

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #346

The Cambridge Five Part I | The Recruitment

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[00:00:05] 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.

[00:00:20] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are talking about a group of Soviet [spies](#)¹.

[00:00:26] But they weren't your average Soviets [spies](#); they were members of Britain's [ruling elite](#)².

[00:00:33] Highly educated, upper-class men thought to be the best and brightest of British society. Men who, to the outside world, were at the very top of the British

¹ people who found and reported information about the activities of another country

² the class of people in power

[establishment](#)³, but behind closed doors, they fed information to an ideological enemy for a period [spanning](#)⁴ three decades.

[00:00:53] As this is such an incredible story, with so many weird and wonderful facts, [twists](#)⁵, turns, stories and personalities, this is going to be a three part mini-series on the group [dubbed](#)⁶ “the Cambridge Five”.

[00:01:07] Today, in episode one, we will take a look at the backgrounds and [recruitment](#)⁷ of these men, of these [spies](#), with a little historical context to help us properly appreciate the [magnitude](#)⁸ of what they did.

[00:01:20] In part-two, we'll look at their actual [spywork](#)⁹, the [ingenious](#)¹⁰ ways they did it, and, of course, the top secret information they stole.

³ the group of people with a lot of political power and influence

⁴ covering

⁵ changes in the direction of a situation

⁶ called, named

⁷ the process of finding and employing them

⁸ great importance

⁹ the process of finding and reporting information about the activities of another country

¹⁰ clever and original

[00:01:29] And in part-three, we'll get into their [downfall¹¹](#), how their story ended, and how, in some respects, they [got away with it¹²](#).

[00:01:37] OK then, let's get into it and talk about the Cambridge Five - the Soviet [spy¹³](#) ring hidden in plain sight.

[00:01:48] It was a July afternoon in London's Regents Park, in 1934.

[00:01:54] It was a clear, hot day, and the sun was high in the sky.

[00:01:59] Birds [chirped¹⁴](#), and children played.

[00:02:03] Park benches lined the paths, and Londoners [lounged¹⁵](#) lazily in the shade.

[00:02:10] A 22-year-old man named Kim Philby, looking rather [nervous¹⁶](#), made his way through the park wearing a shirt and tie, despite the [sticky¹⁷](#) summer heat.

¹¹ end, failure

¹² managed to avoid punishment

¹³ a person who found and reported information about the activities of another country

¹⁴ made short high sounds

¹⁵ sat in a relaxed way

¹⁶ worried, anxious

¹⁷ hot, making you sweat

[00:02:21] He hadn't planned to come to the park that day, but set off after his wife had told him, rather mysteriously, that she had arranged for him to meet, and I'm quoting directly, 'a man of [decisive](#)¹⁸ importance'.

[00:02:36] She told him nothing more, only the time and location.

[00:02:41] Not knowing what to expect, he sat down on a bench and tried to [blend in](#)¹⁹.

[00:02:48] After a few minutes he saw a [stocky](#)²⁰, short man approaching.

[00:02:53] He introduced himself as 'Otto', and spoke with a strong eastern European accent.

[00:03:01] Looking around, Otto made [small talk](#)²¹ and complained that he hated London.

[00:03:06] He much preferred Paris, he said.

[00:03:09] It wasn't long before Otto [cut to the chase](#)²², he stopped with the [small talk](#) and revealed the true purpose of the meeting.

¹⁸ great, major

¹⁹ look and behave like the other people

²⁰ broad, well-built

²¹ conversation about things that were not important

²² got to the point without wasting time

[00:03:18] Otto turned and said that someone like Philby, someone from his family background, could be of great use. He could make a much greater impact than a mere ‘[run-of-the-mill](#)²³ party member’.

[00:03:33] Philby [nodded](#)²⁴, saying nothing.

[00:03:36] “You must stop communicating with all the friends I tell you to if you want to go ahead with this”, Otto said.

[00:03:43] Eventually the men came to an agreement, and a few moments later Otto left in one direction, Philby the other, and the two men slipped back into the anonymous [hustle and bustle](#)²⁵ of central London.

[00:03:58] Officially, Otto was working at a nearby university; unofficially, he was Arnold Deutsch, a [spy recruiter](#)²⁶ for the Soviets.

