

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #564
The Darién Scheme
22nd Aug, 2025

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Transcript

[00:00:05] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about the Darién Scheme.

[00:00:28] It is a fascinating period of history, a [supposedly¹](#) genius idea to transform global trade and generate [vast²](#) wealth and riches for Scotland, all by [colonising³](#) a tiny part of Central America.

[00:00:43] As you might be able to imagine, it didn't quite go to plan, and ended in the creation of modern Britain.

[00:00:51] So, let's not waste a minute and get right into it.

[00:00:58] The Pan-American highway is, by some standards, the longest road in the world.

¹ according to what is generally assumed or believed

² very big

³ taking control of the land and living there

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The Darién Scheme

[00:01:04] Starting at Prudhoe Bay, in Alaska, you can drive all the way down through Canada, the United States, Mexico, Central America, and continue down through Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and end up in Argentina, right at the very southern [tip](#)⁴ of South America.

[00:01:25] The total length is around 30,000 kilometres, and it's probably more accurate to call it a large collection of roads rather than a single road, as there are multiple ways you can go.

[00:01:39] And another important clarification is that you can't actually go all the way from the top to the bottom. There is a break, an area where the road comes to a [halt](#)⁵, in modern-day Panama.

[00:01:54] This is the Darién Gap, the [dense](#)⁶ and [inhospitable](#)⁷ rainforest area in southeastern Panama and northwestern Colombia.

⁴ pointed end

⁵ a stop

⁶ thick and hard to move through

⁷ not good for living

The Darién Scheme

[00:02:05] To this day, there are no **functional**⁸ roads, and anyone wishing to cross it must make the **treacherous**⁹ journey on foot.

[00:02:16] But just over 300 years ago, an enterprising Scottish man called William Paterson had a plan for this area, a plan that he thought would make him, and his country, **spectacularly**¹⁰ wealthy.

[00:02:34] He had spent some time in the Caribbean and had got an idea.

[00:02:40] Ships transporting goods between Asia and Europe needed to sail all the way around Cape Horn, at the bottom of South America.

[00:02:51] Paterson had a plan to fix this.

[00:02:54] Instead of going all the way around, a ship could sail to modern-day Panama, **unload**¹¹ its **cargo**¹², and this would be transported by land for the 50 kilometres or so to the other side, where it would be **loaded**¹³ onto another ship and continue its onward journey.

⁸ working or useful

⁹ very dangerous

¹⁰ in a very big or amazing way

¹¹ take things off the ship

¹² goods carried by the ship

¹³ put (onto a ship)

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The Darién Scheme

[00:03:15] It was a clever idea, [on paper](#)¹⁴, at least.

[00:03:19] Why spend months battling storms and freezing temperatures around the southern tip of the continent when you could simply carry goods across a [narrow](#)¹⁵ [strip](#)¹⁶ of land?

[00:03:30] Now, you might be thinking, “Uhm, surely a better idea would have been to dig a canal?”, and of course, this is the solution that exists today: the Panama Canal.

[00:03:42] Quick side note: we also have an episode on the Panama Canal, in case you haven’t listened to that one already. It’s episode number 411.

[00:03:51] But let’s go back to the late 17th century, and this [enterprising](#)¹⁷ young Scottish merchant.

[00:03:59] Paterson’s plan was a land route.

[00:04:03] Back in the 1690s, pre the Industrial Revolution, the idea of a canal would have been unthinkable.

¹⁴ in theory rather than in reality

¹⁵ not wide

¹⁶ a long, thin piece

¹⁷ good at finding new ideas and chances

The Darién Scheme

[00:04:12] There was **dense** jungle and mountainous ground; engineering a 50 km canal through all that would have been **utterly**¹⁸ impossible. The technology simply didn't exist.

[00:04:25] Paterson was working within the **realms**¹⁹ of what he thought was possible.

[00:04:31] Goods would be **hauled**²⁰ overland using **pack animals**²¹, human labour, and possibly some sort of **rudimentary**²² road or track. It would be a kind of **relay**²³ system for global trade, with New Caledonia, the name he gave to this planned Scottish colony, acting as the **vital**²⁴ middleman.

[00:04:54] What's more, with its strategic location in the West Indies, it could become a **booming**²⁵ trading port.

¹⁸ completely

¹⁹ areas or fields of activity

²⁰ pulled or carried with effort

²¹ animals used to carry loads

²² basic and simple

²³ a system of passing things from one to another

²⁴ very important

²⁵ growing fast and doing well

[00:05:02] And if it worked, Scotland wouldn't just become rich. It would become powerful, independent, and a major player in global trade.

