



English Learning for Curious Minds



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Episode #132

Valentine's Day

12th Feb, 2021

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

[00:00:11] 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.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Valentine's Day.

[00:00:27] This episode is set to be released on February the 12th, two days before a day that has become associated with romance and love across much of the world.

[00:00:37] So, in today's episode we are going to talk about the history of this day, some of the not-very-romantic-at-all theories about where it [originates¹](#) and how it has developed into this huge commercial holiday.

¹ comes from



Valentine's Day

[00:00:53] It's a fascinating story, and whether you're listening to this just before Valentine's Day or you want to surprise a loved one with some [trivia](#)², with some interesting facts, or you just want to listen to an interesting story, I hope you'll enjoy today's episode.

[00:01:09] Before we get right into that though, let me quickly remind you that you can get all of the bonus episodes, plus the subtitles, the transcript, and the key vocabulary for this episode and all of our other ones over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:20] This is also where you can also check out becoming a member of Leonardo English, and join a community of curious minds from all over the world, doing meetups, exchanging ideas, and generally, improving their English in a more interesting way.

[00:01:40] So if that's of interest, and I certainly hope it is, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:48] OK then, Valentine's Day.

[00:01:51] I should start by saying that nobody really knows where Valentine's Day [definitively](#)³ comes from.

² detailed, but often unimportant, facts and information

³ for sure



Valentine's Day

[00:01:59] If you read an article with a [catchy](#)⁴ title like “The Real Origins of Valentine’s Day”, you’ll probably learn about one of the theories about where Valentine’s Day comes from, but historians do not agree on the matter, and there are several ideas, all [intriguing](#)⁵ and interesting in their own right.

[00:02:20] It’s one of those things that we are probably never going to know the real origin of, and even going back to 1853 there was an article in the New York Times that described Valentine’s Day as, and I’m quoting directly here, “one of those mysterious historical or [antiquarian](#)⁶ problems which are [doomed](#)⁷ never to be solved.”

[00:02:44] So, instead of attempting to claim “Here’s where Valentine’s Day comes from”, in this episode we’ll talk about some of the more [prominent](#)⁸ theories, and you can decide for yourself which one sounds most [plausible](#)⁹.

[00:02:59] The most common explanation for where Valentine’s Day comes from is from St Valentine, a man who was killed because of his [dedication](#)¹⁰ to love.

⁴ attracting attention and easy to remember

⁵ interesting because it is mysterious

⁶ very old

⁷ certain (to be or do)

⁸ very well known

⁹ believable

¹⁰ effort put in by someone because they believe strongly in something



Valentine's Day

[00:03:09] But there are actually stories of two St. Valentines, two different legends of a Valentine who was [martyred¹¹](#) for his romantic actions, who was killed for his romantic [deeds¹²](#), and both of these stories have slightly different versions.

[00:03:28] Our first Valentine is a Christian priest called Valentinius, who lived in the 3rd Century AD, just north of Rome.

[00:03:38] The legend goes that Valentinius was arrested by the Roman Emperor Claudius for the crime of helping [persecuted¹³](#) Christians.

[00:03:48] He was imprisoned by an [aristocrat¹⁴](#) called Asterius.

[00:03:52] While he was being held by Asterius, our priest Valentinius was allowed to [preach¹⁵](#), he was allowed to tell Asterius about Jesus Christ.

[00:04:04] Asterius was [captivated¹⁶](#) by what he heard about this [miraculous¹⁷](#) Christ, and made a deal with Valentinius.

¹¹ killed for their beliefs

¹² actions

¹³ treated unfairly

¹⁴ someone of the highest social class

¹⁵ give a religious speech

¹⁶ very interested

¹⁷ able to do miracles, amazing



Valentine's Day

[00:04:12] If this Jesus Christ could cure Asterius's daughter of **blindness**¹⁸, if he could make her see again, then Asterius would free Valentinius.

[00:04:26] Valentinius put his hands over the **blind**¹⁹ daughter's eyes, he said a prayer, and ta-da, the daughter could see.

