

The four main reasons why Britain wanted an empire were:

1. to get valuable raw materials and riches (such as diamonds, gold, spices, sugar and tea) that were found in other countries
2. so it could sell goods to the people in the colonies and make money
3. to become a more powerful country and strengthen their position in the world
4. because some people thought it was the right thing to do.

▼ **INTERPRETATION A** Written in 2019 by Peter Crowhurst, an author and retired History teacher.

'Land was now being annexed [invaded and taken over], not just for purposes of trade but to improve Britain's strategic position around the world and to prevent other powers from strengthening their own empires. It seemed that if you wanted to be a great power you had to have an empire.'

▼ **INTERPRETATION B** Adapted from a section titled 'Attitudes of Empire' on a BBC revision webpage about 'The British Empire through Time' (2019).

'Many goods were of interest to the Europeans, most specifically silk, calico, dyes, saltpeter [to preserve meat], cotton, pepper, cardamom, other spices and tea. India, the Europeans believed, would be easy to **exploit**.'

▼ **INTERPRETATION C** From a 2022 article on the National Geographic Kids website called 'British Empire Facts'.

'When the empire was being built, British people largely believed they were doing the right thing. In their eyes, they were improving and developing lands and bringing order to non-white countries which – due to racist attitudes – they thought were "uncivilised" and "backward". The British also believed they were doing the work of God by spreading Christianity – which they considered to be the "right" religion.'

▼ **INTERPRETATION D** From a History textbook written by Bea Stimpson, 2000.

'The colonies had to purchase all their manufactured goods from Britain. This gave Britain a guaranteed market for its manufacturers.'

## War

If Britain won a war against another country, it could often take over any land the other country controlled around the world. For example, when Britain won the Seven Years War (1756–1763) against France, land previously conquered by France in America and India became part of the British Empire. British victories in war were also how Canada and Caribbean islands such as Tobago and St Lucia became part of the empire. Little thought was given to the Indigenous peoples who had lived in Britain's so-called 'new' lands for centuries.

## European exploration

The 1500s is often referred to as the 'Age of Discovery' in Europe. 'New' thinking about the world and better shipbuilding led to more exploration of land that Europeans had not visited before. Occasionally, explorers would find land and claim it for Britain.

That happened in 1770 when Captain James Cook sailed to Australia.

To strengthen the claim that the land belonged to Britain, British colonists who went there built towns.

The people who already lived there – the Indigenous Australians – faced increasing threats to their land.



## Settlers

Sometimes British people would go to another part of the world and start to live there. They might be looking for new business opportunities or a chance to own land, or be running away from the ill-treatment they received in their home country as a result of their religion. This is how large parts of the North American east coast became part of the British Empire in the 1600s and 1700s. Treaties were agreed between Indigenous peoples and the settlers, but over time the settlers often did not keep to these agreements and grabbed more and more land, leading to conflict.



## Trade

When British companies went to trade in some places, they slowly took over large areas. These companies sometimes became so powerful that they controlled the trade of luxury goods like spices, cotton, silk and tea. The British government sometimes sent and hired soldiers to support the companies by enforcing colonial order, guarding trading settlements and controlling the local people. This happened in India and parts of Africa for many years from the 1600s.

