

A History of Brexit in 47 Objects: The Journey to 2016

In the second of his nine-part history of Brexit, **Tim Oliver** looks at six objects that tell the history of how Britain found itself facing a referendum.

We begin our history of Brexit with six objects that explain the history of Britain's part in European integration. They are objects that touch on the themes of war, strategy, legitimacy, trade, integration, and diplomacy.

Object 1: The Grave of the Unknown Warrior, Westminster Abbey

Regrettably, war has often defined relations not only between Britain and the rest of Europe but between all European states. It continues to do so today. Of the many graves and memorials found across the British Isles that commemorate conflicts in Europe, the most famous is to be found in Westminster Abbey. Of the 3,500 illustrious (and in some cases notorious) souls buried in the abbey, pride of place is given to that of an unknown British soldier killed on a European battlefield in the First World War. It is a reminder that despite Britain's island status it has never been able to separate itself from the goings-on in the rest of the continent. As Winston Churchill (we'll come back to him frequently) so neatly put it during the First World War: 'Europe is where the weather comes from.'

In facing the European weather, every European state, Britain included, has pursued numerous alliances and treaties and when they have failed have pursued equally numerous bloody wars, divisions and fallings out. Europe after the devastation of two world wars saw numerous attempts to manage that instability. What we now know as the European Union is one of the most prominent attempts, but by no means the only one in what has become a complex and sometimes confusing set of overlapping organisations and relationships. Changes in bilateral relations (such as between France and Germany), multilateral conferences, intergovernmental organisations such as the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights, trading arrangements such as the European Free Trade Association and numerous security setups (most obviously NATO) now unite – or at least try to – a continent long defined by divisions that too often led to war.

Justifying and interpreting Britain's approach to these European alliances and relationships has never been straightforward, especially when it comes to the EU. But such relationships have never been straightforward for any European country, all of whom have been scarred by Europe's many conflicts. As with any memorial or monument put up anywhere to those past European conflicts, the history the British people draw from the Grave of the Unknown Warrior is political. It can be seen as a symbol of the sacrifices necessary to ensure independence, sovereignty, justice and freedom. It can also be seen a symbol of the loss of life by millions of unknown souls because of the failures of the kings, statesmen and generals who across Europe are usually buried in hallowed places such as Westminster Abbey.

Object 2: The Allies Statue, Bond Street

Europe might be, as Churchill put it, 'where the weather comes from' but a long-standing strategy of successive UK governments has been to look beyond it for assistance and support. Many of the other unknown British servicemen and women killed in the two world wars lie buried in the 23,000 Commonwealth War Graves found across the world. British men and women might make up a majority of those resting in such gravesites, but by their sides lie Canadians, Australians, Indians, Kenyans and hundreds of thousands more from across the former British Empire and Commonwealth. London, the former imperial capital, hosts numerous memorials to their sacrifices in the aid of the UK. As we turn to later in the series, the power and attachment to the empire and Commonwealth remains a powerful one. But it is not only linked to the Commonwealth that has shaped British approaches to Europe.

The relationship with the USA has played an equally powerful but often confusing part in Britain's relations with the rest of Europe. Located on the upmarket Bond St in West London, the Allies Statue perfectly encapsulates this. Unveiled in 1995, it commemorates the UK-US 'special relationship' in the form of the two Second World War leaders, Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Sat at either end of a bench, the two relaxed smiling figures are separated by a space the viewer can sit in. It's approachable and located on one of London's busiest shopping streets.

The 'special relationship' however, has always been fraught with more difficulties for both sides than the statue of the two smiling leaders suggests. First given prominence by Churchill in a speech in 1946, he talked of 'a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States.' This was about Britain as a global empire and equal of the USA, something now overlooked. What is not overlooked, at least officially by UK governments, is that a central UK goal of the relationship has been to keep the USA committed to Europe. Britain's key strategic lesson from two world wars was that it needed to rely on outside support, especially the USA, if it was to face hostile and uncertain European weather. For the USA, the UK remains an important, if diminished, ally. But for both, not least the USA, the relationship is one of several important (read: special) relationships. It has left successive prime ministers and presidents struggling with a series of contradictions. British prime ministers have sought to use the relationship to remain apart from the rest of Europe while also seeking increased European cooperation to boost Europe – and therefore Britain's – standing with the USA and ability to stand apart when needed. US presidents meanwhile have supported European integration (including British membership) so Europe can speak more clearly with a single voice, while being ambivalent about Europe – Britain included – becoming a strategic competitor.