[00:05:14] That was the dream.

[00:05:15] The reality, as we'll discover, was something very different.

[00:05:20] Now, before we get into what actually happened and why, it's worth pausing for a moment to reflect on what was going on in Scotland and in Great Britain at this time, and how all this might have helped Paterson convince his countrymen to [take a punt](#)²⁶ on this scheme halfway across the world.

[00:05:41] In the late 17th century, to put it [plainly](#)²⁷, things were not going particularly well in Scotland.

[00:05:50] At this point in history, Scotland was still an independent kingdom.

[00:05:55] But, it shared a monarch with England, following the Union of the Crowns in 1603.

[00:06:03] There was a curious situation in which both countries were ruled by the same king, William III, at that point in time.

²⁶ take a risk or chance

²⁷ clearly

[00:06:12] But the two countries remained politically and economically distinct²⁸.

[00:06:19] Scotland had its own parliament, its own legal system, and its foreign policy.

[00:06:26] Crucially²⁹, it was not part of England's growing empire and was excluded³⁰ from trading in English colonies, in order to protect the monopoly³¹ and increasing profits of the East India Company.

[00:06:40] So, while technically sovereign³², Scotland found itself in a kind of geopolitical limbo³³: not fully in control of its own economic future, but also locked out³⁴ of the prosperity³⁵ enjoyed by other imperial powers.

²⁸ separate and different

²⁹ most importantly

³⁰ left out

³¹ complete control of the market

³² having full control and power

³³ a state of waiting and not knowing

³⁴ not allowed to join or take part

³⁵ success and wealth

The Darién Scheme

[00:06:59] What's more, in the 1690s, the country was [reeling](#)³⁶ from a period of extreme [hardship](#)³⁷ known as the Seven Ill Years.

[00:07:09] [Crop](#)³⁸ failures had led to [widespread](#)³⁹ famine, and tens of thousands of people died from [starvation](#)⁴⁰ or disease.

[00:07:19] Between direct deaths from disease, indirect deaths from [starvation](#) and people who [fled](#)⁴¹ abroad, it's estimated that Scotland lost 20% of its population in the 1690s alone.

[00:07:35] And there wasn't much it could do to change its fate.

[00:07:38] Trade was dominated by its larger neighbour, England, which tightly controlled access to colonial markets. Scotland had no empire of its own, no access to the riches flowing in from the Americas, Africa, or Asia.

[00:07:54] And elsewhere in Europe, other colonial powers were expanding aggressively.

³⁶ shocked or upset

³⁷ a time of suffering or trouble

³⁸ a plant grown for food

³⁹ happening in many places

⁴⁰ (dying) from not having enough food

⁴¹ ran away

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The Darién Scheme

[00:08:00] The Spanish had long dominated Central and South America. The Dutch controlled major trading ports in Asia and the Caribbean.

[00:08:09] The French were pushing into North America. And England was [consolidating](#)⁴² its own colonial interests around the globe.

[00:08:18] These countries all had state-backed companies, like the Dutch East India Company, the English East India Company, as well as massive [naval](#)⁴³ infrastructure to support their imperial [ambitions](#)⁴⁴.

[00:08:31] The Scots had none of this.

[00:08:35] The sense of [frustration](#)⁴⁵ was deep.

⁴² making stronger

⁴³ about ships or the navy

⁴⁴ strong wishes to succeed

⁴⁵ feeling angry because of problems

The Darién Scheme

[00:08:38] The country was politically free, but economically [at the mercy of](#)⁴⁶ others.

For many Scots, the idea of creating their own trade route, their own [lucrative](#)⁴⁷ colonial [outpost](#)⁴⁸, was not just attractive — it felt like a matter of survival.

[00:08:57] William Paterson believed he had the answer: the creation of this land route over Darién.

[00:09:06] Now, importantly, most historians believe that he had never actually been to Darién, but had heard about it from a Welsh doctor and explorer.

[00:09:17] This doctor, a man called Lionel Wafer, had told Paterson about the [lush](#)⁴⁹ forests and [supposedly idyllic](#)⁵⁰ climate, and had also mentioned that the indigenous people there had been kind and welcoming.

[00:09:34] And, well, Paterson had decided that this was the place.

[00:09:40] In fact, he had been talking about this for a long time, since the mid-1680s, but few had listened to him.

