

8.3 Why the Industrial Revolution began in Britain

One of the key factors that led to the start of the Industrial Revolution in Britain was its authority and wealth as an empire.

Rise of the British Empire

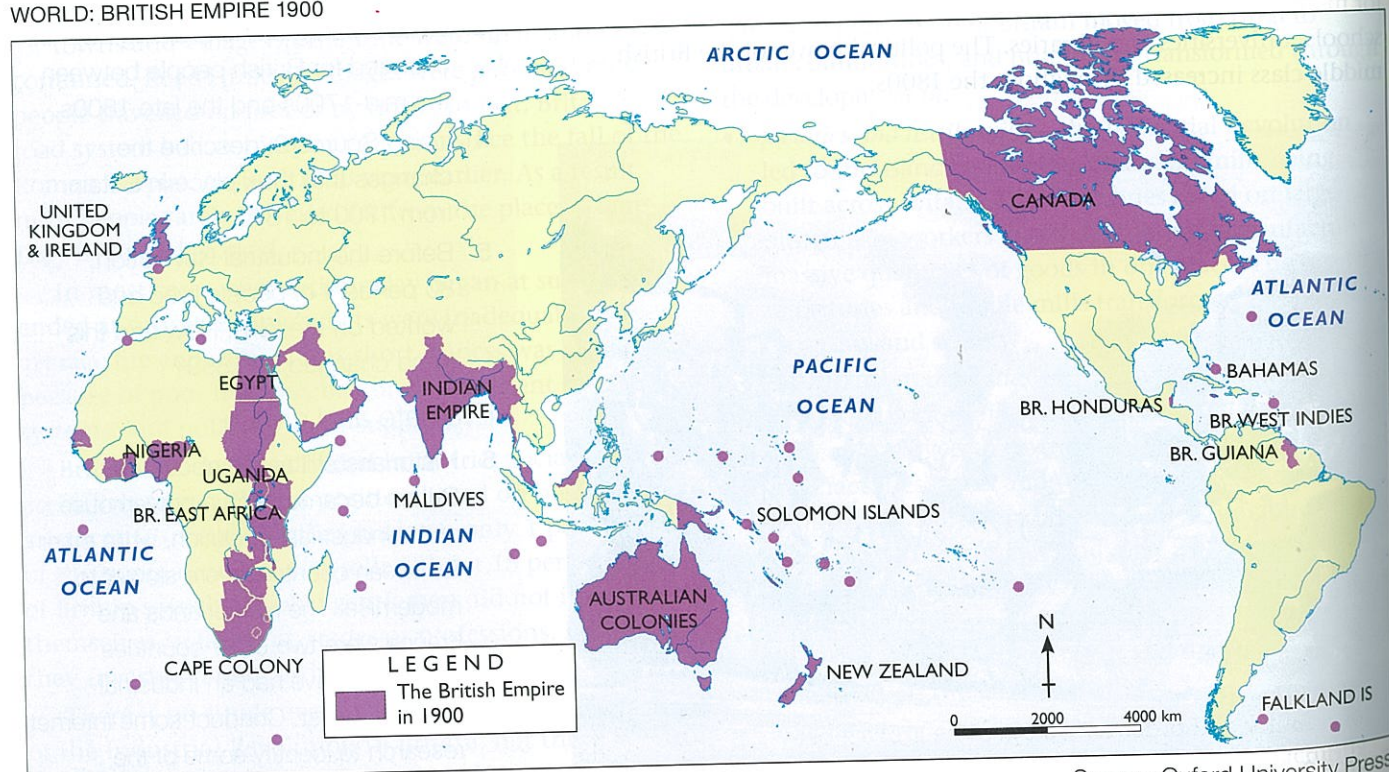
The expansion of the British Empire took place in two phases:

- The first phase was the establishment of the earliest British colonies in North America in the 1600s. Over the next 200 years, Britain, France, Spain, the Dutch and Portuguese all laid claims to new territories around the world, including the Americas, Asia, Africa and the Pacific.
- The second phase was linked to a series of wars fought between the European powers in the 18th century and early part of the 19th century. Britain's

superior naval strength ensured that it succeeded in becoming the dominant imperial power, despite the loss of many of its American colonies in the American War of Independence in 1865.

By 1900, the British Empire had expanded to cover around a quarter of the Earth's surface and ruled over a quarter of the world's population (see Source 1). Many of Britain's colonies provided the raw materials, workforce (in the form of slaves) and customers needed to drive the Industrial Revolution. Britain controlled more colonies, and therefore had access to more raw materials than any other country, including sugar from Australia and the West Indies, wool from Australia and New Zealand, cotton and tea from India, rubber from Malaya, gold from Australia and South Africa, coffee from Jamaica and Africa, wheat from Australia and Canada, and timber from the vast pine forests of Canada.

WORLD: BRITISH EMPIRE 1900



Source 1

Source: Oxford University Press



Source 2 Britain relied heavily on a strong navy and experienced fleets of merchant trading ships.

Other factors

In addition to the power of the British Empire, historians have proposed a range of reasons why Britain was the first country to experience the Industrial Revolution and why it became the world's leading economic and industrial power for a time. The answer lies in a combination of factors related to Britain's history, geography and culture. Some of these are discussed briefly below:

- **Britain's coal supplies** – Britain was fortunate to have large supplies of coal, a vital fuel for the steam power that drove the Industrial Revolution. None of the other European powers had such large quantities of accessible coal.
- **naval power and trading power** – as an island nation, Britain had always relied on skilled sailors, a strong navy and experienced fleets of merchant ships. Its largest merchant trading company was the East India Company (EIC). At its peak, the EIC rivalled many smaller European powers in terms of wealth and influence.
- **individual freedom and the capitalist spirit** – unlike many of the other European powers, there was a greater measure of individual and intellectual freedom in Britain. These freedoms provided a fertile ground for those willing to try new methods and take risks. In other parts of Europe, government restrictions and less individual freedom limited opportunity.
- **stable government** – before the start of the Industrial Revolution, Britain had enjoyed a prolonged period without much political or social conflict, compared to many other countries in Europe. This sense of stability and order encouraged the growth of business.
- **superior banking system and capital for investment** – increased trade meant that financial services in

England – such as banking, investment and insurance – expanded to support and protect that trade. Britain's banking sector was more advanced and modern than those of other European countries. There was a ready supply of capital (money) available at very low rates of interest. This meant that money was available to start up new businesses and pay for experiments to develop new inventions. Two of the key inventions of the Industrial Revolution, the steamship and the telegraph, were important in helping Britain administer their colonies around the world.

Check your learning 8.3

Remember and understand

- 1 List the main changes that took place across Britain between 1750 and 1850.
- 2 Why were large coal deposits in Britain so significant during the Industrial Revolution?
- 3 What was the name of the largest British merchant trading company?
- 4 List three colonies under British rule and the raw materials they provided to fuel the growth of industries in Britain during the Industrial Revolution?

Apply and analyse

- 5 What percentage of the Earth's surface was under British rule by 1900?
- 6 Use Source 1 and your own research online to answer the following: By 1900, 25 per cent of the world's total population was ruled by the British. How many people was this?