



‘They live by Trade’: Britain’s global trade in the Great Days of Sail

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So wrote Rudyard Kipling, in 'The Merchantmen', a poem published in his collection, *The Seven Seas* of 1896. Some of you will know that Kipling, indelibly associated with the British Raj in India, was also instrumental in establishing and naming the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. Kipling understood that Britain's history has been fundamentally shaped by its relationship with the sea. The possibilities and profits offered by maritime trade, in particular, were crucial in defining the country's development as a global power in the Age of Sail. In this lecture, I want to explore how British overseas trade went hand in hand with Britain's global empire in those eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries days of the sailing ship.

The importance of the sea and the trading possibilities it presented was not lost to those living through these centuries. Britain was a trading nation. One of the most perceptive social commentators of the time, Daniel Defoe, remarked on the role played by commerce in defining British society and her people:

I think I need not tell them that they live by TRADE: that their Commerce has rais'd them from what they were, to what they are; and may, if cultivated and improv'd, raise them yet farther to what they never were. (Daniel Defoe, *An Humble Proposal to the People of England*, 1729)

Britain's commercial success was built on complex and multifaceted foundations. Commercial maritime contacts with continental neighbours were already well established by the fifteenth century, with traders from the British Isles involved in the commerce of the North Sea, the Baltic and the Mediterranean. But merchants soon began to look further afield, using ships and the sea to fuel the development of trade. Early English voyages in the Atlantic Ocean were undertaken to expand fishing, to challenge the Spanish hold on Central and South America, and to establish colonies further north, in Virginia, New England and the Caribbean.

By the mid-seventeenth century, overseas trade was tightly controlled by the Navigation Acts, a series of laws that restricted the use of foreign shipping for trade with the colonies. Merchant enterprise was encouraged and regulated by the granting of royal charters, which awarded monopoly trading rights to groups of investors. Companies such as the Muscovy Company and the Levant Company had responsibility for conducting trade with particular regions, as well as the privilege of harvesting the resulting profits. A host of other companies, such as the Royal African Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the South Sea Company were involved in Atlantic trade. And trade with English colonies in the Atlantic Ocean was later increasingly financed, organised and operated by private merchants. Meanwhile, in 1600, Elizabeth I awarded a royal charter to the East India Company, giving it a monopoly on all English trade east of the Cape of Good Hope. And all of this commercial activity depended on ships and shipping which relied, in turn, on the protection offered by the Royal Navy. The systems of global connections and international trade created by these circumstances laid the basis for Britain's global empire and continue to affect our world today.

One of the central themes that will recur throughout this lecture is how Britain's trade was linked to Britain's empire in complex ways. It is important to note that empire means a number of things: pink-coloured maps, imperial durbars and so on, are not the only characteristics of the British Empire. Indeed, these are very much nineteenth- and twentieth-century creations and twentieth-first-century preconceptions. However, they are, of course, corollaries of what went before. But that 'maritime empire of free trade', that British people felt so distinguished their imperial ambitions and achievements, needs to be seen in its context.

In this lecture then, I want first to discuss some of the sailing ships that provided the basis for this commercial and political success. Then I want to move on to focus on some specific aspects of Britain's oceanic trade and empire: in the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. Finally, I will explore the connections between the military power of the Royal Navy and its role in protecting, sustaining and expanding British commercial concerns.

Ships, trade and commerce

It is an oft-quoted adage that 'boats built Britain'. But what were they building? According to what pattern was this British edifice constructed? What type of British state emerged as a result of the maritime activity facilitated by the boats, ships and other vessels of the great Age of Sail? These are some of the questions that I want us to think about in the course of the next fifty minutes or so. Unsurprisingly this lecture is necessarily a broad overview: covering several oceans; a couple of centuries of history, thousands of vessels; tens of thousands of voyages; and millions of people.

These are the ships that built Britain; the first painting here even here shows the building of those ships that built Britain:

- St Albans floated out at Deptford, by John Clevely the Elder, 1747 (BHC1046)

A very local connection for Greenwich; Deptford was one of the most populous English towns at the time and its wealth, success and importance was founded on shipbuilding, trade, and associated maritime services.

- A Sixth-Rate on the Stocks, by John Clevely the Elder, 1758 (BHC1045)

Of course, the Royal Navy was the single biggest builder of ships; what is in many respects a symbiotic relationship between Britain's imperial expansion and its naval power is one that we will explore over the course of the lecture.

- HMS Royal George, 100 guns, Thomas Burroughs, 1772–77, scale 1:48 (SLR0036)

The Navy Board ordered models like this to be constructed in order to convince Parliament that it was worth spending such vast sums of money on this cutting-edge technology that would make Britain strong, powerful and wealthy and defend her island fortress from continental rivals.

- Logbook of the Betsey, Nicholas Pocock, 1770 (LOG/M/21)

But this logbook represents some of the other ships that built Britain: it is the log of a merchant ship, the basis of Britain's mercantile fleet that spread around the world.

Trade was the life-blood of the English, and later the British, economy. In an age when the circulation of blood was just beginning to be understood, the metaphor was not lost on contemporaries. John Dryden thought that as blood fed the body by flowing through it, so trade freely flowing around the globe was the vital ingredient in sustaining the country. Daniel Defoe, as we have heard, thought the nascent British state, recently united following the 1707 Act of Union, was one that survived by trade alone. And the rhetoric of Britain as a maritime trading nation, and her empire as an empire of free trade (as opposed to the tyrannical empires of settlement developed by the Spanish and Portuguese in the Americas) was one that would recur. According to William Fleetwood, in 1711: 'We are a people who live and maintain ourselves by Trade, and if Trade be lost, or overmuch discouraged, we are a ruined Nation.'

Merchant ships, then, are as important as the Royal Navy and its operations in understanding Britain's development as an imperial power. I want to concentrate not on the sailing ships themselves but on the consequences of their existence; the reasons they were built and the uses to which they were put. Lots of boats built the British 'Empire of Trade' in the eighteenth century – generally understood as the century of the great Age of Sail but a very elastic century as we will see:

- An East Indiaman in the time of King William III, Isaac Sailmaker, c. 1690 (BHC1676)

This ship portrait is a conventional maritime view, showing two perspectives of the same ship; the ship flies the East India Company jack; more about the East India Company shortly. This is one of the largest East Indiamen of its day, displacing some 800 to 900 tons, and making voyages to Asia for spices, textiles and tea.

Ships made London a great emporium of world trade.

- East India Company's yard at Deptford, c. 1660 (BHC1873)

In addition to the navy then, private merchant shipping was vital to places like Deptford; here the East India Company was one of many companies that owned yards and employed thousands of workers.

And Britain's eighteenth-century economic success was based on a set of unique domestic advantages, which supported an ever-increasing share of the world's maritime trade. New markets were exploited and Britain's volume and share of world trade continued to grow in the nineteenth century. Financial services and shipping were particularly important as average exports for the period rose from £21.7 million per annum in 1794–96 to £44 million per annum in 1814–16. By 1830, Britain's share of world trade was 45 per cent and London was the world's pre-eminent capital market. All of this commercial success relied on highly developed ship-building and repairing operations, which provided the transportation for a global fleet. For example, the Brunswick Dock was built by John Perry adjacent to his shipyard at Blackwall. When it opened in late 1790, it had two basins of above eight acres in all, one (the nearer in this picture) capable of holding thirty large East Indiamen. In 1806, the dock was bought by the East India Dock Company, and became the East India Export Dock. By 1808, the company had constructed an Import Dock where cows are shown grazing here, to the left of the road. The development of the Blackwall shipyard also reflects the vital importance of maritime trade to Britain throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1820s, managing interest in the shipyard transferred to Perry's son-in-law, George Green, whose son Richard made it famous as the home of 'Blackwall frigates', the last development of large Indiamen, and of Green's Blackwall line which traded to both India and Australia:

- The Mast House and Brunswick Dock at Blackwall, William Daniell, c. 1803 (BHC1867)
- The East Indiaman Warley, Robert Salmon, 1804 (BHC3707)

And these ships were not necessary static and unchanging instruments of maritime activity: ships changed considerably during our time period, developing and evolving with advances in technology into even more efficient and effective machines of the early modern economy. They became bigger, faster, more efficient, more durable and more reliable:

- East Indiamen in the China Seas, William John Huggins, 1820 (BHC1157)

The ships that you can see here are 1200-ton behemoths, carrying the huge quantities of tea that was increasingly demanded back in Britain; it was selling for £10 per pound (lb) in 1800.

