

TAKE FIVE

Great British Icons by Judith Schrut



Iconic: There are 15 Great British Icons in this photo. Can you name them all? Photo, Judith Schrut

Love ‘em or loathe ‘em, you can’t miss ‘em. They’re instantly recognisable, much used, and, most of all, peculiarly *British*. From familiar sights like Big Ben, the London Eye or Stonehenge, to pastimes like cricket, rugby or rambling, and cultural traits like irony, eccentricity, queuing and the stiff upper lip, you’d be forgiven for thinking Great Britain is a nation of icons. Let us share some of our favourites with you.

1. The Cup Of Tea

Iconic edibles and drinkables may come and go; fish and chips, haggis, Newky Brown and sticky toffee pudding all have their place. But to the British, only a **Cup of Tea** is forever.

“If you are cold, tea will warm you. If you are heated, it will cool you. If you are depressed, it will cheer you. If you are excited, it will calm you,” said Prime Minister William Gladstone, and Queen Victoria’s first words on ascending the throne were reputed to be *“bring me a cup of tea and The Times!”*

A ‘cuppa’ is the supreme cure-all, offered in all times and circumstances. You’ll find modern life here full of tea moments, from a groggy morning’s wake up drink, to that strong, sugary cup served with buttered toast to new mothers in maternity wards across the land. Want to meet your neighbours? Ask them in for a cup of tea.

Want to get on with work colleagues? Offer to make the afternoon brew. After a brisk autumn walk there’s nothing nicer than curling up in front of a log fire with a hot steaming mug of tea and a sweet biscuit, and in times of crisis a cup of tea will make everything all right. *“Nice cuppa tea?”* is as common a social greeting as *“How are you?”* Each day Brits get through 165 million cuppas—that’s 60.2 billion cups of tea per year—98% with milk, 30% with sugar and 95% made from tea bags, with PG Tips the nation’s favourite brand. The average Brit makes his or her first cup of tea at 7½ years of age.

Traditional afternoon tea served with a ‘round’ of finger sandwiches, warm scones, clotted cream and a fat chunk of cake has long been top of must-dos for visitors to Britain and an immensely enjoyable special treat for the rest of us. And it’s no secret that we Americans have a particular soft spot and seemingly infinite belly space for English cream teas.

But for a long time tea was a beverage reserved for the rich—not surprising when a pound of tea might cost a worker’s annual wage. High prices meant tea was often adulterated with brick dust and other nasty stuff; in fact, some tea contained no tea at all. By the late 18th century the price of tea went down and its popularity shot up. The Victorian Duchess of Bedford, desperate for a pick-me-up



Kensington Palace Tea Party, photo credit Laurence Looi/HRP/NTI



There’s nothing like a Nice Cuppa Tea....

between lunch and dinner, usually gets credit for inventing the ritual of afternoon tea.

Experts and amateurs perpetually argue over how to make that perfect brew, with especially hot debate focused on whether milk should go in the cup first or last. The British Standards Institute advises brewing loose tea in a pot, leaving to infuse six minutes for maximum flavour, adding milk to the cup before tea, while the UK Tea and Infusion Association insists tea first, as did George Orwell, declaring tea a mainstay of civilization in his essay 'A Nice Cup of Tea'. Essentially, it boils down to one simple fact: there is nothing more British than a cup of tea.

Further information:

www.tea.co.uk

www.afternoontea.co.uk

2. The Queen And All Things Royal

Cadbury's, Marks & Spencer, the Women's Institute, the BBC, the NHS— it's easy to make a list of cherished British brands. But only one can crown that list. Companies, celebrities and the value of the pound may rise and fall; it may drizzle or it may pour, but whatever the weather, it's Brand **Queen** who long reigns over us.

Mother, grandmother and great-gran, animal lover and skilled equestrian, respectable wearer of hats, handbags and sturdy shoes, Queen Elizabeth II is an enduring symbol of stability, tradition, steadfastness: iconic traits a citizen of any nation would be proud to hold up to the world.

