

BEING BRITISH  
*What's Wrong With It?*

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\B<sup>b</sup>\  
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always better if people try to do something. In my case, it has been writing this book.

### **What we have**

I hope, if you have read this far, and even find yourself agreeing with my analysis, that you are not one of those who feel like giving up on Britain. It's more than likely that, if the survey we looked at earlier is to be believed, you are one of the 79 per cent who consider themselves proud to be British. So you should take heart from the fact that the last thing you are is alone, although it must seem like it sometimes. That's hardly surprising when you consider the scale of the problems that Britain has experienced, the sense that it has been battered from all sides and the ingrained self-loathing amongst those who shape its culture.

Whether or not you also agree with the few suggestions I have put forward for enhancing a cohesive sense of identity and boosting our sense of Britishness, I hope the cultural malaise we have faced has not blinded you to what is right about being British.

For the fact is that this is a truly remarkable country. I am not just talking here about its geography or political stability. It is fair to say that there is hardly a single part of our everyday lives that has not in some way been affected or shaped by British method, inventiveness or industrial innovation. As the first country to industrialise, Britain essentially created the modern age. From the magnifying glass down to the World Wide Web, its inventors have been pioneers without

equal. Its contribution to science is equally unique – indeed it invented science in the modern sense.

How men see themselves has been hugely influenced by this country's literature. It essentially created the modern novel. Its greatest writer, Shakespeare, is also the world's greatest writer. Its political development has been a testament to the power of reform over bloody revolution.

The point has been made before but can be made again: the impact that this country has had on the world is extraordinary. This is especially so given its size. America might be the world's superpower but it has a hell of a lot of land and people to draw on; Britain could comfortably fit into California with room to spare. Historians have tried to explain this hugely disproportionate influence, sometimes in terms of lucky timing, sometimes even in terms of favourable climate conditions (other countries wouldn't be so self-effacing). But however it came to pass, these small islands ended up shaping the world in which we now live.

The British Empire might have been regarded by many in the period we have covered in this book as a source of shame – although thankfully some balance is now being restored to the picture. The legacies it left in individual countries were by no means all negative ones. But even when just seen as a feat of administrative, commercial and military power, the Empire was a quite extraordinary achievement. It might have started as something of an accident, but at its height, it covered nearly a quarter of the world's land surface and over 450 million of its people. After the war, it was dismantled, too, with remarkable speed and little resistance on the part of

the British. Whereas my parents' generation was perhaps the last to grow up with a genuine sense of the country's imperial power, for those of us born in the 1950s and 1960s, the Empire simply meant fleeting TV images of flags being lowered in some far-flung place in the presence of a minor royal in white uniform.

I think it would be fair to say that a hankering after a departed imperial past does not play much part in most people's sense of national pride now. The patriotism they might feel is couched more at home than in the outward bound: the defence of Britain in 1940 by 'the few' is vastly more potent as a national memory today than, say, the British Raj. But this is not to say that they would rather not talk about the Empire, or have consciously rejected it in some way. Rather, they see it as an episode in the country's history, an extraordinary one perhaps, but an episode nonetheless, alongside Magna Carta, the defeat of the Spanish Armada and Nelson's victory at Trafalgar. And it is that history, with its catalogue of astonishing world-class achievements, which is at the basis of their sense of pride. It certainly is of mine.

As we said earlier on, identifying with your country to the extent that you love it can be based on a liking for its ways, its humour, or the fact that you feel, quite simply, that it is, in a way which is hard to define, special; that for all its faults, it is the best place in which to live. That such a feeling still exists in Britain is all the more remarkable when one considers the onslaught it has endured over the past half a century, and which we have looked at in this book. A sense of national identity, and a pride in that identity, might once have been

reflected by and in those who led Britain from the top. But now, such a feeling is held *in spite of* those who, in all their different forms and incarnations, presume to lead us, and *in the face of* those who have power over our cultural and political fate.

All the more reason, then, not to rely on politicians, nor just to wait for pollsters to ask us questions, but to speak up more often. You might be familiar with a now classic scene from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, in which John Cleese, surrounded by his followers in the People's Popular Front of Judea (or is it the Judea People's Popular Front?) asks angrily 'What have the Romans ever done for us?' One by one the motley crew volunteer various achievements, leaving Cleese eventually exasperated and defeated.

