



**BLOOMSBURY INTERNATIONAL**

# British Culture - Superstitions

5 common British superstitions  
and their origins



# Origin of 5 common British superstitions

Do you know the word "superstitions"? Superstition is a belief in supernatural causality. It is something your parents or culture told you when you were young and you have believed even if you don't know why you should or shouldn't.

This month we will introduce 5 common [British superstitions](#) and their origins!

## 1. Don't open an umbrella indoors

There are two possible origins of this superstition. Some people believe that it originated in Egyptian times when umbrellas were used to protect people from the heat of the sun. To open an umbrella indoors was an insult to the God of the Sun.

Other people believe that this superstition started in 18th century London when waterproof umbrellas with large metal spokes began to be used. The umbrellas were very large and difficult to open so often caused an injury to someone or an object to be broken if opened in the house.



## 2. Don't walk under a ladder



This is one of the most common superstitions in Britain. If you see a ladder propped up against a wall in the UK, it is very unlikely that you will see someone walking underneath it for fear of getting bad luck. It is thought that this superstition originates in Egypt thousands of years ago. The Egyptians strongly believed in the power of the pyramids. So much so that even a ladder leaning against a wall formed a triangle which symbolised a pyramid. They believed that walking under a ladder would break the 'power' of the pyramid and bring bad luck.

## 3. Don't break a mirror

It is a common belief that breaking a mirror will result in seven years of bad luck. But where did this superstition come from and why seven years? [In Roman times, it was believed](#) that your reflection (in a mirror or in water) represented your soul. If the reflection was distorted (e.g. by the mirror breaking or a stone being thrown into the water), your soul would be distorted too, bringing you bad luck.



The Romans also believed that people's health changed in 7-year cycles; so after breaking your reflection, you would have 7 years of bad health or misfortune. This bad luck would change when your body regenerated after 7 years.

#### 4. Don't spill salt

Have you ever seen someone [spill](#) salt and then throw some over their shoulder? It is a common belief that spilling salt is bad luck but throwing some over your shoulder afterwards will counter the



bad luck (although, not for the person standing behind you who is likely to get salt in their eyes!).

It might be hard to believe, but many years ago salt was very expensive and spilling it was considered wasteful behaviour which could bring unlucky omens. An alternative theory is that spilling salt is an invitation to let the devil in and throwing salt over your shoulder will keep the devil (and bad luck) away.

#### 5. Don't put new shoes on the table

According to superstition in the UK, you should never put new shoes on a table as it symbolises death of a family member. Many years ago, when a miner passed away, his shoes would be

placed on a table and this is often how his family would find out about his death. Due to this, people started to believe that putting shoes on a table was tempting fate (doing something risky or dangerous and relying on luck).



It is not clear why people specifically don't put NEW shoes on a table, but one reason could be that when people used to buy new shoes, there were nails holding the shoes together. If they were put on a table, the nails would scratch it.

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So now you know where some of the most common British superstitions originated from and you can choose whether or not to believe and follow them. Ask your [English](#) teacher for more common superstitions in the UK!



## Have fun with English!

This month we will look at synonyms, words with similar meanings.  
Can you match the word on the left with a synonym on the right?

fortunate

topic

definitely

recall

remember

reliable

theme

lucky

worried

enraged

furious

mischievous

dependable

certainly

naughty

anxious

Fortunate – lucky, definitely – certainly, remember – recall, theme – topic, worried –  
anxious, furious, enraged, dependable – reliable, naughty – mischievous

**Answers:**