

# United Kingdom



## I. The United Kingdom and the British Empire

### a. Early Beginnings of the First English Empire

It is not really until the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) of England that what was later to become known as the British Empire began to take shape. Until the last decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there had been little attempt by the English to expand and to take possession of other countries. The 1532 Statute in Restraint of Appeals, under Henry VIII (the father of Elizabeth I and the monarch that split with the Catholic Church), made the king the last person to appeal to in all matters of the realm of England, and to all intents and purposes ousting the Pope from the authority above the monarch. The realm of Henry VIII was defined in the Statute in Restraint of Appeals as “an empire”, although in the real sense of the word it was not yet that. However, it did mean that the divide with the Catholic Church over Henry’s marriages lead England to become immediately the enemy of France, Spain and Portugal, the leading Catholic countries of the world at the time and also those that were and had been attempting to conquer other lands and create colonies. England had only established a colony in Ireland, through the settling of Protestants there, but it was really in 1578 when Elizabeth I granted letters patent to Sir Humphrey Gilbert for overseas exploration and with the intention of conquering other lands, thus being able to prove English worth in the face of French, Spanish and Portuguese successes around the world that were already bringing in vast amounts of wealth for them. Gilbert intended to sail for the Caribbean and establish a colony in the Americas there for England and the Queen. However, the first attempt did not succeed and never even managed to get

across the Atlantic. The second attempt was to go to Newfoundland, claim it for England, which he did manage to do. But he never left anyone behind to set up a colony there. Newfoundland is a large island off the coast of North America, and it was claimed on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1583 as England's first foreign territory. The English Empire was beginning and would later be transformed into the British Empire, spanning almost one quarter of the population in the world (412 million people) by the outbreak of World War I and 24% of the land area on the planet. By the defeat of Napoleon at the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), Britain had become the policeman of the world and the unchallenged power, a global hegemon. British dominance was known as *Pax Britannica*, or British Peace, meaning that nobody had enough power in the world to challenge the British, thus meaning that they were able to do what they wished for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in terms of colonisation and control of the world. This might be some rather strange definition of peace, simply because they were the strongest and the wealthiest nation.

Gilbert died on the return journey to England after having taken possession of Newfoundland but Elizabeth I provided letters patent to his half-brother, Sir Walter Raleigh (c. 1552-1618) in 1584, inviting him to take possession of lands that were "not actually possessed of any Christian Prince, nor inhabited by Christian People, as to him, his heirs and assignee" forever. Elizabeth I was so certain that there was immense wealth to be found that she allowed Raleigh and his heirs to take possession forever of 4/5 of everything that he found, including the land. He would have to pay 1/5 of everything to the Crown. Raleigh founded the Roanoke Colony on the coast of North Carolina (today). But the colony failed. The fact that Elizabeth I gave Raleigh the sole right to take possession of lands that were not already possessed by other 'Christian Princes' is questionable since technically-speaking Elizabeth did not recognize the authority of the Catholics and so, therefore, it is debatable as to what she might have considered as being a land possessed by a 'Christian Prince'. It was not until the succession to the throne by James VI, King of Scots and also James I of England in 1603, after the childless death of the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth I, that there was a shift from taking the lands (or attempting to) from the Catholic monarchs of France, Spain and Portugal and a desire to conquer new lands in England's own right. Scotland and England would not join together as one combined country until the Act of Union of 1707. James I of England signed the Treaty of London with Spain and put an end to conflict between the two countries and thus allowed for England to leave those possessions belonging to the Catholics alone, to some extent.

### **1. Roanoke Colony**

The Roanoke Colonies (there were two of them) failed. The first had Governor Ralph Lane appointed in 1585 and the second had John White appointed as the Governor. However, both were hampered by poor relations

with Native Americans and both lacked in supplies. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Colony established in Roanoke has been of great interest since the colony disappeared and has become known as the Lost Colony since then. White had returned to England in the hope of securing supplies that were much needed and returning to the newly established colony. However, instead of returning in 1588, he did not manage to do so until 1590 due to the Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604). When White did return to Roanoke, he found a settlement that had been built and fortified and yet there was nobody there and it had been abandoned. The words 'CROATOAN' and 'CRO' were carved. He believed that they had relocated to Croatoan Island, however, he was forced to return to England due to rough seas and bad weather after having lost anchor. Recent research has shown that, as believed from as early as 1604, those colonists (between 112 and 121) probably assimilated with local Native Americans (artefacts have been found, notably writing and some pottery or rings – the Native Americans were unable to write and had no need to do so at the time and as such it is believed that the Europeans retained some of their own culture and interbred with the Native Americans)<sup>1</sup>.

