

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Life in England

Scott Polar Research Institute
Cambridge, England
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

The first and most immediate handicap that confronts an American family in England is that the "natives" speak something akin to English. This is not meant to be an enigmatic statement. The fact that the local population speaks English throws one off balance - you can easily forget that you are in a foreign country. For England is just as foreign to an American as any other European country.

The consequence is that you forget this fact and expect to find life as it was back in the U.S.. Because social intercourse is so simple one expects the English to speak, act and think as we do at home - and as a result many Americans are quickly disillusioned and begin to make hasty comparisons which inevitably result in the conclusion that the English are inexplicably backward.

Among early conversations the subject of central heating is inevitable. "What is the matter with you Americans, don't you like fresh air"? English homes are kept at about 50° F. and they think any inside temperature over about 60° is a heat wave. Every room has a separate heating system; sometimes using coal, sometimes coke (supplies of each are kept in separate bins at the rear of the house), sometimes portable oil heaters, sometimes electric heaters, and sometimes gas heaters - either built-in or portable. Bedrooms are never heated - even in darkest and coldest winter; you just jump into bed with heavy pajamas and pile over you four blankets plus an eiderdown quilt - then you burrow under this mass of covering and breathe in that brisk air (because windows are kept open) and then hope you go to sleep before you freeze to death.

Refrigerators: "why you poor old deluded Yank, don't you know that food will never taste properly once you put it into a freezer"? [Even if they were convinced otherwise sales would not jump with prices ranging from \$300 up (10 weeks average wages) for 5.6 cubic feet of refrigeration.]

Supermarkets and shopping: "What don't you want fresh food? Oh, I forgot, you Yanks eat from 'tins'....." The English housewife shops six days a week and spends anywhere from an hour to four doing it. Children up to the age of five are literally strapped into the "pram" (usually a very fancy and expensive affair costing

from \$60 to over \$100) and off they go on foot. Several shops must be visited including the grocer, the butcher, the green-grocer, the baker, the chemist etc.

Since our last visit to England some seven years ago much change is evident in the availability of consumer goods. There is practically full employment, and such items are more abundant than ever before. Restrictions on "hire-purchase" (installment buying) have just been largely removed, and one is able to buy almost any appliance, auto or furniture with little down payment.

Purchase tax also has been greatly decreased from most items (most conspicuously taxed are autos [50%] and electrical appliances), and the shops are stocked with a wide diversity of products. There is only one trouble: prices are exceedingly high for the average family.

To demonstrate this we have prepared the following rough table using selected examples of consumer purchasing showing the cost in England as a percentage of the cost in the U.S. for the same item or service:

<u>Food (ave. 104%):</u>		<u>Services (ave. 65%):</u>	
Pork chops	56%	Laundry shirt	100%
Steak	83	Clean suit	112
Chicken	150	Press suit	100
Fish	100	Haircut (mens')	22
Bread	60	Haircut (womens')	25
Eggs	70	Cobbler shop	50
Milk	73	Wash car	80
Fresh vegetables	100	Baby sitter	55
Fresh fruit in season	100	Cleaning woman	42
Canned goods	250		
Flour, sugar etc.	100	<u>Clothing (ave. 110%):</u>	
		Mens' suit	80
<u>Appliances & Furniture (155%):</u>		Mens' shirt	180
Table TV, 17"	210	Womens' suit	90
Good qual. phonograph	140	Childrens' clothes	100
Automatic washer	150	Woolens	90
Automatic dryer	200		
Refrigerator	260	<u>Entertainment, etc. (56%):</u>	
Pop-up toaster	100	Movie	40
Portable typewriter	100	Theatre, concert	50
Furniture	130	Books	60
Household supplies	110	Restaurant meals	75
<u>Medical & Insurance (45%):</u>		<u>Tobacco (ave. 230%):</u>	
Medical costs	15	Pack 20 cigarettes	160
Insurance costs	75	Pipe tobacco, 1 oz.	300

<u>Transportation (ave. 80%):</u>		<u>Housing (ave. 90%):</u>	
Purchase family sedan**	83%	Purchase new 3 bedroom house	60
Gasoline	150	Mortgage interest	100
Grease, oil etc.	100	Rental furnished	100
Busfare	25	Rental unfurnished	100
Cabfare	70	Utilities	95
Subway (London)	50		
** Including 50% tax		<u>Miscellaneous (ave. 65%):</u>	
		Newspaper, magazines	50
		Postage	75

A simple weighted system of assigning 30% of family income for food, another 30% for housing and the remaining 40% for all else will show that expenses in England are about 98% of those in the United States. (This compares favorably with recent figures used by the U.S. Government in determining cost-of-living for overseas employees).

This 98% becomes much more meaningful when one remembers that the apparent median English weekly wage is approximately £10 to £12 (about \$30). This is less than half of the most recent comparable figures for the U.S.

Thus the average English family is faced with the prospect of paying, by and large, the same prices as his American counterpart to achieve the same standard of living - but has half or less than half as much money to do it with. The natural result is that the standard of living, as measured by ownership of those typical items listed in the above table, is considerably less than in the U.S.

Naturally, emphasis varies from family to family, Some will sacrifice most anything to have a TV set, others to own and drive an auto. The latter, although much more commonly used than in previous years, is still considered a luxury, and most people in provincial England will invariably cycle or use public transportation. Nevertheless, auto registrations have increased from 3.5 to 4.4 million in the last three years, thus providing now an auto for every 11 Englishmen.

Very few English homes are, as yet, equipped with such items as refrigerators, automatic washers and dryers and automatic toasters, and we have yet to see a dishwasher. Furniture is seemingly never replaced or thrown away - it simply changes hands, as do old automobiles.

Other generalities can be stated: steaks, chicken and all canned goods are considered luxuries, as indeed are almost all electrical appliances except lamps. New furniture (much of it horribly Victorian in appearance) is quite rare in English homes.

But the English will not give up smoking, even though the cost is almost prohibitive (I've just about put away my pipe because I wince having to pay \$1.50 for two ounces of tobacco to fill my pouch - and we are both grateful that we do not use cigarettes.)

The tendency is to eat fairly well at the expense of buying very many clothes or in living in a home beyond one's means. The great majority of children's clothing is knitted by hand, and almost all English housewives wash and iron their husband's shirts. Clothing is sent to the cleaners far less regularly than in the U.S., and there is little social stigma for middle-class professional men to wear a non-white shirt, which needs laundering less often.

English families buy and read many more books than American families, but far less reading matter comes into their homes. They are not a nation of subscribers to dozens of periodicals as so many of us are at home.

The younger generation attend as many movies as do their American counterparts, but total movie admissions have decreased from 24 per capita per year in 1955 to an estimated 16 in 1958. Meanwhile, during the same period, T.V. licences (each T.V. or radio owner is obliged to pay an annual tax) have increased from 5.5 million to almost nine (one for every 1.5 households).

Concerts and theatre are well attended here - and certainly the relatively low cost is an important factor. And many of the recent fads seem to have overrun England like the plague. Hula hoops are in great demand, and rock-and-roll swept over the country last year and is still evident.

Since the English do not theoretically have to wait until after "Thanksgiving" the shops have been, for weeks, decked out in all their Christmas finery. The commercial emphasis on Christmas buying is just as strong here as in the U.S., and Christmas cards are splattered over almost every shop. At present we hope to spend the holidays with friends in Scotland, and I shall look forward to writing further with respect to these festivities.

Yours sincerely,



John Hanessian, Jr.

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