

ENGLISH LEARNING
FOR CURIOUS
MINDS



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Episode #214

Robert Baden-Powell & The Boy Scouts

26th Nov, 2021

[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 a man called Robert Baden-Powell, and the organisation that he founded, The Boy Scouts, or simply, The Scouts.

[00:00:34] There are currently more than 31 million boys and girls in the world who take part in The Scouts, [spread¹](#) across 216 countries and territories. And since its founding in 1908, hundreds of millions more children have been in The Scouts, perhaps including you.

¹ being distributed, coming from

[00:00:55] So, in this episode we are going to look at the amazing history of this organisation and its [iconic](#)² founder, from the life of Robert Baden-Powell to why he started The Scouts in the first place, from the early days of The Scouts to how it spread all over the world.

[00:01:14] We'll look at what being a Scout actually means, how the organisation has changed, and some of the [controversies](#)³ it has had to [overcome](#)⁴.

[00:01:24] OK then, The Boy Scouts.

[00:01:29] To understand the history of The Scouts, we must look at the childhood of its [iconic](#) founder, an Englishman named Robert Baden-Powell, who was known to everyone simply as “B-P”.

[00:01:44] He was born to an upper class English family in 1857. His father was a well-known mathematician and Church of England priest, and his mother was the daughter of a famous [naval](#)⁵ officer.

[00:01:59] B-P's godfather was the famous railway engineer, Robert Stephenson, who invented the [steam train](#)⁶.

² very famous, symbolic

³ disagreement and arguments

⁴ succeed in dealing with

⁵ belonging to his country's sea military

⁶ a train that is powered by an steam engine (the vapour into which water is converted when heated)

[00:02:07] So, he came from a wealthy, [prestigious](#)⁷ family.

[00:02:12] He won a [scholarship](#)⁸ to a famous private school called Charterhouse, where he developed his love for all things outdoors.

[00:02:21] Although he was a clever boy, he was reportedly not particularly interested in his academic studies, and would prefer running around in woods, going on outside adventures, and being [out in the open](#)⁹.

[00:02:38] As was not unusual for someone with B-P's [upbringing](#)¹⁰, an upper class young Englishman at the height of the British empire, he joined the army, and spent time out in India, which was, remember, a British colony at the time.

[00:02:54] He was [posted](#)¹¹ to a variety of different British foreign territories including Malta, South Africa and Zimbabwe, or Rhodesia as it was called during the colonial period.

[00:03:07] He was clearly a talented soldier, and promotions came quickly.

⁷ respected and admired

⁸ payment made to support his education

⁹ in an open space, in the country

¹⁰ education and training received during childhood

¹¹ sent or stationed

[00:03:13] It wasn't until the Boer War, which lasted from 1899-1902, that he really [made a name for himself](#)¹².

[00:03:22] As a quick reminder, The Boer War was the war between Britain and two states in modern-day South Africa. Although the British technically won the war, it [shone a light on](#)¹³ one of the very [nasty](#)¹⁴ [aspects](#)¹⁵ of imperial rule, especially through the use of concentration camps to [imprison](#)¹⁶ the Afrikaans, or Boer, population, and it was considered by many to be the start of the [decline](#)¹⁷ of the British empire.

[00:03:52] During the Boer War, Baden-Powell was in charge of defending a town called Mafeking from the advancing Boer forces. This was a particularly important town to defend because the son of the British Prime Minister, a man called Lord Edward Cecil, was stuck there.

¹² became well-known

¹³ explained

¹⁴ bad and very unpleasant

¹⁵ parts

¹⁶ keep them in prison, confine

¹⁷ the fact of becoming less powerful

[00:04:12] It would have been hugely [embarrassing¹⁸](#), a massive blow to British [morale¹⁹](#) if he, the son of the British Prime Minister, had been captured and killed by the enemy.

[00:04:24] The British forces were surrounded, and under B-P's leadership they managed to defend the town for 217 [consecutive²⁰](#) days.

[00:04:35] The word for when a town or castle is surrounded is “a [siege²¹](#)”, and it was during the [Siege](#) of Mafeking that B-P really [made a name for himself](#).

