

BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The British Empire

Episode 1 – Exploration and the development of the British Empire

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Katie: I'm history podcaster Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And I'm history graduate and TV and radio presenter Datshiane Navanayagam.

Katie: And this is Bitesize History.

Datshiane: This is the first episode in an eight-part series on the British Empire.

Katie: We'll be sharing revision hints and tips on how to remember those key facts, and there'll be exam tips and a quick test of your knowledge.

Datshiane: And we'll be hearing from our Bitesize time-travelling reporter, who we'll send back in time to report from some key moments in history.

Katie: And remember that it might help you if you have something to make notes on, and do feel free to press stop and rewind whenever you need to.

Datshiane: In this episode, we'll look at the formation of Britain over the last thousand years, the European exploration in the fifth century and the early development of the British Empire under Elizabeth the First.

Datshiane: Let's start our story all the way back in the fifth century, way before the British Empire, but shortly after the Roman Empire had collapsed. So, the Anglo-Saxons had migrated to England around 400AD and by 900AD they had established four powerful kingdoms, but these kingdoms weren't united, in fact they each had different rulers who were often in conflict with one another.

Katie: Hang on, wouldn't that make the kingdoms more vulnerable to attack and invasion?

Datshiane: Exactly. So, from the eighth to the eleventh centuries - well - along came the Vikings from Scandinavia, and they began raiding England in 793AD. It was King Alfred the Great who defeated the Vikings by uniting Anglo-Saxon Christians, but that wasn't the only thing he did; he also accepted the creation of a Viking kingdom, which was called Danelaw.

Katie: Great! So, that's all sorted with the Vikings then?

Datshiane: Well, no, not exactly. The eleventh century saw more Viking invasions, which restored Viking rule over England through King Canute who ruled over a North Sea Empire.

Katie: After Canute's death, there was a struggle for control, leading to a return of Anglo-Saxon rule under Edward the Confessor. So, lots of changes of rule there between the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings.

Datshiane: Okay, but fast forward to 1066, and now King Edward dies without an heir to the throne.

Katie: Oh, a succession crisis!

Datshiane: You bet! William, the Duke of Normandy, wins the Battle of Hastings, and he's now crowned King of England.

Katie: Okay, so that's lots of dates, names and invasions in early Britain, but the key thing to note for us is that Britain as a united kingdom was developed, and there was a huge migration of people to the British Isles.

Datshiane: That's right, so we have the Anglo-Saxons from Northern Germany, the Vikings from Scandinavia and the Normans from Northern France.

Katie: Speaking of France, let's turn our attention there, where throughout this period English Kings also held land, power, and influence.

Datshiane: In the late twelfth century during the reign of King Henry the Second, England was part of a vast Angevin empire, you might want to pause and write this down, Angevin is spelt A-n-g-e-v-i-n. This empire included England, Wales, West of France as well as the East of Ireland, and get this, at this time the language of England was French.

Katie: Fast forward again, and the Angevin empire began to unravel and ended in the thirteenth century. This was due to a series of conflicts, betrayal and political challenges which led to England no longer controlling areas of France, and this was a huge setback for English imperial ambitions.

Datshiane: In fact, this contributed to ongoing tensions between England and France, which would eventually lead to the Hundred Years War in which England was eventually defeated. Check out the Bitesize website for more on this.

Katie: This loss of wealth and resources from the French territories encouraged England to look for new sources of income and influence. As European trade routes expanded in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the English began to see the potential for overseas exploration and trade as a way to compensate. This contributed indirectly to the exploration of America and the foundation of the early British Empire.

Datshiane: Right, and in the next section we'll look at the development of empire under Elizabeth the First. But first, lots of dates, invasions, and kings of England there, so how about a quick test to see how much of it you've remembered? Three questions about that section, five seconds to write your answers down, here it goes.

Katie: Who were the early invaders and rulers of England after the Roman Empire had collapsed?

Datshiane: The Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century, the Vikings in the eighth to eleventh centuries, and if you want an extra point you can also include the Anglo-Saxons again in the eleventh century, the Normans in 1066 and the Angevins in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Katie: Great, and what is Danelaw?

Datshiane: Well, that was the name for an area of England that was under the control of the Danish Viking Empire.

