

Talking about:
British society

care facility – *Pflegeeinrichtung*
council housing – *Sozialwohnungen*
culture clash – *Aufeinanderprallen*
zweier Kulturen
diversity – *Vielfalt*
European Economic Area – *Euro-*
päischer Wirtschaftsraum
general practitioner – *Allgemeinarzt*
needy – *bedürftig*

pension fund – *Rentenkasse*
poverty line – *Existenzminimum*
social class – *Gesellschaftsschicht*
social security – *Sozialversicherung*
to socialise – *unter die Leute kommen*
state pension – *staatliche Rente*
welfare state – *Sozialstaat*
well-off – *wohlhabend*



Brick Lane Market, London. The area surrounding this busy market is well-known for its mix of immigrant communities.

4.4 Britain and the world

The British Empire

Britain's colonial empire, which lasted from the late 16th to the mid 20th century, was the largest ever in the world. At its height in the early 1900s, it comprised over 20% of the world's land area and about 458 million people. It was said that "the sun never sets on the British Empire". In other words, the empire was so extensive that there would always be daylight in at least one of the colonies.

Reasons for empire-building

- ⦿ Since it is an island, Britain has long been a seafaring nation. The first great explorations took place during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603), when Sir Francis Drake sailed around the world (1588) and Walter Raleigh explored the Americas between 1578 and 1595. However, the first long-term colonies were not founded until the beginning of the 17th century.
- ⦿ Economic factors played an important role from the start: the idea was to establish foreign trade in order to bring wealth to the mother country. Colonies were a source of cheap raw materials and provided a market for exports. Large trading companies were established as early as the 17th century, for example the East India Company (1600) and the London (Virginia) Company (1606).

The goods that were traded included silk, cotton, salt, opium and tea.

The first empire

The first British colonies were in:

- ⦿ the West Indies (Jamaica, the Bahamas, Bermuda)
- ⦿ India (although it was not directly ruled by Britain until 1858)
- ⦿ North America
- ⦿ Canada (Newfoundland, Hudson Bay)
- ⦿ Gibraltar

Britain acquired some of this land during wars with France (Canada, India) and Spain (West Indies, Gibraltar). After gaining control of Gibraltar, Britain was permitted to supply slaves and trade goods in the Spanish Americas, which established the country as a major overseas power.

Gibraltar is one of Britain's few remaining overseas territories today.

The North American colonies

These can be divided into three groups:

- ▶ The New England Colonies: the area around Boston settled by the Puritans.
- ▶ The Middle Colonies: the area around New York settled by various European immigrants attracted by the opportunities for religious and political freedom that they offered.
- ▶ The Southern Colonies: Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina and Georgia. This was the area in which tobacco and cotton was grown, and also where slavery was introduced.

The phrase “Taxation without representation is tyranny” became one of the anti-British slogans used in the time leading to the American Revolution

Britain expanded its North American territory when it gained control of the French parts of Canada in 1763. To pay for the increasing costs of a growing empire, it decided to impose taxes on the North American colonies (the Stamp Act of 1765). The colonists resisted this, arguing that they should not have to pay taxes because the colonies did not have any representation in the British Parliament. The Boston Tea Party (1773) was a protest against tea taxes, which ultimately led to the War of Independence and the founding of the United States of America as a nation in its own right.

The Second Empire

After America became independent, Britain concentrated on extending its empire towards the east.

- ▶ Trade still played the most important role in the earlier stages of this expansion → during the Industrial Revolution, there was a huge increase in goods available for export and in the need for raw materials.
- ▶ The new colonies contributed significantly to Britain’s wealth and turned it into a world power.

The rise of imperialism

As the British empire expanded, the colonists saw it as their mission to “civilize” the native populations of the countries they settled. It was seen as being in the best interests of the local people to impose Western values, beliefs and many aspects of white society on them. However, this was often done with a lack of sensitivity that led to resentment, resistance and, in the end, the fight for independence.

For example, the local people were not allowed to practice some of their local customs, many of which were lost as a result.