Jamestown became the first real colony that existed as an established settlement when it was founded in 1607 in North America. The difference here was that the success was partly due to the lack of hostility immediately from the local Native Americans that came into contact with the English. In the country of Tsenacommacah (Pasphegh tribe), the English were greatly helped and had supplies given to them in order for them to be able to survive. They had arrived during a great drought and they had arrived far too late for them to be in a position to plant crops. They were hardly prepared at all for the hard labour that would be needed in order to survive in the colony, either. The colonists were mainly made up of wealthy gentlemen and manservants that had no knowledge at all of how to survive in such circumstances. The Native Americans helped them. However, the colonists ended up killing the tribe within approximately four years after arrival. Two-thirds of the settlers had already perished by the time a ship arrived in 1608 bringing with it Polish and German craftsmen that were intended to set up manufacturing in the colonies. The first successful colony of the English was founded in Virginia in 1607, in Jamestown and also the Popham Colony on the Kennebec River. The latter failed again, however due to famine. The former succeeded. Gold and other metals were sent back to England and they funded further expeditions and the providing of supplies for the colonists. Slaves soon arrived in the Colony of Virginia in 1619 and two hundred years of slavery increased the wealth of England, later Britain (after the Union with Scotland) and then the United Kingdom generally speaking.

1. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/08/150807-lost-colony-roanoke-hatteras-outer-banks-archaeology/>. Accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

## 2. *Slave Trade and Slavery*

Portugal and Britain are the two countries that are probably responsible for about 70% of the slavery in the world in terms of transportation of slaves from Africa to the Americas. It is estimated that Britain transported more than 3 million slaves (with about 2.7 million actually arriving in the colonies; the others dying on the journey). A total of some 12 million slaves may have historically been transported to the colonies in total by the British, the Portuguese and the Dutch alone. It is predominantly the opening up of the slave trade to any and all English merchants in 1698 that meant that the slave trade took off and Britain became dominant in its role of slavery. The major ports for the slave trade were those of London, Bristol and Liverpool at varying times throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Until 1698, London had the monopoly on slavery, and it was only changed to open it up to other ports when places like Liverpool and Bristol petitioned the Crown. The first English slaves arrived in Virginia in the new colony in 1619. The Caribbean became a lucrative place of colonisation for the English when they first took control of Barbados in 1625 and then Jamaica in 1655. There were some 7,000 slaves per year that were taken by English ships to the Americas and the Caribbean in the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. That figure rose to 80,000 being transported there by Europeans in the 1770s and of that number, Britain was responsible for more than 50% a year.

Ships never sailed empty in the triangular trade of collecting slaves from Africa, travelling to the Americas, and then bringing back sugar to be sold and make profit in Europe, with the cycle going on and on. 70% of government tax revenue came from the colonies and poured into Britain making it richer than had ever been imagined, and all at the cost of free labour. Wealthy landowners and investors made profits, and filled their banks with money, increasing the wealth, and providing money for the Industrial Revolution. The British Industrial Revolution took place much earlier than other nations in part because the British had the resources of other countries, the wealth that was generated from them and free inexhaustible labour.

John Hawkins is known for being the first English slave trader and he first left the shores of England in 1562 in order to bring back slaves from Africa to sell them in St. Domingo. He returned to Africa in 1564 and again in 1567.

It is probably due to the introduction of sugar cane and the fact that this was a high labour-intensive form of agriculture that slavery took off in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Slavery is considered to have always existed, at least since agricultural farming started and man became sedentary, in need of labour, probably to be estimated at about 6,000 BC. Sugar was first introduced by the Dutch into Barbados, in the Caribbean in the 1640s. They had learnt it from the Brazilians, and they supplied Barbadian planters with African slaves in order to be able to grow cane.

The Slave Trade was abolished in 1807. But slavery was not abolished in the British Empire until 1833. In India (under British rule) it was abolished in 1861 after the passing of the Indian Penal Code, making it a criminal offense to enslave someone and this bringing finally an end to all slavery in the British Empire. However, modern forms of slavery still exist, and this question should be thought about, perhaps to remind us of the consequences of enslavement of other human beings.

The first bill presented in the British Parliament in 1791 to abolish the slave trade was rejected by 163 votes to 88. The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade believed that it would be impossible to abolish slavery immediately as the wealthy would not accept it.

When slavery was abolished it was decided by the then-British government to pay the slave owners for their loss in revenue. This amounted to £20 million that was paid out to 3,000 slave-owning families (sometimes of illustrious descent, for example David Cameron, former Prime Minister (2010-2016) of the United Kingdom, whose own family was awarded the equivalent of £3 million (£4,000 in 1833) in today's money; Samantha Cameron, his wife descends from a businessman that received about the same sum for the loss of 164 slaves). The entire amount of money paid out to slave owners in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the British government represented about 40% of its annual budget.

In 1806, James Stephen, an abolitionist wrote a bill and it received favourable backing in the British Parliament and was passed making it forbidden to engage in any slave trade with the French (with whom the British had been at war since 1793). This paved the way for the abolition of the slave trade entirely since slavery had thus by Stephen's bill been reduced by one third already.

The British government has always refused either to apologise or to provide reparations or compensation for the descendants of slavery in the country or in the rest of the world despite many demands to do so. David Cameron, as Prime Minister, on an official visit to Jamaica stated that there would be no reparations for descendants and that he encouraged people to "move on" and "get over it". It was discovered in 2018 that the British government of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had taken out a loan to pay slave owners in 1835 with the banker Nathan Mayer Rothschild for the sum of £15 million back then. That loan was only paid off in 2015 with the last instalment being made on 15<sup>th</sup> February, by using the taxpayers' money of the United Kingdom. There are estimated to be some 300,000 West Indians in the UK now settled. Those people directly or indirectly also contributed to the paying off of that loan. This raises ethical questions as to the validity of what money was paid out by the British government to those slave owners.

