

Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves!" This old song, which was first performed in 1740, is still sung every year on the last night of the famous 'Proms' concerts in London. Every time the refrain starts, the whole audience joins in. The words they sing are a reminder of Britain's past as a sea power, and of the reason why a small island nation was able to build a great empire around the world. After John Cabot had crossed the Atlantic from England in 1497, other explorers continued to look for new lands during the following century. This often meant trouble with Britain's neighbours in Europe who also wanted more territory and trade. Spain was very powerful and already had an empire in the Americas, but the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 at the time of Elizabeth I gave Britain the chance and the confidence to develop her own influence in different continents. The New World played a big role in the early years of Britain's empire. In 1607 English settlers founded Virginia, the first of thirteen permanent colonies along the east coast of North America. Caribbean islands like Bermuda, the Bahamas and Barbados were also taken by Britain during the 1600s, although Spain was still strong in this region and France held territory, too, so that there was often conflict between the three countries. Fighting between Britain and France also broke out regularly in what is now Canada, and this continued until the end of the Seven Years' War in Europe in 1763. In that war Britain and France were on opposite sides, as usual, and when Britain and her allies won, France had to give Britain most of her land in North America. Meanwhile, the British had been building up their influence in Asia. In 1600 the East India Company was formed to develop trade in Southeast Asia and India. After rivalry with the Dutch had led to the massacre of British merchants in the Spice Islands in 1623, the Company concentrated on India, and by the end of that century had important trading stations around the coast. As in North America, however, France was a big rival, and both countries tried to win influence through military support for Indian leaders who were fighting their own wars against each other. Once again, the Seven Years' War in Europe helped to give an advantage to the British. Bengal, in the northeast of India, came under the control of the East India Company in 1757, and then other areas followed. It was actually this company that ruled India until the British government finally took over officially in 1858. Even losing the American colonies when they decided to fight for their independence in 1776 could not stop Britain's power growing around the world. Exploration of the Pacific region by sailors like James Cook led to the huge new colony of Australia in 1788, New Zealand in 1840, and many other smaller territories. At the same time, Africa also offered possibilities. Like the Portuguese, the Dutch and the French, the British had already been involved in trade in West Africa for centuries, but the only permanent European settlement was the Dutch colony at the Cape of Good Hope. In 1806 the Cape was taken from the Dutch by the British, and then later in the 19th century missionaries, explorers and merchants like David Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley and Cecil Rhodes helped to open the way north into the centre of the continent. The British were not alone in the hurry to grab land in Africa. Other countries like Portugal, France and Germany had the same idea. In the end, however, the big winner was Britain, and by the early part of the 20th century Britain ruled over a quarter of the world and had the largest empire in history. The British Empire became known as 'the empire on which the sun never sets'.