I'm reminded of that scene when I think of my two bookshop assistants. So by way of a conclusion, and to help you out if ever you find yourself in a similar situation and lost for words, I've written here fifty handy suggestions – from the groundbreaking to the quirky – to that same question, 'What have the British ever given the world?'

I will certainly be taking a leaf out of my own book from now on. The list, by the way, is in no particular order, and is by no means exhaustive. But it's a start.

### **The industrial revolution**

Taking place from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, the transformation wrought by the mechanisation of all aspects of manufacturing and agriculture essentially ushered in the modern age. What began in Britain, as a result

of British ingenuity, inventiveness and enterprise, eventually spread throughout the rest of the globe, changing the way life was lived forever.

### **Parliamentary democracy**

As the Mother of Parliaments, Britain has been the biggest exporter of a system of government which developed over centuries through incremental reform, constant revision, tradition and one or two moments of serious conflict. Much emulated throughout the world, the British model remains for many the best guard against the corruption which besets so many other systems – a belief that remains largely intact despite the dishonour brought upon Westminster itself by the petty deceptions of the current generation of parliamentarians.

### **William Shakespeare**

Nearly 400 years after this death, the position of Shakespeare (1564–1616) as the benchmark by which all literature is judged is unassailable. Translated and performed in countless languages, his plays and poetry remain the backbone to all studies of literature and drama. Still a remarkably enigmatic figure, his identity is frequently the object of investigation, but his achievement is never in doubt; there is never a moment when his plays are not being performed somewhere. Our everyday speech is, unbeknown to most of us, peppered with words and phrases introduced into the language by him.

### **The concept of evolution, as developed by Charles Darwin**

One of the most important books ever written, Darwin's

*On the Origin of Species* (1859) proposed the scientific theory that evolution was the result of a process of natural selection. Popularly accepted remarkably quickly given its revolutionary nature, it is impossible to overstate the full extent of its remarkable global influence, although in our time the teaching of evolution is banned in some Muslim countries. On his death Darwin (1809–1882) was given a full ceremonial funeral in Westminster Abbey; in 2002 he was voted one of the top ten Greatest Britons of all time.

### **The concept and laws of gravity, as discovered by Sir Isaac Newton**

Considered to be the greatest scientist who ever lived, Newton (1642–1727), wrote *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), which described universal gravitation, and is regarded as the most important scientific book in human history. Also a mathematician, philosopher and astronomer, Newton famously (and modestly) described himself as having just stood ‘on the shoulders of giants’, but the English poet Pope was nearer to the mark when he wrote: ‘Nature and nature’s laws lay hid by night; God said “Let Newton be” and all was light.’

### **The World Wide Web, as invented by Sir Tim Berners-Lee**

Computer scientist Berners-Lee (born 1955) is famous not just for this world-altering invention, but also for the fact that he left his idea deliberately unpatented and therefore free (considering his achievement, his name is still less well known than some eighteenth-century inventors). The

first website was built at CERN in France in 1991. In 1999 Berners-Lee was named by *Time* magazine one of the 100 most important people of the twentieth century.

### **Common Law**

An ancient system of law which is based on precedent, or the decisions of past cases, Common Law was first codified into a proper country-wide system in England by Henry II in the mid-twelfth century. Its strength traditionally lies in its flexibility and ability to evolve with changing times and mores. It now forms the basis of the legal systems in the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa and Zimbabwe and many other countries which were once British colonies.

### **English, the global language**

Now perhaps the first truly global method of communication (to the eternal chagrin of the French), English is the language of business, communications and diplomacy throughout the world – not to mention entertainment. A billion people speak it. Its current status as the world's lingua franca developed from its use within the British Empire and the subsequent rise of the USA as a global superpower. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists over 250,000 words, which include words and phrases from countless other languages.

### **The King James Bible**

The 400th anniversary in 2011 of this, perhaps the most influential single book in the English language, was marked by many events and celebrations. It has been described as the



only great work of art to be created by a committee. Fifty-four scholars worked for seven years on the new translation of the Bible at the behest of James I. 'The scholars who produced this masterpiece are mostly unknown and unremembered,' said Churchill. 'But they forged an enduring link, literary and religious, between the English-speaking people of the world.'

### **Penicillin, as discovered by Alexander Fleming**

Fleming (1881–1955), a Scottish biologist, won the Nobel Prize for his world-changing discovery; at the end of the last millennium *Time* magazine named him one of the most important people of the twentieth century. Astonishingly, there was a gap of twelve years between the discovery and its first use, in 1941. Penicillin would go on to treat effectively countless bacterial infections and hitherto fatal diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis.

