The Golden Age of the British Empire

Britain's "imperial century" is a period (referred to as by some historians) between 1815 and 1914: around 10 million square miles of territory and roughly 400 million people were added to the British empire.

1   Britain adopted the role of global policeman

With the defeat of Napoleon and the conclusion of the 1815 Congress of Vienna, Britain found itself in an extraordinarily powerful position. At this time, the empires of Britain's traditional rivals had been lost or severely diminished in size, and its imperial position was unchallenged at sea. The British established what was known as the *Pax Britannica* (1815–1870), latin for "the British Peace", modeled after the roman *Pax Romana*.

   ○   Britain becomes the leading industrial nation of Europe

In addition, it had become the leading industrial nation of Europe, and more and more of the world came under the domination of British commercial, financial, and naval power. This was called the Victorian era (1837 – 1901) which coincided with the development of the "second industrial revolution" (1830-1900). It was also named the "Age of Steel," because of its strength and durability, steel became the metal choice for buildings and ships.

Official acceptance of the new doctrine of Adam Smith's economic liberalist theories was marked by the United Kingdom's adoption of free trade in the mid-19th century. United Kingdom became the 'workshop of the world', supplying a large share of the manufactured goods consumed by such nations as Germany, France, Belgium and the United States.

This period saw improvements in:

•Communications. Victorian Era was the improvement of communication links. Stagecoaches, canals, steam ships, telegraph, telephones, cars, aircraft, and most notably the railways. *Greenwich Mean time* (GMT) was adopted across the island of Great Britain in 1847, and by almost all railway companies by the following year, from which the term "railway time" is derived. "Railway time" became the standard by which clocks were set throughout Britain!
•Health: disease and pollution. Disease was a constant threat during the industrial revolution. Changes in the way that people lived and the conditions in which they worked led to disease being able to spread much more rapidly. One of the main killers of the industrial age was cholera. Sanitation reforms were made in the crowded, dirty streets of the existing cities, and soap was the main product shown in the relatively new phenomenon of advertising.
•Social changes. Increase in real wages resulted in significant improvements in the standard of living. An excellent example is the changes in diet that occurred. In fact, the average weekly English diet of 1850 (butter, meat, potatoes, fruits and vegetables)—is quite similar to the English diet of today! This is also sometimes called the "Age of the middle class". But industrial revolution also resulted in low wages, slum housing and the use of child labour creating an important social divide between rich and poor. The Industrial age led to a rapid increase in birth rates. It was not uncommon for families to have more than 10 children!
•Education. To provide for England's newly-industrialised society, various types of schools began to be established to offer some basic education to the masses, including children. Indeed the Church of England regarded education for all children as desirable. New schools were being built and school attendance was rising.
•Protest movements : protest movements developed during the nineteenth century as the middle classes, and the working classes, became more educated. With this education came a desire to have more say in the way that their lives were run. This, inevitably, would lead to a conflict with the ruling, wealthy, classes.
At the end of Victorian era, Britain had lost its industrial supremacy to Germany and to the USA.

2   Breakdown of Pax Britannica and the rise of "new imperialism"

The first British Empire was a mercantile one. Until the early nineteenth century, the primary purpose of imperialist policies was to facilitate the acquisition of as much foreign territory as possible, both as a source of raw materials and in order to provide real or potential markets for British manufactures.

   •   End of slave trade

A strong movement emerged in 18th-century Britain to put an end to slave trade. This campaign developed alongside international events such as the French revolution and ideas from the Enlightenment. In 1807, the Slave Trade Act abolished the slave trade in the British empire so was the transatlantic slave trade by the British parliament. The US also banned the transatlantic slave trade. Between 1810-65, nearly 150,000 people are freed in West Africa. Britain negotiated with Portugal and Spain for the abolition of the trade. In 1839 a group of 49 enslaved africans on board the slave ship Amistad revolted off the coast of Cuba. The US Supreme court upheld their freedom.

The *Pax Britannica* era also saw the enforced opening of key markets: Turkey, Egypt, Persia (Iran), China or Japan.

At the same time the British Empire saw the acquisition of new territories: British West Africa (1821), Western

Australia (1829), Hong-Kong from China (1841), Canada (1867), Cyprus (1878).

These developments stimulated imperial competition, in spite of the United Kingdom's long-established naval and maritime superiority. This Period is also known as "new imperialism" referring to the colonial expansion and imperial competition adopted by Europe's powers and, later, Japan and the United States; from approximately 1830 to 1914, overlaps with the *Pax Britannica* period (1815–1870).

Commercial competition of old rivals like France was now added that of newly industrialising powers such as Germany and the United States. All sought ways of challenging what they saw as the United Kingdom's undue dominance in world markets—the consequence of her early industrialisation and maritime supremacy. Rivalry between France and Germany led to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71, to the creation of a unified German Empire which put an end to the *Pax Britannica* and de facto the "balance of power" that had been created at the Congress of Vienna after the end of the Napoleonic wars.

As a matter of fact, the development of "new imperialism" also coincided with the "Victorian era" (1837 – 1901) and the "second industrial revolution" (1830-1900) . After all Queen Victoria had herself crowned Empress of India in 1876!

- Scramble for Africa

During the "new imperialism" period took place the "Scramble for Africa" as a process of invasion, occupation, colonization and annexation of African territory by European powers (1881 – 1914) and China's century of humiliation (mid 19th-mid 20th centuries). China got partitioned by European, American and Japanese powers.

Advocates of imperialist foreign policies justified them by invoking a paternalistic and racist theory (founded in part upon popular but erroneous generalizations derived from Darwin's theory of evolution) which saw imperialism as a manifestation of what Kipling would refer to as "the white man's burden." The implication, of course, was that the empire existed not for the benefit — economic or strategic or otherwise — of Britain itself, but in order that primitive peoples, incapable of self-government, could, with British guidance, eventually become civilized (and christianized).

It served to legitimize Britain's acquisition of portions of Africa and her domination of India and of China (in concert with other European powers).

However, while slavery became abolished, racial categorization took on a pseudoscientific stance helping to spread and justify imperialist policies across the globe. Pseudosciences like "eugenics" (and its link to "social darwinism") or "racial hygiene" theories will inspire the 20th century nazi holocaust.

To go further :

The Rise and Fall of the British Empire (animated timeline)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVsEMtCPeI8