

British civilisation and institutions

Leisure, sports and the arts (2 sessions)

THE DIVERSITY OF LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN is reflected in the ways the British organize their personal, sporting, leisure and artistic lives. These features reveal a series of different cultural habits, rather than a unified image, and are divided between participatory and spectator pastimes. Some are associated with national identities and, in many cases, are also connected to social class and minority participation.

According to the authors of *We British* (Jacobs and Worcester 1990: 124), the rich variety of leisure, arts and sporting activities disproves the notion of Britain as a country of philistines who prefer second-rate entertainment to the best. Yet there are frequent complaints from many quarters about a 'dumbing down' of British cultural life in television programmes, films, the arts, literature, popular music and education.

Certain findings about 'leisure pursuits' and their social implications have been formulated by academics. Since most leisure time in Britain is now spent within the home and/or family environment, this would seem to indicate a separation from the wider social context. Much leisure provision is commercialized or profit-oriented and is therefore part of the consumer society. But access to leisure activities is unevenly distributed in the population, because it is dependent upon purchasing power and opportunity.

Nevertheless, the creative and cultural industries which service the 'leisure market' are an important part of Britain's social and economic life. According to a *DCMS* survey in 2001, these industries generate £112.5 billion a year in revenue, contribute £10.2 billion in export earnings, employ 1.3 million people and account for over 5 per cent of the gross domestic product.

Leisure activities

Leisure activities in earlier centuries, apart from some cultural interests exclusive to the metropolitan elite, were largely conditioned by the rural and agricultural nature of British life. Village communities were isolated and transport was either poor or non-existent. People were consequently restricted to their villages and obliged to create their own entertainments. Some of these participatory activities were home-based, while others were enjoyed by the whole village. They might be added to by itinerant players, who travelled the countryside and provided a range of alternative spectator entertainments, such as drama performances and musical events.

Improved transportation and road conditions from the eighteenth century onwards enabled the rural population to travel to neighbouring towns where they took advantage of a variety of amusements and wider social opportunities. Spectator activities increased with the industrialization of the nineteenth century, as theatre, the music halls and sports developed and became available to more people. The establishment of railway systems and the formation of bus companies initiated the pattern of cheap one-day trips around the country and to the seaside, which were to grow into the mass charter and package tours of contemporary Britain. The arrival of radio, films and television in the twentieth century resulted in a further huge professional entertainments industry. In all these changes, the mixture of participatory, spectator, home-based and wider social leisure activities has continued.

Many contemporary pursuits have their roots in the cultural and social behaviour of the past, such as boxing, wrestling, cricket, football and a wide range of athletic sports. Dancing, amateur theatre and musical events were essential parts of rural life for all classes and were often associated with the changing agricultural seasons. The traditions of hunting, shooting and fishing have long been widely practised in British country life (not only by the aristocracy), as well as blood sports, such as dog and cock fighting and bear baiting, which are now illegal.

A feature of contemporary Britain is the continuing attempt to stop many kinds of rural activities (such as fishing) and hunting (especially fox hunting). A *MORI* poll in 1997 showed that two-thirds of respondents favoured a complete ban on fox hunting with horses and dogs. The countryside lobby opposes such a ban, and animal activists have become more violent in their objections to and campaigns against what they see as the cruelty of many rural traditions.

In addition to cultural and sporting pastimes, the British enjoy a variety of other leisure activities since many opportunities are now available and, despite their long working hours, more people have more free time. Most workers have at least four weeks' paid holiday a year, in addition to public holidays such as Christmas, Easter and Bank Holidays, although Britain has fewer public holidays than most other European countries. The growing number of pensioners has created an

economically rewarding leisure market, while unemployment (although reduced) means that such groups of people have more enforced spare time.

Consumer patterns associated with leisure activities are also changing in Britain. These coincide with part-time and shift working and greater disposable incomes, particularly among young people. There is a demand for pubs and leisure services as well as shops, companies, businesses, doctors and schools to remain open longer or to be available for longer periods.

The most common leisure pastimes are social or home-based, such as visiting or entertaining friends, trips to the pub (public house), watching television and videos, reading books and magazines and listening to the radio, tapes, records and cassettes. The most popular non-sporting leisure activity for all people aged four and over is watching television (for 26 hours a week), and for men television viewing is apparently the single most popular pastime throughout the year. But, according to the *Henley* research centre in 2001, the British public now spends more time reading each year and less time listening to radio and television. Although television still tops the list, the decrease in viewing hours may be due to a dissatisfaction with the quality of the programmes shown on British television.

