Britain was the last of the major Community powers to make a public issue of the EC's Single Market programme. Many British companies are only just awakening to the potential changes being orchestrated in Brussels; changes which may not only vastly alter the way businesses are conducted, but also affect our daily lives. The proposed new order is bound to become increasingly controversial as the 'Committee', consisting of Britain and eleven foreign partners, votes each step into implementation while attempting to satisfy local needs in their respective countries.

Many believe that Britain's 'island' mentality poses a challenge to a truly integrated market in Europe. Despite the building of the Channel tunnel, the British may for a long time continue to regard Britain as separate from the Continent they call Europe. Some of these attitudes are rooted in outdated fears and prejudices, often second-hand when adopted by the younger generation. But, overall, our fears are the product of ingrained thinking habits. Margaret Thatcher's visit to a number of European capitals and her controversial comments then and recently, have done nothing to help achieve the reality of the Single Market. But Britain is no different from many of the other EC member states who, despite their perceived attitudes, also put the needs and requirements of their own countries before those of Europe.

Despite these negative attitudes, the Single Market programme goes ahead. It is Europe's best plan for halting the slide in economic growth by tackling the problem at its root — the weaknesses of companies, protected for too long in small and comfortable home markets. Better management will be forced on Europe's businesses which will put the EC economy on a stronger footing to face the biggest economic threat of the 21st Century — that is, living in the shadow of USA and Japanese economic power.

### Will Europe be one market after 1992?

The birth of the Single European Market will be attended by midwives representing salesmanship, industry, international politics and high-flying finance, but as we tire of celebrating the birth of the new Europe, what can we expect to see on the continental shelf once the barriers are down? In the interests of better European understanding, a leading British research company, Mintel, has published one of the most comprehensive studies ever into European lives, loves, leisure and spending habits. From Stuttgart to Seville and from Brussels to Birmingham, financial nosey parkers from Mintel peered into the
bank balances, bedrooms and boozing habits of adults in France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, Britain and the Netherlands. Although the report weighs in at 10,000 pages and is eight volumes in total, one will not have to read far before seeing that the facts cancel any fear of creeping Europeanisation in our lifestyles and outlooks. Harmonised we might well be, but the only thing these seven countries (and probably the other five) really have in common are the Eurovision Song Contest and a profound dislike of Belgian food. In short, says Mintel, the picture postcard stereotypes of the bossy German, the stuffy Englishman, the pasta-touting Italian, the chauvinistic Frenchman and the boring Belgian, still hold true. In their view, the economic barriers may be being broken down, but we have perhaps never been more divided.

Cultural differences

We can see how Europe remains fragmented as a market in many ways by, first, looking at some of the major differences in the people within some of the European countries; and, second, by looking at major differences in marketing approaches country by country. Once we start to research European markets in detail, looking beyond the legislative changes in order to grasp the facts about the people, the communities and townships to which we hope to direct sales, we see that the changes in the Single Market are primarily a matter of improved access, and do not necessarily in themselves create opportunities. In many instances real opportunities will be created where new businesses are established as part of economic development programmes, just as some existing opportunities will be lost when businesses relocate and rationalise their operations. In principle, however, the task of marketing and selling is not made easier by changes in the Single Market, since once the changes are made, they benefit every supplier in the field. This places everyone on a level playing field in terms of access, though not, of course, in terms of the many other factors in competitiveness which apply. Recognising and adapting to cultural differences is a fundamental factor in competitiveness, as most regular exporters understand. Sometimes we see our “different” European neighbours as amusing caricatures, but there is often enough truth in national stereotypes to interest market researchers.

According to the Mintel study mentioned earlier, West Germany with its preponderance of wealthy widows, should prove something of a happy hunting ground for international toy boys. The Germans are the wealthiest of all the European people and stay that way with high levels of savings, little borrowing and a racial fear of inflation dating back to the Weimar Republic. German men find themselves outnumbered and outmanoeuvered by their highly assertive women-folk, but the vast majority (88 per cent) insist on choosing the family car. Although the growth in income of the Germans has outstripped that of any country in Europe, the German economic miracle could be in decline.

Turning to the French, most Europeans envy their relaxed lifestyle, their fertile countryside and their gourmet food and wine. Flying the flag is second nature to the chauvinistic French; so enamoured are they with France that holidays abroad are rated low. Two-day breaks in France, however, are a must. Rates of marriage and divorce are increasing in the rest of Europe, but the French do not seem to be the marrying kind. If the Frenchman had more money to spend he would opt for more weekend and day trips but failing that, he would plump for a new stereo. Do not, however, try to interest him in a new kitchen or a high-powered saving plan. These do not figure on a Frenchman’s list of priorities.