

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #121

Fordlandia

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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 the time that Henry Ford, the boss of the Ford Motor Company, tried to build a huge [rubber¹](#) [plantation²](#) in the Amazon rainforest.

[00:00:37] The name of his creation was Fordlândia.

¹ a material used to make tyres, boots etc

² a large area of land in a hot country where a crop is produced in large quantities

Fordlandia

[00:00:41] It's a fantastic story, and I have to give a [shout out](#)³ to a member of Leonardo English, an amazing lady called Susana, who requested an episode on it.

[00:00:51] So, thank you Susana, I hope you'll enjoy today's episode.

[00:00:56] OK, then, let's get started.

[00:00:59] You will, no doubt, have heard of the Ford Motor Company, the American car company, and its [iconic](#)⁴ founder, Henry Ford.

[00:01:10] Henry Ford had introduced the Model T to the world in 1908, and created the first [affordable](#)⁵, [mass-market](#)⁶ car.

[00:01:20] You need a lot of different products to make the body of a car, but that car isn't going to go anywhere without [tyres](#)⁷.

[00:01:30] And what do you need for [tyres](#)?

[00:01:33] [Rubber](#).

[00:01:35] Brazil had historically been the world's capital for [rubber](#).

³ public acknowledgement

⁴ very famous and well-known

⁵ not expensive

⁶ designed to be sold to lots of people

⁷ the thick rubber rings that go around the wheels of a car

Fordlandia

[00:01:40] **Rubber** trees grew naturally in the Amazon rainforest, and up until the end of the 19th century Brazil was the only country in the world that exported **rubber** in any serious quantities.

[00:01:56] Brazilians that owned **rubber plantations**⁸ grew fabulously wealthy as the demand for **rubber** increased, and it was a great **boost**⁹ for the economy.

[00:02:06] Indeed, this period was **nicknamed**¹⁰ the Amazon **rubber boom**¹¹.

[00:02:12] But just because Brazil was the only place that rubber grew naturally, it didn't mean it was the only country in the world where it could grow.

[00:02:23] In 1876 an **intrepid**¹² Englishman called Henry Wickham managed to export a large **batch**¹³ of **rubber** tree seeds out of Brazil, shipped them to London, and then took them to Malaysia, which was at the time a British colony, as well as to other colonies such as Sri Lanka, which was called Ceylon at the time.

[00:02:47] Malaysia, and these other colonies, proved to be fantastic places for growing **rubber**.

⁸ a large area of land in a hot country where a crop is produced in large quantities

⁹ quick and large improvement

¹⁰ given another name

¹¹ period of improving economic activity

¹² brave and showing no fear

¹³ group (of things)

Fordlandia

[00:02:55] **Rubber** trees in Brazil were frequently attacked by **pests**¹⁴ and suffered from **disease**¹⁵, and this wasn't nearly as much of a problem in places like Malaysia.

[00:03:07] The British, with their Malaysian trees, were able to produce just as much **rubber** as the Brazilians could, at a lower price, and by the start of the 20th century the Brazilian **stronghold**¹⁶, the Brazilian **monopoly**¹⁷ on the **rubber** industry was over.

[00:03:26] Companies now bought British **rubber**, not Brazilian **rubber**.

[00:03:31] Naturally, given that he was selling 40% of all of the cars in America, and all these cars needed **tyres**, Henry Ford needed to buy a lot of **rubber**.

[00:03:44] But he didn't like being **dependent**¹⁸ on the British, and their colonial **rubber**.

[00:03:50] Not only would the **rubber** take a long time to get to Ford's factories in the US, but he had no control over that part of the **supply chain**¹⁹.

¹⁴ small insects that damage crops

¹⁵ an illness affecting a person, plant, animal etc.

¹⁶ a building or place that is strongly defended

¹⁷ when a company or government has complete control over something

¹⁸ needing the support or help of

¹⁹ the system of people and things that are involved in getting a product from one place to its final destination

Fordlandia

[00:04:01] Henry Ford was reportedly a huge [control freak](#)²⁰, and he wasn't happy with this situation.

[00:04:09] He also knew that the Brazilians were suffering, as their [rubber](#) industry had been hugely damaged.

[00:04:17] Brazil was a lot closer to America than East Asia was.

[00:04:21] Rubber grew naturally in Brazil, and there was a huge amount of land.

[00:04:26] So, what if Ford applied the same business practices and skill that he had used to build very efficient factories in America to build a new [rubber plantation](#) in the Amazon?

