



# English Learning for Curious Minds



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## Episode #073

### Robert Maxwell | From Baron to Villain

#### 21 July, 2020



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

[00:00:29] Now, you may not have heard this name before, or if you have, you might have heard it recently [in conjunction<sup>1</sup>](#) with his daughter, Ghislaine Maxwell, who is accused of being involved in the Jeffrey Epstein [sex trafficking ring<sup>2</sup>](#).

[00:00:45] But we aren't going to talk about Ghislaine Maxwell, or Jeffrey Epstein.

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<sup>1</sup> because of, happening with

<sup>2</sup> a group that transports people for sexual exploitation



[00:00:48] Instead, we are going to be talking about Ghislaine's father Robert.

[00:00:56] His story takes us from Czechoslovakia to France, to the British Houses of Parliament, to the top of the British media and ends as we'll find out just off the Canary Islands of Spain.

[00:01:11] So without further ado, [let's get cracking<sup>3</sup>](#).

[00:01:16] Our story starts in a small town called Slatinské Doly in what was then Czechoslovakia, but now is part of Ukraine.

[00:01:27] On the 10th of June 1923, Ján Ludvík Hyman Binyamin Hoch was born to a poor orthodox Jewish family.

[00:01:39] Not a huge amount is known about his early life, but he claimed to not have owned a pair of shoes until he was seven years old.

[00:01:49] When he was 16 years old, in 1939, the Nazis marched into Czechoslovakia. Obviously, it wasn't a good time or place to be Jewish, and the teenager fled to France.

[00:02:06] It proved to be an act that saved his life, as most of his family were left behind in Czechoslovakia, and ended up being sent to Auschwitz and murdered by the Nazis.

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<sup>3</sup> let's start



[00:02:18] The young Hoch [enlisted](#)<sup>4</sup> in the Czechoslovakian army, and fought the Nazis throughout France.

[00:02:27] He then transferred over to the British army, and was promoted several times, achieving the [rank](#)<sup>5</sup> of Captain, and winning the [Military Cross](#)<sup>6</sup>.

[00:02:38] After the war ended, he settled in Britain, with his new, French wife, and ended up having 9 children over the next 16 years, the youngest of whom, Ghislaine, is the one you may be hearing about at the moment.

[00:02:54] And it was when he got to Britain that he really turned his attention to business.

[00:03:02] His ambition was to build up an empire, and he got to work right away.

[00:03:09] But first, he needed a new name. He was starting a new life in the United Kingdom, and so he needed a British name.

[00:03:19] In June 1948, after having become a British citizen two years earlier, he changed his name to Ian Robert Maxwell, you might say a classic British name at the time.

[00:03:33] Maxwell quickly got to business, and started building up his empire.

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<sup>4</sup> joined (the army)

<sup>5</sup> a position in the army

<sup>6</sup> a high medal awarded in the British army



[00:03:40] He started by distributing scientific books, and he then bought a small company that he renamed Pergamon Press, which he turned into a publishing [powerhouse](#)<sup>7</sup> over the next 20 years or so.

[00:03:54] Although he was an [avowed](#)<sup>8</sup> socialist, which was unusual for people in the media back then, he was known for being a [ruthless](#)<sup>9</sup> operator, religiously cutting costs, sacking people, and generally, not doing things that would go down very well with any modern [HR department](#)<sup>10</sup>.

[00:04:15] The company was a huge success, and he [floated it](#)<sup>11</sup>, it went public, in nineteen sixty four, for today's equivalent of around 30 million dollars.

[00:04:29] Now, in the era of billion dollar companies, 30 million might not sound like very much, but it was a huge sum at the time, and made him a multi-millionaire.

[00:04:42] And he wasn't the kind of person to be quiet in the background, keeping out of the public eye and maintaining a low profile.

[00:04:51] Quite the opposite.

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<sup>7</sup> a very powerful organisation

<sup>8</sup> admitted, publicly declared

<sup>9</sup> not caring about others

<sup>10</sup> Human Resources department (the department of a company dealing with the employees)

<sup>11</sup> sold shares to the public for the first time



[00:04:53] He rented a large mansion house outside Oxford, directly from the Oxford Council, and traveled to his office in London every day in a helicopter.

[00:05:07] His London headquarters were named Maxwell House, of course. I wonder if you can think of any comparisons with any modern public figures who like to put their names on buildings?

[00:05:19] Maxwell had [all the trappings<sup>12</sup>](#) of a multimillionaire, the Rolls Royces, the yacht, and he even owned a couple of British football clubs.

[00:05:32] And, as seems to be even more common nowadays with media personalities, he [tried his hand<sup>13</sup>](#) at politics, becoming a Labour Party MP in 1964.

[00:05:44] But his politics, and his background were to be a problem when trying to expand his media empire.

[00:05:53] He tried to buy the [tabloid<sup>14</sup>](#) newspaper The News of The World in 1969, but the family who owned it were [loathed to<sup>15</sup>](#) sell it to an immigrant, especially one with socialist views.

