

HISTORY · Y5–Y6

The British Empire

Knowledge Organiser — Y5–Y6

Key facts and chronology

1 What was the British Empire?

A collection of territories — colonies, dominions, protectorates — ruled or controlled by Britain. At its peak (1920s), it covered approximately 25% of the world's land surface.

2 How did it grow?

Through exploration (15th–17th century), trade, military conquest, and treaties. The East India Company (founded 1600) drove much of the expansion in Asia.

3 Key colonies

India (1757–1947), Australia (1788–1901), Canada (1867 independence), South Africa (1806), Nigeria, Kenya, Jamaica, Hong Kong.

4 The transatlantic slave trade

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, Britain transported approximately 3.1 million enslaved Africans to the Americas. Slavery was abolished in British colonies in 1833 (Slavery Abolition Act).

5 Decolonisation

The process by which colonies gained independence — largely 1947–1980. India (1947) was the most significant.

6 The Commonwealth

A voluntary association of former British territories, most of which were once part of the empire. 56 member states today.



Perspectives on empire

The historical debate

- **ECONOMIC IMPACT:** The empire was built partly on exploiting the resources and labour of colonised peoples. The transatlantic slave trade created enormous wealth for Britain.
- **CULTURAL IMPACT:** British colonialism spread the English language, legal systems, and institutions — some still exist today.
- **RESISTANCE:** Colonised people resisted throughout — the Indian Rebellion (1857), the Kenyan Mau Mau uprising (1950s), and many others.
- **LEGACY IN BRITAIN:** Mass immigration from former colonies in the 1950s–70s (Windrush generation) permanently shaped British society and culture.
- **THE DEBATE:** Historians disagree about how to evaluate the empire. Teaching it means giving space to the perspectives of those who were colonised — not only those who colonised.
- **IMPORTANT:** No clean summary exists. The empire created benefits for some and caused severe suffering to many others. Both of these things are true simultaneously.

