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The Suez Canal: Its history and importance for the Empire

The Suez Canal, the longest artificial waterway in the world, connecting Port Said on the south-east shore of the Mediterranean Sea to Suez on the north shore of the Red Sea, has been called 'the door to the east'.

Nearly the whole of the trade with India and the Far East, and almost half the trade with Australia passes through it. Though comparatively young, it has had a great effect on the world's trade, especially on that of the British Empire.

It was first thought of in the eighth century A.D. by Haroun-al-Raschid, who, however, abandoned the project as he thought that it would expose the coast of Arabia to the Byzantine navy. Then, in the fifteenth century, trade with the east by the old channels, through the Red Sea and the valley of the Nile, or through the valley of the Euphrates, was rendered too dangerous: the Turks, claiming that it was the holy sea of Mecca, would not allow free navigation on the Red Sea, and also interfered with the caravans going by the other route, through Arabia. Therefore people looked about for a new route, and, in 1498, Vasco da Gama solved the problem by sailing round the cape to India. All the trade with the east before had passed through Venice, but when ships began to use the Cape Route, this

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town lost its chief means of support and, in an effort to regain it, suggested cutting the canal to the Egyptians.

The Turks intervened, however, and nothing more was done until the nineteenth century. There had been various attempts to renew the old routes, but these were found unsatisfactory and the French were seriously thinking of building the canal, when De Lesseps, the great engineer, appeared on the scene. His friend, Said Pasha, viceroy of Egypt, made a concession that De Lesseps should constitute 'La Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime du Suez,' which should build the canal. It was decided that it should stretch from Port Suez to the Gulf of Pelusium, passing through Lake Timso, The Bitter Lakes, and Lake Menzah. A second concession stated that the canal should be in the hands of the company for ninety-nine years, and should then be surrendered to Egypt. The consent of the Turks was needed; De Lesseps went to Constantinople to make his request to the Sultan, but, through the intervention of British diplomacy, did not obtain his consent until 1866. This was due to the fact that Lord Palmerston of the British government thought that French interest would predominate to the detriment of our own. In spite of this, however, the building of the canal was started in 1859. The majority of shares were taken by France and the Ottoman Empire. England, Russia, Austria and America stood entirely aloof.

Said Pasha gave De Lesseps permission to force the natives to work for him, but, in

1863, Ismael, Said Pasha's successor, with the Sultan's approval, ordered him to give up the lands by the canal which had been granted him in the concessions, and to abolish forced labour. The company naturally objected and referred the dispute to Napoleon III. The decision was that the company should give in, but that it should be allowed enough land on which to build its workshops, hospitals, etc, and that it should be paid a large sum of money as consolation. Though it involved additional expense for the company, the abolition of forced labour had a good result, for it gave scope for modern engineering methods and mechanical appliances. The canal, which had cost £16,000,000, was finished, and opened with great ceremony by the Empress Eugénie in 1869.

The development of the canal is closely bound up with the development of shipping. It greatly encouraged the building of steamships; ^{for} sailing ships found it difficult to navigate the Red Sea. As ships have increased in size, the Suez has been enlarged until it now has a depth of 36 feet, and is wide enough for two ships of fairly large size to pass. Also the average time of transit has been lowered to 15 hrs. 6 mins by the innovation of electric light all through the canal. Developments are still going on — the canal will be widened until the two largest ships in the world can pass. In 1875 Egypt was about to sell her shares to the French when England, under Disraeli, bought them and eventually became the largest shareholder. Since then the canal dues, about which there was some

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dispute, have been reduced to 6.75 francs per ton, 2.5 francs for vessels in ballast. Even now, though, the labour is mainly French. It has been attempted to extend the period of possession of the canal, but Egypt has refused.

The port for the north end of the canal is Port Said, but this is now beginning to lose its importance. All the workshops, etc, are being moved to Port Fuad opposite to it, on the west side of the Suez. Port Fuad is a very new city: it is going to be a garden city where all the employees will live. Port Said also is a coaling-station for the ships passing through the Suez — it imported its coal from Wales. Now many ships use oil and pass on to Suez, oiling-station and port for the south end of the canal, merely stopping at Port Said to pay their dues.

The Suez is of vast strategical importance in war, as it is the link between west and east. The west side is especially important. Whoever has the mastery of the west side has the mastery of the canal, for on the west side trees have been planted for cover, and there is water; on the east are neither. In the Great War the Suez was one long camp: there were men at Port Said, Ismailia, and Suez.