[00:04:47] Baden-Powell showed himself to be not only a talented military leader, but also an excellent leader of people. He managed to [keep up²² morale](#) in the town, organising games and activities to [distract²³](#) people's attention from the reality that they were surrounded by enemy forces.

[00:05:08] News of the [siege](#) of Mafeking was being broadcast back in Britain, and B-P was becoming a [household name²⁴](#). It was a great [morale-boosting²⁵](#) story for the

¹⁸ making them feel shame

¹⁹ confidence

²⁰ following one after the other

²¹ the situation in which a town or castle is surrounded by enemies

²² make it remain at a high level

²³ make them stop giving their attention to

²⁴ someone very well known

²⁵ able to improve confidence

British public, which was sick and tired of hearing about military defeats and the deaths of young soldiers.

[00:05:28] When **reinforcements**²⁶ finally arrived and the **siege** was over, Baden-Powell returned to Britain a hero, **greeted**²⁷ by **adoring**²⁸ crowds, **rewarded**²⁹ with promotions, and even meeting The King.

[00:05:43] Although he was a soldier, his real passion wasn't fighting, he was a soldier more out of necessity than anything else.

[00:05:53] After returning from Africa in 1903, and aged 46, he **set out**³⁰ on an idea for a training manual **aimed**³¹ at young boys.

[00:06:05] Baden-Powell believed that one of the reasons for the **decline** of the British empire was that the youth of the time wasn't prepared for adult life, they didn't know how to do things that young men should know how to do, and there wasn't a strict code or training for the **proper**³² behaviour of a young man.

²⁶ extra troops sent to increase the strength of their army

²⁷ received, acknowledged

²⁸ showing love and respect

²⁹ given as a recognition for his services

³⁰ started working

³¹ directed, pointed

³² correct, suitable

[00:06:28] B-P had written some previous training manuals for military [recruits](#)³³ during his time in India, but back in Britain he wanted to [go one step further](#)³⁴.

[00:06:40] He wanted to [test out](#)³⁵ his theories about activities that young boys would not only enjoy doing, but would benefit from. In August of 1907, four years after returning from Africa, he decided to put these ideas to the test.

[00:06:58] He took a group of 20 young boys to an island off the south coast of England, and put them through a series of outdoor activities, activities that will be familiar to anyone who has ever been a scout: [camping](#)³⁶, exercises, making fires, saving lives, and games.

[00:07:19] It was an immediate [hit](#)³⁷, the boys loved it.

[00:07:24] The following year Baden-Powell published his ideas based on these activities in a book called “Scouting for Boys”.

³³ people newly enlisted in the armed forces

³⁴ do something more, to advance

³⁵ do it as a test to see if or how it works

³⁶ the activity of staying in a tent in the country

³⁷ success

[00:07:32] It was hugely popular from the [outset](#)³⁸ and is thought to have sold 150 million copies since it was first published, which would make it the fourth most popular book published in the 20th century.

[00:07:48] Soon scouting became a national movement, with scouting organisations [popping up](#)³⁹ all over the country.

[00:07:55] The following year, in 1909, B-P organised a [mass rally](#)⁴⁰, called a [Jamboree](#), at London's Crystal Palace. Tens of thousands of boys turned up, and [controversially](#)⁴¹ at the time, so did some girls.

[00:08:13] Baden-Powell's book was called "Scouting for Boys"; he had [intended](#)⁴² it to be for boys, not girls.

[00:08:22] Not only did he have what we would now call pretty [old-fashioned](#)⁴³ views about the role of women, but he also feared that allowing girls to participate in The Scouts would make it less attractive to young boys.

³⁸ beginning

³⁹ appearing

⁴⁰ a meeting of a very large group of people

⁴¹ in a way that caused disagreement and arguments

⁴² planned, wanted

⁴³ belonging to a time in the past, not modern

[00:08:38] While it's easy to look back at this view and call him a terrible [misogynist](#)⁴⁴, women in Britain still didn't have the vote at this time, the [Suffragette](#)⁴⁵ movement, which campaigned for Votes for Women, was only just getting started, and his views wouldn't have seemed [abnormal](#)⁴⁶ at the time.

