YEAR 5: THE BIRTH OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE (5 lessons)

Contents Include:

Global Trade
The Seven Years War
The Conquest of Canada
The East India Company
Life as a British Seaman

Suggested Teacher Resources:

- *Great Tales from English History* by Robert Lacey, pages 298-301; 324-332.
- The National Archives has an excellent set of resources on the [British Empire](#).
- Clips from films could be used, e.g. *The Bounty* (1984), *Last of the Mohicans* (1992), and *Master and Commander* (2003) and the recent BBC series *Empire*. 
Lesson 1. Global Trade

From around 1600, the British Empire grew out of Britain’s trade with the ‘New World’. The first seeds of Empire were coastal trading posts, governed by commercial bodies such as the East Indian Trading Company, where British power stretched little further than a few miles in land. Examples included Bengal, Madras and Bombay in India, and the Gold Coast in West Africa. Gradually, the British settled larger areas and established more control—particularly in the Americas. Victory in the Seven Years War (1756-63) was a significant turning point, as France ceded vast territories in India and North America to Britain.

See pages 126-127 of What Your Year 5 Child Needs to Know.

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<td>To understand the origins of the British Empire in global trade.</td>
<td>The British Empire emerged out of a desire to protect and expand its growing trade interests around the New World. Britain set up colonies in the countries where they traded, such as Africa, America, the Caribbean and India. Some were very small, some covered large territories. European trading nations increasingly fought over who controlled trade where, and began to increase their power over their colonies.</td>
<td>Create a large A3 ‘Trading Map’ of the world demonstrating all of the different trade routes that existed in the early years of the British Empire. Pupils could use pictures and even real products such as spices, tea and tobacco to illustrate their map (see example in resource 1). <strong>This</strong> is the introduction to the British Empire provided by Horrible Histories. <strong>This</strong> is a good animated map of the growth of the British Empire. Analyse the painting ‘The East Offering Its Riches to Britannia’ by Spiridione Roma (resource 2).</td>
<td>New World colony empire trade</td>
<td>What is trade? What different resources did the British trade around the world? How did an Empire begin to develop from this?</td>
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1. Global Trade by 1700

This is an illustration of how a ‘Trading Map’ could be created for lesson 1. Pupils could stick images of each product onto their piece of paper around a world map, or, where possible, the actual product or a stand in material could be used (tea bag, cotton, coffee bean, felt for beaver skin etc.).
2. **East India offering its riches to Britannia**

This image was painted on the ceiling of the East India Company headquarters, London in 1778. It contains many messages about how the British viewed their Empire.

Look at the image [here](#), and see which of the following features you can locate.

- **A ship with the East India Company flag leaves India and returns to London full of its ‘riches’**.
- **Figure holds bundles of raw cotton to be spun into clothes and textiles back in England. Increasingly, cotton was grown in the Americas and not India.**
- **This man represents ‘Old Father Thames’. He is included because the Thames was seen as the heart of the British Empire, where trading cargo was unloaded.**
- **Roman messenger God Mercury, also the God of financial gain and trade. Britain wants to build an Empire as powerful and important as the Roman Empire once was.**
- **Britannia is a figure used to represent the British Empire. The top of a Union Jack shield can be seen by her right leg, and she sits by a lion—another representation of Empire, as it is the head of the animal Kingdom.**
- **Chinese figure also offering goods to Britannia, including a large Chinese vase.**
- **Figure representing India offers pearls to Britannia. This is not very accurate, as many of the native population disliked British control.**
Lesson 2. Canada

One of the single most important moments in the building of the British Empire was the capture of Quebec from the French by General Wolfe. This audacious attack took place during the Seven Years War (1754-1763), in which Great Britain won a series of surprise victories against the French and emerged the most powerful nation in the world. Quebec was the capital of ‘New France’, a large area of French controlled North America which threatened Britain’s ‘thirteen colonies’. After General Wolfe’s victory, Britain controlled nearly all of the North American continent, and the colonies had no threat of French attack.

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<td>To understand why the Battle of Quebec was an important even in the growth of the British Empire.</td>
<td>General Wolfe’s victory in the Battle of Quebec meant that much of North America was taken from the French and passed into British control. Britain at first controlled 13 colonies in North America, running down the East Coast, but they were surrounded and threatened by French territories. After General Wolfe took control of Quebec, all of French North America (Canada and the interior of the continent) was ceded to the British Empire.</td>
<td>Shade in two maps, of the North American Continent before the Seven Years War and after the Seven Years War, to show how much land was transferred from the French to the British by Wolfe’s victory (resource 2). Study and annotate the painting, The Death of General Wolfe by Benjamin West, and pick out all of the clues that it tells us about the Battle of Quebec (resource 3). This is a good summary of the painting for the teacher.</td>
<td>Canada Quebec New France</td>
<td>Who won the Battle of Quebec? What was the threat to the British colonies of French control of New France? Why was the Battle of Quebec so important for Britain?</td>
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2. Land gained from the Battle of Quebec
2. Land gained from the Battle of Quebec (Complete)

North America before the Battle of Quebec

North America after the Battle of Quebec
3. **The Death of General Wolfe**

This image was painted in 1770 by the well known Anglo-American Artist Benjamin West. It showed the dying moments of General Wolfe during the Battle of Quebec, Britain’s victory in the Seven Years War.

