins (often featuring genitalia in inappropriate places).

There's a wealth of fascinating information at your fingertips at the National Archives website (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk), where you can find everything from WWII spy records to celebrity death certificates.

Apart from Hirst, one of the few Britart graduates to find mainstream success is Rachel Whiteread, known for her resin casts of everyday objects. In 2008 she was one of five artists short-listed for the Angel of the South, a £2 million project to create a huge outdoor sculpture near Ebbsfleet in Kent to counterbalance the celebrated *Angel Of The North* (p757) created by Antony Gormley outside Gateshead in 1998. Whiteread's idea for the project was a plaster-cast of a house interior on an artificial hill; other ideas include a stack of 26 giant polyhedrons, a winged disc, a tower of cubes, and a massive horse, proposed by Mark Wallinger, winner of the 2007 Turner Prize. The winning design will be built in 2009.

Gormley is also busy on other projects – a recent major work, *Event Horizon,* placed 31 life-size bodies on top of prominent buildings around London (including Westminster Bridge and the Shell Building). But don't go looking for them – the sculptures were removed in September 2007.

One of England's other artistic exports is Banksy, the Bristol-based graffiti artist famous for his provocative murals and semi-secret identity – check out the boxed text on p335 for more.

Theatre & Dance

The nation's best-known theatrical name is, of course, William Shakespeare, whose plays were first performed in the 16th century, most of them at the Globe Theatre. Ground zero for the national poet is Stratford-upon-Avon (p546), and you can also catch the bard's plays at a replica of the original Globe (see p126) on London's South Bank.

Following the Civil War, the puritanical Oliver Cromwell closed the nation's theatres, but when Charles II returned from exile in 1660 he reopened the doors and encouraged many radical innovations, including actresses (female roles had previously been played by boys). Bawdy Restoration comedies satirised the upper classes and indulged in fabulously lewd jokes (William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* is a prime example). One of the leading actresses of the day, Nell Gwyn, became Charles II's mistress; England's first female playwright, Aphra Benn, also emerged during this period.

English drama entered a sharp decline during the 18th century, mainly due to the rise in operas and burlesque entertainment. It wasn't until the Victorian era that serious drama came back into fashion; during the mid-19th century classical plays competed for space on London's stages with a broad mix of melodramas, comic operas, vaudeville and music hall.

WHAT A PANTOMIME

If any English tradition is guaranteed to bemuse outsiders, it's the pantomime. This over-the-top Christmas spectacle hits stages throughout the land throughout December and January, and traces its roots back to Celtic legends, medieval morality plays and the English music hall. The modern incarnation is usually based on a classic fairy tale and features a mix of saucy dialogue, comedy skits, song-and-dance routines and plenty of custard-pie humour, mixed in with topical gags for the grown-ups. Tradition dictates that the leading 'boy' is played by a woman, and the leading lady, or 'dame', played by a chap. B-list celebrities, struggling actors and soap stars famously make a small fortune hamming it up for the Christmas panto, and there are always a few staple routines that everyone knows and joins in ('Where's that dragon/wizard/pirate/lion?' – 'He's behind you!'). It's cheesy, daft and frequently rather surreal, but guaranteed to be great fun for the family. Oh, no it isn't! Oh, yes it is! Oh, no it isn't..!

The masters of the Victorian stage were Gilbert and Sullivan, who produced a string of comic operas including *HMS Pinafore, The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Mikado*. Of the Victorian and Edwardian dramatists, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw and Noel Coward are the most famous names; Scottish-born JM Barrie also found huge success with his classic children's fairy-tale *Peter Pan,* first performed as a London stage play in 1904.

The theatre soldiered on during the early 20th century, despite increasing competition from the cinema, but it wasn't until the 1950s that a new generation of English playwrights brought theatre back to life with a bang. The 'Angry Young Men', including John Osborne, Joe Orton and Terence Rattigan, railed against the injustices of mid-1950s Britain with a searing and confrontational new style of theatre, while playwright Harold Pinter developed his own unique dramatic voice, full of non sequiturs, pauses and dead ends (not to mention plenty of menace).

Other ground-breaking playwrights – Tom Stoppard *(Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead),* Peter Shaffer *(Amadeus),* Michael Frayn *(Noises Off)* and Alan Ayckbourn *(The Norman Conquests)* – experimented with language and form during the 1960s and '70s, while new directors like Peter Hall and Peter Brook took new risks with dramatic staging. It was also a golden period for stage acting – the staid, declamatory style of performance of the past steadily gave way to a new, edgy realism in the performances of Laurence Olivier and Richard Burton, succeeded by actors such as Antony Sher, Judi Dench, Glenda Jackson and Ian McKellen.

Many of these actors remain big names, although they're perhaps better-known for their appearances in big-budget films across the pond. Other notable English actors – including Ralph Fiennes, Brenda Blethyn, Toby Stephens and Simon Callow – also juggle high-paying Hollywood roles with theatrical appearances on the English stage.

Interestingly, many major Hollywood stars have taken hefty pay cuts to tread the London boards – including Glenn Close, Nicole Kidman, Gwyneth Paltrow, Macaulay Culkin and Christian Slater. Kevin Spacey liked it so much he decided to take over a theatre. Since 2004 he's been in charge at London's Old Vic (p162), producing acclaimed (and sometimes not so acclaimed) productions, most recently Peter Hall's version of *Pygmalion* in 2008. Perhaps the most interesting film-star appearance on the London stage in recent years was Daniel Radcliffe – otherwise known as Harry Potter – who agreed to strip off in a recent production of Peter Shaffer's *Equus*.

Another notable to look out for in current English theatre is playwright Mark Ravenhill, who made his name with the provocatively titled

Withnail and I is one of the great cult British comedies. Directed by Bruce Robinson, it stars Paul McGann and Richard E Grant as a pair of hapless out-of-work actors on a disastrous holiday to Wales.

debut *Shopping and Fucking,* and has since penned a series of challenging productions, including a collection of 17 short plays about war, entitled *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat.* The controversial young female directors Katie Mitchell and Emma Rice are also names to watch. A storm of controversy broke out in 2007 when Rice's production of *A Matter of Life and Death* was panned by (mostly male) broadsheet critics, prompting the director of the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner, to dub them 'dead white males'. Hytner had better luck with his own award-winning staging of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys.*

But if it's controversy you're looking for, you won't find it in the West End. London's theatreland is mostly the preserve of classic plays and big musicals (including *Mary Poppins, The Sound of Music* and all the Lloyd Webber canon). If you're after new or experimental work, you'll be better served at the capital's smaller theatres like the Donmar Warehouse (p162), the Battersea Arts Centre (p162) or the Royal Court (p162).

England also has a well-deserved reputation for cutting-edge dance. Major national companies – including the English National Ballet, the Royal Ballet and Rambert – produce top-quality productions, while leading names in the world of contemporary dance include DV8, CandoCo, Vincent Dance Theatre, Ballet Lorent, Protein Dance, the Ballet Boyz and the Richard Alston Dance Company, plus ground-breaking choreographers Michael Clark, Jasmin Vardimon, Lea Anderson and Matthew Bourne (best-known for his version of *Swan Lake* featuring all-male swans).

Food & Drink

Once upon a time, English food was highly regarded. In the later medieval period and 17th century, many people – especially the wealthy – ate a varied diet. Then along came the Industrial Revolution, with mass migration from the country to the city, and food quality took a nosedive – a legacy that means there's still no English equivalent for the phrase *bon appétit*.

