

Jo Molloy

**YOU CAN TAKE THE GIRL  
OUT OF BRITAIN,  
BUT YOU CAN'T TAKE BRITAIN  
OUT OF THE GIRL**

**Snapshots of Britain**

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**You Can Take The Girl Out Of Britain, But You Can't Take Britain Out Of The Girl**

written by Jo Molloy

illustrations by Hana Phillips Knoblochová

editors: Zuzana Pernicová, Marie Dosoudilová

graphics, DTP: Ondřej Strnad

production: Jan Dosoudil

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## FOREWORD

It's easy for me to blog or write about my experiences living in the Czech Republic because some of them are so different to what I know! I'm interested in learning about Czech life, making observations about its fascinating traditions and strange customs (like your obsession with taking off shoes and wearing slippers!).

When *Bridge* asked me to write a book about growing up in the UK, I tried the same approach: to see it from the outside looking in. So hopefully I can give you a flavour of some of the odd or distinctive things that British people do, explain why we do them, and to try to give you a taste of what it's like in Great Britain.

# 'IT'S RAINING CATS AND DOGS!'

## The weather

You need to know a few good weather phrases if you ever visit the UK, or find yourself in conversation with a Brit. Here are a couple that will impress a local:

'It's a bit nippy out today isn't it?', meaning there is a nip<sup>1</sup> in the air, or it is chilly.

'It looks like drizzle outside.' This is what you should say if there's a light misty rain.

However, if it looks pretty nasty outside and pouring<sup>2</sup> you should say, 'It's chucking it down', or 'It's raining cats and dogs.'

And on the very rare (unusual) occasion in the UK that it's very hot, you might be able to say, 'Phew, it's a scorcher!'

If you can have a conversation about the weather, you'll make a British person really happy, because we love discussing whether it will be nice, nasty, too hot or too cold. We just can't help ourselves; we often do it without even realising it!

The weather might simply be the nation's favourite topic of conversation and there are a few reasons why.

The first is that the weather is a neutral, impersonal (not personal) topic. In the past, women and men weren't allowed to talk about personal subjects; it was considered impolite to ask someone about themselves or what they were feeling. So instead they had 'small talk'<sup>3</sup> about middle-of-the-road<sup>4</sup> subjects like the weather. Even today, most Brits still aren't that comfortable about talking to strangers, but don't be surprised if they happily have a conversation with you about the weather!

The second reason that British people are constantly observing the sky over (above) their heads is that the weather is so changeable. Some people live in the tropics, others in the desert or the rainforests – we live in a 'changeable environment'. One moment it can be warm, then windy, then sunny, and of course we always bring an umbrella with us in case it rains. Our country is so far north that

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1 **nip** – sharp, cold weather

2 **pouring** – raining a lot

3 **small talk** – light informal conversation

4 **middle-of-the-road** – something that is not extreme and is acceptable to most people



we should have freezing winters, but we don't because we have something called the Gulf Stream, which is a giant ocean current (movement) which brings warm air, but unfortunately also a lot of rain.

When I moved to Prague, I was surprised at the weather – it was hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter! I loved the summer, of course, and being able to rely on<sup>5</sup> having a good week or two of sunshine, but the winters were a shock! When I saw minus 18 on the thermometer, I couldn't believe it was possible. I'm learning to love the winters though – to enjoy skiing, ice skating and, of course, snow.

'Lovely day, isn't it?'

## TONGUE-TWISTING WEATHER

This tongue twister is a good example of British weather!

Whether the weather be fine,  
Or whether the weather be not,  
Whether the weather be cold  
Or whether the weather is hot  
We'll weather the weather  
Whatever the weather  
Whether we like it or not.



## 'MY CUP OF TEA'

### Brits and tea

Supposedly, the average (typical) Brit drinks three cups of tea a day – that's an amazing 165 million cups of tea drunk in the UK every day! Why do we love tea so much? Well first it's mildly (a bit) addictive<sup>6</sup> because it has caffeine in it, and obviously we must like the taste of it. But mainly it's because tea drinking has become our national habit or ritual.

When I say ritual, I don't mean like the Japanese, who have special tea ceremonies, and we're not like the Czechs who go to teahouses and sample (try) different teas from around the world. We don't drink anything as fancy (special). We like our tea quite boring actually. But it's the social custom of having a 'cuppa tea' that we love so much.

The first cup of tea is usually drunk when we get up or at breakfast to help us 'kick-start' the day (help kick us awake). When we have that afternoon slump<sup>7</sup> and need a little pick-me-up (energy boost) around

3.30 pm, that's the time for a second cup. And back at home later, watching TV in the evening, most people enjoy their third cup of tea.

But most people in the UK would admit (say) that they drink tea because it has the power to soothe (calm) and comfort, and a cup of coffee or a hot chocolate is just not the same. Tea to Brits is like a warm, cosy snuggle, a hug in a mug •. If someone has broken up with their boyfriend, if a friend has lost their job, failed their driving test, had a bad day or simply wants to chat about their day, it's time to 'put the kettle<sup>8</sup> on'. The world's problems can be solved over a cup of tea.

If you order a cup of tea in the UK, it will always be served with milk. It's nice, I promise you – just try it! Supposedly our habit of adding milk started not only to reduce the bitterness of the tea, but to stop the fine, delicate china cups (thin decorated porcelain cups) from cracking because of the boiling water. Milk also stops the tea from staining<sup>9</sup> the cups.

5 **to rely on sth.** – to be sure that sth. will happen

6 **addictive** – when sth. is addictive, you cannot be without it and you want more

7 **slump** – feeling tired with no energy

8 **kettle** – the container you boil water in

9 **to stain** – to leave dirty marks (such as the brown colour that tea leaves on the inner sides of cups)

Most people drink ‘builders brew’. That means a good strong cup of tea, where the tea bag has been left in for a while. But that’s not ‘my cup of tea’ – I like mine ‘milky’ (weaker with more milk). I couldn’t start the day without a cup of tea, and what would I do at 4 pm, when I’m feeling tired, without a cup of tea? Tea breaks are a part of British working life, a chance to relax and bond (get friendly) with colleagues. We also like to have a biscuit with a cup of tea. When our boss isn’t looking, we dunk (dip) the biscuit into the hot drink. It’s a balance getting it just right, choosing the right biscuit and the right dunking time – if it’s dipped in the tea for too long it falls off into the tea, leaving a mush<sup>10</sup>.

If you ever get the chance to have a ‘cream tea’, you must grab (take) it with open arms. A ‘cream tea’ doesn’t mean putting cream instead of milk; it’s a pot of tea served with a scone (small round cake), jam and cream on the side. The tradition is found in the west of England, especially in places like Devon and Cornwall. And if the cream is proper clotted (thick) homemade stuff, you’ll be in heaven.

