

# BRITISH EMPIRE

Aimed at Key Stage 3 – year 8/9

circa 1500

Beginning of the  
British Empire

1500



The East India  
Company was  
founded  
1600

Slavery  
abolished in  
the UK

1833

Indian mutiny

1857

1997

Hong Kong  
handed back  
to China



1997

## National Curriculum subject links

*Ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain 1745–1901*

- The development of the British Empire
- The transatlantic slave trade; its effects and eventual abolition

## Coverage and links

The British Empire has had a mixed reception in History classrooms over recent years. Whilst it has featured in all versions of the National Curriculum for History, some teachers have been loath to present it as anything other than a 'bad thing'. These lessons will ask several questions about the growth of the Empire before ending at that very debate, as students use their new knowledge of the Empire to come to some tentative conclusions. There are three short enquiries here. They are designed for one to two lessons each, though of course they can be extended or shortened as necessary.

1. The first enquiry is a short causation study that asks how the British came to rule over so much of the globe. The films lead to several different factors that led to the immense size of the Empire. The films about John Cabot and James Cook point to the idea of exploration as a factor. Then we learn how trade built links with countries around the globe and finally, the films about the Zulu Wars and the Indian Mutiny show that armed force was used to secure British rule.
2. The second sequence looks at the transatlantic slave trade and the significance of William Wilberforce. We hear from Wilberforce himself, and pupils will learn about the nature of the slave trade as they follow a slave's journey from capture to market via the hold of a slave ship across the Atlantic. They will also learn about the work of Wilberforce that led to the abolition of the slave trade and then slavery itself.
3. This leads to the final debate about the extent to which the Empire was a force for good or bad.

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## Suggested learning outcomes

*By the end of these lessons, pupils will be able to...*

- Give reasons why the British had such a large Empire and make some links between these reasons
- Explain the consequences of different wars and rebellions in different parts of the Empire
- **Describe different facets of the transatlantic slave trade and the reasons why it ended**
- Make a tentative judgement about the extent to which the British Empire was a force for good or bad.

## Pre-lesson homework

To prepare for this sequence of lessons, pupils could be asked to come up with a definition of the word 'Empire' that takes in the work they will have done on Empire before, such as the Roman Empire.

## Enquiry 1 – How did the British come to rule so much of the world?

Films to use

- **The beginning of the British Empire**
- **British Empire – trading companies**
- **The East India Company**
- **Captain Cook part 1**
- **Captain Cook part 2**
- **The Death of Captain Cook**
- **The Zulu Wars – parts 1**
- **The Zulu Wars – parts 2**
- **The Indian Mutiny of 1857 – parts 1**
- **The Indian Mutiny of 1857 – parts 2**
- **The Jewel in the Crown**

Start the enquiry by showing students the illustrated map, shown in figure 1. This map

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## Enquiry 1 – How did the British come to rule so much of the world?

of the British Empire at its height in the 1880s tells us such a lot, both in terms of factual detail – where precisely the British ruled around the world – and in terms of attitudes towards the native populations of the nations of the Empire.

Indeed, the picture gives an impression of what the Empire meant to British people at the time. There are high resolution versions of the map available on Wikipedia which would make it possible to zoom in on different sections; you could give out sections of the illustrations to small groups of students to study and feed back to the rest of the class. At the end, it will be important to establish with students some definitions of 'Empire' and their emergent thoughts about what it meant to Britain and the Empire.

**Then** introduce the enquiry question. Students will consider some of the factors that led to the British having such a vast empire. They might also consider whether the answers that they come to might lead to some very tentative thinking about what the Empire might have been for.

**Show The Beginning of the British Empire** in which an Elizabethan sailor talks about Tudor explorers like Cabot, Drake and Raleigh sailing off to the New World across the Atlantic and, in Drake's case, going all the way round the world. Students should record this first factor in their books and give it a title; perhaps, simply, 'Exploration'. Then write some details from the films as examples. Captain Cook – **part 1** & **part 2** could be shown here so that students have a wider range of examples. End this factor by returning to the map; by the death of Captain Cook in 1777 - how far had British explorers gone?

**Now** show **British Empire – trading companies**. What factor for the Empire is suggested here? Again, students should record the factor and add details in support of it. Be careful to ensure that your students don't get muddled with the all the companies mentioned in the film; not all, of course, worked in places that were part of the Empire. The next film, **The East India Company** describes the work of the biggest of these trading companies and students will add more detail. This film also leads students into the next lesson, so ask students to hold on to ideas about the army of the EIC until then.

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## Enquiry 1 – How did the British come to rule so much of the world?

At the end of this lesson, ask students to discuss two questions:

1. From these two factors, can you start to think who might be benefiting from the Empire?
2. Which factor seems to be the biggest motivator? Exploration or trade?

In the next lesson, begin by zooming in the bottom left corner of the illustrated map. We see in this corner two soldiers, so ask your class if they can infer the final factor that led to the Empire. Ask them to record this with the other factors and show **The Indian Mutiny of 1857 – Part 1 & Part 2**. The first film gives us some of the causes of the mutiny but the real business for this enquiry comes in the second film. Ask your class to note down some details under their new heading. What happens when people already occupied start to rebel against British rule?

Follow this by showing **The Zulu Wars – part 1 & part2**. The two films describe the lifestyle of the Zulus in Southern Africa and how the British Army came to eventually defeat them. Though there was some public outcry, Zululand became part of the British Empire nonetheless. Indeed, in the first film there is the suggestion of a final factor – wealth. The wars began after the discovery of diamonds. The final film to show, **The Jewel in the Crown**, gives us one final factor for Empire – it was to benefit the occupied countries. Building tea plantations and railways brought a benefit to previously undeveloped countries. If time allows, these factors could all now be added to through students researching the relationship between Britain and a part of the Empire.