But today the tide has turned once again. In 2005, food bible *Gourmet* magazine famously singled out London as having the best collection of restaurants in the world, and in the years since then the choice for food lovers – whatever their budget – has continued to improve, so it's now easy to find decent food in other cities, as well as country areas across England.

Queen Elizabeth I reputedly had the kitchen at Hampton Court Palace moved because the smell of cooking food drifted into her bedroom and spoilt her clothes.

Having said that, a post-industrial culinary heritage of ready-sliced white bread, fatty meats and vegetables boiled to death, all washed down by tea with four sugars, remains firmly in place in many parts of the country. But wherever you travel, for each greasy spoon or fast-food joint, there's a local pub or restaurant serving up enticing home-grown specialities. Epicures can splash out big bucks on fine dining, while more impecunious visitors can enjoy tasty eating in England that definitely won't break the bank.

The infamous outbreaks of 'mad cow' disease in the late 1990s and foot-and-mouth disease in 2001 are history now, and British beef is once again exported to the world. An upside of the bad press was a massive surge in demand for organic food, and there's now a plethora of natural, unadulterated, chemical-free products available from producers or in shops, markets, cafes and restaurants across the country.

For locals and visitors, organic food usually means better food, but there are some anomalies: it seems impossible to buy English apples in some supermarkets during the autumn cropping season, although you can chose between 10 different varieties imported from New Zealand, Chile or South Africa.

According to leading organic-food campaign group the Soil Association (www.soilassociation.org), more than 85% of people in Britain want pesticide-free food. For more info, see www.whyorganic.org.

Alongside the greater awareness of food's quality and provenance, there have been other changes to English food thanks to outside influences. For decades most towns have boasted Chinese and Indian restaurants, so a vindaloo or a chow mein is no longer considered 'exotic'; in fact, curry is the most popular takeaway food, outstripping even fish and chips.

As well as the food available in Indian restaurants (which in many cases are actually owned, run and staffed by Pakistanis or Bangladeshis), dishes from Japan, Korea, Thailand and other countries east of Suez have become available in more recent times too. From the other side of the world, there's been a growth in restaurants serving up South American, African or Caribbean cuisine. Closer to home, pasta, pizza and a wide range of Mediterranean dishes – from countries as diverse as Morocco and Greece – are commonplace, not only in smarter restaurants but also in everyday eateries.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

All restaurants and cafes in England are non-smoking throughout. Virtually all pubs have the same rule, which is why there's often a small crowd of smokers standing on the pavement outside. Some pubs provide specific outdoor smoking areas, ranging from a simple yard to elaborate gazebos with canvas walls and the full complement of lighting, heating, piped music and TV screens – where you'd never need to know you were 'outside' at all, apart from the pungent clouds of burning tobacco.

The overall effect of these foreign influences has been the introduction to 'traditional' English cuisine of new techniques (eg steaming), new condiments (eg chilli or soy sauce), new implements (eg woks) and even revolutionary ingredients (eg crisp, fresh vegetables). So now we have 'modern British cuisine', where even humble bangers and mash rise to new heights when handmade pork, apple and thyme-flavoured sausages are paired with lightly chopped fennel and new potatoes, and 'fusion' dishes where native ingredients get new flavours from adding, for example, Oriental spices. Perhaps the best example of fusion cuisine is chicken tikka masala, the UK's favourite 'Indian' dish created specifically for the British palate and unheard of in India itself.

But beware the hype. While some restaurants in England experiment with new ideas and are undeniably excellent, others are not. Only a few months after *Gourmet* magazine called the capital 'the best place in the world to eat right now,' one of the country's most respected food critics, the *Evening Standard*'s Fay Maschler, decried the domination of style over substance, and accused several top eateries of offering poor value for money. As any food fan will tell you, rather than forking out £30 in a restaurant for a 'modern European' concoction that tastes as though it came from a can, you're often better off spending £5 on a top-notch curry in Bradford or a homemade steak-and-ale pie in a country pub in Devon.

Rick Stein is a TV chef, energetic restaurateur and good-food evangelist. His *Food Heroes* and *Food Heroes – Another Helping* books extol small-scale producers and top-notch local food, from organic veg to wild boar sausages.

A pub? Yes. Not so many years ago your choice would be a ham or cheese roll, with pickled onions if you were lucky, but today many foreign visitors to England are surprised to learn that pub food is often a good-value option, whether you want a toasted sandwich or a three-course meal. Many pubs have upped the food quality to such a degree that a whole new genre of eatery – the gastropub – was born.

While some gastropubs have become almost restaurants in style (with formal decor, neat menus and uniformed table service) others have gone for a more relaxed atmosphere where you'll find mismatched cutlery, no tablecloths, waiters in T-shirts, and today's choices chalked up on a blackboard. And in true pub style, you order and pay at the bar, just as you do for your drinks. For visitors relaxing after a hard day doing the sights, nothing beats the luxury of a wholesome shepherd's pie washed down with a decent ale without the worry of guessing which fork to use.

Of course, there's more to food than eating out. The lavishly illustrated food sections in weekend newspapers and the bookshop shelves groaning under the weight of countless new cookery books all indicate that food is now officially fashionable. Feeding on this is the current phenomenon of so-called 'celebrity chefs', including Hugh Fernley-Whittingstall, who famously scored a £2 million deal with his publishers in early 2006, and Gordon Ramsay who featured in a list of Britain's richest self-made entrepreneurs a few months later. They are not alone; every night on a TV channel near you a star of the kitchen demonstrates imaginative and simple techniques for producing stylish, tasty and healthy food.

Like meat, but not battery pens? Go to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (www.rspca.org.uk) and follow links to Freedom Food.

There's change afoot in the shops too. Supermarkets still dominate – four companies (Asda Wal-Mart, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco) account for around 80% of all grocery shopping – squeezing suppliers to sell at ever-lower prices, while forcing out old-fashioned butchers and bakers from high streets and neighbourhoods – but they're selling more organic food than ever before, and new labels show just how much fat, salt and sugar the foodstuffs contain.

Alongside these changes at the multiples there's an increase in the number of independent stores selling high-quality food, while the relatively new phenomenon of farmers markets create an opportunity for food producers to sell high-quality, locally sourced meat, veg, fruit, eggs, honey and so on direct to

THE PIG, THE WHOLE SHEEP & NOTHING BUT THE COW

One of the many trends enjoyed by modern British cuisine is the revival of 'nose to tail' cooking – that is, using the whole animal, not just the more obvious cuts such as chops and fillet steaks. This does not mean boiling or grilling a pig or sheep all in one go – although spit-roasts are popular. It means utilising the parts that may at first seem unappetising or, frankly, inedible. So as well as dishes involving liver, heart, chitterlings (intestines) and other offal, traditional delights such as bone marrow on toast or tripe (stomach) and onions once again grace the menus of fashionable restaurants. The movement is particularly spearheaded by chef Fergus Henderson at his St John restaurant in London (p154), and via his influential recipe book *Nose to Tail Eating: A Kind of British Cooking* and 2007's follow-up *Beyond Nose To Tail*.

the public. And not just in country towns where you might expect to see them, but in cities too: there's around 20 farmers markets in London alone.

