



English Learning for Curious Minds



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Episode #135

The National Trust

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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.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The National Trust.

[00:00:28] In case you haven't heard of it before, it's the biggest [conservation¹](#) charity in Europe, and is responsible for [preserving²](#) large parts of Britain.

[00:00:38] It is a fascinating story, and through it you'll learn about how it started, why it was able to become so big, the value it provides today to people in Britain—and of

¹ the protection of plants, animals and natural areas

² keeping something in its current state



The National Trust

course, to you as well if you visit Britain—and some of the [controversy](#)³ that surrounds it.

[00:00:56] I'm really excited for this episode, so without further ado, let's get right into it.

[00:01:04] The National Trust is something [uniquely](#)⁴ British, there are comparable organisations in other countries, but nothing of quite the same size, or national impact, as the National Trust has.

[00:01:18] If you ask someone in Britain what the National Trust does, they might say something like “they own all those big houses”, or “they have the big parks”, or something [along those lines](#)⁵.

[00:01:31] The National Trust does both of those things, but it is much bigger than that.

[00:01:37] It's an organisation that is responsible for the protection, and [conservation](#) of large, historic buildings, of country houses, of parks, of the [coastline](#)⁶, and of the countryside.

[00:01:50] And it is responsible for a lot.

³ disagreement or arguments, normally affecting large groups of people

⁴ special

⁵ similar to

⁶ the area where the land meets the sea



The National Trust

[00:01:54] To give you an idea of the actual size of the area it's responsible for, it is responsible for 2,500 kilometres squared of land, that's an area the size of Luxembourg.

[00:02:08] Granted, Luxembourg isn't huge.

[00:02:11] But nor is Great Britain, really.

[00:02:13] These 2,500 kilometres squared make up about 1.5% of the total land area of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, so the National Trust is responsible for 1.5% of the total land area.

[00:02:29] Note, I didn't include Scotland, because there is actually a separate National Trust for Scotland.

[00:02:35] It's not just the land that the National Trust is responsible for, it also manages large proportions of the [coastline](#), 1,260 kilometres of [coastline](#) to be [precise](#)⁷, which is about 20% of all the coast of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

[00:02:54] To give you an idea of exactly how much that is, it's almost exactly the same distance as London to Madrid, [as the crow flies](#)⁸, or if you drew a line directly from London to Madrid.

⁷ clear and exact

⁸ in a straight line



The National Trust

[00:03:08] One of the fantastic things about what this means, from a practical point of view, is that anyone can walk through this land, so if you want to walk along [vast⁹](#) parts of the British [coastline](#), you can do it, thanks to the National Trust.

[00:03:24] When it comes to the houses that it is responsible for, it owns over 500 historic houses, castles, parks and gardens, containing almost one million works of art.

[00:03:37] So, it is big, and it is responsible for a lot.

[00:03:41] But what you might still be wondering is...why and what does 'responsible' actually mean?

[00:03:48] And what exactly is The National Trust?

[00:03:51] To best answer those questions, and to give you an idea of the role that it plays today, we need to go back to where it all started, and that is Victorian Britain, Britain in the late 19th century.

[00:04:06] By the time that Queen Victoria came onto the throne, in 1837, Britain was almost 100 years into the industrial revolution.

⁹ very large



[00:04:16] **Manufacturing**¹⁰ had **boomed**¹¹, people had **flocked**¹² to the cities, people had gone to the cities in large numbers, and a country that had been **predominantly**¹³ rural and agricultural had started to become industrial and urban.

[00:04:33] Large areas of countryside were used for factories, cities **expanded**¹⁴, and there was an increasing feeling that the city was just **expanding**¹⁵ and **expanding**, and the countryside of Britain was going to be **swallowed up**¹⁶.

[00:04:49] You can see this feeling through literature and art at the time, but an excellent example of it is in the 1803 poem by William Blake called “And did those feet in **ancient**¹⁷ time”, where he talks about ‘dark, **satanic**¹⁸ **mills**¹⁹’ - the dark, factories of the devil that were **poisoning**²⁰ the beautiful English countryside.

¹⁰ the business of producing goods in large quantities

¹¹ increased greatly

¹² gone in large numbers

¹³ mostly

¹⁴ increased in size

¹⁵ increasing in size

¹⁶ if something is swallowed up, it disappears and becomes part of something else

¹⁷ very old

¹⁸ relating to the devil

¹⁹ buildings where grain is crushed and turned into flour

²⁰ destroying



The National Trust

[00:05:12] So, in 1895, three people got together to do something about it.