[00:04:35] Asterius had seen the light, he had seen the power of God, and immediately **converted**²⁰ to Christianity.

[00:04:42] And of course, Valentinius was freed.

[00:04:46] When the Emperor **got wind of**²¹ this, when he heard about this story, he was furious and ordered for them all to be put to death.

[00:04:55] Valentinius was thrown back into jail, but he had fallen in love with Asterius' daughter, and reportedly wrote her a love letter the night before he was to be executed.

[00:05:07] It was signed, 'Your Valentine', which has become a traditional way to sign a Valentine's Card.

¹⁸ the state of not being able to see

¹⁹ unable to see

²⁰ changed (religion)

²¹ heard about



Valentine's Day

[00:05:15] There are numerous different versions of this story, with parts added and removed.

[00:05:21] One additional [twist](#)²² that appears in several versions is that Valentinius performed secret Christian marriage ceremonies for Roman soldiers who weren't allowed to marry.

[00:05:33] The whole story is, of course, a little problematic.

[00:05:37] Even if we [skip over](#)²³ the part where Valentinius [miraculously](#)²⁴ heals the [blind](#) daughter, the probability that Valentinius would have been able to get pen and paper in his jail cell would have been [slim](#)²⁵, it would've been quite small, and even if he could have, it's very unlikely that a young woman in the 3rd Century AD would have been able to read, especially if she was blind just shortly [beforehand](#)²⁶.

²² change, difference

²³ avoid talking about

²⁴ in an unbelievable way

²⁵ small

²⁶ earlier (than a particular time)



Valentine's Day

[00:06:03] Nevertheless, this is one of the most **prominent** stories, and if we worried too much about the practical **considerations**²⁷ of the **origins**²⁸ of the **feasts**²⁹ and celebrations that we know and love, life wouldn't be that much fun.

[00:06:18] So, that's our first St Valentine, St Valentinius of Rome.

[00:06:23] Our second theory of where Valentine's Day comes from is about another St Valentine, but this time it's St Valentine of Terni, a town about 75 kilometres to the north of Rome.

[00:06:37] The story about St Valentine of Terni actually dates from a similar time, in the third century AD, when Christianity was still very much considered a **cult**³⁰, not a **mainstream**³¹ religion.

[00:06:52] Valentinius of Terni was a Christian bishop with a similar story to Valentinius of Rome.

²⁷ things to think about

²⁸ where something came from

²⁹ religious celebrations

³⁰ a religious group whose beliefs are considered strange by most of society

³¹ considered normal



Valentine's Day

[00:06:59] He tried to [convert](#)³² someone, he healed their child as proof of the power of Christianity, but was later executed by the Roman Emperor as punishment for trying to [convert](#) this person to Christianity.

[00:07:14] Like the story of St Valentine of Rome, there are some [additions](#)³³, such as St Valentine offering a fighting couple a rose and telling them to love each other because they only had one heart.

[00:07:28] And there are [variants](#)³⁴ of the story of St Valentine of Terni that are identical to St Valentine of Rome, for example that he conducted [clandestine](#)³⁵, secret, Christian marriage ceremonies for young Roman couples that weren't allowed to be married in a Christian tradition.

[00:07:47] The reality is that there probably weren't two St Valentines.

[00:07:51] There might have been one, and the story has been told and retold, [embellished](#)³⁶ as the years went on, with parts from other legends added.

³² change (religion)

³³ things that are added

³⁴ differences

³⁵ hidden, done in secret

³⁶ made to seem more beautiful or dramatic than it really is



Valentine's Day

[00:08:02] Fair enough, you might think, but why is it on February 14th, and how did it go from a Christian bishop being killed to a huge celebration of love and romance, and something that is quite far removed from any religion?

[00:08:19] Well, it did start out as a religious [feast](#)³⁷.

[00:08:22] The [Feast](#) of St Valentine was added to the Catholic religious calendar around the year 496, and celebrated this [mythical](#)³⁸ St Valentine.