The warmth and brotherly feel of the Allies Statue certainly contrasts with the statues found elsewhere to many of Britain's allies from the Second World War. The statue of France's General de Gaulle stands proudly on Carlton Gardens in the heart of St James's, not far from where he led the Free French. Unveiled only two years before the Allies Statue, its more formal, frosty and largely overlooked nature tells of an Anglo-French relationship that has been more brittle, suspicious and lacked the warmth of the UK-US relationship. De Gaulle himself famously twice rejected Britain's attempts to join European integration, with Britain's continued close relationship with the USA used as part of his justification. He might have been protecting French interests and his vetoes have distracted attention from a very close French-UK relationship. But that cold, calculating decision highlighted a post-war relative decline for Britain that close personal relations symbolised in the Allies Statue could distract from but not hide.

Object 3: A Ballot Paper from the 1975 Referendum

Britain's eventual membership of the then European Economic Community was achieved on a third attempt. It was hardly an auspicious start. Britain's membership has from the start been overshadowed by several mistakes and problems, not least when it came to the issue of the legitimacy of the relationship. Britain's aloofness followed by de Gaulle's vetoes meant Britain joined an organisation whose institutions, budget and policies had been set by the founding members. It meant a series of painful adjustments for the UK also facing the equally painful adjustments of post-war relative decline. The decision to join was also not widely embraced. Instead, it was seen as a necessary step to deal with decline and therefore a transactional relationship focused on trade and business. No surprise then that questions of popular support and party unity haunted the topic from the very start.

The ballot paper shown is from the 1975 referendum on Britain's membership, which was a product of this inauspicious start to British membership. Called by Labour prime minister Harold Wilson, the referendum was his way of managing both internal Labour party differences that reached into his cabinet and a degree of public disquiet at UK participation in an organisation whose membership had been approved by parliament instead of the people as happened in several other European states (with Norway, for example, voting via referendum not to join in 1972). Held on the 5th June 1975, the referendum was preceded by a renegotiation of the UK's membership. The government confidently presented this as a successful renegotiation even if little of substance changed. The result, on the other hand, appeared to confidently assert British support for membership with 17,378,581 of the ballots (67%) cast for 'Yes' to whether 'the UK should stay in the European Community (Common Market).'

It soon became clear, however, that the referendum had been a temporary solution. Labour split in the early 1980s, in part over differences about Europe, and opinion polling showed the public soon moved towards a more sceptical view of UK membership. Arguments have persisted over what was offered, with the meaning of 'Common Market' being the topic of much debate. Threatening to leave also pointed to Britain's isolation. Neither Denmark or Ireland, who had also joined in 1973, was tempted to follow the UK if it voted to withdraw.

That the referendum, therefore, offered only a temporary reprieve for Wilson, who was able to retire shortly afterwards, has not discouraged other party leaders from attempting to mimic his approach. Whether it was John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown or David Cameron promising referendums on membership of the Euro, of the European Constitution and Lisbon Treaty, or eventually on membership itself, the offer of a referendum has been used repeatedly as a way to placate (or at least attempt to) disgruntled backbenchers and growing public unease. That their use or promise would lead to new and difficult questions, not least surrounding legitimacy, in constitutional, political, economic, social and diplomatic matters was all too easily overlooked.



Object 4: A Eurostar

A common claim about the 1975 referendum was that the British people voted to remain in a 'Common Market' and not partake in some form of political union. There can be no doubt that securing access to the economic benefits of European integration, and being able to shape these from within, was a widely accepted aim of UK membership. Britain had tried to offer an alternative setup in the form of the European Free Trade Association. Compared to the European Community, however, it lacked unity and momentum. Embracing the European Community, at least in a transactional business-like way, might not have led the British to embrace the idea of European integration in ways other Member States did. It did, however, provide a foundation on which to build the UK's biggest contribution to European integration: the Single Market.

This series will include a number of objects that explain the single market and the economic links that have developed between the UK and the EU. There could be no better object to start with, however, than the high-speed train that connects London with several other European cities via the Channel Tunnel. First proposed in the early nineteenth century, it was not until the mid-1980s that a successful attempt at constructing a link began. Today, the 50km/31mile long tunnel carries millions of passengers and tons of freight. Passengers catching a Eurostar from London's refurbished St Pancras International station can travel to 16 stations ranging from Marseille in the South of France to Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Each year millions of others make use of the car and coach link while millions of tons of freight also flow through it. It has become a normal part of the links between Britain and the rest of Europe.

