The British Empire was the biggest empire in the history of the world. Large areas of North America, Australia, Africa and Asia were part of it. Britain’s colonisation began in the late 16th century. By the 19th century Britain owned one quarter of the world’s land! People said: ‘The sun never sets on the British Empire’, because it was always day time in one of the British colonies.

The British Empire helped to make Britain rich. The British controlled all trade with its colonies. They imported raw materials, made them into manufactured goods and then sold the goods in their colonies.

But conditions for the local people in the colonies weren’t good. They had to work long hours and they didn’t earn a lot of money. Local people rarely participated in the political decisions of their countries. For this reason there were often rebellions in the colonies against the British and many people died in the oppression.
At the beginning of the 20th century many British colonies demanded their political and economic independence. Some countries left the Empire peacefully but, for others, years of conflict with Britain began. In India one local leader, Gandhi, became very famous for his peaceful protest against Britain.

Gandhi brought the attention of the world to the oppression and injustice of the British occupation of India. By the late 1960s the majority of the British territories were independent. It was the end of the British Empire!

Britain changed the countries in its empire. Many people left Britain and went to live in the colonies. They took their religion, language and social structures with them. English became a global language. Today about 1.5 billion people around the world speak English.

But the Empire also changed Britain. Many people from the colonies came to live in Britain. Today there are large Indian, African and Caribbean communities in the UK. People from the colonies brought their food, languages and traditions with them. As a result, Britain is a multicultural society.