

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #037

London's Gin Craze // Mother's Ruin

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[00:00:04] Hello hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, where you can improve your English while learning fascinating things about the world.

[00:00:17] I'm Alastair Budge.

[00:00:19] I hadn't mentioned anything about the Corona virus so far as, well, you listen to this podcast to improve your English, not to get any kind of medical advice or commentary that I am in no way qualified to give.

[00:00:34] So I'm not going to start today, other than to say that I hope you are keeping safe in these [**turbulent**¹](#) times.

¹ involving a lot of sudden changes, arguments, or violence

[00:00:42] Here at the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast we are going to carry on as usual, as much as is possible, bringing you weird and wonderful stories and helping you improve your English at the same time.

[00:00:57] The subject of today's podcast is gin.

[00:01:01] But before we get right into it, let me just remind those of you listening to this podcast on Spotify, Apple Podcasts iVoox or wherever you get your podcasts, that you can get a copy of the transcript and key vocabulary for this podcast over on the website, which is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:23] The transcript comes in PDF format for you to download.

[00:01:27] It's there on the website too, but it also now comes in animating format.

[00:01:33] So this is a bit like subtitles, but actually way cooler because you can tap on a word and your browser should give you the definition of that word.

[00:01:43] And the key vocabulary is really useful because less common words are explained, you don't have to stop to look things up in a dictionary, and it means that you can build up your vocabulary at the same time as improving your English.

[00:02:00] So go and check that out.

[00:02:02] That's at Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:02:05] Okay, then.

[00:02:06] Today let's talk about gin.

[00:02:10] You may now think of it as an ingredient in a fancy cocktail, enjoyed with tonic and fresh lime.

[00:02:19] But not so long ago London experienced a gin [craze](#)² of [epic](#)³ scale.

[00:02:29] It has been called London's gin [epidemic](#)⁴, and actually that was the original title for this podcast.

[00:02:38] But [in light of](#)⁵ recent events, it obviously wouldn't be appropriate to talk about it as an [epidemic](#), so I'll try to avoid using that word.

[00:02:50] However, it was [deemed](#)⁶ pretty serious at the time, it was considered a big, big problem.

[00:02:56] To give you an idea of quite how much gin Londoners were drinking, the average Londoner, and [bear in mind](#)⁷ that this includes people who didn't drink gin at

² an activity, object, or idea that is extremely popular, usually for a short time

³ extremely large

⁴ the appearance of a particular disease in a large number of people at the same time

⁵ given that

⁶ considered

⁷ to remember a piece of information when you are making a decision or thinking about a matter

all, so small children for example, the average Londoner was drinking 10 litres of gin per year.

[00:03:20] To put that in context, now, the average amount of gin drunk per year is half a litre by Londoners.

[00:03:29] And the biggest gin drinkers in the world, the Spanish, drink one litre.

[00:03:36] So even now, the biggest gin drinkers in the world only drink 1/10th of what Londoners were drinking 250 years ago.

[00:03:46] So let's find out exactly how this happened and how gin got to this position where Londoners were drinking it like it was water.

[00:03:59] Gin, as you may know, is a [spirit](#)⁸, an alcohol, flavoured with [juniper](#)⁹ berries.

[00:04:08] It has been around since the middle ages and arrived in Britain in the 17th century after a Dutch [liquor](#)¹⁰ called Genever was introduced.

[00:04:20] One historian suggested that the reason that 'gin' is called 'gin' was because the British were too drunk to pronounce Genever and they just shortened it to gin.

[00:04:38] Anyway, I'll let you be the judge of that.

⁸ a strong alcoholic drink made from wine and sometimes flavoured with fruits

⁹ a small evergreen bush (= one that never loses its leaves) with sharp leaves and small purple fruits that are used in medicine and in making gin (= a type of strong alcoholic drink)

¹⁰ strong alcoholic drink

[00:04:41] Perhaps if you have spent many Friday evenings in British towns, then that might sound like a reasonable explanation.

[00:04:50] At the time that gin was introduced, most people would drink beer or [brandy](#)¹¹, and there really wasn't interest in this new arrival, this new gin.

[00:05:04] But there were three events that caused the [fate](#)¹² of gin to change and caused it to jump in popularity.

[00:05:13] Firstly, large taxes on [brandy](#).

[00:05:18] [Brandy](#) was normally imported from France, and as you may know, Britain was at war with France for extended periods during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

[00:05:33] As a way of punishing the French, King William raised taxes on imported French [brandy](#), making it much more expensive.

[00:05:44] And from a [patriotic](#)¹³ point of view, people didn't want to drink something made by a Frenchman.

[00:05:51] We were at war with them, and it would be very un-English to drink a French drink.

¹¹ a strong alcoholic drink made from wine and sometimes flavoured with fruits

¹² what happens to a particular person or thing, especially something final or negative, such as death or defeat

¹³ showing love for your country and being proud of it

[00:05:58] So brandy became expensive and unfashionable.

[00:06:04] Secondly, to try to encourage [domestic¹⁴](#) production of [spirits](#), and to reduce [reliance¹⁵](#) on the French, the British government allowed [unlicensed¹⁶](#) production of gin, meaning that practically anyone could do it.