Some important British colonies

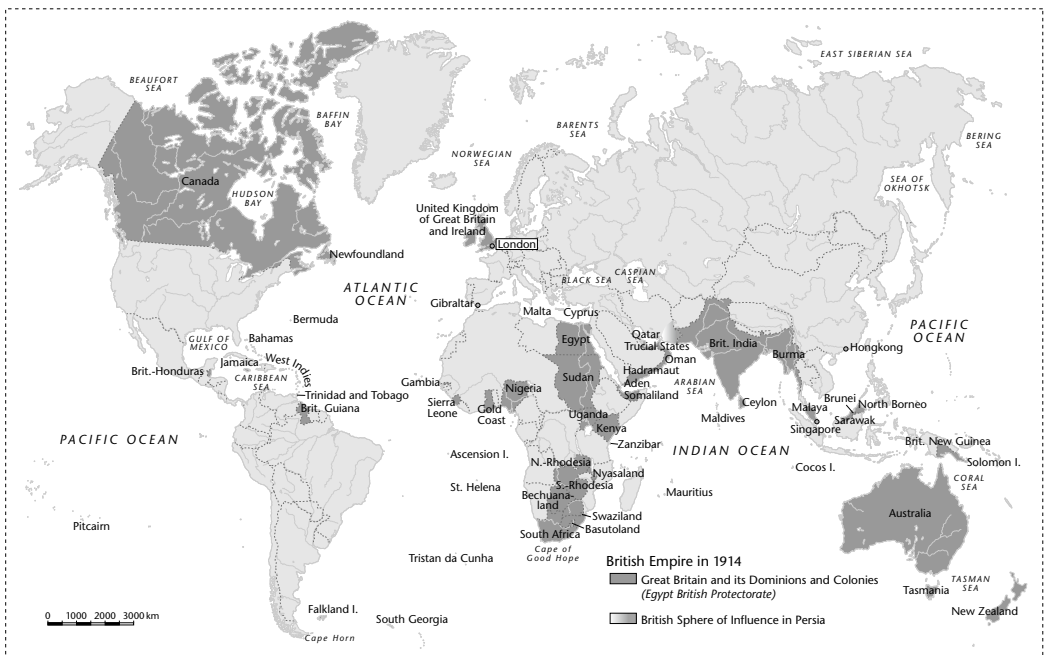
- ▶ **Australia:** The explorations of Captain Cook in the 1770s led the British to believe they had discovered a rich, fertile land which, although a long way away, could form a valuable part of the empire. At first, it was mainly used

as a penal colony for convicts, to ease some of the pressure on Britain's overcrowded prisons. As it turned out, much of the country consisted of desert, which meant that it was far less hospitable than the explorers had reported. However, it still proved to be a source of wealth for the home country when gold was discovered there. This discovery was a turning point for Australia: it became a destination for people who wanted to seek their fortune, and it gradually no longer made sense to send people there as a punishment. Over time, Australia, New Zealand and Canada became the main British colonies with mostly European settlers.

Although prisoners were usually sentenced to transportation for around 5 years, once in Australia they were unlikely to be able to afford a return trip to Britain, at least not in the early days of the colony.

- ▶ **Africa:** The British conquered Cape Colony from the Dutch during the Napoleonic Wars, which gave them a stronghold in South Africa. By the beginning of the 20th century, Britain controlled one third of the African continent. Cecil Rhodes, who was in charge of the occupied territory that became Rhodesia, proposed a “Cape to Cairo” railway. The idea was to link the colonies in the south with their rich supply of minerals (e.g. gold and diamonds) with the north, where the British had partial control of the Suez Canal. The Canal was extremely important to the Empire strategically, since it provided a fast link to the east and better trade routes.
- ▶ **India:** From the start of the colonial period, India played a vital role as a trading post, and grew to be one of Britain's most important colonies. See below for a more detailed analysis of India during and after British rule.

Rhodesia was renamed Zimbabwe in 1980.



The British Empire in 1914