

English for life in the UK - Chapter 3 - The British Empire.

(Music)

Welcome to Episode 3 of English for Life in the UK. Hello, my name's Mark. English for Life in the UK is a Podcast produced for intermediate level learners of English. It's produced by a group of volunteer teachers from the St Augustine's Centre in Halifax, Yorkshire.

It is intended mainly by students who attend our course in the Centre, however it will also be of use to anyone wanting to improve their English and learn more about life in this country. Some of you may also be wanting to become British citizens at some stage and if that is the case, you will need to pass a citizenship test. Our course does cover some of the topics you will need to know about for that test.

We are currently studying some aspects of British history and in this episode we will be focusing on the history of the British Empire.

I'm joined for this episode by John and Christine.

(Music)

C: So today's session we looked at the British Empire and we started off, Mark, with you talking about the age of exploration. Would you like to say something about that?

M: Yes - that was the period of around the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth centuries, when certain European powers - in particular, England, France, Spain and Portugal - they went out to explore the rest of the world. And England was probably the last of those to start to establish colonies - settlements - in those other countries. And for England, our first major settlement was in America and there were thirteen colonies established in America and, of course, eventually they'd had enough of English rule and we got the American War of Independence and those thirteen colonies became the first thirteen states of what became the United States of America.

C: And so what period would you say that was? The age of exploration - the American War of Independence - what dates?

M: Well, the exploration really began in the kind of Tudor period of English history - so in the 1550's, let's say. That kind of period when we had Queen Elizabeth I (the first) on the throne, but the American colonies were established the following century and the War of Independence and the establishment of the start of the United States of America was 1776.

C: Right, thank you. And so really what's often thought of as the British Empire is really the second stage of the British Empire and you told us quite a bit about that, John.

J: Yeah - we, as Mark says, he covered the thirteen colonies. What is kind of referred to as the *first* British Empire. We went on to look at - as you say - what most people identify with being the British Empire is really, the *second* British Empire. From that period up to the mid-twentieth century. So we discussed the East India Company. And we explained that the roots of British Empire in India started with the East India Company, which was actually a private company - and we explained how this was different to the previous empires, the Portuguese and the Spanish Empires: here, the Governments had gone out and conquered these places and we explained, it was the East India Company, effectively, a private company, based in London, began as a trading company in the coastal regions of India and gradually, it became more and more powerful until it eventually had its own army: a private army effectively of more than a quarter of a million men, many of them drawn from the Indian population. And they effectively took charge of most of what is modern-day India and ruled it as a private concern until 1857, when the Indian Rebellion, the uprising, saw the British Crown assume(d) direct control of India. And from then on, as we said, it was known as 'The Jewel in the

Crown' of the British Empire because it was the richest and most important part of the British Empire.

C: So, as well as what was happening in India, and the British East India Company, what about the rest of the Empire?

J: Well, Mark explained and we pointed this out with the use of the map, obviously we looked at some of the statistics, so in its peak in 1913 - the British Empire was the largest empire that had ever existed. It covered around 25% of the world's land surface and oversaw around 412 million inhabitants - or approximately about 23% of the world's population, at its peak. One of the things we examined with the use of the map - and we compared it to other Empires in history, so the Mongul Empire, Persian Empire, Roman Empire - the British Empire is very obviously spread out across the world so it wasn't contiguous like some of the other empires. This is because we basically achieved the empire through exploration and naval power, so if you look on the map, it's not just India and not just North America, its right across Africa, the Caribbean, and Austral-Asia and South East Asia. Part of this was related to our previous settlements in North America, so we'd taken over and colonised a lot of the places in the Caribbean, a lot of places in West Africa and in East Africa. Part of this was tied up with the slave trade. Obviously, we discussed that, so we were taking, at one point slaves from West Africa to the plantations in the Caribbean, the American states.

[7:00 minutes]

M: One of the obvious very negative sides of the Empire.