### **The scientific method, as developed by Francis Bacon**

Bacon (1561–1626) has been called the creator of empiricism, and his work has been credited with laying the foundations by which scientific enquiry was henceforth carried out. Also a philosopher, he laid out the moral and practical grounds for the industrialisation which followed in the eighteenth century. His nineteenth-century biographer William Hepworth Dixon summarised Bacon's immense achievements and influence thus:

Every man who rides in a train, who sends a telegram, who follows a steam plough, who sits in an easy chair, who crosses

the channel or Atlantic, who eats a good dinner, who enjoys a beautiful garden, or undergoes a painless operation, owes him something.

### **Anaesthetic in the use of surgery, as pioneered by Joseph Lister**

Lister (1827–1912) was the first surgeon to use anaesthesia and antisepsis and in doing so transformed the standards of safety in medical procedures. He invented the sinus forceps and probe-pointed scissors still used today. The popular mouthwash Listerine was named in his honour when it first appeared in the nineteenth century.

### **Charlie Chaplin**

The son of south London music hall entertainers, Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977) went on to become, in his incarnation as the little tramp, one of the few instantly recognisable cultural icons of the twentieth century. His winsome persona endeared him to audiences and he went on to achieve a kind of fame which had not really existed before – that of the global entertainer. The character he created is still known now to generations who have never seen a silent film.

### ***An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith.**

A Scottish economist and philosopher, Smith (bap. 1723–1790) published *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. It is regarded as one of the most important and influential treatises on economics

ever published, and, in promoting the idea of individual enterprise as the key to economic prosperity, is to this day venerated especially by those with a belief in the virtues of free market capitalism. The former Chairman of the US Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, described *The Wealth of Nations* as 'one of the great achievements in human intellectual history'.

### **The art of J. M. W. Turner**

Hugely prolific in both oils and watercolour, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) is considered the greatest British artist of Romantic landscapes. His work was to prove of huge and lasting international influence. His 1839 picture *The Fighting Temeraire* was voted the greatest British painting of all time in a public poll in 2005. The famous annual Turner Prize was named after him, although he should not be held responsible for this.

### **Power looms, as invented by Edmund Cartwright**

A clergyman from Nottinghamshire, Cartwright (1743–1823) was to revolutionise mechanical weaving in the years which followed the patenting of his power loom in 1785. Many improvements followed, and by 1850 there were a quarter of a million of the machines operating in Britain.

### **Abolition of the slave trade**

The Slave Trade Act of 1807 abolished slavery, the end result of a largely religiously motivated movement which had

begun in the 1770s and which by the time the Act was passed had been led for some time by the Yorkshireman Sir William Wilberforce. Other countries such as France, Sweden and Spain followed suit in the years directly after. The British Navy used its then incomparable might to enforce abolition across the globe, and within the next half a century 150,000 slaves were freed.

### **Mass production of steel, as developed by Henry Bessemer**

An English engineer and prolific inventor, Bessemer (1813–1898) developed a method for the much cheaper production of steel, which could then be used on an industrial scale.

### **Football, rugby, cricket, golf – virtually all organised sport**

Although people have played games since time immemorial, for all practical purposes, organised, modern sport in most of its various guises originated in Britain. It was here that its rules were codified and where its first associations – the MCC, the Football Association – were set up. It matters not that the British performance in all the numerous fields of play is now extremely variable, for if it is indeed the playing of the game that truly matters, then organised sport is one of Britain's great altruistic gestures to the world. Spread far and wide as an offshoot of the Empire, these games in their different ways still display aspects of the British social character, but are now universal and as such owned by the world. The hope, however, that 'football's coming home' springs eternal in the breasts of millions of British fans.

***The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien**

Tolkien (1892–1973), an Oxford professor, published *The Hobbit* in 1937 and then followed it with this, his epic three-part fantasy, in the 1950s. Hundreds of millions of copies have been sold worldwide and the meanings and themes of each pored over and analysed. The film adaptation by director Peter Jackson was phenomenally successful, both financially and critically: the final instalment, *The Return of the King*, won eleven Academy Awards.

**The human circulatory system, as discovered by William Harvey**

The Kent-born Harvey (1578–1657) was the first person to describe in detail the method by which the heart pumped blood around the system. A doctor at London's famous Bart's Hospital, he published his famous work, *de Motu Cordis*, in 1628. He was physician to both James I and Charles I.