[00:05:19] Their names were Octavia Hill, Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley and Sir Robert Hunter.

[00:05:26] But it was Octavia Hill that was the most famous of the three, and is really the **patron saint**²¹ of the National Trust.

[00:05:35] Hill was a **fierce**²² social **reformer**²³, and she believed in the importance of green spaces, and historic places for everyone, that every person had the right to enjoy the beauty of nature, and that something needed to be done in order to stop the English countryside from being **swallowed up** by industrialisation.

[00:05:58] So, in 1895, our three heroes, Octavia Hill, Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley and Sir Robert Hunter, came together and **established**²⁴ The National Trust.

[00:06:10] It started as a company, just like any other, and the idea was that it could buy and hold buildings and land, with the objective of **preserving** them, of saving them from being turned into factories or sold to industrialists, and allowing everyone to benefit from them.

²¹ the most important person (for a group of people)

²² very strong (in her beliefs)

²³ someone who tries to change the law

²⁴ started (an organisation)



The National Trust

[00:06:30] That same year, in 1895, the National Trust got its first piece of land, a small piece of land near a cliff in Wales, which it was given by a [philanthropist](#)²⁵.

[00:06:44] Later that year, still in 1895, it bought its first property, a 14th century house in a county called East Sussex, to the south of London.

[00:06:55] It paid £10 for it, and then needed to spend an additional £350 for repairs.

[00:07:03] £10 back in 1895 is the [equivalent](#)²⁶ of about £600 now, so that's around €700.

[00:07:12] And this is [broadly](#)²⁷ what the National Trust did for several decades - it received land and property as gifts from people who believed in its [philanthropic](#)²⁸ mission, and it also bought property with money that it had been given as a donation.

[00:07:31] For the first 50 years or so of its existence the properties it [acquired](#)²⁹ were generally quite small.

²⁵ someone who helps the poor, by giving or raising money

²⁶ the same

²⁷ generally

²⁸ related to helping the poor

²⁹ got, obtained



[00:07:38] It was a charity, and although it did have an increasing number of supporters every year, an increasing number of people who gave it money, it still wasn't rich **by any means**³⁰.

[00:07:49] But now it owns some of the most **majestic**³¹, the most important buildings in the entire country, huge, beautiful country houses.

[00:07:59] How did it manage that, you might be thinking?

[00:08:02] Well, it actually comes down to tax.

[00:08:06] Starting in 1894, an **inheritance**³² tax was introduced in Britain, meaning that when someone died, any **assets**³³ that they passed to their **heirs**³⁴, typically their children, would be taxed.

[00:08:20] It increased gradually during the first half of the 20th century, then at the end of World War II, after a new Labour government was elected, it was increased dramatically, to up to 80%.

³⁰ at all

³¹ very large and grand

³² money or objects received from someone who has died

³³ things belonging to someone

³⁴ people who you leave money/property to after death



[00:08:33] So, when someone died, their [heirs](#) would have to pay up to 80% in tax to the British government.

[00:08:42] Whether this is right or wrong is another question, but the result was that many of the old, British families with these huge country houses simply couldn't [afford](#)³⁵ to pay the tax on the [inheritance](#) and keep the property.

[00:08:59] To give you a working example, if your parents owned a large country [mansion](#)³⁶, a large country house, and it was left to you after they died, let's say this [mansion](#) was valued at £10 million, you might have to pay £8 million in taxes.

[00:09:16] Now, assuming you didn't have £8 million in your bank account, or in other [assets](#) that you could quickly sell, you would need to sell the house to pay the tax.

[00:09:27] This would mean that lots of these old, beautiful houses would be sold to [the highest bidder](#)³⁷, who could do whatever they wanted with them - [knock them down](#)³⁸, completely change them, build new villages on top of the land.

[00:09:41] The National Trust offered an alternative to this, and something called the Country House [Scheme](#)³⁹ was developed.

³⁵ able to do something because you have enough money

³⁶ a very large and expensive house

³⁷ the person able to pay the most money

³⁸ destroy them

³⁹ an official plan



The National Trust

[00:09:48] In short, this meant that someone who **inherited**⁴⁰ a large property but didn't have the money to pay the **inheritance** tax on it could give the property to the National Trust, and the National Trust would allow that person and their family to continue to live in a part of the property.

