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STOLEN HISTORY

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STOLEN HISTORY

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE BRITISH EMPIRE AND HOW IT SHAPED US



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First published by Puffin Books 2023
001

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Text design by Janene Spencer

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–62343–5

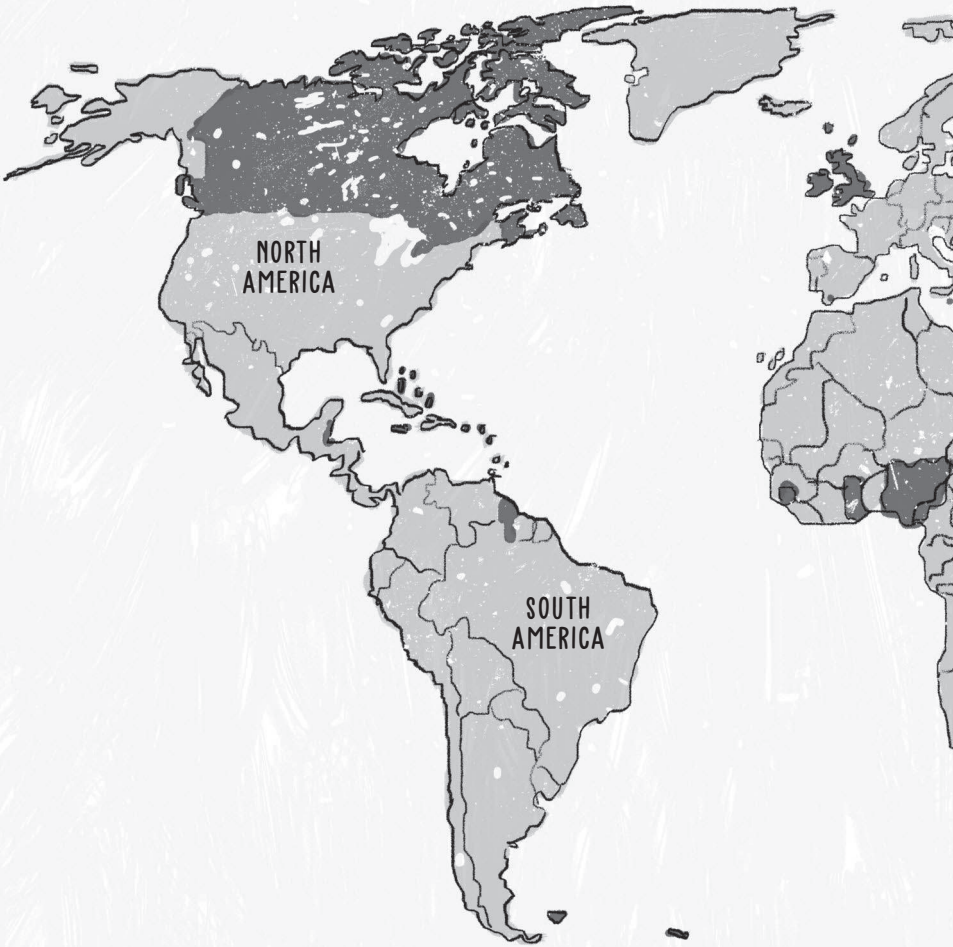
All correspondence to:
Puffin Books, Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