[00:09:00] To his credit, he did encourage the girls, and asked his sister, Agnes, to lead the girls scouting movement, called The Girl Scouts.

[00:09:11] While B-P's views on gender equality might be something he is [criticised](#)⁴⁷ for today, he showed progressive views on [social mobility](#)⁴⁸, and right from the start made sure that being a Scout was something that should be open to and encouraged for all boys of all social classes. This was certainly not obvious, given the importance of social class in other aspects of British society at that time.

[00:09:41] B-P's special talent was speaking to boys in language they could understand. He recognised the sort of things that boys like doing, and scouting activities [reflected](#) [this](#)⁴⁹.

⁴⁴ a man who believes men are better than women

⁴⁵ a woman who fights for women's right to vote

⁴⁶ different from what was expected, not normal

⁴⁷ considered being wrong about

⁴⁸ the ability of people to change their social status

⁴⁹ showed, represented this

[00:09:55] He believed that young boys like **ritual**⁵⁰, they like the idea of a **ceremony**⁵¹ being performed.

[00:10:03] They like the idea of having something that **bonds**⁵² people together.

[00:10:08] He also noticed that groups of young boys will normally **elect**⁵³ some kind of leader, or a natural leader will **emerge**⁵⁴.

[00:10:17] And he saw that young boys love the idea of adventure, especially adventures they go on as a group.

[00:10:26] All of this was **woven into**⁵⁵ the Scouting movement.

[00:10:30] Plus, if you aren't aware, when you become a Scout you make a promise. The original promise from B-P's 1908 handbook read:

[00:10:41] 'On my honour I promise that—

[00:10:43] I will do my **duty**⁵⁶ to God and the King.

⁵⁰ a set of actions or words spoken that are performed regularly in the same manner

⁵¹ a set of actions or words spoken that are performed on special occasions

⁵² brings, connects

⁵³ choose by voting

⁵⁴ appear

⁵⁵ included in

⁵⁶ something that you have to do as part of a responsibility and because you feel it is the right thing to do

[00:10:47] I will do my best to help others, whatever it costs me.

[00:10:51] I know the scout law, and will [obey](#)⁵⁷ it.'

[00:10:55] What's more, the book read:

[00:10:57] While taking this [oath](#)⁵⁸ the scout will stand, holding his right hand raised [level with](#)⁵⁹ his shoulder, [palm](#)⁶⁰ to the front, thumb resting on the nail of the little finger and the other three fingers [upright](#)⁶¹, pointing [upwards](#)⁶².

[00:11:13] This is the scout's [salute](#)⁶³ and secret sign."

[00:11:18] So, B-P knew that this would [appeal](#)⁶⁴ to young boys. A promise that they could make that would [bond](#)⁶⁵ them together, unite them with each other, forming their own little secret adventurous [gang](#)⁶⁶.

⁵⁷ to act according to what you have been asked or according to rules

⁵⁸ a formal promise, a vow

⁵⁹ at the same level or height as

⁶⁰ the inside part of the hand

⁶¹ straight up

⁶² towards a higher position

⁶³ a formal sign of respect

⁶⁴ be attractive or interesting

⁶⁵ bring, connect

⁶⁶ group of young people who do activities together

[00:11:33] What B-P seemed to not have understood though was that what he had created was [appealing](#)⁶⁷ not just for British boys, but for boys and girls from all over the world.

[00:11:46] B-P intended his movement to be a British movement, but soon enough scouting associations appeared all over the world. Within a couple of years there were Scouting groups in countries such as France, the US, Argentina, India, Greece, Mexico, Chile, Russia, and Germany.

[00:12:07] Of course, Baden-Powell couldn't control all of these new Scouting organisations directly, and so adults were [encouraged](#)⁶⁸ to lead these [decentralised](#)⁶⁹ groups, based on B-P's ideas. It had a lot in common with religious movements, really, but the [caveat](#)⁷⁰ was that the founder was alive and certainly didn't [claim](#)⁷¹ any sort of [divine](#)⁷² special powers.