But behind the scenes, and despite the growing availability of good food in shops, markets, pubs and restaurants, many English folk still have an odd attitude to eating at home. They love to sit on the sofa and *watch* TV food shows. Then, inspired, they rush out and buy all the TV-tie-in recipe books. Then on the way back, they pop into the supermarket and buy a stack of ready-made meals. Homemade food sounds great in theory, but in reality the recipe for dinner is more likely to be something like this: open freezer, take out package, bung in microwave, ping, eat.

For tasty details on the whereabouts of farmers markets see www.farmersmarkets.net.

In fact, more junk food and ready-made meals are consumed in the UK than in all the rest of the countries of Europe put together. So it's no surprise that the English are getting increasingly heavy, with over 60% of the adult population overweight and almost 25% obese. But despite the vast intakes, average nutrition rates are lower now than they were during 1950s post-war rationing.

So in summary, yes, as a local or a visitor you can definitely find great food in England. It's just that not all the English seem to like eating it.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Although grazing on a steady supply of snacks is increasingly commonplace, the English culinary day is still punctuated by the three main meals of breakfast, lunch and dinner, also called – depending on social class and location – breakfast, dinner and tea.

Breakfast

Although most working people make do with toast or a bowl of cereal before dashing to the office or factory, visitors staying in B&Bs will undoubtedly encounter a phenomenon called the 'Full English Breakfast'. This usually consists of bacon, sausages, eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, baked beans and fried bread. In northern England (if you're really lucky) you may get black pudding – see Regional Specialties, following. And just in case you thought this insufficient, it's still preceded by cereal, and followed by toast and marmalade.

If you don't feel like eating half a farmyard first thing in the morning it's OK to ask for just the egg and tomatoes, for example, while some B&Bs offer other alternatives such as kippers (smoked fish) or a 'continental breakfast' – which completely omits the cooked stuff and may even add something exotic such as croissants.

Lunch

One of the many great inventions that England gave the world is the sandwich. The word originates from Sandwich, a town in southeast England

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

It's official, vegetarians are no longer weird. Many restaurants and pubs in England have at least one token vegetarian dish (another meat-free lasagne, anyone?), but better places offer much more imaginative choices. Vegans will find the going more tricky, except of course at dedicated vegie/vegan restaurants – and where possible we recommend good options throughout this book. For more ideas see www.happycow.com.

(p186). Slapping a slice of cheese or ham between two bits of bread may seem a simple concept, but no one apparently thought of it until the 18th century when the earl of Sandwich ordered his servants to bring cold meat between bread so he could keep working at his desk or, as some historians claim, keep playing cards late at night. Of course, he didn't really invent the idea – various cultures around the world had been doing it for millennia – but the name stuck and sandwiches became fashionable food for the aristocracy. Their popularity grew among the lower classes in the early days of the Industrial Revolution: labourers heading for mines and factories needed a handy way to carry their midday meal to work.

A favourite sandwich ingredient is Marmite, a dark and pungent yeast extract that generations of English kids have loved or hated. Either way, it's a passion that continues through adulthood. In 2006, when the manufacturer of Marmite moved from selling the stuff in a near-spherical glass jar to a (much more practical) plastic tube, much was the consternation across the land. Similar to the Australian icon, Vegemite (but not the same – oh no, sir!), it's also popular on toast at breakfast and especially great for late-night munchies.

Another English classic that perhaps epitomises English food more than any other – especially in pubs – is the ploughman's lunch. Basically it's bread and cheese, and although hearty yokels probably did carry such food to the fields (no doubt wrapped in a red spotted handkerchief) over many centuries, the meal is actually a modern phenomenon. It was invented in the 1960s by the marketing chief of the national cheese-makers' organisation as a way to boost consumption, neatly cashing in on public nostalgia and fondness for tradition – even if it was fake.

You can still find a basic ploughman's lunch offered in some pubs – and it undeniably goes well with a pint or two of local ale at lunchtime – but these days the meal has usually been smartened up to include butter, salad, pickle, pickled onion and dressings. At some pubs you get a selection of cheeses. You'll also find other variations, such as a farmer's lunch (bread and chicken), stockman's lunch (bread and ham), Frenchman's lunch (brie and baguette) and fisherman's lunch (you guessed it, with fish).

Dinner

For generations, a typical English dinner has been 'meat and two veg'. Dressed up as 'evening meal' or dressed down as 'cooked tea', there was little variation: the meat would be pork, beef or lamb, one of the veg would be potatoes and the other would inevitably be carrots, cabbage or cauliflower – just as inevitably cooked long and hard. Although tastes and diets are changing, this classic combination still graces the tables of many English families several times a week.

Traditionally, the beef is roasted beef (that's why the French call the English 'les rosbif'), although meat consumption – and British farming – took a dive in 2000 and 2001 following the outbreak of mad-cow and foot-and-mouth disease. These events were still most notoriously recalled in

NAME THAT PASTY

A favourite in southwest England is the Cornish pasty – originally a mix of cooked vegetables wrapped in pastry – now available everywhere in England, and often including meat varieties (much to the chagrin of the Cornish people). Invented long before Tupperware, the pasty was an all-in-one-lunch pack that tin miners carried underground and left on a ledge ready for mealtime. So pasties weren't mixed up, they were marked with their owners' initials – always at one end, so the miner could eat half and safely leave the rest to snack on later without it mistakenly disappearing into the mouth of a workmate. Before going back to the surface, the miners traditionally left the last few crumbs of the pasty as a gift for the spirits of the mine, known as 'knockers', to ensure a safe shift the next day.

2005 by France's President Jacques Chirac; joking with fellow leaders at an international conference, he quipped about the British, 'The only thing they have done for European agriculture is mad cow.' But despite Mr Chirac's derogatory comments, good-quality roasts from well-reared cattle grace menus once again.

And with the beef – especially at Sunday lunches – comes Yorkshire pudding. It's simply roast batter, but very tasty when properly cooked. Another classic English dish brings Yorkshire pudding and sausages together, with the delightful name of toad-in-the-hole.

In Yorkshire, the eponymous pudding is traditionally a *starter*, a reminder of days when food was scarce and the pudding was a pre-meal stomach-filler.

Yorkshire pudding also turns up at dinner in another guise, especially in pubs and cafes in northern England, where menus may offer a big bowl-shaped Yorkshire pudding filled with meat stew, beans or vegetables. You can even find Yorkshire puddings filled with curry – a favourite multicultural crossover that says something about English society today.

But perhaps the best-known classic English meal is fish and chips, often bought from the 'chippie' as a takeaway wrapped in paper to enjoy at home – especially popular with families on a Friday night. Later in the evening, epicures may order their fish and chips 'open' to eat immediately while walking back from the pub. For visitors, English fish and chips can be an acquired taste. Sometimes the chips can be limp and soggy, and fish can be greasy and tasteless, especially once you get away from the sea, but in towns with salt in the air this classic deep-fried delight is always worth trying.

Regional Specialities

If fish is your thing, Yorkshire's coastal resorts are particularly famous for huge servings of cod – despite it becoming an endangered species, thanks to overfishing – while restaurants in Devon and Cornwall regularly conjure up prawns, lobster, oysters, mussels and scallops. Seafood you may encounter elsewhere on your travels includes Norfolk crab, Northumberland kippers, and jellied eels in London.

Meat-based treats in northern and central England include Cumberland sausage – a tasty mix of minced pork and herbs, so large it has to be spiralled to fit on your plate – and Melton Mowbray pork pies (motto: 'gracious goodness for over 100 years') – cooked ham compressed in a casing of pastry and always eaten cold, ideally with pickle. A legal victory in 2005 ensured that only pies made in the eponymous Midlands town could carry the Melton Mowbray moniker – in the same way that fizzy wine from other regions can't be called Champagne.