J: Yeah - of course. Also, of course we had a famous Yorkshireman, Captain Cook, whose explorations had travelled though the Pacific and the South Seas in the wake of the Dutch explorers meant that the British navy set up bases in Australia and New Zealand and set up contact with the people there and eventually colonised Australia, New Guinea and New Zealand, Fiji and latterly towards the end of the 19th century, into the early 20th century, there was a lot of colonial expansion in Southern and East Africa. Some of that down to taking colonies from other European powers such as Germany or France, for example.

M: There is that phrase, isn't there that it was "an Empire on which the sun never set". What do we mean by that?

J: Its - basically, an exploration of the world-wide stretch of the British Empire - so if it's night-time in Canada, it's daytime in India. If it's daytime in London, you know, it's night-time in New Zealand so the idea is that at any given point the sun would always be shining on a part of the British Empire. Amazing thing to think about really, isn't it?

C: Indeed!

M: [8:26 minutes] If we are thinking about the legacy of the Empire - if you like, what's left over from the Empire, I think we should say there's a lot of - there are a lot of people who are now settled in Britain who have come from various parts of the Empire and our country is very much a multi-cultural country these days and a lot of that is down to Empire and many of the really positive, enriching of British culture as it is today, has come from people who have come from all parts of the Empire to the United Kingdom and also, people who have gone from the United Kingdom to the Empire as well.

J: We did discuss, if you like, the different attitudes looking towards the history of the British Empire. We did discuss this in class - there are people - we put forward the idea of the Empire being a good thing, as a civilising mission - we brought democracy and rule of law - theists like that to - you know - enriched them culturally. There are other people who are very critical of Empire - one of the interesting things that I came across is new additions to the English language. The word "loot" is a Hindi word which came into the English language when Clive of India and the East India Company

were taking out the wealth of India and bringing it back to London. So there are conflicting ideas about the good and bad things that the Empire did. I think one of the important things is when we are talking about things like migration, is that many of the people in places like Jamaica, Hong Kong, - they felt themselves to be British subjects and they felt a closeness to what they referred to as the "mother country" and this is something that we still see in many parts of the Commonwealth. People have an identity with Britain and a fondness for Britain. Obviously that is reflected in many people who have come from the Commonwealth to their new lives and new homes.

[10:36 minutes]

- M: And I think it is also important to say that because there are undoubtedly some negative sides as to what the British Empire did when they went out into the rest of the world, I think Britain ... I would argue that Britain has a responsibility to make sure that actually we are looking after and welcoming people who are coming from those other parts of the Empire, many of whom, of course, are actually our students now.
- J: As we've covered in the lessons that we've done, in World War I we've been supported and aided in our time of need by people from right across the British Empire, through both World Wars and I think, to keep it topical, just as a final point much of the political discussions around Brexit, about the UK moving away from our close relationship with the European Union, many people would follow the idea we perhaps should be exploring trade links and economic links with places like India, Malaysia, Singapore, things like that ... so it's still a very topical subject.
- C: So, what would you say we talked a bit about the legacy of the British Empire ...about how it is today. What's happened to it? Who'd like to say something about that? You told us a bit, John.
- J: Yeah, we discussed - the period of decolonisation. So after the first and second World Wars, the UK had been the global super-power. After the two world wars our power receded obviously. We said the United States and the Soviet Union coming forward as being the two global super powers. At this time, there was a move among the colonial states to fight for their independence. So especially after World War II, so India became independent, India and Pakistan became independent 1947, Palestine that was a British land there, went on to become Israel, 1948, and through the 1950's and 1960's, various British colonies across Asia and Africa, so places like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Malaysia, Singapore - they took it in their turns then to find their independence and move out of the British Empire. One of the main legacies which we discussed which is important for when we are looking at migration and we are looking at British citizenship, is the Commonwealth, which is an organisation of states that used to be part of the British Empire which now form, if you like, a political alliance across the countries, across the world.