[00:08:34] There are some interesting theories about why the date of February the 14th was chosen.

[00:08:41] There's no evidence that St Valentine was killed on or even around February 14th, and instead the theory goes that it was placed on that day to [coincide](#)³⁹ with a [pagan](#)⁴⁰ festival that was celebrated by the Romans called Lupercalia.

[00:09:00] The Christian church was trying to [convert](#) as many people as possible to Christianity, and turning a [pagan](#) celebration into a Christian one was a far simpler way of getting people [onboard](#)⁴¹ than just saying "ok, you can't celebrate your [Pagan](#) festival now, you need to celebrate our Christian one on a different date".

³⁷ religious celebration

³⁸ only existing in stories

³⁹ happen at the same time

⁴⁰ of a religion that worships many gods, normally one that existed before the current main religions

⁴¹ if someone is onboard, they agree with you



Valentine's Day

[00:09:21] Lupercalia was already a festival that celebrated [fertility](#)⁴², and thus it wasn't [a huge jump](#)⁴³ to go from a festival that celebrated the act of [reproduction](#)⁴⁴ through to one that celebrated a saint who had a strong romantic story.

[00:09:39] During the Roman [feast](#) of Lupercalia, Roman priests would meet at a [cave](#)⁴⁵ where it was believed Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, had been brought up by a wolf.

[00:09:52] They would then [sacrifice](#)⁴⁶ a goat, they would kill a goat, they would skin it, they would cut off its skin and then [dip](#)⁴⁷ the pieces of goatskin into blood.

[00:10:05] After this they would walk through the streets of Rome with this bloody goatskin and [slap](#)⁴⁸ women with it.

[00:10:14] The idea was that this would make the women more fertile, more able to produce children in the coming year.

⁴² the quality of being able to produce children

⁴³ a large change

⁴⁴ the process of having babies

⁴⁵ a large hole in the side of a cliff or mountain

⁴⁶ to kill for religious reasons

⁴⁷ put something into a liquid for a short time

⁴⁸ hit gently



Valentine's Day

[00:10:23] Further to this, the young women of the city would put their name into a big jar, and the young, unmarried men would pick the names out, and matches would be formed, young men would be paired together with young women.

[00:10:38] So, it was in 496 AD that this pagan feast of Lupercalia was banned and replaced with the [Feast](#) of St Valentine, a celebration of the life of St Valentine.

[00:10:52] But, [crucially](#)⁴⁹, it was not immediately a celebration of love and romance at all.

[00:10:58] This wasn't to come for several centuries, and many historians believe that the association with love and romance was first put forward by the English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, in the 14th Century.

[00:11:13] The medieval era saw the development of something called courtly love, this idea that love was a powerful force that [swept](#)⁵⁰ people up and caused them to do great, brave things to win over the objects of their desire.

[00:11:29] Of course, this idea of courtly love is everywhere throughout medieval literature.

⁴⁹ very importantly

⁵⁰ if something sweeps x up, it carries x with it



Valentine's Day

[00:11:36] At the time that Chaucer was writing, it was believed in England and France that mid-February was when birds choose their [mate](#)⁵¹, they choose a partner, and when flowers start to bloom.

[00:11:49] So mid-February, and Valentine's Day, which is February 14th, became associated with love, [coupling up](#)⁵², and reproduction.

[00:11:59] [Aristocrats](#)⁵³ started to write love letters to each other, and as the idea of February 14th being a celebration of love and romance continued to grow, this became a more and more important part of European culture.

[00:12:15] When it came to Shakespeare, in the early 17th Century, we can see the Valentine's Day tradition clearly there, with Ophelia, one of the characters in Hamlet, saying that she was Hamlet's Valentine.

[00:12:30] Hamlet was first published in 1609, and by this time the connection between Valentine's Day and love was clearly established.

[00:12:40] With these connections now a part of much of Western European culture, it was just a question of the mass [commercialisation](#)⁵⁴ of it that we are familiar with today.

