

The Story of Trade



A C T I V I T Y S H E E T

Trade between East and West became very active in the beginning of the 19th Century (1800's). China, Japan and India had many products that were of interest to people in Europe. China provided delicious tea and beautiful silk. India had indigo, jute, rice, cotton and opium. In the middle of the century, gold was discovered in California, and wool, sugar and coffee were being grown in Australia, Ceylon and South Africa. At the end of the century, refrigeration was invented, and it then became possible to transport beef, lamb, butter and fruit halfway around the globe. People needed a way to transport these goods all over the world, and the coal-fueled ship was the answer.

Worldwide trade ballooned in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had the effect of channeling much of the resultant shipping through the Middle East. Britain developed a strong partnership with India during this time. Their strong connection influenced every aspect of British and Indian life.

Before the steam engine, when sailing ships were still in use, travel on the water was difficult and took a very long time. The voyage from England to India around the Cape of Good Hope off the coast of Africa took six months at least, and you might have another three or four months of traveling to do before reaching your final destination. If you went to work for the East India Company, a famous British – Indian business, you could expect to return home perhaps once before retirement. Employees were given one three-year furlough (or visit home) in mid-career. Replies to letters, therefore, could well take over a year and a half to receive. For years traders explored a variety of ways to get goods across the Middle East easily. For boats, there were narrow passages, treacherous winds and rocky shores. On land, the desert was unpleasant terrain: horse-drawn wagons carried passengers and mail part of the way. After the Suez Canal opened up a route through the Middle East in 1859, travel time for many boats was greatly reduced. The average journey time from India to Britain was reduced from six months to two, except during monsoon season.

The invention of the steam engine made it possible to cross the Red Sea easily, and it was an important part of making the Industrial Revolution possible. But fueling steam was difficult. Steam coal from South Wales, Great Britain, had to be shipped to the Indian Ocean around the Cape of Good Hope. Over 170 sailing ships loaded with coal were used for this task. Coal was stocked at a town called Aden, roughly midway on the 3,000-mile voyage between Suez and Bombay. One third of this journey time was taken up in coaling, or refueling, the ship. A herd of 3,500 camels regularly carried coal across the desert from Aden to the boats. In 1858 a newly opened railway connecting Alexandria with Suez presented an alternative, and the animals no longer had to carry their heavy loads.

For many years, a variety of waterways were explored for the purpose of transporting goods, mail and passengers. Railways and ships competed for business, and it was always the vessel that could transport the materials in less time that won out. The steam engine was replaced by the turbine engine, developed in the early 1900's, which was fueled by oil instead of coal. The compression-ignition engine invented by Dr. Rudolf Diesel in 1897 gradually came into widespread use during the second quarter of the twentieth century. Soon after, humankind began to explore the possibilities of air travel, and eventually airplanes were able to carry mail, passengers and goods reliably and far more quickly than ships. It is hard to believe that all these changes occurred in less than two hundred years!

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