

empire and us

THE BRITISH EMPIRE & COMMONWEALTH MUSEUM

Background

The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum is an independent museum. It is the first major institution in the UK to address the 500-year history of Britain's colonial past and to examine its relevance to today's multiracial society.

Housed in I.K. Brunel's old Station at Temple Meads, Bristol, the World's first purpose-built passenger railway terminus, the first phase of the Museum was opened by the Museum's Patron, HRH the Princess Royal, on 25 October 2002. This marked the culmination of a seven-year project during which the Museum Trust raised over £7 million to restore the Grade 1 listed building and create the first permanent galleries.

The Museum is based in Bristol, not only because of Brunel's splendid building, but also because of the city's historic connection with empire through voyages of exploration, trade (including in slaves), piracy, shipbuilding and the railways. Bristol today is a culturally diverse community, symbolically reflective of Britain's colonial past. Since opening, the role of the Museum has been widely praised for its contribution to the understanding of modern Britain through its exploration of the complex legacy of the British Empire. The Museum is a registered charity.

Purpose

Museum Mission Statement:

The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum provides a national forum for preserving, exploring and studying Britain's cultural heritage associated with the former Empire and today's Commonwealth, to promote an understanding of its integral role in Britain's cultural, historical and social heritage.

Achievements

In its first five years of operation the Museum has:

- Become one of only two institutions in the UK to be short-listed three years running in the 2005 Museums and Heritage Awards for Excellence
- Reached the final round of the 2004 European Museum of the Year award
- Won a Good Britain Guide award in 2004
- Won a 2004 Sandford Award for Heritage Education

Special Exhibition 2007 **'Breaking the Chains – the fight to end slavery'**

'Breaking the Chains', a ground-breaking exhibition about Britain and the slave trade, was opened by Her Royal Highness, the Princess Royal in April 2007. Coinciding with the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade the £1 million Heritage Lottery-funded exhibition is the centrepiece of the former major slave-trading port's commemoration programme. 'Breaking the Chains' occupies an entire floor of the city's British Empire & Commonwealth Museum and has been developed in partnership with Bristol City Council's Museums, Galleries and Archives' service. The exhibition will run for two years. Entry is included with normal Museum admission.

Permanent Galleries

The story of the empire and Commonwealth is broken down into separate galleries, which explore a number of themes. The journey begins in 1497, when John Cabot set sail from Bristol to land in Newfoundland. This voyage marks the beginning of a five hundred-year history, spanning Cabot to the return of Hong Kong to the Chinese mainland in 1997.

The Museum examines the early British initiatives in exploration, trade, and conquest, beginning with the opening of the sea route to the Americas and continuing up to Britain's loss of her first empire in the American War of Independence.

The second section covers the century or so before World War I, the period in which the British empire expanded most rapidly. This section covers the establishment of British rule over large areas of India, south-east Asia, and Africa, the peopling of the white colonies and their transformation into self-governing dominions, and the industrial triumph of Britain as an exporter of manufactured goods to her colonies and, in return, an importer of their primary produce.

The third and final section surveys the period from World War I to the present day, tracing the decline of the empire and the birth of the Commonwealth. It concludes with a presentation on contemporary multiracial Britain.

A list of the galleries:

Trading Fortunes: the rise and fall of Britain's first empire c. 1500-1790

- Exploration & Discovery
- A Luxurious Trade
- Planters and Labourers in America
- Islands of empire: Australia & the Pacific

Encircling the Globe: the British empire at its height 1790-1914

- Colonial Conflict & Control
- Pax Britannica?
- Shrinking the Globe: A Transport & Communication Revolution
- White Dominions
- The Humanitarian Impulse
- The Empire at Home (Propaganda & Empire)

From Colonialism to Commonwealth: decolonization and beyond 1914-2002

- Keeping up Appearances
- Forest, Plain & Jungle
- Rich Nation, Poor Nation: Industrial Development & the Colonies
- The Empire Embattled: The Enemy Without & Within
- The Commonwealth Ideal
- The Commonwealth Comes to Britain

Images of Empire – Museum Collections

The Museum has collected material relating to the British Empire and Commonwealth since 1992. In addition to this the trust has assumed responsibility for collections made in the name of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the British Mercantile Marine Memorial Collection. The Museum's collections now total well over 75,000 items ranging from uniforms and other costume to domestic items and ethnographic material.

Important collections include a unique archive of over one thousand recordings covering a wide range of views, anecdotes and experiences from people who lived and worked in the British Empire and the Commonwealth. Recorded are Administrators, Ayas, Foresters, Freedom Fighters, Colonial Wives, and Commonwealth Soldiers.

www.imagesofempire.com is an online library of photographs, still and moving images relating to the history of the British Empire which is maintained by the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum. It covers all aspects of the political, economic and home life of the colonizers and colonised offering a fascinating insight into British imperial history. It includes ordnance survey aerial maps of colonies; photographs of political figures; cultural events and everyday life. Key themes include: wars and conflicts; trade and industry; domestic life; royalty; landscapes and scenery and dress and fashion. It is possible to browse or search the database. Images may be viewed online. Information on technical issues; copyright and reproduction fees is provided.

As well as presenting the museums archives for the first time, Images of Empire also offers collections from The Royal Geographical Society and Anti-Slavery International.

Key Museum Contacts

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