

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #238

A Short History Of Tea

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about tea.

[00:00:28] It is the second most popular drink in the world, second only to water, and it's estimated that 3.7 billion cups of tea are consumed every single day.

[00:00:41] I'm drinking one right now, as are hundreds of millions of other people, including, perhaps, even you.

[00:00:48] So, in this episode we are going to look at how tea became such a global sensation¹.

¹ something that caused a lot of interest and excitement

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[00:00:56] It is an amazing story, it's one of global trade, East vs. West, opium, theft, addiction, wars, international [espionage](#)², [smuggling](#)³ and a Portuguese Princess.

[00:01:11] If you would like to press pause and put the [kettle](#)⁴ on, now is the time to do so, as this episode is best listened to with an [accompanying](#)⁵ cup of your favourite tea.

[00:01:24] OK then, let's get right into it.

[00:01:28] Great Britain is said to be a nation of tea drinkers. We drink it at breakfast, we drink it in the mid-morning, and we drink it in the afternoon.

[00:01:39] The average person in Britain drinks about one and a half kilos of the stuff every year, which will make you about 700 cups, or almost two cups of tea every single day.

² the practice of spying to discover secret information

³ the process of illegally moving goods into a country

⁴ a container for boiling water

⁵ being there at the same time

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[00:01:52] And it has become part of British culture, [so much so](#)⁶ that during World War II, as things were not going well for the Allies, the British government [bought up](#)⁷ all the tea available in Europe [in a bid to](#)⁸ [keep up](#)⁹ [morale](#)¹⁰.

[00:02:09] But there is, of course, nothing actually British about tea.

[00:02:14] Tea, as you will probably know, [originates](#)¹¹ from China.

[00:02:19] There are several myths about the discovery of tea.

[00:02:23] One has a Chinese emperor, Shen Nung, about to drink from a bowl of boiling water, and magically some leaves blow into it, he drinks this newly [flavoured](#)¹² water and thinks, hmm, that was nice.

[00:02:39] Another has Shen Nung accidentally poisoning himself, and just as he was about to die a leaf blew into his mouth, he [chewed](#)¹³ it, and he was saved.

⁶ to such a degree or extent

⁷ bought (for a large amount)

⁸ in an attempt or effort to

⁹ make it remain at a high level

¹⁰ confidence during a difficult situation

¹¹ comes or derives from

¹² having a particular taste by the addition of extra material

¹³ bit and broke it into small pieces in the mouth

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[00:02:51] While I'll leave you to decide whether you believe either of these two stories, there is evidence of tea being drunk in China going back to the second century BC.

[00:03:03] Tea was mainly grown in south-western China, in the provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan.

[00:03:10] And it is thought to have initially been considered to be a [medicinal](#)¹⁴ drink, a drink to be mixed with things like onion, ginger and salt, and drunk for its health benefits.

[00:03:24] But as China continued to grow in power, especially during the Tang dynasty from the 7th to 10th century, people looked for other uses for tea.

[00:03:36] It turned from a [medicinal](#) drink to one drunk for similar reasons as it is drunk today, because it was enjoyable, because it was tasty, and because the [caffeine](#)¹⁵ in it gave you a little [buzz](#)¹⁶ of energy.

[00:03:51] And as the popularity of tea continued to grow within Imperial China, it was increasingly exported to [neighbouring](#)¹⁷ countries: Japan to the east, and the Tibetan empire to the south.

¹⁴ having healing use or properties

¹⁵ a chemical found in coffee and tea that makes people more active

¹⁶ a state of activity and excitement

¹⁷ nearby, close

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[00:04:04] And with the growth of the Silk Road, tea was also introduced to central Asia and the Middle East.

[00:04:13] It was a popular drink, and countries began to [put their own mark¹⁸](#) on how tea should be drunk.

[00:04:20] In China, it was typically drunk [plain¹⁹](#) - green tea mixed with hot water.

[00:04:27] In the mountainous Tibetan region they added Yak milk to it.