In 1999, 14 per cent of total household expenditure was spent on leisure goods and services (more than on food). The British now occupy some two-thirds of their spare time using electronic equipment. An increasingly large amount of money is spent on items such as television sets (owned by over 98 per cent of households, with 13 per cent subscribing to satellite television and 9 per cent to cable television in 1999), radio (listened to for some ten hours a week), video recorders (owned by nine in ten households in 1999), computers (a third of households in 1999) and compact disc players (68 per cent of households in 1999). 25 per cent of households had access to the Internet in 2000 and 45 per cent of adults had accessed it at some time.

The home has become the chief place for family and individual entertainment, and poses serious competition to other activities outside the home, such as the cinema, sports and theatre. Leisure activities for both males and females exclusively within the home include listening to the radio or music; watching television; studying; reading books and newspapers; relaxing; conversations; entertaining; knitting and sewing; and hobbies.

Despite the competition from television, the cinema and other electronic media, reading is still an important leisure activity for over half of men and women in Britain. There is a large variety of books and magazines to cater for all tastes and interests. In 1999 123 million books were sold in the UK and the value of exported books amounted to £890 million. The best-selling books are romances, thrillers, modern popular novels, detective stories and works of adventure and history. Classic literature is not widely read, although its sales can benefit from adaptations on television. The tie-in of books (of all types) with videos and television series is now a very lucrative business.

There are 5,000 public libraries in the UK which provide books, CDs, records and audio/visual cassettes on loan to the public, together with information, computer and Internet facilities. Libraries are very well used, with 34 million people (58 per cent of the population) in 2001 being members of local libraries and 50 per cent borrowing at least once a month. Only readers in Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands borrow more library books per head of population.

Do-it-yourself hobbies (DIY), such as house painting, decorating and gardening, are very popular and home repairs and improvements amount to a large item in the total household budget. The number of restaurants has increased and the practice of eating out is much more popular. This is catered for by a variety of so-called 'ethnic' restaurants (particularly Indian, Chinese, Italian and French) in most British high streets and fast-food outlets serving pizza, hamburgers, kebabs, chicken and fish and chips.

But visiting the pub is still a very important part of British life, and more money is spent on drinking and other pub activities than on any other single form of leisure. Some seven out of ten adults visit pubs and one-third go once or more a week. Research from Leeds University in 2001 suggested that the pub was a psychological necessity for most men, and visits were good for their health. They used the pub to bond, to recharge their batteries and as an emotional outlet. Almost half of the research sample said that they would still go to the pub if there was no alcohol.

But the pub, as a social institution, has changed over the years, although it still caters for a wide range of different groups and tastes. The pub is said to be Britain's most envied and imperfectly imitated institution, where people can gather on neutral ground and socialize on their own terms. However, falling custom, rising property prices, takeovers by large breweries and entertainment chains, an obsession with trendiness, faddishness and quick profits have led to a decline in Britain's unique pub heritage. The UK's 56,000 pubs are being depleted by more than twenty a month and turned into gentrified eateries, clubs or American-style bars in an attempt to emulate 'café society'.

But in recent years, the mushrooming of wine bars, café bars, discos and nightclubs has meant a considerable amount of competition for traditional pubs. The growth and popularity of the club scene with its music, drink and appeal to the young offers further competition to the pub trade, although people may move between different venues during an evening.

British nightlife for most young people is varied and vibrant, with nightclubs, large-scale pop gigs at arenas and sports grounds, music festivals and controversial outdoor 'rave' parties. British bands and DJs are much admired throughout the world. Use of recreational drugs such as cannabis, Ecstasy and cocaine has become so widespread that there are increasing calls, even from the police, for decriminalization. There is also a thriving lesbian and gay scene, more developed than in some other European countries.

Holidays and where to spend them have also become an important part of British life and have been accompanied by more leisure time and money for the majority of the people. They represent the second major leisure cost (after pub drinking). While more Britons in recent years have been taking their holidays in Britain itself, where the south-west English coastal resorts and Scotland are very popular in summer, much larger numbers now also go abroad in both winter or summer or both, and the great days of the British (particularly seaside) resorts have declined considerably. The number of holidays taken away from home by the British amounted to 56 million in 1998, with 33 million being taken in Britain itself. Some 26 million are taken abroad, with Spain, France and the USA being the main attractions for holidaymakers, who buy relatively cheap package tours. But the British seem to have become more adventurous and are now travelling widely outside Europe to Asia and Africa on a variety of holidays.