[13:34 minutes]

- C: I noticed that some of the students were particularly surprised to find out that some countries still had Queen Elizabeth as their Head of State.
- J: Yeah, I were telling one of our students from Eritrea many years ago. I found myself in Fiji and we met a very confused American gentleman who'd just withdrawn his Fijian money and he were very surprised to see that they all had the Queen of England's face on the Fijian bank notes. So we explained that Canada, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, still have this close relationship with the United Kingdom, which extends to them still having the British monarch, in this case, Queen Elizabeth, as their Head of State.
- M: Even though the governments of all those countries are completely independent, or largely independent, of the Crown. So, is there anything of the Empire left?

J: Well, there are small parts. We got to the end of the reading. We discussed places like, for example, the Falkland Islands, we think about places like Gibraltar, there are still some places like St Helena, places like this, there are still some places that are under direct British rule, scattered across the globe. The last real outpost of the Empire was Hong Kong which gained its independence in 1997 and obviously came under rule from China. So these are a few of the things we discussed - the present situation in Hong Kong, and the Middle East and various other places where there are still issues of the British Empire that are still being ironed out today.

M: Certainly, if any of our students are following what is going on in the news recently, then of course, Hong Kong is featuring very strongly there, where people are, in a sense, resisting the move from being part of the British influence, to becoming increasingly part of the Chinese - you could almost say - "Empire", couldn't you?

C: You could!

(Music)

Language Support

This is the part of the podcast where I choose a few words or phrases and we talk about them in more detail. I'm going to start by choosing one that John used. He talked about "decolonialisation" - you could also say "decol - onisation" (open 'o' sound).

So to "colonise" is, we said, to take over, to settle, in another country. So Britain went out and colonised various parts of the world that was the beginnings of the Empire. We settled people in those areas. In some cases, we conquered the areas, in some cases, we simply went there and settled. So de-colonisation is the opposite of that, it's when we withdrew from these areas or no longer controlled these areas. Usually, that was because the people in those areas wished to be independent, they wished to control themselves, and not be controlled by Britain and in the period of the second half of the 20th century, this is what happened to most of the British Empire. So the countries involved became independent - sometimes peacefully, sometimes by agreement with Britain, sometimes through struggle, sometimes through war. The interesting thing about the word is it is made up of "de-", "d" and "e", in front of another word, and that makes the opposite of that word and you can find that elsewhere in the English language. For example, you can talk about "de-stress". So, if you get stressed, you're anxious, you're worried - you might want to try to relax, to do some exercises, to destress, so that you no longer are stressed.

In these winter mornings at the moment, my car in the morning, has got ice all over the windscreen, so I have to de-ice the car. I have to get rid of the ice from the car - de-ice. So if you put 'de' in front of a number of words in the English language it means the opposite of, or taking back from, what the original word was.

[18:43 minutes] There is a second word, a second construction of words which is bit like that and we use the word "enriching". In this case, we put 'en-' in front of the word 'rich' - to enrich - this means to bring about, to make happen. So we talked about the various people from the Empire who came to Britain and enriched our society and culture. They brought with them their language, their food, some of their ideas, their music: and this enriched - it made richer - the country, this country.

And again, you can add 'en-' to other words in a similar way, which means to bring about, to make happen. So, for example, to 'enact': to act is to do something, to enact is to bring something about, to make it happen. You can 'enclose' something - so to close, but then to enclose is to put something inside something else. So that's 'en-' at the beginning of a word which often works in the English language.

Two more today - 'civilisation' or 'civilising' - this it's a controversial word in a way, because what one person regards as 'civilisation' may not be what somebody else does, but it usually means to make a society more advanced in some way, to educate it. So we talk about Britain having civilised other parts of the world. However, there are some who would say: 'Actually, that was just Britain imposing its way on other parts of the world, which often had quite sophisticated cultures already and didn't need 'civilising', in that sense', but that's usually what it means.

And finally, John mentioned the word "loot", which he discovered comes from a Hindi word. When we talk about 'loot', we usually mean goods or money that's been stolen. It means taking something illegally: to loot it. And, of course, it came from the idea that Britain when it went out into the world, it actually took goods and gold from those countries. In one sense they stole things from those lands and that's where we get the word 'loot' from.

Hope that's been helpful. That's it for this week and we hope you'll listen in again. Bye for now.