And the mercantile success of Britain could not have been achieved by relying on London alone. Britain grew into a worldwide empire, with every part of the country flexing its commercial sinews. This painting shows a merchant ship plying the transatlantic route from Liverpool, a city that grew wealthy on the basis of individual, private merchant trading to West Africa and the British colonies of North America and the Caribbean:

- A packet off Liverpool, Robert Salmon, 1809 (BHC1862)

And even Captain Cook, the patron navigator of Enlightenment science so to speak, plays a part in our story. His three voyages to the South Pacific (and beyond) were ostensibly scientific missions but they were also predicated on a desire to expand trade and trading opportunities:

- HMS Resolution and HMS Adventure with fishing craft in Matavai Bay, William Hodges, c. 1775–76 (BHC1932)

And this theme is picked up in such a celebrated (or notorious) episode as the mutiny on the Bounty. Famously commanded by William Bligh, it was detailed to transport breadfruit from the South Pacific to the Caribbean. This was part of a late-eighteenth-century drive to apply the discoveries of science to problems of agriculture and horticulture. The breadfruits were intended to feed the slaves that produced the sugar, cotton, and tobacco on which much imperial wealth was based.

Trade and trading companies: the Atlantic Ocean

We will now focus on some specific examples of trade and trading companies in the Atlantic Ocean. Initially, the focus of European colonial expansion there was in the south, as the Portuguese and Spanish founded and settled colonies. North America had none of the gold or other raw materials available in South America. But, although she was late to begin colonisation in the Americas, Britain would find itself in control of large swathes of North America after the successes of the Seven Years War.

Before that, however, the South Sea Company was established in 1711, with a monopoly on British trade to Spain's colonies in southern America. At this time, the term 'South Seas' referred to the waters surrounding South America. It was the brainchild of Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, who saw an opportunity to harness public interest in overseas maritime trade, and turn it to the advantage of the state. The company was essentially a way of managing the National Debt that had resulted from the long wars with Spain and France. In return for a monopoly on British trade with South America, the company assumed the debts incurred during the war. Although it was only allowed to send one ship to South America every year, the company was also granted the Asiento – a monopoly on the transatlantic slave trade to Spain's colonies. But the South Sea Company never flourished, as war repeatedly flared up between Britain and Spain in the early eighteenth century.

The company is probably better known today for 'South Sea Bubble' of 1720, when speculation in its stock precipitated an economic crisis and ruined many investors. Looking back in 1855, the Illustrated London News remarked that the crisis was caused by 'the extravagant expectations that were formed of enormous profits to be gained by the Company's trade in South America'. The company's coat of arms includes a globe, with South America prominently represented here. Above this are the arms of Great Britain and two herrings, a reference to the anticipated benefits to the fishing industry. The two figures flanking the coat of arms are Britannia on the right, with a shield and lance, and a fisherman on the left, complete with a fishing net. The motto, 'A Gadibus usque Auroram', is a quote from the tenth Satire of the Latin poet Juvenal. It refers to the countries of the western hemisphere: the South Sea Company's trading territory. But the poem's alternative name, 'The vanity of human wishes', might be a more appropriate motto for those caught up in the South Sea Bubble.

Meanwhile, Britain's interests in North America were expanding. Increasing numbers of ships sailed the transatlantic route to North America, where a network of colonies was established following the permanent settlement of Virginia in 1607. A list of ports on this map gives a sense of British interests in North America; it also reinforces the point that British interests were essentially maritime in this period:

- Slide of map

By the mid-1770s, on the eve of the War of American Independence, there were twenty-six British colonies in America. Even after the loss of thirteen of those colonies, Britain continued to have a major role to play in the Americas and there was no immediate threat to her position following the independence of the United States.

