CONWAY
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square,
London, WC1B 3DP, UK

29 Earlsfort Terrace,
Dublin 2, Ireland.

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First published in Great Britain 2024.

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data has been applied for.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-8448-6663-2;
ePub: 978-1-8448-6662-5;
ePDF: 978-1-8448-6664-9.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Designed by Louise Turpin.
Typeset in Effra by louiseturpindesign.
Printed and bound in India by Replika.

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My travels through Britain's urban jungle have been made all the more cheery thanks to my wife, Nicola, and my two children, Toby and Willow.



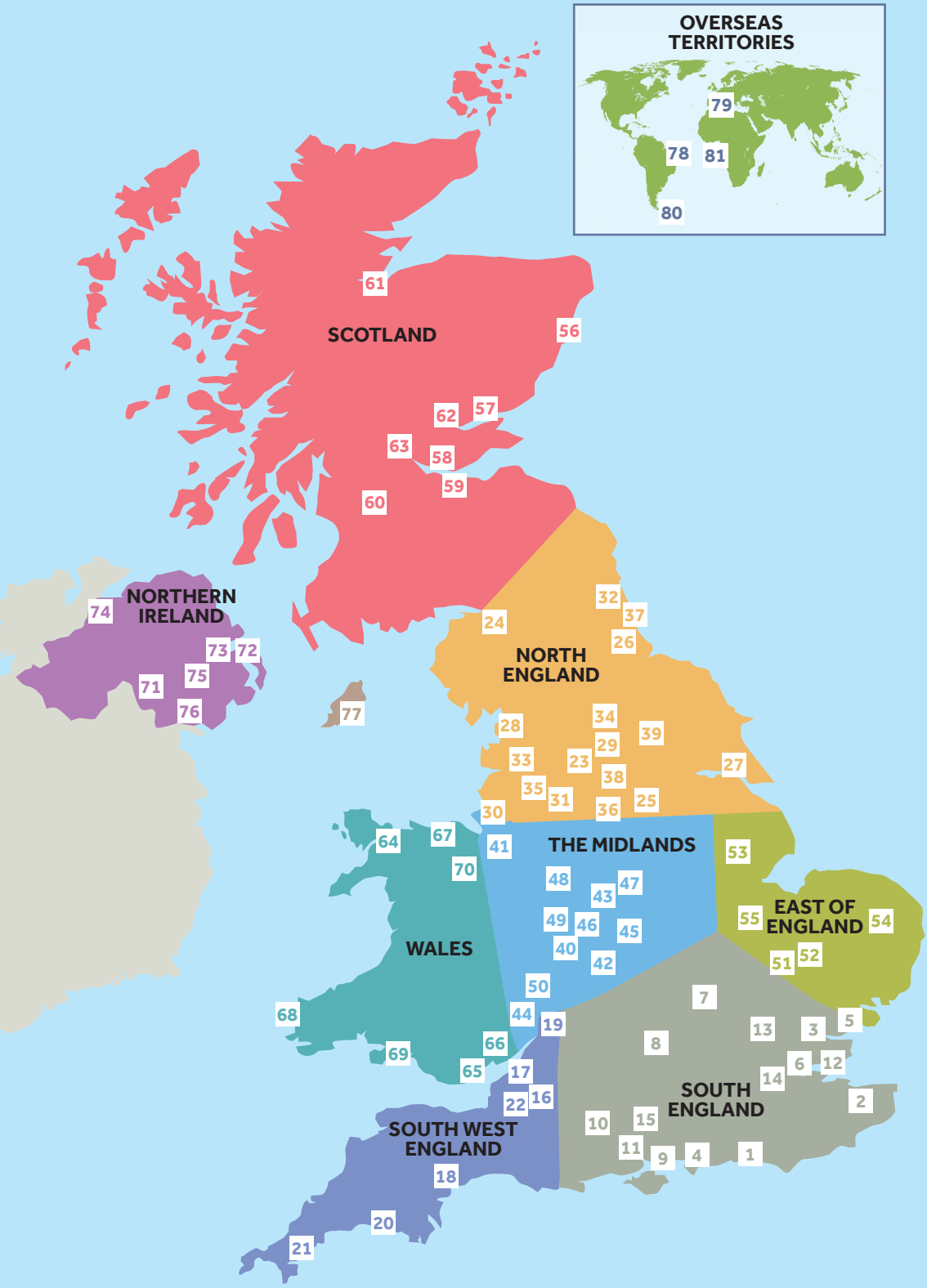
BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITIES

