

English Identity: what does it mean?

Discussion at The Park

Wednesday 5 October 2016 7:30pm at *The Park Tavern, Macclesfield*

An Introduction:

The concept of the English "people", "nation" and "identity" has long been contentious amongst historians and other academics (Note 1).

Possibly the earliest reference to "the English" is *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written by the Venerable Bede in the 8th century. The main focus of this history is the conflict between the British (Celtic) and English (Saxon) Churches. It also records a general history of England and is believed to have been completed in 731. This book has played a key role in the development of an English identity (Note 2).

1066 is familiar to all English school pupils as the date of the successful invasion by the Normans, in claim of the Anglo-Saxon Crown. In contrast, little attention is given to the other successful invasion of these Isles in 1688 by William of Orange, in claim of the English Crown. Both of these invasions left profound imprints on the nature of "Englishness"; the first being early French and the second being strongly Enlightenment Dutch. (Note 3)

A constant strand of English history from 1066 to the 20th Century was a steady growth of English dominance over the other parts of our Isles, until about the 1880s. The British Empire was also gradually established, from about 1600. As the non-English parts of our Isles have reasserted themselves, over the same span as the British Empire has faded away, the English have begun to think more about their own sense of identity. (Note 4)

Questions:

1. Going around our circle, how do each of us identify ourselves: English, British, other, mixed identities? Are any of us non-UK citizens? How does our group compare to the current picture of national identity given in the Wikipedia article of Note 1, below?
2. What is the difference between The United Kingdom, Great Britain and England? Does it matter that these terms are often used interchangeably?
3. What do we suggest might be the essential characteristics of any sense of a people's identity, first, in general terms? A shared history, perhaps? A shared language? A flag? An anthem? Shared values? A shared ethnicity? Maybe a characteristic sport? Can we suggest anything else?
4. Of the characteristics we have identified, which apply to "the English"? Which not?
5. There is much discussion of the potential for tensions within the UK to lead to its breaking up. What about regional differences within England itself? What regional differences are we aware of, if any, and how serious are these differences?

Further Reading:

Those who wish to learn a little more might wish to refer to these sources.

1. A brief history of the English people, nationality and identity is in Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_people
2. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is available as a pdf, for those who would like to read bits of it <http://www.heroofcamelot.com/docs/Bede-Ecclesiastical-History.pdf> and a background account is here https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiastical_History_of_the_English_People.
3. *Going Dutch* by Lisa Jardine, published 2008, was discussed in *The Daily Mail*, here: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-560614/The-1688-invasion-Britain-thats-erased-history.html>.
4. Two of the most prominent recent books tackling English identity are (a) *The Isles* by Norman Davies, 2000 and (b) *The English and Their History* by Robert Tombs, 2014. There is also a contemporary, campaigning website called *English Identity* at <http://www.englishidentity.co.uk>