For more than 63 years, the longest reigning monarch in British history, her steady gaze has beamed down from every stamp, bank note and coin of the realm. The Royal Mail delivers our letters. The Royal Mint makes our money. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs collects our taxes and Her Majesty's Government spends them. HM Ships patrol our waters and HM

Prison Service tends our criminals. There's a Royal Society for this and for that, and 800 tradesmen proudly hold a Royal Warrant of Appointment, the prestigious hallmark declaring an officially approved supplier of goods to the Queen. From traditional brewers, chimney sweeps, silversmiths and jam-makers to modernists like green fuel providers, tamper-proof envelope makers and horse exercisers, holders of royal appointments, like the Brits, are a diverse and eccentric lot.

The national calendar abounds with royal occasions: the daily Changing of the Guard, the annual Trooping of the Colour, the Queen's Speech, the Queen's Official Birthday. Every royal engagement, wedding, divorce, scandal or fashion statement is bound to make headlines somewhere. Were you, Dear Reader, amongst the million well-wishers who lined the royal route when Prince William wed Kate in 2011, or one of 24 million Brits and 60 million Americans who tuned in to view it all on TV? And could you resist joining a teary-eyed nation, smiling Queen and jiggling Duke of Edinburgh as they marvelled at the 1000-boat flotilla sailing down the Thames during the 2012 Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations?

Things Royal consistently top visitors' lists of must-sees, and each year's a record-breaking one for Britain's palaces, parks and landmarks with a noble imprint. Millions flock daily to royal hotspots like the **Tower of London**, **Buckingham Palace**, **Princess Diana Memorial Fountain** and **Westminster Abbey**, with the latter playing host to royal weddings, funerals and the crowning of every monarch since 1066. Culture vultures can satisfy imperial cravings at venues like the **Royal Albert Hall**, **Royal National Theatre** and **Royal Opera House Covent Garden**.

Although rendezvous with royalty can be pricey, there are plenty of free options too. Favourite free entry sites include the **Royal**

Maritime Museum, **Royal Air Force Museum** and **Royal Armoury**. You can view the astonishing history of royals in portraits at the **National Portrait Gallery** or see Her Majesty's wigs and gowns in action at the **Royal Courts of Justice**. For free, green and healthy, explore one of the Royal Parks, like **Regents Park**, with its splendid boating lake, Open Air Theatre, London Zoo, playgrounds and Queen Mary Rose Garden.

And if you're still mad on majesty, a fast train from London can whisk you to **Windsor Castle**, **Hever Castle**, childhood home of Queen Anne Boleyn, or **Hampton Court Palace**, residence of King Henry VIII of the Six-Wives fame, where costumed guides bring 500 years of royal history to life and you can have great fun getting lost in the magnificent garden maze.

Further information:

www.royal.gov.uk

www.royalpalms.org.uk

www.hrp.org.uk

3. The Pub

Ask your best British friend the quickest route into UK life and you're unlikely to be told to hop a black cab to Buckingham Palace, go on a Harry Potter tour, or ride the London Eye at sunset. Nope, it's a pretty good bet you'll be told, "go down the **Pub**."

Four hundred years ago, writer Samuel Pepys described the pub as the heart of England, and today this rings just as true. Pubs - and the ale, lager and cider within - are about as ancient and quintessentially British as anything could be. In days gone by, pubs were the community's meeting place, with family visits the norm and beer regularly served to children - safer than water which was often contaminated. In King Henry VIII's reign, his household at Hampton Court Palace consumed 600,000 gallons of beer yearly, that's more than 13,000 pints each day.



Her Majesty the Queen, Buckingham Palace, December 2011, photo copyright John Swannell/Royal Household/Camera Press



Her Majesty the Queen's Diamond Jubilee River Pageant, London 2012, photo credit PO Phot Terry Seward/Ministry of Defence

So, if you want to know what Britain is really about, you need to pop into a pub. Over three-quarters of the adult population do so, with over one-third visiting their 'local' at least once a week.

But let's be clear: the pub is not just about beer. It's where the natives meet and talk, exchange news and gossip, argue and debate, celebrate and commiserate, where strangers are welcome and where buying a round of drinks may bring you friends for life. Visit any of Britain's 48,000 pubs and you're likely to find more than a good pint and a packet of crisps (that's 20-ounces and a bag of potato chips, to you and me). Numerous pubs also have live music, theatre, quiz or comedy nights, darts, pool, table games, karaoke, movies, beer festivals and more.

