Episode #109

The British Empire

24th Nov, 2020

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The British Empire.

[00:00:29] It's the story of how one little island gained control over almost a quarter of the world's population, a quarter of the total land area, and left a lasting **legacy**[1] that we are still struggling to properly **come to terms with**[2].

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[1] something that exists as a result of things that happened at an earlier time

[2] to accept or understand a bad situation

[00:00:47] Now, the British Empire is a long and complicated subject, and 20 minutes is far too little time to do it justice.

[00:00:57] In today's episode we'll go over how it started, the different stages of the empire, what life was actually like under the British, and talk about some of the complications that the **imperial**[3] **legacy** has left the world with.

[00:01:14] So, without further ado, let's get started.

[00:01:19] There is a saying that the sun never set on the British Empire.

[00:01:25] At its **zenith**[4], at its greatest point, it stretched over huge **swathes**[5] of the world, covering 35 million kilometres squared, with 412 million people living under its rule.

[00:01:42] It **propelled**[6] English to be the world's **lingua franca**[7], the common language, and if there were no empire, you probably wouldn't be learning English today.

[00:01:54] The British Empire wasn't the first empire, of course, Britain didn't invent the concept of empire.

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[3] relating to empire

[4] highest point

[5] areas (especially of land)

[6] moved, pushed forward

[7] common language

[00:02:00] From the Egyptians to the Romans, The Mongols to the Ottomans, societies had **sought**[8] to expand their territory for all manner of different reasons.

[00:02:12] Indeed, large parts of Britain were conquered by other empires.

[00:02:18] It was conquered by the Romans in 84 AD, then in 1066 it was conquered again by William the Conqueror, a Norman.

[00:02:29] At the start of the Middle Ages, Britain, as a unified country, didn't exist. England, Scotland and Wales were all separate countries.

[00:02:40] Then at the end of the 13th century England conquered Wales, and it wasn't until 1707 that England, Wales and Scotland united to become the Kingdom of Great Britain.

[00:02:55] In this episode I'll normally refer to Britain, even if the Kingdom of Britain wasn't actually formed until 1707.

[00:03:05] Towards the end of the 15th century and during the 16th century Spain and Portugal had started their own global exploration, setting off across the Atlantic to the Americas, discovering large amounts of precious metals, growing rich off the profits, and starting their own empires in Latin America.

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[8] looked to, tried to

[00:03:29] Britain saw how profitable this naval exploration was for Spain and Portugal, and started sending ships off to discover new, **virgin**[9] territory that could be claimed for Britain, to look for Britain's El Dorado.

[00:03:48] This started as early as 1497, when the Italian Explorer John Cabot, or Giovanni Caboto, was sent by King Henry VIII of England across the Atlantic. He landed in what's now Canada, but no great **settlement**[10] was made.

[00:04:10] It wasn't to be until just under 100 years later, in 1585, that the first English colonies were formed in North America, when an explorer called Sir Walter Raleigh formed a **settlement** in Virginia.

[00:04:27] British settlers continued to land on the east coast of North America, claiming territory on behalf of the British monarch, on behalf of the British king.

[00:04:39] At the same time they **ventured**[11] south, towards the colonies held by the Spanish and Portuguese in the Caribbean.

[00:04:48] At the start of the 17th century Britain took control of the Caribbean islands of St Kitts, Barbados and Antigua.

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[9] (of land) new and uninhabited

[10] a group of houses or buildings in a place where people didn't live before

[11] went (especially somewhere that could be dangerous)

[00:04:57] The British learned how to grow sugar, and built large **plantations**[12] on these islands using slaves who were brought over from Africa.

[00:05:08] Now, the British Empire, especially in the Americas, was **enabled**[13] by slavery.

[00:05:14] It wouldn't have been possible without it.

[00:05:17] It's believed that British ships transported almost 3 million slaves from Africa to the Americas, out of a total of around 12 million Africans who were taken from their homeland, **piled**[14] into ships and sold into slavery.

[00:05:35] It's one of the darkest parts of the story of the British Empire, which is often **brushed under the carpet**[15] and not spoken about, it's **conveniently forgotten**[16], when discussing the empire in Britain.