The idea of a tunnel had long been overshadowed not only by doubts about the engineering and costs. The security threats it posed were also a prominent concern and have remained so. Earlier plans for a tunnel or crossing were repeatedly thwarted by concerns it could be captured by a hostile force who would use it for an invasion. The possibility of France or another European state invading might have disappeared, but security concerns about diseases (the spread of rabies was a prominent concern when the tunnel was being dug) and illegal immigration continue to surround the tunnel.

The Eurostar also points to some of the economic problems and differences that have dogged UK-EU relations. Differences between Britain and France over how to pay for the scheme allude to wider differences in economic approaches between the UK and the other EU Member States. Despite the economic gains, Britain's very commitment to the scheme has sometimes been in doubt. An earlier proposal for a tunnel was cancelled due to doubts surrounding the 1975 referendum. The economic gains themselves have not always lived up to the promises made. Britain's membership of the EU coincided with the end of the post-war economic boom that had helped ease and justify the earlier stages of integration.

This is not to say that Britain did not gain economically from membership of the EU and its Single Market. The gains, however, hid that Britain had long traded heavily with the rest of Europe with the growth in British trade in the post-war era being in part a realignment after a period of global protectionism and imperial trade preferences. But that trade – or the opportunities offered – has not benefited everyone in Britain the same way, or at least appeared to do so recently. That London had a high-speed train link to Paris, Brussels and the South of France long before it is planned to have one to Birmingham, Glasgow or Scotland has not passed unnoticed elsewhere in the UK. Promises have been repeatedly made, not least when the project's debts have needed restructuring, that Eurostar trains would connect towns and cities outside of London and the South East to the rest of Europe. Such trains have yet to arrive.

Object 5: A €1 coin

Radio 4 and the British Museum's *History of the World in 100 Objects* includes several entries focused on coins. Coins can tell us a lot about the history of human civilisation. They can tell us about economies, wealth, trade patterns, technological advancements and the spread of human civilisation. They also tell us about authority, power and, crucially, trust in that authority and power to uphold laws, pay (and enforce) debts, and keep the peace. Like any currencies, the Euro, the EU's single currency, and the British Pound Sterling can tell us a lot about the power, authority, and trust that exists within and between the EU and the UK.

The Euro is the most significant change in the international monetary system since the US decision to end convertibility of the dollar to gold that led to the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1971. The decision to abolish the currencies of eleven Member States, starting in 1999 and eventually covering nineteen Member States, means that today 343 million people buy and sell goods and services using one currency. That currency is also now the world's second-largest reserve currency. Before its introduction, Europe was home to a multitude of currencies ranging from Germany's Deutschmark to Slovakia's koruna. A single currency to replace them had been an ambition of some from the very earliest stages of European integration. For some, a currency was a stepping stone towards a political union, perhaps a United States of Europe. For others, it was a technical and much-needed means by which to improve the operation of European economies and protect them against the uncertainties of an unstable global financial system. After the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany it also became the means by which Germany pooled its currency with other European states so as to assure them that Berlin sought a 'European Germany' not a 'German Europe'.

Britain's decision not to join the Euro was far from straightforward and offers several insights into the history of Brexit. As a leading proponent of the Single Market, successive UK governments had been supportive of efforts to remove trading barriers to create a more open market across the EU. What British decision makers were less keen to admit was that this would inevitably require supranational oversight and enforcement (to which we return in later objects). If pushed further, it would also require some forms of monetary and fiscal policies to coordinate and manage the collective European economy. If British businesses, especially in the City of London, were to fully benefit from this then British participation might be needed. A single currency could also form a core to the EU, meaning that if British decision makers wanted to fully participate and shape EU politics then they might have to give up the Pound Sterling as the necessary price for a seat at the top table.

More than anything, British decision makers and the public more broadly also struggled with an issue that underpins any currency: trust. The Pound Sterling's ejection in 1992 from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), by which European countries were attempting to stabilise their exchange rates, might have been because the value of the Pound Sterling was too high leaving it vulnerable to financial speculators. But it shattered an already fragile faith in the EU amongst some in the Conservative party, with Germany especially the subject of much animosity. Later predictions that by not joining the Euro Britain, and especially the City of London, would be badly hurt turned out to be far from the mark. London continued to grow, eventually dominating areas such as Euro-denominated trades. This failed prediction of economic pain would be much repeated by the Leave campaigns during the 2016 referendum. The crises that have afflicted the Eurozone since 2009 have also helped weakened British faith and trust. So toxic did the Euro become in Britain that in the 2015 referendum on Scottish independence many supporters of Scottish independence were keen to distance themselves from the idea that an independent Scotland would have to join the Euro. Instead the Pound Sterling, which also brings with it a history of empire and power, has grown as a symbol of British identity. UKIP went so far as to adopt it as part of its symbol.