Students will now play with their factors for a few minutes. Challenge them either to put them into order of importance, coming up with reasons why this is the case or to make links between the factors. This could lead to a wider discussion or even small groups working together on weighing up and linking the factors.

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## Enquiry 2 – Why should we remember William Wilberforce?

The final activity in this short sequence is to write an essay that answers the enquiry question. How did the British come to rule so much of the world?

Films to use

- What is a slave?
- Why were the British involved in the Slave Trade?
- Slave Capture
- Slave Journey to the Coast
- The Middle Passage – part 1
- The Middle Passage – part 2
- Slave Market
- The Slave Triangle

These lessons are aimed at learning about the transatlantic slave trade and the importance of William Wilberforce in bringing it, and eventually slavery itself, to an end in the British Empire.

**Start** by asking your students what they think a slave is? Have them brainstorm ideas in small groups. What does a slave do? What can't a slave do? Is all slavery the same? After getting some feedback show **What is a slave?**, and see if William Wilberforce confirms the definition. Now ask a more speculative question; based on what was learned in the sequence of lessons about the making of the Empire, why might the British Empire have slavery? After some thoughts from students, show **Why were the British involved in the Slave Trade?** Again, does this confirm ideas? What else does Wilberforce say?

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## Enquiry 2 – Why should we remember William Wilberforce?

**Now** introduce William Wilberforce and talk a little about what he did to campaign against the slave trade. It is worth noting at this point that he didn't work alone and that others, such as the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano and the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson, all played an important role in this story, but that we are going to focus our attention on Wilberforce. Students will be helping him to write his big speech to parliament that he mentioned in the second film.

In order to find out what Wilberforce saw, the next set of films tells the story of the journey of a slave from capture to eventual sale at the slave market. Tell pupils that they will need to use these details to support the things they will be saying in the speech. The first film to show is **The Slave Triangle**. In it, Wilberforce talks about the economics of the slave trade. Students should use his description to draw a diagram, possibly on a printed map of the Atlantic Ocean (**like the one here**), showing the passage of a ship sailing from Liverpool.

**After this**, show the next set of films whilst students make notes about the slave's journey. They should do two things; keep a record of the big ideas suggested by the film titles, and then the details given by the slave in the film which help us to see what actually happened to him. At the end of each film, give students a chance to talk about some of what they've heard because it's powerful stuff. The stories told in **The Middle Passage – part 1** and **part 2** are particularly harrowing.

It might seem a question with an obvious answer, but ask students why they think that Wilberforce and his fellow campaigners wanted to bring an end to the slave trade? Is it just because of the cruelties of the journey?

**Now** set up the writing task which could be done in small groups or individually. Students should help Wilberforce with his speech by writing a section that tells listeners about the journey of a slave.

**At the end**, hear some of the speeches and have others in the room comment on them.

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## Enquiry 3 – Was the empire a good thing?

Films to use

### Was the British Empire a good or bad thing?

- Part 1
- Part 2
- Part 3

This is a question that will have been hanging around all the other lessons up to this point. Of course it's easy to concentrate on the bad bits - the armed conquest, the middle passage and the racist views of native peoples as shown in the map in Lesson 1. On the other hand, the Empire did bring benefits. This lesson will give students a chance to consider their views more carefully.

**When you start**, it would be useful to hang a 'washing line' across your room or have a wall space clear for pupils to stick something up on a continuum. On a piece of paper, ask pupils to answer the question in a sentence or so. Then they should come and put their answers on the continuum that runs from 'yes' to 'no' or perhaps 'good' to 'bad'. Are they wholly down one end, or somewhere between the two positions? At this stage, keep talking with pupils. What sorts of things have they focussed on in their responses? Is anyone persuaded by anything said by a classmate?

**Now show Was the British Empire a good or bad thing? Part 1.** In it, a Victorian explorer outlines some of the big ideas. At the end, ask students to add notes to their original answer and put it back up, perhaps in a new position. Talk about any movements or indeed about anybody who's views are not altered.

**Show Was the British Empire a good or bad thing? Part 2** and repeat the exercise.

**Finally**, show **Was the British Empire a good or bad thing? Part 3** after which students will do their final notes and their final repositioning.

You can keep talking on this basis for some time, but towards the end change the question. Tell them that this question is perhaps too simple. Instead ask 'Who benefitted from the British Empire?' This will lead to a new and richer debate and a final piece of writing.

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## Differentiation, assessment and reflection

### Extension

There are opportunities in each lesson to extend pupils thinking.

- In the first enquiry, some students could be given another factor – government action, for example – to find out details about.
- In the work on the slave trade, students could be given an extract from Olaudah Equiano's autobiography or something about Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson.
- In the final debate, they might read views on empire by politicians like Churchill or by historians.

### Scaffolding

- Some students might find it useful to have the transcripts of the films available to them – each one is accessible when you've selected a film to play. This is especially true for the second enquiry where there is a lot of information to record.
- For the final debate, students could be provided with a summary of the big points that might be made on either side.

### Formative assessment opportunities

- Throughout the enquiry short answer tests might be used to secure important factual details.
- In the debate at the end it will be crucial that everyone contributes. It might be that everyone offers a very brief opening statement. Targeted questions would also help here.

### Reflection

The discussion and short piece of writing at the end of the last lesson works as a final concluding activity for the whole topic.

This could be followed up with some homework that builds on this. The question could be changed again to something like, 'How should the British Empire be remembered?'

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source 2 – Imperial Federation, map of the world



source Wikipedia:

**Imperial Federation, Map of the World Showing the Extent  
of the British Empire in 1886**