You can enjoy a pun with your pint at **The Nobody Inn**, near Exeter, **The Sir Loin of Beef**, Portsmouth or **The Hung, Drawn and Quartered** near Tower of London's famed execution spot. Or hook-up with history at legendary pubs like **The Fighting Cocks**, St Albans or **Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem**, Nottingham, reputedly the UK's oldest. In London, look out for **Ye Old Mitre Tavern**, an ancient hidden gem where a young Queen Elizabeth I danced round a cherry tree, the **Prospect of Whitby**, famed for its clientele of sailors and smugglers as well as Charles Dickens and Samuel Pepys, and the ornately Victorian **Dog and Duck**, favoured by George Orwell and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. **The Mayflower**, Rotherhithe, was a stopping point for our Pilgrim forefathers on their way to the New World, the **Ten Bells** hosted the infamous Jack the Ripper, and it was over a drink at **The Eagle**, Cambridge, that Crick and Watson announced their discovery of DNA. You can even experience pub life without leaving your armchair, with pubs a plenty appearing in classic British movies like **The Long Good Friday**, **American Werewolf in London** and Hitchcock's **Frenzy**.

British pubs changed forever with the legal ban on indoor smoking in 2007. Pub landlords raged loudly at the time, but in reality the ban brought many pubs a lease of life and a new golden age. Gone - or going fast - are age-old traditions like salty, stodgy, deep-fried pub grub, nicotine-stained walls and early closing times. In their place you'll find a joyful explosion of small local breweries and specialist quality beers, artisan ciders and non-alcoholic tipples, and the advent of the 'gastropub' has led to seriously much better food.

Now, if you're a pub novice there are a few basics you should know. Firstly, don't expect waiter service for your drinks. Instead it's the norm for one person to buy drinks at the bar and carry them back to the table. And that bar may be the only place in Britain where anything is sold or served without the formation of a queue, although you may notice that skilled bar staff possess a silent tracking technique telling them who's next.



The Ale House Door by Henry Singleton, c1790



American in Britain goes down the pub, The Beckford Arms, Wiltshire, Photo copyright Geoffrey Davies

Secondly, British beers are nothing like their American cousins. There are a huge range of beer styles, each with different tastes, qualities and strengths, the main ones being pale ale, bitter, brown ale and stout. Bitter is the most popular: rich, dark and served at room temperature. Lager is lighter and served cold.

Finally, when tasting beer take advice from native experts – *don't sip it, swig it*. Chug at least a full mouthful to wash the flavour over your taste buds and experience its full glory before swallowing. And don't be afraid to sample those old-fashioned beers which come in wooden barrels and need to be hand-pumped but be wary: some British beers are as strong as wine.

Further information:

www.camra.org.uk

www.pubs.com

4. The Garden

How many gentle flowers grow, in an English Country Garden? The Dutch may have their windmills, tulips and canals; the French their lavender fields and vineyards; the Norwegians their fjords and forests. The British love their **Gardens**.

This national passion for plants has become a metaphor for home, security, freedom, serenity; an antidote to the manmade world; a celebration of senses and the imagination, where climate meets culture and art meets the outdoors. There is perhaps no better symbol for a country where so much conversation revolves around the weather, where a deep relationship with nature has long been feted by

poets, playwrights, philosophers and kings, and recited in the most familiar of nursery rhymes. Perhaps Sir Thomas More summed it up best when he said, *"The soul cannot thrive in the absence of a garden."*

The garden has held a special place in British hearts as far back as Roman times. Medieval monasteries were famed for kitchen herb gardens, the Plantagenets had their Red Rose and White Rose and the Tudors their knot gardens, while explorers of the time ventured into the world and brought back plants, herbs, bushes and trees. Henry VIII and Shakespeare were both renowned gardeners. The Georgians followed with dramatic landscapes, while the Victorians gloried in gardens with massed flower beds, exotic colours, complex designs and the invention of the public park.

The modern era has brought 'garden cities' like Letchworth and Welwyn, wartime Victory Gardens, allotments, bluebell woods and wildflower walks, organic gardening and everyday back garden pride. Every town, village and suburb has its Garden Centre, many with elaborate tea rooms, play trails, animal farms and sophisticated shopping. The **Chelsea Flower Show**, **National Garden Competition** and **Shed of the Year** are flourishing annual events.