Katie: And why did the end of the Angevin Empire lead to England beginning to explore other lands?

Datshiane: Well, after England lost control of many French regions they explored other overseas territories to make up for that loss of wealth.

Katie: During the sixteenth century under the rule of Elizabeth the First, British sailors were encouraged and funded to travel to lands where Britain had never been before.

Datshiane: Sir John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake were privateers and they were the first English traders in enslaved people. Queen Elizabeth the First's enemy was Spain, and Hawkins and Drake sailed to raid Spanish ships and colonies in the Americas on her behalf.

Katie: In 1585, Queen Elizabeth the First gave Walter Raleigh permission to set up a colony on Roanoke Island, now part of modern-day USA.

Datshiane: However, life wasn't always easy for migrants when they got there. The early years in the American colonies were marked by famine and disease.

Katie: In 1610, William Strachey, the secretary of the colony, wrote a detailed letter about the conditions in Jamestown: 'A most dreadful winter, more than half of our company died, and it was so extreme as our men were driven to do things which the tongue relishes not to mention, and far worse were resolved upon.'

Datshiane: But the colony's fortunes changed with the cultivation of crops such as sugar, tobacco and cotton, that made Jamestown and Virginia economically profitable; and in fact the colony grew, but eventually the chosen way to meet this demand was to exploit the labour of enslaved Africans who continued to be transported from West Africa.

Katie: And in 1564, Hawkins seized 300 people from the coast of West Africa, close to modern day Sierra Leone and he sold the captives in Hispaniola.

Datshiane: Between 1564 and 1569, Hawkins was involved in four voyages transporting and selling around twelve hundred people into enslavement. We'll have more about the connection between the growth of the British Empire and slavery in a later episode.

Katie: Okay, so it is time to check in with Jordan our time-travelling reporter, with his report as Drake's Golden Hind returns to the Plymouth docks in September 1580.

Jordan: The air is filled with the salty tang of the sea mixed with the smell of tar. As sailors unload barrels of food, fresh water and trade goods I'm hoping to catch a glimpse of Francis Drake, who in England at this time is considered one of the world's most famous explorers. His ship, the Golden Hind, has just docked after three years at sea. The journey has taken his crew across the Atlantic, around treacherous waters of South America, and into the Pacific, completely unknown territories to

Europeans, raiding Spanish ships, exploring and capturing immense wealth in gold and spices. Drake's successful circumnavigation of the globe, the first Englishman to do so, is sure to be remembered for generations to come, for supplying England with vast riches and opening more trade routes with other countries. But whilst he is being celebrated today for his exploration, I want to ask him about something less celebratory - his and his cousin John Hawkins' involvement in the cruel and inhumane slave trade. It's up to the historians of the future to analyse the full story and life of the vastly different impacts Hawkins had on different groups of people. This is Jordan, reporting for BBC Bitesize. Back to the studio.

Katie: Thanks, Jordan. Okay, so an exam question might ask what the significance of Francis Drake was.

Datshiane: Have a go at that, after the podcast, thinking about his role in the slave trade and his exploration, or listen to the Exam Skill series if you need some reminders on how to answer these kinds of questions.

Katie: As voyages continued from Britain, to and from what became known as the New World to exploit their resources?

Datshiane: Ooh can I just stop you there Katie, that term the New World, these places weren't new to the people who had lived in these parts of the world for centuries.

Katie: That is absolutely right, and that is a good point to remember.

Datshiane: In fact the exploration of land and trade led to the establishment of British colonies in the Americas. These colonies became increasingly profitable for Britain as the demand for these new crops such as tobacco was high.

Katie: A quick summary of the key facts from the second half of this episode anyone?

Datshiane: Well, the first explorer John Hawkins led an expedition to the West Indies by enslaving Africans, who were taken from West Africa.

Katie: His cousin Francis Drake sailed across the world on the Golden Hind, an expedition seen as the development of the British Empire.

Datshiane: People from Britain began to migrate to North America, and new British colonies and settlements started to grow there.

Katie: Jamestown in Virginia eventually became profitable due to the farming of key crops and enslaved labour from Africa. Now there's loads more revision hints and tips on the Bitesize website and more episodes in this series.

Datshiane: In the next episode we'll look at how the British took control of India in the eighteenth century. Thanks for listening.