This medal sums up what Britain's Atlantic trade was all about: 'Ships, Colonies, Commerce':

- Medal

Although not organised along the monopolistic lines of the East India Company, there are some examples of chartered companies extracting monopoly rights in specific places and for specific commodities in the Atlantic world. For example, the Hudson's Bay Company was involved in fur-trapping and fishing around what became Canada. But their margins were low and they traded in lower-value goods:

- Three ships of the Hudson Bay Company off Greenwich, John Hood, 1769 (PAI6954)

- Hudson Bay Trading Company token, c. 1865 (MEC2758)

The consequences of this trade and expansion were manifold. One of the most obvious was the encounters that European merchants had with indigenous people and the cultural exchanges that these interactions inspired:

- Shot pouch, c. 1820s (AAA2644)

Further south, the Caribbean was the engine that drove the British Atlantic economy. There was significant money to be made here, much of it founded on the slave trade and the slave-holding plantation economies of the islands which this trade supported. Although England had established colonies in the Caribbean in the early seventeenth century, the English position was significantly strengthened by the taking of Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655. At a stroke, the amount of cultivable land available to English settlers increased six-fold. This commercial success was based on plantation economies, which relied on the unpaid labour of millions of enslaved Africans to produce sugar, tobacco and other crops for consumers in Europe. The transatlantic slave trade, in which Britain was a major participant, supplied American and Caribbean colonies with millions of Africans. Their bondage was paid for in Africa with British-made goods like firearms, metalwares and alcohol. This trade was only finally abolished in 1807, when an Act of Parliament

made it illegal for British subjects to trade in slaves. The institution of slavery was outlawed throughout the British Empire in 1833–34.

- A View of Port Royal, Jamaica, Richard Paton, 1758 (BHC1861)
- Pistol presented to Captain Peter Reed by the Assembly of St Kitt's, 1756 (AAA2417)

And as this trade grew, it needed to be protected. An indication of the success and value of trade is often given by the rewards people receive for defending it: this pistol was given to Captain Reed for seizing a French privateer off the coast of St Kitt's.

Perhaps the most profitable commodity cultivated in the Americas was sugar, or white gold. The cultivation of sugar – as well as cotton, indigo, coffee, tobacco – was built on the slave trade. And this nefarious trade was absolutely dependent on the shipping industry. It was a process that began well away from ships and the sea, often in the interior of West Africa, where people were captured, rounded up and marched hundreds of miles to the coast, as recorded in the journal of Samuel Gamble, the captain of a British slave ship in 1793:

- Log of the Sandown, Samuel Gamble, 1793 (LOG/M/21)
- Slave Traffic, S. Hutchinson, 1793 (PAG9696)

The cultivation of sugar may have been a resolutely land-based activity but ships were again vital to the success of the trade: they took huge quantities of the stuff back to Europe, where it would be refined, baked and sold across the continent. British consumption of sugar increased ten-fold over the course of the eighteenth century.

- Planting the Sugar Cane, after William Clark, 1823 (ZBA2505)
- Shipping Sugar, after William Clark, 1823 (PAH3019)

Sugar was grown by enslaved Africans on Caribbean and American plantations. It was then shipped to Europe, where it was refined and sold. Between 1750 and 1820, sugar was Britain's largest single import.

While ships were crucial in sustaining the slave trade, they also played a part in abolishing that trade. This image of the famous (or, perhaps more correctly, infamous) slave ship, the *Brooks*, offers evidence of how maritime affairs were very much at the centre of people's consciousness. It gives a sense of the cultural cache of ships: everyone recognised them:

- The Slave Ship *Brooks* (ZBA2745)

And of course, the Atlantic trade was never hermetically sealed; it was always connected with other oceanic systems, as the evidence an English cup of tea or even the decoration of this bowl suggests:

- Bowl, 1795 (AAA4440)

Trade and trading companies: the Indian Ocean

The British experience of doing business in Asia in the great days of sail was much more regulated. The availability of spices and other luxury commodities led to the foundation of the East India Company, an institution that one present-day historian has described as the 'corporation that changed the world'. But it is important to emphasise that when it comes to trade with Asia, England got there late (and Scotland was not even in the race). Instead, it was the Portuguese and the Dutch who led the way eastwards. The Dutch, with their *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, or VOC, represent the archetype of the trading nation rising to become an imperial power in Asia:

- The Return to Amsterdam of the Second Expedition to the East Indies on 19 July 1599, Andries van Eertvelt, c. 1610 (BHC0748)

