

The United Kingdom: an overview

The United Kingdom is an island country located off the northwestern coast of mainland Europe. The United Kingdom forms an archipelago that comprises the whole of the island of Great Britain which contains England, Wales, and Scotland-as well as the northern portion of the island of Ireland. The name Britain is sometimes used to refer to the United Kingdom as a whole. Collectively, the group of islands is known as the British Isles.

The only land border of Britain is with the Irish Republic. The United Kingdom is surrounded by the sea like the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea, the English Channel, and the Irish Sea. The geography is mainly rocky hills and low mountains. At its broadest, the United Kingdom is 500 km across. From the northern tip of Scotland to the southern coast of England, it is about 1,000 km. No part is more than 120 km from the sea. The capital, London, is situated on the tidal River Thames in southeastern England.

The capital London is among the world's leading commercial, financial, and cultural centers. Other major cities include Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester in England, Belfast and Londonderry in Northern Ireland, Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland, and Swansea and Cardiff in Wales.

Politics

The government is a constitutional and parliamentary monarchy. The chief of the state is the monarch (either the King or the Queen) and the head of the government is the prime minister. Politically speaking, there are two states in the British Isles. One of them is the Republic of Ireland which took its independence in 1922. Its capital is Dublin. The second state in the British Isles is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This state governs the remaining isles (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, England, and most of the smaller islands) and its capital is London.

Ethnicity and Religion

For centuries people have migrated to the British Isles from many parts of the world, some to avoid political or religious persecution, others to find a better way of life or to escape poverty. In historic times migrants from the European mainland joined the Celtic indigenous population of Britain during the Roman Empire and the invasions of the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Danes, and Normans. The Irish have long made homes in Great Britain. Many Jews arrived in Britain toward the end of the 19th century and in the 1930s. Christianity with its diverse branches is the dominant religion in UK, 59 per cent. Nevertheless, other

religions co-exist together in the country like Islam 4, 4 percent, Hindu 1, 3 percent, and others, like non-religious people exist in the UK.

Languages

Some earliest languages still survive in the two forms of Celtic: the first is Goidelic, from which Irish, Manx, and Scottish Gaelic are derived. The second one is Brythonic, from which the old Cornish language and modern Welsh have developed. Among the contemporary Celtic languages, the Welsh one is the strongest and still spoken in Wales. Modern English is derived mainly from the Germanic dialects spoken by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (whom all arrived in Britain in the 5th century AD) and heavily influenced by the language of the Danes (Vikings), who began raiding the British Isles about 790 and subsequently colonized parts of northern and eastern England.