Another English speciality that enjoys the same protection is Stilton – a strong white cheese, either plain or in a blue vein variety. Only five dairies all of England – four in the Vale of Belvoir, and one in Derbyshire – are allowed to produce cheese with this name. Bizarrely, the cheese cannot be

SNACK BOX

Despite promotion, and general awareness, of the need for a healthy diet, items such as biscuits, chocolate and crisps still form a large part of the average English person's daily intake – as a stroll down the aisles in any supermarket will immediately show.

Among biscuits, 'international' favourites include bourbons and garibaldis, while home-grown iconic styles and brands include chocolate 'digestives' (a name originating from early advertising campaigns that claimed the biscuits had antacid properties) and HobNobs (famously lauded by comedian Peter Kay as 'the Marines of the biscuit world' because they don't fall apart when immersed – that is, when you dunk (dip) them in a cup of tea).

Moving onto chocolate bars, long-standing favourites include the well-known global brands such as the Mars Bar, KitKat, Twix and Snickers (in the UK still remembered fondly as the Marathon by anyone over 30). A firm favourite of the 1980s and 90s, the Wispa bar, was discontinued in 2003 but made a comeback in 2007 after a surprisingly well-supported 'Bring Back Wispa' internet campaign.

And then there are crisps – the thin fried slices of potato eaten cold from a packet, known to most other parts of the world as 'chips'. (But not in Britain, where chips are chunks of potato deep fried and eaten hot – often with fish – known elsewhere as 'fries'.) The main brands of crisp are Walkers, Golden Wonder and McCoy's, and the main flavours are ready salted, cheese and onion, and salt and vinegar. Others include smoky bacon, prawn cocktail and roast chicken. Kettle Chips are marketed as a more upmarket brand, with flavours such as sea salt and balsamic vinegar, and sour cream and chive.

Until the 1980s most British crisp manufacturers used the same colour packaging for the same flavours (ready salted was in a blue packet, cheese & onion in green, and so on). Then Walkers took the revolutionary step of packaging cheese & onion in blue, salt & vinegar in green and ready salted in red. The confusion was great, and the public controversy even greater, but the end result – bizarrely – was a massive gain in market share for Walkers, and the near disappearance of Golden Wonder. A concurrent series of clever – and occasionally controversial – TV adverts featuring footballer Gary Lineker helped a lot too.

Naturally, Walkers kept their colour scheme but many years later so-called 'instinctive' crisp buyers still get home from the shop with a flavour they weren't expecting.

made in the village of Stilton in Cambridgeshire, although this is where it was first sold – hence the name.

Perhaps less appealing is black pudding, effectively a large sausage made from ground meat, offal, fat and blood, and traditionally served for breakfast. It's known in other countries as 'blood sausage', but the English version has a high content of oatmeal so that it doesn't fall apart in the pan when fried.

Puddings

After the main course comes dessert or 'pudding'. A speciality is rhubarb, the juicy stem of a large-leafed garden plant, best eaten in a 'crumble' – fruit with a crunchy flour, butter and sugar topping – and served with custard or ice cream. For much of the 20th century, rhubarb was a very popular food, with overnight trains dubbed the 'rhubarb express' bringing tonnes of the stuff to London and the cities of the south from the main growing area in Yorkshire, between the towns of Leeds, Wakefield and Morely, known – inevitably – as the 'rhubarb triangle'. It fell out of fashion around the 1980s but is currently enjoying a renaissance in gourmet restaurants as well as humble kitchens.

Moving onto another sweet option, Bakewell pudding blundered into the recipe books around 1860 when a cook at the Rutland Arms Hotel in the Derbyshire town of Bakewell was making a strawberry tart, but mistakenly (some stories say drunkenly) spread the egg mixture on top of the jam instead of stirring it into the pastry. Especially in northern England, the

Bakewell pudding (pudding, mark you, not 'Bakewell tart' as it's sometimes erroneously called) features regularly on local dessert menus and is certainly worth sampling.

Other favourite English dishes from the same stable include sherry trifle (a classic from the same era – the 1970s – that gave us cheese cubes and tinned pineapple chunks on cocktail sticks), treacle sponge and bread-and-butter pudding. While key ingredients of most puddings are self-explanatory, they are perhaps not for another well-loved favourite, spotted dick, a suet pudding with currants. Plus sugar, of course. Most English puddings have loads of butter or sugar, preferably both. Light, subtle and healthy? Not on your life.

Then there's plum pudding, a dome-shaped cake with fruit, nuts and brandy or rum, traditionally eaten at Christmas, when it's called – surprise, surprise – Christmas pudding. This pudding is steamed (rather than baked), cut into slices, and served with brandy butter. It's eaten after the traditional Christmas lunch of roast turkey and brussels sprouts, and shortly before the traditional sleep on the sofa when the annual Queen's speech airs on TV. Watch out for coins inserted in the pudding by superstitious cooks – if you bite one it means good luck for the next year, but it may play havoc with your fillings.

And to polish of our tour de table, staying with the sweet stuff, a reminder that the international favourite banoffee pie (a delightfully sticky dessert made from bananas and toffee) is also an English invention, first developed in a pub in Sussex in southern England in the early 1970s. A plaque on the wall of the pub proudly commemorates this landmark culinary event.

DRINKS

Alcoholic

Among alcoholic drinks, England is probably best known for its beer. Typically ranging from dark brown to bright orange in colour, and generally served at room temperature, technically it's called ale and is more commonly called 'bitter'. This is to distinguish it from lager – the drink that most of the rest of the word calls 'beer' – which is generally yellow and served cold.

Well-known international brands such as Fosters, Carling and Budweiser are all available in England, but as you travel around the country, you should definitely try some native traditional beer, also known as real ale. But be ready! If you're used to the 'amber nectar' or 'king of beers', a local English brew may come as a shock – a warm, flat and expensive shock. This is partly to do with England's climate, and partly to do with the beer being served by hand pump rather than gas pressure. Most important, though, is the integral flavour: traditional English beer doesn't *need* to be chilled or

The Campaign for Real Ale promotes the understanding of traditional British beer. Look for endorsement stickers on pub windows, and for more info see www.camra.org.uk.

CLASSIC BREWS

For keen students of real ale, classic brewery names to look out for – and their beers to sample – as you travel around England include: Adnams (eastern England), Arkell's (south, southwest), Black Sheep (north), Fuller's (southeast), Greene King (eastern, central, south), Hardys & Hansons (central), Hook Norton (south, midlands), Jennings (northwest), Marston's (south, central, north), St Austell (west), Shepherd Neame (southeast), Timothy Taylor (north) and Wadworth (west). For more ideas, tipplers' favourite tomes include the annual *Good Beer Guide to Great Britain,* produced by the Campaign for Real Ale, which steers you to the best beers and the pubs that serve them, and the *Good Pub Guide,* which details thousands of fine establishments across the country. Look out too for the wonderful *300 Beers to Try Before you Die* by Roger Protz; unashamedly jumping on the current trend for lists, this homage to British beers (and a few from other countries) is educational and jolly good fun.

fizzed to make it palatable. In contrast, sample a pint of lager that's sat in its glass for an hour and you'll see it has very little actual taste.