[00:04:09] Deutsch had just [recruited](#)²⁷ Kim Philby: the most famous British [double-agent](#)²⁸ of all time, the biggest [traitor](#)²⁹, some say, in British history.

²³ ordinary, not special

²⁴ moved his head down in agreement

²⁵ a lot of activity, noise

²⁶ a person whose job was to find and employ them

²⁷ found and employed

²⁸ an agent who worked as a spy for the country, but who also worked for its enemies

²⁹ a person who was not loyal to his country

[00:04:21] That afternoon in Regent's Park was the first step in the story of the Cambridge Five.

[00:04:27] So, who were the Cambridge Five?

[00:04:30] They are Kim Philby, who we heard about a moment ago, Donald Maclean, Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt, and John Cairncross.

[00:04:40] Though, of course, the story of the Cambridge Five really begins at Cambridge University, we should start first with a bit of background on these men.

[00:04:49] This is important because the types of people the Cambridge Five were, and by that I mean their class backgrounds, their social status and the [circles](#)³⁰ they moved in, these were [crucial](#)³¹ to their [spywork](#).

[00:05:03] Now, what you need to understand about the Cambridge Five is that they all - besides one - came from incredibly [privileged](#)³² backgrounds.

[00:05:11] They were all born into Britain's upper-middle or upper-class, were educated at the top private schools, and came from 'good', wealthy, families with connections.

³⁰ social groups

³¹ extremely important

³² having special advantages

[00:05:23] To give you an idea of quite how high up these men were in British society, Donald Maclean was the son of Sir Donald Maclean, a powerful Liberal Party politician who was a Privy Councillor, like an advisor, to the Royal Family.

[00:05:38] Harold Adrian Russell Philby, known as 'Kim', the man from the London park a couple of minutes ago, he was educated at one of Britain's most exclusive private schools, Westminster, and he was the son of a famous Arab [scholar](#)³³ and [diplomat](#)³⁴ who advised the King of Saudi Arabia.

[00:05:57] Guy Burgess, whose full name was Guy Francis de Moncy Burgess, went to school at the [prestigious](#)³⁵ Eton College, the school that has produced a third of Britain's Prime Ministers, including Boris Johnson, and is where Princes William and Harry went.

[00:06:13] Anthony Blunt was a distant cousin of the Queen Mother and fourth cousin of Sir Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists. He also had a [suitably](#)³⁶ [prestigious](#) education, going to Marlborough College, another [elite](#)³⁷ private school.

³³ professor, expert

³⁴ a person who officially represented his country in a foreign country

³⁵ respected

³⁶ in a way that was right or fitting

³⁷ suitable for rich and powerful people, exclusive

[00:06:29] John Cairncross, on the other hand, was a little different from the other four of the Cambridge Five.

[00:06:35] He was Scottish, first of all, and came not from the same [privileged](#) background as the others but from working-class [roots](#)³⁸. He was born in Glasgow in 1913, the son of an [ironmonger](#)³⁹ and a primary school teacher, but when he won a place at Cambridge University, he was [thrust](#)⁴⁰ into the very top of British society.

[00:06:57] And Cambridge University, in the early-1930s, is where our story really begins.

[00:07:04] As you may know, or may remember from episode number 276, Cambridge University is not just one of the most [prestigious](#) universities in Britain, but it's consistently [ranked](#)⁴¹ as one of the best in the world.

[00:07:19] Cambridge is a lot more [meritocratic](#)⁴² now, but in the 1930s going to study at Cambridge or Oxford was a [rite of passage](#)⁴³ for wealthy and [privileged](#) young

³⁸ origins, beginnings

³⁹ a person who sold tools for a living

⁴⁰ pushed suddenly

⁴¹ listed, considered

⁴² an organisation in which people are chosen because of their abilities and not their social status

⁴³ important event with special meaning

British men. It was the expected step for young men like Burgess, Philby, Maclean and Blunt.

[00:07:37] Three or four years at Cambridge, then a respectable job in government or the army or the business world.

