



**AN UTTERLY IMPARTIAL
HISTORY OF BRITAIN (OR
2000 YEARS OF UPPER
CLASS IDIOTS IN CHARGE)**

JOHN O'FARRELL

**TRANSWORLD
BOOKS**

About the Book

When a historian says 'Waterloo', do you automatically think of Abba?

Do you wonder how Neville Chamberlain failed to realize that Hitler was a baddie when the Fuhrer was so clearly wearing a Nazi armband?

And why did the Normans fight the Saxons at a place called 'Battle?' Did they just see the road signs and just think that's where they were supposed to go?

From 55 BC to 1945, *An Utterly Impartial History of Britain* informs, explains, but most of all laughs at the seemingly incomprehensible rollercoaster of events that make up the story of Great Britain. Packed with great characters trapped in impossible dilemmas, this true-life drama will have you on the edge of your seats thinking 'I wonder which of them dies at the end?' (Well, they *all* do obviously. It was ages ago.)

As entertaining as a witch burning and a lot more laughs.

'Mum, Dad, the Second Crusade is starting! Can we put a St George's flag on the cart?'

'No dear, we don't want everyone to think Daddy is a builder.'

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AN UTTERLY
IMPARTIAL
HISTORY OF BRITAIN

or 2000 Years of Upper Class
Idiots in Charge

John O'Farrell

For Freddie

Author's Note

During the writing of this book there were many occasions when I found myself flicking from one source to another, perplexed to discover that different historians gave conflicting dates for the same event. One respected scholar would assert that some ancient war lasted nine years, another might say eleven. It was at this point that I found phrases like 'around a decade later' incredibly useful. If the academics couldn't agree then I felt it was my duty to blur the facts further and make things as vague and murky as possible. When it comes to the audio book, I'll just mumble.

However, may I apologize now for any further errors that slipped through this process of checking and re-checking. My only defence is that these mistakes are fairly minor compared to the decision of the Scottish army to invade England during the Black Death.

Great Moments in British History

(and some mediocre ones to pad it out a bit)

- 55 BC** Julius Caesar takes his chariots to Britain on specially built cross-channel ferry. Fails to get four nice seats together for the crossing.
- AD 45** British chieftains agree to pay Roman taxes, but claim large expenses for employing their wives as 'secretarial assistants'.
- 60** Boudicca burns down Colchester, St Albans and London. Roman Governor regrets asking her if it's her 'funny week'.
- 122** Emperor Hadrian commissions defensive wall. Builders repeatedly call him 'Adrian' just to wind him up.
- 410** Goths overrun Western Roman Empire. Romans forced to wear black and listen to Marilyn Manson.
- 450s** Angles, Saxons and Jutes invade south-east. Londoners invent second homes in Cornwall and Welsh countryside.
- 596** St Augustine invites Saxon heathens to come along to the Alpha Course, 'just to find out what it's all about'.
- 761** Offa declares only a great big dyke will stop the marauding Welsh. Someone suggests Olaf's sister.
- 793** Reports of the Viking attack on Lindisfarne.

General disappointment that it wasn't the hippy folk-rock band.

- 947** Scandinavians conquer English kingdoms, bringing pillage, terror and flat-pack furniture.
- 1075** Bayeux Tapestry portrays grisly death of King Harold at Battle of Hastings. Outcry follows over so-called 'Tapestry Nasties'.
- 1191** Richard I joins Third Crusade, convinced that Saladin has Weapons of Mass Destruction.
- 1215** King John accepts Magna Carta. Power of monarchs officially limited to opening sports centres and waving.
- 1265** First Parliament is summoned. Liberal Democrats demand proportional representation.
- 1337** King Edward III promises 'Hundred Years War' will be over by Christmas.
- 1349** 'The Black Death' kills two fifths of the population, but homeopaths stand by their natural remedies.
- 1380s** Chaucer writes *The Canterbury Tales*. No one checks spelling.
- 1415** Henry V massacres thousands at Battle of Agincourt to avenge a particularly rude French waiter.
- 1455** War of the Roses begins after Yorkshireman is asked what part of Lancashire he's from.
- 1485** Tudors win Battle of Bosworth in effort to secure place on Key Stage 2 of the National

Curriculum.