Another key feature is that real ale must be looked after, usually meaning a willingness on the part of the pub manager or landlord to put in extra effort – often translating into extra effort on food, atmosphere, cleanliness and so on too. But the extra effort is why many pubs don't serve real ale, so beware of places where bar staff give the barrels as much care and attention as they give the condom machine in the toilets. There's honestly nothing worse than a bad pint of real ale.

If beer doesn't tickle your palate, try cider – available in sweet and dry varieties. In western parts of England, notably Herefordshire and the southwestern counties such as Devon and Somerset, you could try 'scrumpy', a very strong dry cider traditionally made from local apples. Many pubs serve it straight from the barrel.

On hot summer days, you could go for shandy – beer and lemonade mixed in equal quantities. You'll usually need to specify 'lager shandy' or 'bitter shandy'. It may seem an astonishing combination for outsiders, but it's very refreshing and of course not very strong. Another hybrid is 'snakebite', an equal mix of cider and lager, favoured by students as it's a cost-efficient way to get drunk – thanks to the lager's bubbles and the cider's strength – the very reason some pubs refuse to serve it.

Back to more sensible tipples, many visitors are surprised to learn that wine is produced in England, and has been since the time of the Romans. Today, more than 400 vineyards and wineries produce around two million bottles a year – many highly regarded and frequently winning major awards. English white sparkling wines have been a particular success story recently, many produced in the southeast of the country where the chalky soil and climatic conditions are similar to those of the Champagne region in France. At the 2005 International Wine and Spirit Competition, a wine called Ridgeview Marret Bloomsbury from the Ditchling Vineyard in East Sussex beat entrants from 55 other countries to win the accolade 'best sparkling wine in the world'. For more see p192.

Nonalcoholic

In England, a drink means any ingestible liquid, so if you're from overseas and a local asks 'would you like a drink?', don't automatically expect a gin and tonic. They may well mean a 'cuppa' – a cup of tea – England's best-known beverage. Tea is sometimes billed as the national drink, although coffee is equally popular these days; the Brits consume 165 million cups a day and the British coffee market is worth almost £700 million a year – but with the

THE OLDEST PUB IN ENGLAND?

Many drinkers are often surprised to learn that the word 'pub', short for 'public house', although apparently steeped in history, dates only from the 19th century. But places selling beer have been around for much longer, and the 'oldest pub in England' is a hotly contested title.

One of the country's oldest pubs, with the paperwork to prove it, is Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem in Nottingham (p504), which was serving ale to departing crusaders in the 12th century.

Other contenders sniff that Ye Trip is a mere newcomer. A fine old hotel called the Eagle & Child in Stow-on-the-Wold (Gloucestershire, p247) claims to have been selling beer since around AD 950, while another pub called Ye Olde Fighting Cocks in St Albans (Hertfordshire, p265) apparently dates back to the 8th century – although the 13th is more likely.

But then back comes Ye Olde Trip with a counter-claim: one of its bars is a cave hollowed out of living rock, and that's more than a million years old.

prices some coffee shops charge, maybe that's not surprising. And a final word of warning – when you're ordering a coffee and the server says 'white or black', don't panic. It simply means 'do you want milk in it?'

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's a huge choice of places to eat in England, and this section outlines just some of your options. For details on opening times, see p793. The tricky issue of tipping is covered on p798, while some pointers on restaurants' attitudes to kids are on p793.

Picnics & Self-catering

When shopping for food, as well as the more obvious chain stores and corner shops, markets can be a great place for bargains – everything from dented tins of tomatoes for 1p to home-baked cakes and organic goat's cheese. Farmers markets, mentioned earlier in this section, are always worth a browse; they're a great way for producers to sell good food direct to consumers, with both sides avoiding the grip of the supermarkets.

Cafes & Teashops

Since the major coffee-shop chains arrived in Britain in the 1990s, around 80% of local cafes have closed.

The traditional English cafe is nothing like its continental European namesake. For a start, asking for a brandy with your coffee may cause confusion, as most cafes in England don't serve alcohol. Most cafes are simply basic places serving simple meals suchs meat pie, beans on toast, baked potato or omelette with chips (costing around £3 to £4) and stuff like sandwiches, cakes and other snacks (£1 to £2). Quality varies enormously: some cafes definitely earn their 'greasy spoon' handle, while others are neat and clean.

Smarter cafes are called teashops, and you might pay a bit more for extras like twee decor and table service. Teashops are your best bet for sampling a 'cream tea' – a plate of scones, clotted cream and jam, served with a pot of tea. This is known as a Devonshire tea in some other English-speaking countries, but not in England (except of course in the county of Devon, where Devonshire cream tea is a well-known – and much-hyped – local speciality).

Eggs, Bacon, Chips & Beans by Russell Davies showcases 50 of the UK's finest traditional cafes, with tongue-in-cheek taster's notes on their various versions of the traditional fry-up. The conversation continues at http://russelldavies.typepad.com.

In country areas, many market towns and villages have cafes catering for tourists, walkers, cyclists and other outdoor types, and in summer they're open every day. Good cafes are a wonderful institution and always worth a stop during your travels.

As well as the traditional establishments, in most cities and towns you'll also find American-flavoured coffee shops – the inevitable Starbucks on every corner – and Euro-style cafe-bars, serving decent lattes and espressos, and offering bagels or ciabattas rather than beans on toast (you'll probably be able to get that brandy, too). Some of these modern places even have outdoor chairs and tables – rather brave considering the narrow pavements and inclement weather much of England enjoys.

Restaurants

London has scores of excellent restaurants that could hold their own in major cities worldwide, while places in Bath, Leeds and Manchester can give

EATING INTO THE FINANCES

Most of the Eating sections in the chapters throughout this book are divided into three price bands: budget (up to £8 per person for a main course with a drink), midrange (£8 to £16) and top end (over £16). For more guidance, see Costs on p20.

EARLY DOORS, LATE NIGHTS

Pubs in towns and country areas usually open daily, from 11am to 11pm Sunday to Thursday, sometimes to midnight or 1am Friday and Saturday. Most open all day, although some may shut from 3pm to 6pm. Throughout this book, we don't list pub opening and closing times unless they vary significantly from these hours.

In cities, some pubs open until midnight or later, but it's mostly bars and clubs that take advantage of new licensing laws ('the provision of late-night refreshment', as it's officially and charmingly called) to stay open to 1am, 2am or later. As every place is different, we list opening hours for all bars and clubs.

the capital a fair run for its money (actually, often for rather less money). We've taken great pleasure in seeking out some of the best and best-value restaurants in England, and have recommended a small selection throughout this book.

Prices vary considerably across the country, with a main course in a straightforward restaurant costing around £7 to £10 and rising to £15 or £20 at good-quality places. Utterly excellent food, service and surroundings can be enjoyed for £30 to £50 per person – although in London you can, if you want, pay double this.

Pubs & Bars

The difference between pubs and bars is sometimes vague, but generally bars are smarter, larger and louder than pubs, with a younger crowd. Drinks are more expensive too, unless there's a gallon-of-vodka-and-Red-Bull-for-a-fiver promotion – which there often is.

As well as beer, cider, wine and the other drinks mentioned earlier in this chapter, pubs and bars offer the usual choice of spirits, often served with a 'mixer', producing English favourites such as gin and tonic, rum and coke or vodka and lime. These drinks are served in measures called singles and doubles. A single is 35ml – just over one US fluid ounce. A double is of course 70ml – still disappointingly small when compared to measures in other countries. To add further to your disappointment, the vast array of cocktail options, as found in America, is generally restricted to more upmarket city bars in England.