[00:07:45] Kim Philby arrived to study History and Economics; Maclean studied modern languages; Burgess, history; Blunt, who was the oldest of the group, studied mathematics; and Cairncross, studied French and German.

[00:07:59] All five men were academically gifted, that's to say, intelligent, but their interests extended outside the library.

[00:08:09] Moving in the same [circles](#) - meaning, the same social groups - the five met and became friends, and were all known to be very sociable and active in Cambridge's exclusive social scene.

[00:08:21] Burgess in particular, it was said, [bragged⁴⁴](#), or claimed of “knowing everybody who was anybody, everywhere and anywhere.”

⁴⁴ claimed in a proud way

[00:08:31] In fact, as we will see, socialising and alcohol - and some of the men's [struggles](#)⁴⁵ to control their alcohol [intake](#)⁴⁶ - this was a common theme throughout their careers and it was partly to [blame](#)⁴⁷ for their eventual [downfall](#).

[00:08:46] Some of the Five were also active in Cambridge's ultra-elite secret societies.

[00:08:52] Burgess and Blunt were both members of the Cambridge Apostles and Pitt Club, two private members clubs for Cambridge's 'cream of the crop' - that's to say, the best of the best - that have had kings, politicians and famous academics as former members.

[00:09:08] Outside this bubble of Cambridge, as you will know, the 1930s was a time of great [economic upheaval](#)⁴⁸ and class tension.

[00:09:19] The First World War had ended in 1918, at the end of the 1920s the Great Depression had caused huge [hardship](#)⁴⁹ and suffering, and with it came extreme [political turbulence](#)⁵⁰.

[00:09:31] And specifically, the threat of fascism across Europe.

⁴⁵ difficult situations

⁴⁶ the act of consuming it or taking it in

⁴⁷ be considered responsible

⁴⁸ difficult or confused economic conditions

⁴⁹ difficult conditions

⁵⁰ difficult or confused political conditions

[00:09:37] For these young men and women at Cambridge, men and women who felt they were [destined](#)⁵¹ to go on to rule not only the country, but large parts of the world, the question remained: what sort of world do we want to live in, what sort of country do we want to rule?

[00:09:54] It seemed like there were two competing visions of the world: on the one side, there was fascism, Mussolini, Hitler, and Oswald Molsley in the UK, and on the other, the teachings of Karl Marx, communism.

[00:10:10] For many who feared the rise of fascism, there was only one logical choice: support the communists.

[00:10:18] And all five of these young men you just heard about, Maclean, Burgess, Philby, Blunt and Cairncross, they all held what would be considered very left-wing views and moved in [circles](#), or interacted with, groups with links to the British Communist Party.

[00:10:35] Well, as you might imagine, the Soviets were hoping to find and [win over](#)⁵² exactly these types of young, [ideological](#)⁵³ and [impressionable](#)⁵⁴ men.

⁵¹ meant, intended

⁵² persuade them to agree with them

⁵³ concerned with ideas or principles

⁵⁴ easily affected or influenced by others

[00:10:46] And it's here that we need to meet our friend Otto, the man with the Eastern European accent from the start of the episode.

[00:10:54] Or rather, not Otto, but Arnold Deutsch.

[00:10:58] In early-1934, Deutsch had been sent by Soviet intelligence to London.

[00:11:04] Deutsch's cousin was Oscar Deutsch, the man who created the Odeon cinema [chain](#)⁵⁵, which still exists today by the way, and is actually the largest cinema [chain](#) in the country. Crucially, the respectable Oscar Deutsch supported his cousin's move to the UK, meaning he was able to exist, to do his [spywork](#), [under the radar](#)⁵⁶, without the knowledge of the British authorities.

[00:11:31] Deutsch's postgraduate work at the University of London was a [cover](#)⁵⁷, of course, and he was secretly working as a [recruiter](#) with instructions from Moscow to, and I'm quoting directly '[cultivate](#)⁵⁸ young [radical](#)⁵⁹ [high-fliers](#)⁶⁰ from leading British universities before they entered [the corridors of power](#)⁶¹.'