[00:12:36] But, just as the Scouting movement was really starting to [take off](#)⁷³, The First World War broke out.

⁶⁷ attractive, interesting

⁶⁸ advised

⁶⁹ remote, far from the main centre

⁷⁰ something that limits what was previously said

⁷¹ say that it was true

⁷² connected with God

⁷³ become successful and popular

[00:12:44] Baden-Powell was almost 60 at the time, so no [spring chicken](#)⁷⁴, not a young man by any means.

[00:12:52] He didn't go to fight, he was too old, but tens of thousands of young Scouts, both former and current, did. Many of whom never returned, and this was an experience that was to [scar](#)⁷⁵ Baden-Powell forever.

[00:13:08] After the end of the First World War Baden-Powell started to see scouting as a way to promote peace between countries, based on unity between Scouts.

[00:13:20] He had been a soldier himself as a young man, so he knew how wars worked, but he thought he could use scouting as a way for boys to better understand boys from other countries, so that when they grew up and became men they were less likely to go to war with each other.

[00:13:41] The 1920s saw the start of the Global Scout Movement, with B-P being given the title of "Chief Scout of The World". Great [jamborees](#)⁷⁶, large parties were organised, allowing boys and girls from all different countries and backgrounds to get together, united through Scouting.

[00:14:02] By 1922 there were more than a million Scouts spread across 32 countries, a number that was to rise to over 3 million by 1939.

⁷⁴ a young man

⁷⁵ leave him damaged or scarred

⁷⁶ large organised meetings that many people go to

[00:14:14] While the 1920s might have been a time for [optimism](#)⁷⁷, in much of the western world and also for the Scouts, the 30s were a different matter altogether.

[00:14:26] Starting with the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the [subsequent](#)⁷⁸ Great Depression in the United States and then the rise of [totalitarianism](#)⁷⁹ in Europe, it was a very different world.

[00:14:39] As far as Scouting was concerned, Baden-Powell was [horrified](#)⁸⁰ to see the Boy Scouts in Germany [banned](#)⁸¹, and then [swallowed up](#)⁸² by the Hitler Youth, an organisation that numbered 8 million at its peak, and with a much more military and [sinister](#)⁸³ purpose than the Boy Scouts.

⁷⁷ the belief that good things will happen

⁷⁸ happening right after, following

⁷⁹ the political system in which people in power have complete control

⁸⁰ very frightened

⁸¹ not allowed

⁸² becoming part of

⁸³ harmful, evil

[00:15:00] Now, this is **by no means**⁸⁴ saying that the Hitler Youth wouldn't have been created without The Boy Scouts, but the presence of The Boy Scouts in the country certainly gave it a **headstart**⁸⁵, and this was something that deeply **troubled**⁸⁶ B-P.

[00:15:18] By the **outbreak**⁸⁷ of the Second World War he was an old man, and had retired to Kenya. His health was **failing**⁸⁸, and he died on 8 January 1941, less than a month away from his 84th birthday.

[00:15:34] Of course, the death of Baden-Powell was a great loss for the Scouting movement, but it was strong enough to continue without him.

[00:15:43] During the second half of the 20th century it continued to grow and grow, with over 31 million people worldwide.

[00:15:52] By 2023, so not so long from now, it **aims**⁸⁹ to, and I'm quoting directly here, "enable 100 million young people to be active citizens creating positive change in their communities and in the world based on shared values".

⁸⁴ not at all

⁸⁵ promising beginning, advantage

⁸⁶ worried

⁸⁷ sudden beginning

⁸⁸ becoming worse

⁸⁹ plans, has the intention

[00:16:11] Like any global movement with millions of people that have taken part, it has had its [fair share](#)⁹⁰ of criticism.

[00:16:19] Baden-Powell himself has been called a colonial [oppressor](#)⁹¹, a murderer, a supporter of Hitler and fascism, a [repressed](#)⁹² homosexual, and someone trying to turn little boys into soldiers.