- 1533** Henry VIII executes second wife Anne Boleyn following argument over map-reading.
- 1570s** Protestants and Catholics 'agree to disagree'.
- 1588** Spanish Armada sinks in storm. Pools Panel award home win to England.
- 1590s** *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is written in order to confuse primary school children whose parents want them to do Shakespeare.
- Nov 5** Guy Fawkes discovered with 36 barrels of gunpowder, some
- 1605** sparklers and an overcooked jacket potato.
- 1649** Charles I sentenced to be beheaded. Head sewn back on after appeal.
- 1650s** Cromwell bans Christmas after forgetting to get wife a present.
- 1688** Glorious Revolution makes Parliament supreme and establishes freedom of speech, political liberty and the right to beat up Catholics.
- 1707** Act of Union unites Scotland and England. Treaty stipulates that Scottish sportsmen will be referred to as 'British' for as long as they are successful.
- 1730s** Jethro Tull revolutionizes agriculture by inventing 'The Quad Biking and Paintballing Stag Weekend Mini-break'.
- 1763** Seven Years War ends bang on time.

- 1769** James Watt patents steam engine that will soon power the whole Industrial Revolution. Plants a couple of trees to offset his carbon footprint.
- 3rd Sept 1770** Entire population of England moves from rural bliss to one small tenement building in Manchester.
- 1776** Americans declare independence, following dispute about standards of British dentistry.
- 1789** French Revolution prompts widespread tutting in England.
- 1805** Nelson dies in determined bid to get statue on the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square.
- 1815** Wellington wins Eurovision Song Contest with 'Waterloo'.
- 1832** Great Reform Act - Rotten Boroughs replaced with Rotten MPs.
- 1840** Queen Vic marries Prince Albert of Square.
- 1848** Chartists' mass petition is rejected by Parliament, as several supporters put their signature in the little box where they were supposed to print their name.
- 1855** Florence Nightingale teaches nurses to wash hands, thereby ending all hospital infections for evermore.
- 1875** Disraeli buys shares in Suez Canal after going to persuasive timeshare presentation.
- 1876** Victoria named 'Empress of India' after her

favourite curry house.

- 1900** South Africans nearly drive out British Army using only repellent accents.
- 1914** Germany invade neutral Belgium to seize expensive chocolates. World War ensues.
- 1918** Germany admit they have lost the '*First World War*'. Some anxiety over their choice of name.
- 1921** Ireland finally gains independence from Britain but entire population moves to Kilburn anyway.
- 1930s** Great Depression. Everyone puts on cloth claps and hangs around on street corners waiting for World War Two.
- 1938** Hitler declares Anschluss with Austria despite best efforts of the family Von Trapp.
- 1939** Germany invades Poland. Chamberlain goes on the wireless to announce World War Two during an edition of 'You and Yours'.
- 1940** Winston Churchill sees 'Prime Minister' job advertised in the *Guardian's* 'Creative, Marketing and Media' section.
- 1941** Hitler denies hubris. Declares war on Russia, America and the Jedi Empire.
- 1944** D-D day. Only time in history the Brits get to the beach before the Germans.
- 1945** Britain wins World War Two, but passes coffee mug saying 'World's Number One Country' over to Americans.

Introduction

My history teacher went to the pub at lunchtime. You could smell the beer on his breath. History in the morning was irritable and short-tempered; it was no wonder there were so many wars and witch-burnings. But after lunch the history of Britain became suffused with a genial bonhomie and a slightly blurred sense of goodwill to all men (except the Germans). All the kings and statesmen down the centuries came across as bloody good blokes, although the nature of their predicaments seemed increasingly less clear as Double History entered its second hour. By the end of the afternoon 'The Causes of the Second World War' were mumbled in a sleepy, meandering monologue punctuated by extended silent pauses almost long enough for Britain to rearm. We'd glance up from our faithful note-taking, still awaiting the fate of Czechoslovakia, to see him staring out of the window. Had he just had a revelation about the annexation of the Sudetenland? Or was he thinking about a beautiful French girl he had left behind at Dunkirk in the summer of 1940? Either way, I still have this vague sense that the fateful meeting between Hitler and Neville Chamberlain didn't take place in Munich at all, but over a pub lunch at the Hand and Flowers in Queen Street.