⁵⁵ series

⁵⁶ without being noticed

⁵⁷ a position he used to hide his true occupation

⁵⁸ prepare

⁵⁹ supporting and wanting extreme change

⁶⁰ people who had the requirements to be very successful

⁶¹ the higher levels of government

[00:11:51] This mission brought him to that bench in London's Regent's Park, and resulted in the [recruitment](#) of Kim Philby, the first of the Cambridge Five, in the summer of 1934.

[00:12:03] Philby later said that Deutsch "spoke at great length, arguing that a person with my family background and possibilities could do far more for Communism than the [run-of-the-mill](#) Party member or [sympathiser](#)⁶²... I accepted. His first instructions were... that I should break off as quickly as possible all personal contact with our Communist friends."

[00:12:27] This was, of course, to make it appear as though he was no longer a communist [sympathiser](#) and strengthen his [cover](#) - his fake identity.

[00:12:36] His first mission was to [spy on](#)⁶³ his own father, the [diplomat](#), as the Soviets believed he could have had important documents in his office.

[00:12:47] From there, Philby recommended Burgess and Maclean, then Burgess [recruited](#) Blunt, and a little while later Burgess and Blunt convinced Cairncross to join them.

⁶² supporter

⁶³ secretly find information on him

[00:12:58] The [pitch](#)⁶⁴, or the offer, was [framed](#)⁶⁵ in a way to not be [explicitly](#)⁶⁶ working for the Soviets, but rather, against fascism and for peace.

[00:13:08] Indeed, it wasn't [pitched](#)⁶⁷ as them [spying](#)⁶⁸ against Britain, but rather they were providing information that would help stop Britain falling to fascism. Well, this was the case in the 1930s, but as we will discover, it soon became something altogether very different.

[00:13:27] By the time the Five began to [graduate](#)⁶⁹ from Cambridge in the mid to late-1930s, at least three, Philby, Maclean and Burgess, and possibly more, had been [recruited](#) and trained by the NKVD, the Soviet intelligence wing that would go on to be the famous KGB.

[00:13:46] The exact timing and sequence of their [recruitment](#) is a little [murky](#)⁷⁰, or unclear, not only because they were [spies](#) and it was all top secret, obviously, but also

⁶⁴ offer

⁶⁵ planned

⁶⁶ in a way that was clear

⁶⁷ proposed

⁶⁸ finding and reporting information

⁶⁹ finish their studies

⁷⁰ unclear

because some of the Five, [notably](#)⁷¹ Blunt, have [cast doubt](#)⁷² on the fact that they were all [recruited](#) while they were students at Cambridge.

[00:14:05] The exact timings aren't [crucial](#) for our story.

[00:14:08] Whether it was at university or shortly after, they were all [recruited](#), they were [full-blown](#)⁷³ Soviet [spies](#), with their own cryptonyms, that is, their own secret [spy](#) names or codes.

[00:14:21] Maclean was known as Homer, Burgess as Hicks, Philby was Sonny or Stanley, Blunt was Johnson, and Cairncross [went by](#)⁷⁴ Liszt.

[00:14:34] And these Soviet [spies-in-waiting](#)⁷⁵ all went on to secure the kind of jobs that were beyond the Soviet's wildest dreams.

[00:14:43] So, what did they do?

[00:14:45] That's to say, what were their official jobs - their '[covers](#)'⁷⁶?

⁷¹ especially

⁷² made it seem uncertain

⁷³ fully developed

⁷⁴ was called

⁷⁵ planned to be spies

⁷⁶ positions they used to hide their true occupation

[00:14:49] Maclean and Cairncross joined the Foreign Office, becoming [diplomats](#)⁷⁷, essentially.

[00:14:54] Guy Burgess initially worked for a Conservative MP, a member of parliament, before moving on to the BBC, where he spent time interacting with and interviewing politicians and other influential figures from the British establishment.

[00:15:09] Blunt joined the army and then moved onto MI5, the domestic [counterintelligence](#)⁷⁸ agency, essentially, the internal [spy](#) department of the UK.

[00:15:20] Kim Philby, however, was given a slightly more interesting first mission, one I think is worth considering for a moment and that might be particularly interesting for the Spanish listeners among you.

[00:15:33] According to top secret MI5 files that were made public in 2011, Philby was sent to Spain.