[00:04:32] In Japan there was an [intricate²⁰ ritual²¹](#) developed to do with the preparation of tea.

[00:04:39] But it was to be in 1610 that tea took its first step to becoming a drink that would literally change the world.

[00:04:49] Dutch merchants brought tea to Amsterdam, the first tea leaves arrived on northern European shores.

[00:04:57] When it first arrived, people weren't so [convinced²²](#).

¹⁸ had their own effect on

¹⁹ with nothing added

²⁰ very detailed

²¹ a specific series of actions

²² certain about it

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[00:05:02] Sure, it was [exotic](#)²³, and therefore there was interest in trying it.

[00:05:07] But it was incredibly expensive, and it was, like coffee, initially thought to be a [medicinal](#) drink by Europeans.

[00:05:17] The first records of tea arriving in Britain came shortly after, but the Brits weren't [overly](#)²⁴ [convinced](#) about these new, green leaves either.

[00:05:27] Tea only really started to [take off](#)²⁵ in Britain after Charles II took the [throne](#)²⁶ in 1660.

[00:05:36] To briefly remind you, Charles II was the king [nicknamed](#)²⁷ “The Merry [Monarch](#)²⁸”.

²³ exciting because of coming from a far away country

²⁴ too, very

²⁵ become popular

²⁶ the special chair used by kings or queens

²⁷ given the informal name

²⁸ king

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[00:05:43] He was crowned king after the country had spent 11 years experimenting with life without a [monarch](#), and after it had decided to [restore](#)²⁹ the [monarchy](#)³⁰, the [crown](#)³¹ was placed on Charles' head.

[00:05:57] The country was ready for a good time, and Charles was a [party animal](#)³².

[00:06:02] He reopened the theatres, allowed music to be played again, and there was a general mood of celebration in the air.

[00:06:12] His wife was Catherine of Braganza, a Portuguese princess. Now, Portuguese merchants had brought tea back a little earlier than the Dutch, so the Portuguese nobility had had a bit more time to [develop a taste for](#)³³ the stuff.

[00:06:29] And Catherine of Braganza was someone who had certainly [developed a taste for](#)³⁴ it. She was a huge fan of tea, and she brought it with her when she moved to England to marry Charles II.

²⁹ return to the earlier position

³⁰ a type of government with a king or queen at the head

³¹ special headdress (head decoration) worn by a king

³² someone who enjoys parties and social activities

³³ start liking

³⁴ started to like it

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[00:06:43] In those days the King and Queen were the most fashionable people in the country, and if you wanted to show that you were [fashionable](#)³⁵ and a person of high reputation, you did what the King and Queen did.

[00:06:56] You went to the same places as they did, you wore the same clothes, and you drank the same drinks.

[00:07:03] So all of high society, in an attempt to do what Catherine of Braganza was doing, started to drink tea.

[00:07:12] Demand for tea did increase, but given that it was such an expensive drink few people could afford it.

[00:07:20] The only place in the world that produced tea at this time was China, so British merchants needed to go to China to get it.

[00:07:30] And at the time a [monopoly](#)³⁶ on British trade with China had been given to an organisation called The East India Company. The East India Company, given that British [aristocrats](#)³⁷ had started to [develop a taste for](#) the stuff, started to buy tea from Chinese merchants in Canton, modern day Guangzhou.

³⁵ behaving according to the current popular style

³⁶ the exclusive or only control of the trade

³⁷ people belonging to the high social class

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[00:07:53] This was the only port with which foreign trade was allowed - so the entire tea trade needed to pass through here.

[00:08:01] But for the first 30 years or so of its existence in Britain, tea was so expensive that only the richest in society could afford it.

[00:08:11] Then, over the next 50 years, so this is from around 1690 to 1740, tea went from [the preserve of³⁸](#) the upper classes to a truly national drink.

[00:08:26] In 1690 around 50 tonnes of tea were imported to Britain, but by 1740 it had gone to 2,500 tonnes, an increase of 50 times.

