



**A GUIDE TO ENGLISH  
CULTURE AND  
CUSTOMS**



**St.  
Giles  
International**



**This document has been prepared for you to read before you leave for England, and to refer to during your time there. It gives you information about English customs and describes some points that may be different from your own culture. Part of the fun of coming to live or study in another country is observing and learning about the culture and customs of its people. We don't want to spoil the surprise for you but we do understand that it can be useful to know how other people will expect you to behave, and will behave towards you whilst you're away from home. This can avoid awkward misunderstandings for both you and the people you meet and make friends with! We hope that your stay in England will be thoroughly enjoyable and we very much look forward to welcoming you at St Giles College.**



### **Queues –**

The English are famous for being very polite. Always join the back of the queue and wait your turn when buying tickets, waiting in a bank, post office or for a bus or train. If you ‘jump the queue’ in England you are known as a ‘queue jumper’ and although people may not say anything to you, they will make very unhappy noises!

If there is any confusion about whether there is one queue or more for several different cashiers, you should still wait your turn and stay behind everyone who arrived before you. English people do not try to get to the front first; they are very fair. You will often hear people saying ‘Who’s next?’ The general rule is that you are next if you were the first person to have arrived in the queue!

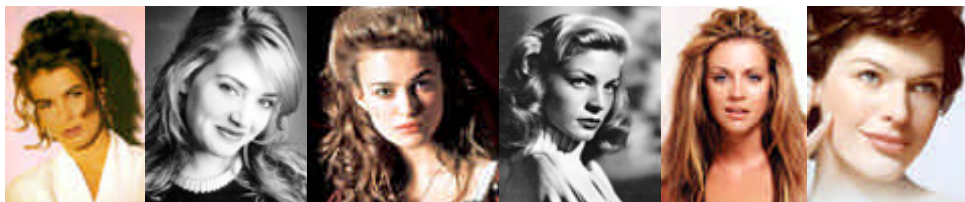


### **Smoking –**

Although you are generally allowed to smoke in public, many places that serve food and drink have an allocated non-smoking section. It is always important to check if it’s ok to smoke. If there is an ashtray on the table it usually means you can but if not, it is always a good idea to ask a member of staff. Inside banks, post offices, shops, hairdressers and offices it is ALWAYS forbidden to smoke.

### **Drugs –**

Buying and selling illicit drugs is illegal in the UK. The police are very strict about enforcing these laws and if you are found carrying drugs either in school or in public, you may face a custodial sentence or large fine. Cannabis is illegal in England.



### **Women –**

Women in the UK are seen as equal to men, and should be treated fairly. It is normal for men and women to do an equal share of the household tasks and childcare. This may not be the case in certain more traditional British families and every couple has their own arrangement.

Safety for women: It is never a good idea for women to walk around on their own at night. Make sure that you use registered taxis and try to stay with a group as much as possible.

### Personal Hygiene –



### Toilets

It is customary to flush the toilet after use and to dispose of toilet paper in the toilet. Ladies' sanitary towels should however, be placed in the bin.



### Tissues -

It is British custom to blow your nose with a tissue. Some people keep a tissue or a handkerchief up their sleeve or in their pocket. It is not polite to sniff.

### Spitting -

In England, it is extremely rude to spit in public.



### Water –

The water in the taps is clean enough to drink and brush your teeth with. Very few people drink bottled water in England but some people filter their water in a jug before they drink it.

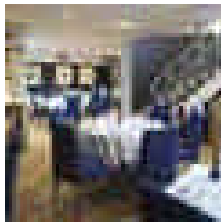


### **Meal times –**

Most English people eat three times a day. Breakfast is usually a small meal during the week (cereal, toast or some fruit) but a more substantial cooked breakfast of eggs, bacon and tomato is sometimes eaten at the weekends.

