

Year 5 General Studies

British Empire

What was it?

The largest, richest, and most powerful empire in world history was the British Empire. Over a span of some three centuries Great Britain brought lands on every continent and islands in every ocean under its rule. At its height the colonies and other territories of the empire encompassed nearly one-quarter of the world's land surface and more than one-quarter of its population. It was a common saying that the sun never set on Britain's dominions.



The 'First British Empire'

Over time, the English would claim more and more territories. This sometimes meant fighting with other European nations to take over their colonies.

Over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, England gained major colonies in North America and further south in the West Indies, today known as the Caribbean Islands. Here, the climate was perfect for growing crops like sugar and tobacco, so they set up farms known as plantations.

Trading settlements were also created in India by a company called the East India Company. This company became so powerful, it allowed England to control of the trade of luxury goods like spices, cotton, silk and tea from India and China, and it even influenced politics.

The 'Second British Empire'

Although Britain had lost a huge part of its North American territories, it claimed new lands in the late 18th Century and early 19th Century, forming the 'Second British Empire'. Colonies were founded in parts of Australia, and later Trinidad and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Singapore and Hong Kong (China) as well as other parts of Asia.

From 1881 to 1902, Britain competed with other European empire-builders in what became known as the 'Scramble for Africa'. By the early 1900s, huge parts of Africa – including Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and large areas of southern Africa – all came under British rule. The British Empire was larger and more powerful than ever.

The Commonwealth

As the British Empire began to fall, it was replaced by what is today called The Commonwealth (or The Commonwealth of Nations) – an organisation that countries can choose to join, or leave. It began in 1931, when the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa formed the British Commonwealth of Nations. Today, it is made up of over 50 countries who work and trade together. They also share a common set of values, including fair political elections, the respect of human rights and working towards international peace.

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Questions

1. **Approximately how many years was the British Empire the most powerful empire in the world?**

2. **At its height the colonies and other territories of the empire encompassed nearly one-quarter of the world's land surface and more than one-quarter of its population.**

True / False

3. **What was the name of the company in India that use trading settlements to help expand the British Empire?**

4. **When did the 'Scramble for Africa' occur?**

5. **Fill in the blanks.**

Although _____ had lost a huge part of its North American _____, it claimed new lands in the late _____ and early 19th Century, forming the 'Second British _____'.

6. **The Commonwealth of Nations is an organisation that countries can choose to join, or leave.**

True / False