

Two Men, One Queen, One Grateful Nation, and Two Gifts: A Palace and a House

Athenaeum Society

December 3, 2009

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The title refers to the history of two men, related, but separated in time, and their service to their country, England. The two men are John Churchill and Winston Churchill, the Queen is Queen Anne, the grateful nation is England, and the two gifts are Blenheim Palace, home of John Churchill, the 1st Duke of Marlborough, and Chartwell, the home of Winston Churchill. Margaret and I visited both Blenheim Palace and Chartwell in 2004, and then visited Blenheim Palace again this past August. We visited Chartwell on the advice of Pam and Joe Vance, who had found it immensely interesting, as did we. We cannot recall the reason for visiting Blenheim the first time, but saw the connection between Blenheim Palace and Chartwell almost immediately.

By the time that Queen Anne came to the throne in February of 1702, John Churchill, who later became the 1st Duke of Marlborough, and his wife, Sarah, were already long-accepted members of the royal circle. Sarah, in particular, was an intimate friend of the new Queen, Queen Anne, who had come to depend on her companionship and advice. John Churchill was born in Devon. Although his family had aristocratic relations, they were minor gentry rather than high ranking members of the upper echelons of 18th century society. In 1678 he married Sarah Jennings, and seven years later, on the accession of James II, was elevated to Baron Churchill. On the accession of William III, Churchill was further elevated to the title of the Earl of Marlborough, a title which had become extinct in his mother's family. An easy way to remember the order of English peerage is to remember the first letter of each word in the following sentence. "Does Mary ever visit Brighton Beach?" The order is: Duke; Marquis; Earl; Viscount; Baron; and Baronet. When the War of the Spanish Succession broke out in Europe later on during the Queen's first year on the throne of England, Marlborough, a military genius, was the logical choice as leader of the allied troops. During 1702 and 1703 Marlborough defended Holland from invasion by the French, and in 1704 began to move forward up the Rhine valley. On the August 13, 1704, a decisive battle took place on the north bank

of the Danube near a small village called Blindham, or Blenheim, where the French commander, Marshall Tallard, had fixed his lines. Here Marlborough won a great allied victory over the forces of Louis XIV, and saved Vienna in the process from a French invasion.

In reward for his services, the grateful Queen Anne granted to John Churchill the Royal Manor of Woodstock and signified that she would build him there, at her own expense, a house to be called Blenheim. At the same time she bestowed upon him the title of Duke of Marlborough. Blenheim Palace is the only non-episcopal country house in England to hold the title "palace." It is one of England's largest houses and in 1987 was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, one of only four in England. A plaque above the massive east gate of the palace reads:

"Under the auspices of a munificent sovereign this house was built for John, Duke of Marlborough and his Duchess Sarah, by Sir J Vanbrugh between the years 1705 and 1722. And the Royal Manor of Woodstock, together with a grant of L240,000 towards the building of Blenheim, was given by Her Majesty Queen Anne and confirmed by an Act of Parliament."

Queen Anne's generosity was regal indeed, but she did not make it very clear at the outset how much she meant to give. At the time of the gift, so high was the regard for Marlborough, so close was the Queen's friendship with the Duchess Sarah, that any hint of a limit to the royal bounty, much less anything so formal as a written agreement, would have been unthinkable.

The estate given by the nation to Marlborough was the manor of Woodstock which had been a hunting reserve located in Oxfordshire, just northwest of London. Woodstock is now a lovely town just outside the grounds of Blenheim Palace. Henry I (1100-1135) enclosed the park to contain the deer within its boundaries. Henry II (1154-1189) housed his mistress Rosamund Clifford, sometimes known as "Fair Rosamund" there in a "bower and labyrinth," a spring where she is said to have bathed. A hunting lodge was built sometime during this period and was rebuilt many times. It had a relatively uneventful history until Elizabeth I, before her succession, was imprisoned there by her sister Queen Mary between the years of 1554 and 1555. When the park was being re-landscaped as the setting for the palace, the Duchess wanted the historic ruins

demolished, while the architect wanted them restored and made into a landscape feature. The Duchess, who had many disputes with the architect, prevailed in her wish for the destruction and the remains of the ancient manor were swept away.