Look at the image [here](#), and see which of the following features you can locate.

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<th>The battle takes place on the Plains of Abraham, outside Quebec City. The steeple of Quebec Cathedral can be seen behind the smoke.</th>
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<td>The French General Montcalm falls from his horse, having been shot by a British musket ball.</td>
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<td>The Union Jack is right in the centre of the painting. This is a patriotic message, reminding the viewer that General Wolfe died whilst serving the British Empire.</td>
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| A messenger runs towards General Wolfe holding the white flag of truce to tell him that the French have surrendered. Will the messenger reach General Wolfe before he dies? |
| A native American, with tattoos and feathers in his hair watches the scene. Next to him is a native American ‘ranger’ who has been helping the British, dressed in a British green jacket, but with native American beaded trousers and sash. They shows us that we are in the ‘New World’ of North America. |

| On the floor are General Wolfe’s musket and ammunition. This suggests that unlike many generals at the time, he was brave enough to fight alongside his own men. |
| General Wolfe dies, aged only 32. The composition is similar to paintings of the death of Jesus Christ, suggesting that General Wolfe was also a martyr who died for his cause. He is surrounded by his favourite officers. |
| The St Lawrence River that leads towards Quebec. This was key to General Wolfe’s victory, as he sailed up the river during the night to launch a surprise attack on the city. The masts and sails of the British ships can be seen in the background. |
Lesson 3. India

The East India Company was formed in 1600, and established small but highly profitable trading settlements in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. Until 1750, almost all of India was under the control of the Mughal Empire, and Britain’s interest in the country was commercial. However, around 1750 the Mughal Empire began to break up, causing endless conflicts between different Mughal Princes, and the British, French and Dutch traders. In the confusion, ambitious British officers stepped into the vacuum and started establishing British control over different regions—none more so than Major-General Robert Clive.

See pages 128-129 of What Your Year 5 Child Needs to Know.

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<td>To understand why British control spread through India after 1750.</td>
<td>Britain owned trading colonies in India such as Madras, Calcutta and Bombay which were controlled by the East India Company. The spread of the British Empire in India was aided by the dissolving of the Mughal Empire leaving a vacuum into which British power could spread. Clive’s victory at the Battle of Plassey was a turning point in British rule in India, after which power moved from the French and the former Mughal Empire, to the British.</td>
<td>This would be a good opportunity to study the Mughal Empire, which ruled most of India and Pakistan from around 1500 to 1700. Their contribution to Indian culture, architecture and society was immense, and could perhaps form a separate lesson (resource 3). Study painting of a treaty between Britain and Bengal (1765). Explain what is being discussed, and imagine what Robert Clive is saying to the new Nawab of Bengal here. There are some good clips, particularly about India, from a recent BBC series about the British Empire here.</td>
<td>East India Company Mughal Empire Bengal Madras Nawab</td>
<td>Before 1750, who governed India? What happened to the Mughal Empire around 1700? What did the British do when the Mughal Empire began to break up? Why was the Battle of Plassey and important turning point?</td>
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3. The Mughal Empire

From 1526 to the early 1700s, much of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh was ruled by the magnificent Mughal Empire. The Mughal Emperors were from central Asia (modern day Uzbekistan) and claimed descent from the great Mongol leader Genghis Khan. They were also Muslims, and adopted the art and culture of the Middle East, particularly Persia.

Mughal rule in India began under Babur (1526-1530), who invaded Northern India from Afghanistan and made himself king. In 1526, he captured Delhi, marking the start of Mughal rule. Although Babur was a Muslim, he tolerated other religions in India. This was key to the Mughal’s early success as rulers, as Hindus and Sikhs were not discriminated against, so they were happy to obey their Muslim rulers.

The greatest Mughal ruler was their third emperor, Abu Akbar. He became emperor aged 13 and conquered most of India. To please the Indian people, he married a Hindu princess.

Emperor Shah Jahan (1628-1658) is remembered today for his amazing buildings. He invited architects from across the Muslim world to create the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort, two buildings that millions of tourists today visit India to see.

The last great Mughal Emperor was Aurangzeb (1659-1707). He ruled for 50 years, having imprisoned his father and killed his older brother. He expanded his Empire to its largest size, but also enforced Islamic laws and customs on Hindus and Sikhs. This made him very unpopular, and caused a series of rebellions against Mughal rule. As the Mughal Empire began to loose power, the British Empire was able to control in India.
Lesson 4. The Seven Years War

The Battle of Plassey and the Battle of Quebec took place during the Seven Years War (1754-1763) fought between Britain and France. It was perhaps Britain’s most successful ever war, as they gained land in North America, West Africa, the Philippines and India from the French and Spanish. This marks the beginning of the British Empire’s world dominance. These victories led to a surge of patriotism in Britain, and songs such as ‘Rule Britannia’ and the character of Britannia became part of British culture. Figures such as William Pitt, General Wolfe and Robert Clive became national heroes.