[00:06:08] When he was making a bid for the newspaper, when he was trying to buy it, the editor published an opinion piece on the front page saying “This is a British paper,

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<sup>12</sup> all of the signs

<sup>13</sup> try something for the first time

<sup>14</sup> a newspaper with small pages, mainly with sensational stories

<sup>15</sup> to very strongly not want to do something



run by British people... as British as roast beef and Yorkshire pudding... Let us keep it that way".

[00:06:27] Instead, the News of the World was sold to another media [tycoon<sup>16</sup>](#), a man called Rupert Murdoch.

[00:06:36] Now, if you have listened to the episode on Fox News, you will know all about Rupert Murdoch.

[00:06:43] He became a [bitter<sup>17</sup>](#) rival of Maxwell's, and they both ended up fighting for control over various British newspapers over the next couple of decades.

[00:06:54] The deal for which Maxwell is most remembered is for the Mirror Group, which is a large British publishing company that mainly published pro-Labour [tabloids](#), but Maxwell's politics and his business interests didn't always [align<sup>18</sup>](#).

[00:07:14] He had been a Labour MP, but he got into big fights with the [trade unions<sup>19</sup>](#) when it came to sacking people.

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<sup>16</sup> a rich and powerful person

<sup>17</sup> fierce and important

<sup>18</sup> be similar

<sup>19</sup> organisations that represent the rights of workers



[00:07:23] So much so<sup>20</sup> that the unions<sup>21</sup> even tried to kick him out of the Labour Party.

[00:07:29] Buying companies and sacking people wasn't a very socialist thing to do, and there was an obvious contradiction here between his politics and his personal business interests.

[00:07:43] Now, we're not going to list out every single one of Maxwell's business dealings, because, well, he had a lot. He ended up buying companies all over Europe and the United States, and it's said that he was worth over a billion dollars. Quite an impressive rise for someone who didn't have a pair of shoes until he was 7 years old.

[00:08:07] However, this rise wasn't without controversy, the biggest of which will have to wait until the end of the episode.

[00:08:16] Firstly, he was, according to many who worked for him, just an awful boss. He would routinely bully<sup>22</sup> his employees and fire<sup>23</sup> them without any reason.

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<sup>20</sup> to the extent that

<sup>21</sup> see trade unions

<sup>22</sup> to hurt or frighten someone, often over an extended period of time

<sup>23</sup> end an employment contract



[00:08:30] He reportedly<sup>24</sup> worked up to 17 hours a day, 7 days a week, and was constantly on the hunt<sup>25</sup> for his next purchase, a way to expand his empire.

[00:08:42] He was never happy with what he had, he was always looking for more.

[00:08:48] The line between truth and fiction was quite blurred<sup>26</sup> for Maxwell, and he would apparently try to impress visitors to his office by picking up the phone and saying 'Get me Number 10' - which is the home of the British Prime Minister, or 'Get me the White House', then a few minutes later the phone would ring back and he'd pretend to be having a conversation.

[00:09:13] However, this all pales in comparison<sup>27</sup> when it comes to what happened next.

[00:09:21] On the 5th of November, 1991, he was sailing just off the Canary Islands on his yacht, the Lady Ghislaine, named after his youngest daughter.

[00:09:32] He had spoken to his son, Kevin, the previous day, and was last seen by the crew around 4.35 in the morning.

[00:09:42] But later that morning, he was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared.

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<sup>24</sup> according to what people say or think

<sup>25</sup> looking for

<sup>26</sup> unclear, not easy to see

<sup>27</sup> to seem small compared to something else



[00:09:48] Later that day, his naked body was [spotted](#)<sup>28</sup> by some Spanish fisherman, floating about 15 miles from where he was last seen.

[00:09:59] Maxwell was a big man, weighing about 140kg at the time, and I can imagine it must have been quite a surprise to see this huge, naked man just floating in the ocean.

[00:10:15] After his death, it was found that he had taken huge amounts of money from his staff's [pensions](#)<sup>29</sup>, almost 500 million pounds that had been put aside by the employees of his companies, to be saved for their retirement.

[00:10:33] Maxwell was badly in debt, and he had [raided](#)<sup>30</sup> the [pension](#) pots of his employees in order to try to save his companies. Obviously, it was highly illegal to take this money that his staff had been saving for their retirement.

[00:10:51] Rumours quickly began to circulate.

[00:10:54] This all seemed very suspicious - it looked like Maxwell had been [on the cusp](#)<sup>31</sup> of being found out, of this huge fraud and theft being discovered.

[00:11:07] Did he kill himself?

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<sup>28</sup> seen

<sup>29</sup> the money that an employee puts aside for retirement

<sup>30</sup> stolen

<sup>31</sup> about to



[00:11:09] Or was he pushed by someone?

[00:11:12] After the autopsy, nothing strange was found. Apparently Maxwell liked to pee off the edge of the boat, and it's suspected that he had a heart attack and fell off in the middle of the night, and none of the crew heard him.

[00:11:30] Certainly, those who knew him say that suicide is unlikely, given the kind of person Maxwell was. He thought he was [invincible](#)<sup>32</sup>, and the idea of him throwing himself off a boat to avoid being found out just wasn't believable to many of those who knew him.

[00:11:51] In the months after his death, there were large protests from the employees of his companies.