The point is that the way we recount the past is deeply affected by how we feel now; whether our perspective is clouded by fierce religious fervour, a surge of patriotism or three pints of Brakspear's bitter. And so at a moment when we are feeling particularly sceptical and irreverent towards our leaders, I thought it was time for some edgy, hard-hitting satire aimed at King Eawa of the Angles. I don't

care whom I knock, there are no sacred cows for me when it comes to sixth-century Mercia. It's just that it strikes me as odd that while we seem to have total contempt for today's politicians, a syphilitic wife-murderer like Henry VIII gets voted on to the BBC's list of all-time Great Britons. (He came in at number 40; 'greater' than Charles Dickens but apparently less great than Michael Crawford. Though to be fair Henry VIII's Frank Spencer impression was rubbish.)

When I said I wanted to write a humorous history of Britain, a common reaction was: 'What, like *1066 and All That?*' But unlike that comic classic, this is not a subversion of what we already know; this presumes that we never knew it in the first place. It assumes that when our history teacher slunk off to the staff room for another ciggie, mumbling the inspiring guidance 'Take notes from chapter seven' we did nothing of the sort, choosing instead to put to the test the bold claim printed on Timothy Johnson's 'shatterproof' ruler. I hope this book will provide the chance to put all that right, by going right back to basics and assuming the reader has only the sketchiest knowledge of the story of Britain. (*Britain*, you know; big island off the coast of Europe, rains a lot.)

My aim has been to write a funny, accessible history of Britain, for all those who weren't listening at school. And I have been amazed how many people said, 'That's exactly the book I need to read.' In fact I am still struggling to find a single person who was listening at school. This is a shame because unless you have the bad luck to be studying 'The Whig Oligarchy 1714-1763' the history of Britain really is a fascinating and compelling story, packed with one great character after another trapped in impossible dilemmas and gripping adventures which have you thinking: I wonder if he dies at the end? Obviously he *always does* die at the end; it happened hundreds of years ago, the 'ending-up-dead' bit is something of a foregone conclusion.

The '2000 years' in the subtitle take us from 55 BC to 1945. Clearly no history book can be comprehensive. Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* took him fifteen years to write and was published in six fat volumes totalling one and a half million words. And then to wind him up, all his mates said, 'I can't believe you left out the Siege of Ravenna, Eddie.'

'What Siege of Ravenna?'

'God, that's crucial, that is, Ed, no Siege of Ravenna? That's central to the whole decline and fall thing, man.'

It's not possible to cover everything, and I apologize now to Scottish and Welsh readers for the way that English history tends to dominate these pages in much the same way that England has trodden all over her creative and enterprising neighbours. But all that stuff that you have vaguely heard about but never quite understood, all those niggling questions that seemed too obvious to ask: I will attempt to explain all of it here, trying to unpick the causes and the consequences before giving up and saying, 'Oh well, look, you had to be there, really.'

J. O'F.
Summer 2007

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Ancient and Roman Britain

*How the Romans established our template for 'civilization'
by killing anyone who didn't like it*

THERE MUST HAVE been a single day on which it happened. A definite moment seven thousand years ago when the strip of land connecting us to continental Europe disappeared under the waves to create a new island of Britain. Was there a last-minute rush to get across as people saw what was happening? An anxious wife trying to hurry her husband out of the prehistoric departure lounge as that last rising tide lapped at the disappearing causeway?

'This is the last call for anyone wishing to cross the land bridge to Britain! Last call for indigenous Britons: please proceed to gate one!'

'Come on, we're going to miss it!'

'Stop fussing, dear, we've got loads of time ...'

Or did the isthmus just become increasingly treacherous over the decades, so that larger animals such as elks, bison and humans could wade through the increasingly boggy salt marshes, leaving all the hedgehogs and badgers sulking on the water's edge?¹ However it happened, 5,000 BC is apparently 'incredibly recent' in terms of the entire history of mankind. You have to ask what sort of timescale these historians and geologists are working to because I

can't help feeling that 5,000 BC was ages ago. Last Tuesday was recent. Windows XP; that was quite recent.