DAY TRIPS AND WEEKEND STAYS IN EVERY SINGLE UK CITY

PETER NALDRETT

CONWAY




OVERSEAS TERRITORIES
79
78
81
80
SCOTLAND
61
56
62
57
63
58
59
60
NORTHERN IRELAND
74
73
72
71
75
76
77
NORTH ENGLAND
32
37
24
26
28
34
39
29
33
23
27
38
35
31
25
30
36
THE MIDLANDS
41
53
48
47
43
49
46
45
40
42
WALES
64
67
70
68
50
44
19
66
69
65
17
22
16
EAST OF ENGLAND
55
54
51
52
7
13
3
5
8
6
12
14
SOUTH ENGLAND
2
10
15
11
9
4
1
SOUTH WEST ENGLAND
18
20
21

CONTENTS

Introduction **6**

SOUTH ENGLAND

1 Brighton and Hove **12**
2 Canterbury **17**
3 Chelmsford **21**
4 Chichester **24**
5 Colchester **28**
6 City of London **31**
7 Milton Keynes **37**
8 Oxford **41**
9 Portsmouth **46**
10 Salisbury **51**
11 Southampton **55**
12 Southend-on-Sea **59**
13 St Albans **63**
14 Westminster **66**
15 Winchester **70**

SOUTH WEST ENGLAND

16 Bath **76**
17 Bristol **81**
18 Exeter **86**
19 Gloucester **90**
20 Plymouth **93**
21 Truro **98**
22 Wells **101**

NORTH ENGLAND

23 Bradford **106**
24 Carlisle **108**
25 Doncaster **111**
26 Durham **114**
27 Kingston-upon-Hull **118**
28 Lancaster **122**
29 Leeds **126**
30 Liverpool **131**
31 Manchester **136**
32 Newcastle upon Tyne **141**
33 Preston **146**
34 Ripon **149**
35 Salford **152**
36 Sheffield **157**
37 Sunderland **160**
38 Wakefield **164**
39 York **167**

MIDLANDS

40 Birmingham **174**
41 Chester **178**
42 Coventry **183**
43 Derby **186**
44 Hereford **189**
45 Leicester **193**
46 Lichfield **197**
47 Nottingham **200**
48 Stoke-on-Trent **206**
49 Wolverhampton **210**
50 Worcester **212**

EAST OF ENGLAND

51 Cambridge **217**
52 Ely **221**
53 Lincoln **225**
54 Norwich **229**
55 Peterborough **233**

SCOTLAND

56 Aberdeen **238**
57 Dundee **244**
58 Dunfermline **249**
59 Edinburgh **253**
60 Glasgow **260**
61 Inverness **264**
62 Perth **268**
63 Stirling **272**

WALES

64 Bangor **277**
65 Cardiff **279**
66 Newport **282**
67 St Asaph **284**
68 St Davids **286**
69 Swansea **290**
70 Wrexham **292**

NORTHERN IRELAND

71 Armagh **296**
72 Bangor **298**
73 Belfast **300**
74 Derry **304**
75 Lisburn **306**
76 Newry **308**

CROWN DEPENDENCIES

77 Douglas, Isle of Man **311**

OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

78 Hamilton, Bermuda **313**
79 Gibraltar, Gibraltar **314**
80 Stanley, Falkland Islands **315**
81 Jamestown, Saint Helena **316**