Their profits eventually convinced a group of London merchants to seek a royal charter to set up their own trading company, which would tap into some of this wealth. The idea of seeking royal approval to trade with the East was not new. Henry VIII had received a petition in 1511, which emphasized the need to keep up with commercial and political rivals:

The Indies are discovered and vast treasure brought from thence every day. Let us therefore bend our endeavours thitherwards; and if the Spaniards and the Portuguese suffer us not to join with them, there will be yet region enough for all to enjoy.[1]

Harbouring similar dreams of unlimited riches, a group of men trading in the City of London approached Elizabeth I. On 31 December 1600, the Queen granted a royal charter to the 'Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading with the East Indies' to deal with Asia. By the terms of the charter, the 'Company', as it became known, was given a monopoly on all English trade east of the Cape of Good Hope. 218 subscribers to the new enterprise raised £68,373 – a massive amount at a time when a skilled carpenter was earning about seven pence a day. Over the next two hundred years, these men and their successors altered the course of British history, had a massive impact on the people of Asia with which they came into contact.

Rarely does a business enterprise, for that is what the East India Company was after all, change the world in such profound ways. And all of this trading was conducted by sea. Between 1600 and 1833, ships sailing under Company colours made about 4600 voyages from London to Asia. It was England's, and later Britain's, single biggest commercial venture. According to Captain Robert Eastwick, a Company commander, 'no finer fleet sailed the seas than that which was directed from Leadenhall Street', the Company's headquarters in the City of London.[2] Initially a relatively small player in the Asian trading world, with its complex, long-established and highly developed commercial networks, the Company eventually came to dominate the Indian Ocean region. By the eighteenth century, Indian provinces populated by millions of people came under British rule by virtue of Company expansion. At its height, the Company ruled a fifth of humanity, generated revenues in excess of the domestic British economy at the time, and commanded a quarter of a million troops in its private armies. Less than three years after its demise, the legacy of the East India Company was assessed by the *Illustrated London News*. The popular newspaper concluded that the Company was 'the most celebrated commercial association of ancient or modern times'. Over the course of two and a half centuries, it had 'extended its sway over the whole Mogul empire'.[3] The history of the East India Company is one of wealth, power and the pursuit of fortune. But, it is also one profoundly linked to the maritime world of which it formed such a crucial part.

· Sir James Lancaster, c. 1596 (BHC2828)

The Company's first voyage was commanded by James Lancaster (1554/5–1618) He was one of the few Englishmen with previous experience of doing business in the East. In 1588, Lancaster was involved in repelling the Spanish Armada, which he followed by spending time trading in Asia. Following the establishment of the East India Company, Lancaster became a director of the newly founded enterprise. When it came to launching the venture with a trading expedition, he was the obvious choice to command the small fleet of four ships that left Woolwich on 13 February 1601. The *Hector*, the *Susan*, the *Ascension*, and the *Red Dragon*, in which Lancaster himself sailed, carried a total of 500 men. The ships were armed with over 100 cannon to protect them from preying pirates, potentially hostile local Asian traders, and their traditional European foes. The small convoy was immediately delayed by contrary winds, so that 'it was Easter-day before they arrived at Dartmouth, where they spent five or six days in taking their bread and certain other provisions appointed for them'. Eventually Lancaster's fleet made its way into the Atlantic Ocean, passing Gran Canaria. They were further becalmed in the doldrums and did not reach Table Bay, at the southern tip of Africa, until 9 September, by which time they had lost 105 men from scurvy. Lancaster's ship, however, managed to avoid too many losses due to his previous experience of long sea voyages. He had 'certain bottles of the juice of limons [sic], which he gave to each [sailor] as long as it would last, three spoonfuls every morning fasting, not suffering them to eat anything after it till noon'[4] They called at Madagascar and spent nearly three weeks in the Nicobar Islands, before eventually reaching Aceh, in Sumatra, after many months at sea. Here, the sultan permitted them to trade without paying custom dues. But, unsurprisingly, he had no use for the woollen vests and Devon trousers brought by the English and preferred them to pay for their spices in silver.[5] Pepper was available in neighbouring Java, and it was here that Lancaster set up a trading post at Bantam in 1602. On their way home, the *Red Dragon* was so badly damaged in a storm that the crew wanted to abandon her, which Lancaster refused to do. He ordered the *Hector* to leave him and make for home, but his order was disobeyed. These two remaining ships eventually anchored safely in the Downs, their holds full of pepper, cloves and nutmeg. Lancaster's voyage had succeeded. He overcame difficult sailing conditions, steered clear of jealous European rivals, avoided medical disaster and mutiny among his crew, negotiated with local merchants in Asia, and dealt diplomatically with local rulers and customs. This was a pattern that would be repeated as long as the East India Company traded by sea.