[00:08:40] Given the amount that was being imported, the cost had reduced, meaning that it was now something that normal people could afford.

[00:08:49] It was also a very easy drink to make, you simply boil water and add it to the tea.

[00:08:56] If you compare this to the other hot drinks available, coffee or hot chocolate, hot cocoa, tea was much easier to prepare, and it became part of British culture.

[00:09:09] The British also added their own [twist³⁹](#), their own unique style, to tea preparation. They added sugar, and unlike in east Asia, tea became a sweet drink.

³⁸ something meant only for certain people

³⁹ change, variation

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[00:09:23] Indeed, if you look at the amount of tea imported to Britain every year, it increases at almost exactly the same rate as the imports of sugar.

[00:09:34] Now, we are still in the early 18th century here, but we can already see quite how [interlinked](#)⁴⁰ the global economy already is.

[00:09:43] Sugar is being exported from the Caribbean, after having been produced in [plantations](#)⁴¹ filled with slaves taken from west Africa, who were bought from European slave traders with [wool](#)⁴² and metal goods.

[00:09:58] The sugar then makes its way back to Britain, where it is drunk with a leaf exported from China.

[00:10:05] It is quite [horrific](#)⁴³ to think about, and this is evidently a [gross](#)⁴⁴ simplification, but globalisation was already well [underway](#)⁴⁵.

[00:10:16] Now, a functioning global trade system requires countries to produce things that other countries want.

⁴⁰ connected

⁴¹ large farms

⁴² soft thick hair coming from the coat of sheep

⁴³ shocking

⁴⁴ general, not detailed

⁴⁵ happening

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[00:10:24] I make product A, you make product B, and then I give you some of product A in exchange for product B.

[00:10:33] The only problem with this was that China, the global centre of tea production, wasn't really interested in products that Britain was producing - [wool](#), [textiles](#)⁴⁶, and machinery.

[00:10:48] In a famous letter to the British King George III, the Emperor of Imperial China, Qianlong, in 1793 wrote: "Our Celestial Empire [possesses](#)⁴⁷ all things in [prolific](#)⁴⁸ [abundance](#)⁴⁹ and lacks no product within its borders. There is therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside [barbarians](#)⁵⁰ in exchange for our own produce."

[00:11:14] Translation: "we don't need or want anything you make".

[00:11:20] And Britain had, [to date](#)⁵¹, been paying for tea with silver, but the silver was [running out](#)⁵².

[00:11:28] Britain needed to find a product that it could sell to China in exchange for tea.

⁴⁶ cloth

⁴⁷ has, owns

⁴⁸ plentiful, in large numbers

⁴⁹ the situation in which there is more than enough of something

⁵⁰ peoples considered less advanced

⁵¹ until now

⁵² being used up

[00:11:35] The product was [opium](#)⁵³.

[00:11:38] Now, [opium](#) was illegal in China, but this didn't stop the British [smuggling](#) it into the country. More and more Chinese became addicted to the drug, and by 1840 there were an estimated 10 million Chinese [opium](#) addicts.

[00:11:57] You may know the story of what happened next, The [Opium](#) Wars.

[00:12:02] We actually made an episode on this, it's episode number 93, so if you want the long version of that story, I'd recommend listening to that.

[00:12:12] But here's the short version.

[00:12:15] In 1839, a Chinese official named Lin Zexu destroyed 1,000 tonnes of [opium](#) that had been [seized](#)⁵⁴ from British [smugglers](#)⁵⁵.

[00:12:26] Britain rushed to the defense of these drug [smugglers](#), and between 1839 and 1860 there were two different wars between Britain and China.

[00:12:39] China wanted Britain to stop [flooding](#)⁵⁶ its country with [opium](#).

⁵³ a drug made from the seeds of a flower called poppy

⁵⁴ taken

⁵⁵ people who illegally moved goods into a country

⁵⁶ moving in large quantities of

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[00:12:44] Britain needed the [opium](#) trade to continue, because its population was also addicted, [albeit](#)⁵⁷ to tea.