⁴⁶ controlled by or dependant on

⁴⁷ making a lot of money

⁴⁸ a small settlement far from main towns

⁴⁹ full of green plants

⁵⁰ very beautiful and peaceful

The Darién Scheme

[00:09:50] However, by the late 1690s, people started to take him more seriously.

[00:09:57] Firstly, he was older and better connected, and had played a key role in the founding of the Bank of England, so he commanded more respect.

[00:10:09] And secondly, the [mood](#)⁵¹ in Scotland had changed.

[00:10:13] Years of [famine](#)⁵², economic [stagnation](#)⁵³, and [exclusion](#)⁵⁴ from [lucrative](#) colonial trade had created a desperate hunger for a [bold](#)⁵⁵ solution.

[00:10:25] Paterson's plan, which had once been dismissed as [fantasy](#)⁵⁶, now seemed like a [lifeline](#)⁵⁷.

⁵¹ the way people felt

⁵² a time with no food and many people starving

⁵³ not growing or improving

⁵⁴ not being allowed in

⁵⁵ brave and risky

⁵⁶ an idea that was not real

⁵⁷ something that would save them

The Darién Scheme

[00:10:33] He [proposed](#)⁵⁸ the creation of a new trading company, The Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies. Of course, this company needed financial [backing](#)⁵⁹, but this proved to be easier than might have been expected.

[00:10:50] In an extraordinary show of national [enthusiasm](#)⁶⁰, roughly one-fifth of all the money circulating in Scotland at the time was invested in the company.

[00:11:03] From the wealthiest [aristocrats](#)⁶¹ to [modest](#)⁶² [tradesmen](#)⁶³, thousands of Scots bought shares, hoping to [strike it rich](#)⁶⁴.

[00:11:13] But this wasn't just an economic project or financial [speculation](#)⁶⁵; it became a national cause, a symbol of pride and possibility.

⁵⁸ suggested

⁵⁹ support or help

⁶⁰ strong interest and excitement

⁶¹ rich and powerful people with titles

⁶² simple or humble

⁶³ people who worked with their hands

⁶⁴ suddenly get a lot of money

⁶⁵ investment in the hope of gain

The Darién Scheme

[00:11:25] Scotland, it seemed, was ready to [stake its future](#)⁶⁶ on this new company, Scotland's answer to the East India Company.

[00:11:35] Importantly, this new company had a pretty wide [remit](#)⁶⁷; it was intended to go on [a bunch of](#)⁶⁸ different missions, not just Darién.

[00:11:46] And so in July 1698, the first ships set sail.

[00:11:53] There were five in total, carrying around 1,200 settlers, along with supplies, weapons, tools, and, of course, trade goods, mirrors, [combs](#)⁶⁹, woollen hats, items they believed they could exchange with local Indigenous populations or passing merchants.

[00:12:14] The first mistake they made was to set off from Edinburgh, not Glasgow. Now, in case you need a reminder of Scottish geography, both Edinburgh and Glasgow are by the sea, but Edinburgh is on the east coast and Glasgow is on the west.

[00:12:35] Setting off from Edinburgh meant going all the way around the north of Scotland, an often [brutal](#)⁷⁰ journey, and in this case, one that took 4 months just to get around the British Isles.

⁶⁶ risk everything for the goal

⁶⁷ job or duty

⁶⁸ a group of

⁶⁹ tools for brushing hair

⁷⁰ very hard or difficult

The Darién Scheme

[00:12:49] Nevertheless, [spirits were high](#)⁷¹. The settlers were [optimistic](#)⁷². They believed they were sailing towards a new chapter in Scottish history.

[00:13:01] But when they arrived at their destination, the Bay of Darién, on the Caribbean coast, they found a land that was far less promising than the dream they had [bought into](#)⁷³.

[00:13:14] There was no natural harbour, the ground was [waterlogged](#)⁷⁴ and [uneven](#)⁷⁵, and the jungle was thick, hot, and full of unusual creatures.

[00:13:28] Worse still, the rainy season had begun, and their food supplies were already [deteriorating](#)⁷⁶ in the [humid](#)⁷⁷ climate.

[00:13:38] Still, they named their settlement New Edinburgh, [hoisted](#)⁷⁸ the Scottish flag, and tried to build a colony from the ground up.