The architect chosen to complete the building of the palace was John Vanbrugh, who had already proven his ability by his masterly designs for Greenwich Hospital and Castle Howard. However, this choice was a controversial one. The Duchess was known to favor Sir Christopher Wren, famous for St. Paul's Cathedral and many other well known national buildings. She later commissioned him to build Marlborough House in St. James Square in London. The Duke, however, following a chance meeting at a playhouse, is said to have commissioned Vanbrugh then and there. Vanbrugh, a popular dramatist, was an untrained architect, who usually worked in conjunction with the trained and practical Nicholas Hawksmoor. The actual person who appointed Vanbrugh is unclear. The Duchess said that the Queen appointed him but Vanbrugh insisted that the Duke had done so and produced a warrant, dated the 9th of June, 1705 and signed by Lord Godolphin, the Treasurer appointing him "...at the request and desire of the Duke surveyor (or architect) for Blenheim." Nowhere in the warrant was there any mention of the Queen. Was this omission important? Very much so because when the Queen replaced the Duchess in her role as Keeper of the Privy Purse the Treasury payments for the building of Blenheim dwindled and then ceased altogether. The Duchess was replaced in this role when the relationship between the two became strained and finally severed in 1711. Construction on the palace ceased, after spending some £220,000 and £45,000 was still owed to Vanbrugh and to the masons, carvers and others.

From 1712 to 1714 the Marlboroughs were abroad in what the Duchess called a "sort of exile." They returned the day after Queen Anne died. "My Lord Duke," said George I to Marlborough, "I hope your troubles are now all over." A knighthood was conferred on Vanbrugh, and after the Queen's debts had been looked into and the Blenheim debt acknowledged, the Duke decided to complete the palace at his own expense.

The summer of 1716 saw a resumption of the work at Blenheim, but by November of the same year Vanbrugh had left in a rage, never to return as surveyor, or architect. Blenheim was not to provide him with the fame that he had imagined with its

magnificence. The fighting over funding led to accusations of extravagance and the impracticality of its design. The Duchess leveled criticism at Vanbrugh on every level, from design to taste. In part the problems arose from what was demanded of the architect. The nation, it was assumed, wanted a monument, but the Duchess wanted not only a fitting tribute to her husband but also a comfortable home, two requirements that were not compatible in 18th century architecture. Differences with the Duchess about the costs had been brought to a head by her violent criticisms, which, coupled with her ill-usage of him in other matters, made it, as he told her, not practical to continue. She had assumed control of the construction as the Duke had suffered a stroke. Vanbrugh wrote to her saying, "You have your end, Madam, for I will never trouble you more unless the Duke of Marlborough recovers so as to shelter me from such intolerable treatment." Following the Duke's death in 1722, completion of the Palace and its park became the Duchess's driving ambition. Vanbrugh's assistant Hawksmoor was recalled and designed the "Arch of Triumph" based on the Arch of Titus, at the entrance to the park from Woodstock. Hawksmoor also completed the interior design of the library, the ceilings of many of the state rooms, and other details in numerous other minor rooms, and various outbuildings. The final date of completion is not known, but as late as 1735 the Duchess was still haggling over the costs. Vanbrugh planned Blenheim in perspective, that it would be best viewed from a distance. As the actual building site covers some seven acres this is also a necessity.