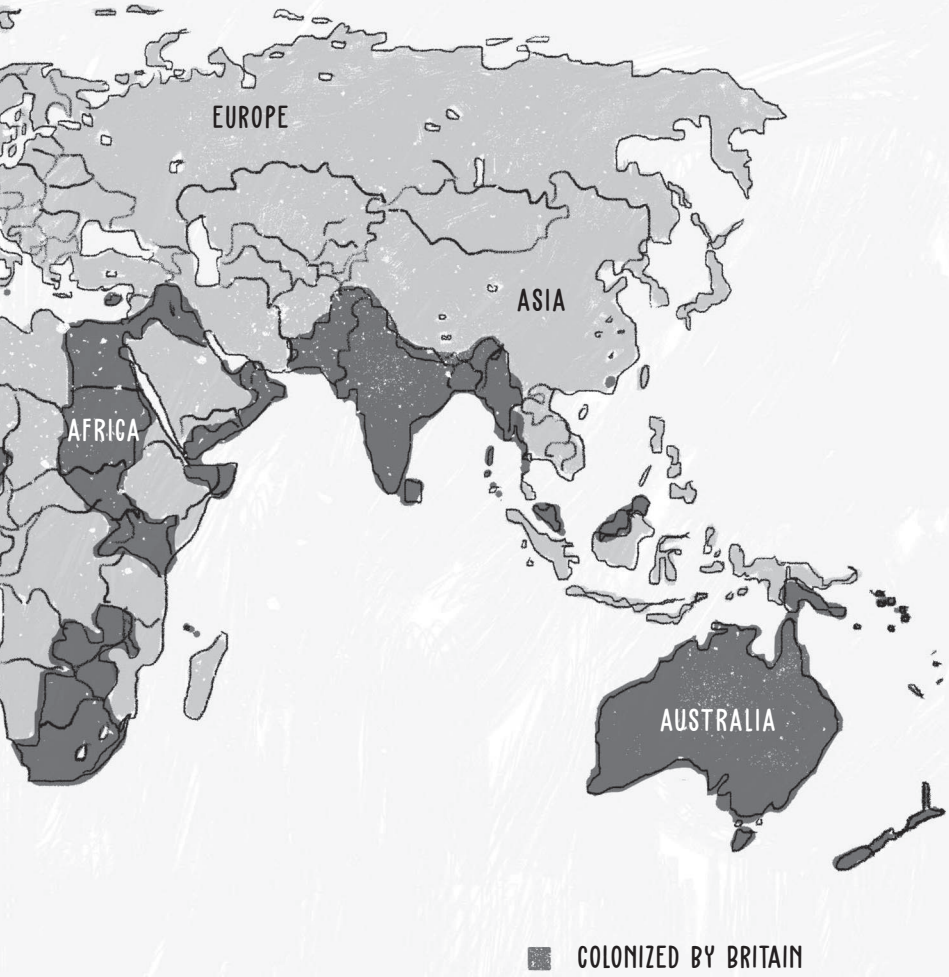
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My thanks to Lottie Moggach,
Kit Moggach, Phoebe Jascourt,
Corinne Fowler, Shalina Patel,
Anita Anand, Kate Teltscher
and Alan Lester.

A MAP OF THE WORLD IN 1919



Source: Adam Taylor, *Washington Post*. 'Map: The Rise and Fall of the British Empire', 8 September 2015. Accessed January 2023.


EUROPE
ASIA
AFRICA
AUSTRALIA
COLONIZED BY BRITAIN

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **1**

CHAPTER 1
What on earth was the British Empire? **9**

CHAPTER 2
If it was such a big part of history, why don't we know more about it? **31**

CHAPTER 3
Is all the stuff in our museums nicked? **57**

CHAPTER 4
How did the British Empire shape our towns, cities and countryside? **81**

CHAPTER 5
Why are British families from so many different places? **133**

CHAPTER 6
But I wasn't even there! **153**

CHAPTER 7
What can I do? **177**

INTRODUCTION

History bored me to tears at school. I couldn't see how spending a whole term learning about the Stone Age was going to help me live my life. It must have been grim to be those strange hairy people in those strange and hairy times, but I didn't why we needed to know about them. I mean, we had chainsaws instead of stone tools, we lived in houses rather than caves, and we had fantastically cheap razors available in most supermarkets. Nor did I see how the Hundred Years War had any relevance to us. Beyond the fact that every single lesson on it felt like it was 116 years long (which was, in fact, how long the Hundred Years War actually lasted. How did the war-naming person get that so wrong?!).

It wasn't just history I struggled with. I never got the hang of art; everything I ever drew ended up looking like a donkey. And I dreaded cross-country running. Not only were we told to run for six kilometres without stopping or drinking water, but the teachers also threatened that we'd have to run in our underpants if we 'forgot' our running kits (the 1980s were weird!). But history was dreadful. It comes as a massive surprise therefore that, at the age of forty-six, I am the author

of a bestselling history book for adults, *Empireland*. It's even more of a shock that here I am now, beginning a children's version of that book.

Until recently I had read very few history books – finding them, in general, too long and boring. I'm not a historian; I'm a journalist and author. And I didn't even study history beyond the age of sixteen. What changed? Well, it turns out there's an incredibly interesting slice of history, which I wasn't taught about at school or university – the British Empire. It's a part of history that is still important to life as we know it today. It explains so much about us as a nation, including where lots of our money comes from, the stuff we find in our museums, the reason the country is home to citizens of all different races and backgrounds, the food we eat, the words we use and so much more.