This extreme period of climate change must surely have been a catastrophe for those who lived through it. Thousands of square miles of inhabitable land were suddenly claimed by the sea; a vast area now underneath the North Sea containing the villages and hunting grounds of long-forgotten societies disappeared under the waves. It was the same as when the tide finally washes over the little dam your kids have built on the beach, except that the next tide takes your entire village as well. The sea advanced at a rate of about two hundred yards a year (it would of course have been yards - the metric system came much much later) and no amount of recycling or car-sharing was going to stop it. The increased pressure on habitable land would have led to wars, famine and the breakdown of society, so thank goodness we are not going to have to go through any of that ever again.

Although we are all constantly evolving (with the exception of the readers of *Nuts* magazine), *Homo sapiens* are pretty much as they were 100,000 years ago, and the people who lived in Britain seven thousand years ago were not that different in appearance or intelligence to human beings today. They had language, tools, religion and culture, all influenced by and intermingled with the societies of other hunter-gatherers from all over the continent. And then suddenly they were cut off.² Immediately the debate began: Is Britain at the heart of Europe? Or should we keep our own currency until the conditions are right? Strictly speaking, those few thousand who found themselves isolated in these islands were the only original Britons. All the rest - Celts, Romans, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Vikings, Normans - they were all immigrants. In fact there are one or two Conservative politicians who would still like to see a repatriation policy based upon this narrow criterion.

The end of the Stone Age (a Thursday)

At the time that Britain became a separate geographical entity, the people of Northern Europe were in the last millennia of the Stone Age. They lived in caves, hacked at the earth with deer antlers and attached flints to arrows to hunt for food. Although contemporary culture has provided us with a very clear image of what everyday life was like for Stone Age man, many academics have begun to question the historical accuracy of our most popular source materials for this period. Apparently Stone Age man did not have pet dinosaurs, pterodactyls employed as gramophones or cars that ran on leg power. Nor did they have fur Wonderbras like the one worn by Raquel Welch in *One Million Years B.C.* The historical consultant on that film kept explaining that the dinosaurs died out 65 million years before *Homo sapiens* appeared on the earth, but the producer just nodded blankly and then said to the crew, 'OK, can we do that scene again, but this time the big dinosaur almost bites off Raquel's bra-strap!'

Our lazily absorbed view of ancient societies is that they must have been incredibly savage and brutal communities, totally without law and order, art, science or culture or any of the traits of what we would recognize as 'civilization'. People back then were savages; we, however, are highly sophisticated and civilized; ergo we are better than them. They'd never have used the word 'ergo', for a start. But this is of course arrogant and most certainly wrong. If the members of prehistoric British society were like that of any other society, then only *some* of them would have wanted to smash their neighbours' skulls in so they could steal all their possessions. But others would have cherished and developed the friendship, co-operation and mutual support without which they could not survive. And then once their neighbours' guard was down, *then* they would have smashed their skulls in. Then, as now, every member of

society would have to battle with his inner caveman. Much of the journey of history is attempting to control the external factors that determine whether we win that battle or not. It's just that it was harder not to behave like a caveman when you were a man who lived in a cave.

Archaeological remains suggest that the greatest concentrations of human population were in the Fens, in the Thames Valley and along the South Downs, but we can presume that people hunted and ranged over much of the country. We know what people back then looked like from all those artists' impressions you see in the newspaper; the men were always walking around holding something they'd just killed and the women had very saggy breasts. Primitive attempts at agriculture gradually evolved where patches of land could be dug over with flint axes, and archaeologists tell us that animals such as the goat and ox were 'gradually domesticated'. How you gradually domesticate an ox, I don't know; you'd want to make pretty sure it was house-trained before you had it in the hut.

Britain's isolation would have made development slower, and for some reason British arrowheads got much, much smaller in relation to the European standard after the islands were cut off. But the continent was close enough for new ideas and technological advances to cross the widening channel. Without such cross-fertilization, it is quite probable that Britain would have remained in the Stone Age in the same way that the Australian Aboriginals did until the arrival of the rest of the world.