The plan of Blenheim Palace is basically that of a large central rectangular block, containing behind the southern façade the principal state apartments. On the east side are the suites of private apartments of the Duke and Duchess, on the west along the entire length is the long gallery originally conceived as a picture gallery. The central block is flanked by two further service blocks around square courtyards. The east court contains the kitchens, laundry, and other domestic offices, the west court adjacent to the chapel, the stables and indoor riding school. The three blocks together form the "Great Court" designed to overpower the visitor arriving at the palace. The interior, like many other palaces, is quite magnificent. The furnishings are quite elaborate and obviously very, very expensive. It appears as though no detail has been left undone. There are huge tapestries depicting the victories by John Churchill over his enemies, gilded furniture,

statuary, and every conceivable accessory to make the overall appearance quite grand. This past August, while waiting for Margaret after our tour of the Palace and the extensive grounds, I was in this Great Court when I noticed a black Range Rover driving into the court. There is no vehicular traffic at the Palace, so I thought that this might be someone of some import. The Rover pulled up near the private apartment area and two men in livery rushed out to greet the vehicle. Out stepped a quite tall and distinguished looking individual. It was the Duke! He stayed outside for a few minutes with his dog, a beautiful setter, before going into his private quarters. I find it amusing the way that those with titles sign their names. The Duke simply signs "Marlborough." When we visited Sudeley Castle in the Cotswolds, the ancestral home of the Seymour family, we noticed in the guest register that a visitor had simply signed "Charles." Of course, this is the Prince of Wales. There is no need to write any more, for everyone in England knows exactly who is signing.

The grounds are difficult to describe because of their immense size. The Palace sits in the center of a large undulating park. The renowned Capability Brown was responsible for much of the landscaping. The usual approach to Blenheim is through the town of Woodstock, past all the lovely and unobtrusive shops and streets that leads to a quadrangle and then drops through a triumphal arch to suddenly spring on the visitor a view that has been designed to take one's breath away. "As we passed through the entrance archway and the lovely scenery burst upon me," wrote Lady Randolph Churchill on her first visit to Blenheim, "Randolph said with pardonable pride, 'This is the finest view in England.' Looking at the lake, the bridge, the miles of magnificent park studded with old oaks....and the huge and stately palace, I confess I felt awed. But my American pride forbade the admission."

From the Woodstock entrance the towers of the palace appear some way off to the left, while far away to the right the Column of Victory, topped with its statue of the 1st Duke of Marlborough, rises nobly above the trees. But what takes the eye and holds it is the great lake and its tree covered island with Vanbrugh's Grand Bridge and Capability Brown's hanging beechwoods beyond that. It all seems so effortless and natural in its creation, although it must have been very carefully contrived to have this effect. It is the same view that led George III to say, "We have nothing to equal this!"

When the first Duke died in 1722, both his sons having predeceased him, he was succeeded by his daughter Henrietta. This was an unusual succession and required a special Act of Parliament, as only sons can succeed to a dukedom. When Henrietta died, the title passed to Marlborough's grandson Charles Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, whose mother was Marlborough's second daughter Anne. Charles Spencer is the ancestor of the late Diana, Princess of Wales, which explains her connection to the Churchill family.

The 1st Duke was a soldier and not a wealthy man, and what fortune he possessed was mainly used for completing the palace. In comparison with other British ducal families, the Marlboroughs were not very wealthy. Yet they existed quite comfortably until the time of the 5th Duke of Marlborough, a spendthrift who considerably depleted the family's remaining fortune. He was eventually forced to sell other family estates, but Blenheim was safe from him as it was entailed. That did not prevent him from selling priceless artwork for amounts far, far below their actual value. His library, which was housed in a room that is 180 feet long, was sold off in 400 different lots. On his death in 1840, he left the estate and his family in severe financial difficulties.

By the 1870s the Marlboroughs were in even worse financial trouble, and in 1875 the 7th Duke sold the "Marriage of Cupid and Psyche," together with all of the famous Marlborough jewelry, for only L10,000. However, even this was not enough to save the family from financial ruin. In 1880 the 7th Duke was forced to petition Parliament in order to break the protective entail of the Palace and its contents. This was achieved under the Blenheim Settled Estates Act of 1880, and the door was opened for the wholesale disposal of Blenheim and its contents. The first victim of the disposal was the great Sunderland Library, which was sold in 1882, including such volumes as *The Epistles of Horace*, printed at Caen in 1480, and the works of Josephus, printed at Verona in 1648. Works by Raphael, Van Dyck, and Peter Paul Rubens were sold, all to help pay the enormous debt. The sums of money that were realized were enormous, but they failed to cover the debts and the maintenance of the great palace remained beyond the Marlborough's resources. These resources had always been small in relation to their ducal rank and the size of the house. When the 9th Duke inherited the title and the palace in 1892, the Spencer-Churchills were almost bankrupt.