⁷¹ people were happy and hopeful

⁷² thinking good things will happen

⁷³ believed in

⁷⁴ full of water

⁷⁵ not flat or smooth

⁷⁶ getting worse, going bad

⁷⁷ hot and wet

⁷⁸ lifted up

The Darién Scheme

[00:13:48] They built a fort, which they called St. Andrew, but the place they chose for this had no fresh water source.

[00:13:57] And this was just one failure among hundreds.

[00:14:01] The Scots were, to put it simply, [woefully](#)⁷⁹ unprepared for Darién.

[00:14:08] They had brought the wrong kind of supplies, luxury goods they wanted to trade rather than survival essentials to keep them alive.

[00:14:17] The indigenous Kuna people, who had lived in the region for centuries, had little interest in any of the products the Scots planned to trade with them.

[00:14:26] There was some contact, and they did share some water and supplies, but there was not nearly enough to support the Scottish settlement.

[00:14:37] Presumably, some assumed that these strange-looking foreigners would leave, or that the jungle would do its work.

[00:14:46] They didn't have to wait particularly long.

[00:14:49] Most of the men had no idea how to survive in this kind of climate, and had no useful skills for life in the jungle. They might have been able to survive a night

⁷⁹ very badly

The Darién Scheme

outdoors in the Scottish [highlands](#)⁸⁰, but a Central American jungle is something slightly different.

[00:15:09] Disease quickly [set in](#)⁸¹: [malaria](#)⁸², [dysentery](#)⁸³, fever, and within a few months, hundreds were dead, with 10 dying every single day.

[00:15:23] And the overland trade route? The [grand plan](#)⁸⁴ to carry goods across the [isthmus](#)⁸⁵?

[00:15:29] It never [got off the ground](#)⁸⁶; they never even started it.

[00:15:34] [Merely](#)⁸⁷ surviving was enough of a challenge, and one that hundreds failed to complete; it soon became obvious that clearing a path through the jungle and building a road, well, that was completely out of the question.

⁸⁰ high land or hills

⁸¹ started and stayed

⁸² a disease spread by mosquitoes

⁸³ a disease causing severe diarrhoea

⁸⁴ big and important plan

⁸⁵ a narrow piece of land with sea on both sides

⁸⁶ started to happen

⁸⁷ only, just

The Darién Scheme

[00:15:51] And there was another problem.

[00:15:53] This territory, this land, had also been claimed by Spain.

[00:16:00] Granted, Spain had shown little interest in it because of how [inhospitable](#) it was.

[00:16:06] But the Spanish did not [take kindly to](#)⁸⁸ a group of Scots planting a flag in what they considered to be their [backyard](#)⁸⁹.

[00:16:16] Now, initially, there was no significant military action on the part of Spain, and even if there had been, it would have been no competition; a [fully-fledged](#)⁹⁰ army against a [dwindling](#)⁹¹ number of sunburnt, [sickly](#)⁹² and [starving](#)⁹³ Scottish traders.

[00:16:35] After all, the biggest enemy the Scots faced wasn't Spain. It was the jungle.

⁸⁸ like or accept

⁸⁹ area near where they lived or controlled

⁹⁰ complete or fully developed

⁹¹ getting smaller

⁹² often ill

⁹³ very hungry

[00:16:42] By the summer of 1699, just eight months after arriving, the jungle had [proved victorious](#)⁹⁴.

[00:16:51] Of the 1,200 settlers who had set off, only 300 survived.

[00:16:59] They decided to [cut their losses](#)⁹⁵ and sail back home [with their tails between their legs](#)⁹⁶, with the ships carrying more [coffins](#)⁹⁷ than live passengers.

[00:17:10] But the story does not end there.

[00:17:14] Back in Scotland, news of the failure was slow to arrive, and before it did, a second expedition of 1,000 more settlers had already set sail.

[00:17:29] It's difficult to [overstate](#)⁹⁸ how tragic and almost surreal this was.

[00:17:36] The second group of settlers left Scotland believing they were going to reinforce a [thriving](#)⁹⁹ colony. They brought ministers, schoolteachers, and musicians.

⁹⁴ won in the end

⁹⁵ stop to avoid losing more

⁹⁶ feeling ashamed after failing

⁹⁷ boxes for dead bodies

⁹⁸ say or state that it was bigger or more important than it was

⁹⁹ doing very well

The Darién Scheme

They wrote letters full of hope and ambition. Some even saw it as a religious mission, a chance to build a godly society in a new world.

[00:18:00] When they arrived and found only [ruins](#)¹⁰⁰ and [graves](#)¹⁰¹, the shock must have been [overwhelming](#)¹⁰².