The Bronze Age: when the clever kids did metalwork

Historians have debated long and hard about which invaders came when, with the only consensus being that all of it occurred 'incredibly recently'. It is believed that the stone circle temple at Avebury was built by Neolithic man,

but their supremacy was challenged by a stronger, larger race who originated in the Rhineland, reaching Britain in around 1,900 BC. These invaders have been dubbed the Beaker People, so called because of the pottery they brought with them. Since remains of the Beaker People have been found buried with their beakers, archaeologists believe that great significance was attached to the beakers. They were obsessed with bloody beakers; every birthday it was the same. 'You'll never guess what I've got you ...' 'Ooh, thank you, darling, what a surprise! I'll put it with the others.'

It might be that the importance of the beaker was to do with what it was used for. Alcohol was a recent discovery, and the magical powers of this drink may have had religious meaning for the Beaker People. The drinking of fermented honey would probably have been a great religious ceremony with formal sipping being executed with great reverence as they paid homage to their gods. And then half an hour later it was all, 'Oi, you spilt my beaker!' 'Oh yeah, do you want some?' 'Right, outside, you beardy bastard!'

These were the people who built Stonehenge; after a long day dragging giant rocks into place you'd probably need a drink or two. Many of the stones were quarried in South Wales, 160 miles away from their destination on Salisbury Plain, and sunken stones have been found at the bottom of the Severn Estuary, which must have been the cause of a certain amount of prehistoric swearing. You spend months hacking a fourteen-foot rock out of the Welsh Hills, you drag it forty miles, and then halfway across the river Severn the bloke running the little ferry service explains that his raft wasn't quite as watertight as he'd thought.

'I'm terribly sorry, I seem to have lost your sacred stone.'

‘Oh, not to worry, really. We can go back and get another one; it’s no trouble.’

As a piece of engineering, Stonehenge is an incredible achievement and there is something rather symmetrical about Microsoft providing a photo of Stonehenge as a standard wall-paper for the twenty-first-century computer screen. No one knows quite why it was built, but it seems sensible to presume that some ancient ceremony took place there every year, hopefully slightly more meaningful than today’s annual beating up of New Age travellers by the local riot police. The sheer scale of the monument and the logistics that must have been involved in constructing it tell us something of the society that built it. We know that they followed the movement of the stars and the planets, the presumption being that they worshipped the sun, which as religions go seems a bit ‘first base’, but then it was a long time ago. In fact the site was of religious significance for far longer than Christianity or Islam have existed. It is the temple of a civilization about which we know very little and so tend to presume was very simplistic. But they must have also had a fairly advanced social structure; in addition to a good number of labourers or slaves they would have needed managers, engineers, surveyors and designers. Basically they must have had a middle class. How Stonehenge managed to get planning permission with all those objections from ‘The Friends of Salisbury Plain’ is just another one of its ancient mysteries.

By this time Britain was following the rest of Europe into the Bronze Age. It is hard to imagine that one type of metal could have so transformed life for early man; today its only use is to make the medals for British athletes at the Commonwealth Games, but back then this new alloy brought about a revolution. Bronze Age man would have treasured the strength and versatility of this new resource and there would have been much debate about the evolving process of metalwork.

'So how do you make this "bronze" stuff exactly?'

'You smelt together the ore of two different minerals - copper and tin, see?'

'I thought that made brass. Are you sure we're not living in the *Brass Age*?'

'Nah, brass is copper and zinc, isn't it?'

'Or is it copper and lead?'

'What about this metal here, what's this?'

'Oh, that's iron. That's much better.'

'So isn't this the *Iron Age* then?'

'Well, it is *now* - but it wasn't when we started talking about brass. I mean bronze.'

The Iron Age actually arrived with invaders from Europe. Iron is much stronger, but consequently requires a far higher temperature to extract it from its mineral source. It took around a thousand years or so before they realized that that dial on the kiln went clockwise for 'hotter'. The Iron Age came to Britain around the seventh century BC. It is not just marked by the switch to stronger metal, but also by all sorts of development in society: advances in pottery, metalwork, woodwork and all the other subjects you choose because you think they sound easier than GCSE Physics.