Many people prefer to organize their own holidays and make use of the good air and sea communications between Britain and the continent. In Britain itself, different forms of holiday exist, from the traditional 'bed and breakfast' at a seaside boarding house, to hotels, caravan sites and camping. Increased car ownership has allowed greater travel possibilities. Today, more than seven out of ten households have the use of at least one car and 27 per cent have two or more.

Leisure activities outside the home and their social implications consequently encompass travel; excursions; playing sport; watching sport; walks; church; civic duties; cinema and theatre; discos, dances, parties and bingo; social clubs; pubs; and visiting friends.

Sports

There is a wide variety of sports in Britain today, which cater for large numbers of spectators and participants. Some of these are minority or class-based sports (such as yachting and rugby league respectively), while others appeal to majority tastes (such as football). The number of people participating in sports has increased. This has coincided with a greater awareness of health needs and the importance of exercise. Spending on playing and watching sports, and buying sports equipment, amount to a considerable part of the household budget. But it is argued that Britain has inadequate sporting facilities and leisure centres in both the public and private sectors.

The 2001 *General Household Survey* reported that 71 per cent of men and 57 per cent of women (29 million people over sixteen) participate in outdoor and indoor sports or forms of exercise. The most popular participatory sporting activity for both men (49 per cent) and women (41) is walking (including rambling and hiking). Billiards, snooker or pool (20) are the next most popular for men, followed by cycling (15), indoor swimming (11) and football (10). Keep fit or yoga (17) is the next most popular sport for women, followed by indoor swimming (15), cycling (8) and snooker and pool (4). Fishing is the most popular country sport.

Amateur and professional football (soccer) is played throughout most of the year and also at international level. It is the most watched sport and today transcends its earlier working-class associations. The professional game has developed into a large, family-oriented organization, but has suffered from hooliganism, high ticket prices, declining attendances and financial crises. However, enforced changes in recent years such as all-seater stadiums, greater security, improved facilities and lucrative tie-ins with television coverage (such as Sky-Sport) have greatly improved this situation. Many of the top professional football clubs in the English Premier League have become public companies quoted on the Stock Exchange, and football is now big business.

But there is a widening gulf between these clubs and others in the lower divisions. Some 80 per cent of England's soccer clubs in 2001 were losing money despite television income, which goes largely to the twenty clubs in the Premiership. Most football clubs (even in the Premiership) are in a precarious financial position despite increased income, with only a few making a profit and many losing control over their costs. It is argued that this situation is due to poor club organization, bad business sense, huge salaries for players, inflated transfer fees and lack of success on the pitch.

Rugby football is a popular winter pastime and is widely watched and played. It is divided into two codes. Rugby Union was once confined to amateur clubs and was an exclusively middle-class and public-school-influenced game. But it became

professional in 1995 (at least for the top clubs) and now covers a wider social spectrum. Rugby League is played by professional teams, mainly in the north of England, and still tends to be a working-class sport. Both types of rugby are also played internationally.

Cricket is a summer sport in Britain, but the England team also plays in the winter months in Commonwealth countries. It is both an amateur and professional sport. The senior game is professional and is largely confined to the English and Welsh county sides which play in the county championships. Attendance at cricket matches continues to decline and the contemporary game has lost some of its attractiveness as it has moved in overly-professional and money-dominated directions. It has lost many spectators and is in danger of becoming a minority sport.

There are many other sports which reflect the diversity of interests in British life. Among these are golf, horse racing, hunting, riding, fishing, shooting, tennis, hockey, bowls, darts, snooker, athletics, swimming, sailing, mountaineering, walking, ice sports, motor-car and motor-cycle racing and rally driving. American football and basketball are increasingly popular owing to television exposure. These sports may be either amateur or professional, and spectator- or participator-based, with car and motorcycle, greyhound racing and horse racing being the most watched.

The professional sporting industry is now very lucrative, and is closely associated with sponsorship schemes, television income, brand merchandizing and non-sport sales. Gambling or betting on sporting and other events has always been a popular, if somewhat disreputable, pastime in Britain, and is now much more in the open and acceptable. Most gambling (through betting shops or bookmakers) is associated with horse and grey-hound racing, but can involve other sports. Weekly football pools (betting on match results) are very popular and can result in huge financial wins. The new-found acceptability of gambling in Britain was reflected in the establishment of a National Lottery in 1994. It is similar to lotteries in other European countries, and considerable amounts of money can be won. Some of its income has also funded artistic, community, leisure and sports activities which are in need of finance to survive. But falling ticket sales and profits in 2001 meant that the Lottery could no longer guarantee financial support for these 'good causes'. A *National Centre for Social Research* survey in June 2000 found that 72 per cent of British adults gamble at least once a year.