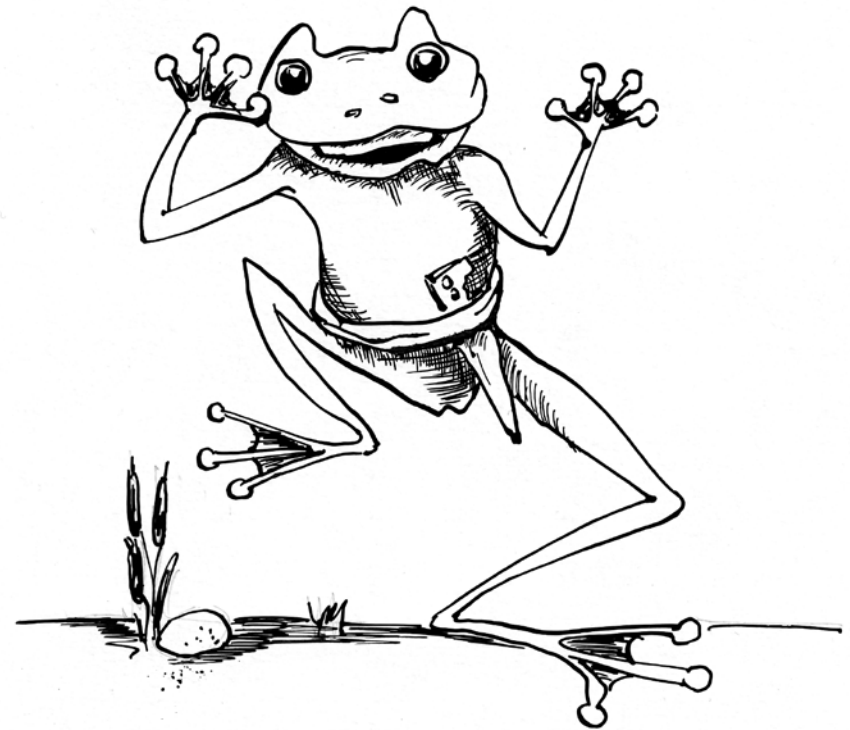
My friend Mike just came to visit me in Prague and stayed at a hotel. What was the first thing he unpacked? His travel kettle and his tea bags. If you stay in a hotel in the UK, you automatically have a kettle and tea-making kit in your room. We Brits miss it so much when we travel that we have to bring it with us. And even though I live in Prague, I admit I always bring tea from the UK, and if I travel in the Czech Republic, it’s the first thing I pack!

10 **mush** – soft mess

## ● LANGUAGE POINTS

“Tea to Brits is like a warm, cosy **snuggle**, a hug in a **mug**.” – Both ‘snuggle’ and ‘hug’ are used to mean a cuddle, like two people holding each other tight. It’s used to express that drinking tea is like a warm, loving feeling.

**Cup of tea** is a common idiom. When something is your cup of tea, you like it. When it is not your cup of tea, you don’t like it. (*Going to cinema is my cup of tea. Football is not my cup of tea.*)



## ‘ENGLAND’S GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND’

### Nature

There’s a song called ‘Jerusalem’ that has the line, ‘England’s green and pleasant land’. The lyrics of the song were written by the English poet William Blake. It’s an unofficial anthem<sup>11</sup> for England, and every time I hear it I get goose bumps<sup>12</sup> and feel all patriotic<sup>13</sup>. I can’t help it. I start thinking about those gentle green hills, narrow country lanes (roads) enclosed by hedgerows or dry-stone walls •, chocolate-box villages • with charming little tea shops, old churches and village greens.

11 **anthem** – national song

12 **goose bumps** – what happens to your skin when you feel cold or excited

13 **patriotic** – proud of the country one comes from



The countryside is quite different in the Czech Republic. For a start it's much more accessible<sup>14</sup> and definitely wilder. I love your forests and your mountains. Only last week in South Bohemia I saw a wild boar (wild pig) leading her young to eat, and a herd (group) of deer crossing the hillside. The wildest thing you'll probably see in the English countryside is a frog! If you're looking for something more mountainous or rugged (rocky), you need to try Scotland; or for forests and waterfalls try Wales. But England is all gentle hills and streams.

On the other hand, the English countryside is extremely pretty, the villages so picturesque with their quaint (old-fashioned) shops, stone or thatched • houses and welcoming pubs. Little farms dot • the hillsides, and the woods are carpeted with • bluebells<sup>15</sup> in spring. In contrast, some Czech villages can seem a little neglected, with tired grey buildings lining the road, chickens running everywhere, disused (no longer used) farm buildings and rusty tractors.

What I think the Czechs have got right, though, is the way they live in close harmony with the land. It's something we Brits have forgotten to do. We go for 'drives' in the countryside and only get out of our cars to stop off at a pub for a Sunday lunch. We certainly don't go searching in the countryside for blueberries or mushrooms. On the contrary, we are taught from a young age never to pick and eat things from the wild because they might be poisonous.

It's a pity we don't teach our kids at school how to use nature; we don't learn species of trees or plants, which berries are safe to eat and which not. So as a result we are fearful of touching something we don't know. It's completely different here, every year I'm always fascinated by the mushroom or blueberry picking. It's such serious business, Czechs get up at the crack of dawn (very early), guard their special spots, and leave no stone unturned<sup>16</sup>!