- Captain Robert Knox of the East India Company, P. Trampon, 1711 (BHC2825)

In this portrait, the pistols, quadrant and miniature anchor hanging on the wall behind the sitter, refer to Knox's adventures in Asia. His left hand rests on a sheet of paper, bearing the title 'Memoires of my owne life 1708' – an allusion to Knox's best-selling account of his time in Ceylon.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the East India Company became even more powerful, attracting more people to come from Britain to seek their fortunes in Asia: principally to India, as they became cloth merchant to the world and ended up administering an empire, but also to China, the source of all the tea drunk in Europe:

- The Money Brothers, Jean François Rigaud, c. 1788–92 (BHC2866)

Involvement in the lucrative market for tea meant working within the strict limits imposed on foreign trade by the Chinese Emperor:

- European Factories at Canton, William Daniell, late 18th century (ZBA1291)
- Whampoa in China, after William John Huggins, 1835 (PAI0239)

Tea, which became the quintessentially British drink, had a huge cultural impact back in Europe:

- Chinese export porcelain belonging to Captain James Cook (AAA6192–5)
- Vase presented to Lady Hamilton by the Queen of Naples c. 1800 (AAA4723)

In an attempt to open up markets even more, British manufacturers tried to sell the latest European scientific instruments to the Chinese, a strategy that was not necessarily always successful or welcome:

- Astronomical Chronometer, George Margetts, c. 1783 (ZBA1219)
- Presentation telescope, Fraser & Son, c. 1792 (NAV1597)
- K'o-ssu tapestry (TXT0107)

The constant British pressure to open up greater access to markets, combined with the opium being shipped from India in increasing quantities to pay for Chinese tea, ultimately led to war between the two empires in the mid-nineteenth century.

Battles for trade and empire

And this example leads us neatly into the next theme which I want to touch on today: the role played by war and conflict in defending trade and securing empire. This image of the execution of Admiral Byng, and the episode it represents, gives an indication of crucial role played by the navy and other military forces in expanding and defending Britain's empire of free trade in the great days of sail:

- The Execution of Admiral Byng, 14 March 1757, British School, c. 1760 (BHC0380)

The Seven Years War was the first worldwide war. It was the first occasion when the two global superpowers of the day went head to head in a battle to secure military and mercantile supremacy. Military and naval victories irrevocably changed the history of Britain, laying the foundations of a truly global empire as well as sowing the seeds of future conflicts. In terms of raw numbers, the odds favoured the French with the population of France numbering some twenty-five million, while that of Britain was a mere seven million.

But by 1760, the Royal Navy had over three hundred ships and some 85,000 men at its disposal. Ultimately the British victory can be attributed to the bold strategy put in place by the prime minister during the early years of war, William Pitt the Elder. He concluded that, by making North America and the Caribbean the crucial crucibles of war, Britain could strangle France's food and financial supply chains. More than anyone else, he understood the global nature of the war and the possibilities that it offered. And the aggressive offensive strategy he pursued after the entry of the Spanish in 1760 was one that ensured British dominance in the Caribbean for the next century.