[00:05:50] Especially with the Black Lives Matter movement there has been a **renewed**[17] need to **confront**[18] and discuss quite how awful this was, and there's **renewed**

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[12] large farms, especially in warm countries

[13] allowed to happen

[14] went (in large numbers)

[15] kept a secret, not discussed

[16] forgotten because you do not want to think about it

[17] starting again

[18] deal with

discussion of how we treat people who had previously been considered masters of the British Empire.

[00:06:10] You've probably seen clips of statues being **torn down**[19] in Britain, and debates about things like whether names of buildings should be changed.

[00:06:22] Evidently, it's a very complicated subject, but it's certainly a good thing that there is a growing understanding of quite how **inseparable**[20] the British Empire and the slave trade were.

[00:06:36] **Boosted**[21] by favourable conditions for growing products like cotton and sugar, and powered by slave labour, Britain's power and wealth continued to grow.

[00:06:48] It was growing rich off the **proceeds**[22] of its **plantations** and colonies, which were paying taxes to the British monarch.

[00:06:56] And up until the mid 18th century, the **going was pretty good**[23] for Britain.

[00:07:03] Its colonies included most of the eastern part of what's now the US and Canada, as well as Caribbean islands such as Jamaica and Barbados.

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[19] taken down forcefully

[20] not able to be separated from

[21] improved, made more successful

[22] money got from selling something

[23] things were going well

[00:07:15] But for the colonies that were paying taxes to the British, and having their natural resources sent back to Europe, this wasn't a great deal.

[00:07:25] They weren't getting much in return.

[00:07:28] For the Caribbean colonies, there wasn't a huge amount they could do about this.

[00:07:34] But the American colonies were growing stronger, and in 1776 thirteen American colonies joined together and declared that they would stop paying taxes to the British monarch, and they would **club together**[24] to form the United States of America.

[00:07:54] The British king, King George III, didn't think much of this, so sent **troops**[25] to fight the Americans, starting the American War of Independence.

[00:08:06] It wasn't just the British against the Americans though.

[00:08:09] The French, the Spanish and the Dutch joined forces with the Americans as a way to **undermine**[26] British power and ultimately the Americans won the war, gaining independence from Britain on the 4th of July 1776, a day that's now celebrated as Independence Day.

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[24] join together

[25] soldiers

[26] reduce, make less strong

[00:08:30] For Britain, and the British Empire, this was a big problem.

[00:08:35] These 13 colonies formed the largest and most powerful part of its empire at the time, and they were now gone, never to return.

[00:08:46] The loss of America to the empire is often considered the end of the first British Empire, but it most definitely wasn't the end of The British Empire.

[00:08:59] Britain had experienced the power that empire brings, so started to focus its attention elsewhere, and specifically, to the east.

[00:09:10] In 1787, as you may have learned about in the last episode on Penal Colonies, the first **settlement** was established in Australia.

[00:09:21] But Australia was really a minor **feature**[27] in the British Empire.

[00:09:26] The **jewel in the crown**[28], as it was nicknamed, was India.

[00:09:32] There had actually been British settlers in India since 1608, and Britain had been building up trading **outposts**[29] near the coast.

[00:09:44] Unlike in the Americas, it didn't go in and immediately enslave the local population.

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[27] important part

[28] your most important possession

[29] a group of buildings far away from your main place of business, usually military or trading outposts

[00:09:51] The British Empire in India was also really pushed forward by a semi-private company, not by the British government itself directly.

[00:10:02] This company was called the East India Company, and had actually been set up in the year 1599 for the purposes of trade with India and East Asia.

[00:10:15] Although it was a private company, it became heavily involved with politics, and it also had its own private army, with over a quarter of a million soldiers, a larger army than the British army.

[00:10:31] It grew and grew in power in India, exporting spices and tea back to Europe, and also getting heavily involved in the **opium**[30] trade, triggering the **Opium** Wars with China in the mid-19th century.

[00:10:47] As the East India Company continued to grow and grow in strength, it started **stretching its military muscles**[31] against the local population.

[00:10:57] After a series of battles, it proved victorious over the local rulers, and **morphed**[32] from a purely trading company to a political and governmental organisation, essentially taking over the administration of India.

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[30] a powerful drug made from poppy seeds

[31] testing the capabilities of its army

[32] changed

[00:11:16] This period, called Company Rule, when most of what's now India was controlled by a British company, began in 1757 and lasted until 1858, when the rule of India was passed to the British crown.

