**British Empire 1500-1900**

**1500-1750**

Between 1497 and 1763, English seamen discovered new lands, set up colonies and traded all over the world.

* In 1497, only five years after Christopher Columbus sailed to the West Indies, the Italian explorer John Cabot, financed by English merchants, discovered new lands in Canada.
* The first English colonies were formed in north America - in 1585, Sir Walter Raleigh organised a small settlement at Roanoke in Virginia, but it failed and in 1607, Captain John Smith founded a permanent colony at Jamestown in Virginia.
* After 1612, the East India Company began to build up a small empire of trading posts in India.
* The first successful English colonies in the West Indies were founded in the 1620s. The settlers set up sugar and tobacco plantations and used slave labour.
* In 1664, the English took over the Dutch colony of New Netherland, which included the state of New Amsterdam. The English renamed this New York. The English also took over New Sweden (which is now called Delaware). Florida became a British colony in 1763.

**Fighting the French and gaining control of India**

In the 18th century, Britain fought a number of wars against France, taking over colonies established by the French:

* in 1713, the British took over the French colony of Acadia (New France in northeastern North America)
* victories by Robert Clive, including the Battle of Plassey in 1757, drove out the French and established British control in India
* during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) the British won Canada from the French with a notable victory coming from General James Wolfe's capture of Quebec in 1759

**1750-1900**

In the century 1815–1914, 10 million square miles of territory and 400 million people were added to the British Empire. By the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 Britain was the 'Mother Country' of a worldwide empire which covered a fifth of the land in the world, and at the time, the British were proud of how Britannia 'ruled the waves'. This view was not shared by many of the people who experienced political and economic inequality and the decline of their culture and religion.

**Timeline leading up to the British Empire Exhibition of 1924**

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| **1787** | First shipment of transported prisoners to Australia. |
| **1839** | The Opium War forced China to allow British traders to sell the drug opium into China. |
| **1857** | There was a rebellion in India (the Indian Mutiny). The government took over rule of India from the East India Company. |
| **1867** | Canada was given 'dominion' (self-governing) status, followed by Australia and New Zealand in 1907. |
| **1876** | Queen Victoria was declared 'Empress of India'. |
| **1881‒1919** | The 'Scramble for Africa' – Britain acquired colonies in Africa stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. |
| **1899‒1902** | The Second Boer War – the British conquered South Africa. |
| **1919** | The Treaty of Versailles gave Germany's colonies as 'mandates' for Britain and France to administer. |
| **1924** | The British Empire Exhibition at Wembley Stadium. The Empire looked happy and strong. |

**Attitudes of Empire**

* Britain regarded itself as 'ruler of the waves'. The songs 'Rule Britannia' and 'Land of Hope and Glory' show this.
* Many British people at the time thought that they were doing the right thing by taking the British government and Christianity to the rest of the world, ending slavery and barbaric traditions and bringing 'civilisation' and an international 'Pax Britannica', or 'British peace'. The British generally felt that the way they lived their lives was the right way. They believed that colonising various countries was a means of helping others to become like Britain and therefore improve.

The British Empire had clearly changed in this period. Whilst owning territories around the world still gave Britain space, power and global influence, the Empire was now more than just about discovering new lands and building them up. Most of the world was now known and belonged to someone. Therefore, the British had to colonise established countries with populations and leadership systems of their own. In Africa, it is true that some of these countries were disunited and in some form of chaos, split between various tribes and tribal chiefs rather than united by one common leader.

However, the British were now repressing various groups and even entire countries. In Africa, following the ‘Scramble’, British soldiers controlled many villages that they saw as disruptive and removed many local leaders. The British helped these countries by opening up trade markets with them and developing them more than they had ever been developed before. Nevertheless, these changes were usually for the benefit of Britain, and one of the legacies of the Empire today is the extreme poverty and conflict in many countries previously ruled by Britain.