In the centuries before the Romans made their first visit to these shores, complex and ornate objects were created by the Celtic metallurgists. Numerous metal artefacts have been recovered from British rivers: swords, axe heads, shields, helmets and a Sainsbury's shopping trolley, though this is thought to come from much, much later. There is a particularly fine Celtic shield in the British Museum which was taken from the Thames in Battersea. The Celtic warrior who forgot to take it home thought, Ah well, we conquered Britain centuries ago, I'm not going to need that now. Julius Caesar turned up with the Roman army the following weekend.

'Pah! Julius who?'

The Iron Age Britons described by Caesar were very similar to the tribes in northern Gaul. Jewellery was fashioned from shells and bronze, druids administered herbal remedies and hairy bearded craftsmen daubed bright colours all over their bodies and believed in the power of the sun and the stars. Basically the whole place was populated by hippies - the Romans definitely looked favourite to beat this lot. The British Celts faced their enemies stripped to the waist, which was a marginal improvement on the battledress of their cousins in Gaul, who went into battle completely naked. I'm no expert in classical military strategy, but if I was suddenly faced with thousands of heavily armed Romans with metal plate armour, iron shields and helmets, I'm not convinced that I would feel particularly invulnerable standing there with my genitals swinging about. Blushing and shuffling along with both hands covering your private parts can't be the most intimidating way to charge into battle.

Despite this typically slack French attitude to decency and personal hygiene, the Gallic tribes had been no pushover for Julius Caesar, whose attempts to conquer Gaul had been hindered by the military support they had been receiving from the Celts of southern Britain. Caesar decided that to secure northern Gaul he would need to crush their comrades on the other side of the Channel and so in 55 BC he sailed over the *Oceanus Britannicus* and landed near the white cliffs of Dover. This first visit may have been more of a reconnaissance mission than invasion because the following year he returned with eight hundred boats especially designed for the cross-Channel journey. Men in woolly hats waved each chariot driver to get his vehicle as close as possible to the one in front, and then it was a mad rush up to C Deck to claim their comfy seats for the crossing.

This campaign took Caesar much further inland. His army camped in the Thames Valley, which caused a certain amount of tutting from the local residents. In fact, judging by the number of places marked Caesar's Camp on the Ordnance Survey maps, he seems to have camped all over the place. Local farmers tended not to complain when he had over twenty-five thousand soldiers in the next field. But eventually he met fierce resistance and was nearly driven out of Britain by sheer weight of numbers. His absence from Gaul had also led to further uprisings there, and so with a handful of British Celtic chieftains now in the pay of Rome, he crossed back over the English Channel never to return. Contrary to popular belief, Caesar never did conquer Britain. He came, he saw, he went home again.

But the island was now in the sphere of Roman influence. Indeed it was argued in Rome that there was no point in conquering the territory while the British tribes were paying more in tributes to the Roman Empire than would have been raised in taxation if Britain had been conquered. So the decades following 54 BC were a relatively quiet time for Britain. While Caesar's best mates stabbed him in the back (and front), while Antony told Cleopatra that he didn't want to lose her as a friend, while the Roman Empire waited with bated breath to see what B C actually stood for,³ various plans to complete the conquest of Britain were repeatedly postponed.

Of course, that's not to say that everyday life wasn't an enormous struggle. The ordinary Briton was at the mercy of forces way beyond his control and whatever life lacked in quality it made up for in variety; generally alternating between cold, hunger and fear. Then, as for many centuries afterwards, the spectre of death constantly hung over every community. Most parents would have had to bury at least one child; at any moment you might succumb to disease, famine or murder. Basically, if you bought a five-year diary, you were considered an optimist. And to cap it all, in AD 43,

you had to leave the farm to fight the greatest Empire the world had ever seen.

Kent Young Farmers' Association v Roman Empire: away win

Over the previous hundred years Britain had taken on a certain amount of glamour as the land that not even the iconic Caesar had been able to conquer. And so when the reviled Emperor Claudius came to the throne, facing military revolt and a desperate need to gain respect in Rome, the chance of glory offered by a conquest of Britain was too much to resist. Basically Britain was invaded because a weak dictator thought it would look good back home. As if having the Roman army turn up wasn't annoying enough.

