



Keep Calm and Carry On

Most of us have heard the phrase, seen the poster. We have often come to associate the saying with peak and stereotypical British culture. One does not even need to have internet to know that the phrase had long ago exploded into a myriad of different variations.

Allow me to tell you where it all started.

The year was 1939. And, somewhere between 27 June and 6 July, the British Ministry of Information, which was in charge of public relations and propaganda, commissioned three posters for the public. Their message: sober restraint.¹

The first two posters read: “Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution, Will Bring Us Victory,” and “Freedom is in Peril; Defend it with all Your Might”.²

Though the iconic Keep Calm posters had been printed, they would be released upon the invasion of Britain by Germany.³ But the previous two were met with overwhelming negativity, and the Ministry feared that the public would find the Keep Calm patronising.⁴

The Keep Calm posters were shelved, and the 2.45 million posters were pulped and recycled in 1940 to help the British government deal with a serious paper shortage. Only a fraction of the prints remain, and they were lost. Until 2000.⁵

The propaganda poster was rediscovered in a dusty box at Barter Books, a second-hand bookshop in Northumberland. When Guardian journalist Susie Steiner included them in a 2005 article on her 10 favourite design items, they exploded.⁶



¹ The story behind ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’, University of London.

<https://www.london.ac.uk/about/history/history-senate-house/story-behind-keep-calm-carry>

² Keep Calm and Carry On, Nabb Research Center Online Exhibits.

<https://libapps.salisbury.edu/nabb-online/exhibits/show/propaganda/slogans/keep-calm-and-carry-on>

³ Keep Calm and Carry On, Australian War Memorial. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C99059>

⁴ ‘We had no idea of what it would become’: How Keep Calm and Carry On became a divisive 21st-Century phenomenon, [BBC.com](https://www.bbc.com)

<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20250805-how-keep-calm-and-carry-on-became-a-21st-century-phenomenon>

⁵ The story behind ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’, University of London.

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⁶ ‘We had no idea of what it would become’: How Keep Calm and Carry On became a divisive 21st-Century phenomenon, [BBC.com](https://www.bbc.com)

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Since then, the poster had appeared in a radically different environment and became the ultimate shorthand for British stoicism and a platform for endless parody.

The poster travelled to souvenir shops targeting tourists. Soon, it was printed on anything that could fit in a luggage case. Mugs, shirts, hats, pillow cases and key chains were some of the first victims. For the most part, the exact phrasing, typeface and icon stayed the same - its only variation was switching the red background for the British flag.

But when the phrase fell into the hands of the internet, it seemed as if the variations were endless and no longer bound to England. Soon, these parodies could be shuffled into different categories - although overlapping was a common theme.

At first, the iconic red background was swapped out for every colour in the rainbow and then some. But not even the font and icon were safe. Its final variation: a white background with a bold serif text reads "BE CALM".

But the possibilities were endless as the text read anything from "Keep Calm and Call Batman" to "Save Water and Drink Beer." A far-off variation with a green background and Starbucks logo at the top said: "Keep Calm and Drink Starbucks." But perhaps the poster that stayed true to the very essence of the 2000 Barter Books energy reads: "Keep Calm and Fake a British accent."



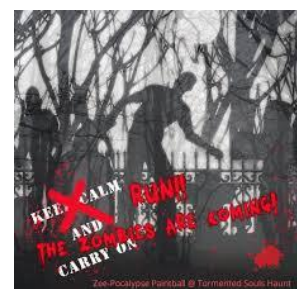
With the added factor of the internet, the format soon became a meme capable of referencing anything in pop culture. Sometimes the text started with "Keep Calm", and all was added over an image. Later, they read "You made a keep calm joke? How innovative," explaining their exasperation with the oversaturation of variations.

On the other side, templates for making your own variation of the poster emerged. Now, searching "Keep Calm and Carry On" on any search engine will lead you to a red image with only the

crown hovering at the top or to a website named something along the lines of a Keep calm and buy app :) - Amazon Keep calm generator.⁷ These generators are often linked to other shops, allowing the buyer to print pillow cases, shirts, mugs, etc., once more circling back to tourist souvenirs. The phrase has also been used unironically during the 2010s by any girl or woman wanting to add a dash of serenity and sophistication (often associated with Great Britain) to their decor.

Amongst the text parodies, memes and products, a new genre emerged. Pets. At the end of a list of variations, "Keep calm" paired with a pet illustration got the point across.

Some parodies depict the very opposite of everything. A blue background with an upside-down crown reads: Now Panic and Freak Out. This genre of posters leads down a path of cynical parodies or posters with blood splatter or crossed-out text leading to frantic messages of panic and apocalypses scrawled in graffiti.



⁷ Keep Calm generator, [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Rello_Stark-Keep-Calm-generator/dp/B00E3Bariations9SLO)
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But lastly, there is a category that remains perhaps the truest to the original. These posters are placed inside lineart illustrations and comic strips,⁸ sometimes emitting the intended comforting energy. Other times, they disperse into depictions of depressed figures looking at the poster with tired eyes or angry little people tearing at the poster with rage and frustration. This poster was created as a propaganda piece. And it will always remain political. And perhaps, always British.

To summarise, the Keep Calm and Carry On propaganda poster has been edited to be seen in every context, mood and occasion. Some only remember the phrase's structure or layout; others only acknowledge the first two words. Some stay with the intended emotion, and some manipulate it to fit their vision. Sometimes it is used as iconic and cheesy memorabilia, and other times it is/ was used unironically because the meaning resonated with the viewer. Often, it reminds the viewers of its origin, Great Britain, and other times, the variations have traveled to far to think back to the source. But there is no debate, the Keep Calm and Carry On will stay iconic for a few more decades. And who knows, maybe it will disappear again, and we will have a grand rediscovery.



⁸ Keep Calm And Carry On cartoons and comics, Cartoon Stock.

https://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/k/keep_calm_and_carry_on.asp?srsId=AfmBOOqr77Vqu6vXz0fbX5iMxHTYrETcty0z-IWHG-lxzJ2VVf_pGfME