**James Bond, as created by Ian Fleming**

Bond, or 007 as he is known, is the fictional British Secret Service agent who first appeared in 1953 in Fleming's *Casino Royale*. First portrayed on screen by Sean Connery in *Dr No* in 1962, he became a global icon of a certain sort of Britishness, one born of the Cold War and Macmillan era. In the decades and five further actors since, the Bond series has made nearly \$5 billion, although for some of that time the character slipped into parody. As the latest incumbent, Daniel Craig is generally considered to have restored Bond's credibility. His introductory line 'Bond ... James Bond'

is known even to those who've never read a book or seen a film.

### **The jet engine, as invented by Sir Frank Whittle**

Initially receiving remarkably little official encouragement or support, Whittle (1907–1996), an RAF engineer, persevered with the groundbreaking work that would eventually lead to the invention of the turbojet engine, one of most important achievements of the twentieth century. Early stresses took a considerable toll on his health, but in the post-war years he received universal recognition. Air travel of the kind the world takes for granted today simply would not have happened without him.

### **Peter Pan, as created by J. M. Barrie**

The boy who refused to grow up first appeared in 1902, and since then has become a worldwide star of stage, screen and television, even giving his name to a psychological complex. Barrie's creation, who lives with his gang of Lost Boys in Neverland, is not an altogether sympathetic character, but his cocky irresponsibility continues to enthral children of all ages across the world as he enters his second century.

### **Brit Art**

Love them or hate them (and much of the British press hates them) artists like Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, who were at the forefront of the sudden explosion in British art in the 1990s, have pushed the output of our contemporary culture into the global spotlight.

**The smallpox vaccination, as discovered by Edward Jenner**

Known now as the father of immunology, Jenner (1749–1823), a doctor and scientist, was widely ridiculed after famously inoculating 8-year-old James Phipps with cow pus. But the experiment proved the correctness of his hypothesis, and resulted thereafter in the saving of countless lives from the then deadly killer smallpox.

**The steam engine**

Thomas Newcomen (bap. 1664–1729), an ironmonger, invented the first practical steam engine, which was named after him. But it was hugely improved later in the eighteenth century by the Scottish inventor and engineer James Watt (1736–1819), and became quite literally the engine which drove the industrial revolution in Britain and henceforth the world. The unit of power, the watt, is named after him.

***Paradise Lost* by John Milton**

One of the greatest works of English literature, Milton's epic poem from 1667 about the fall of man has continued to have a profound cultural resonance, whether it be in influencing the work of William Blake, or informing popular Hollywood films such as *Seven* and *The Devil's Advocate*.

**The 'CAT' scanner, as invented by Sir Godfrey N. Hounsfield**

This vital piece of modern medical machinery was invented by the little known engineer Hounsfield (1919–2004) who, along with his collaborator Allan Mcleod Cormack, was

awarded the Nobel Prize for his efforts. Houndsfield, who did not go to university and was largely self-taught, originally developed it simply as a way of gaining a three-dimensional image of the inside of a living organism.

### **Harry Potter, as created by J. K. Rowling**

Over fifteen years the seven Harry Potter books have together sold over 400 million copies worldwide, and the boy wizard now easily stands alongside those other fictional creations like Peter Pan and Sherlock Holmes as being part of global culture. Joanne Rowling's own remarkable rags-to-riches story is known to everyone and her achievement in getting children to read again (as well as many of their parents) cannot be overstated. The cinema adaptations have been equally phenomenally successful, creating a virtually separate film industry on their own.

### **The structure of DNA, as discovered by Francis Crick and James Watson**

In 1953 Crick, along with his American collaborator Watson, made one of the twentieth century's most important – if not *the* most important – scientific breakthroughs: the establishment of the double helix structure of the DNA molecule within the human cell. Apparently Crick visited the local pub that same day and announced, 'We have found the secret of life.' They were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1962.

### **The hovercraft, as invented by Sir Christopher Cockerell**

As with other inventors, Cockerell (1910–1999) was often



starved of cash from official sources when attempting to put ideas, which would later be regarded as revolutionary, into practice. Starting out with tin cans and an air blower to develop his notion of movement on a cushion of air, he eventually produced a working model in 1955. The hovercraft went on to become one of the emblems of post-war technological progress.