[00:10:08] So everyone was a winner - the National Trust acquired a grand property, the **heirs** could continue to live in a part of that property, and the ordinary people of Britain had the right to go and visit these beautiful country houses that had previously belonged to the richest in society.

[00:10:28] Through this **scheme** the National Trust **acquired** some of the most **prestigious**⁴¹ country houses in the country and they are now all open to the public.

[00:10:39] And they are, in many cases, absolutely fabulous, and if you visit the UK I would certainly **urge**⁴² you to visit some.

[00:10:47] You might even have been to some already.

[00:10:50] Giant's Causeway, an amazing volcanic area by the sea in Northern Ireland is a National Trust property, as is Attingham Park, an amazing country house in the west of England.

⁴⁰ received from someone who died

⁴¹ respected and well known

⁴² encourage, suggest strongly



The National Trust

[00:11:03] If you haven't had the chance to visit any of them, you will probably have seen them in films and TV series, from Game of Thrones to Harry Potter, and of course, Downton Abbey.

[00:11:16] It's a [unique](#)⁴³ part of British heritage, and is hugely popular.

[00:11:20] Indeed, the National Trust has 5.6 million paying members, 5.6 million people who pay a membership [fee](#)⁴⁴ to support it every year.

[00:11:32] So that's almost one in ten people in Britain, 10% of the British population.

[00:11:38] So far so good, you might think.

[00:11:41] It's a cultural organisation that is responsible for protecting beautiful country houses, [preserving](#) them for future generations, making them accessible to anyone who wants to visit them, and allowing anyone to visit lovely countryside landscapes.

[00:11:56] I should add that many of these sites are free to visit, you don't have to pay.

[00:12:02] Often the larger houses do require a [fee](#), or a [donation](#)⁴⁵ to go in, but even in this case, the gardens and [the grounds](#)⁴⁶ are often free to walk around and enjoy.

⁴³ unusually good or special

⁴⁴ an amount of money paid to do something

⁴⁵ money given as a gift

⁴⁶ an area of land around a large house



The National Trust

[00:12:15] This is made possible not only by the 10% of the British population that supports it, but also because the Trust has a huge army of [volunteers](#)⁴⁷, people who [volunteer](#)⁴⁸ to work in the properties for free.

[00:12:30] There are 65,000 of these people, a huge football stadium full of [volunteers](#) who stand in often cold country houses all day long with a smile on their face because they believe in the mission of The National Trust.

[00:12:47] Quite something, right?

[00:12:49] Well, yes it is, but it has come under some recent [controversy](#).

[00:12:54] And the best way of explaining this [controversy](#) is through a story of a property that the National Trust relatively recently [acquired](#).

[00:13:04] There is a fantastic great house near Bristol, in the South-West of England, called Tyntesfield Manor.

[00:13:11] In 2002 it was put up for sale by its owners.

⁴⁷ people who do something that helps others, without being paid

⁴⁸ do something that helps others, without being paid



The National Trust

[00:13:15] The National Trust managed to raise £3 million from 50,000 individual [donors](#)⁴⁹, an average of £60 per [donor](#)⁵⁰, and together with a [grant](#)⁵¹ from the UK government, it bought the house.

[00:13:30] The house had been built in 1863, and was in serious need of [renovation](#)⁵². The National Trust [piled](#)⁵³ money into it to bring it back to its original [glory](#)⁵⁴, and it is now restored and open to the public.

[00:13:48] It's an absolutely fantastic house, it has huge gardens, 23 main bedrooms and 47 bedrooms in total - including the servants' accommodation of course - it has its own private chapel, and everything you might expect from a huge, country [mansion](#).

[00:14:08] When it was built, in 1863, just the construction of it cost today's equivalent of £7 million, about €8 million.

[00:14:19] Where did the owner get the money to do this, you might be asking?

⁴⁹ people who give money

⁵⁰ someone who gives money

⁵¹ an amount of money given by the government for a special purpose

⁵² the repair and improvement, usually of a building

⁵³ if you pile money into someone, you spend a lot of money on it

⁵⁴ importance, beauty



[00:14:23] The man who built the house was called William Gibbs, and he made his fortune selling [guano](#)⁵⁵, the [poo](#)⁵⁶, the [excrement](#)⁵⁷, from sea birds.