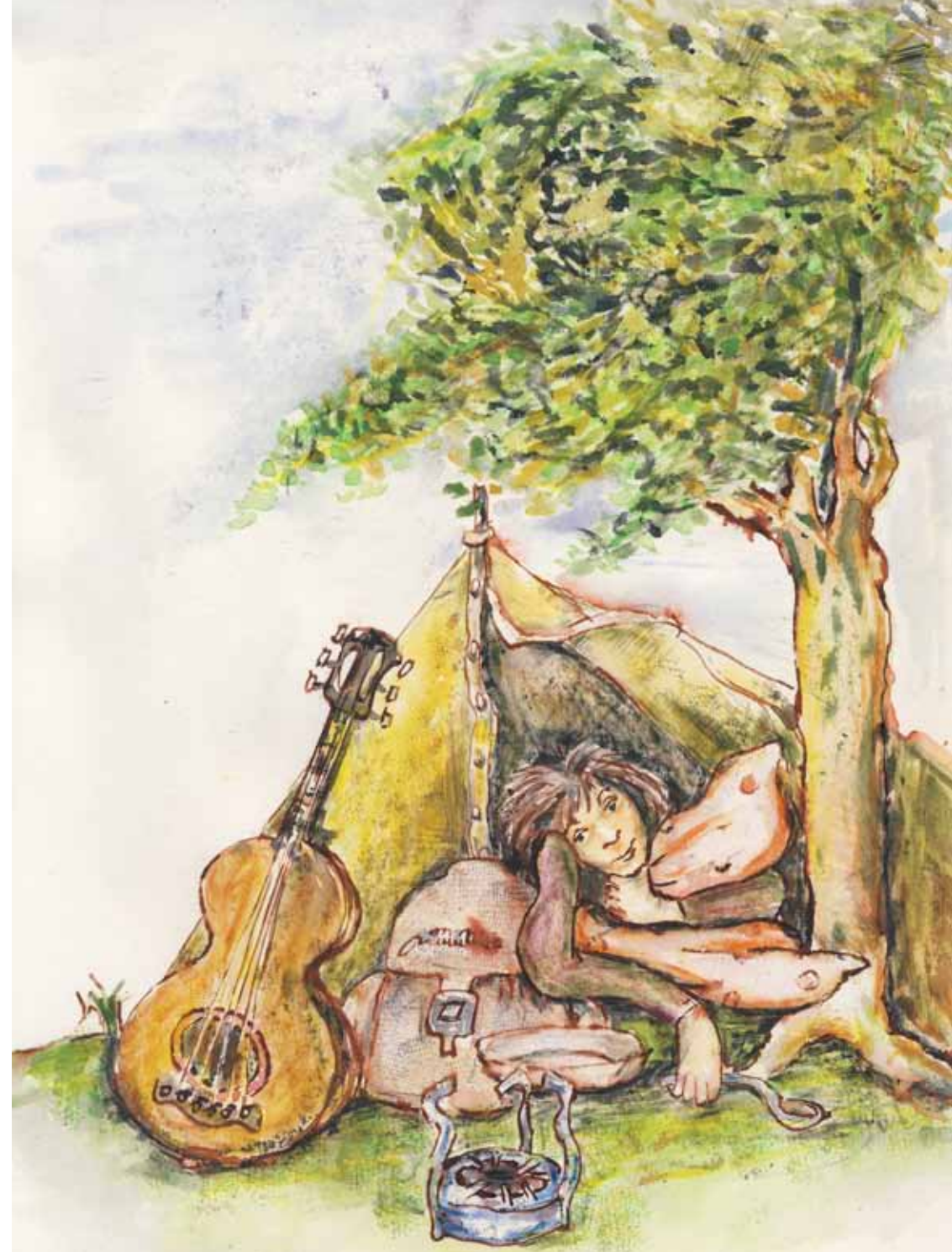
I also like camping in the Czech Republic; it's a little bit more wild than back at home. In the UK, I was used to going to campsites where you choose a pitch (place where you put your tent) near the toilets, and cook dinner on the BBQ (barbecue grill) or go to the local pub. My husband calls it 'car camping'. I didn't realise there was any other

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14 **accessible** – easy to get to

15 **bluebell** – a plant with blue flowers shaped like bells

16 **no stone is left unturned** – an idiom meaning to search in all possible places (under every rock or stone)

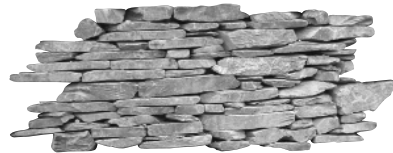


kind of camping until he made me camp 'properly' in the Czech Republic. I huffed and puffed<sup>17</sup> up some hills with a backpack and a tent on my back, I wasn't anywhere near a toilet or hot water, and there certainly wasn't a camp shop anywhere near to buy chocolate or a postcard!

I've always loved nature, but I've definitely found time to explore it more by living here in the Czech Republic. I'd like Brits to have a bit more of a relationship with the land around them.

## ● LANGUAGE POINTS

**Dry-stone walls** (walls made of stones fitted together without mortar) and **hedges or hedgerows** (lines of closely spaced bushes), are the most commonly used field boundaries in England, separating field from road, or field from field. Not only have they helped shape the landscape in England, many are also important historically and date back hundreds if not thousands of years!



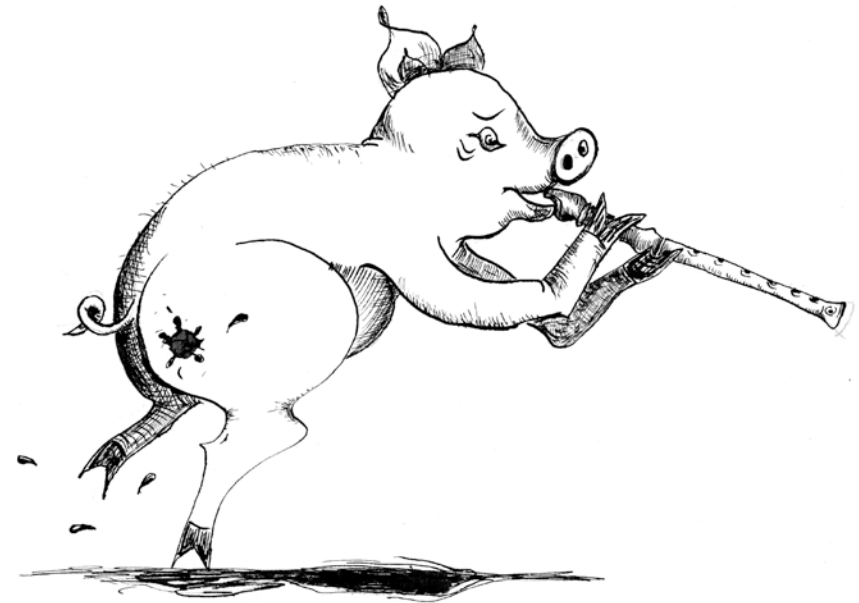
**Chocolate-box** is used to describe something that is traditional and pretty, like the pictures found on boxes of chocolates.

**Thatched houses** have roofs made of straw or reeds (dry grasses and plants). It was a very old and traditional way of making roofs, and you can still see them today in some villages in the English countryside.



"Little farms **dot** the hillsides, and the woods in spring **are carpeted with** bluebells." – Farms are like dots or little marks on the hills, and the bluebell flowers cover the earth like a carpet or rug.

<sup>17</sup> **huffed and puffed** – breathed in and out noisily because of doing physical exercise



## 'A PINT OF LAGER AND A PACKET OF CRISPS PLEASE'

### Going to the pub

I couldn't write a book about the UK and not mention going to The Pub (or public house, meaning a place for everyone to drink). It's as much part of the landscape as the Royal Family, red postboxes or country lanes. Going to the pub is an important part of British social life and everyone from young to old goes to meet friends, talk, relax, eat and, of course, drink.

It's a bit difficult to describe a typical British pub because they come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, each with their own atmosphere and clientele (customers). There are cute country pubs with their cosy (warm and intimate) fireplaces and pretty summer gardens; gastro pubs which are known for their good food; there are the large designer



city pubs where flocks of businessmen and women go to celebrate the fact that it's Friday; small 'local' pubs where regulars hang out to chat; or club/pubs with DJs and dancing until morning.

My dad lives in a small village which has three very different pubs – one is where you go for a quiet drink, another is a bit rougher and you might go there to watch the football, and the third is a family-friendly pub that serves meals and has a large garden with a play area.