[00:18:09] They tried to continue, but they were even worse prepared. After all, they thought they were going to join a [bustling](#)¹⁰³ settlement rather than to have to [start from scratch](#)¹⁰⁴.

[00:18:23] And without fresh supplies, without leadership, and facing the same [hostile](#)¹⁰⁵ conditions, it was only a matter of time before the same [fate](#)¹⁰⁶ awaited them.

¹⁰⁰ broken remains of buildings

¹⁰¹ places where people were buried

¹⁰² too much to handle

¹⁰³ full of people and activity

¹⁰⁴ begin again with nothing

¹⁰⁵ unfriendly or dangerous

¹⁰⁶ end or future

The Darién Scheme

[00:18:35] Disease, hunger, and tropical [hardships](#)¹⁰⁷ quickly [took their toll](#)¹⁰⁸.

[00:18:41] And the Spanish this time did decide that action was required.

[00:18:46] They [blockaded](#)¹⁰⁹ the area, cutting off all potential routes for [resupply](#)¹¹⁰.

[00:18:53] The Scots were given an [ultimatum](#)¹¹¹: [surrender](#)¹¹², or we're coming to attack you.

[00:18:59] It can't have been a particularly difficult decision.

[00:19:03] In March 1700, the remaining Scots [surrendered](#)¹¹³, and fortunately, they were allowed to leave with their lives.

[00:19:13] It was a national disaster.

[00:19:16] The total cost of the Darién Scheme was enormous.

¹⁰⁷ hard times or troubles

¹⁰⁸ caused damage over time

¹⁰⁹ stopped things from coming in or out

¹¹⁰ bringing more supplies

¹¹¹ a final warning or demand

¹¹² stop and give up

¹¹³ stopped and gave up

[00:19:19] The human cost was **vast**, with over 2,000 people estimated to have died.

[00:19:26] And the financial losses were devastating.

[00:19:30] Almost every Scottish **noble**¹¹⁴ family had invested, and many were **ruined**¹¹⁵.

[00:19:37] Many ordinary Scottish families, **tradespeople**¹¹⁶ who had put everything they had into the company, were left **destitute**¹¹⁷.

[00:19:46] By some estimates, between a quarter and half of all the money in circulation in Scotland at that time had been invested in the scheme and, **puff**¹¹⁸, it was gone.

[00:20:00] The economy was **shattered**¹¹⁹, public confidence was destroyed, and the dream of becoming a global trading power was dead.

[00:20:10] Ordinary people were devastated.

¹¹⁴ rich and important by birth

¹¹⁵ reduced to a state of poverty, lost everything

¹¹⁶ people engaged in trading or a trade

¹¹⁷ having nothing

¹¹⁸ sudden vanishing or disappearing

¹¹⁹ completely broken or destroyed

The Darién Scheme

[00:20:13] Entire communities had [pooled¹²⁰](#) money to invest in the Company of Scotland. Families had lost sons, brothers, husbands. The failure was not just financial; it was deeply personal.

[00:20:28] There was public [outrage¹²¹](#), accusations of corruption, and cries for [accountability¹²²](#).

[00:20:35] And yet, there is another part to this story, one that fuelled [resentment¹²³](#) and lasting [bitterness¹²⁴](#) in Scotland.

[00:20:43] Yes, the conditions were incredibly [hostile](#), and the Scots were [utterly](#) unprepared.

[00:20:50] But there was another factor.

[00:20:53] England, partly not to annoy Spain and partly to protect the interests of its own East India Company, had quietly ordered its colonies not to offer any support to the Scottish expedition.

¹²⁰ put together

¹²¹ strong anger

¹²² being responsible and explaining actions

¹²³ anger from feeling unfairly treated

¹²⁴ hurt feelings

The Darién Scheme

[00:21:08] Ports in Jamaica and Barbados were closed to them. English ships were forbidden from trading with the colony. Even supplies and medical aid were refused.

[00:21:21] Many Scots saw this as a [betrayal](#)¹²⁵; not just [indifference](#)¹²⁶, but active [sabotage](#)¹²⁷.

[00:21:28] The sense that England had abandoned the scheme, or even deliberately [undermined](#)¹²⁸ it, this only deepened the wounds when it all fell apart.

[00:21:39] And to make matters worse, quiet, desperate calculations were being made in the background.

[00:21:47] Scotland was [broke](#)¹²⁹. Its political class was facing [ruin](#)¹³⁰.