[00:15:41] He arrived in February of 1937, shortly after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Officially, he was there as a journalist, covering the war for The Times newspaper.

[00:15:54] The Times is a more right-wing publication and was [sympathetic](#)⁷⁹ to the nationalists, that is, Franco's fascist army, not the Republicans.

⁷⁷ people who officially represented their country in a foreign country

⁷⁸ activities organised to block an enemy's sources of information

⁷⁹ supportive

[00:16:04] Why is this relevant, you might be thinking, and surely, if he was a [spy](#) for the Soviets this seems like an [odd](#)⁸⁰ choice.

[00:16:13] It was all a [cover](#), of course.

[00:16:16] For the duration of his time in Spain, Philby was [stationed with](#)⁸¹, he was based with, nationalist forces, supposedly reporting for the British newspaper.

[00:16:26] But his real mission was to 'keep an eye' on [troops](#)⁸², particularly the Italians and Germans, and pass this information back to the Soviets, who were, of course, supporting the Republican cause.

[00:16:39] Some historians believe that his real mission, however, was something altogether more exciting, and had he [pulled it off](#)⁸³, would have had a [tumultuous](#)⁸⁴ impact on Spanish history.

[00:16:52] And this was, according to a Soviet officer who [defected](#)⁸⁵ to the West, to assassinate Franco, the Spanish dictator.

⁸⁰ strange

⁸¹ based with

⁸² soldiers

⁸³ succeeded in doing it

⁸⁴ of great importance, momentous

⁸⁵ left his country to go to

[00:17:01] Now, this does seem slightly [far-fetched](#)⁸⁶, slightly unlikely, as Philby had no military training or experience.

[00:17:10] And just in case you need a reminder, Franco wasn't assassinated, and he ruled Spain from 1939 until his death in 1975.

[00:17:19] It is incredible to think that the young Philby would have been given such a mission so early on in his spying career, but as we will see throughout this mini-series, the story of the Cambridge Five is filled with strange [coincidences](#)⁸⁷ and lucky escapes.

[00:17:36] Take for example the time when Franco's guards searched Philby but didn't find the piece of paper he had written his secret codes down on - codes for communicating and sending secret messages.

[00:17:49] Philby then got lucky again in December of 1937 when he was the [sole](#)⁸⁸ survivor after a bomb landed in front of his car.

[00:17:58] The other passengers, all foreign journalists too, were killed, and the nationalist soldiers used Philby as a [propaganda](#)⁸⁹ tool.

[00:18:07] Incredibly, he was even given the Red Cross of Military Merit by Franco.

⁸⁶ unlikely

⁸⁷ things that happened by accident

⁸⁸ only

⁸⁹ information or ideas used to affect people's opinions

[00:18:13] Now by the time the Second World War had started in 1939, all of the Cambridge Five had done exactly as their Soviet [handlers](#)⁹⁰ had hoped for.

[00:18:23] They had [established](#)⁹¹ themselves and started careers in key [branches](#)⁹² of the British political and intelligence establishment.

[00:18:31] Some of them were in the Foreign Office, or interacting with influential people in the BBC and British Army.

[00:18:38] As war in Europe began, the Cambridge [spy](#) ring were also approached by British intelligence, who thought that their education, experiences and contacts would make them excellent candidates to be [spies](#).

[00:18:51] British [spies](#), that is.

[00:18:54] Philby was [recruited](#) into MI6, and some of the others were interviewed or worked informally for British intelligence.

[00:19:03] Crucially, [owing to](#)⁹³ their [privileged](#) backgrounds and respected families, very little [if any] security checks were done on the men.

⁹⁰ the people that organised and manage them

⁹¹ secured acceptance

⁹² positions, parts

⁹³ because of

[00:19:13] They were, simply put, assumed to be ‘good [chaps](#)⁹⁴’ because of who they were - they had come from good families, gone to the right schools, gone to Cambridge, they behaved like a British gentleman should behave.

[00:19:26] They were perfectly positioned for Act Two, what would turn out to be the most [prolific](#)⁹⁵ and [treacherous](#)⁹⁶ [spy](#) ring in British history.

[00:19:38] Ok then, that’s it for part one on this mini-series on the Cambridge Five, part one of this wonderful story.