And while we're serving out warnings, here are two more: First, if you see a pub calling itself a 'free house', it's simply a place that doesn't belong to a brewery or pub company, and thus is 'free' to sell any brand of beer. Unfortunately, it doesn't mean the beer is free of charge. Second, remember that drinks in English pubs are ordered and paid for at the bar. If the pub serves food, that's usually ordered and paid for at the bar as well. You can always spot the out-of-towners – they're the ones sitting forlornly at a empty table hoping to spot a waiter.

When it comes to gratuities, it's not usual to tip pub and bar staff, as it is, say, in America. However, if you're ordering a large round, or the service has been good all evening, you can say to the person behind the bar 'and one for yourself'. They may not have a drink, but they'll add the monetary equivalent to the total you pay and keep it as a tip.

Apart from good service, what makes a good pub? It's often surprisingly hard to pin down, but in our opinion the best pubs follow a remarkably simple formula: they offer a welcoming atmosphere, pleasant surroundings and, in villages where pubs have been the centre of the community for centuries, they often offer a sense of history (see the boxed text, p80). The best pubs also offer a good range of hand-pulled beer and a good menu of

ENGLAND'S TOP PICKS

Looking for something special? Here's our highly subjective selection of English eateries, ranging from temples of gastronomy to humble-but-excellent pubs, with other parameters – such as the finest food (obviously), the friendliest staff or simply the best view – thrown in for good measure.

Restaurant	Location	Go for…	Page
5 North St	Winchcombe	friendly service, good atmosphere, great food	p246
Al Frash	Birmingham	no frills decor and hearty balti	p538
Terre á Terre	Brighton	inventive, robust vegetarian fare, for vegetarians and carnivores alike	p209
Blake's Coffee House	Newcastle-upon-Tyne	Sunday morning cures all week long	p754
Bordeaux Quay	Bristol	high quality dishes, low food miles	p338
Cap'n Jaspers	Plymouth	funky feel of a local institution	p386
Daffodil	Cheltenham	modern food in a converted art-deco cinema	p258
Demuth's	Bath	fabulous, imaginative vegetarian cuisine	p349
Drunken Duck	Hawkshead	first-class Cumbrian cooking	p718
Engineer	London	gastropub eating with a hip vibe	p158
Fifteen	London	a touch of fame and a wide range of price options	p155
Lighthouse	Aldeburgh	welcoming atmosphere and top-notch international dining	p454
Magpie Cafe	Whitby	fantastic fish and chips (but crowds to match)	p649
Midsummer House	Cambridge	excellent French Mediterranean cuisine in a Victorian setting	p436
Modern	Manchester	amazing city views with food to match	p664
Mr Underhill's	Ludlow	Michelin-starred modern British menu	p583
Oldfields	Durham	seasonal menus featuring local and organic ingredients	p762
Olive Branch	Rutland	county pub vibe with dining that exceeds expectations	p490
Riverford Field Kitchen	Totnes	organic lunch including a tour of the farm	p382
Teza Indian Canteen	Carlisle	21st-century Indian cuisine	p740
Wheeler's Oyster Bar	Whitstable	fine seafood in historic surroundings	p183
Stone Trough Inn	York	valley views and gourmet pub grub	p632

snacks and meals (cooked on the premises, not shipped in by the truck-full and defrosted in the microwave). After months of painstaking research, this is the type of pub we recommend throughout this book but, of course, there are many more pubs in England than even we could sample, and nothing beats the fun of doing your own investigating. So, armed with the advice in this chapter, we urge you to get out there and tipple your taste buds.

FOOD GLOSSARY

aubergine – large purple-skinned vegetable; 'eggplant' in the USA and Australia

bangers – sausages (colloquial)
bap – a large, wide, flat, soft bread roll
bevvy – drink (originally from northern England)
bill – the total you need to pay after eating in a restaurant ('check' to Americans)
bitter – ale; a type of beer
black pudding – type of sausage made from dried blood and other ingredients
bun – bread roll, usually sweet, eg current bun, cream bun
BYO – bring your own (usually in the context of bringing your own drink to a restaurant)

caff – abbreviated form of cafe
candy floss – light sugar-based confectionary; called 'cotton candy' in the USA, 'fairy floss' in Australia

chips – sliced, deep-fried potatoes, eaten hot (what Americans call 'fries')
cider – beer made from apples
clotted cream – cream so heavy or rich that it's become almost solid (but not sour)
corkage – a small charge levied by the restaurant when you BYO (bring your own)
courgette – green vegetable ('zucchini' to Americans)
cream cracker – white unsalted savoury biscuit
cream tea – cup of tea and a scone loaded with jam and cream
crisps – thin slices of fried potato bought in a packet, eaten cold; called 'chips' or 'potato chips' in the USA and Australia
crumpet – circular piece of doughy bread, toasted before eating, usually covered with butter

double cream – heavy or thick cream
dram – whisky measure

fish fingers – strips of fish pieces covered in breadcrumbs, usually bought frozen, cooked by frying or grilling

greasy spoon – cheap cafe

ice lolly – flavoured ice on a stick; called 'popsicle' in the USA, 'icy pole' in Australia
icing – thick, sweet and solid covering on a cake; called 'frosting' in the USA

jam – fruit conserve often spread on bread
jelly – sweet desert of flavoured gelatine
joint – cut of meat used for roasting

kippers – salted and smoked fish, traditionally herring

pickle – a thick, vinegary vegetable-based condiment
Pimms – popular English spirit mixed with lemonade, mint and fresh fruit
pint – beer (as in 'let me buy you a pint')

salad cream – creamy vinegary salad dressing, much sharper than mayonnaise
scrumpy – a type of strong dry *cider* originally made in England's West Country; many pubs serve it straight from the barrel
shandy – beer and lemonade mixed together in equal quantities; when ordering, specify a bitter shandy or a lager shandy
shepherd's pie – two-layered oven dish with a ground beef and onion mixture on the bottom and mashed potato on the top – no pastry
single cream – light cream (to distinguish from *double cream* and *clotted cream*)
snakebite – equal mix of cider and lager; favoured by students as it reputedly gets you drunk quickly thanks to the lager's bubbles and the cider's strength
snug – usually a small separate room in a pub
squash – fruit drink concentrate mixed with water
stout – dark, full-bodied beer made from malt; Guinness is the most famous variety
swede – large root vegetable; sometimes called 'yellow turnip' or 'rutabaga' in the USA

tipple – an old-fashioned word for drink, often used ironically, eg 'Do you fancy a tipple?'; a tippler is a drinker
treacle – molasses or dark syrup

Environment

England is the largest of the three nations on the island of Britain, with Scotland to the north and Wales to the west. Further west lies the island of Ireland. Looking south, France is just 20 miles away across the strait known to the French as La Manche (the sleeve) and to the English – with characteristic modesty – as the English Channel.

THE LAND

England is not a place of geographical extremes – there are no Himalayas or Lake Baikals here – but even a relatively short journey can take you through a surprising mix of landscapes.

Southern England's countryside is gently undulating, with a few hilly areas like the Cotswolds, and farmland between the towns and cities. East Anglia is mainly low and flat, while the Southwest Peninsula has wild moors and rich pastures – hence Devon's world-famous cream – with a rugged coast and sheltered beaches that make it a favourite holiday destination.