[00:16:33] And in terms of the Scouting organisation itself, it has a long list of [controversies](#).

[00:16:39] For starters, the original promise required Scouts to pledge their [allegiance](#) to “God and the King”, which has had to be changed for people who don’t believe in a God, or don’t want to swear their [allegiance](#)⁹³ to a monarch.

[00:16:55] In the US, until very recently, 2015 in fact, you couldn’t be gay and participate in the Scouts. The relationship between boy and girl scouts is still being defined, and more importantly there are multiple cases of child abuse that continue to [emerge](#) over the long history of The Scouts.

⁹⁰ a lot, more than enough

⁹¹ a person who practises authority in a harsh and unfair way

⁹² not being able to express himself as a

⁹³ loyalty and support

[00:17:18] The child abuse issue isn't simply a [moral](#)⁹⁴ or criminal issue, it is also an important financial one for the Scouts in America. There is an [ongoing](#)⁹⁵ legal case against The Boy Scouts of America involving the [abuse](#)⁹⁶ of 63,000 boys.

[00:17:38] As a result, the Boy Scouts of America is trying to declare [bankruptcy](#)⁹⁷ in order to protect itself from having to [pay out](#)⁹⁸ literally billions of dollars, which would completely [sink](#)⁹⁹ the organisation.

[00:17:54] And even all of these problems aside, there is a wider question mark over whether being a Scout has the same [appeal](#) as it had 110 years ago. There is now a lot more competition for children's attention, whether that comes from video games, social media or simply other outdoor activities, such as sports.

[00:18:19] Membership numbers are dropping significantly in countries like the US, and the organisation is struggling to attract children in the same numbers as it was able to 50 years ago.

⁹⁴ relating to standards of behaviour that each person believes in

⁹⁵ continuing to exist

⁹⁶ violent treatment including sexual activity

⁹⁷ a situation in which an organisation has no money

⁹⁸ pay a large amount of money

⁹⁹ cause to fail, destroy

[00:18:32] If membership continues to fall at the same rate, then Scouting might become a thing of the past, a cultural [relic](#)¹⁰⁰ that had its place but [goes the way of](#)¹⁰¹ the dinosaurs.

[00:18:45] Or, perhaps there might be a [phoenix-like](#)¹⁰² [rebirth](#)¹⁰³, a reinvention for the 21st century as children and parents look for a break from the always-on digital world and use Scouting as a way to reconnect with a more natural sense of adventure.

[00:19:06] Having spent many hours reading people's [reflections](#)¹⁰⁴ on their time Scouting, it's clear that for some people it was a [traumatic](#)¹⁰⁵ experience, and one that they would like to forget.

[00:19:19] But for many more, for [upwards of](#)¹⁰⁶ a hundred million people, it was one that brought them great joy and happiness, long-lasting friendships and memories, and taught them how to be better, more balanced adults.

¹⁰⁰ a tradition or system from the past

¹⁰¹ ends up the same as

¹⁰² having a resemblance to a phoenix (a mythical bird) in the sense of re-appearing and beginning again

¹⁰³ new period of growth

¹⁰⁴ thoughts

¹⁰⁵ causing emotional pain

¹⁰⁶ more than

[00:19:34] And no doubt if Robert Baden-Powell knew how much of a positive impact he had on many people's lives he would be a very happy man indeed.

[00:19:47] OK then, that is it for today's episode on Robert Baden-Powell and The Boy Scouts.

[00:19:56] I hope it's been an interesting one, that you've learnt something new, and even if you were a Scout when you were younger, then you learned something new about this amazing global movement.

[00:20:07] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:20:11] Were you a Scout, and if so what was your experience like? Is it something that you would like your children [to take part in¹⁰⁷](#), or do you think it's something that had its time and place but is no longer [appropriate¹⁰⁸](#) for kids in the 21st century?

[00:20:27] I would love to know.