It's a history that explains lots about my life too, such as the reasons why my Indian parents emigrated to Britain in the 1960s ('emigrate' means moving from one country to another). It also explains the racism that surrounded me as I grew up in Wolverhampton in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, at the time certain jobs

seemed closed off to people of colour – not just the big jobs running companies, but some brown people even found themselves unable to get jobs as teachers and drivers. Some pubs and clubs didn't allow non-white people in. And there was horrible abuse and violence directed at brown people.

I bet empire explains something about your life too.



The British Empire (and don't worry, I'll be explaining exactly what this is very soon!) was the biggest empire in human history, covering a quarter of the planet at

its height, and is the biggest thing we ever did as a nation. It's as important as the leading role we played in World War II, when we beat the evil German Nazis, and reaffirmed the idea that we were as plucky and determined as the British bulldog which is sometimes used to symbolise us (and which graces the cover of this book). Frankly it's one of the biggest things that ever happened in the history of the world.



It's astonishing that I was taught almost nothing about it at school. And it's astounding that it's still not a priority to teach this in history classes today. So do not fear if you've not come across it yet either. It turns out we're not alone. In my research and conversations, I've come across adults who studied history at some of the most famous universities in Britain who learned almost nothing about British Empire. A survey conducted around twenty-five years

ago found that huge numbers of adults had very little knowledge about it. For example, more than half the people taking part didn't know that the USA began as a British project. We can't be blamed for Donald Trump or Hershey's chocolate, or take credit for Disneyland – it was long before all these things – but, yes, it was once a British enterprise.

If you didn't know these things either, there's no shame in it at all; you're still at school and learning. Also, I hope you'll feel a lot more knowledgeable by the time you get to the end of this book. The plan is to tell you some of the things I wish I had known at your age (beyond a short-cut to that dreaded cross-country route!). I'll explain what the British Empire was exactly and why lots of us don't know more about it. We'll talk about museums, which are home to many priceless artefacts from countries that used to be part of the British Empire. I'll give you examples of things in our modern world that have roots in the empire – things we see, do, say and experience, from Britain's towns and cities to our food and drink, sports, books, plants and more. And we'll also discuss what you can do to spread knowledge and understanding about it.

Most importantly I'll tell you how British Empire explains why modern Britain is such a wonderfully diverse place, filled with people from all races, cultures and walks of life, including your friends, teachers, family and favourite celebrities! It's a lot to aim for, but I hope that by the end you'll understand what has taken me forty-six years to understand: that if we learn the truth about our past, we can make better sense of the present and future. And also fight for a kinder and fairer world.

(The one thing I definitely won't be doing, however, is the illustrations. The talented Jen Khatun is in charge of those, which means that if you see something that resembles a donkey, it is actually meant to be a donkey.)

CHAPTER 1

What on earth was the British Empire?

Let's start with the basics. What is an 'empire'? You've probably heard the word before, perhaps in connection with the Roman Empire, or the song by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys 'Empire State of Mind', or the Star Wars film *The Empire Strikes Back*. Or maybe, even, with the British Empire, which is the one we're interested in here.

An empire is a group of countries that are ruled by a single other country or power. There are other words that are useful to know, as they come up a lot when discussing empires. You'll see these words appear many times throughout the book, so I've taken it upon myself to create a short dictionary for you to come back to whenever you need it:

- **Imperialism:** this is the practice of creating an empire (for instance, you might see the phrase 'Britain's imperial past', which means when Britain had an empire).

- **Colonialism:** if one country takes control of another, it colonizes it. If one nation of people takes over another nation of people, the people who are conquering are colonizers and