[00:21:53] England offered it a [lifeline](#).

¹²⁵ being hurt by someone they trusted

¹²⁶ not caring

¹²⁷ trying to ruin them on purpose

¹²⁸ weakened

¹²⁹ having no money

¹³⁰ complete loss or damage

The Darién Scheme

[00:21:56] It would offer financial compensation for the losses, but part of this deal was that Scotland would sign the Acts of the Union, establishing the Kingdom of Great Britain, and bringing Scotland and England together as one country.

[00:22:16] To many in Scotland, this was the only [viable](#)¹³¹ path forward, and in 1707, just a few years after the final failure in Panama, the Acts of Union were signed, creating the Kingdom of Great Britain.

[00:22:34] The result was a union forged not in triumph, but in the [ashes](#)¹³² of a national [catastrophe](#)¹³³.

[00:22:42] The Darién Scheme, for all its ambition and vision, did not just fail to create a colony.

[00:22:49] It played a not insignificant part in the end of Scotland's independence and forced it into an [alliance](#)¹³⁴ with its historical greatest enemy.

[00:23:01] So, to wrap things up, what can we take from this ill-fated attempt by Scotland to [carve out](#)¹³⁵ its own Central American colony?

¹³¹ able to work or succeed

¹³² what was left after a fire or a terrible disaster

¹³³ a terrible disaster

¹³⁴ a partnership or union

¹³⁵ create with effort

The Darién Scheme

[00:23:11] Clearly, one obvious lesson might be “mind your own business and don’t try to colonise other people”.

[00:23:17] That is certainly a valid [takeaway](#)¹³⁶.

[00:23:20] The Darién Scheme was, after all, a colonial project, one that conveniently ignored the interests and [sovereignty](#)¹³⁷ of the Indigenous peoples who already lived there.

[00:23:31] But perhaps there are other lessons too.

[00:23:35] One is the danger of [unchecked](#)¹³⁸ [optimism](#)¹³⁹. The enthusiasm for the scheme in Scotland was so [overwhelming](#), so total, that few people asked hard questions.

[00:23:49] There was little [scrutiny](#)¹⁴⁰, no serious contingency planning, and almost no real understanding of the land or people they were trying to settle among. The national [mood](#) swept away reason and caution.

¹³⁶ lesson or thing you learn

¹³⁷ full control over a country

¹³⁸ not stopped or controlled

¹³⁹ belief that things will be good

¹⁴⁰ careful look or check

The Darién Scheme

[00:24:05] Another is the risk of putting all your hopes in a single, grand solution.

[00:24:11] For many Scots, this one project was meant to solve everything: to rescue the economy, to restore pride, to assert independence on the global stage.

[00:24:24] But when it failed, there was nothing to fall back on. The collapse of Darién took the entire country with it.

[00:24:33] And finally, perhaps there is the lesson that history is rarely clean or fair.

[00:24:39] The scheme's failure wasn't just caused by poor planning or disease. It was also **undermined** by geopolitical forces beyond Scotland's control: by England's refusal to support it, and by Spain's determination to defend its empire. The Scots were caught in the middle of a much bigger game.

[00:25:00] So what started as a bold attempt to reshape the world ended in disaster. But it did reshape something — not global trade, but the political map of the British Isles.

[00:25:15] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on The Darien Scheme.

[00:25:20] I hope it's been an interesting one and that you've learnt something new.

[00:25:24] We actually have lots of listeners from Colombia, and a fair few from Panama too, so particularly if this subject is close to home for you, I'd love to know what you thought.

[00:25:35] Did you know this story? How does it make you feel, and what do you think we can take from it?

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[00:25:41] You can head right into our community forum, which is at
community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:25:50] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo
English.

[00:25:55] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Supposedly	according to what is generally assumed or believed
Vast	very big
Colonising	taking control of the land and living there
Tip	pointed end
Halt	a stop
Dense	thick and hard to move through
Inhospitable	not good for living
Functional	working or useful
Treacherous	very dangerous
Spectacularly	in a very big or amazing way
Unload	take things off the ship
Cargo	goods carried by the ship
Loaded	put (onto a ship)

The Darién Scheme

On paper	in theory rather than in reality
Narrow	not wide
Strip	a long, thin piece
Enterprising	good at finding new ideas and chances
Utterly	completely
Realms	areas or fields of activity
Hauled	pulled or carried with effort
Pack animals	animals used to carry loads
Rudimentary	basic and simple
Relay	a system of passing things from one to another
Vital	very important
Booming	growing fast and doing well
Take a punt	take a risk or chance
Plainly	clearly
Distinct	separate and different