Less sure, however, have been the predictions made by some, not least in Britain, that the Euro is doomed to fail because the absence of political and economic bonds make it a currency without a state. In something of a twist, Britain's withdrawal from the EU might have allowed the EU to move forward in building those bonds and creating that state.

Object 6: Translator's Headphones from the European Council Chamber

The EU is complex, sometimes cumbersome, and can come across as distant, technocratic and elite-driven. To be fair, the same is said of the UK government or the government of any modern state. What makes the EU unique is its hybrid nature: part state, part international organisation. The EU's business is, therefore, a strange mix of diplomacy and the high politics of war and peace, while also being the bread-and-butter issues associated with routine domestic politics. As mentioned earlier when discussing the Grave of the Unknown Warrior, Europe's peace and politics (at all levels) has been shaped by a multitude of organisations and treaties of which the EU is the most prominent. They reflect that for post-war Europeans, 'jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war' (Churchill, again).

When it comes to 'jaw-jaw' the role of the translator should never be overlooked. With 24 official languages, the EU goes far and beyond the language diversity and challenges faced by other international organisations or states with several official languages. The main working languages might be English, French and German (with English the most widely spoken) but visit any official EU website and you'll be able to read, and sometimes listen to EU documents and debates in any of the official languages. It fits the EU's motto of 'united in diversity.' Critics have long argued that such diversity is actually a weakness. They claim too much is lost in translation to make effective governing possible. EU citizens might hold common passports and rights to free movement, but the ability to do so is constrained by cultural and especially language barriers. In a world where swift decisions are necessary, the EU can be slow, cumbersome and bureaucratic. The EU's defenders, however, argue that the constant translating, internal negotiating, and the numerous institutions and decision makers that must be consulted (including between Euro and non-Euro members) makes the EU a powerful negotiating machine that can overwhelm its opponents in negotiations on trade or other matters.

Britain's own sometimes difficult relationship with European integration has been due to more than overcoming language barriers by a country with a famously monolingual citizenry. The EU's more consensus style of politics that focuses on negotiations, translations and compromises to make the EU work contrasts with the more majoritarian system of winner takes all, single party government politics found in Westminster. It means a more confrontational approach, including wielding the UK's veto, was sometimes taken by UK governments and politicians even when this left the UK isolated. That doesn't mean the UK was ineffective in getting what it wanted. British officials and MEPs (until, that is, the arrival of large numbers of UKIP MEPs) were regularly rated as amongst the hardest working and most effective in EU policy making. UK governments negotiated two renegotiations of the UK's membership (in 1975 and 2016), a budgetary rebate, and opt-outs from the Euro and some areas of justice and home affairs cooperation. They successfully pushed on matters ranging from the Single Market to EU enlargement in such a way that French Eurosceptics once bemoaned the 'Britishisation' of the EU. Sometimes the UK's objections hid those of other Member States. No surprise then that the UK was labelled 'an awkward partner.'

In 2015-16 the EU's ability to tolerate that awkwardness reached a limit. It was then that David Cameron had to deliver on a 2013 promise he made to an increasingly Eurosceptic Conservative Party that he would renegotiate the UK's membership, which would then be put to the British people in an in-out referendum. Perhaps Britain's increasingly special demands and treatment led him and others to believe that Britain could keep asking for more and the EU's politics of consensus would accommodate it. Perhaps something was lost in translation as British and EU decision makers struggled to understand each others politics. Whatever the merits of the renegotiation Cameron secured, the vote that followed it to leave the EU meant British officials soon found themselves back in negotiations with the EU. This time, however, instead of negotiating as an insider, the officials found themselves facing the EU negotiating machine as a (soon to be) outsider.

In the next part of the series, we'll turn to the story of why the Leave campaign won the referendum by looking at objects that include the Vote Leave bus, Nigel Farage's coat, and a Wetherspoon's beermat.

If you'd like to suggest an object for this history of Brexit then please do so through the comments section below or by email (t.l.oliver@lboro.ac.uk). At the end of this nine-part series I'll publish a selection of the objects you suggest. Thank you to those of you who have already done so.