In England's north, farmland remains interspersed with towns and cities, but the landscape is bumpier. A line of large hills called the Pennines (fondly tagged 'the backbone of England') runs from Derbyshire to the Scottish border, and includes the peaty plateaus of the Peak District, the delightful valleys of the Yorkshire Dales and the frequently windswept but ruggedly beautiful moors of Northumberland.

Perhaps England's best-known landscape is the Lake District, a small but spectacular cluster of hills and mountains in the northwest, where Scaféll Pike (a towering 978m) is England's highest peak.

Wildlife of Britain by George McGavin et al is subtitled 'the definitive visual guide'. Although too heavy to carry around, this beautiful photographic book is great for pretrip inspiration or post-trip memories.

WILDLIFE

For a small country, England has a diverse range of plants and animals. Many native species are hidden away, but there are some undoubted gems – from lowland woods carpeted in shimmering bluebells to stately herds of deer on the high moors – and taking the time to have a closer look will enhance your trip enormously.

For more in-depth information on the nation's flora and fauna, www.wildaboutbritain.co.uk is an award-winning site that's comprehensive, accessible and interactive.

Animals

In farmland areas, rabbits are everywhere, but if you're hiking through the countryside be on the lookout for brown hares, an increasingly rare species. They're related to rabbits but much larger. Males who battle for territory by boxing on their hind legs in early spring are, of course, as 'mad as a March hare'.

Although hare numbers are on the decline, down on the riverbank the once-rare otter is making a comeback, while in farmland the black-and-white striped badger is under threat from farmers who believe they transmit bovine tuberculosis to cattle. Conservationists say the case is far from proven and seem to have won the argument; mooted badger culls were abandoned by the government in July 2008.

Common birds of farmland and similar countryside (and urban gardens) include the robin, with its instantly recognisable red breast and cheerful whistle; the wren, whose loud trilling song belies its tiny size; and the yellowhammer, with a song that sounds like (if you use your imagination) 'a-little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese'. In open fields, the warbling cry of a skylark is another classic, but now threatened, sound of the English outdoors. A larger bird is the pheasant, originally introduced from Russia to the

WILD READING

Is it a rabbit or a hare? A gull or a tern? Buttercup or cowslip? If you need to know a bit more about England's plant and animal kingdoms the following guidebooks are ideal for entry-level naturalists:

- *Complete Guide to British Wildlife* by Paul Sterry is portable and highly recommended, covering mammals, birds, fish, plants, snakes, insects and even fungi, with brief descriptions and excellent photos.
- If feathered friends are enough, the *Complete Guide to British Birds* by Paul Sterry combines clear photos and descriptions, plus when and where each species may be seen.
- *Wildlife of the North Atlantic* by world-famous film-maker Tony Soper beautifully covers the animals seen from beach, boat and cliff top in the British Isles and beyond.
- Collins Gem series includes handy little books on wildlife topics such as *Birds*, *Trees*, *Fish* and *Wild Flowers*.

nobility's shooting estates, but now considered naturalised and commonly seen in farmland and moorland.

Perhaps surprisingly, England's most wooded county is Surrey, despite its proximity to London. The soil is too poor for agriculture, and while woodland areas elsewhere in England were cleared, Surrey's trees got a stay of execution.

In woodland areas, mammals include the small white-spotted fallow deer and the even smaller roe deer. Woodland is full of birds too, but you'll hear them more than see them. Listen out for willow warblers (which have a warbling song with a descending cadence) and chiffchaffs (which, also not surprisingly, make a repetitive 'chiff chaff' noise).

If you hear rustling among the fallen leaves it might be a hedgehog – a cute-looking, spiny-backed insect eater – but it's an increasingly rare sound these days; conservationists say they'll be extinct in Britain by 2025, thanks to insecticides in farming, increased building in rural areas (hedgehogs are notoriously bad at crossing roads) and the changing nature of city parks that once made up the hedgehog's habitat.

In contrast, foxes are widespread and well adapted to a scavenging life in rural towns, and even city suburbs. A controversial law banning the hunting of foxes with dogs was introduced in 2005, but as this activity (a traditional country pursuit or savage blood sport, depending who you talk to) killed only a small proportion of the total fox population, opinion is still divided on whether the ban has had any impact on numbers.

Grey squirrels (introduced from North America) have also proved very adaptable, to the extent that native red squirrels are severely endangered because the greys eat all the food.

Britain's Best Wildlife by Mike Dilger is a 'Top 40' countdown of favourites compiled by experts and the public, with details on when and where to see the country's finest wildlife spectaculars.

Perhaps unexpectedly, England is home to herds of 'wild' ponies, notably in the New Forest, Exmoor and Dartmoor, but although these animals roam free they are privately owned and regularly managed. There's even a pocket of wild goats near Lynmouth in Devon, where they've apparently gambolled merrily for almost 1000 years.

On mountains and high moors – including the Lake District and Northumberland – the most visible mammal is the red deer. Males of the species grow their famous large antlers between April and July, and shed them again in February. Also on the high ground, well-known and easily recognised birds include the red grouse, which often hides in the heather until almost stepped on then flies away with a loud warning call, and the curlew, with it's stately long legs and elegant curved bill. Look hard, and you may see beautifully camouflaged golden plovers, while the spectacular aerial displays of lapwings are impossible to miss.

Down by the sea, mammals include seals – see boxed text, opposite – and in areas such as Norfolk and Northumberland boat trips to see their

SEA LIFE

Two seal species frequent English coasts: the larger grey seal, which is more often seen, and the misnamed common seal. Dolphins, porpoises, minke whales and basking sharks can also be seen off the western coasts, especially from about May to September when viewing conditions are better – although you may need to go with someone who knows where to look!

colonies are a popular attraction. Estuaries and mudflats are feeding grounds for numerous migrant wading birds; easily spotted are black-and-white oystercatchers with their long red bills, while flocks of small ringed plovers skitter along the sand.

On the coastal cliffs in early summer, particularly in Cornwall and Yorkshire, countless thousands of guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes and other breeding seabirds fight for space on crowded rock ledges, and the air is thick with their sound. Even if you're not into bird spotting, this is one of England's finest wildlife spectacles.

Plants

In the chalky hill country of southern England and the limestone areas further north (such as the Peak District and Yorkshire Dales), the best place to see wildflowers are the fields that evade large-scale farming – many erupt with great profusions of cowslips and primroses in April and May.

The latest edition of the ever-popular *Wildlife Walks* book, published by the Wildlife Trusts, suggests great days out on foot in 500 wildlife reserves across the country.

For woodland flowers, the best time is also April and May, before the leaf canopy is fully developed so sunlight can reach plants such as bluebells – a beautiful and internationally rare species.

Another classic English plant is gorse: you can't miss the swaths of this spiky bush in heath areas like the New Forest. Legend says it's the season for kissing when gorse blooms. Luckily its vivid yellow flowers show year-round.

In contrast, the blooming season for heather is quite short, but no less dramatic; through August and September areas such as the North York Moors and Dartmoor are covered in a riot of purple.

NATIONAL PARKS

Back in 1810, poet and outdoor-fan William Wordsworth suggested that the Lake District should be 'a sort of national property, in which every man has a right'. More than a century later this area is indeed a national park (although quite different from Wordsworth's vision), along with Dartmoor, Exmoor, the New Forest, Norfolk and Suffolk Broads, Northumberland, the North York Moors, the Peak District and the Yorkshire Dales. A new park, the South Downs, is in the process of being created.

