




How did the British Empire grow so large?

KS3 Ages 11-14 🕒 6 min read

At its height in the 1920s, the British Empire covered about 24% of the world's land surface and governed roughly 412 million people — a quarter of the world's population at the time. It was the largest empire in history. How did a relatively small island in northern Europe accumulate such an extraordinary amount of global power?

It started with trade

Britain's expansion began not with armies but with merchants. The East India Company, founded in 1600, was a private trading company granted a royal charter to trade with Asia. It built trading posts, then forts, then effectively its own army. The company's gradual takeover of Indian territory was driven primarily by commercial interest — securing trade routes, protecting profits, and eliminating competitors. This pattern — commerce leading to control — was repeated across the globe.

 Imagine a large supermarket chain that opens a store in a town, then buys the neighbouring shop to stop competition, then builds a warehouse for the area, then starts managing the local supply chain, then employs its own security guards, and eventually is effectively running the local economy. Nobody planned to take over the town — it happened as a series of commercially rational decisions. That's somewhat how British colonialism worked in many places: trade relationships gradually expanded into political and military control.

Naval power was the foundation

Britain is an island nation, and from the 17th century onwards it invested heavily in its navy. After defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588 and competing with the Dutch and French through the 17th and 18th centuries, Britain emerged as the dominant naval power. Control of the seas meant control of trade routes, the ability to project military force anywhere in the world, and the capacity to cut off rivals. Without naval supremacy, the empire couldn't have been built or maintained.

The Industrial Revolution multiplied British power

The Industrial Revolution — which began in Britain in the late 18th century — gave Britain an enormous military and economic advantage. British factories produced weapons, ships, and goods faster and cheaper than anywhere else. Steam-powered gunboats could travel upriver into the interiors of Africa and Asia, where sailing ships couldn't go. The telegraph enabled rapid communication across vast distances. Britain's industrial head start translated directly into imperial expansion.

What did it mean for the people living under it?

This is where the picture becomes deeply uncomfortable. Colonial rule involved the violent suppression of local populations, the extraction of resources and wealth to Britain, the destruction of local industries and economies, forced labour, and the imposition of foreign laws and cultures. The famines that killed millions in India, the concentration camps of the Boer War, the suppression of the 1857 rebellion in India, the exploitation of African territories — these were not incidental to the empire; they were features of it. The wealth generated flowed to Britain; the costs were paid by the colonised. The legacy of that imbalance shapes global inequality today.