Photo credits **318**

INTRODUCTION

Sheffield is my city. I've done my time elsewhere, studying in Lancaster and working in Leeds while living just over the border in Bradford. I've spent a lot of time in London and visited Edinburgh every year for decades. I like a night out in Manchester and always look forward to visiting the likes of Newcastle, Carlisle, Glasgow, Inverness and Belfast. But Sheffield is my city. It's the place where I live with my family; the city I love going home to; the place where I enjoy the highs and suffer the lows of being a football supporter. I love it, warts and all. And, as with most cities around the world, there are plenty of those unsightly nooks and crannies we would like to improve if the money was there to do so. I'm also fiercely defensive of my city. Of course, my fellow Sheffielders and I are allowed to criticise it and call out its flaws. But you're not if you don't live here. Being part of a city is, I suppose, a little like being part of a tribe. These are my people and places, and if you don't like them – get yersen off 'ome.

During the course of writing this book, I've enjoyed journeying to all the cities within the United Kingdom and tried to appreciate how each one has its own set of qualities, its own unique character and how each one is a special place – a home – to thousands of people. Without exception, I've been welcomed with open arms up and down the country. Sure, I have places I like better than others. But I've been lucky enough to have enjoyed all the visits I made to our cities and I've seen the positive side of all these important urban areas. This book, then, is a celebration of the great British city, a look at their diverse characters and a guide to many happy activities each one holds within its city limits. As well as that, it's also an ambitious tick list for urban explorers looking for new places to head at weekends and on day trips. And weekend and day trips is what I'm aiming to help you with here. Nobody has attempted an all-inclusive cities' guide to the UK. Usually in guides to the country you'll find many of the cities left out completely, disregarded like they're not worth visiting. The truth is, though, you could write a good-sized book on most of the cities included in this guide. There are so many fascinating places to visit, so many stories to tell. What I've attempted to do here is create a whistle-stop tour of each and every one, providing enough background and key attractions for you to plan a couple of days in all our cities.

Whenever I tell people about the title of this project – *Bright Lights, Big Cities* – I always start singing 'Viva Las Vegas' in my





head. '*Bright light city gonna set my soul, gonna set my soul on fire...*' While nothing on these shores quite matches up to the neon buzz generated in the desert by Vegas, we can certainly experience the 'big city' feel when we stay for a few days in London, Birmingham, Cardiff, Belfast, Glasgow, Leeds and Manchester. The notion of 'bright lights, big city' is a relative one, though, and not necessarily to do with the

ABOVE Some cities, like York, offer visitors the chance to almost travel back in time.

BELOW Sheffield: Sex City, at least according to the Pulp song.



number of people or illuminated billboards. Walking by the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, it's impossible not to get a sense of a big city with the grand, iconic buildings and thousands of tourists from all over the world. Lancaster is much smaller, but if you head to the train station on a Saturday night, you'll see young people arriving from surrounding towns and villages in Lancashire wanting a big night out in the city. Even at tiny St Davids, with its handful of shops, rural dwellers will head in from the countryside to get their shopping. A city means different things to different people, but they all operate like a magnet pulling people in from the surrounding areas that may enjoy fewer facilities.

There's no magic formula to determine whether a settlement is a city or not. Traditionally, being a city is associated with having a cathedral or a university. Others say a city must have a large population, or be part of a big local authority. But it's much more complicated than that. Cities have been granted the title for many different reasons. One thing is certain, though: you can't just declare yourself city. It's a complicated process that ultimately needs signing off by the monarch. At one time, hundreds of years ago, it was enough to have a cathedral to be classed as a city. These early 'cathedral cities' are still in existence, but many have not developed big populations, so the likes of Ely, St Davids, Wells and Salisbury are smaller than many towns. Some cities, such as London, have their city status going back even further – so far back that records are unclear, and they say they have been a city since time immemorial. With no new dioceses created in the 17th and 18th centuries, no new cathedral cities were created. But all changed with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Settlements became so big and internationally important that only city status seemed to fit the likes of Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield.