[00:11:57] Their [hard earned](#)<sup>33</sup> money that had been taken from them - who was going to help them get it back?

[00:12:04] The British government did [step up](#)<sup>34</sup>, and provided some of the money to repair the pension fund. But not all of it, and his employees lost half of the savings they had put aside for their retirement.

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<sup>32</sup> impossible to defeat

<sup>33</sup> deserved because someone has worked hard to get it

<sup>34</sup> to take an action, even if it is not strictly required



[00:12:20] Although now it's been almost 30 years since his death, he has had a lasting impact on British popular culture.

[00:12:31] If you have seen the James Bond film Tomorrow Never Dies, there is a media [baron<sup>35</sup>](#) called Eliot Carver who is thought to be inspired by Maxwell.

[00:12:42] If you remember the film, the baddy - the bad guy - Carver is killed by James Bond. But this is [covered up<sup>36</sup>](#) by the British secret service, who issue a press release saying that Carver died falling [overboard<sup>37</sup>](#) his yacht.

[00:12:59] And, of course, Maxwell's legacy is back in the news, given what has [come to light<sup>38</sup>](#) with his daughter, and her relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, and the crimes that she is accused of committing.

[00:13:14] Robert Maxwell's story is one of rise and fall, of how someone can go from arriving [penniless<sup>39</sup>](#) in a country to controlling a large part of the media.

[00:13:26] At his height, he was admired by many as a business guru and a tale to [emulate<sup>40</sup>](#).

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<sup>35</sup> technically a member of the nobility, but it can also mean a high-powered businessman

<sup>36</sup> to hide what has really happened

<sup>37</sup> over the side of a boat

<sup>38</sup> become known publicly

<sup>39</sup> without any money, very poor

<sup>40</sup> to copy



[00:13:34] However, shortly after his death, with no way to hide what he had been up to, it soon became evident that a large part of his success was a [scam](#)<sup>41</sup>, that despite [pledging](#)<sup>42</sup> to be [a man of the people](#)<sup>43</sup>, and a [devout](#)<sup>44</sup> socialist, he was actually stealing from the very people he was [pledging](#) to support.

[00:13:58] And unfortunately for him, that is the legacy of Robert Maxwell.

[00:14:05] OK then that is it for today's episode.

[00:14:09] As always, I would love to know what you think.

[00:14:12] Had you heard of Robert Maxwell before, or at least, had you heard of him before hearing about his daughter?

[00:14:19] Are there similar stories in your country? I would love to know. You can email hi - hi@leonardoenglish.com.

[00:14:29] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:14:35] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

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<sup>41</sup> an illegal way of making money, often by tricking people

<sup>42</sup> promising

<sup>43</sup> someone who shows understanding of and sympathy for normal people

<sup>44</sup> strongly believing



## Key vocabulary

<b>Word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>In conjunction</b>	because of, happening with
<b>Sex trafficking ring</b>	a group that transports people for sexual exploitation
<b>Let's get cracking</b>	let's start
<b>Enlisted</b>	joined (the army)
<b>Rank</b>	a position in the army
<b>Military cross</b>	a high medal awarded in the British army
<b>Powerhouse</b>	a very powerful organisation
<b>Avowed</b>	admitted, publicly declared
<b>Ruthless</b>	not caring about others
<b>HR department</b>	Human Resources department (the department of a company dealing with the employees)
<b>Floated it</b>	sold shares to the public for the first time
<b>All the trappings</b>	all of the signs
<b>Tried his hand</b>	try something for the first time



<b>Tabloid</b>	a newspaper with small pages, mainly with sensational stories
<b>Loathed to</b>	to very strongly not want to do something
<b>Tycoon</b>	a rich and powerful person
<b>Bitter</b>	fierce and important
<b>Align</b>	be similar
<b>Trade unions</b>	organisations that represent the rights of workers
<b>So much so</b>	to the extent that
<b>Unions</b>	see trade unions
<b>Bully</b>	to hurt or frighten someone, often over an extended period of time
<b>Fire</b>	end an employment contract
<b>Reportedly</b>	according to what people say or think
<b>On the hunt</b>	looking for
<b>Blurred</b>	unclear, not easy to see
<b>Pales in comparison</b>	to seem small compared to something else
<b>Spotted</b>	seen



<b>Pensions</b>	the money that an employee puts aside for retirement
<b>Raided</b>	stolen
<b>On the cusp</b>	about to
<b>Invincible</b>	impossible to defeat
<b>Hard earned</b>	deserved because someone has worked hard to get it
<b>Step up</b>	to take an action, even if it is not strictly required
<b>Baron</b>	technically a member of the nobility, but it can also mean a high-powered businessman
<b>Covered up</b>	to hide what has really happened
<b>Overboard</b>	over the side of a boat
<b>Come to light</b>	become known publicly
<b>Penniless</b>	without any money, very poor
<b>Emulate</b>	to copy
<b>Scam</b>	an illegal way of making money, often by tricking people
<b>Pledging</b>	promising
<b>A man of the people</b>	someone who shows understanding of and sympathy for normal people



**Devout**

strongly believing

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