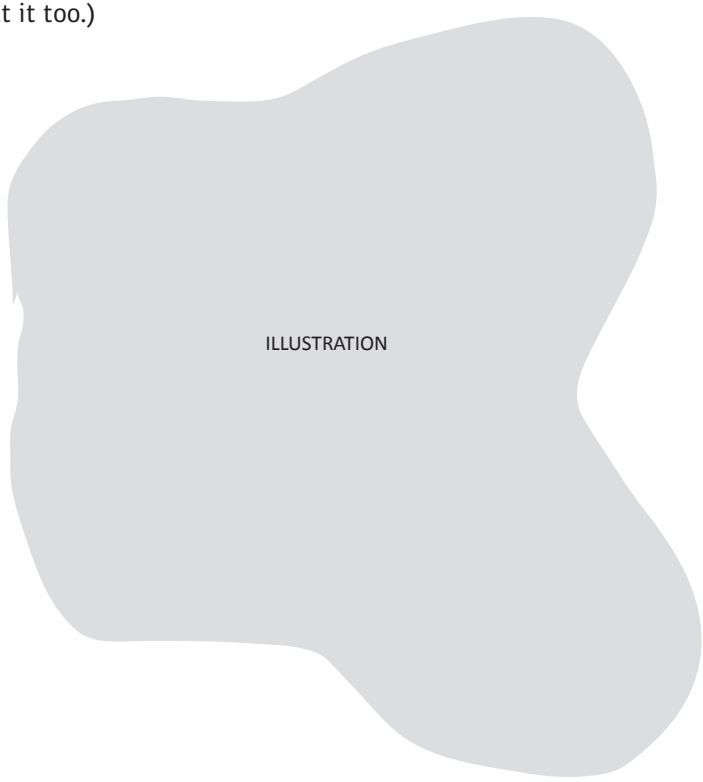
> the people who are conquered are colonized. The taken-over place is now a colony, and the people who came in to do the 'taking over' are colonists or colonialists.

The words mean quite similar things. If this seems like it's already getting complicated, don't worry. There's no getting away from the fact that the British Empire can be a fiendishly tricky subject. More complicated than algebra and the poems of William Shakespeare and the plot of *Lord of the Rings* and the storyline of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* combined. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't learn about it. Britain's colonial past is important to understand.

So why would a country want to have an empire? There are three BIG reasons: power, money and glory.

The more land and resources that you control (such as another country's food and valuable materials), the stronger, more famous and wealthier you are and the

more adventures you have. Unsurprisingly lots of rulers through history have been keen to have one. One of the most famous empires was the Roman Empire, which began in 27 BC and continued for around 500 years. During this time, the Romans colonized large parts of Europe and beyond, including Britain. (In fact, the Romans weren't the only ones who colonized Britain – the Vikings, the Saxons and the Normans all had a go at it too.)





It's generally accepted that Britain's empire began back in the 1600s during the reign of Elizabeth I, when seafaring adventurers 'discovered' lands rich in highly prized goods[1]. It existed for about 500 years and around the same time many other European countries, such as France, the Netherlands (also known as Holland), Portugal, Spain and Italy, had their own empires too. Britain's empire, though, was the biggest there has ever been. It was seven times the size of the mighty Roman Empire.

At its peak, around a century ago, the British Empire covered 13.71 million square miles, and included India (sometimes also referred to as 'the subcontinent'),

1 The people who already lived in these parts of the world (who are called 'indigenous') would quite rightly object to this word, given they'd been aware of their own homelands before the British imperialists turned up. Imagine how annoyed you'd be if a random person came round to your house and then went around declaring to everyone that they'd somehow 'discovered' it. You were aware of it first! It didn't need discovering!

many countries in Africa, Canada and Australia, and numerous Caribbean islands. That is a quarter of all the land in the world. Or to put it another, even more mind-boggling way, if all Britain's empire in the early 1900s was put together, it would cover almost the entire surface of the moon! Because it spanned so many different countries and time zones across the globe, it was said that, at its height, you could travel through Britain's empire without seeing the sun set.

British imperialism went through many different phases. At one time it was acceptable for white men to marry the brown women they met in empire. But then, at another, interracial relationships were frowned upon. At one stage British imperialists worked hard to stamp out the evils of the slave trade wherever they encountered it. But then there was a long period between the late-seventeenth and early-nineteenth centuries when the British Empire profited from the evils of the Atlantic slave trade. This involved taking Black men, women and children who had been kidnapped in Africa and shipping them across the Atlantic Ocean to force them to work, for free, on farms across the Caribbean, North America and elsewhere.

Around 3 million Africans suffered this fate during the British Empire, with many of them dying on the journey due to terrible conditions on the ships. The sugar and other crops produced by the enslaved made some British people very rich, but eventually Britain accepted the trade was evil, outlawed it and took a leading role in abolishing it around the world.

So how was such a collection of countries controlled? Well, think of your school. If it's like most schools, it probably has a number of classes of a similar size that are normally calm and well behaved (OK, that part might not be true, but stick with me here!). The class teachers probably follow the national curriculum that has been set by the government to plan their lessons. And, at the top of it all, in charge of everything, there is a wise, kind and efficient head teacher. Well, Britain's empire was absolutely nothing like that at all!