[00:12:54] To cut a long story short, these wars were won by Britain, and resulted in the so-called Century of Humiliation for China.

[00:13:04] As far as tea is concerned, the British continued to [flood](#)⁵⁸ China with [opium](#), which allowed them to continue to buy vast quantities of tea.

[00:13:16] But this wasn't a long term solution.

[00:13:20] While all of this had been going on, Britain had been desperately trying to find a way to produce tea in its [rapidly-growing](#)⁵⁹ empire.

[00:13:30] The problem was that Britain had no idea how tea was actually produced.

[00:13:36] Given that the British traders only saw the final version of tea, the [dried out](#)⁶⁰ leaves ready to be exported, they had no real idea how tea actually went from being a plant growing on a bush to the final product that you add to hot water.

⁵⁷ although

⁵⁸ move in large quantities of

⁵⁹ fast-growing

⁶⁰ completely dried, without water in them

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[00:13:55] The British even thought that green and black tea were two completely different plants, and that different varieties of tea came from a very large variety of plants.

[00:14:08] In case you didn't know, black tea is [ox⁶¹idised](#), when green tea isn't - they come from the same plant.

[00:14:17] So, what did the British do?

[00:14:20] They sent [spies⁶²](#) deep into China to try to see tea production for themselves.

[00:14:27] The most famous of these [spies](#) was a Scotsman called Robert Fortune, who travelled deep into China, [disguised⁶³](#) as a Chinese [peasant⁶⁴](#), and learned how tea was actually made.

[00:14:41] I'm not quite sure how a very [Caucasian-looking⁶⁵](#) Scotsman managed to successfully [disguise⁶⁶](#) himself as a Chinese [peasant](#), but apparently it worked.

⁶¹ combined with oxygen

⁶² people who were sent to secretly collect information

⁶³ having the appearance of

⁶⁴ countryman or farmer

⁶⁵ looking like a white-skinned man of European origin

⁶⁶ give new appearance to

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[00:14:52] He managed to learn the secrets of tea production, and escape from China with tea plants.

[00:15:00] And it was with the tea plants that Fortune had taken from China, and with the knowledge he had gained from [witnessing](#)⁶⁷ the production of tea, that tea started to be produced in British India, specifically, in Assam, in northern India.

[00:15:18] The Chinese [stronghold](#)⁶⁸ on global tea production was coming to an end, and tea production in India continued to grow.

[00:15:27] [Armed](#)⁶⁹ now with the knowledge of how to produce tea, the British brought it to other parts of the empire, for example Sri Lanka and East Africa.

[00:15:37] And the rest is, as they say, history.

[00:15:41] Tea is as popular as it ever has been, and as we heard, literally billions of people drink it every day.

[00:15:50] Now, I want to finish off this episode with three curiosities about tea.

[00:15:56] The first is linguistic, and it's about what the word for tea tells you in any language.

[00:16:04] There are three broad groups of ways of saying tea:

⁶⁷ seeing with his own eyes

⁶⁸ strong position

⁶⁹ equipped, having

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[00:16:09] The first is “te”, so in English we say “tea”, in French you say “thé”, in Spanish it’s “té”, and so on.

[00:16:18] The second is “cha”, so in Mandarin it’s “chá”, in Japanese it’s “cha”, and in Portuguese it’s also “chá”.

[00:16:28] And the third is more like “chai”, so in Russian, Arabic, and Persian, the word for tea sounds a bit like chai.

[00:16:38] The interesting thing about this is that the way a language says “tea” tells you about how tea probably entered the country.

[00:16:49] If the word is something like “tea”, it will have come from south-east China, in or around Fujian province, as “te” is the word in the Min group of languages spoken in this area of China.

[00:17:03] If the word is something like “cha”, it will either have come from the original Chinese word, in the case of Japanese or Korean, or have come from the traders in Canton, in southern China.

[00:17:17] Interestingly, the reason that Portuguese is the only European language to have this [root](#)⁷⁰ is thanks to early Portuguese traders in Macau.

