

# The British Empire

The British Empire Consisted of the territories, colonies and protectorates under direct or indirect administration of Great Britain

At its height in 1913, the British Empire held sway over 412 million people, 23% of the world population at the time and 24% of the Earth's total land area earning the phrase "the empire on which the sun never set."

This article will further elaborate on the aspects of the British empire for the Civil Services Examination.

## Origins of the British Empire

As the views of the Enlightenment in the late 17th century became more widespread it led to a curiosity to explore parts of the world hitherto untouched by Europeans. The discovery of the Americas in 1492 and the sea route to India on 20 May 1498 was the beginning of European exploration and colonialism.

The foundation of the British presence in America can be traced back to the days of the Reformation when the adherents of the Catholic faith fled England on account of King Henry VIII breaking his ties with the Pope

Along with other European powers the British also ventured into colonialism at first in North America, paying little heed to Africa and Asia for the time being. With the independence of its American (Canada being the exception) colonies in 1776, the British now began to focus primarily on gaining colonies in Africa and Europe.

In 1788 an association was formed in London to encourage the exploration in Africa. Many would-be colonists went to Cape Colony in South Africa, which the British had taken from the Dutch in 1806.

Many British expeditions explored Africa's interior along the great rivers. Between 1768 and 1875. From 1768 to 1773, James Bruce explored Ethiopia and in two expeditions from 1795 to 1806 Mungo Park explored the Niger River.

In Asia, the East India Company (founded on December 31, 1600) led the foray into colonial ventures. Through the battles of Plassey and Buxar, the East India Company began a gradual takeover of the Indian subcontinent. And by the end of the Carnatic Wars, they had complete control of the Indian subcontinent by the beginning of the 1800s. Following the revolt of 1857, the East India Company was dissolved and control passed directly to the British Crown.

Along with controlling India, the British established colonies in Southeast Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries. One of the earliest was Singapore on the tip of the Malay peninsula, which came under British control in 1819. By 1896 the Malay states had formed a federation under British advisors, effectively making it a protectorate. In 1824, the British invaded Burma in response to Burmese expeditions in Northeast India.

The Burmese resisted British efforts of colonisation through a series of three wars before being finally defeated in 1885 and Britain took much control over the country.

## The Economy of the British Empire

Much of the British Empire's wealth came from its colonies, the earliest been added in the 17th and 18 century, more when Napoleon Bonaparte was defeated during the Napoleonic wars. The Empire reached its furthest extent under the rule of Queen Victoria who had ascended the throne in 1837 and ruled for the next 64 years. It was around this time that the British Empire gained colonies in New Zealand, many islands in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, parts of the Far East and large parts of Africa.

The Colonies mainly provided raw materials for British factories and a ready market for their goods. The Industrial Revolution made the production of British goods a faster and cheaper affair. India was the most prized of all its colonies and was referred to as the "jewel in the crown of the British Empire". This was especially true after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which cut 6436 km off the journey from Britain to India.

As British rule became firmly established, the economies of many of the colonies were also changed as plantations produced rubber or cotton. Many people also migrated from Britain to Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where they set up farms producing wheat, cattle and sheep to export to Britain.

## The decline of the British Empire

At the beginning of the 20th century, a unified Germany and the United States had begun to challenge Britain's economic might. The resulting military and economic tensions between Germany were one of the causes of World War I, during which Britain relied heavily upon its colonies to alleviate the enormous strain on its military and financial resources.

Although it won the first World War, it was a shadow of its former military might. This became evident during the outbreak of World War II when a resurgent Japanese Empire effortlessly blitzed across its holdings in South-East Asia. Despite winning the war, the blow to its prestige was too severe and it hastened the decline of the empire.

India was the first amongst its colonies in Asia to gain independence in 1947. This was a part of the decolonisation venture in which Britain granted independence to most territories of the Empire.

The Suez Crisis of 1956 confirmed Britain's decline as a global power, and the transfer of Hong Kong to China in 1997 marked for many the end of the British Empire. Fourteen overseas territories remain under British sovereignty. After independence, many former British colonies joined the Commonwealth of Nations, a free association of independent states.