[00:06:23] The result was a [boom¹⁷](#), a huge increase in the number of people producing gin.

[00:06:31] And the third factor was a reduction, a lowering of the price of food, meaning that even the poor now had some extra money in their pockets.

[00:06:45] These three factors: the increased taxes on [brandy](#), the relaxing of [legislation¹⁸](#) around production and the increased amount of [disposable income¹⁹](#) created the [perfect storm²⁰](#) for a huge [boom](#) in gin consumption.

[00:07:04] And that is exactly what happened.

¹⁴ relating to a person's own country

¹⁵ the state of depending on or trusting in something or someone

¹⁶ not having a licence (= a document giving legal permission) to do something, for example to sell alcohol, or use or own something, for example a gun

¹⁷ an increase in something, or a time when something becomes more popular

¹⁸ a law or set of laws suggested by a government and made official by a parliament

¹⁹ the money that you can spend as you want and not the money that you spend on taxes, food, and other basic needs

²⁰ an extremely bad situation in which many bad things happen at the same time

[00:07:08] By 1730 it's estimated that there were 7,000 gin shops, which made up half of the drinking [establishments](#)²¹ of London.

[00:07:21] And these were just the legal ones.

[00:07:24] There must have been thousands more illegal gin shops.

[00:07:28] And when I say gin shop, if you are thinking of a fancy gin bar with people sitting there [sipping](#)²² lovely cocktails, you'd be very much [mistaken](#)²³.

[00:07:42] They were literally just shops, places where you would go and buy a glass of gin, quite often it would be warm, you would drink it quickly, and presumably you would [emerge](#)²⁴ completely drunk a matter of minutes later.

[00:08:00] The gin itself was pretty horrible stuff, [fiendishly](#)²⁵ strong, very, very strong, and full of horrible things like sulphuric acid and [turpentine](#)²⁶, the kind of thing you use for cleaning paint brushes.

²¹ places of business

²² drinking, taking only a very small amount at a time

²³ wrong

²⁴ exit, leave

²⁵ extremely

²⁶ a strong acid with no colour

[00:08:19] Not only was it obviously disgusting to taste, to drink, it was incredibly bad for you.

[00:08:28] It made men [impotent²⁷](#) and made women's [sterile²⁸](#), so it made both sexes unable to have children, and it's thought that this was a major reason why the birth rate in London at this time was [exceeded²⁹](#) by the death rate.

[00:08:47] It also drove people mad, as we'll talk about in a bit.

[00:08:53] But this didn't stop Londoners from drinking it and it didn't stop the shops from selling it.

[00:09:02] The gin shops sold [vast³⁰](#) amounts of the stuff, [vast](#) amounts of gin, huge amounts, selling almost 50 million litres of gin per year.

[00:09:13] The signs above the shops, reportedly, said 'drunk for a penny, dead drunk for two pennies, clean straw for nothing'.

[00:09:27] So just to go over that again, it's that you'll be drunk for one penny, which is approximately 50p in today's money, under \$1.

[00:09:39] Dead drunk, very drunk for two pennies, so one pound or a dollar and a half.

²⁷ if a man is impotent, he cannot have sex because his penis cannot become hard or stay hard

²⁸ (of a living being) unable to produce young, or (of land) unable to produce plants or crops

²⁹ to be greater than a number or amount, or to go past an allowed limit

³⁰ extremely big

[00:09:47] Then clean straw for nothing means that you'll be so drunk, you'll just [pass out](#)³¹, you'll fall asleep onto a straw bed, and you won't have to pay for a bed.

[00:09:59] Remember, life in the 18th century for the majority of people in London was pretty terrible.

[00:10:07] It was cold, wet, and working days were long, dangerous, and [monotonous](#)³² and boring.

[00:10:17] Gin was something that was very cheap, it warmed you up, and I guess it helped you forget your situation.

[00:10:25] People have [drawn parallels](#)³³, they've made comparisons with the crack [epidemic](#), the crack cocaine epidemic in the 1980s in the US.

[00:10:39] Gin was [nicknamed](#)³⁴ 'mother's ruin' because of the rate at which it ruined, it destroyed women's lives.

[00:10:49] The [impurities](#)³⁵ in the gin, the bad things that were going into the gin, plus the rate at which people were drinking it, it drove people mad.

³¹ to become unconscious for a short time, for example when ill, badly hurt, or drunk

³² not changing and therefore boring

³³ compare something to

³⁴ given an informal name

³⁵ the fact that a substance is dirty or lower in quality because it is mixed with another substance, or something that causes this

[00:10:59] They became a hopelessly addicted to the stuff.

[00:11:05] One particularly sad story was of a woman named Judith Defour, and her two year old daughter, Mary.

[00:11:16] Apparently she had such a terrible gin addiction that she was literally driven mad.

[00:11:25] She went with her daughter and a friend into a field.

[00:11:29] They removed the daughter's clothes and they [strangled](#)³⁶ the daughter, they killed the daughter, and left her there dead.

