

Great Britain made its first tentative efforts to establish overseas settlements in the 16th century. Maritime expansion, driven by commercial ambitions and by competition with France, accelerated in the 17th century and resulted in the establishment of settlements in North America and the West Indies.

British colonialism before the Victorian era (pre-1837) focused on maritime trade, mercantilism, and territorial expansion, shifting from Atlantic settlements to Asian dominance. Starting in the late 16th century, Britain established colonies in North America and the Caribbean, driving economic growth through plantation slavery. Key milestones included the East India Company's rise (1600s), the loss of the American colonies (1783), and the start of colonization in Australia (1788)

Key Aspects of Pre-Victorian British Colonialism (1500s–1836):

- **16th–17th Century Beginnings:** Exploration and settlement began with Queen Elizabeth I authorizing privateers like Walter Raleigh and John Hawkins. Early colonization focused on Caribbean sugar plantations (Jamaica, Barbados) and North American tobacco plantations, which heavily relied on enslaved African labor.
- **The East India Company (EIC):** Founded in 1600, the EIC evolved from a trading body into a governing power, laying the foundation for British control in India by dominating trade and eventually territory.
- **18th Century Shift:** Britain emerged as the leading global naval power, securing dominance in India and acquiring Canada from France following the Seven Years' War.
- **The American Revolution (1775-1783):** The loss of the thirteen American colonies was a major setback, which prompted Britain to pivot its strategic focus toward Asia, Africa, and the Pacific.
- **Australia and the Pacific:** In 1770, James Cook claimed Australia, leading to the establishment of the first penal colony in 1788, utilizing convict labor to build infrastructure.
- **Abolition of the Slave Trade:** The Slave Trade Act of 1807 abolished the trade, and subsequent acts began the process of ending slavery, heavily shifting the economic landscape of the Caribbean colonies.

Core Drivers:

- **Economic Gain:** The main goal was controlling global trade, securing raw materials (sugar, tobacco), and creating markets for British goods.
- **Power Dynamics:** Intense competition with European rivals, specifically Spain, Portugal, and France, drove expansionist policies.

By the time Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837, the British Empire had already established a "first empire" in the Americas and was busy developing a "second empire" : on India and colonial expansion in the Pacific.

This 'First Phase' is generally dated from 1757, when the British East India Company acquired the rights to collect revenue from its territories in the eastern and southern parts of the subcontinent, to 1813, when the Company's monopoly over trade with India came to an end.

The British Empire had its origins in the late 1500s.

In 1585, Queen Elizabeth I gave Walter Raleigh permission to set up a *colony* on Roanoke Island, now part of the modern-day USA. The settlers had lost most of their supplies on the journey and struggled to find food when theirs ran out. They were at first reliant on local *indigenous people* for food, but there was a lack of trust between the two groups and the relationship descended into violence.

All of the settlers' attempts to set up a colony on Roanoke Island failed and they eventually abandoned the land in 1590. The first successful colony was set up in 1607 in Jamestown, which is now part of the state of Virginia in the USA, by Captain John Smith, and managed by the Virginia Company; the Crown took direct control of the venture in 1624, thereby founding the Colony of Virginia.

Britain decided to build an empire for several reasons. These included:

- To gain more money
- To gain more power
- To spread Christianity and British ways of life

Spain built its empire in the 1500s. It controlled 80 per cent of the world's silver because it conquered several colonies in Latin America, such as Peru and Mexico. England wanted the money and power that the Spanish had, but this would require a lot of violence and force. The indigenous people in the new colonies were presented to the British public as 'uncivilised', because their way of living was different from that of people in Europe. This meant people began to believe that the British should continue to grow their empire to bring 'civilisation' to these places, even by force. There were also *missionaries* who believed it was their duty to travel to new countries and convert people to Christianity.

The development of the British Empire

The empire existed for nearly 400 years in total. It spread from the Americas to include colonies in Africa, Asia and Australasia. During this time Britain lost and gained colonies.

During the early years of the British Empire, 13 colonies in North America were established by the British. These colonies went to war against Britain in 1775 to achieve their freedom, declaring themselves independent on 4 July 1776. Britain formally recognised the United States of America as an independent country in 1783.

After losing the 13 colonies Britain did not want its empire to shrink again, and decided to make it even bigger.

Life in the British Empire

For people living in the colonies, British rule often meant that their traditional languages, religions and ways of living were replaced with the English language, Christianity and British systems of government and education. English remains the official language of many ex-colonies to this day. The number of speakers of some indigenous languages, like that of the *Māori* in New Zealand, has declined dramatically.

The colonies were generally run by British government officials who lived in the colony and not by the indigenous people. British laws were brought to colonies that often did not take into account cultural differences between the people of the colonies and the British. Taxes on colonised people were often high and the British exploited natural resources for their own financial gain.

In the 1700s and 1800s, India experienced several devastating famines. These famines were partly caused by the weather, and the region had suffered from famine before British rule, but British policies often made the situation worse. Under British rule, Indians were pushed to produce crops, such as tea, that Britain could sell for high prices. Therefore when poor weather affected the harvests, there were food shortages resulting in famines across India. During many of these famines Britain did not organise a large enough relief effort, and millions died across India.

Punishments for uprisings and protest were harsh. They could include executing people and even firing openly onto crowds of civilians, for example during the Amritsar Massacre.

Opposition to the British Empire

While there was a lot of support in Britain for the empire at the time, there was always some opposition to it. Some people argued that colonies had their own cultures and traditions before the arrival of the British, and that it was wrong to force a different way of life or religion on people.

There was **opposition to the transatlantic slave trade** in Britain during the 1700s and 1800s. This came from members of parliament, like William Wilberforce, as well as religious organisations, such as the *Quakers*. **Olaudah Equiano**, a formerly-enslaved man who settled in London, campaigned against slavery and published an autobiography detailing his experiences of enslavement.

The opposition to empire became stronger when Britain went to war to protect its new power, as this often led to the deaths of indigenous people and British soldiers. For example, there was public opposition to the Second Boer War, as well as political opposition from the *Liberal Party*.