[00:04:41] He would get his own supply of [rubber](#), and wouldn't be [beholden](#)²¹ to the British.

[00:04:46] The Brazilians would have a large customer, probably the world's biggest customer for [rubber](#), and this would give their economy a much-needed [boost](#).

²⁰ someone who doesn't like not being in control of everything

²¹ obliged to do something for someone else

Fordlandia

[00:04:57] It sounded like a win-win situation, and in the early 1920s Henry Ford sent some of his employees to Brazil to try to [negotiate](#)²² with the Brazilian government, and find some [suitable](#)²³ land.

[00:05:13] As expected, the Brazilian government [sensed](#)²⁴ an opportunity, and offered Ford a huge [patch](#)²⁵ of land in the Amazon rainforest.

[00:05:24] Specifically, they offered him about 10,000 km squared to build a huge [rubber plantation](#).

[00:05:32] Ford wouldn't have to pay any export taxes, but he would have to pay the Brazilian government 9% of the profits.

[00:05:43] 10,000 km squared is the kind of number that sounds large, but just to give you an idea of how big that actually is, it's about the size of Jamaica, it's about 10 times the size of Greater London and 20 times the size of Madrid.

[00:06:01] It was a huge amount of land.

[00:06:04] But Ford wasn't only interested in creating a place to produce [rubber](#); he wanted to create a community, he wanted to build more than just a [rubber plantation](#).

²² have formal discussions

²³ appropriate, acceptable for the purpose

²⁴ believed

²⁵ area

Fordlandia

[00:06:17] In Detroit, where Ford was based, the Ford factory had been [instrumental](#)²⁶ in creating the American middle class.

[00:06:27] The company paid a [fair wage](#)²⁷, it paid more than the average salary, and it took care of its employees.

[00:06:36] Henry Ford had this [paternalistic](#)²⁸ view of the role of a company, that it was the role of a company to look after its employees, not just to make as much money as possible.

[00:06:50] That might seem like a slightly revolutionary idea now, but 100 years ago it was even more so.

[00:06:59] Ford believed that he could recreate his successes in America in the Amazon, so he sought to build a kind of mid-western town, an American town, in the heart of the Amazon.

[00:07:14] The name of that town was Fordlandia.

[00:07:18] Fordlandia was to be built a day and a half's boat ride up the Amazon, in a state called Para.

²⁶ very important

²⁷ an appropriate salary

²⁸ a paternalistic company is one where the people in charge take decisions about their workers lives that they believe will benefit them, even though this may not always be true

Fordlandia

[00:07:26] For the non-Brazilians out there who need an explanation of where exactly that is, it's right at the north of Brazil, just a few hundred kilometres south of the equator.

[00:07:38] Construction started and by 1928, Ford's dream **rubber** city was completed.

[00:07:47] It had schools, a hospital, a swimming pool, a golf course - everything that Ford would have expected there to be in a **civilised**²⁹ American town.

[00:07:58] And of course, there were huge **rubber** plantations.

[00:08:02] It was a **daring**³⁰ move, a very **bold**³¹ move.

[00:08:07] Henry Ford hadn't even visited the site, and he hadn't **commissioned**³² any sort of real **survey**³³ of the land before going ahead with the deal.

[00:08:18] He also didn't hire any **botanists**³⁴, or take any advice from any experts on how to actually grow **rubber**.

²⁹ well developed

³⁰ brave

³¹ brave, not frightened

³² formally choose to do a piece of work

³³ examination

³⁴ experts in plants

Fordlandia

[00:08:28] Reportedly he hated experts, and he had complete [conviction](#)³⁵ in his own genius and business ability.

[00:08:37] He had essentially created the entire automobile industry, and became one of the richest men in America, so he didn't need to listen to any experts about what was and wasn't possible, especially when it came to something as simple as what was really just farming.

[00:08:56] Or so Ford thought.

[00:09:00] Fordlandia was built, and managers from Ford America were [shipped down](#)³⁶ to manage Henry Ford's creation.

[00:09:08] To work on the [rubber plantation](#), the American managers hired local workers.

[00:09:14] They paid them double the normal rate in Brazil, and understandably had no problem finding people willing to work on this new, exciting American development.

[00:09:25] Fordlandia was in the middle of nowhere, there was nothing around it but the Amazon rainforest.