It was the year 1759 that really changed the course of the war. It was a year when, as Horace Walpole remarked, the bells of victory were constantly ringing out across the land. Things had not gone quite so

well before that (although Plassey has been won by Lord Clive in India), e.g. loss of Minorca and execution of Admiral John Byng on 14 March 1757). But in January came the capture of Goree and the slave factory on River Senegal:

- Attack on Gorée, Dominic Serres (BHC0386)

In May, in the West Indies, Guadeloupe was captured:

- Medal commemorating the capture of Guadeloupe, 1759 (MEC1304)

And the victories seemed to go on unabated:

- 'The Defeat of a French Squadron, Commanded by Monsieur de la Clue, off Cape Lagos'

After Francis Swaine (PAD5260)

- Admiral Edward Boscawen, Sir Joshua Reynolds (BHC2565)
- The battle of Quiberon Bay, 20 November 1759, Nicholas Pocock, 1812 (BHC0399)
- Admiral Edward Hawke, Francis Cotes (BHC2754)
- The Battle of Quiberon Bay, 21 November 1759: The day after, Richard Wright (BHC0402)
- The Death of General Wolfe, William Woollett after Benjamin West, 1776 (PAH7700)

In 1959, two hundred years after the battle, Christopher Hibbert described the capture of Quebec as the most 'fateful, dramatic and important event in the history of the eighteenth century'.^[6] In the same year, Stacey said that the 'fall of Quebec was the towering landmark in the establishment of British imperial power'.^[7]

In addressing the king, the aldermen of the City of London adumbrated the triumphs of this Annus Mirabilis which would, they said, be remembered as 'the favourite era in the history of Great Britain'.^[8]

The global nature of the war can be seen by this bowl's decoration:

- Bowl made by John Wall, 1760:

The interior shows warships outside the harbour at Senegal, West Africa, while the exterior is finely printed with scenes of naval actions at Cape Breton, Canada, and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean

And there was success against the Spanish too:

- The Capture of Havana: The Storming of Morro Castle, Dominic Serres, c. 1775 (BHC0413)
- The Capture of Havana: The Battery, Dominic Serres, c. 1775 (BHC0410)

Britain and her allies won the war, destroying the Spanish Empire in the Caribbean and setting the French on road to revolution. Francis Parkman, the great nineteenth-century historian of the conflict described its results thus:

The Seven Years' War made England what she is. It crippled the commerce of her rival, ruined France in two continents, and blighted her as a colonial power. It gave England control of the seas and the mastery of North America and India, made her the first of commercial nations, and prepared that vast colonial system that planted new Englands in every quarter of the globe.^[9]

Eighteenth-century warfare was, as Parkman pointed out, about primacy among commercial nations. For the rest of the century, through the various wars with France, defence of trade was of paramount concern. Even during the War of American Independence, the protection of Britain's commercial power weighed more strongly with British politicians than bringing troublesome colonists to heel. They were much keener on preventing the French from acquiring Jamaica:

- Dioramic Model of the Battle of the Saints, c. 1782 (MLD0011)

And a similar pattern can even be identified in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars at the end of the century. Even in this great struggle for national survival, the role of Britain's overseas empire and its protection from the predations of the French plays an important part:

- The Battle of the Glorious First of June, 1794, Philippe-Jacques de Louthembourg, 1795 (BHC0470)

- Flag of Lord Howe's ship, HMS Royal Charlotte, 1794 (AAA0730)
- Guillotine blade, c. 1790s (TOA0079)
- Duckworth's Action off San Domingo, 6 February 1806, Nicholas Pocock, 1808 (BHC0571)
- Sword presented to Admiral Sir John T. Duckworth, Richard Teed, c. 1804–6 (WPN1120)
- Tea kettle presented to Vice-Admiral Sir J. T. Duckworth (PLT0040)

And just in case this is becoming too Atlantic-centric, a similar picture emerges from the British engagement with Asia: the interweaving of trading and imperial concerns and the need to defend trading routes and commercial establishments from European rivals. It goes back to the seventeenth century, where the enemy is invariably the Dutch:

- The manner of our unfortunate being take by the Dutch in the Straights of Banka in the latitude 2 & 3 degrees, Edward Barlow, 17th century (JOD/4/226)

And it continues through the Seven Years War right up to the early nineteenth century:

- Commodore Sir William James, Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1784 (BHC2801)
- Cup presented to John Allen, 1761 (PLT0003)
- Battle of Negapatam, 6 July 1782, Dominic Serres, 1786 (BHC0448)
- The Battle of the Nile: Destruction of L'Orient, 1 August 1798, Mather Brown, 1825 (BHC0510)
- 'Extirpation of the Plagues of Egypt...', after James Gillray, 6 October 1798 (PAF3893)
- 'The China Fleet heavily laden Commanded by Commodore Sir Nathaniel Dance beating off Adml Linois and his Squadron the 15th of Feby 1804' (PAG9019)
- Sir Nathaniel Dance (PAH5517)
- Presentation sword by Richard Teed, 1804 (ZBA1470)
- Lloyd's Patriotic Fund Vase presented to Captain John Timins, 1806 (PLT0180)
- Captain Robert Maunsell capturing French gunboats off Java, July 1811, William John Huggins, c.1812 (BHC4218)