[00:14:34] As you may know, there was a lot of money to be made in [guano](#).

[00:14:39] Gibbs exported [guano](#) from Peru, and shipped it to Europe, where it was used to produce [fertiliser](#)⁵⁸.

[00:14:47] Gibbs was given a [monopoly](#)⁵⁹ on the [guano](#) trade by the Peruvian government, he was the only person allowed to export Guano from Peru to Europe.

[00:14:55] The business started small, but by 1864 he was exporting 435,000 tonnes of [guano](#) to Europe, and making the equivalent of about €9 million in profit every year.

[00:15:12] Indeed, there was a song that was sung about Gibbs that goes “William Gibbs made his dibs, Selling the turds of foreign birds“.

[00:15:22] So, to explain that, dibs is a [slang](#)⁶⁰ term for money, turd is a [slang](#) term for [poo](#), it's [excrement](#).

⁵⁵ the faeces of sea birds, used to help plants grow

⁵⁶ faeces, solid waste from the body

⁵⁷ faeces, solid waste from the body

⁵⁸ a substance used to help plants grow

⁵⁹ when someone (or a company) has complete control over something

⁶⁰ informal language



The National Trust

[00:15:30] So, “William Gibbs made his dibs, made his money, Selling the turds, selling the [poo](#), of foreign birds“.

[00:15:38] Now, why is how Gibbs made his money important for our story?

[00:15:42] It’s because Gibbs used slave labour from [indigenous](#)⁶¹ Peruvians and imported Chinese labourers, these people worked in terrible conditions to collect the [guano](#), ship it to Europe, where it was turned into piles of money, and then ultimately partly turned into this fantastic house that is open to the public to enjoy.

[00:16:04] Indeed, a large number of these properties that are now in the hands of the National Trust were built because of fortunes [enabled](#)⁶² by British [colonialism](#)⁶³, and by slavery.

[00:16:17] In 2020, actually before the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, the National Trust [commissioned](#)⁶⁴ a report into the links between its properties and the slave trade, and unsurprisingly found that there were very strong links.

⁶¹ naturally existing in a place

⁶² allowed to happen (because of)

⁶³ the ruling of one country by a richer and more powerful one

⁶⁴ formally given a job or task



The National Trust

[00:16:37] Now, in many National Trust properties, including Tyntesfield Manor, there are signs up that [acknowledge](#)⁶⁵ the [links](#)⁶⁶ between the property and the slave trade.

[00:16:48] When these signs started going up, it divided opinion.

[00:16:53] For some, [acknowledging](#)⁶⁷ the fact that these beautiful buildings exist partly because of slavery was the right thing to do, and indeed it's not morally right to enjoy [strolling](#)⁶⁸ through the beautiful gardens and houses without at least understanding the past.

[00:17:12] For others, it was [political correctness](#)⁶⁹ gone mad, it was the left [imposing](#)⁷⁰ different cultural [norms](#)⁷¹, and why should people have this history forced upon them when all they want to do was enjoy a countryside walk.

[00:17:25] This debate is all relatively new, and is still ongoing. The report came out in September 2020, and you will see opinion articles in UK newspapers, or letters written in to the editor almost every week with strong opinions either way.

⁶⁵ accept or admit

⁶⁶ connections

⁶⁷ accepting or admitting

⁶⁸ walking slowly

⁶⁹ language or behaviour chosen to not upset any particular group

⁷⁰ causing people to accept

⁷¹ accepted standards of behaviour



The National Trust

[00:17:42] Whatever your view on the matter, it's hard to debate the fact that the National Trust is a [national treasure](#)⁷².

[00:17:50] Its original stated mission was to [preserve](#)⁷³ properties that were to be kept for the enjoyment, [refreshment](#)⁷⁴ and rest of those who had no country house.

[00:18:00] And it's quite something that, 126 years later now, whether it's enjoyment or [refreshment](#) you can now find it at over 500 different country houses.

[00:18:11] And for that, we have a wonderful woman called Octavia Hill to thank.

[00:18:16] Now, I can't think of any better way to end today's episode than with a quote from the marvelous Octavia Hill, which really [sums up](#)⁷⁵ the philosophy of The National Trust.