⁵¹ an animal's sexual partner

⁵² forming partners

⁵³ people of the highest social class

⁵⁴ the act of taking something and making money from it



Valentine's Day

[00:12:52] There's evidence of this [trend⁵⁵](#) starting as early as the 1840s, when the tradition of sending Valentine's Day cards started.

[00:13:02] The cost of printing had reduced greatly, given the invention of the printing press, and improvements in the postal service had also reduced costs.

[00:13:12] So, by the mid 19th Century it was comparatively easy and cheap to buy and send a Valentine's card for a loved one.

[00:13:22] And as shops started offering more and more expensive Valentine's Day gifts, and chocolate manufacturers also [got in on the game⁵⁶](#), these costs soon [spiralled out of control⁵⁷](#).

[00:13:35] In America, where Valentine's Day is probably more [commercialised](#) than anywhere else in the world, people will spend \$20 billion dollars on Valentine's day, with the average Valentine's Day gift costing \$110.

[00:13:51] Indeed, it's believed by many that the reason that Valentine's Day is now such a [big deal⁵⁸](#) is [in no small part⁵⁹](#) because the companies that profit from it have

⁵⁵ a general development

⁵⁶ participated, took part

⁵⁷ greatly increased

⁵⁸ if something is a big deal, it is important

⁵⁹ not insignificantly



Valentine's Day

spent hundreds of millions of dollars marketing it, promoting their products to make people feel bad if they aren't spending large amounts of money on Valentine's Day.

[00:14:14] Hallmark, the American card manufacturer, has been accused of [pushing](#)⁶⁰ Valentine's Day cards on young children, and essentially inventing the idea that kids at school should be sending Valentine's cards to each other, making it a competition about who received the most.

[00:14:34] For Hallmark, Valentine's Day is the second biggest day in the year, after Christmas, for sending cards, with 145 million Valentine's Day cards sent.

[00:14:45] As you probably know, greeting cards are incredibly cheap to produce, and are very high [margin](#)⁶¹, the companies make a lot of money from selling each one.

[00:14:56] There are [countless](#)⁶² [adverts](#)⁶³ leading up to Valentine's Day encouraging us to spend, spend, spend, and placing the idea that you are a bad husband, boyfriend, wife or girlfriend if you aren't treating your loved one to something special.

[00:15:12] And for people who aren't in a relationship, Valentine's Day can obviously be a difficult time of year.

⁶⁰ forcing, making someone do something

⁶¹ the amount of money a company makes after costs are taken into account

⁶² very many

⁶³ a picture, sign, or film intended to make people buy something



Valentine's Day

[00:15:20] This has led to several anti-Valentine's Day holidays, some of which take place around February 14th, and others are on completely different dates.

[00:15:32] In the US there is something called Singles Awareness Day, which is a celebration of being single.

[00:15:39] That happens on February 14th, on Valentine's Day, and the idea is that you make a [toast](#)⁶⁴ of your single status, and presumably celebrate not being pressured to spend hundreds of dollars on cards, chocolate and roses.

[00:15:54] In China there's something called Single's Day, which is celebrated on November 11th.

[00:16:01] The idea here is to treat yourself, to spend money on yourself, because nobody is buying presents for you.

[00:16:08] This has actually [morphed](#)⁶⁵ into the biggest spending day in the entire world, and is about two and a half times bigger than Cyber Monday, so although it might have started as an anti-Valentine's Day, it's really just a way to [bag](#)⁶⁶ yourself a few [bargains](#)⁶⁷.

⁶⁴ if you make a toast of something, you celebrate it

⁶⁵ changed (religion)

⁶⁶ manage to get

⁶⁷ things that are cheaper than normal



Valentine's Day

[00:16:28] And one that emerged out of a TV Series called Parks & Recreation is something called Galentine's Day, which is celebrated on the day before Valentine's Day. The idea here is that it's a way for women to celebrate friendship, without any pressure or romantic [implications](#)⁶⁸.

[00:16:48] And to explain the name, Gal is [slang](#)⁶⁹ for 'girl', so it's Valentine's, just for gals - Galentine's.