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The Darién Scheme

Crucially	most importantly
Excluded	left out
Monopoly	complete control of the market
Sovereign	having full control and power
Limbo	a state of waiting and not knowing
Locked out	not allowed to join or take part
Prosperity	success and wealth
Reeling	shocked or upset
Hardship	a time of suffering or trouble
Crop	a plant grown for food
Widespread	happening in many places
Starvation	(dying) from not having enough food
Fled	ran away
Consolidating	making stronger
Naval	about ships or the navy

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The Darién Scheme

Ambitions	strong wishes to succeed
Frustration	feeling angry because of problems
At the mercy of	controlled by or dependant on
Lucrative	making a lot of money
Outpost	a small settlement far from main towns
Lush	full of green plants
Idyllic	very beautiful and peaceful
Mood	the way people felt
Famine	a time with no food and many people starving
Stagnation	not growing or improving
Exclusion	not being allowed in
Bold	brave and risky
Fantasy	an idea that was not real
Lifeline	something that would save them
Proposed	suggested

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The Darién Scheme

Backing	support or help
Enthusiasm	strong interest and excitement
Aristocrats	rich and powerful people with titles
Modest	simple or humble
Tradesmen	people who worked with their hands
Strike it rich	suddenly get a lot of money
Speculation	investment in the hope of gain
Stake its future	risk everything for the goal
Remit	job or duty
A bunch of	a group of
Combs	tools for brushing hair
Brutal	very hard or difficult
Spirits were high	people were happy and hopeful
Optimistic	thinking good things will happen
Bought into	believed in

The Darién Scheme

Waterlogged	full of water
Uneven	not flat or smooth
Deteriorating	getting worse, going bad
Humid	hot and wet
Hoisted	lifted up
Woefully	very badly
Highlands	high land or hills
Set in	started and stayed
Malaria	a disease spread by mosquitoes
Dysentery	a disease causing severe diarrhoea
Grand plan	big and important plan
Isthmus	a narrow piece of land with sea on both sides
Got off the ground	started to happen
Merely	only, just
Take kindly to	like or accept

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The Darién Scheme

Backyard	area near where they lived or controlled
Fully-fledged	complete or fully developed
Dwindling	getting smaller
Sickly	often ill
Starving	very hungry
Proved victorious	won in the end
Cut their losses	stop to avoid losing more
With their tails between their legs	feeling ashamed after failing
Coffins	boxes for dead bodies
Overstate	say or state that it was bigger or more important than it was
Thriving	doing very well
Ruins	broken remains of buildings
Graves	places where people were buried
Overwhelming	too much to handle
Bustling	full of people and activity

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The Darién Scheme

Start from scratch	begin again with nothing
Hostile	unfriendly or dangerous
Fate	end or future
Hardships	hard times or troubles
Took their toll	caused damage over time
Blockaded	stopped things from coming in or out
Resupply	bringing more supplies
Ultimatum	a final warning or demand
Surrender	stop and give up
Surrendered	stopped and gave up
Noble	rich and important by birth
Ruined	reduced to a state of poverty, lost everything
Tradespeople	people engaged in trading or a trade
Destitute	having nothing
Puff	sudden vanishing or disappearing

The Darién Scheme

Shattered	completely broken or destroyed
Pooled	put together
Outrage	strong anger
Accountability	being responsible and explaining actions
Resentment	anger from feeling unfairly treated
Bitterness	hurt feelings
Betrayal	being hurt by someone they trusted
Indifference	not caring
Sabotage	trying to ruin them on purpose
Undermined	weakened
Broke	having no money
Ruin	complete loss or damage
Viable	able to work or succeed
Ashes	what was left after a fire or a terrible disaster
Catastrophe	a terrible disaster

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The Darién Scheme

Alliance	a partnership or union
Carve out	create with effort
Takeaway	lesson or thing you learn
Sovereignty	full control over a country
Unchecked	not stopped or controlled
Optimism	belief that things will be good
Scrutiny	careful look or check

Language spotlight

1. Take a punt

- **Meaning:** To try something risky in the hope of success.
- **Synonyms:** take a chance, gamble, give it a shot
- **Antonyms:** play it safe, avoid risk
- **Examples:**
 - They **took a punt** on the new business idea and it paid off.
 - I wasn't sure the plan would work, but I decided to **take a punt**.