[00:18:28] And that is: "We all want quiet. We all want beauty... We all need space. Unless we have it, we cannot reach that sense of quiet in which [whispers](#)⁷⁶ of better things come to us gently."

[00:18:45] OK then, that is it for today's episode on The National Trust.

⁷² a well known person or organisation that is loved by the people of a country

⁷³ keep in its original form

⁷⁴ small amounts of food and drink

⁷⁵ summarises in a clear way

⁷⁶ speaks quietly



The National Trust

[00:18:51] I hope it's been an interesting one, that you've learnt something new, and that if you do manage to go to the UK, and you do go to a National Trust property, then you'll know a little bit more about the history of this fantastic organisation.

[00:19:05] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:19:09] What's the [equivalent](#) of The National Trust in your country, if one exists?

[00:19:13] Who, or what, is responsible for preserving the [cultural heritage](#)⁷⁷ in your country?

[00:19:19] And of course a question that is a real [hot potato](#)⁷⁸, what do you think the National Trust should do about its complicated [legacy](#)⁷⁹ with [colonialism](#) and slavery?

[00:19:30] I would love to know.

[00:19:31] You can head right in to our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:40] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:19:45] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

⁷⁷ the shared cultural history and buildings

⁷⁸ if a situation or question is a hot potato, it causes disagreement between people

⁷⁹ a situation that exists because of things that happened in the past



[END OF EPISODE]



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Conservation	the protection of plants, animals and natural areas
Preserving	keeping something in its current state
Controversy	disagreement or arguments, normally affecting large groups of people
Uniquely	special
Along those lines	similar to
Coastline	the area where the land meets the sea
Precise	clear and exact
As the crow flies	in a straight line
Vast	very large
Manufacturing	the business of producing goods in large quantities
Boomed	increased greatly
Flocked	gone in large numbers
Predominantly	mostly



Expanded	increased in size
Expanding	increasing in size
Swallowed up	if something is swallowed up, it disappears and becomes part of something else
Ancient	very old
Satanic	relating to the devil
Mills	buildings where grain is crushed and turned into flour
Poisoning	destroying
Patron saint	the most important person (for a group of people)
Fierce	very strong (in her beliefs)
Reformer	someone who tries to change the law
Established	started (an organisation)
Philanthropist	someone who helps the poor, by giving or raising money
Equivalent	the same
Broadly	generally
Philanthropic	related to helping the poor



The National Trust

Acquired	got, obtained
By any means	at all
Majestic	very large and grand
Inheritance	money or objects received from someone who has died
Assets	things belonging to someone
Heirs	people who you leave money/property to after death
Afford	able to do something because you have enough money
Mansion	a very large and expensive house
The highest bidder	the person able to pay the most money
Knock them down	destroy them
Scheme	an official plan
Inherited	received from someone who died
Prestigious	respected and well known
Urge	encourage, suggest strongly
Unique	unusually good or special



The National Trust

Fee	an amount of money paid to do something
Donation	money given as a gift
The grounds	an area of land around a large house
Volunteers	people who do something that helps others, without being paid
Volunteer	do something that helps others, without being paid
Donors	people who give money
Donor	someone who gives money
Grant	an amount of money given by the government for a special purpose
Renovation	the repair and improvement, usually of a building
Piled	if you pile money into someone, you spend a lot of money on it
Glory	importance, beauty
Guano	the faeces of sea birds, used to help plants grow
Poo	faeces, solid waste from the body
Excrement	faeces, solid waste from the body
Fertiliser	a substance used to help plants grow



Monopoly	when someone (or a company) has complete control over something
Slang	informal language
Indigenous	naturally existing in a place
Enabled	allowed to happen (because of)
Colonialism	the ruling of one country by a richer and more powerful one
Commissioned	formally given a job or task
Acknowledge	accept or admit
Links	connections
Acknowledging	accepting or admitting
Strolling	walking slowly
Political correctness	language or behaviour chosen to not upset any particular group
Imposing	causing people to accept
Norms	accepted standards of behaviour
National treasure	a well known person or organisation that is loved by the people of a country
Preserve	keep in its original form



Refreshment	small amounts of food and drink
Sums up	summarises in a clear way
Whispers	speaks quietly
Cultural heritage	the shared cultural history and buildings
Hot potato	if a situation or question is a hot potato, it causes disagreement between people
Legacy	a situation that exists because of things that happened in the past

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