They all have one thing in common, though: booze (a good slang word for alcohol). You probably know us Brits do like to drink a bit. We're so polite and well behaved during the day that it's my theory that we like alcohol because it helps us 'let our hair down'<sup>18</sup> and go a bit crazy.

If you do ever find yourself in a British boozier<sup>19</sup>, there are some important things you need to know, though.

You have to order your drink at the bar. Don't just order 'a beer' – you have to name either the brand of the beer you want (for example, 'I'll have a Carlsberg please') or just specify whether you want a lager (a light beer served cold) or a bitter or ale (dark beer served at room temperature to help its flavour).

You will automatically be given a 'pint' (0.568 litres) unless you specifically ask for a 'half', a half-pint measurement, or order a bottle of beer. We import a lot of lagers, like Grolsh and Fosters; even Staropramen is becoming popular in some London pubs. But we produce hundreds of bitters and dark ales ourselves; famous ones include Newcastle Brown Ale, Bass Ale, Boddingtons, Fullers and, of course, Guinness from Ireland. On a hot summer day, try a 'lager shandy' or a 'bitter shandy' – it's the beer of your choice with a small bit of lemonade added. Very refreshing!

If you're with friends at the bar, what normally happens is you take it in turns<sup>20</sup> buying a 'round' of drinks – that is drinks for everyone that you're with. You might say, 'it's my shout' or 'my round'.

Unlike in the Czech Republic, we are very, very particular (specific) that we get a full measurement of beer and we aren't cheated by a large foamy head •. So a beer will always have a small head of foam,

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18 **let your hair down** – to relax and enjoy yourself without worrying what other people will think

19 **boozier** – (UK slang / informal) pub, bar

20 **take it in turns** – when people take turns, they wait for their time to do the same, or rotate around



otherwise customers will complain and send it back to the bar. It was such a shock when I saw my husband first pour<sup>21</sup> a beer with a huge foamy head – I told him never to pour a drink like that in the UK!

Pubs used to have very strict licensing hours (rules regarding opening hours) and would have to close at 11 pm. It's still not unusual around 10.30 pm for the pub landlord (owner) to ring a bell to let customers know to get their 'last orders' at the bar. Nowadays some

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21 **to pour** – to put a liquid (like water, tea or beer) into a cup, bottle, etc.

pubs can stay open much later if they have a late-night drinking licence. Sometimes if you're lucky you might experience a 'lock in'. This is where the pub landlord lets people stay in the pub after the legal closing time; they lock the doors of the pub so it's more like a private party, and you can continue drinking until the early hours of the morning.

There are over 60,000 pubs in the UK. One of the oldest dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century; it's called Ye Olde Fighting Cocks, and you can probably guess what kind of entertainment they had – fighting cockerels (roosters). Each pub has a decorative sign outside, originally a way of showing the mainly illiterate<sup>22</sup> population a bit about the pub – where it was located, what the people did around the area, or what kind of entertainment could be found there.

For example, The Coach and Horses would be an inn – a place where you could stop off and get rest and lodgings (accommodation). The Angler's Rest was where fishermen used to go, The Golden Fleece<sup>23</sup> would be a pub in an area with lots of sheep farmers. The Bricklayers Arms was owned by a bricklayer.

Some of the most popular pub names like The Crown, The Red Lion, The Royal Oak, and The White Hart are patriotic or royal names. But there are also some quirky (strange) pub names. I once went to The Crooked House, which really was like visiting the Leaning Tower of Pisa. I wasn't sure if it was me, or whether I'd drunk too much alcohol, but it was a strange experience – the whole

## ● LANGUAGE POINT

**Foamy head** means the white bubbles that appear when you pour a beer. The head is normally the top part of the body; here the word 'head' is also used to describe the top of the beer. 'Head' can also be used to mean the person in charge, for example a headmaster is the person who runs a school. The word can also be used to describe individuals, 'tickets cost £5 a head', meaning each person.



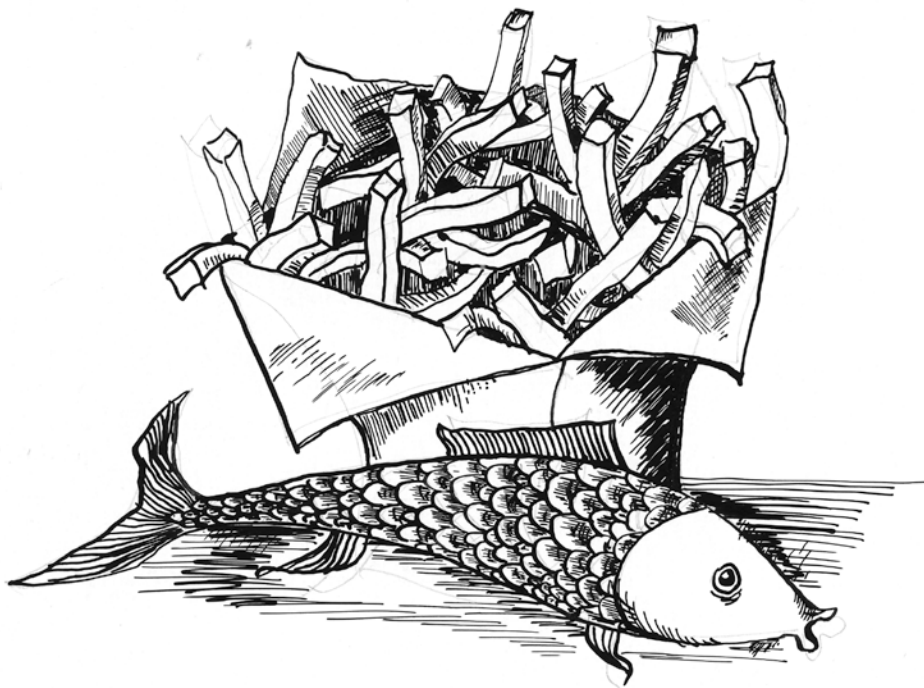
pub, the bar, the seats are all at an angle as if the pub is slowly sinking (falling).

Other funny names include The Cat and the Fiddle, The Drunken Duck, The Pig and Whistle, and The Ferret and Trouserleg.

If you get the chance to visit the UK, go to a 'local' pub, meaning a small regular friendly pub, because sadly they are dying out and being replaced by the large 'chain' pubs and breweries. And have a go at (try) ordering, 'A pint of lager and a packet of crisps please'.

<sup>22</sup> **illiterate** – not able to read and write

<sup>23</sup> **fleece** – wool on a sheep



## 'OH, I DO LIKE TO BE BESIDE THE SEA...'

### The seaside

Apparently, you're never more than 72 miles (116 km) from the coast at any given point in the UK. It's interesting, growing up on an island. Even though Brits don't think of themselves as islanders, a little bit of us at the back of our minds considers ourselves as 'different', or separate from mainland Europe. That little stretch (area) of cold grey sea between us and France has played a big part in who we are, and our history.