Around forty thousand men arrived in Britain to face Celtic tribes who had become increasingly defiant of the Empire on the other side of the Channel. The British vastly outnumbered the invaders but, as is traditional in rural areas, hated their neighbours even more than they hated foreigners. If they could ally themselves with these Romans to gain an advantage over that tribe who lived up the road then they would do so. Caesar's old maxim of 'divide and rule' never worked so well as in the Roman conquest of Britannia. What's more, the Celtic warriors had farms to tend back home. Unlike the professional soldiers from Rome whose supply chains allowed them to fight year after year if need be, the Celtic smallholders could only spend a limited time on military service. So either they allowed the Romans to conquer the whole country, steal their land, murdering and looting at will; or they fought them in a protracted war that would see their fields unploughed and their people left to starve. Well, that's what they claimed

anyway, but then farmers are always moaning about something.

Boadicea rebels over incorrect spelling of her name

Within four years the Roman armies occupied Britain as far as the Severn and the Trent. The successful campaign was crowned by the public submission of eleven British kings to the Emperor and his triumphant entry into Colchester complete with a parade of elephants, which was more interesting than anything that has ever happened in Colchester before or since. However, the Romans' success on the battlefield was not matched by their skills of diplomacy. Had a regional commander in East Anglia treated the Queen of the Iceni tribe with a little more respect, the Romans might have avoided an uprising that saw tens of thousands of Roman settlers put to the sword. Within a few months 'Boadicea' was a name that struck fear across the whole province.

'Though you're not supposed to say *Boadicea* any more,' moaned one of the legionaries. 'It's Iceni-ist, apparently. We have to call her *Boudicca* now.'

'Honestly, it's just political correctness gone mad.'

Boudicca's dying husband had left half of his royal possessions to Rome, to ensure that his family and kingdom would be protected. As with all insurance schemes throughout history, however, the Iceni did not get what had already been paid for; instead the local commander immediately set about helping himself to the whole lot, including all of the bereaved Queen's personal possessions. When Boudicca protested, she was flogged, her teenage daughters were raped and the Iceni were driven off their land as the invaders began an orgy of destruction.⁴ And then the Romans were surprised that she was really, really annoyed.

Allying herself with neighbouring tribes who had many grievances of their own, the striking red-headed Queen assembled a force of around 120,000 men; three times the number of the occupying army, most of whom were far away in North Wales. She swept through southern Britain burning Colchester, St Albans and London.⁵ While the Roman army rushed back south and thousands of soldiers were sent over from Germany, her forces were estimated to have killed around seventy thousand Roman settlers and sympathizers. Finally, at an unknown location somewhere in the Midlands, the two armies came face to face in the Battle of Watling Street. Almost inevitably the military tactics of the disciplined Roman army proved superior to the chaotic charges of the assembled chiefs, and despite their massively superior numbers, the Celts were defeated and massacred. Rather than allow her daughters to fall into the hands of the Romans, Boudicca persuaded them to drink poison from a golden cup and then took the hemlock herself. When the Roman Governor finally beheld the dead Queen, he described her as lying peacefully, with an arm around each of her daughters. It's a beautiful and poignant image. The actual effects of hemlock are vomiting and diarrhoea, but you have to allow a certain amount of poetic licence.

Boudicca's rebellion was a major event in the story of Rome's conquest of Britannia; indeed it very nearly led to the Romans withdrawing from the island altogether. But her status as a British national icon is a fairly recent invention. When the Victorian propagandists were busy sifting through English history looking for some heroes they could stick on the plinths, they were attracted by the fact that this warrior apparently had the same name as their glorious Queen. Admittedly the Celtic spelling of 'Victoria' was a bit shaky, but back in AD 61 adult literacy still had a long way to go. 'Boudicca' is indeed the Celtic for 'Victoria', though after that it's hard to see many other

similarities between the two. The Celtic Queen was much, much harder than her nineteenth-century namesake, but then Queen Victoria had the edge when it came to anger management. The fact that this English heroine came from a race of people who were later to be brutally displaced by the English seems to have been conveniently overlooked. Her status as one of our national heroes makes no more sense than if today's Americans were to get all patriotic about the bravery of Chief Sitting Bull. On the other hand ... we really showed those bloody Romans a thing or two, didn't we? I think we can really pat ourselves on the back. Good old Boudicca, she was a true Brit and no mistake ...

