

The People of England





When you think of England, what comes to mind? What do you picture?
Which words do you hear?



This country, this England, is an ancient land, full of mystery and tradition.
From her craggy hills to her rugged coastlines, her forests, her lakes, her dales,
this England is steeped in history.



Her architecture, some of which still stands after more than a thousand years,
forms the fabric of the land. Chocolate-box villages, dreaming spires, towering
cathedrals, village greens, thatched rooves: every brick, every paving stone,
tells a story – and it is the story of your ancestors - England's sons and
daughters.



So, Who are the English?



Well, the English are people descended from the tribes of North West Europe. Our ancestors are the Celts, the Saxons and the Vikings and we have been living on these islands for thousands of years! We have our own language, English, but we also have regional dialects. We have national traditions and regional ones too; we all have white skin but some of us have red hair, or brown hair, black hair or blond hair; some of us have blue eyes, some of us have green or brown eyes – there is a lot of true diversity amongst the English people! We can be found in other places in the world too – there are lots of people descended from Englishmen and women in America, Canada and Australia.



The Regions of England

No two places in England are the same. If you were to travel from north to south, or east to west, you would meet lots of different Englishmen and women who speak differently and who have different traditions.



Take the north east, for example: people from this area of England have very distinctive accents. They use words which aren't found in other parts of the country (for example, you may hear boys and girls being referred to as “lads and lasses”). This part of the country used to be very industrial – it had coal mines and heavy industry which produced iron and steel. Traditionally, people from the north east are a tough, no nonsense crowd! They have a lot of history and even some rivalries ... never get a Yorkshireman mixed up with a man from Lancaster – it could get very tricky!

Let's see what Emily Bronte, one of Yorkshire's most famous daughters, had to say about it in her novel, *Wuthering Heights*: (N.B.: the word “wuthering” comes from the Yorkshire dialect and it means “tumultuous”) the moors are described thus:

Pure, bracing ventilation they must have up there at all times, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind blowing over the edge, by the excessive

slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun.

The bleakness and isolation of the moors, where Bronte's novel is set, are crucial to its plot. This story simply could not have occurred anywhere else.

By contrast, let's look at the way another writer, Thomas Hardy, describes the city of Oxford in his novel, *Jude the Obscure*; (Hardy calls the city “Christminster” but, really, he is talking about Oxford). Oxford is located in the south east of England and is celebrated for its university, which is the oldest English-speaking university in the world and was established almost one thousand years ago, in 1096:

Grey-stoned and dun-roofed, it stood within hail of the Wessex border, and almost with the tip of one small toe within it, at the northernmost point of the crinkled line along which the leisurely Thames strokes the fields of that ancient kingdom. The buildings now lay quiet in the sunset, a vane here and there on their many spires and domes giving sparkle to a picture of sober secondary and tertiary hues.

Reaching the bottom he moved along the level way between pollard willows growing indistinct in the twilight, and soon confronted the outmost lamps of the town—some of those lamps which had sent into the sky the gleam and glory that caught his strained gaze in his days of dreaming, so many years ago.

Jude, the hero of the story, dreams about one day going to Christminster (Oxford) and becoming a scholar. The city's spires and domes represent his hopes and aspirations – once again, we see that this novel could not have been set in any other place.





The people of Oxfordshire are very distinct too. Much of the city's income is derived from the university but there was also a great deal of small industry in the wider county, particularly brewing, printing and agriculture.

In the west of England, on the border with Wales, lies the county of Shropshire. AE Housman, a poet and Classical scholar, wrote about his home county in a volume called *A Shropshire Lad*. His poetry uses the natural landscape as a metaphor through which to consider the Human Condition, as we see here:

VII

*When smoke stood up from Ludlow,
And mist blew off from Teme,
And blithe afield to ploughing
Against the morning beam
I strode beside my team,*

*The blackbird in the coppice
Looked out to see me stride,
And hearkened as I whistled
The tramping team beside,
And fluted and replied:*

*"Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;
What use to rise and rise?
Rise man a thousand mornings
Yet down at last he lies,
And then the man is wise."*

*I heard the tune he sang me,
And spied his yellow bill;
I picked a stone and aimed it
And threw it with a will:
Then the bird was still.*

*Then my soul within me
Took up the blackbird's strain,
And still beside the horses
Along the dewy lane
It Sang the song again:*

*"Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;
The sun moves always west;
The road one treads to labour
Will lead one home to rest,
And that will be the best."*

Housman's poetry is deceptively simple: he uses a very traditional rhyme and meter and his language often seems childlike but, as we read this poem, we can see that the countryside which he knew and loved was a means by which he could contemplate the mortality of all living things. Had Housman not grown up in Shropshire, he would never have been able to write so intimately of its "happy highways" and to create a sense of nostalgia in the reader.



Shropshire's major industry was linen production and ropemaking. Factories and cottage industries together provided much of the county's income throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the skilled workers exported much of their produce to other counties and to different parts of the world.

English Traditions



Ever heard of “Aunt Sally”, “Cheese Rolling” or “Morris Dancing”? How about “Splat the Rat”, “Punch and Judy”, “Maypole Dancing” or “The Ottery Tar Barrels”?

These funny traditions can still be found in different parts of England. Every region of the country has its own and they can often be seen at village fayres, in pubs or on special occasions. They all have roots in the parts of the country from which they hail... England is an unusual place!



England, My England

However far you travel in the world, however many places you visit, you will never find anywhere quite like England... and you will never meet a people like the English.

This beautiful, funny, quirky country with its proud, brave, eccentric people is unique. As William Shakespeare, one of England's most famous sons wrote:



*This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.*

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