It's an impressive total, covering 8% of England's land area, but the term 'national park' can cause confusion. First, they are not state-owned: nearly all land is private, belonging to farmers, private estates and conservation organisations. Second, they are *not* areas of wilderness as in many other countries; in England's national parks you'll see crop-fields in lower areas and grazing sheep on the uplands, as well as roads, railways and villages, and even towns, quarries and factories in some parks. It's a reminder of the balance that needs to be struck in this crowded country between protecting the natural environment and catering for the people who live in it.

To explore England's national parks from your computer, before putting on your boots and getting out there, an excellent portal site is www.nationalparks.gov.uk.

Despite these apparent anomalies, national parks still contain vast tracts of mountain and moorland, with rolling downs, river valleys and other areas of quiet countryside, all ideal for long walks, easy rambles, cycle rides, sightseeing or just lounging around.

ENGLAND'S TOP NATIONAL PARKS

National Park	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit	Page
Dartmoor	rolling hills, rocky tors and serene valleys: wild ponies, deer, peregrine falcons	walking, off-road cycling, horse riding	May-Jun (wild flowers in bloom)	p387
Exmoor	sweeping moors and craggy sea cliffs: red deer, wild ponies, horned sheep	horse riding, walking	Sep (heather in bloom)	p361
Lake District	majestic fells, rugged mountains and shimmering lakes: ospreys, red squirrels, golden eagles	water sports, walking, cycling, mountaineering, rock climbing	Sep-Oct (summer crowds have left and autumn colours abound)	p704
New Forest	woodlands and heath: wild ponies, otters, Dartford warbler, southern damselfly	walking, cycling, horse riding	Apr-Sep (lush vegetation, wild ponies grazing)	p289
Norfolk & Suffolk Broads	expansive shallow lakes, rivers and marshlands: water lilies, wildfowl, otters	walking, cycling, boating	Apr-May (birds most active)	p463
North York Moors	heather-clad hills, deep-green valleys, lonely farms and isolated villages: merlins, curlews and golden plovers	cycling, on- and off-road	Aug-Sep (heather flowering)	p641
Northumberland	wild rolling moors, heather and gorse: black grouse, red squirrels, Hadrian's Wall	walking, cycling, climbing	Apr-May (lambs) & Sep (heather flowering)	p774
Peak District	high moors, tranquil dales, limestone caves: kestrels, badgers, grouse	walking, cycling, hang-gliding, rock climbing	Apr-May (even more lambs)	p512
Yorkshire Dales	rugged hills and lush valleys, crossed by stone walls and dotted with monastic ruins	walking, cycling, climbing	Apr-May (you guessed it, when lambs outnumber visitors)	p605

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

With England's long history of human occupation, it's not surprising that the country's appearance is almost totally the result of people's interaction with the environment. Since the earliest times (see the History chapter) people have been chopping down trees and creating fields for crops or animals, but the most dramatic changes in rural areas came after WWII in the late 1940s, continuing into the '50s and '60s, when a drive to be self-reliant in food meant new – intensive and large-scale – farming methods. The visible result: an ancient patchwork of small meadows became a landscape of vast prairies, as walls were demolished, woodlands felled, ponds filled, wetlands drained and, most notably, hedgerows ripped out.

Britain's new 'hedgerows' are the long strips of grass and bushes alongside motorways and major roads. Rarely trod by humans, they support rare flowers, thousands of insect species plus mice, shrews and other small mammals – so kestrels are often seen hovering nearby.

In most cases the hedgerows were lines of dense bushes, shrubs and trees forming a network that stretched across the countryside, protecting fields from erosion, supporting a varied range of flowers, and providing shelter for numerous insects, birds and small mammals. But in the rush to improve farm yields, thousands of miles of hedgerows were destroyed in the postwar decades, and between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s another 25% disappeared.

Hedgerows have come to symbolise many other environmental issues in rural areas, and in recent years the destruction has abated, partly because farmers recognise their anti-erosion qualities, partly because they don't

need to remove any more, and partly because they're encouraged to 'set aside' such areas as wildlife havens – although in 2008 set-aside land was again under threat as farmers sought to take advantage of soaring grain prices (but by harvest time, prices had dropped again). Nonetheless, subsidies from government or European agencies are now available to replant hedgerows. Ironic, when only 20 years ago there were subsidies to pull them out.

Of course, environmental issues are by no means exclusive to rural areas. In England's towns and cities, topics such as air and light pollution, levels of car use, public-transport provision and household-waste recycling are never far from the political agenda, although some might say they're not quite near enough to the top of the list. Over the past decade, the main political parties have lacked engagement with the issues, although the opposition Conservatives have made sustainability a major tenet – even changing their logo in 2006 to include a tree. Their Party leader David Cameron famously made a big deal about cycling to work, which looked good (and would have been fine if he'd emphasised the health benefits) until the press discovered his chauffer still drove his official car to Parliament, carrying a huge stack of paperwork and a change of clothes. On the other side of the political fence, the Labour government has also come in for criticism; for example, an independent scientific study released in 2007 reported that the UK's carbon dioxide emissions in 2020 may be a 17% reduction on current levels, significantly lower than the 30% target. The government has also been lampooned by critics for championing 'headline grabbing' environmental initiatives (such as the Green Homes Project information portal) on one hand, while approving motorway-widening and airport expansion on the other.

England buries most of its rubbish in 'landfill sites' such as disused quarries and gravel pits. By 2015, say environmental campaigners, these will all be full. Options will then be more recycling, or more controversial methods such as incineration.

But perhaps the politicians are only representing public opinion. While numerous surveys show high proportions of respondents *saying* they care, a poll in mid-2008 revealed that only 1% of holidaymakers considered the environmental impact of flying as a priority when booking their trip.

Meanwhile, back in the country, in addition to hedgerow clearance, other farming techniques remain hot environmental issues: the use of pesticides, monocropping, intensive irrigation, and the 'battery' rearing of cows, sheep and other stock. The results of these unsustainable methods, say environmentalists, are rivers running dry, fish poisoned by run-off, and fields with one type of grass and not another plant to be seen. These 'green deserts' support no insects, so in turn some wild bird populations have dropped by an incredible 70%. This is not a case of wizened old peasants recalling the idyllic days of their forbears; you only have to be over about 30 in England to remember a countryside where birds such as skylarks or lapwings were visibly much more numerous.

The Environment Agency is responsible for everything from clean air and flood warnings to boat permits and fishing licences. Find information at www.environment agency.gov.uk.

COMPARING COVERAGE

Statistics can be boring, but these essential measurements may be handy for planning or perspective as you travel around:

England: 50,000 sq miles
Britain: 88,500 sq miles
UK: 95,000 sq miles
British Isles: 123,000 sq miles

If you want some comparisons, France is about 212,000 sq miles, Texas 266,000 sq miles, Australia 2.7 million sq miles and the USA about 3.5 million sq miles.

But all is not lost. In the face of apparently overwhelming odds, England still boasts great biodiversity, and some of the best wildlife habitats are protected (to a greater or lesser extent) by the creation of national parks and similar areas, or private reserves owned by conservation campaign groups such as the **Wildlife Trusts** (www.wildlifetrusts.org), **Woodland Trust** (www.woodland-trust.org), **National Trust** (www.nationaltrust.org.uk) and the **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds** (www.rspb.org.uk). Many of these areas are open to the public – ideal spots for walking, bird watching or simply enjoying the peace and beauty of the countryside – and well worth a visit as you travel around the country.