[00:20:29] You can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:20:38] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:20:43] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

¹⁰⁷ to participate in, to be part of

¹⁰⁸ suitable, right

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Robert Baden-Powell & The Boy Scouts

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Spread	being distributed, coming from
Iconic	very famous, symbolic
Controversies	disagreement and arguments
Overcome	succeed in dealing with
Naval	belonging to his country's sea military
Steam train	a train that is powered by an steam engine (the vapour into which water is converted when heated)
Prestigious	respected and admired
Scholarship	payment made to support his education
Out in the open	in an open space, in the country
Upbringing	education and training received during childhood
Posted	sent or stationed
Made a name for	became well-known

himself

Shone a light on explained

Nasty bad and very unpleasant

Aspects parts

Imprison keep them in prison, confine

Decline the fact of becoming less powerful

Embarrassing making them feel shame

Morale confidence

Consecutive following one after the other

Siege the situation in which a town or castle is surrounded by enemies

Keep up make it remain at a high level

Distract make them stop giving their attention to

Household name someone very well known

Morale-boosting able to improve confidence

Reinforcements extra troops sent to increase the strength of their army

Robert Baden-Powell & The Boy Scouts

Greeted	received, acknowledged
Adoring	showing love and respect
Rewarded	given as a recognition for his services
Set out	started working
Aimed	directed, pointed
Proper	correct, suitable
Recruits	people newly enlisted in the armed forces
Go one step further	to do something more, to advance
Test out	do it as a test to see if or how it works
Camping	the activity of staying in a tent in the country
Hit	success
Outset	beginning
Popping up	appearing
Mass rally	a meeting of a very large group of people
Jamboree	a large organised meeting that many people go to

Controversially	in a way that caused disagreement and arguments
Intended	planned, wanted
Old-fashioned	belonging to a time in the past, not modern
Misogynist	a man who believes men are better than women
Suffragette	a woman who fights for women's right to vote
Abnormal	different from what was expected, not normal
Criticised	considered being wrong about
Social mobility	the ability of people to change their social status
Reflected this	showed, represented this
Ritual	a set of actions or words spoken that are performed regularly in the same manner
Ceremony	a set of actions or words spoken that are performed on special occasions
Bonds	brings, connects
Elect	choose by voting
Emerge	appear

Woven into	included in
Duty	something that you have to do as part of a responsibility and because you feel it is the right thing to do
Obey	to act according to what you have been asked or according to rules
Oath	a formal promise, a vow
Level with	at the same level or height as
Palm	the inside part of the hand
Upright	straight up
Upwards	towards a higher position
Salute	a formal sign of respect
Appeal	be attractive or interesting
Bond	bring, connect
Gang	group of young people who do activities together
Appealing	attractive, interesting
Encouraged	advised
Decentralised	remote, far from the main centre

Caveat	something that limits what was previously said
Claim	say that it was true
Divine	connected with God
Take off	become successful and popular
Spring chicken	a young man
Scar	leave him damaged or scarred
Jamborees	large organised meetings that many people go to
Optimism	the belief that good things will happen
Subsequent	happening right after, following
Totalitarianism	the political system in which people in power have complete control
Horried	very frightened
Banned	not allowed
Swallowed up	becoming part of
Sinister	harmful, evil
By no means	not at all

Headstart	promising beginning, advantage
Troubled	worried
Outbreak	sudden beginning
Failing	becoming worse
Aims	plans, has the intention
Fair share	a lot, more than enough
Oppressor	a person who practises authority in a harsh and unfair way
Repressed	not being able to express himself as a
Allegiance	loyalty and support
Moral	relating to standards of behaviour that each person believes in
Ongoing	continuing to exist
Abuse	violent treatment including sexual activity
Bankruptcy	a situation in which an organisation has no money
Pay out	pay a large amount of money
Sink	cause to fail, destroy

Relic	a tradition or system from the past
Goes the way of	ends up the same as
Phoenix-like	having a resemblance to a phoenix (a mythical bird) in the sense of re-appearing and beginning again
Rebirth	new period of growth
Reflections	thoughts
Traumatic	causing emotional pain
Upwards of	more than
To take part in	to participate in, to be part of
Appropriate	suitable, right

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

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com