Within a couple of decades most of England and Wales was subjugated, although the island remained a very rebellious territory for the entire four centuries of Roman rule; requiring more occupying soldiers than any other province. At times, ten per cent of the entire Roman Empire's army was employed here as the rebellious Britons forced the Romans to put fortifications all around their cities, something that was not required in provinces such as Gaul where the indigenous population proved more willing to be Latinized. Several contemporary commentators mention the unusually defiant character of these Britons, their hatred of injustice and their determination to keep their liberty. Perhaps the geographical isolation of these particular Celts had made them value their freedom more than most, or maybe there really was something defiant in their national character that lives on today in the independently minded Celts of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Hard to imagine Boudicca being satisfied with a regional assembly, but perhaps it was never suggested.

Hadrian's Wall: 'They promised it would be finished by Christmas'

The Scots can pride themselves that they proved to be completely unconquerable.⁶ There was no pre-ordained plan to set the northern limit across the north of England and several wars of conquest of Scotland were undertaken, two of them led by the emperors themselves. But the Romans who had crossed the Alps and the Pyrenees found the subjugation of the Scottish Highlands to be beyond them. In fact, having failed to extend the Roman Empire into Scotland, the mood in Rome changed and no further major expansions of the Empire were attempted. Scotland stopped the Roman Empire in its tracks. And all the Emperor had said was, 'So what exactly happens on Burns Night?'

So Hadrian's Wall is generally seen as the northern limit of the Roman Empire and remained the most heavily fortified boundary in the entire Empire. Anyone who remembers the Scottish football fans at Wembley in 1977 will understand why. The wall (some of which remains) starts at the Solway Firth and finishes up at Wallsend, which seemed like a sensible place to aim for. It was begun in AD 122 on the orders of the visiting Emperor Hadrian to keep out the Picts who kept crossing into England and deliberately calling him 'Adrian' to wind him up. It took ten years to build because the builders kept leaving at lunchtime to work on another job. To be posted to Hadrian's Wall was probably the bleakest posting a Roman soldier had to endure. 'Join the Army, they said. Travel to interesting and exciting places. Stand about on a freezing cold wall waiting to be skewered by a screaming bearded Pict.' Recent DNA samples have revealed that black African soldiers were stationed at Hadrian's Wall, who will no doubt have descendants living in Britain today being asked who they support when England play cricket against the Roman Province of Numidia. Some Roman garrisons were stationed beyond Hadrian's Wall at various times, and later on the Emperor Antonine built another wall between the

Clyde Estuary and the Firth of Forth, but his ambition to extend the Empire a hundred miles northwards also proved to be unsustainable. Antonine became quite bitter that his follow-up wall was not such a big hit.

Romanized Britain: globalization starts here

Like many empires since, the Romans found that the most effective way to subjugate the locals was to get the native aristocracy to do it on their behalf. Britain's indigenous Celts were permitted to stick to their old-fashioned uncivilized ways, but began to notice their own tribal leaders walking around in togas and speaking Latin. Finally someone had to have a word.

'The thing is, boss, me and the lads were talking about it, and, well, we can't help wondering if you haven't, like, sold out.'

'Sold out! Don't be ridiculous. I'm a Celt through and through, from the sandals on my feet to the laurel wreath on my head.'

'You see, that's what I mean, all this dressing up like Caesar and lying on sofas eating grapes before throwing up in the vomitorium² ... It's almost as if you're on their side ...'

'That's what we want them to think! But I'm doing this for you and the lads. If I can win their trust, and *appear* to be enjoying all the trappings of their civilization, then maybe I can change the Roman Empire *from the inside*.'

'Oh. Right. OK then.'

'Now pass the amphora, would you? I've run out of wine again.'

The British gentry thrived under Roman rule, building themselves huge villas in the countryside and growing rich on the slave labour they employed on their farms. There was the opportunity for a certain degree of social