⁷⁰ original form of the word

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[00:17:28] And if the word is something like “chai”, it will likely have come [overland⁷¹](#), through the Silk Road, which explains why Middle Eastern and Slavic languages typically use this version.

[00:17:42] OK, our second curiosity about tea is the story of tea bags.

[00:17:49] Nowadays, most [pre-packaged⁷²](#) tea, certainly in Europe, comes in tea bags. You put the tea bag in a cup, add water, then take it out, and you don’t need to worry about dealing with all of the little leaves.

[00:18:04] It’s [convenient⁷³](#).

[00:18:06] But it might surprise you that tea bags were discovered completely by accident.

[00:18:13] In 1908, an American tea merchant called Thomas Sullivan sent small [samples⁷⁴](#) of tea to his customers. He [enclosed⁷⁵](#) them in little [silk⁷⁶](#) bags, assuming

⁷¹ across the land

⁷² already put into a box for sale

⁷³ easy to use, involving little trouble

⁷⁴ small amounts to show what the rest was like

⁷⁵ placed, put

⁷⁶ a soft type of cloth

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that the customers would take the tea leaves out and prepare the tea in a metal [infuser](#)⁷⁷.

[00:18:32] But the customers just put the entire bag into hot water, not realising that they were meant to take the tea leaves out. It tasted just as good, and there was none of the [mess](#)⁷⁸.

[00:18:46] So, Sullivan started [mass-producing](#)⁷⁹ these little bags, no longer made out of [silk](#), of course, and that was how the tea bag was invented.

[00:18:57] Our final curiosity is perhaps more of a point of debate, and that is about how you actually make a cup of tea.

[00:19:06] Do you put the water in first, the milk first, the bag first, and how long do you leave it to [brew](#)⁸⁰, how long do you leave the bag in there?

[00:19:17] Well, I can assure you that there are conversations happening about this very topic in British households right now, but here are three tips from a [so-called](#)⁸¹ tea-making expert.

⁷⁷ device used to make tea

⁷⁸ dirty or untidy state

⁷⁹ producing in large quantities

⁸⁰ boil, get prepared

⁸¹ supposed or self-named

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[00:19:29] Firstly, always drink from a [porcelain](#)⁸² or [ceramic](#)⁸³ cup, never from a [styrofoam](#)⁸⁴ one. The [styrofoam](#) actually [absorbs](#)⁸⁵ flavour [molecules](#)⁸⁶, reducing the taste.

[00:19:44] Secondly, always use [filtered](#)⁸⁷ water, as if you use [hardened](#)⁸⁸ water then the flavour of the tea will react with the [calcium](#)⁸⁹. And add the water first, then the tea, and then the milk.

[00:19:58] And the final tip, which some of you might find surprising, is to leave the teabag in the hot water for at least 5 minutes. You might think that the tea would be [horrendously](#)⁹⁰ strong and disgusting, but according to a literal expert in the science of tea making, this is the way to do it.

⁸² a hard shiny substance used to make cups, plates etc.

⁸³ a substance made of clay and hardened by heat

⁸⁴ a kind of plastic

⁸⁵ takes in

⁸⁶ the smallest units of a substance

⁸⁷ passed through a device to remove hard and other unwanted material

⁸⁸ containing hard or solid material

⁸⁹ a chemical element

⁹⁰ in a terrible way

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[00:20:21] So, that is our not-so-short history of tea, a drink with mysterious [origins](#)⁹¹, one that went from the [preserve](#)⁹² of emperors and the ultra-rich to being the second most popular drink in the world. Along the way it [altered](#)⁹³ global politics, caused countries to go to war with each other, and changed the world.

[00:20:44] It's certainly something to think about when you next put the [kettle](#) on, ready to enjoy a refreshing cup of tea.

[00:20:53] OK then, that is it for today's episode on tea.

[00:20:58] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:21:02] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:21:06] We do have an increasing number of members from China, so I would particularly love to know what your thoughts on this were.