When I was a kid, going to the 'seaside' on holiday was the absolute best. It didn't matter if it was raining, cold or grey – and most of the time it was. We hid behind our 'windbreaks'<sup>24</sup> to protect us from the elements (weather), with our flasks of tea and sandy sandwiches. My sisters and

24 **windbreak** – a piece of tent fabric or thin plastic with poles (sticks) that gives protection from the wind

I dug holes in the sand and made sandcastles, or looked for crabs in the rock pools<sup>25</sup>.

I remember one particularly wet holiday when we sat in our coats on the beach, trying to hide from the rain behind our windbreak, and my mum said 'enough'. After that year we drove the long drive to the south of France for some sunshine and we never looked back, or holidayed in the UK again.

Even though I love nothing more than being in the sun and swimming in warm water, a part of me still loves the British seaside. Normally now I go for a day trip or for a weekend when I know the weather will

be good. Unfortunately, everyone else is thinking the same thing, and the beaches are packed with people – families, friends, kids and teenagers playing cricket, eating ice creams, paddling in the water and, of course, sunbathing.

After the financial crisis a few years ago, many British families could no longer afford the expensive holidays abroad, and we began to rediscover the delights of the seaside again. Instead of having a vacation, we started going on a 'stay-cation' and holidaying in the UK like we used to. The seaside is back in fashion again, there are a generation of young families trying to nostalgically re-create their childhood – except now there are trendy (cool, stylish) cafes and kite surfing, boutiques and bars.

But of course no trip to the seaside can be complete without eating a big portion of fish and chips. It's as traditional as, well... going to the seaside. And if you haven't eaten a hot fish in batter<sup>26</sup> and fried chips on a windswept<sup>27</sup> beach, well, you haven't lived!

### ● LANGUAGE POINT

A **beach hut** (also known as a **beach cabin** or **bathing box**) is a small, usually wooden, and often brightly coloured attractive structure located at the top of some popular beaches. They were originally used for changing in/out of swimming costumes, or to give shelter. Now they have become quite popular, people own them or rent them for the summer. Some of them have facilities for preparing food/making hot drinks.



25 **rock pools** – little pools that fill up with sea water when the tide is in; when the tide goes out, it leaves shallow pools of water where you can find crabs, fish, and starfish

26 **batter** – a mixture of flour, eggs and milk

27 **windswept** – exposed or swept by the wind

## 'WORKING CLASS, MIDDLE CLASS OR UPPER CLASS?'

### Classes in Britain

Class is a funny thing. You can't quite quantify it, you can't buy it, and it's very difficult to change it.

I'm not sure when I first realised what 'class' I belonged to. Was it the fact that my parents had holidays in the south of France, or drank wine and some of my friends' parents didn't? Or, similarly, when did I realise that I didn't live in a posh (luxurious) house and go to private school?

If you're British, you're automatically put into these strange social categories and it really defines who we are – it affects the university or school we go to, the contacts we have in life, and even the jobs that we get. No one asks us, it just happens and it has to do with where we were born, what kind of education we had and how much wealth our family inherited<sup>28</sup>.

But if you ask a Brit, 'What is class?', there's usually a lot of scratching of heads (confused expressions) and the answer is usually vague, 'Urrrm, it's education? Your parents? Don't know... money?'

My husband, who's Czech, thinks it's just money that makes you upper class, and if you are poor, you are working class. If only it was that simple...

In the old days it was very clear. If you were upper class, you were normally very rich, you inherited 'old money' or family money, your family had a position of power and you controlled large areas of the country. Most upper-class people would have a title like 'Lord', 'Lady' or 'Duke', and of course you were privately educated.

The middle classes were the industrialists, the business people who owned factories, or professionals like teachers, doctors and lawyers.

And the working or lower class were the ones who were the servants, the miners, or the people that worked in the fields. They were usually uneducated and poor.

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<sup>28</sup> to inherit – to receive money and other things from someone after they have died



We don't fall into those neat (simple) categories anymore; the world of work has changed. Now there are rich working-class families who have made money, and poor upper-class families who have lost theirs! We don't have as many traditionally 'working-class' jobs, and people don't want to say they are rich or upper class anymore, so instead we have a growing middle class which now gets divided into lower-middle, middle or upper-middle class!

I can meet people and know instantly (immediately) what 'social class' they are, even if I'm not thinking about it! It's subtle<sup>29</sup>, it's got to do with their clothes, if they are well educated, the way they act even – if they are confident or self-assured, or more subservient<sup>30</sup>.

You can even tell by someone's name. I'm generalizing, of course, but there's a strong possibility that if you're called Tyrone, Neveah, Britney or Jaiden, you're working class. With a name like Lucy, William, Jack, Oliver or Ruby you're probably middle class. And if your parents called you Jasper, Jemima, Lawrence or Henrietta, it's pretty certain that you're upper-middle class!

The problem is when class affects the opportunities you have in life, or when you are judged by being in a particular social 'grouping'. Top universities like Oxford and Cambridge are still criticised for only taking upper-class or upper-middle-class students who have been educated at private school, instead of opening their doors to people from all social backgrounds.

I know I haven't really answered the question, 'What is class?' and you can see it's difficult to define. But one thing is sure – we can hope that class becomes less important as time goes on.

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29 **subtle** – small and not immediately obvious

30 **subservient** – willing to do what other people want / considering your wishes as less important than those of others

## 'WE DON'T NEED NO EDUCATION...'

### School days

My school-years memories are a mixture of boring essays, being cold and miserable outside in P.E. (physical education) in the winter, horrible maths lessons, inspiring teachers, taking part in school plays, being naughty in the classroom, and of course making friends for life.

I didn't go to a 'traditional' English school. On one hand it was a very ordinary comprehensive school • in a middle-sized town, on the other hand it had a more liberal approach than other schools (meaning it wasn't a strict, academic school; its philosophy was to produce well-rounded<sup>31</sup> and sociable children). We didn't have a school uniform and we could choose non-academic subjects like outdoor pursuits (climbing, canoeing and other outdoor activities). Other than that, we followed the national curriculum<sup>32</sup> with core (main) subjects like English, maths, science, art/design, geography, history, French/German, music, P.E., and religious studies.

I'm not sure how I feel about a school uniform now, but at the time I was quite happy not wearing one. Although we had school rules, like no dangly<sup>33</sup> jewellery, no high heels or short skirts, we looked like a bunch of scruffs<sup>34</sup> whenever we went on a school trip compared to all the other kids in their uniform. I suppose it made us different, though.