[00:11:38] And they went to sell the clothes to buy gin.

[00:11:43] This woman had literally killed her baby for a drink of gin.

[00:11:49] This was a little bit of a [wake-up call](#)³⁷ for Britain, that this gin was causing people to do such horrible and desperate things, and the government finally decided to do something about it.

[00:12:04] In 1751 the government passed something called The Gin Act, which raised taxes and made it harder to get a licence.

³⁶ to kill someone by pressing their throat so that they cannot breathe

³⁷ If something that happens is a wake-up call, it should make you realise that you need to take action to change a situation

[00:12:14] Alongside this, they promoted drinking beer and tea, and by 1830, nearly 100 years after the death of poor little Mary Defour, beer finally became cheaper than gin again.

[00:12:30] So the gin [craze](#) was finally over.

[00:12:35] London's gin consumption returned to normal, although I'm sure that if you were to go to a bar on a normal Friday night in central London, you might not agree with the statement that Londoners' gin consumption is 'normal'.

[00:12:52] In any case, it's a lot less than 10 litres per year.

[00:12:56] And at least people don't seem to be going mad at quite the levels that they were doing 300 years ago.

[00:13:04] Gin, today, as you may know, is enjoying a bit of a [resurgence](#)³⁸, it's getting popular again, with consumption worldwide growing 13% per year from 2013 to 2018.

[00:13:21] Now though, it's certainly in the premium category.

[00:13:26] I think if you went to a fancy bar and asked for a cup of warm gin for a penny, they might be slightly surprised.

³⁸ a new increase of activity or interest in a particular subject or idea that had been forgotten for some time

[00:13:37] Okay then, I hope that this has been an interesting journey into the time of London's gin [craze](#)³⁹.

[00:13:45] It's fascinating to think that this really wasn't that long ago and that it had such a strong [grip](#)⁴⁰ on so many people.

[00:13:57] As usual, if you are looking for the transcript and key vocabulary for the podcast, you can get that on the website, which is [Leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:14:07] The transcript is available in new animating form, so that's a bit like subtitles, but even better.

[00:14:14] So go and check that out.

[00:14:16] That's at [Leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

[00:14:19] And final point - I always like to hear what you think of the podcast.

[00:14:23] So if you have thoughts, feedback, questions, or anything you want to say, then please do get in touch.

[00:14:31] You can email us at hi - 'hi' @[leonardoenglish.com](mailto:hi@leonardoenglish.com).

[00:14:35] I'd love to hear from you.

³⁹ an activity, object, or idea that is extremely popular, usually for a short time

⁴⁰ tight hold, control over

[00:14:38] I'm Alastair Budge and you've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:14:45] Stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Turbulent	involving a lot of sudden changes, arguments, or violence
Craze	an activity, object, or idea that is extremely popular, usually for a short time
Epic	extremely large
Epidemic	the appearance of a particular disease in a large number of people at the same time
In light of	given that
Deemed	considered
Bear in mind	to remember a piece of information when you are making a decision or thinking about a matter
Spirit	a strong alcoholic drink made from wine and sometimes flavoured with fruits
Juniper	a small evergreen bush (= one that never loses its leaves) with sharp leaves and small purple fruits that are used in medicine and in making gin (= a type of strong alcoholic drink)

Liquor	strong alcoholic drink
Brandy	a strong alcoholic drink made from wine and sometimes flavoured with fruits
Fate	what happens to a particular person or thing, especially something final or negative, such as death or defeat
Patriotic	showing love for your country and being proud of it
Domestic	relating to a person's own country
Reliance	the state of depending on or trusting in something or someone
Unlicensed	not having a licence (= a document giving legal permission) to do something, for example to sell alcohol, or use or own something, for example a gun
Boom	an increase in something, or a time when something becomes more popular
Legislation	a law or set of laws suggested by a government and made official by a parliament
Disposable income	the money that you can spend as you want and not the money that you spend on taxes, food, and other basic needs
Perfect storm	an extremely bad situation in which many bad things happen at

the same time

Establishments

places of business

Sipping

drinking, taking only a very small amount at a time

Mistaken

wrong

Emerge

exit, leave

Fiendishly

extremely

Turpentine

a strong acid with no colour

Impotent

if a man is impotent, he cannot have sex because his penis

cannot become hard or stay hard

Sterile

(of a living being) unable to produce young, or (of land) unable

to produce plants or crops

Exceeded

to be greater than a number or amount, or to go past an allowed

limit

Vast

extremely big

Pass out

to become unconscious for a short time, for example when ill,

badly hurt, or drunk

Monotonous

not changing and therefore boring

Drawn parallels	compare something to
Nicknamed	given an informal name
Impurities	the fact that a substance is dirty or lower in quality because it is mixed with another substance, or something that causes this
Strangled	to kill someone by pressing their throat so that they cannot breathe
Wake-up call	If something that happens is a wake-up call, it should make you realise that you need to take action to change a situation
Resurgence	a new increase of activity or interest in a particular subject or idea that had been forgotten for some time
Craze	an activity, object, or idea that is extremely popular, usually for a short time
Grip	tight hold, control over

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

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.