[00:09:33] So most of the workers lived, worked, and played in the [complex](#)³⁷.

³⁵ strong belief

³⁶ sent down by ship

³⁷ a group of buildings

Fordlandia

[00:09:39] But they soon found that their ideas of how they wanted to live their lives, and Ford's idea of how a good life should be lived, weren't exactly the same.

[00:09:52] With his [paternalistic](#) view of the role of a company, Ford believed that people living in Fordlandia, whether those were the Americans or the Brazilians, should live in a certain way, [regardless](#)³⁸ of their cultural background.

[00:10:08] There was no meat served, as Ford was a vegetarian.

[00:10:12] Alcohol was banned - Ford had been a great supporter of [prohibition](#)³⁹ in the US.

[00:10:19] [Prostitution](#)⁴⁰ was also banned - that wasn't something that fitted with Ford's [moral](#)⁴¹ beliefs either.

[00:10:26] The Brazilian workers were required to adjust to American working [customs](#)⁴². They had [ID badges](#)⁴³, and they were required to work at fixed, American hours, not at the times that were necessarily best to collect [rubber](#).

³⁸ despite

³⁹ the prohibition era in the United States was when alcohol was forbidden

⁴⁰ the buying and selling of sex

⁴¹ relating to good standards of behaviour

⁴² habits and traditions

⁴³ identification badges

Fordlandia

[00:10:43] They were even expected to participate in activities like [square dancing](#)⁴⁴ - this was a type of dance that was popular in America at the time, and Ford had apparently met his wife at a [square dancing](#) party.

[00:10:59] As you might imagine, this [custom](#)⁴⁵ was a little confusing for people who had grown up in the Amazon.

[00:11:07] They were paid a lot of money, compared to other opportunities, but because they were stuck in Fordlandia with nothing really to spend their money on, this didn't matter that much, the only effect it had was making people more likely to leave.

[00:11:25] Workers would stay for short periods, then disappear with their [earnings](#)⁴⁶ to spend them elsewhere, only to come back weeks or months later, when the money ran out.

[00:11:37] And they weren't prepared to just stick to these American [customs](#) and rules that were promoted by Ford.

[00:11:45] There was a report of some of the workers building their own [brothel](#)⁴⁷, their own house with [prostitutes](#)⁴⁸ and a bar.

⁴⁴ a traditional American dance

⁴⁵ habit and tradition

⁴⁶ salary, the money you are paid for doing a job

⁴⁷ a place where people go to pay for sex

⁴⁸ people who sell sex

Fordlandia

[00:11:54] This was actually built on the river, it was built on [stilts](#)⁴⁹, and just outside the [boundary](#)⁵⁰ of Fordlandia, so that it technically wasn't part of Ford's territory and the American managers couldn't shut it down.

[00:12:10] It was called, somewhat [amusingly](#)⁵¹, the Island of Innocence.

[00:12:15] So, there was a [clash](#)⁵² of cultures, a [mismatch](#)⁵³ between the sort of life that Henry Ford thought his workers should be living and the lives that they actually wanted to live.

[00:12:29] Henry Ford had essentially decided that everyone should live the life of a [midwestern](#)⁵⁴ car factory worker, no matter whether they lived in Detroit or in the middle of the Amazon rainforest, and no [compromises](#)⁵⁵ were made.

[00:12:46] Indeed, this [clash](#) of cultures reached a new level when a change was made to how the workers would receive their food in the cafeteria.

⁴⁹ long poles that support a building from below

⁵⁰ the line that marks the edge of an area

⁵¹ in a funny way

⁵² fight, battle

⁵³ when two things come together that are unsuitable for each other

⁵⁴ relating to the American Midwest

⁵⁵ adjustments to a situation to accommodate the demands of someone else

Fordlandia

[00:12:57] Traditionally, the workers had sat down at tables and had their food brought to them.

[00:13:04] But Ford, ever the efficiency-expert, thought it would be more efficient for workers to queue up and collect their food at a sort of [buffet](#)⁵⁶ system.

[00:13:16] Enough was enough.

[00:13:18] The workers rebelled, there was a huge [riot](#)⁵⁷, and parts of the cafeteria were destroyed.

[00:13:25] They even pushed trucks into the river, and caused tens of thousands of dollars in damage.

[00:13:32] The riot was only stopped when the Brazilian army arrived, and some [compromises](#) were reached between the workers and their American managers.