I definitely think that when you're in the sixth form, which is the name for the two years between 16 and 18 years when you're studying or sitting your 'A Levels' (taking school-leaving exams), you shouldn't have to wear a uniform and should be free to express your individuality. But in the lower years, I don't think I have a problem with it. It gives you a sense of belonging to a school, you don't have any worries about fashion and competition, and it gives the school a sense of 'formality'. Not everyone in Britain looks like Harry Potter, though. There are many types of uniform. Some schools like a casual

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31 **well-rounded** – having a balance of everything: academic, sports and social skills

32 **national curriculum** – a set of subjects taught by all schools so that children learn the same things

33 **dangly** – long and hanging down

34 **bunch of scruffs** – a group of untidy looking people



look, usually smart trousers and a sweater with the school logo on; for others it's much more formal with a blazer, shirt and tie.

We had a mix of teachers at our school – some of them were really 'old school', meaning old fashioned and strict, and others were young or had a modern approach to learning. I remember in our maths lessons we would have to sit at individual wooden desks and the teacher would rap (hit) our hands with a ruler if we made a noise! But our science teacher was young and enthusiastic, we were lucky we got to make a couple of video projects with him, and he ran (organized) an environmental lab with all sort of animals (chickens, guinea pigs, snakes, insects, etc.). And always on the last day before school holidays we were allowed to 'play' with the Bunsen burners<sup>35</sup> and practice glass-blowing with pipettes!

I wonder whether all of that would be allowed today. The problem with British schools is that we've gone a bit mad with 'health and safety'. These are safety rules that don't allow teachers or schools to do certain activities in case a child gets hurt, but it's also a way to protect the teachers from complaints

## TYPES OF SCHOOLS IN THE UK

We start **infant school** at five years old, then at seven we go to a **junior school**, sometimes known as a **primary school** until we are 11 years old. We then change schools and start **secondary school**. A state or government funded secondary school is called a **comprehensive school**. There are a few **grammar schools** in the UK, which you have to do an entrance exam for, but they are not as common as in the Czech Republic. You can also go to **private or public school** – this means a school that you pay for. We also have **faith schools**, which teach their religious values, like Church of England schools, Catholic schools or Jewish schools. It is still common in the UK to have **single-sex schools** – they were started because boys and girls used to be educated separately, but they are still popular because some people think that girls and boys learn in different ways.

Aged 15 or 16 we take an exam called a **GCSE** (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and after we can choose whether to leave school to get a job or train for a vocation, or stay at school for two more years to do our **A Levels**, or advanced levels, which are a bit like doing a Maturita exam. We need A Levels to get into university.



<sup>35</sup> **Bunsen burner** – a little gas flame used in laboratories or science classrooms to heat chemicals





if there are any accidents. Most of them are pretty silly or unnecessary. So it means that there are no more school camps, fewer trips, and a feeling from teachers that they don't want to take risks that could get them into trouble.

It's sad that it's got like that. I like the fact that my kids are more independent in the Czech Republic; it's similar to the childhood I had growing up. I like the fact that kids can go to *škola v přírodě* or have sleepovers (stay overnight) at the school. I remember school trips with warm memories – on the coach (bus) with friends to Dorset, a geography trip to Scotland, and even horse riding for a week in Wales!

I was surprised when my daughter came home from her *základní škola* and told me she was allowed to light the candles for Advent, and that my son had used a 'hot' glue gun<sup>36</sup>. That just wouldn't happen in the UK because children might burn themselves!

There are other things that make the Czech school system so different from the UK. For a start, the school day is so short! If you're in the UK, you have to go to school from 9 am to 3.30 pm whether you are five or 18 years old; it's a long day. I was shocked when my kids came home at 1 pm. Weren't they still supposed to be at school?

What I like about the Czech system is that there is a lot of learning by 'rote', which means repeating facts until you remember them. We don't have that style in the UK. It means that our lessons are definitely more interesting, but the problem is we're not so good at remembering what we just learnt! I think my kids really miss the school playground, though. In the UK we might have a longer school day, but we also have longer school breaks and it's really normal to spend it running around outside, playing games or sports. I also miss the fact that my kids aren't doing more creative subjects, like drama or literature, from a young age. The perfect school system would be a mix of both Czech and English styles!

I know it's hard to enjoy school all the time – but one day I promise you, you'll look back with fond (warm) memories too.

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36 **hot glue gun** – a tool with hot glue used for arts and crafts

## SCHOOL JOKES

Teacher: We will have only half a day of school this morning.

Class: Hurrah!

Teacher: We will have the other half this afternoon.

What did you learn in school today?  
Not enough, I have to go back tomorrow



## 'THE BIG SMOKE'

### London

I love London.

It's always nice to leave it, to take a break away from the crowds of people, the dirty streets, stuffy<sup>37</sup> underground, traffic and crime. But it's even nicer to come back and wander around its maze (labyrinth) of streets, every one telling its own different story.

Black cabs, red buses, the Thames, Big Ben, the British Museum, the Tate art gallery, Westminster, Buckingham Palace, Hyde Park, Tower Bridge, they're all fine... but it's the real gems (jewels) like the markets, tiny fringe<sup>38</sup> theatres, people spilling (coming) out of pubs

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37 **stuffy** – without fresh air

38 **fringe** – not mainstream

on a Friday night, or sitting in squares enjoying sandwiches at lunchtime, watching the sun rise after a night out clubbing, having a full English breakfast at the local builders cafe, or stumbling across (finding by chance) a hidden archway<sup>39</sup> you never knew existed. What I love about the city is that you can never run out of places to explore.

I didn't grow up in the city, but in a very boring suburb in the south-east of England, all concrete, roundabouts<sup>40</sup> and narrow-mindedness<sup>41</sup>. I left as soon as I could to university in Birmingham, which calls itself 'The Heart of England', but I never fell in love with it, and instead came back down south and found a heart in London.

It's not an obvious city to love or even like. It doesn't have the romance of Paris or the picturesque skyline of Prague, but there's something about the city. I think it's got to do with the spirit of Londoners, their resistance<sup>42</sup>, their individuality, but also the city's multicultural mix. It feels alive.

London is a city of 'islands', each with its own cute high street (main street), historical nooks and crannies •, cafes, and pretty parks, but these islands are surrounded by seas of concrete and dirt which

## ● LANGUAGE POINTS

**Nooks and crannies** is an idiom meaning small, out-of-the-way places where something can be hidden or found. (E.g. *His house was full, in every nook and cranny he had something.*)

Brits like to send a lot of **greeting cards** for different occasions: birthdays, Christmas, thank yous, and even 'welcome to your new home' cards.

**Streets paved with gold** is an expression meaning a place where you can get rich and make money.



you have to learn to navigate around and through. I've lived in some pretty grotty (unpleasant) places but as long as you can jump on a tube (underground) and find solace (comfort) in a park, a museum, or a pub you'll be OK.

I've lived in many areas around the city – North, South and East, but never West. (I feel like a tourist when I go to West London). West London was traditionally where rich Londoners lived, and the East end was where the factory and dock (harbour) workers lived. Over the years East London has experienced a revival and has become the centre of 'cool' with its art galleries, funky bars and independent shops, leaving West London behind in the shadows.