### **Sherlock Holmes, as created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle**

So familiar across the world is the famous fictional detective that he is assumed by many who beat a path to his famous address at 221b Baker Street to have been a real person. Featuring in sixty stories written by Conan Doyle, he remains the most portrayed film character, including memorably Basil Rathbone (fourteen times). Benedict Cumberbatch successfully updated the character to modern times for television. Aficionados, however, consider the British actor Jeremy Brett to have been the definitive Holmes. The detective's worldwide appeal shows no signs of diminishing.

### ***Frankenstein*, as created by Mary Shelley**

Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, first appeared in 1818. The monster, sewn together by the eponymous scientist, long since outgrew the page and is now a universally known fictional character, made famous by countless films, although many still confuse the maker and his ghastly creation. As portrayed in the 1930s by the exotic-sounding Boris Karloff (who was in fact a British gent by the name of William Henry Pratt), the monster, with his flat

head, bolted neck and lumbering walk, now belongs to global popular culture.

### **The world's first modern postal service**

Methods of posting of one kind or another have been around for some time of course, but it was the reforms of Sir Rowland Hill (1795–1879), and his introduction of pre-paid postage of varying rates, which essentially created the modern mass postal service as the world now knows it.

### **British television**

It might be that our real glory days are behind us here, but only a few decades ago British TV was routinely talked of as the best in the world. Whether it was the surreal humour of *Monty Python*, the slapstick of *Mr Bean* or the drama of *Brideshead Revisited* and *Upstairs Downstairs*, British programmes were exported across the globe and became popular viewing and henceforth highly influential in other countries. This remains true, even if the formats have changed: game and quiz shows which started here are now staples on TV channels throughout the world.

### **Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, as created by Agatha Christie**

These two fictional detectives from another, perhaps gentler age are alive and well and playing on a screen somewhere near you now. The perennially popular Dame Agatha (1890–1976) wrote over sixty detective novels, but it is Marple and Poirot who, thanks to continual film and television adaptations, are known throughout the world.

## **The Beatles**

British pop and rock music has shown astonishing variety and innovation over the past five decades, but in terms of popularity alone the fabulous four from Liverpool still stand head and shoulders above their nearest rivals. John, Paul, George and Ringo broke up over forty years ago, but their music remains as significant – and as enjoyed – as ever. Their immense worldwide success in the 1960s was followed by a stream of British bands and entertainers who became some of the biggest names in contemporary music and entertainment – from the Rolling Stones, David Bowie and Elton John to the Spice Girls, Florence + the Machine and Adele.

## **The BBC**

First formed in 1922 and then confirmed under a Royal Charter in 1927, the BBC remains perhaps the most famous broadcasting service in the world. It is certainly the largest, with over 20,000 staff. For almost the same length of time it has operated the BBC World Service (which started out as the BBC Empire Service), which still stretches across the globe, broadcasting in twenty-six languages as well as English. The standards of BBC journalism have been held in particularly high regard, with tens of millions tuning in to its news and programmes.

## **Sir Alfred Hitchcock**

Hitchcock (1899–1980) has been called the most influential director of all time; certainly he is the greatest film-maker Britain has ever produced. Originally from London's East

End, his career spanned six decades, including periods spent in both Britain and Hollywood, and countless classics, from *Rebecca* and *Foreign Correspondent* to *Vertigo* and, of course, *Psycho*. His reputation as the master of suspense is almost too limiting, when one considers the extent of his influence on myriad film genres and directors since.

### **The music of Benjamin Britten**

British classical music flourished in the twentieth century, and Britten (1913–1976) was at the very forefront. Through his operas, such as *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd* and *The Turn of the Screw*, his reputation became truly international and his work remains in the repertory. He founded the internationally prestigious Aldeburgh Festival, which takes place annually at Snape Maltings in Suffolk.

### **Sir Winston Churchill**

Despite the occasional ‘revisionist’ attempts to lessen his standing, Churchill (1874–1965) remains revered today, not just in Britain – where he is virtually beyond criticism – but in Europe, the US and around the world. It is true to say that he is something ‘we have given the world’ because it was his leadership at a crucial point in the Second World War that kept Hitler at bay and in doing so prevented the world from slipping deeper into the abyss. And despite his name carrying with it the very essence of Britishness, there is something international about him as an individual, in that the sheer extent of his talents, wit and force of character are an inspiration to people everywhere.

### **The novels of Charles Dickens**

The widespread celebrations of Dickens's bicentenary in 2012 were testament to his undiminished fame, and the special place he holds in the British imagination. However, the characters he created are known throughout the English-speaking world and beyond, thanks in large part to the countless cinema and television adaptations: Scrooge, Fagin, Mr Micawber and Oliver are familiar even to those who have never read the books. Modern writers regularly attempt to emulate the grand social sweep of Dickens's panoramic novels; most of them fail.