Charles, the 9th Duke of Marlborough, who lived from 1871 to 1934, can be credited with saving both the palace and the family. Inheriting the near bankrupt dukedom in 1892, he was forced to find a quick and drastic solution to the problems. Governed by the strict social dictates of the late 19th century, which prevented the Duke from earning money, he was left with only one solution, and that was that he had to marry it. In the fall of 1965, as a freshman at Vanderbilt, I, along with many others, pledged a fraternity. I recall going down to the chapter room the day that I pledged and looking at the composite pictures of the members of the fraternity from years past. When I studied the composite from the year before, I saw the name Charles George William Colin Spencer-Churchill and remember asking an upperclassman who in the world had a long and hyphenated name like that? He said, "Oh, you mean Charlie. He graduated last year and is some kind of English royalty." I wondered silently why some British aristocrat would attend Vanderbilt instead of Cambridge or Oxford. My visit to Blenheim Palace in 2004 answered that question. In November of 1896, the 9th Duke very coldly, and openly without love, married the American railroad heiress and renowned beauty Consuelo Vanderbilt. Charlie Churchill is the grandson of Consuelo Vanderbilt, the 9th Duchess of Marlborough, and the younger brother of the current Duke, John, the 11th Duke of Marlborough. Charlie, now Lord Charles Spencer-Churchill, is very active, along with his older brother, in maintaining the integrity of their ancestral home. The marriage between the Duke and Consuelo was celebrated following lengthy negotiations with her divorced parents. Her mother was desperate to see her daughter a Duchess, and the bride's father, William Vanderbilt, paid for that privilege. The final price was \$2.5 million, which is probably around \$400 million in today's dollars. The couple was also given an annual income of \$100,000 each for the remainder of their lives. The bride later claimed that she had been locked in her room until she agreed to the marriage. In the carriage following their wedding in New York, Marlborough told Consuelo that he loved another woman and would never return to America after the wedding, as he "despised anything that was not British."

The replenishing of Blenheim began on the honeymoon with the replacement of the Marlborough jewelry. Tapestries, paintings and furniture were bought in Europe to fill the depleted palace. On their return the Duke began an exhaustive restoration and

redcoration of the palace. Inside the palace the staff was enlarged to suit a now fabulously wealthy ducal household. The inside staff numbered 40, while the outside staff numbered 50, including the game-keeping staff of 12, electricians for the newly installed wiring, carpenters, flower arrangers, lodge keepers and a cricket professional to ensure the success and honor of the estate cricket team. Blenheim was once again a place of wonder and prestige. However, Consuelo was far from happy and in 1906 shocked society and left her husband, finally divorcing him in 1921. After the divorce the Duke married a former friend of Consuelo, Gladys Deacon, another American. After their marriage she was in the habit of dining with the Duke with a revolver by the side of her plate. Tiring of her, the Duke was temporarily forced to close Blenheim, and turn off the utilities in order to drive her out. They subsequently separated but never divorced. The Duke died in 1934 and was succeeded by his and Consuelo's eldest son John, the 10th Duke of Marlborough, and the current Duke's father and father of Charlie Churchill.

What does all this about Blenheim Palace, Queen Anne, and the Dukes of Marlborough have to do with Winston Churchill? The last names are the same, and yes they are related. Winston Churchill and the Duke of Marlborough were first cousins.