The canal was cut at a time when railways were beginning to be built in India, and thus because of the easier travelling facilities, had an even greater effect upon trade than had been expected. Even before the canal was cut, the Red Sea had been the earliest route for trade with the east, but before it had only been

luxury traffic because goods had to be carried across the Arabian Desert by camels, which, naturally, could not carry very heavy loads. The Cape Route was not conducive to the trading of heavy things, such as rice and wheat either, for so much coal had to be carried that there was hardly any room for the goods also, by this route, the equator had to be crossed twice, and wheat does not keep well in an equatorial climate. Thus, the cutting of the canal has greatly increased the exports of India, for, besides saving twelve days on the journey, the ships from India have to cross the equator once only. The exports of rice, jute, cotton and oilseeds between 1870 and 1880 were doubled, while the export of wheat was more than doubled. In consequence of the greater facilities for the export of wheat, there has been a big development in the irrigation of the Punjab, where most of the wheat grows. As a further consequence of this, a port, Karachi, has developed on the delta of the Indus, for the purpose of exporting the products of the Punjab.

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Another port which has developed is Bombay, on the west coast of the Deccan. This is very important, as it has an excellent harbour, the only good one on the Deccan. Partly because of the cotton growing behind it, partly because it is nearer to the Suez Canal, Bombay is rapidly rivalling Calcutta in importance.

There has also been an increase in the trade with Australia, though not nearly so great. As on the way out to Australia only one and a half days are saved by using the canal, most of the outward bound shipping

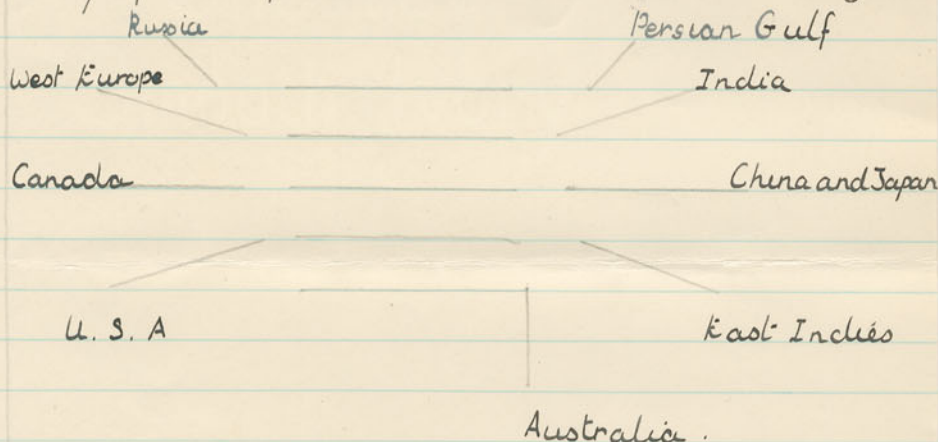
goes by the Cape Route. On the return journey, however, most of the ships come, with very heavy cargoes, by the Suez Canal, as by doing this they elude the west winds and save three to six days. The cargoes are mainly wheat, fruit, and a very great deal of wool. This year the ships brought back chilled beef by the canal, as it does not deteriorate so, going by this quicker route. This export, brought about solely by the canal, is likely to develop.

The cutting of the canal has assisted trade with the Far East. Spices, copra, and oilbeans are sent to Singapore, and from there, through the Suez Canal to Europe. Russian petroleum is sent through the canal and finds a large market. Also, a million tons of shipping yearly return empty to the Persian Gulf, and continue their journey full of oil from the Persian oilfields.

Thus we see what an enormous impetus the Suez has given trade; there has been a great fall in the price of wool, and in the price of all eastern goods. The importance has been restored to the Mediterranean ports to the detriment of our own, for ships that coming by the Cape Route used to use our ports, now pass through the canal, and use those of the Mediterranean lands. This one drawback, however, is more than balanced by the increase in trade.

The Suez Canal is unique: not only is it a link between Europe and India, but, as the following diagram will show, three quarters of the world's population live in

the lands near it, or at its termini, and from many of these places coal or oil can be brought



At the north end of it is a statue to De lesseps, the engineer to whom the world owes so much. Beneath it is this inscription:-
 'Aperire Terram Gentibus' -
 To open the earth for the nations.

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