

1) City life is cool; but is country life cooler?

Apparently yes. More and more people in Britain want to live in the country, and this is causing more and more problems in some rural areas.

The population of British cities has been falling for years. Cities like Liverpool and Glasgow have lost about 30% of their population in 30 years. But Britain's population is still growing. Where are the people going? Answer: to the country.

The English countryside has a classic image. People imagine that life in the country is slow and calm; that there are no traffic jams, no pollution, and no crime. In some places, this is true; but in others it is not.

Small towns and villages are becoming more and more popular; people have more space and most houses have gardens. But problems are growing. Lots of people want to live in the country and work in the city; so more and more people travel long distances each day, to go to work. Of course they don't use buses (they are too slow) or trains (they don't stop in the country); they use cars. And although they live in the country, they want to use supermarkets and good fast roads.... but they do not want to see them or hear them. Besides, lots of young people say that life in the country is boring: there is not enough to do, there are not enough activities and excitements.

Little villages now have traffic problems in the morning, just like big cities! And they are getting worse.

The problems are very complicated! If everyone moves into the country, large parts of the countryside will disappear! People leave cities and big towns, to escape from urban problems; but more and more, they are bringing their problems with them.

On warm summer days, and cold winter days, air pollution can be a big problem in large parts of the south of England, not just in London. Traffic jams are now often part of life, even in the country; crime has become a serious problem in rural areas.

Perhaps there is hope for the future. Soon Britain's population will stop rising. From about the year 2020, it will perhaps start to fall. In 100 year's time, there will be less people in Britain than today - perhaps two million less. No doubt there will be less pollution too; oil and petrol will probably be rare by then.



2) No more fish and chips?

Long before the Big Mac was invented, Britain had its own national form of fast food.

Every town in Britain had its fish 'n' chip shops. No British town is more than 150 km. from a sea port; once railways were built in the nineteenth century, fresh sea fish could easily be bought in all British towns. Cheaper than meat, sea fish became a popular source of protein ; by 1870, "fish and chip shops" were springing up all over the country. For a hundred years, they were the classic popular restaurant, British style.

"When I was a young man, it was the sort of thing you'd have once or twice a week," remembers 82-year old Arthur Mowbrey. "Sixty years ago, you'd get a full size portion of cod and chips for sixpence. It was cheap, and good."

Fish 'n' chips was nourishing too. It was a proper meal, that you could eat in the street on your way home from work, or during the lunch-break. Wrapped in newspaper, it would keep warm to the last chip, even on the coldest days of the year.

In the last quarter of a century, things have changed.

"It's not so popular with young people these days," says Lizzie, a teenager. "If young people want to eat out, they'll go to a Burger King or something like that, or a Chinese take-away. Fish 'n' chips is a bit old-fashioned really, I suppose. "

Thousands of chip shops, however, have closed in the last twenty-five years. They have survived best in seaside towns, where the fish is really fresh, and people visit them more as a tradition than for any other reason.

Yet nothing, perhaps, can save the classic fish 'n' chip shop from extinction. Fish 'n' chips wrapped in newspaper is already just a memory of the past. British and European hygiene rules no longer allow food to be wrapped in old papers....Of course, you can still eat fish and chips with your fingers if you want, but there are now plastic throw-away forks for those who don't want to get greasy fingers! Yet in spite of these changes, the classic fish 'n' chip shop could disappear from British streets in a few years' time, for a completely different reason..... lack of fish.

As a result of modern industrial fishing, some types of fish are facing extinction in the North Sea and Atlantic. "Overfishing in the North Sea has reached crisis levels," say Greenpeace. Quotas have been introduced, but of course fishermen in Britain, France, Spain and other countries protest, because jobs are lost. Sadly, this is inevitable as there will be few fish left to catch. One way or the other, sea fish will become rarer, and therefore more expensive.

The gradual disappearance of the traditional British fish 'n' chips shop is therefore bound to continue. Fish'n' chips will probably survive only in expensive restaurants

3) London in the Sea?

Planet Earth is getting hotter, and the level of the sea is rising. This is going to cause massive problems for many seaside cities; and London is one of them.

Many parts of London will be under water by 2060, if nothing is done to protect them.

The Thames Barrier...Will this still be enough to protect London in 2050? London on the Thames, yes; but London in the Sea? No thank you! Yet this could happen before 2060, unless steps are taken quite quickly, to prevent it.

As a result of global warming, the sea level around the south east corner of England is expected to rise by 54 cm in just half a century! And scientists now say that many parts of London will be at serious risk from flooding by the sea within 50 years.

It's not all of London that is in danger; just some parts to the east of the city. And they won't be under water all the time; just when there are very high tides.

The low-lying suburbs beside the Thames in the East End of London are already protected from high tides by a massive barrier that stretches right across the river; but more defences will be needed along the banks of the Thames to protect a larger area to the north of the river, and further east. And no-one really knows if the existing Thames Barrier will still be enough to protect London, even in 2050.

The Thames barrier was opened in 1982. During the first ten years of its life, it was closed, on average, just once a year. Some years it was never closed at all. Between 2000 and 2013, it was closed an average of almost six times a year; and in the year 2013-2014, it was closed 50 times.... in twelve months. The level of the sea is getting steadily higher, that is certain.

Other towns and low lying areas in the east of England are facing similar problems; and it will take a lot of time, and cost a lot of money, to protect them.

Of course, there have always been occasional very high tides. A thousand years ago, there were big floods around London; and in 1953, before the Thames Barrier was built, over 300 people lost their lives in "the big flood"; but today the dangers are bigger. There are more people, more roads, more infrastructure. In the past, people did not build in places where there was a risk of flooding. Today, in southeast England, land is so expensive, that people build everywhere – even in places that are liable to be flooded.

Scientists also say that global warming will lead to warmer and drier summers in the south east of England. This will cause major changes in vegetation, and several species of native wildlife will not be able to survive. Wet in winter, hot in summer: will that be London in fifty years' time?

London faces big problems in the next fifty years; but London is a rich city, which can pay to build the protections that will be needed. London's difficulties will be very small, compared to the problems that will be faced in some of the world's poorer countries, like Bangla Desh.



4) America's Amish; model society?

America's Amish communities live a lifestyle that has changed little since the 18th century; but in other respects, they are showing other Americans the way forward into the twenty-first.... Amish communities are strictly religious and self-contained, they do without the essentials of modern-day life such as electricity and cars, and they do not mix with people outside of their own community

The Amish are members of a protestant religious movement that first came to America from the upper Rhine valley over three hundred years ago, and have kept their traditions and lifestyles. They are very law-abiding citizens, and their community is one in which crime is almost, though not entirely, inexistent; Amish families live strict lives, following the same code of morals as their ancestors as if time had stopped.

The most remarkable thing to note about the Amish is the expansion of their community, its efficiency, its social cohesion, and their recent adoption of "green" technology, including wind-power and solar energy. Although they work the land using traditional horse-drawn machines, and use no chemical fertilizers, their agriculture is among the most productive in North America !

The Amish community is growing faster than virtually any other community in the USA. In the 40 years from 1950 to 1990, the number of Amish in Pennsylvania grew by 400% , all by natural growth, not through the influx of immigrants. The total Amish population of the United States in the year 1900 was no more than a couple of thousand; today they are over 260,000. Amish couples , who reject modern medicine and all forms of birth control, have some of the biggest families in America, with an average of over six children per family.

Amish teenagers tend to be as normally rebellious as any other American teens, until they are baptized. Before baptism, Amish teenagers are not obliged to conform to the strict Amish codes and behave much like other American teens; up to 30% of older unbaptized Amish teens own cars, and 40% have driving licences! Amish teens also enjoy baseball, dancing and even alcohol! Amish baptism takes place between the ages of 16 and 21, sometimes even later. But only about 18% of young Amish abandon the austere way of life of their ancestors

Amish families do not live a primitive life; they reject the use of electricity in the home, but they use kerosene and wood that provide plenty of light and heat and comfort in their homes; besides, 80% of homes in some Amish communities are using wind or solar power ! In this respect, far from being stuck in the past, they can be considered as one of the most advanced communities in the world ! Free time is not one of their major preoccupations! they do not have televisions or radios, but they have other social activities and they are not cut off from the rest of America. They know what is going on in the rest of the United States, and like many other Americans, they are alarmed by many modern developments. This explains why most young Amish remain in their community. Though Amish life is hard in many ways, it is free of most of the pressures and problems of the rest of American society.



5) TEA and the British

The father of modern economics, Adam Smith, once described the British as a "nation of shopkeepers". He might just as easily have described them as a nation of tea-drinkers, since tea has long been a national favourite. The image of the tea-drinking British is not just a myth; it is a reflection of reality. Today, tea accounts for 43% of all the drink consumed in Britain, excluding plain water.

The best way to enjoy tea is in a traditional English tea-room where tea is served with scones and cream, and cake.

There was a time in the 1960's and 1970's when some people believed that coffee would replace tea as Britain's favourite beverage. That did not occur, and today, tea remains firmly Britain's favourite drink, accounting for over two fifths of all the drink consumed in Britain with the exception of water.

The British are fond of tea : From the Royal Family down to the humblest of the homeless and the out-of-work, tea is more than just a pleasure; it is an essential part of life! It is one of those things that distinguishes life in Britain from life anywhere else.

It was in 1657 that Thomas Garway, the owner of a coffee house, sold the first tea in London. The drink soon became popular as an alternative to coffee, and by the year 1700, there were over 500 coffee houses in the British capital selling the new drink. In those days however, it was not something for anyone; the cost of a pound of tea in the year 1700 (up to 36 shillings a pound) was almost the same as it was in 1985 (average: £1.80 a pound).... but in 1700, a working man earned one shilling a week, compared to £140 in 1985!