[00:11:35] Both during the Company Rule period and while it was under the rule of the crown, the British **imposed**[33] British cultural **norms**[34] on the local population, and created British-style **institutions**[35] in India.

[00:11:52] Although there was some pretty awful treatment of the local Indian population, a major difference between the treatment of the Indians vs the non-British population in places like the Caribbean was that the Indians were viewed more as equals to the British, perhaps with less developed **institutions**, a different view of the rule of law, but a people to deal with on a similar level **nonetheless**[36].

[00:12:21] In the Caribbean, the black, enslaved, population was viewed as **inferior**[37], viewed as property to be bought and sold, not even in the same category.

[00:12:34] You can put this down to simple racism, which of course, it is.

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[33] forced others to accept

[34] the usual way of doing something

[35] large organisations

[36] in spite of what was previously mentioned, despite

[37] not as good

[00:12:38] There's also the factor that India was initially viewed as a trading partner, merchants to do business with, rather than completely **virgin** territory to **exploit**[38] full of culturally and racially inferior people.

[00:12:55] It's a subject that historians are still debating, but the point is that there's no one **blanket**[39] answer to how the British treated the people living in its colonies.

[00:13:07] But the British weren't content just with India though, and in the 19th century large parts of Africa and SouthEast Asia were also swept up into the British empire.

[00:13:20] There are almost too many to name, but modern day Cameroon, Egypt, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Malta, Myanmar, Mauritius, Oman, Pakistan, South Africa, Sudan and Zimbabwe, along with many others, were all British colonies.

[00:13:40] The **heyday**[40], the peak for the British Empire came at the start of the 20th century, which is quite mad to think - this was only just over 100 years ago.

[00:13:53] Britain controlled a quarter of the Earth's land area, with a quarter of its population ruled by the British monarch.

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[38] use to their advantage

[39] applies to every case

[40] the most powerful period

[00:14:02] But beneath the surface, things were starting to **crumble**[41].

[00:14:06] Throughout British colonial history there had been **uprisings**[42].

[00:14:12] Some had succeeded, like the American War of Independence.

[00:14:16] Others had been brutally **crushed**[43], like the Baptist War in Jamaica in 1831 or the Indian Mutiny of 1857.

[00:14:27] But even those that were **crushed**, often with a large human cost, they created even more **animosity**[44] in the local population towards their British rulers, and **triggered**[45] debate back in Britain about whether it was indeed right to have such a large empire, and to keep so many people of different cultures and traditions under British rule.

[00:14:54] The Declaration of The Rights of Man and The Citizen had come in 1789, and there had been an increasing understanding of people's rights to be treated as human beings, to control their own destiny and not be under the control of others.

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[41] fall down, fall apart

[42] rebellions

[43] stopped

[44] feelings of strong dislike

[45] caused

[00:15:13] Indeed, at the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 one of the big concepts promoted was the right for a country to administer itself.

[00:15:25] It was hard, and certainly **hypocritical**[46], for Britain to promote this idea while it was the largest administrator of other countries in the history of the world.

[00:15:38] Maintaining an empire was also very expensive.

[00:15:42] It did of course bring in large amounts of money through trade and taxes, but controlling the local population and stopping **uprisings** was a difficult and expensive task.

[00:15:56] At the end of the Second World War, Britain was financially in a pretty poor position and it could no longer really afford to keep its empire.

[00:16:08] There was also a growing feeling among several colonies that had contributed hundreds of thousands of soldiers to the war effort that they had deserved the right to independence, and pro-independence movements started to **bubble up**[47] across the globe.

[00:16:27] Long story short, one by one the vast majority of Britain's colonies were either given independence by Britain or there were rebellions, and independence was declared.

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[46] behaving in a way that's different to what you say

[47] rise to the surface

[00:16:42] Now there are only 14 colonies left, they're called British Overseas Territories, and they're mainly small islands, tax havens such as the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands.

[00:16:58] Although the **legacy** of British colonial rule is undeniable, what is still very much debated is how much was positive and how much was negative.

[00:17:09] Of course, it's impossible to generalise here, and opinions will differ hugely depending on the country and of course within the country.

[00:17:21] Some of the advantages that colonial rule is said to have brought include the **implementation**[48] of **bureaucratic**[49] **institutions** and the building of infrastructure.