Now imagine instead that each class at the school is a completely different size: some tiny, some huge. Imagine that it takes many months to get messages between the head teacher and classrooms. Imagine that some classes are fairly peaceful, while some are

out of control and violent. Imagine there are no school rules and no national curriculum and that, although there is a head teacher, they rarely get involved. Instead it is up to each class teacher to set the rules and lessons for their class, and so all the classes do different things in a different way. Some of these teachers know what they are doing but others don't. Some are nice, and want to help the children, but others are cruel. Some of them are so lazy and mean that they make their pupils do all their work for them, while punishing them and taking all the payment and credit. THAT'S how the empire was run.

Sounds pretty chaotic, doesn't it? And it often was. But for centuries it survived and thrived. It made Britain the most powerful nation on Earth, and gave us lots of things that remain part of our lives today.

Most importantly empire is largely responsible for making Britain the multicultural country it is today. Many British people of African, Caribbean, South Asian and South-East Asian heritage are here because Britain colonized these parts of the world. They probably include some of your friends, as well as famous people

such as Marcus Rashford MBE. (By the way, do you know what 'MBE' stands for? Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire!) They might well include you.



Marcus Rashford and sugar are undeniably brilliant additions to Britain (although your dentist may disagree with the second), but the British Empire remains a hugely controversial subject. People have been arguing for centuries about whether it was a good or bad thing (spoiler alert – it's not as simple as that), but pretty much every other aspect of it is argued over too. If you can possibly imagine it, people argue over it more intensely than you've ever argued with your

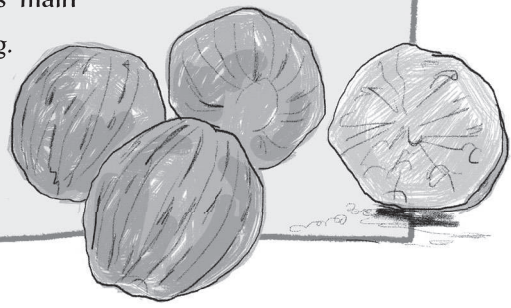
friends about Pokémon card swaps, Superman v Spider-man, who is the best YouTuber, who is best at dancing/cartwheels, or who has the best trainers.

Given that British Empire involved the enslavement of millions and the deaths of millions of others through famine, war and disease, it's no surprise that tempers can rise when the topic arises. Lots of conversations about British Empire involve at least one person getting very upset or shouting, and another person getting very defensive. There are, however, some things people do agree on – or, rather, can talk about without getting too furious. For instance, it is generally accepted that its great power came to an end in the twentieth century, when India declared its independence from Britain in 1947, and when Hong Kong was handed back to the Chinese in 1997. People also cannot deny that empire has shaped Britain in all sorts of ways – not only in the little things that fill our everyday lives, but in the way British people see themselves and how they see the rest of the world. Often we don't realize the impact the empire continues to have on our lives, and how many things that we say, do, see and believe stem from this history.

NUTMEG

As we now know, the British Empire started when seafaring adventurers became aware of 'new' islands and nations overflowing with valuable products and wanted control over them. One of the first – and most interesting – of those lands was a tiny island called Run in what is now Indonesia. And when I say tiny, I mean TINY. Run is only two miles long and half a mile wide, which means you could walk – or run! – across the whole place in your lunch break.

But what Run lacks in size, it makes up for in . . . nutmeg trees. Nutmeg is a spice that you've probably eaten yourself if you've ever enjoyed a gingerbread man or certain curries and pastas. Hundreds of years ago the island and its neighbours were the world's main source of nutmeg. And given food and drink in Britain at the




BRITISH
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time was often beige and tasteless, nutmeg was incredibly sought after. It was so valuable, in fact, that nutmeg bought in Run could be sold on in Britain for 600 times the price. So if you bought £2 worth of nutmeg with your pocket money on the island of Run, you could have sold it for £1,200 in Britain!

It's no wonder that Britain was interested in controlling Run. But so were the Dutch. Much squabbling between British and Dutch traders followed, and eventually the islanders of Run decided they would rather work with the British. The Dutch weren't happy about this and decided to blockade the island – which means they sealed it off to stop goods or people from entering or leaving. Eventually the British lost interest in Run, and in 1667 agreed a deal with the Dutch. The British would give them the island, and, in return, the Dutch would give Britain an island they had colonized on the North American coast, which was then called New Amsterdam.

