

The History of the British Empire

Exploration

Five years after Christopher Columbus sailed to the Americas, John Cabot completed the first English transatlantic voyage, landing in Newfoundland in 1497. For the next century, English explorers landed in places all over the world – in the Straits of Magellan at the southern end of the Americas, on the west coast of North America, and on Baffin Island in northern Canada – and claimed them for their country. Unlike the Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch, however, the English did not settle where they landed. While the British Empire would become the world's largest empire in the nineteenth century, it started more slowly than its European competitors.

The only English attempt to establish a colony before 1600 failed dismally. In 1585, Queen Elizabeth I gave Sir Walter Raleigh a charter to establish a colony on Roanoke Island, off North Carolina. Raleigh sent 100 men to this lush island; another 117, including women and children, followed in 1587. The leader of the settlement, John White, returned to England in 1587 for supplies and was supposed to sail back, but was delayed by the Spanish Armada. When the next ships reached the island in 1590, they found it completely abandoned. The reason for the colonists' disappearance has never been determined; one theory holds that they assimilated into nearby tribes.

Overall, the English were not particularly interested in overseas trade and colonization in the sixteenth century. In part, this was because they still profited from other countries' colonies. The other European empires traded with the English, and English pirates enthusiastically plundered Spanish ships as the two countries went to war late in the century. England had also had colonies in Ireland for centuries, so when most English thought of colonization, if they did at all, they thought first of Ireland. John Winthrop, for instance, considered settling in Ireland before founding the English Puritan colony in Massachusetts.

From Exploration to Exploitation

As if making up for lost time, the English launched numerous settlement and trading ventures in the seventeenth century. Their early successes helped to create enthusiasm at home for overseas adventures. War with Spain had constricted English trade with the European continent, so merchants began to seek other options. On the last day of the year 1600, Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter to the English East India Company. Its rapid success encouraged the foundation of other such charter companies in the ensuing decades. The company focused on trade with India, having been almost completely turned out of Indonesia by their Dutch competitors. The connection with India was lucrative: Indian textile makers could make calicoes in colors stunning to Europeans, and these quickly became popular. As a result, the company opened warehouses (which they called "factories") to store products before shipping them to Europe. The first factory was established at Surat, on India's west coast, in 1613, while on India's east coast the English established trading posts at Madras (Fort

St. George) in 1644 and Calcutta (Fort William) in 1696. Bombay also became a major center of trade for the English in the second half of the century.

The success of the East India Company encouraged other ventures, and together these ventures changed the English market dramatically. Trade with Europe was stagnant, but the English began to send more goods to the other continents. At first, they did so through intermediary ports in Spain, the Mediterranean, and Africa. Later in the century they conducted trade directly, which meant that spices, for example, could be shipped directly to England in bulk and eventually became cheaper. A new economic system quickly developed in which the American colonies paid for their European manufactured goods with cash crops – tobacco from Virginia and sugar from the Caribbean.

Demand for manufactured goods increased in the Americas because English colonies eventually took root there. Successful colonial settlements were established in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, St. George's, Bermuda in 1612, and in New England and Newfoundland in the 1620s. By mid-century tens of thousands of English emigrants had journeyed across the Atlantic. A majority headed to the West Indies, mostly to Barbados, and a large minority went to Virginia and New England. The English also gained at the expense of the Dutch, annexing New Netherland (which covered parts of several present-day states, including New York) in 1664.

By the end of the century, this explosion of activity had given England extensive trading connections in Asia and quickly expanding colonies in the Americas. While these actions set the foundation for the first British Empire, however, generally the “British” (the name “British” did not become official usage until the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland) did not think of their actions as imperial. They thought of themselves, rather, as people (mostly English) trading and settling around the world.