For a century and a half, tea remained an expensive drink; many employers served a cup of it to their workers in the middle of the morning, thus inventing a lasting British institution, the "tea break"; but as a social drink outside the workplace, tea was reserved for the nobility and for the growing middle classes. It was the 7th Duchess of Bedford who, in around 1800, started the popular fashion of "afternoon tea", a ceremony taking place at about four o'clock. Until then, people did not usually eat or drink anything between lunch and dinner but soon a small meal at the end of the afternoon, involving tea and sandwiches became part of a way of life.

Tea became much cheaper during the nineteenth century so its popularity spread through British society it became Britain's favourite drink. In working-class households, it was served with the main meal of the day and called "high tea"

Today, tea can be drunk at any time of day, mainly at breakfast or during the mid-morning "tea break" in British offices and factories (though some people prefer coffee at this time of day); and for anyone working outdoors, a thermos of tea is almost an essential part of the day's equipment. Later in the day, "afternoon tea" is still a way of life in the south of England and among the middle classes, whereas "high tea" has remained a tradition in the north of Britain.



6) The Buy Nothing movement

Social media, magazines and shop windows bombard people daily with things to buy, and British consumers are buying more clothes and shoes than ever before. Online shopping means it is easy for customers to buy without thinking, while major brands offer such cheap clothes that they can be treated like disposable items – worn two or three times and then thrown away.

In Britain, the average person spends more than £1,000 on new clothes a year, which is around four per cent of their income. That might not sound like much, but that figure hides two far more worrying trends for society and for the environment. First, a lot of that consumer spending is via credit cards. British people currently owe approximately £670 per adult to credit card companies. That's 66 per cent of the average wardrobe budget. Also, not only are people spending money they don't have, they're using it to buy things they don't need. Britain throws away 300,000 tons of clothing a year.

People might not realise they are part of the disposable clothing problem because they donate their unwanted clothes to charities. But charity shops can't sell all those unwanted clothes. 'Fast fashion' goes out of fashion as quickly as it came in and is often too poor quality to recycle; people don't want to buy it second-hand. Huge quantities end up being thrown away, and a lot of clothes that charities can't sell are sent abroad, causing even more economic and environmental problems.

However, a different trend is springing up in opposition to consumerism – the 'buy nothing' trend. The idea originated in Canada in the early 1990s and then moved to the US, where it became a rejection of the overspending and overconsumption of Black Friday and Cyber Monday during Thanksgiving weekend. On Buy Nothing Day people organise various types of protests and cut up their credit cards. Throughout the year, Buy Nothing groups organise the exchange and repair of items they already own.

The trend has now reached influencers on social media who usually share posts of clothing and make-up that they recommend for people to buy. Some YouTube stars now encourage their viewers not to buy anything at all for periods as long as a year. Two friends in Canada spent a year working towards buying only food. For the first three months they learned how to live without buying electrical goods, clothes or things for the house. For the next stage, they gave up services, for example haircuts, eating out at restaurants or buying petrol for their cars. In one year, they'd saved \$55,000.

The changes they made meant two fewer cars on the roads, a reduction in plastic and paper packaging and a positive impact on the environment from all the energy saved. If everyone followed a similar plan, the results would be impressive. But even if you can't manage a full year without going shopping, you can participate in the anti-consumerist movement by refusing to buy things you don't need. Buy Nothing groups send a clear message to companies that people are no longer willing to accept the environmental and human cost of overconsumption.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ben & Lisa', followed by a small number '6'.

7) The sharing economy

If we look around us at the things we have purchased at some point in our lives, we would no doubt notice that not everything we own is being put to good use: the thick woollen coat which we thought looked trendy despite the fact that we live in a tropical country, the smartphone that got put away when we bought ourselves the newest model, the car that only gets used at the weekends, or even the guest room in our house that somehow got turned into a storeroom.

Those underutilised items may seem useless to some, but could be an asset to others. With the advent of the internet, online communities have figured out a way to generate profit from the sharing of those underused assets. Using websites and social media groups that facilitate the buying and selling of second-hand goods, it is now easier for sharing activities to take place. And this is known as the sharing economy.

These democratised online platforms are providing a chance for people to make some extra money . To give an example, parents previously might not have thought of selling their children's old equipment at a car boot sale, but with online marketplaces, parents are now able to sell on those baby clothes that their children have outgrown or expensive baby equipment they don't use any longer

Businesses have also caught on to the profitability of the sharing economy and are seeking to gain from making use of those underutilised resources. A business model that has rapidly risen in popularity sees companies providing an online platform that puts customers in contact with those who can provide a particular product or service. Companies like Airbnb act as a middle - man for people to cash in on their unused rooms and houses and let them out as lucrative accommodation. Another example is Uber, which encourages people to use their own personal cars as taxis to make some extra cash in their free time.

This move towards a sharing economy is not without criticisms. Unlike businesses, unregulated individuals do not have to follow certain regulations and this can lead to poorer and inconsistent quality of goods and services and a higher risk of fraud. Nevertheless, in the consumerist society we live in today, the increased opportunities to sell on our unwanted and underused goods can lead to a lesser impact on our environment.

Refused