Nowadays there seems an insatiable national appetite for gardening on TV and other media. The **Great British Garden Revival**, **Big Allotment Challenge** and **Show Me Your Garden** are amongst the recent telly crop and Gardeners World has been a hugely popular show for almost 50 years. **Gardeners Question Time** has been pitting BBC radio listeners against celebrity gardeners from village halls around the UK weekly since 1947. There are hundreds of dedicated magazines, websites and blogs like **Deadheading**, **Gravel Garden Joy** and **Wild About Agapanthus**.

If you'd like to share in the nation's horticultural hysteria, there are many wonderful gardens around the country open to view. We

Our Gardens, Hulme Community Arts, Photo, Judith Schnut





Gardener at work in the Sunken Garden at Kensington Palace, photo courtesy of HRP

highly recommend **Sissinghurst, Hidcote Manor, Beth Chatto Gardens, Great Dixter** and **Trebah**. And in this nation of gardeners, you may just find some of the loveliest gardens in your own neighbourhood.

Further information:

www.greatbritishgardens.co.uk

www.nationaltrust.org.uk

5. The Spitfire– The Little Fighter That Won The Second World War**

There's no shortage of iconic British vehicles, from the black cab, bright red double-decker bus and Mini, to the Rolls-Royce, Brompton fold-up pushbike and Triumph motorcycle. But perhaps nothing captures the spirit of Britain as a symbol of the very best in superb design, solid engineering and sheer fighting spirit as.....the **Spitfire**.

In 1940, as all of Europe fell to the Nazis, only the Royal Air Force stood against a seaborne invasion of Britain by Hitler. The RAF only had about 650 fighters left. Against them was ranged the huge might of the German air force – 2,800 fighters and bombers. If the Germans destroyed the RAF's airfields in Southeast England and pushed British air cover away from the coast, then they could safely land their troops and invade. It was, as Sir Winston Churchill put it, the "darkest hour".

The RAF relied on two fighter aircraft, the Spitfire and the Hurricane. The Hawker Hurricane was a powerful warhorse: solid, quick, and reliable. The Supermarine Spitfire was altogether different, based on an elegant, efficient racing design that had won many international trophies. Both aircraft were fitted with the superlative Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, but the Spitfire outclassed the Hurricane in raw speed and manoeuvrability – and crucially the Spitfire also outclassed all the German fighters.

Pilots liked the Hurricane. They loved the Spitfire. It was a beautiful airplane to look at and to fly. To the Germans, it was death from above. As the Battle of Britain raged through the summer of 1940 in the skies above south-eastern England, the Germans lost over 2,000 aircraft, the bombers helpless against the Hurricanes and the German escort fighters – who had little flying time over England – falling in their hundreds to the swifter Spitfires. When Hermann Goering, head of the Luftwaffe asked German fighter ace Adolf Galland what more could be done, Galland replied, "Give me a squadron of Spitfires." Goering was not amused.

In September 1940, the Germans, with their air force repulsed and battered, had to cancel their waiting invasion force, never to be redeployed. Of the 3,000 Allied pilots who fought the Battle of Britain, 544 died. Many more were wounded. Their average age? Just twenty. Together with their planes, they saved us all from a Nazi-dominated world. As Churchill said: "Never before in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few." And owed to the Spitfire.

There are still plenty of Spitfires flying – the ones that are left are loved, renovated, repaired

and renewed. They can be spotted flown by enthusiasts, dancing in the skies over eastern England as they did 75 years ago and will always feature in air shows or in a flypast for a Royal Wedding and the Queen's birthday. If you want to experience them close up you can see them at the Imperial War Museum in London and Duxford and the RAF Museum in Hendon, North London. Just remember, it's not only a fighter. It's an icon.

Further information:

www.rafmuseum.org.uk

www.iwm.org.uk

www.spitfiremuseum.org.uk

****With grateful thanks to Ivor Benjamin for his splendid contribution.**

Take Five is our quarterly feature bringing the best of British to Americans in Britain. Have you learned to make a proper cup of tea? Do you have an allotment or an adored English country garden? Can you recommend a favourite pub to our readers? We'd love to hear about your special relationship with British icons: email Judith at judith0777@gmail.com.



The Mighty Spitfire, photo courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum, Cosford