[00:13:43] It wasn't just the local Brazilians that [struggled](#)⁵⁸ to adapt to life in Fordlandia.

[00:13:49] The Americans who were sent to manage the land had huge trouble.

[00:13:54] Firstly, [to state the obvious](#), the climate was very different. The Amazon rainforest is not Detroit.

⁵⁶ a meal where people serve themselves food

⁵⁷ when a large amount of people behave in a noisy, violent, way

⁵⁸ had difficulty (to do something)

Fordlandia

[00:14:03] It was incredibly hot for most of the day.

[00:14:06] There were [poisonous](#)⁵⁹ snakes, bats, and all sorts of animals that they had to deal with.

[00:14:13] The houses that were built in Fordlandia were American style houses, the sort of houses you might see in the suburbs of Detroit.

[00:14:22] They had metal roofs, which turned them into ovens in the heat of the Amazon.

[00:14:29] American managers came and went, and there was a huge [turnover](#)⁶⁰ of staff.

[00:14:35] And the problems weren't limited to the people working in Fordlandia.

[00:14:40] Ford had also not properly understood how [rubber](#) grows.

[00:14:47] [Rubber](#) is produced by [rubber](#) trees, but in its natural [habitat](#)⁶¹, in the Amazon, the trees grow in the rainforest, [sheltered](#)⁶² by other, larger trees.

[00:14:59] Ford decided to plant all the [rubber](#) trees together, close to one another in huge fields.

⁵⁹ carrying poison, a substance that can kill or harm

⁶⁰ when workers quit and new ones are hired

⁶¹ the natural environment

⁶² protected from the natural weather

Fordlandia

[00:15:07] This meant that [disease spread](#)⁶³ quickly from one plant to another, and hundreds of thousands of rubber trees were [ruined](#)⁶⁴, they were [unusable](#)⁶⁵.

[00:15:18] The American workers thought that the location of Fordlandia might be the problem, so in 1934 they [abandoned](#)⁶⁶ the original area and created a new [settlement](#)⁶⁷ [downriver](#)⁶⁸ called Belterra.

[00:15:34] But that also proved to be not nearly as productive as Ford had hoped for.

[00:15:41] Indeed, the entire project was [a far cry](#)⁶⁹ from Ford's vision of an Amazonian [rubber utopia](#)⁷⁰ that not only solved the problem of producing enough [rubber](#) for all of the [tyres](#) in his cars, but also created a [model](#)⁷¹ society in the heart of the Amazon.

[00:16:00] After 17 years of Ford's industrial experiment in the Amazon, the entire project was only able to produce 750 tonnes of rubber.

⁶³ moved

⁶⁴ destroyed

⁶⁵ not able to be used

⁶⁶ left alone, usually forever

⁶⁷ a collection of houses where people live

⁶⁸ further down the river (in the direction the river is flowing)

⁶⁹ very different (from)

⁷⁰ a perfect society

⁷¹ something that can be copied because it is the perfect example

Fordlandia

[00:16:11] That might sound like a lot, but it was less than 2% of Ford's goal of 38,000 tonnes. And not a single gramme of it ever made it into a Ford car.

[00:16:26] Throughout Fordlandia's existence, strangely enough, its creator, Henry Ford, didn't visit even once.

[00:16:34] It's not clear exactly why he didn't come.

[00:16:38] Perhaps he trusted his American [lieutenants⁷²](#) to fix it, perhaps he had too much else going on, or perhaps he just couldn't [bear⁷³](#) to see that his project was a huge failure.

[00:16:53] And in 1945, after he handed control of the Ford Motor Company to his grandson, Henry Ford II, all of the land was sold back to the Brazilian government.

[00:17:06] The Brazilian government paid \$250,000 for it, a [pittance⁷⁴](#), a tiny amount of money.

[00:17:14] It's estimated that Ford took a \$20 million dollar loss on this investment, which would work out at almost \$300 million dollars in today's money.

[00:17:25] Amazingly enough, Fordlandia does still exist today, [albeit⁷⁵](#) mostly in ruins.

⁷² managers

⁷³ to accept (a situation)

⁷⁴ a small amount of money

⁷⁵ although

Fordlandia

[00:17:32] If you take a 15 hour boat trip up the Amazon you can still see the [abandoned](#) American project.

[00:17:39] There are some clips on YouTube, and it's really amazing. I'd certainly love to visit if I ever find myself in that part of the Amazon rainforest.