[00:19:44] Next up we’ll get into the real [ins and outs](#)⁹⁷ of what they did, how they did it, and how their personal [vices](#)⁹⁸ got in the way, or perhaps even helped them, in their [quest](#)⁹⁹ to [betray](#)¹⁰⁰ their country.

[00:19:57] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

⁹⁴ men, guys

⁹⁵ having a lot of activity

⁹⁶ involving tricks or dishonest activities

⁹⁷ details

⁹⁸ bad habits or weaknesses

⁹⁹ goal, target

¹⁰⁰ act in a way that wasn't loyal to it

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[00:20:02] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Spies	people who found and reported information about the activities of another country
Ruling elite	the class of people in power
Establishment	the group of people with a lot of political power and influence
Spanning	covering
Twists	changes in the direction of a situation
Dubbed	called, named
Recruitment	the process of finding and employing them
Magnitude	great importance
Spywork	the process of finding and reporting information about the activities of another country
Ingenious	clever and original
Downfall	end, failure

Got away with it	managed to avoid punishment
Spy	a person who found and reported information about the activities of another country
Chirped	made short high sounds
Lounged	sat in a relaxed way
Nervous	worried, anxious
Sticky	hot, making you sweat
Decisive	great, major
Blend in	look and behave like the other people
Stocky	broad, well-built
Small talk	conversation about things that were not important
Cut to the chase	got to the point without wasting time
Run-of-the-mill	ordinary, not special
Nodded	moved his head down in agreement
Hustle and bustle	a lot of activity, noise
Recruiter	a person whose job was to find and employ them

Recruited	found and employed
Double-agent	an agent who worked as a spy for the country, but who also worked for its enemies
Traitor	a person who was not loyal to his country
Circles	social groups
Crucial	extremely important
Privileged	having special advantages
Scholar	professor, expert
Diplomat	a person who officially represented his country in a foreign country
Prestigious	respected
Suitably	in a way that was right or fitting
Elite	suitable for rich and powerful people, exclusive
Roots	origins, beginnings
Ironmonger	a person who sold tools for a living
Thrust	pushed suddenly
Ranked	listed, considered

Meritocratic	an organisation in which people are chosen because of their abilities and not their social status
Rite of passage	important event with special meaning
Bragged	claimed in a proud way
Struggles	difficult situations
Intake	the act of consuming it or taking it in
Blame	be considered responsible
Economic upheaval	difficult or confused economic conditions
Hardship	difficult conditions
Political turbulence	difficult or confused political conditions
Destined	meant, intended
Win over	persuade them to agree with them
Ideological	concerned with ideas or principles
Impressionable	easily affected or influenced by others
Chain	series
Under the radar	without being noticed

Cover	a position he used to hide his true occupation
Cultivate	prepare
Radical	supporting and wanting extreme change
High-fliers	people who had the requirements to be very successful
The corridors of power	the higher levels of government
Sympathiser	supporter
Spy on	secretly find information on him
Pitch	offer
Framed	planned
Explicitly	in a way that was clear
Pitched	proposed
Spying	finding and reporting information
Graduate	finish their studies
Murky	unclear
Notably	especially

Cast doubt	made it seem uncertain
Full-blown	fully developed
Went by	was called
Spies-in-waiting	planned to be spies
Covers	positions they used to hide their true occupation
Diplomats	people who officially represented their country in a foreign country
Counterintelligence	activities organised to block an enemy's sources of information
Sympathetic	supportive
Odd	strange
Stationed with	based with
Troops	soldiers
Pulled it off	succeeded in doing it
Tumultuous	of great importance, momentous
Defected	left his country to go to
Far-fetched	unlikely

Coincidences	things that happened by accident
Sole	only
Propaganda	information or ideas used to affect people's opinions
Handlers	the people that organised and manage them
Established	secured acceptance
Branches	positions, parts
Owing to	because of
Chaps	men, guys
Prolific	having a lot of activity
Treacherous	involving tricks or dishonest activities
Ins and outs	details
Vices	bad habits or weaknesses
Quest	goal, target
Betray	act in a way that wasn't loyal to it

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