[00:16:56] So, that's Valentine's Day, and some of the theories that surround it.

[00:17:01] It's one of those traditions that is now observed by hundreds of millions of people around the world, that has most likely been [pushed](#)⁷⁰ upon us by companies that profit from it, but that does have some interesting stories about its potential [origins](#).

[00:17:16] And for those of us that might not like the idea of being pressured to spend on cards and roses that will end up in the [rubbish bin](#)⁷¹ just a few days later, or those who just don't like the idea of the day in general, I guess we can be thankful that we don't have to run through the streets of Rome with the bloody skin of a dead goat.

[00:17:39] OK then, that is it for today's episode on Valentine's Day.

⁶⁸ suggestions about what might happen

⁶⁹ informal language

⁷⁰ forced to do something

⁷¹ the container in which put rubbish/trash



Valentine's Day

[00:17:44] I hope it's been an interesting one, that you've learnt something new, and that whatever you do on February 14th, whether you're celebrating Valentine's Day, or whether you are not, that you have a fantastic day.

[00:17:56] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode. Is Valentine's Day celebrated in your country?

[00:18:03] If so, how do you do it?

[00:18:05] You can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:18:13] And as a final reminder, if you are looking to improve your English in a more interesting way, to join a community of curious minds from all over the world, to unlock the transcripts, the subtitles, and key vocabulary, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com

[00:18:31] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:18:37] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]



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Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Originates	comes from
Trivia	detailed, but often unimportant, facts and information
Definitively	for sure
Catchy	attracting attention and easy to remember
Intriguing	interesting because it is mysterious
Antiquarian	very old
Doomed	certain (to be or do)
Prominent	very well known
Plausible	believable
Dedication	effort put in by someone because they believe strongly in something
Martyred	killed for their beliefs
Deeds	actions
Persecuted	treated unfairly



Valentine's Day

Aristocrat someone of the highest social class

Preach give a religious speech

Captivated very interested

Miraculous able to do miracles, amazing

Blindness the state of not being able to see

Blind unable to see

Converted changed (religion)

Got wind of heard about

Twist change, difference

Skip over avoid talking about

Miraculously in an unbelievable way

Slim small

Beforehand earlier (than a particular time)

Considerations things to think about

Origins where something came from



Valentine's Day

Feasts	religious celebrations
Cult	a religious group whose beliefs are considered strange by most of society
Mainstream	considered normal
Convert	change (religion)
Additions	things that are added
Variants	differences
Clandestine	hidden, done in secret
Embellished	made to seem more beautiful or dramatic than it really is
Feast	religious celebration
Mythical	only existing in stories
Coincide	happen at the same time
Pagan	of a religion that worships many gods, normally one that existed before the current main religions
Onboard	if someone is onboard, they agree with you
Fertility	the quality of being able to produce children
A huge jump	a large change



Valentine's Day

Reproduction	the process of having babies
Cave	a large hole in the side of a cliff or mountain
Sacrifice	to kill for religious reasons
Dip	put something into a liquid for a short time
Slap	hit gently
Crucially	very importantly
Swept	if something sweeps x up, it carries x with it
Mate	an animal's sexual partner
Coupling up	forming partners
Aristocrats	people of the highest social class
Commercialisation	the act of taking something and making money from it
Trend	a general development
Got in on the game	participated, took part
Spiralled out of control	greatly increased
Commercialised	turned into something that people make a profit from



Valentine's Day

Big deal	if something is a big deal, it is important
In no small part	not insignificantly
Pushing	forcing, making someone do something
Margin	the amount of money a company makes after costs are taken into account
Countless	very many
Adverts	a picture, sign, or film intended to make people buy something
Toast	if you make a toast of something, you celebrate it
Morphed	changed (religion)
Bag	manage to get
Bargains	things that are cheaper than normal
Implications	suggestions about what might happen
Slang	informal language
Pushed	forced to do something
Rubbish bin	the container in which put rubbish/trash

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



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What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

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