People in England usually eat a light lunch – soup, sandwiches or a salad are the most common foods chosen for a weekday lunch. This is normally eaten between 12 and 2pm. At the weekend, this becomes the main meal of the day for many people and families often have a large cooked meal, typically of fish or meat with vegetables and rice or potatoes.

In England, the evening meal is usually eaten between 5:30pm and 7:30pm. This might be called ‘tea,’ ‘supper’ or ‘dinner.’ It is normally a large meal, consisting of meat or fish and vegetables, a dish made with eggs, pasta or pizza.



### **Eating in restaurants -**

The English are very polite to waiters in restaurants. If you want a waiter to come to your table, you should raise your hand but not snap your fingers. To attract their attention when they are close by, you should say ‘excuse me.’

### **British table manners and customs:**

If you put your knife and fork on your plate, a waiter will think that you have finished eating. If you want to take a break but have not yet finished, place your knife and fork by the side of your plate. A good waiter will not clear anything from the table until everyone has finished eating.

In England, it is considered very bad manners to put your elbows on the table and to speak with your mouth full. It is also not polite to make a lot of noise when you eat; chewing noisily and slurping are bad manners in England.

### **Service charge**

It is customary to leave a service charge of 10% of the bill at the end of the meal UNLESS the bill says *Service Included*.

### **Eating in public –**

In England, it is acceptable behaviour to eat, drink and chew gum in the street and on public transport. You should not eat in shops, banks, offices or in post offices.



### **Alcohol –**

It is illegal for young people under the age of 18 to consume alcohol in public. Some pubs and bars have an age limit of over 21. If you look younger than 18 you may be asked to provide photo ID in the form of a passport or driving licence.

It is acceptable in British culture for men and women to drink as a form of social behaviour.



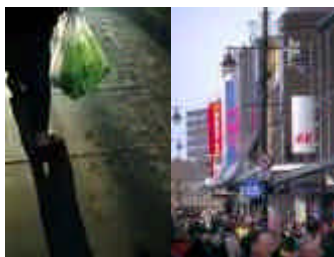
### **Pub closing times –**

Monday – Saturday 11pm

Sunday – 10:30pm

10 or 15 minutes before these times, the barman will call ‘Last orders!’ Drinks will stop being served when the barman says ‘Time!’ and then you will be given about 20 minutes to finish your drinks before you are asked to leave.

Although these are standard closing times, a lot of pubs and bars in England now have a licence to stay open later. This will usually be clearly advertised inside the bar.



### **Shop Opening times\* –**

Shops open between 9-10am

Shops close between 5:30-6pm

Shops in England are open all day; they DO NOT close for lunch.

Late night shopping:  
On Thursdays, most large shops are open until 8pm.

Sunday opening:  
Most large shops open on Sundays. They are allowed to open for 6 hours but opening and closing times vary. Supermarkets often close at 4pm on Sundays.



**Bank and Post Office Opening times\* –**

Monday – Friday 9am-4: 30pm

Saturday – 9-12 (some banks do not open on Saturday)

Sunday – closed

\* This is only an indication. Times may vary according to location.

**Electricity –**

Standard voltage in the UK is 240volts. Our plugs have three pins. Please bring adaptors with you if you wish to use electronic equipment from your own country.

**Clothing –**

Students tend to dress casually during the daytime at school.

You may wish to bring special clothes for going out in the evening and some bars and clubs will not allow you to enter if you're wearing jeans or casual trainers. The climate in England is very changeable so it is a good idea to bring warm, waterproof clothing if you are arriving during the autumn and winter months. Even in mid-summer, it is not unusual to have windy or rainy weather in England.

If you are staying with a host family, you should ensure that you are decently dressed at all times. It may cause offence if you are not dressed before you go to breakfast for example, but it is a good idea to follow the example of the hosts with regards to what is acceptable.



**On the road –**

In England we drive on the left! If you are accustomed to driving on the right, remember to look in the other direction when you're crossing the road.