RIGHT St Paul's Cathedral, a symbol of London's rebirth after the Great Fire destroyed the old city.



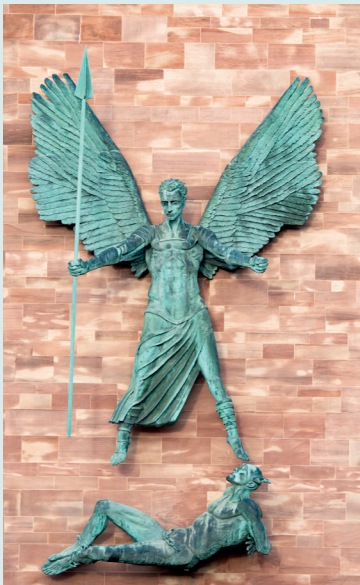

TANIC











In more recent decades, the awarding of city status has become something of a game show at times of national celebration. To mark the millennium and various jubilees for Queen Elizabeth II, towns were invited to bid for city status in a manner normally reserved for selecting the Olympic or Eurovision hosts. The winning cities were announced with pomp and much local festivity. Doncaster, Brighton, Preston and Chelmsford are among those who have achieved city status in this way since 2000. Southend has a more tragic story. Before he was murdered in October 2021, the town's MP, Sir David Amess, had long campaigned for Southend to become a city. The then prime minister, Boris Johnson, announced that Southend would be granted city status in his honour. The journey to becoming a city has been different for every place in this book.

Once you get the coveted city status approved, though, it doesn't mean it will last for ever. Just ask Rochester. When local governments were reorganised in 1998 and the city was merged with Gillingham's authority, the Rochester upon Medway City Council decided not to appoint Charter Trustees and so the city status lapsed. In 2000, Hereford also briefly lost city status in similar circumstances, though it was restored later in the year. St Davids in Wales and Armagh in Northern Ireland both lost city status in the 19th century due to local government reorganisation – and this turned out to be a long-term issue. Eventually, Queen Elizabeth II granted both places city status in 1994 to recognise their contribution to Christian heritage, and the residents became city dwellers once more.

Head to Scotland and things get altogether more complicated. The case of Elgin is indeed a bizarre one. Once home to royal residences and with its own cathedral, known as the Lantern of the North, Elgin was *considered* a city for centuries; while there was a doubt about its official status, it was considered a city nonetheless. A reorganisation of local authorities in 1975, however, identified the cities of Scotland – and would you believe that it left Elgin out! It turns out that Elgin was never given official status. And yet to this day you'll see signs on the streets welcoming you to the City of Elgin. The local football team is Elgin City. And the RAF named one of its aircraft the City of Elgin. Inverness and Perth were also shunned from the city list in the 1975 shake-up, but both have been granted it since. Elgin remains out in the cold.

We all have our favourite cities, be it the place we were born, the place we live or the weekend destination we like to escape to. Some cities are bigger than others – by size and by population – and they all have aspects we'd like to improve. But they all have one thing in common – they are loved. No matter how many people live there, no matter how many square miles they cover, all our cities are big cities in the hearts and minds of the people who call them home.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
The Titanic Museum, Belfast;
Chester Cathedral; punting in Cambridge;
St Michael beats the Devil in Coventry;
Cardiff Bay; Bristol Balloon Fiesta.

SOUTH ENGLAND



BRIGHTON AND HOVE

There's simply no place in the UK like it. Brighton is a buzzing seaside town with a thriving nightlife, wrapped up in an extravagant fleece of human tolerance and sexual freedom.

Brighton is the most colourful and outgoing city in the country and is certainly in its own league as a 21st-century coastal resort. It has a chequered history of culture clashes on the beach as mods battled with rockers, and a reputation as a place where courting couples from London disappeared to for a dirty weekend. But the Brighton of today is far from dangerous and seedy. It's forward-looking, flamboyant and extravagant. This is the hip city where cool bohemian celebrities and artists choose to live. It's a premier destination for clubbers and fun seekers of all genders. It's was home to the country's first Green Party MP, a political statement that reflects the ideology of the city. With a high LGBTQ+ population and well-earned status for being tolerant and inclusive, Brighton is a national symbol of freedom and diversity. It is certainly a city we can all have Pride in.