West of the Great Hall in Blenheim Palace lies the suite of apartments once allotted to Marlborough's domestic chaplain, Dean Jones. In one of those rooms, on November 30, 1874, Sir Winston Churchill was born. "At Blenheim," he declared, "I took two very important decisions: to be born and to marry (for he proposed in the Temple of Diana on the Palace grounds). I am happily content with the decisions I took on both those occasions."

When Sir Winston was asked whether, just before his birth, his mother, Lady Randolph, was attending a ball in the Long Library or was out with a shooting party in the park, he replied with his usual wit and sarcasm, "Although present on that occasion, I have no clear recollection of the events leading up to it."

"We can look back now on the pattern of Sir Winston's life," wrote the 10th Duke of Marlborough, "and see or think we see a pleasing inevitability. His birth at Blenheim, his proposal of marriage here beside the lake, his burial at Bladon (on the park grounds) – these things form a mosaic which seems almost too neat to be true. Yet it was only by

chance that he happened to be born in the house built for the man – John, 1st Duke of Marlborough – whom he so much admired.

“Sir Winston had a strong sense of family. If he did not worship his ancestors he came near it in his written admiration of Marlborough and of his own father, Lord Randolph Churchill. His affection was strong for his family and for his friends, of whom my father was one. When I was a boy he visited us often at Blenheim.....”

The Duke continues,

“Beyond question Blenheim made for Sir Winston the ideal background, and I don’t mean for his paintings. At times, for example when he was researching for his life of Marlborough, it must have given him inspiration, but although, before I was born, he was heir to the dukedom, I doubt if he hankered much for the place itself. Much as he cared for Blenheim, it would not have appealed to him to go down in history as its owner. He had other and better ideas.”

Vanbrugh’s north - south line of axis for Blenheim passes through the Column of Victory, the Great Hall, the Saloon and the tower of Bladon Church, which may be seen from the Saloon in the palace and beside which tower Winston Churchill is buried along with his parents and his dearly loved wife Clementine, Baroness Spencer-Churchill. The places of his birth and burial are physically and symbolically linked.

In the Churchill Exhibition, near the room where he was born at Blenheim Palace, can be found a history of Winston Churchill, along with many of his paintings, which are extraordinary. His artistic talent has never really been noted, at least in this country. The exhibits vary from Churchill’s lively letters to a piece of shrapnel, which fell between him and his cousin, the 9th Duke of Marlborough during World War I.

After his marriage to Clementine, the Churchills bought the property known as Chartwell, and the surrounding 80 acres, in 1922. It is located two miles south of Westerham, in Kent, southeast of London.

The site had been built upon at least as early as the 16th century, when the estate had been called Well Street. Henry VIII is reputed to have stayed in the house during his courtship of Anne Boleyn at nearby Hever Castle. The original farmhouse was significantly modified during the 19th century. It became, according to the National Trust, an example of “Victorian architecture at its least attractive, a ponderous red brick

country mansion of tile hung gables and pokey oriel windows.” The estate derives its name from the well to the north of the house called “Chart Well.” Chart is an old English word for “rough ground.” The highest point of the estate is approximately 650 feet above sea level and the house commands a spectacular view across the Weald of Kent. This view is said to have “possessed” Churchill and was certainly an important factor in persuading him to buy a house with “no great architectural merit.”

Churchill employed the architect Philip Tilden to modernize and extend the house. Tilden worked between 1922 and 1924, simplifying and modernizing, as well as allowing more light into the house through large casement windows. Tilden’s work completely transformed the house, making it a quite beautiful edifice on equally as beautiful grounds. Similar to many early 20th century refurbishments of old estates, the immediate grounds surrounding the house, which fall away behind it, were shaped into overlapping rectilinear terraces and garden plats, in both lawns and herbaceous gardens, linked by steps descending to lakes that Churchill created by a series of small dams, the water garden where he fed his fish, Lady Churchill’s Rose garden and the Golden Rose Walk, a Golden Wedding anniversary present from their children. The garden areas provided inspiration for Churchill’s paintings, many of which are on display in the house’s garden studio, where most were painted in his later years.