And it was not only the French who presented problems to the maintenance and expansion of British interests in Asia. In India, local rulers and domestic empire-builders, such as Tipu Sultan, were also problematic. Tipu actively sought to enroll French help in his tussle with the East India Company in southern India:

- Plan of the attack of Lord Cornwallis on Seringapatam, 1792 (GREN71/7)
- Ship carving from HMS Seringapatam, 1819 (FHD0102)

Exploration, Enlightenment and Empire

Finally, empire and trade went hand in hand with the expansion of enlightenment science. The great voyages of exploration undertaken throughout the great Age of Sail were not necessarily done solely for the sake of finding new lands:

- Drake coconut cup, c. 1580 (ZBA1345)
- HMS Centurion, 60 guns, Benjamin Slade, 1747, scale 1:48 (SLR0442)
- Log of HMS Gloucester, Lieutenant Patrick Baird, 1742 (ADM/L/G/53)
- Captain James Cook, Nathaniel Dance, 1775–76 (BHC2628)
- A View of the monuments on Easter Island (Rapanui), William Hodges, c. 1776 (BHC1795)
- Marine Timekeeper ('H4'), John Harrison, 1759 (ZAA0037)

Even a scientific instrument, apparently disinterested and objective, was an empirical investigation and was ultimately bound up with the expansion of trade and empire.

Conclusion

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a maritime technological revolution had given Britain a powerful economic advantage over its commercial rivals. The development and refinement of iron shipbuilding and steam propulsion for ships were key advances. Steamships replaced sailing vessels during the century and provided regular and increasingly rapid communication with every corner of the globe. In this, they were aided by developments in land-based technology. Europe and Asia were brought 3000 miles closer with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The canal was crucial for trade: by 1900, India consumed almost one fifth of British exports, and the canal also connected Europe with other areas of vital commercial and political interest to Britain:

· Model of the Nonsuch, 1:64 scale, c. 1906 (SLR0083)

Between 1890 and 1914, Britain's merchant shipping carried up to 60 per cent of the world's trade, and built two-thirds of its ships. While twentieth-century events ended that supremacy, the sea remains vital to Britain's economy: ships still carry over 90 per cent of the country's trade – in food, raw materials and manufactured goods.

Patterns of British overseas trade, first created by individual merchants and monopoly trading companies, endured and developed in later centuries through imperial ties and technological innovations. Trade brought wealth. But commercial dominance also created powerful forces whose consequences influenced many other areas of British life. The insatiable demand for resources and markets encouraged greater exploration of the world's oceans. Commercial and business links facilitated transoceanic migration from the British Isles on a vast scale. And, the defence of trading stations and shipping routes lay at the root of many of the conflicts in which Britain was involved over the centuries. Merchant shipping relied on naval protection: defending trade was one of the most important roles performed by the Royal Navy.

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[1]Quoted in Denis Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger: The rise and fall of the British Raj, 1600–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

[2]Quoted in Jean Sutton, *Lords of the East: The East India Company and its Ships, 1600–1874* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 2000), 40.

[3]'The East India House', *Illustrated London News*, 3 August 1861, 125.

[4]Clements R. Markham (ed.), *The Voyages of Sir James Lancaster, Kt., to the East Indies, with abstracts of journals of voyages to the East Indies, during the seventeenth century preserved in the India Office* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1877), 59, 62.

[5]Denis Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger: The rise and fall of the British Raj, 1600–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 7.

[6]Christopher Hibbert, *Wolfe at Quebec* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1959), p. xi.

[7]C. P. Stacey, *Quebec, 1759: The Siege and the Battle* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1959), p. vii.

[8]Quoted in Brumwell, *Paths of Glory*, p. 296.

[9]Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe: The French and Indian War [1884]* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), preface.