LIFE IN THE COOL LANE

Brighton has a reputation for being one of the coolest, hippest places in the country. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the winding labyrinth of streets known



LEFT Watch the skies! Seagulls dive bomb on Brighton Pier.

POPULATION: 277,000
CITY STATUS: 2000
TWINNED WITH...
No official twinning

DON'T MISS

- **Meandering around The Lanes**, the maze of streets where independent shops compete for the trendy pound brought in by hip bargain hunters
- **Feeling the thrilling rush of exciting rides** above the sea at the end of the 525-metre-long Royal Palace Pier
- **Enjoying the opulent and extravagant interiors of the Royal Palace**, the brainchild of the Party King, George IV

ARRIVAL

Car: Follow the A23 south from Gatwick Airport and Crawley

Train: Brighton Station, Queen's Road, Brighton BN1 3XP

SLEEP OVER

- **The Grand**
  97–99 Kings Road, Brighton, BN1 2FW.
  www.grandbrighton.co.uk
- **Sea Spray**
  25–26 New Steine, Brighton, BN2 1PD.
  www.seaspraybrighton.co.uk

TUCK IN

- **Bill's Brighton Restaurant**
  The Depot, 100 North Road, Brighton, BN1 1YE
  www.bills-website.co.uk
- **Burnt Orange**
  59 Middle Street, Brighton, BN1 1AL
  www.burnt-orange.co.uk



ABOVE Nightlife thrives on the seafront at Brighton.

BELOW Brighton's Royal Pavilion is the city's best known building.

as The Lanes, where you can forget your traditional idea of shopping and enter a completely different world. There isn't a 'start' and 'end' point to this brilliantly on-trend shopping zone, but you'll find it squeezed between the seafront and North Lane. It's very central – just a short walk from the train station when you head directly for the seafront. This is a historic area of Brighton. Some of the buildings date back to the 16th century and you get a great feel for this when walking down the narrow alleys linking the roads together – or twittens – as folk around here call them. Half the fun of spending an afternoon in this part of the city is to wander aimlessly about the streets, soaking up the atmosphere and admiring the dedicated followers of fashion who spend much of their time in these parts. For the best experience, pick a café and find a position by the street to watch life go by in one of the most fascinating retail centres in the nation. Folk are here to check out the latest tunes on vinyl, chic vintage clothing, fine vegan cooking, cool paintings and impressive street murals. If you fancy a pint, head to The Cricketers on Black Lion Street – built in 1547 and the oldest watering hole in the area. However you spend your time in The Lanes, it's an opportunity to soak up some of Brighton's stylish vibe.



RESPECT YOUR PIERS

Who doesn't love a good walk down a pier on a nice summer afternoon? It's such a British thing to do and it's etched in our history thanks to many previous generations of our families enjoying the same stroll down the years. Brighton has what many consider to be the greatest example of a Victorian pier the country has to offer. When work started on this new project in 1891, it was almost inconceivable that it would still be as popular as ever and remain one of Brighton's top attractions in the 21st century. But it's true that a walk on this 525-metre-long pier is an essential activity on a trip to this seaside city, whether or not you want to go the whole hog by eating candy floss and living your best life on a white-knuckle ride. What the Brighton Palace Pier does so well is blend history with the modern needs of the thrill-seeking tourist. So you can stretch your legs on the wooden boards or sit and watch the world go by and admire the views out to sea. But you can also while away an afternoon in awesome arcades and buy a wristband to give you unlimited access to the rides doused with bright lights and expelling excited shrieks at the end of the pier. A magnificent structure like this incredible Grade II listed pier needs a huge amount



ABOVE Many visitors make time to catch a show at the seaside.