During the 1920s and 1930s Chartwell was very much a family home, where the Churchill’s four children, Diana, Randolph, Sarah, and Mary grew up, and where the family gathered for Christmas. At Chartwell Churchill could relax by painting in the garden or in his studio and by transforming the grounds with new lakes and stout brick walls built with his own hands. But Chartwell was also at the heart of Churchill’s political career. During his first five years there he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. In what he referred to as his “Wilderness Years,” when he was out of office, it was here that he did most of his writing that kept the family finances afloat. Like his ducal relatives, he too, was far from wealthy. With the rise of Fascism in Europe, Churchill passionately argued the case for rearmament from Chartwell, and many advisers came in secret to the house to tell him of their concern about the Nazi military threat.

Chartwell was closed up during the war years because of its relatively exposed position so near to occupied France. It was thought that it would make the Prime

Minister vulnerable to a German air strike or commando style raid. Churchill still paid the occasional visit during these war years in spite of the perceived threat.

Despite his election defeat in 1945, he was widely acknowledged as the greatest living Englishman, and Chartwell soon became a shrine to his wartime achievements. Many of the gifts and awards he received in the post war years are on display. The house has been preserved as it would have looked when Churchill owned it.

Chartwell meant so much to Churchill, and the thought of his losing it was too much for a group of his friends. Like the act of benevolence from Queen Anne for John Churchill, a group of Winston Churchill's friends bought the house so that he could continue living there and so that it would be preserved for the nation after his death. This was in no small part due to their gratefulness for his service to the nation during the war, and which many believe saved England from Germany's takeover. In 1966 Chartwell was opened to the public for the first time, having been restored to its appearance in the 1930s, when it was a symbol of resistance to Fascism and when it was the most important country house in Europe.

The future of Blenheim Palace and Chartwell are not quite the same. Blenheim Palace is still part of the Marlborough property and must, to a large degree, depend on its visitors. Without the support and goodwill of the visitors, it would be impossible to meet the rising costs of maintenance, restoration, and conservation.

In 1986, the Duke and family trustees donated £1.5 million towards the creation of the Blenheim Foundation, which intends to raise money to secure the upkeep of the palace in perpetuity. In the words of the present Duke, "Whilst Blenheim was given to my ancestor and is still owned by my family, my role today is virtually that of a trustee and custodian of Blenheim – not only for Britain, but for all those in every part of the world who cherish the historical and artistic tradition that Blenheim represents."

The arrangement that Winston Churchill's friends made when purchasing the property so that the Churchills could remain until their deaths is different. Upon their death the property was to go to the National Trust, which maintains properties throughout the United Kingdom. The National Trust was established by an Act of Parliament in 1895, giving it the right to declare its property "inalienable," meaning that its property may never be taken away without the permission of Parliament. Many of its properties

are still occupied by families who have owned them for centuries but no longer have the means to maintain them. The Trust maintains the properties and the public is the beneficiary by being allowed into them while the residents, if any still are living, continue to live on the property.

The Trust cares for more than 300 historic buildings and 200 gardens. These range from country houses, castles, industrial monuments and mills, churches and chapels, and Roman properties, to a post-war council house in Liverpool, once home to the teenage Paul McCartney.

The collections in the Trust's houses include many thousands of paintings and drawings, by famous painters such as JMW Turner, sculptures from the classical to the modern, including works by Henry Moore, porcelain and glass from around the world and over half a million books.

Today the National Trust is Europe's leading conservation charity supported by over three million members, caring for over 612,500 acres of beautiful countryside and some 600 miles of coastline together with the 300 houses and gardens just mentioned, 32 National Nature Reserves, 443 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and 60,000 archaeological sites. Chartwell is but one of these properties.

The victorious leadership at the Battle of Blenheim by John Churchill was as important to the English in the 1700's as the leadership of their beloved Winston Churchill was to them during and after WW II. After visiting Blenheim Palace and Chartwell and taking in the history of both, the significance of the Churchill family and its contributions to the history of England cannot be overstated.