## b. The Second British Empire

It is usually taken that the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Empire lasted from approximately 1783 until 1815. 1783 represents the date of the loss of the Thirteen Colonies in the Americas and the signing of the Treaty of Paris at that date. It was these Thirteen Colonies on the East coast of today's United States of America that declared themselves independent from British rule in 1776. The Treaty of Paris ended the revolutionary war with Britain. The Peace of Paris was the collective name given to all of the treaties signed by Britain with those countries that also fought on the side of the Americans (including France, Spain and the Dutch Republic). It was the culmination in the declaration of the USA being independent, free and a sovereign nation, outside of the jurisdiction of the British Crown. It is from this date that the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Empire begins when Britain is forced to some extent to look for lands elsewhere in order to maintain its status in the world. It looks towards the Great Southern Land of Australia and New Zealand in particular (*c.f.* chapters related to these countries).

At the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Empire and until about the start of World War I in 1914, the period is historically known as the 'Imperial Century' for the United Kingdom. There were no real countries in the world that had the ability to counterattack or to defend themselves against the might of the British Empire during this period, except for perhaps Russia. This is the period also known as the *Pax Britannica* and the period of "splendid isolation" in which Britain refused to contract any alliances with any other countries in the world, because it believed that it simply did not need to do so.

### Video and podcast extracts

- **Life Aboard a Slave Ship – History Channel**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmQvofAiZGA>
- **What was Britain's Role in the Salve Trade – Timeline**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyoJXTohKOE>
- **Unfinished Business (Britain's Slave Trade) – Timeline**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icTi4rKi3Yc>
- **What Happened to the Lost Colony of Roanoke – National Geographic**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFMnMEYwqIM>
- **Sir Walter Raleigh – Pirates Who Stole the British Empire – Timeline**  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZlrwCylmGo&list=PLqYzjXUXOdUiDC-r6hx7PHuOk1pJ7RILv\\_&index=31&t=os](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZlrwCylmGo&list=PLqYzjXUXOdUiDC-r6hx7PHuOk1pJ7RILv_&index=31&t=os)



## Vocabulary

The following words are taken from this chapter and are in the order that they appear.

Reign	Règne
To take shape	Prendre forme
Decade	Décennie
Attempt	Tentative
To split	Séparer
To appeal to	Faire appel à
Realm	Royaume
All intents and purposes	A toutes fins pratiques
To lead to	Mener à
Letters patent	Lettres patentes
Overseas	Étranger
Thus	Ainsi
Vast	Vaste
Wealth	Richesse
To intend to	Avoir l'intention de
Off the coast	Sur la côte / au large
To span	Couvrir
Defeat	Défaite
Hegemon	Hégémon
Childless	Sans enfant
To put an end	Mettre fin à
To some extent	Dans une certaine mesure
To fail	Échouer
To appoint	Nommer
However	Toutefois
Both	Tous les deux / ensemble
To hamper	Entraver
To lack	Manquer
To secure	Sécuriser
Supplies	Provisions
To lose anchor	Perdre l'ancre
Artefact	Artefact
To interbreed	Se croiser
Settlement	Règlement
To found	Fonder
Due to	En raison de
Drought	Sécheresse
Crops	Cultures
To be made up of	Être composé de
To perish	Périr

To end up	Finir par être
Craftsmen	Artisans
Slaves	Esclaves
To transport	Transporter
To petition	Faire une pétition / demande officielle
To sail	Naviguer
To bring back	Ramener
To go on and on	Continuer encore
Landowner	Propriétaires terriens
To provide	Fournir
Sedentary	Sédentaire
Sugar cane	Canne à sucre
To abolish	Abolir
To pass a law	Adopter une loi
Offense	Infraction
To enslave	Asservir
To bring an end to	Mettre fin à
To remind someone	Rappeler à qlqn
Revenue	Revenu
To be awarded	Être récompensé
To descend from	Descendre de
To pave the way for	Ouvrir la voie à
To apologise	S'excuser
Reparations	Réparations
To get over something	Surmonter quelque-chose
Loan	Prêt
To last	Durer
Loss	Perte

## Exercises

William Beckford of Sommerley (1744-1799), English plantation owner, slave owner and a writer. He inherited his father's estate in Jamaica at the age of 21 (1765), although his father Richard Beckford had died when he was just 10 years old. His inheritance included 4 sugar plantations

He had been born in Jamaica in 1744 but went to live in England at the age of 5 years old. His father, Richard Beckford was the son of the Governor of Jamaica in 1702. In 1774, he returned to Jamaica with his wife, Charlotte Hay. He was forced to return to England in 1787 a debtor, after losing his estates through corrupt merchants, generosity and being badly advised on his business activities. On his return he was arrested and taken to the debtors' prison (the Fleet