2. At the mercy of

- **Meaning:** To be in a situation where someone or something else controls what happens to you, usually in a bad way.
- **Synonyms:** helpless against, dependent on
- **Antonyms:** in control, protected from
- **Examples:**
 - The sailors were **at the mercy of** the storm.

- With no food or medicine, the village was **at the mercy of** disease.

3. Strike it rich

- **Meaning:** To suddenly become very rich, often by luck.
- **Synonyms:** hit the jackpot, come into money
- **Antonyms:** lose everything, go broke
- **Examples:**
 - They hoped to **strike it rich** by finding gold in the mountains.
 - Many people invested in the company, thinking they'd **strike it rich**.

4. Cut their losses

- **Meaning:** To stop doing something that is failing to avoid losing more money or time.
- **Synonyms:** give up, stop early to avoid more loss
- **Antonyms:** keep going, double down
- **Examples:**

- After a year of bad sales, they decided to **cut their losses** and close the shop.
- She sold the shares to **cut her losses** before the price dropped more.

5. With their tails between their legs

- **Meaning:** Feeling ashamed or defeated, especially after failing.
- **Synonyms:** humiliated, embarrassed, defeated
- **Antonyms:** proud, confident, triumphant
- **Examples:**
 - They left the meeting **with their tails between their legs** after being told off by the boss.
 - After losing the match badly, the team walked off **with their tails between their legs**.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. Why did the Scottish want to start a colony in Panama?

- a) To escape war in Europe
- b) To improve trade and become wealthy
- c) To find gold and silver mines
- d) To help the Spanish expand their empire

2. What made the land in Darién hard to live on?

- a) It was dry and cold
- b) It had no natural resources
- c) It was hot, humid, and full of disease
- d) It was too far from the sea

3. What kind of people invested in the Company of Scotland?

- a) Only the government

- b) Only poor farmers
- c) Rich aristocrats and ordinary tradespeople
- d) Spanish soldiers and landowners

4. How did England and the East India Company respond to Scotland's plan?

- a) They gave financial support
- b) They ignored it
- c) They helped build the colony
- d) They blocked and sabotaged it

5. What happened to most of the settlers in the colony?

- a) They died from disease and hunger
- b) They became rich traders
- c) They moved to other colonies
- d) They returned home and were honoured as heroes

The Darién Scheme

True or False

6. The Darién Scheme was a major financial success for Scotland. (True/False)
7. The Spanish eventually attacked the Scottish settlement. (True/False)
8. The idea for the colony looked good on paper but failed in reality. (True/False)
9. The failure of the Darién Scheme helped lead to the 1707 Act of Union between Scotland and England. (True/False)
10. Many investors lost their entire life savings in the scheme. (True/False)

Fill-in-the-Blank

11. Nevertheless, _____ were high. The settlers were optimistic.
12. It never got off the _____; they never even started it.
13. The Spanish did not take _____ to a group of Scots planting a flag in what they considered to be their backyard.
14. Disease, hunger, and tropical hardships quickly took their _____.
15. They thought they were going to join a bustling settlement rather than to have to start from _____.

Vocabulary Practice

16. What does "**inhospitable**" mean?

- a) Safe and friendly
- b) Warm and welcoming
- c) Difficult or unpleasant to live in
- d) Easy to grow crops in

17. What does "**cargo**" mean?

- a) A person who travels on a ship
- b) Food for animals
- c) A type of engine
- d) Goods carried by a ship or plane

18. What does "**ruin**" mean?

- a) Make something beautiful
- b) Destroy or damage badly

c) Fix something broken

d) Cover with water

19. What does "**ultimatum**" mean?

a) A final warning or demand

b) A peaceful agreement

c) A random guess

d) A gift or reward

20. What does "**resentment**" mean?

a) A feeling of anger or unfairness

b) A feeling of strong happiness

c) A feeling of surprise

d) A feeling of love and respect

Answers

1. b) To improve trade and become wealthy
2. c) It was hot, humid, and full of disease
3. c) Rich aristocrats and ordinary tradespeople
4. d) They blocked and sabotaged it
5. a) They died from disease and hunger
6. False
7. False
8. True
9. True
10. True
11. spirits
12. ground
13. kindly
14. toll
15. scratch
16. c) Difficult or unpleasant to live in
17. d) Goods carried by a ship or plane
18. b) Destroy or damage badly
19. a) A final warning or demand
20. a) A feeling of anger or unfairness