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<td>To understand why British control spread through India after 1750.</td>
<td>Britain was extremely successful in the Seven Years War, gaining land in North America, Africa, the Philippines and India. Many territories were gained from the French. By the end of the War, Britain had replaced France as the most powerful nation in the world, and 1759 was known as ‘annus mirabilis’, meaning ‘year of miracles’. This led to an surge in patriotism in England, with people waving the Union Jack and singing Rule Britannia.</td>
<td>Label an image of a British infantryman to gain some understanding of what life must have been like for a soldier serving in the British Empire (resource 4). See possible images here and here. This Horrible Histories video will help. Also, a short clip from a film such as Waterloo (1970) or Last of the Mohicans (1992) would be useful. Annotate Britannia to understand what she symbolised, see here. When teaching about Britannia, it is a nice trick to ask pupils to find a 50p piece from their wallet. On the coin they should find an image of Britannia. This can lead to a discussion over whether a symbol of the British Empire should still be celebrated on our coins.</td>
<td>Patriotism Seven Years War Rule Britannia</td>
<td>Who did Britain fight in the Seven Years War? What did Britain gain from the Seven Years War? Why was the Seven Years War such a miracle for the British? What was life like as a soldier in the British army?</td>
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4. Life as a British Infantryman

During a campaign, a soldier would have a daily allowance of bread, meat, oatmeal and beer or rum. Some would be given as much as half a pint of rum a day! They would be paid around 14 pence each day.

Whilst marching, the infantryman carried all of his belongings in his haversack. This included a change of underwear, a tin bowel for cooking, food supplies and a large grey overcoat for cold weather normally tied on top of the haversack.

Discipline was extremely strict. Drunkenness, desertion, or refusing to obey orders could result in being flogged (whipped), or having a D branded (burnt) onto your body. This would normally happen in front of other soldiers.

The weapon of choice for a British infantryman was a musket called the ‘Brown Bess’. It had to be loaded with for every shot, so could only fire three rounds per minute. When fighting hand to hand, a bayonet would be screwed on top of the musket barrel turning the gun into a spear.

From around 1700, the British military uniform was red. Many claimed that this was so that blood could not be seen in battle, but in fact it was because red dye was least expensive. The chance to wear fine clothing would have attracted many to join the army.

From 1799, most British soldiers wore a ‘stovepipe shako’ hat. It had a brass badge and a feather ‘plume’ attached to the front showing what regiment the soldier was in.

Infantrymen could be expected to march up to 25 miles in a day, all in tough leather boots—imagine the blisters after that!
Lesson 5. Life as a British Seaman

The British Empire depended upon its army, but the Royal Navy was considerably more important. As a sea-based trading Empire, which was geographically dispersed, the British Empire needed to ‘rule the waves’ (hence the words to ‘Rule Britannia’). The backbone of this naval dominance was the British seaman, a character affectionately nicknamed ‘Jolly Jack Tar’. The life of a seaman combined the extreme hardship of scurvy, bad food, months at sea, and risk of drowning, along with good pay, adventures and a rich culture characterised by tattoos, rum and sea shanties. This lesson should try to bring that to life.

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<td>What was life like as a seaman in the Royal Navy during the British Empire?</td>
<td>Life in the Royal Navy was extremely hard, with many unpleasant details such as scurvy, poor food, harsh punishments, and a high likelihood of death. However, it was also well paid and adventurous. British men were often forced to serve in the Royal Navy by ‘impressment gangs’. The rank of ‘able seaman’ was the top achievement for sailors, and they were characterised by distinctive tattoos, clothing, and fashions.</td>
<td>To give pupils a vivid idea of life on board warship (known as a ‘Man of War’) scenes from the film Master and Commander (2003), and Hornblower (1998-2003) are excellent. Horrible Histories have some more light hearted contributions, <a href="#">here</a>, <a href="#">here</a>, and <a href="#">here</a>. There are also some good books for children, such as The Royal Navy by Robert Wilkinson-Latham, and Man-Of-War by Stephen Biesty. See also, article from the BBC <a href="#">here</a>. Having studied various images and sources about life at sea, write a piece of extended writing, perhaps as a letter or diary entry, explaining what life was like in the Royal Navy. Discuss whether pupils would or would not have been happy to have fought in the Royal Navy.</td>
<td>impressment weevils scurvy limeys cat-o’-nine-tails</td>
<td>What was life like as a seaman in the Royal Navy? Why did people join the Royal Navy? Would you have wanted to have fought for the Royal Navy?</td>
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