King Charles II gave the American island to his brother James, Duke of York (later James II), and the settlement was renamed after him. Can you see where this is going? Yes – in exchange for tiny little Run and its nutmeg trees, the British got New York City, which is now one of the largest and most famous cities on the planet!

THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

If you've ever been in central London, you may have passed a shop called the East India Company. You probably didn't even notice it. It mostly sells expensive tea and extremely expensive tea accessories. Fancy a tea humidor? Well, after you've looked up what a 'humidor' is – like I just did – you will probably decide that you'd rather not pay £10,500 for an airtight container to keep tea fresh.

The story behind the shop's name, however, is really interesting. The East India Company was an infamous British company that



played a hugely important part in the empire. It was established in 1600 to trade in silk and spices from Asia. The company was soon given extraordinary powers by the British government, allowing it to colonize and run countries, most notably India. It printed its own money and it had its own military force, which was twice the size of the British army. Imagine if a company such as Nando's suddenly had a massive army and was able to take over other countries! Sounds crazy, right?

But with its vast power, the East India Company became corrupt. It illegally sold opium, a dangerous drug, to China, which killed many people and destroyed many lives. Also, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it traded in products that relied on slave labour. It exploited India's workers and products – including fabrics – and made its own officials incredibly rich, while making Indian people pay high taxes, often when they couldn't afford to pay them. And its policies led to terrible famines, such as the one in Bengal in 1770 in which millions died. After all these scandals, and

many others too, the original East India Company was finally shut down in 1874 and the British government took over its territories and army.

The shops with this name today aren't the same business – but they rely on its reputation to sell their products. Considering the original company's dark and violent history, it's a strange decision. The owner of the new East India Company is Indian himself, and so you might think that he wouldn't want to use the name of a company that harmed and looted his mother country. But, as we'll come to discover, even at the time there were many Indians who supported the original East India Company. I told you that empire could be complicated.

The fact that these shops exist, and people buy things from them, tells us that some people might look back fondly on the British Empire. Perhaps these customers would love to go back to the days when Britain ruled a quarter of the planet. In the meantime, they'll have to make do with a cup of VERY expensive tea.

THE SCOUTS

Dyb dyb dyb! Dob dob dob! This might look like a string of nonsense words, but it's something that used to be chanted by the Scouts – a movement that sprang directly from the British Empire.

The organization was the bright idea of a military man called Lord Baden-Powell, who became a hero during a war between British and Dutch settlers (called Boers) in what is now South Africa between 1899 and 1902. A few years later, he decided to start the Boy Scouts, with the aim of teaching boys how to be good, well-rounded citizens and, more specifically, good imperialists. Baden-Powell wanted to create a new generation of children fit to run the empire properly, and better than other European empires, such as those run by the Dutch, Belgian and French. In fact, he originally wanted to call the movement 'the Imperial Scouts'!

Along with teaching the importance of values such as patriotism (which means taking pride in

your country), obedience, teamwork, a sense of purpose and self-reliance, there was also a focus on outdoor activities such as camping, sailing, archery, hiking and survival skills. Badges were awarded when a boy mastered a new skill. Some of these were straightforward skills, like cooking or first aid, while some were a little more exotic. You could get a badge for bell-ringing, bookbinding and even chicken farming! If you're a Scout nowadays, you might be awarded badges for anything from life-saving skills to writing and astronomy. One of their mottos was 'Be Prepared', which came from the initials of the founder, Baden-Powell.

ILLUSTRATION

There were secret greetings and in-jokes, as well as funny rituals, such as shaking hands with your left hand rather than the more usual right hand, and making a three-finger salute (with your palm facing outwards, fold your thumb and little finger in and stick the remaining fingers up). I've just tried it with a passing postman and it's harder than it sounds!

The movement was a wild success, first in Britain and then around the world. At the very first Scout meeting in 1907 twenty boys went camping. Two years later, there were 100,000 members. And within twenty years there were 2 million in seventy-eight countries. Baden-Powell's handbook, *Scouting for Boys*, became one of the bestselling books of all time.

In 1910, girls were demanding to participate in the Boy Scouts, and so the Girl Guides movement began. In 1912, along with his sister, Baden-Powell wrote a handbook for the Girl Guides, which was

subtitled *How Girls Can Help Build the Empire.* Today the Scouts movement isn't as huge as it was, but it's still going strong. Nowadays girls can be Scouts too. You might even be a member yourself. In which case, all together now: Dyb dyb dyb! (which stands for 'Do your best!') Dob dob dob! ('Do our best!').