



1. Map of the British Empire.

The British Empire came into existence in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Britain started to compete with other European countries for control of the seas and of the riches of the new unexplored continents.

Many colonies began as trading centres in newly discovered countries, and trading companies such as the East India Company were set up in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Through the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries more colonies were founded by people who had left their native lands for political or religious reasons, or simply because they were looking for a job and a new life. Other colonies were originally penal colonies like Australia.

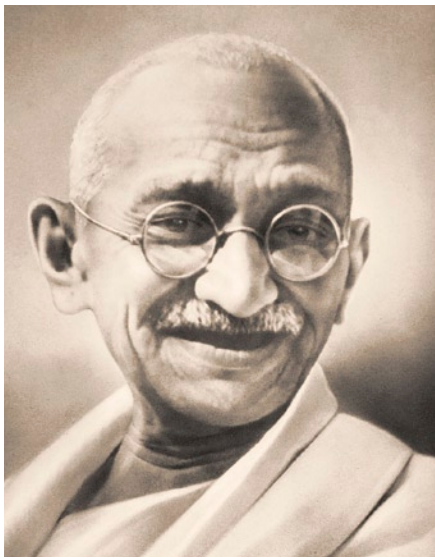
During the 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain colonised large parts of North America, Africa, Asia and Oceania, and colonial expansion continued steadily through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Explorers, such as David Livingstone helped to spread the British Empire in Africa. From the 1880s the states of Western Europe rushed to carve up the continent. They were all looking for new markets for the goods their industries produced. Soldiers came with the traders and the map of Africa was drawn to suit the European governments.

When Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, Britain already had colonies in

every continent. By the end of her reign, the British Empire covered a quarter of the world.

The place of India in the British Empire was so important that it was called 'the jewel in the crown'. Parts of it had been governed by the East India Company since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1858 it passed under the direct control of the British Government which appointed a viceroy to govern the country. Many British civil servants, engineers, administrators and businessmen went to live in India with their families. In 1877 Queen Victoria became Empress of India.

The empire was a source of pride and



2. Gandhi (1869-1948) was the leader of the non-violent movement for Indian independence.

**R**udyard Kipling was born in India and spent part of his life there mainly working as a journalist. He was proud of being British



and exalted the British Empire. He thought that it was 'the white man's burden' to educate the native inhabitants, to christianise them and to impose European culture to them. Kipling wrote poems, stories about Indian life and novels such as *Kim* and *The Jungle Books*. He was the first Englishman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907.

wealth for Britain. Colonies provided cheap agricultural raw materials for its manufacturing industries and were a huge market for its manufactured goods.

For better or worse British rule and emigration have left their mark on the independent nations that arose from the British Empire. The English language became a major language worldwide. Most countries of the former empire have now a system of government,

civil service, army and legal system organized along similar lines to those in Britain, while British colonial architecture, such as in churches, railway stations and government buildings, continue to stand in many cities.

Ball games that were developed in Victorian Britain, such as football rugby, cricket, golf and lawn tennis, were exported to the colonial countries, as was the British system of measurement (the imperial system), and the British convention of driving on the left hand side of the road.

British colonialism brought civilization to underdeveloped regions. The colonists built hospitals, prisons, police stations and schools. They also constructed roads and fought against diseases and superstition. Most British people thought that it was their duty to spread their culture and civilization around the world.

The other side of the coin is, however, that the British Empire was built upon unacceptable ruthlessness.

The British only followed their own interests, exploiting natives with cheap labour and slavery and stealing their resources. Native people everywhere were considered inferior and had few rights. The British kept them under control teaching them to obey and destroyed native cultures forcing the English lifestyle upon them. In his novel "Burmese Days" George Orwell wrote: "They build a prison and call it progress."

3. Queen Victoria, Empress of India.



### READING

With reference to what you have read about the British Empire and to your own knowledge, answer the questions below.

1. Can you think of some reasons why colonies were founded?
2. How did the empire contribute to making Britain a powerful country?
3. Which was Britain's most important colony?
4. Why was the Suez Canal so important for British trade?
5. How did British rule change the colonies?
6. What effects has the empire had on British society and lifestyle?