**1. Why should we study the British empire?**

The British empire was one of the most important developments in world history. The empire was huge, it lasted a long time and it brought tremendous changes to many parts of the world. For millions of people the world today is the way it is because of the impact of the British empire.

**2. How big was the empire?**

At its height the British empire was the largest in world history. It covered around 25% of the world's land surface. Large areas of North America, Australia, Africa and Asia were all part of the British empire at one time or other. Other areas, especially in South America, were closely linked to the British empire by trade.

**3. How long did it last?**

There is a lot of disagreement about when the empire began. Some historians say it was as early as the 12th century, when the Normans moved into Ireland. Others say the start date should be the 1490s, while other historians date the empire from the early 1600s. The end of the empire came in the years after World War 2, with most of Britain's colonies ruling themselves independently by the late 1960s.

**4. How did a small country like Britain rule so much territory?**

Historians are still arguing about this question! There is no doubt that Britain was powerful. It used its wealth, its armies and its navy to defeat rival European countries and to conquer local peoples to establish its empire. However, the empire did not just rely on force. In most of the empire Britain relied heavily on local people to make it work. The empire was a very sophisticated network of nations and peoples, linked by trade, by political systems and sometimes held together by force.

**5. Was the British empire a force for good or not?**

This question cannot be answered with a yes or a no! The British empire brought many changes to many people and many countries. Some of these changes involved innovations in medical care, education and railways. The British empire fought to abolish slavery in the 1800s, but it profited from slavery in the 1700s. For many peoples the British empire meant loss of lands, discrimination and prejudice. There will never be an answer to this question that everyone will agree on.

**6. Why did the British empire decline?**

There is no simple answer to this question. The empire changed throughout its history. In the 19th century, some parts of the empire became Dominions. These were states that were still part of the empire, but ruled themselves. In most cases this happened peacefully, although there was serious violence in Ireland.

**7. What has the British empire left behind?**

The British empire has had a huge impact on the world. The majority of former colonies still keep their ties with Britain through the Commonwealth. Today, North America and Australia are very similar to Europe in a lot of ways. Many countries around the world now have multi-cultural populations. Parliamentary democracy, the English language and the Christian religion can be found in many countries. These are just a few of the ways in which the British empire has had a lasting effect on world history.

The First and Second World Wars left Britain weakened and less interested in its empire. Also many parts of the empire contributed troops and resources to the war effort and took an increasingly independent view. This led to a steady decline of the empire after 1945. In the Asian and African colonies, nationalist movements used a range of methods to end British rule. By the late 1960s, most of Britain's territories had become independent countries.