[00:17:33] India, for example, is now the world's largest democracy, and the East India Company built a large railway network throughout the country that of course was left behind when the British left.

[00:17:48] But the argument that Britain brought **infrastructure**[50], stability and culture to so called '**barbarian**[51]' regions is countered by the fact that we have no way to know

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[48] putting into place

[49] relating to the system of government

[50] the systems and structures a country has to work properly

[51] from a different country

what would have happened to these countries if they hadn't been **subjected**[52] to

British rule.

[00:18:07] Japan, for example, was never colonised by the British, and has managed to

develop into one of the world's most successful countries.

[00:18:17] And looking at countries that were colonised by Britain vs those that weren't,

it's hard to make the case that being part of the British empire left them all in a better

position.

[00:18:30] There are not many success stories that one can point at of ex-colonial

countries, especially in Africa. On the other hand, the one that is most commonly used

as an example of a **booming**[53] ex British colony is Singapore, but it's hard to **attribute**[54]

its success to being part of the British Empire.

[00:18:54] Of course, the enslavement of millions of Africans is a **hideous**[55] aspect of the

British Empire, as is the **persecution**[56] of indigenous peoples in North America and

Australia, and I don't think there are any supporters of the British Empire that would try

to deny that.

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[52] made to accept/experience

[53] successful

[54] say is responsible for

[55] terrible

[56] unfair treatment

[00:19:13] So, was the British Empire a good or bad thing?

[00:19:17] The answer to that question is definitely 'it's complicated', and it's a bit of a silly question really.

[00:19:25] Good or bad for whom? And when? And where? And why?

[00:19:31] One thing is for sure though.

[00:19:33] It certainly did happen, it's very complicated, and trying to avoid talking about it and pretending that it didn't happen doesn't help anybody.

[00:19:47] OK then, that is it for The British Empire.

[00:19:51] It's a fascinating subject, and we really have only just **scratched the surface**[57].

[00:19:57] I know we could do individual episodes on probably a hundred different aspects of the empire, all of which would be interesting in their different ways, but I hope that this has at least given you an overview of what happened, and quite how complicated it is.

[00:20:16] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode. You can head right in to our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

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[57] covered a small amount

[00:20:28] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo

English

[00:20:33] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

<u>Key vocabulary</u>

Word	Definition
Legacy	something that exists as a result of things that happened at an earlier time
Come to terms with	to accept or understand a bad situation
Imperial	relating to empire
Zenith	highest point
Swathes	areas (especially of land)
Propelled	moved, pushed forward
Lingua franca	common language
Sought	looked to, tried to
Virgin	(of land) new and uninhabited
Settlement	a group of houses or buildings in a place where people didn't live before
Ventured	went (especially somewhere that could be dangerous)
Plantations	large farms, especially in warm countries
Enabled	allowed to happen

Piled	went (in large numbers)
Brushed under the carpet	kept a secret, not discussed
Conveniently forgotten	forgotten because you do not want to think about it
Renewed	starting again
Confront	deal with
Torn down	taken down forcefully
Inseparable	not able to be separated from
Boosted	improved, made more successful
Proceeds	money got from selling something
Going was pretty good	things were going well
Club together	join together
Troops	soldiers
Undermine	reduce, make less strong

Feature	important part
Jewel in the crown	your most important possession
Outposts	a group of buildings far away from your main place of business, usually military or trading outposts
Opium	a powerful drug made from poppy seeds
Stretching its military muscles	testing the capabilities of its army
Morphed	changed
Imposed	forced others to accept
Norms	the usual way of doing something
Institutions	large organisations
Nonetheless	in spite of what was previously mentioned, despite
Inferior	not as good
Exploit	use to their advantage
Blanket	applies to every case
Heyday	the most powerful period

Crumble	fall down, fall apart
Uprisings	rebellions
Crushed	stopped
Animosity	feelings of strong dislike
Triggered	caused
Hypocritical	behaving in a way that's different to what you say
Bubble up	rise to the surface
Implementation	putting into place
Bureaucratic	relating to the system of government
Infrastructure	the systems and structures a country has to work properly
Barbarian	from a different country
Subjected	made to accept/experience
Booming	successful
Attribute	say is responsible for
Hideous	terrible

Persecution   unfair treatment

Scratched the   covered a small amount

surface

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com