[00:17:49] Now it's just a [monument](#)⁷⁶ to Ford's industrial dream.

[00:17:54] He had made it work in Detroit, and had brought great [prosperity](#)⁷⁷ to his workers in America.

[00:18:00] But, unfortunately for Ford and unfortunately for the workers in Fordlandia, Henry Ford hadn't realised that just using the same [formula](#)⁷⁸ in the Amazon as had worked in Detroit wasn't the smartest of moves.

[00:18:16] And indeed, this particular move ended up being a lesson that cost Ford \$300 million dollars to learn.

[00:18:26] OK then, that is that is it for today's episode on Fordlandia.

[00:18:31] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:18:36] We have quite a few Brazilian members, so I'd particularly love to know what you thought of this episode.

⁷⁶ something that is built to honour a person or event

⁷⁷ being successful

⁷⁸ recipe, accepted way (of doing something)

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Fordlandia

[00:18:43] Did you know about Fordlandia?

[00:18:45] What do you think of Ford's plans?

[00:18:48] Are there other examples of American [industrialists](#)⁷⁹ trying to do similar things in Brazil?

[00:18:54] I'd love to know.

[00:18:55] You can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:05] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English

[00:19:11] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

⁷⁹ important industrial businesspeople

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Rubber	a material used to make tyres, boots etc
Plantation	a large area of land in a hot country where a crop is produced in large quantities
Shout out	public acknowledgement
Iconic	very famous and well-known
Affordable	not expensive
Mass-market	designed to be sold to lots of people
Tyres	the thick rubber rings that go around the wheels of a car
Plantations	a large area of land in a hot country where a crop is produced in large quantities
Boost	quick and large improvement
Nicknamed	given another name
Boom	period of improving economic activity

Fordlandia

Intrepid	brave and showing no fear
Batch	group (of things)
Pests	small insects that damage crops
Disease	an illness affecting a person, plant, animal etc.
Stronghold	a building or place that is strongly defended
Monopoly	when a company or government has complete control over something
Dependent	needing the support or help of
Supply chain	the system of people and things that are involved in getting a product from one place to its final destination
Control freak	someone who doesn't like not being in control of everything
Beholden	obliged to do something for someone else
Negotiate	have formal discussions
Suitable	appropriate, acceptable for the purpose
Sensed	believed
Patch	area
Instrumental	very important

Fordlandia

Fair wage	an appropriate salary
Paternalistic	a paternalistic company is one where the people in charge take decisions about their workers lives that they believe will benefit them, even though this may not always be true
Civilised	well developed
Daring	brave
Bold	brave, not frightened
Commissioned	formally choose to do a piece of work
Survey	examination
Botanists	experts in plants
Conviction	strong belief
Shipped down	sent down by ship
Complex	a group of buildings
Regardless	despite
Prohibition	the prohibition era in the United States was when alcohol was forbidden
Prostitution	the buying and selling of sex

Fordlandia

Moral	relating to good standards of behaviour
Customs	habits and traditions
ID badges	identification badges
Square dancing	a traditional American dance
Custom	habit and tradition
Earnings	salary, the money you are paid for doing a job
Brothel	a place where people go to pay for sex
Prostitutes	people who sell sex
Stilts	long poles that support a building from below
Boundary	the line that marks the edge of an area
Amusingly	in a funny way
Clash	fight, battle
Mismatch	when two things come together that are unsuitable for each other
Midwestern	relating to the American Midwest
Compromises	adjustments to a situation to accommodate the demands of someone else

Fordlandia

Buffet	a meal where people serve themselves food
Riot	when a large amount of people behave in a noisy, violent, way
Struggled	had difficulty (to do something)
To state the obvious	to say something that is obvious
Poisonous	carrying poison, a substance that can kill or harm
Turnover	when workers quit and new ones are hired
Habitat	the natural environment
Sheltered	protected from the natural weather
Spread	moved
Ruined	destroyed
Unusable	not able to be used
Abandoned	left alone, usually forever
Settlement	a collection of houses where people live
Downriver	further down the river (in the direction the river is flowing)
A far cry	very different (from)

Fordlandia

Utopia	a perfect society
Model	something that can be copied because it is the perfect example
Lieutenants	managers
Bear	to accept (a situation)
Pittance	a small amount of money
Albeit	although
Monument	something that is built to honour a person or event
Prosperity	being successful
Formula	recipe, accepted way (of doing something)
Industrialists	important industrial businesspeople

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?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com