We moved to East London six years ago, and were strangers to the area. But before we knew it (very soon) the neighbours had all popped around (appeared) offering bottles of wine, and 'welcome to your new home' cards •. It wasn't long before I knew the postman, the milkman, the local shopkeepers, and I couldn't walk along the high street without bumping into a face I knew. In all the places I've lived I've never experienced such a feeling of 'community' and ironically it was in one of the world's largest cities.

But don't expect to arrive and find the streets to be paved with gold •; it's a tough city to love, it can seem unfriendly and dirty. But it's also a place where you can try lots of new things; there are job opportunities if you work hard, and chances to meet a huge array (variety) of people and experience lots of different cultures.

## 'HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS'

I love this expression. For me it means that home isn't the bricks, the walls and windows; home means being happy with the people you are with and the place you are in at that time.

Because I've lived in about 17 different places I've called 'home', in four different countries, I can definitely say this proverb means something to me!

When I was a kid we didn't move around much, we only moved to a bigger house when my sister was born. But it was when I went to university that everything changed. For a start, most people choose to

39 **archway** – an entrance or passage formed by an arch

40 **roundabout** – a place where several roads meet and traffic must go around a circular area in the middle

41 **narrow-mindedness** – no willingness to accept ideas or ways of behaving that are different from your own

42 **resistance** – fighting spirit when things get tough

go to university away from home in the UK, living in student dorms<sup>43</sup>, or shared accommodation. It was a great experience. I learnt to eat burnt toast for dinner, and that I had to pay the electricity bill on time, otherwise we would get 'cut off'.

After university I didn't go back to my parents' home. Instead, I lived in a dodgy<sup>44</sup> flat in East London with my friend Dan. When our parents helped us move in, his mum cried and my dad looked horrified. I admit, it was a little bit rough. Pigeons lived in the derelict<sup>45</sup> flat above us, and a lot of the other residents had bars<sup>46</sup> on their windows. We lived on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor, and most of the time the lift was broken. But it was a home for us and it was my first experience of living in London.

A few years later I saved some money and went travelling with my friend Michelle. We spent six months living in Australia where I shared my 'home' with 12 other British travellers. On average there were about two–four people sharing a room, depending on new people that arrived and needed a place to crash (stay overnight). It was a big house right in the centre of town, there were lots of parties... but the only problem was not much cleaning went on, and no one dared cook in the kitchen because it was so dirty! One of our roommates used to sleep with his shoes on; I once asked him why and he replied, 'It's so the cockroaches<sup>47</sup> don't eat the dead skin off my feet!' I wish I had never asked! Gross (disgusting).

Later in my life I lived in Venice Beach in Los Angeles – it sounds very exciting, and for the most part it was. I lived about five minutes from the beach. The only problem was it was the kind of area that attracted a lot of odd people too, some homeless, some gangs. Every Friday night we would hear the Los Angeles Police Department circling overhead in their helicopter looking for criminals.

One particular day my sister was visiting from the UK and at first she was interested in seeing the helicopter and its white beam<sup>48</sup> in the sky – until the light started shining into our house! Suddenly our house was surrounded by policemen and we were ordered to leave.

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43 **student dorm** – accommodation for students who do not live at home or in their own flat/house

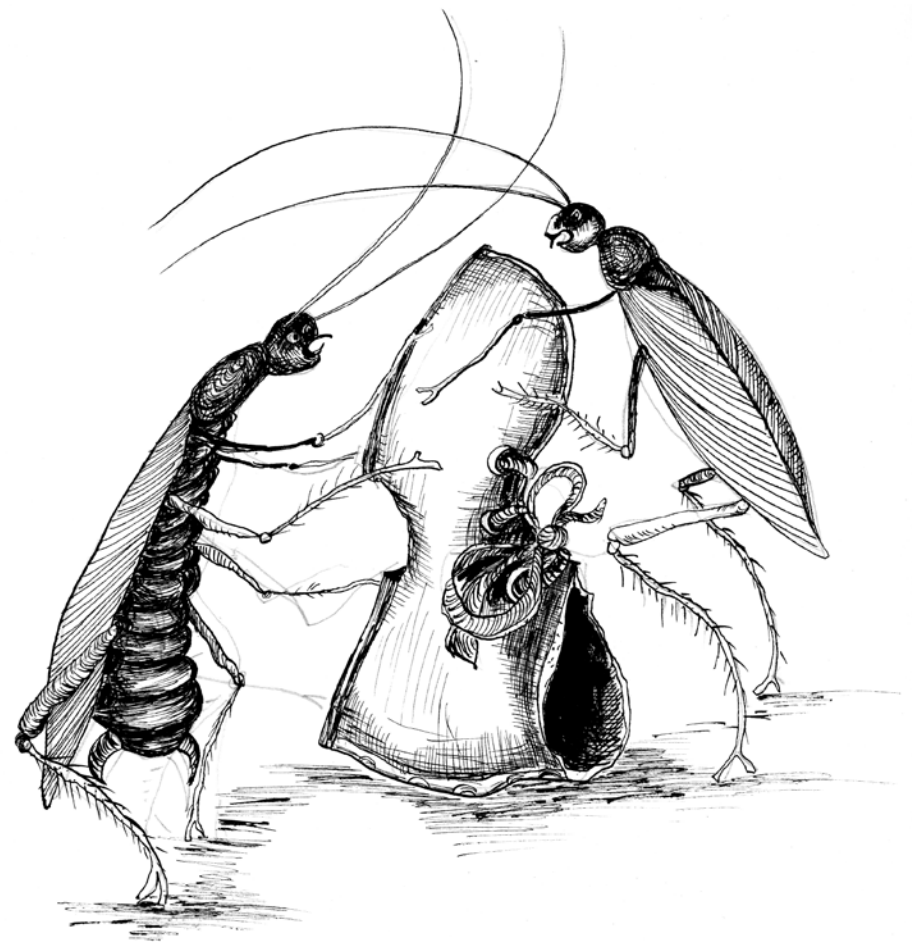
44 **dodgy** – risky or questionable

45 **derelict** – in bad condition because it is not cared for

46 **bars** – wooden or metal covers on the outside of windows

47 **cockroach** – a big flat brown or black insect

48 **beam** – line of light



I grabbed (took) my six-month-old baby and ran out in the street. It was really like being in a scene from a movie, but obviously much scarier because it was happening in real life. It turned out that the police were looking for a drug dealer who was thought to be hiding in the upstairs flat! In the end they didn't find anyone, but what an experience. Some time later my Czech husband and I decided to leave America and move back to Europe as it didn't feel the safest place to bring up children.

Living in the Czech Republic, I notice that the Czechs don't move around so much, and people end up going to university close by, or living close to their parents. Lots of people even get given their parents' house! That's nice. Part of the problem in the UK is that it's

really difficult to get on the ‘housing ladder’, that means buying your first home. Most people start off renting, but eventually want to buy a home. But it’s especially tough for the younger generation.