### **The cat's eye, as invented by Percy Shaw**

Shaw (1890–1976) was the Yorkshire-born inventor who came up with the simple idea of reflecting road studs. There are a number of different stories as to how he got the idea, the most famous being that it came to him when he saw his headlamps reflected in the eyes of a cat when driving one night. Many a fractious child on a long car journey has been kept occupied by that story.

### **Electromagnetism, as developed by Michael Faraday**

Faraday's contribution to the study of electromagnetism and electrochemistry was immense: he discovered electromagnetic induction, the basic principle behind the electric transformer and generator. For such an influential and important figure, Faraday (1791–1867) was, astonishingly, largely self-taught.

### **The music of Edward Elgar**

The more popularly known music of Elgar (1857–1934), such as his *Pomp & Circumstance* marches, was for many years held to be too imperialistic for modern tastes and so his overall output also suffered from critical neglect and disparagement. This has changed in more recent times, and his position as one of Britain's greatest composers has now been affirmed. His work, including the *Enigma Variations*, the cello concerto and *The Dream of Gerontius*, features firmly in the international classical repertory.

### **Railways**

The *Locomotion*, a steam locomotive, was built by the inventor and engineer George Stephenson and in 1825 was used on the famous Stockton and Darlington Railway, the first public steam railway in the world. Four years later, Stephenson produced the famous *Rocket*. Railways grew exponentially and by the middle of that century, there were over 7,000 miles of them throughout the country. Where Britain led, the rest of the world followed.

### **1984 by George Orwell**

Published in 1948, the title of this classic novel has entered the language worldwide as a byword for authoritarian dystopia, as indeed has the adjective 'Orwellian', again usually to denote the uses and abuses of power by regimes with tyrannical intent. Orwell, also the author of the equally important political parable *Animal Farm*, died two years later, full of

foreboding for the future. Interestingly, although a quarter of a century has passed since the title date, the fear of 'Big Brother', the Ministry of Truth and the threat of a future as a 'boot stamping on a human face forever' have lost none of their urgency or global relevance

### **Winnie-the-Pooh, as created by A. A. Milne**

The 'Bear of Very Little Brain' featured as the main character in just two children's books by the early twentieth-century British children's author (*Winnie the Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*), but his worldwide fame was such that Walt Disney considered him as valid a subject for a cartoon adaptation as Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty. A Latin version, *Winnie ille Pu*, became a *New York Times* bestseller in 1958.

### **Viagra**

British scientists have been credited with developing the sexual wonder drug of the modern age, although initially it seems to have been a rather accidental discovery: the drug was meant to treat heart problems, but produced this rather interesting side effect...

So, that's fifty things Britain has given the world. All lists tend to be idiosyncratic but I hope that there's something for everybody on it. I would add that I have left out those achievements where there was even a sliver of doubt or controversy, or where the credit could in some way be spread further afield than these shores. For example, John Logie

Baird was the first man to give a practical demonstration of working television (in central London in 1926) and could justly claim to have invented it, but his system lost out a decade later in favour of Marconi's in the US. If you feel that I'm being too pedantic here, too backward in coming forward in blowing Britain's trumpet, then please do write and let me know.

I hope too that some of the names, inventions and ideas on the list come as a surprise to some people, and that it starts discussion amongst family and friends. Doubtless, as with all lists, some will be outraged at what I have omitted. Why Churchill, for example, and no Nelson? Why Dickens and not Jane Austen? To this I would reply that these fifty had and continue to have significant worldwide importance. Churchill's role was a global one in the way that Nelson's perhaps wasn't. Dickens's individual characters are familiar throughout the world in the way Austen's aren't.

None of which is to say that we shouldn't be intensely proud of the achievements of either Nelson or Austen. Indeed, if we change the emphasis to concern ourselves more simply with great figures from our history – people we admire regardless of the worldwide impact they might have had – a new list emerges, which again could go on and on. Perhaps, inspired by this book, you'd like to start compiling one.

I will start you off: Wellington, Sir Francis Drake, Noël Coward, Evelyn Waugh, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Scott of the Antarctic, Florence Nightingale, Laurence Olivier, Elizabeth I, Chaucer, Captain Cook, Emmeline Pankhurst, Douglas Bader, David Livingstone...