Zebra crossings - If there is a black and white crossing marked on the road, cars are obliged to stop and let you cross the road. You should be cautious though, sometimes drivers don't see you waiting by the side of the road!

Speed limits –

In residential areas - 30mph (unless indicated otherwise)

On main roads – 60mph (unless indicated otherwise)

On motorways and dual carriageways) – 70mph (unless indicated otherwise)



### **Public transport –**

Buying tickets:

If you are catching a bus or train, you should always try and buy your ticket before boarding. On buses, you should get a ticket before boarding if it is possible to do so (some bus stops have machines which tell you to buy a ticket before you get on), otherwise you can buy them from the driver or the conductor.

Sitting down:

If you get on a bus or a train, it is acceptable to sit down next to someone (you don't need to ask!) If you arrive at a spare double seat, you should sit next to the window and leave a spare seat for other people to use. It is considered impolite to sit in the aisle and expect fellow passengers to climb over you in order to sit down. If someone is sat next to you and you want to get off the bus, just say 'excuse me.'

There are **priority seats** on most buses. These are reserved for the elderly, the disabled, pregnant women or people travelling with very young children in their arms. It is ok to sit on these seats, but you should get up and offer your place if anyone of the aforementioned people get on.

Standing up:

You are allowed to stand up on public transport. Some old buses have a limit to the number of people who allowed to stand and the conductor will not let you board if the bus is full. You **MUST NOT** stand **UPSTAIRS** on a **DOUBLE DECKER BUS!**



### **Social behaviour**

Personal space:

You should not stand too close to people when you talk to them. English people find this uncomfortable.



Meeting and Greeting:

Most people shake hands when they meet for the first time or in a formal situation. When people are good friends, they will sometimes kiss each other on the cheek to say hello, goodbye or thank you.



### **Eye contact:**

In public, and particularly on public transport, people avoid making eye contact with strangers. Most people either read or look towards the ground slightly rather than at peoples' faces. People in England find it uncomfortable if they feel as though someone is watching them.

### **'Sorry'**

The word sorry in England is almost a reflex reaction. 'Sorry' is not necessarily used to indicate an admission of guilt and English people say it a lot so don't be surprised by it! We use sorry in a number of situations – here are just a few!

- ? If you bump into someone, or if someone bumps into you – both people say sorry, do NOT respond by saying 'that's ok!'
- ? We say 'sorry' if our arm accidentally brushes against someone else's when passing through a crowded doorway. We even say sorry if we don't actually touch them. They will probably say sorry too!
- ? We say 'sorry?' when we haven't heard someone.
- ? Sorry precedes any intrusive question e.g. 'Sorry, do you know if this train stops at Liverpool?' 'Sorry- do you have the time' 'Sorry- is this seat free?'
- ? We say 'sorry but' before we complain about something e.g. 'Sorry, but I didn't have a towel in my hotel room' 'Sorry, but I bought this shirt and it's got a rip in it.'
- ? We sometimes say 'sorry' instead of 'excuse me' when we want to attract someone's attention or we want them to move.

### **'Ps and Qs'**

Children in England are often told to 'mind their Ps and Qs'

P is for **Please** and Q is for **Thankyou**.

Whenever you ask someone to do anything, you should say please, and whenever someone does something for you (even if it is part of their job) you should say 'Thank you.' Here are a few examples:

- ? When you get out of a taxi, you should always say **thank you** to the driver.
- ? You should say **thank you** to a waiter when they give you your food.
- ? You should say **thank you** to a shopkeeper when they give you your change.
- ? When you are offered something you don't want you should never say no, you should always say **no thank you** or just **thank you**.
  
- ? You should say **please** when you ask the taxi driver to take you somewhere, 'I'd like to go to Buckingham Palace please.'
- ? You should say **please** to the waiter when you order your food, 'I'd like the salmon pasta please.'
- ? When you are offered something you want, the answer should never just be **yes** it should always be **yes please**.