When I first moved to Prague, I was surprised once you left the historical centre to see so many *paneláks*, and it was even more of a surprise to find out that most people actually lived in them! In the UK this type of housing would be called a ‘housing estate’ and it would be where the ‘socially disadvantaged’ would live – those that are poor, or single mums. These are places where gangs of bored kids hang out, drug addicts and criminals. Similar to the place in London where I lived in my first flat with Dan!

I remember when I first walked through a block of *paneláks*, I kept looking behind me to make sure I wasn’t attacked or followed by any strange people. Seriously! It took me a while to realise that these are safe places where families, grandparents, doctors and teachers live. It’s a nice mix. I still think they are pretty ugly to look at and have no character, and I’d miss having a garden, but I like the fact that there are communities of people living together. After all it’s not the bricks and walls that matter, but the people inside and around you, isn’t it?

## SO WHAT IS BEING BRITISH THEN?

In this book I’ve often made references to being a Brit, or coming from Britain. However, when people ask me where I’m from, I normally answer, ‘I’m English.’ So what’s the difference?

The two words can be used interchangeably<sup>49</sup>, but being ‘British’ encompasses (covers) the whole country, while being ‘English’ refers only to England, so that’s not including Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales. I come from the south-east of England and have lived most of my life in London. So my perspective is a very ‘English’ one.

If you live in Wales, or in Scotland, or in Northern Ireland you’ll definitely have a different experience of the country. A bit like the Moravians, the Czechs and the Slovaks, who have distinct cultures, we’re not the same, we have our own unique history, traits (characteristics) and customs. So never ask a Scot if they are English!

Across Great Britain as a whole, there are also lots of regional differences. Cities like Liverpool, Glasgow, Newcastle and Cambridge all have their own local accents and cultural nuances (slight differences). It always amazes me that a small country like the UK, which has so many immigrants, is still able to have very strong regional dialects.

If you’re in London, you’ll experience another ‘Britain’ altogether, one that’s more multicultural, with many nationalities and religions. I really like that my children went to school in London and were exposed to this cultural mix in their classroom. I miss that in Prague because I think it makes you more accepting (tolerant) of people who are different.

However, I also strongly believe that if you make the UK your home, you need to speak the language, adapt (change) to the British ways of life, and not try to force your views on us. It’s about getting the balance right so that we continue to be a modern, multicultural nation, yet we are able to keep our own traditions and customs, the things that make us uniquely ‘British’.

So is being British just about drinking tea, talking about the weather, sitting in pubs, being obsessed by class and liking the Royal Family? Not completely. These are generalisations of course.

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<sup>49</sup> **interchangeably** – without making any difference

We don't all like tea with milk, we don't all get drunk in pubs, and we certainly don't all agree with the Royal Family!

But only when you go abroad and see how other countries do things, you think, 'Oh that's new, we don't do it like that,' and you realise that there are certain things that do make you British or English. I don't consider myself a particularly patriotic person and I've enjoyed living in other countries, but writing this book and thinking about it has made me realise that who I am has been shaped by the country that I was born and raised in.

And even though you can take the girl out of Britain, you can't completely take Britain out of the girl!



# GRAMMAR POINTS AND TASKS

## NEGATIVE PREFIXES

These prefixes come at the beginning of a word and give it a negative meaning. Most you have to learn, but there are some general rules: Words that start with 'm' or 'p' have the prefix **im-** like *impolite, impersonal, immobile*. Words starting with 'r' take **ir-** like *irregular*. Words starting with 'l' take **il-**, like *illiterate*. The prefixes **un-**, **in-** and **dis-** are the most common and unfortunately you'll have to learn when to use them. For example, *unhappy, unusual, incorrect, disrespectful*.

## COLLECTIVE NOUNS

There are various words used to refer to a group of animals:

A **herd** is a group of large animals, such as cattle.

A **pack** is a group of animals which live or hunt together, such as dogs.

A **flock** refers to a group of birds or sheep.

A **swarm** is a large group of insects.

A **school** refers to fish or other sea animals swimming in a group.

A **flock** or **herd** can be also used to describe large groups of people following each other or doing the same thing, rather like animals.

### TASK 1

Give the following words a negative meaning, using the correct prefixes.

- 1 \_\_\_ capable
- 2 \_\_\_ experienced
- 3 \_\_\_ responsible
- 4 \_\_\_ fair
- 5 \_\_\_ honest
- 6 \_\_\_ perfect
- 7 \_\_\_ important
- 8 \_\_\_ possible
- 9 \_\_\_ legal
- 10 \_\_\_ necessary
- 11 \_\_\_ official
- 12 \_\_\_ popular
- 13 \_\_\_ relevant

### TASK 2

Can you match the collective nouns with the animals?

- |            |    |             |
|------------|----|-------------|
| 1 a herd   |    | A) ants     |
|            |    | B) birds    |
|            |    | C) deer     |
| 2 a pack   |    | D) dogs     |
|            |    | E) dolphins |
| 3 a flock  | OF | F) ducks    |
|            |    | G) fish     |
|            |    | H) flies    |
| 4 a swarm  |    | I) horses   |
|            |    | J) sheep    |
| 5 a school |    | K) wolves   |

### VOCABULARY TASK

Match the words from the book with their Czech translations.

- |                    |                           |
|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 small talk       | A) divočák                |
| 2 china            | B) husí kůže              |
| 3 kettle           | C) jelen, srna            |
| 4 goose bumps      | D) konvice                |
| 5 hedgerow         | E) kruhový objezd         |
| 6 wild boar        | F) malta                  |
| 7 deer             | G) molo                   |
| 8 bluebell         | H) porcelán               |
| 9 thatched         | I) pouťová atrakce        |
| 10 mortar          | J) s doškovou střechou    |
| 11 pier            | K) společenská konverzace |
| 12 fairground ride | L) šváb                   |
| 13 roundabout      | M) zvonek (rostlina)      |
| 14 cockroach       | N) živý plot              |

#### SOLUTIONS

**Task 1:** 1 incapable, 2 inexperienced, 3 irresponsible, 4 unfair, 5 dishonest, 6 imperfect, 7 unimportant, 8 impossible, 9 illegal, 10 unnecessary, 11 unofficial, 12 unpopular, 13 irrelevant

**Task 2:** 1 C, I | 2 D, K | 3 B, F, J | 4 A, H | 5 E, G

**Vocabulary task:** 1K, 2H, 3D, 4B, 5N, 6A, 7C, 8M, 9J, 10F, 11G, 12I, 13E, 14L





**Jo Molloy** is a freelance writer and journalist from the UK. She now lives in Prague with her Czech husband and bilingual children. When she's not blogging about her funny and interesting experiences living in the Czech Republic, or writing for *Bridge*, she's struggling to learn Czech grammar!