[00:21:13] What do you see as the role of tea in Chinese culture today, and is it strange for you that it has been [semi-adopted](#)⁹⁴ as a national drink by a country on the other side of the world?

⁹¹ the place or point where it began

⁹² something meant only for them

⁹³ changed

⁹⁴ accepted or used to some degree

[00:21:27] And for everyone else, from whichever country you are from, what role does tea play in your culture?

[00:21:34] I know we have focussed on Britain and tea here, so I'd love to hear any interesting stories about tea and your country.

[00:21:43] Let's get this discussion started.

[00:21:45] You can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:21:55] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English. I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Sensation	something that caused a lot of interest and excitement
Espionage	the practice of spying to discover secret information
Smuggling	the process of illegally moving goods into a country
Kettle	a container for boiling water
Accompanying	being there at the same time
So much so	to such a degree or extent
Bought up	bought (for a large amount)
In a bid to	in an attempt or effort to
Keep up	make it remain at a high level
Morale	confidence during a difficult situation
Originates	comes or derives from
Flavoured	having a particular taste by the addition of extra material

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Chewed	bit and broke it into small pieces in the mouth
Medicinal	having healing use or properties
Caffeine	a chemical found in coffee and tea that makes people more active
Buzz	a state of activity and excitement
Neighbouring	nearby, close
Put their own mark	had their own effect on
Plain	with nothing added
Intricate	very detailed
Ritual	a specific series of actions
Convinced	certain about it
Exotic	exciting because of coming from a far away country
Overly	too, very
Take off	become popular
Throne	the special chair used by kings or queens
Nicknamed	given the informal name

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Monarch	king
Restore	return to the earlier position
Monarchy	a type of government with a king or queen at the head
Crown	special headdress (head decoration) worn by a king
Party animal	someone who enjoys parties and social activities
Develop a taste for	start liking
Developed a taste for	started to like it
Fashionable	behaving according to the current popular style
Monopoly	the exclusive or only control of the trade
Aristocrats	people belonging to the high social class
The preserve of	something meant only for certain people
Twist	change, variation
Interlinked	connected
Plantations	large farms
Wool	soft thick hair coming from the coat of sheep

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Horrific	shocking
Gross	general, not detailed
Underway	happening
Textiles	cloth
Possesses	has, owns
Prolific	plentiful, in large numbers
Abundance	the situation in which there is more than enough of something
Barbarians	peoples considered less advanced
To date	until now
Running out	being used up
Opium	a drug made from the seeds of a flower called poppy
Seized	taken
Smugglers	people who illegally moved goods into a country
Flooding	moving in large quantities of
Albeit	although

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Flood	move in large quantities of
Rapidly-growing	fast-growing
Dried out	completely dried, without water in them
Oxidised	combined with oxygen
Spies	people who were sent to secretly collect information
Disguised	having the appearance of
Peasant	countryman or farmer
Caucasian-looking	looking like a white-skinned man of European origin
Disguise	give new appearance to
Witnessing	seeing with his own eyes
Stronghold	strong position
Armed	equipped, having
Root	original form of the word
Overland	across the land
Pre-packaged	already put into a box for sale

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Convenient	easy to use, involving little trouble
Samples	small amounts to show what the rest was like
Enclosed	placed, put
Silk	a soft type of cloth
Infuser	device used to make tea
Mess	dirty or untidy state
Mass-producing	producing in large quantities
Brew	boil, get prepared
So-called	supposed or self-named
Porcelain	a hard shiny substance used to make cups, plates etc.
Ceramic	a substance made of clay and hardened by heat
Styrofoam	a kind of plastic
Absorbs	takes in
Molecules	the smallest units of a substance
Filtered	passed through a device to remove hard and other unwanted material

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Hardened containing hard or solid material

Calcium a chemical element

Horrendously in a terrible way

Origins the place or point where it began

Preserve something meant only for them

Altered changed

Semi-adopted accepted or used to some degree

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com