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## THE HOUSE THAT JOHN BUILT JOHN CHURCHILL, TOGETHER WITH HIS AMBITIOUS WIFE, SARAH, CREATED BLENHEIM PALACE TO FOUND A DYNASTY. TODAY, IT'S A DESTINATION

By Michael Freeman, *Smithsonian*, February 2001

THE FIRST TIME I SAW BLENHEIM PALACE WAS BY ACCIDENT. MY HOTEL in Woodstock, a small town a few miles north of Oxford, England, was just a handy stop on a business trip, and I set out on a walk before sunset, past old stone town houses with cobbled roofs and brightly painted doorways. The street swung left into a cul-de-sac enclosed by a high stone wall. I hesitated a moment, then walked through an archway and stopped, breathless. Off to the right, in the middle of a vast private park, a lake perfectly mirrored the triple arches of a monumental bridge. Beyond, in the distance, stood Blenheim, a mass of columns arches and towers, the stone glowing like honey in the evening sun, golden spheres on the rooftops glinting against a bruised April sky.

It was arguably the "finest view in England," as a 19th-century Churchill, whose family still owns the place, once boasted: three acres of house (seven if you count the courtyards), 187 rooms (plus 33 in the bridge), a 2,100-acre park landscape by Lancelot "Capability" Brown, enclosed by a stone wall nine miles long, altogether so grand that King George III once remarked, "We have nothing to equal this."



*More than 250,000 tourists visit Blenheim each year. It was conceived as a monument to the most famous Churchill of all, John, the first Duke of Marlborough, who led British troops to victory over the French in 1704. Unlike many generals, Churchill didn't hesitate to station himself in the thick of battle, sometimes even leading cavalry charges.*

Grandeur and envy being near of kin, Blenheim was also one of the most reviled buildings in all of England, and by some of the most scathing critics, among them Alexander Pope ("the most inhospitable thing imaginable, and the most selfish..."), Horace Walpole ("execrable within, without & almost all around"), Francois Voltaire ("une gosse masse de pierre, sans agrement et sans gout"-- "a great pile of stone without harmony or taste"), Noel Coward ("Woke frozen. Shaving sheer agony... loo like an icebox").

The Churchills themselves (or at least their wives) have at times denounced Blenheim Palace as the "dump" and "that wild, unmercifull house," and with good reason. No house anywhere has ever put its mark so thoroughly on a family's collective soul. Built between 1705 and 1722 to glorify John Churchill, one of England's greatest military heroes, Blenheim instead helped ruin his reputation with its sheer egotistic excess. Built to found a dynasty, Blenheim instead turned succeeding generations into madmen, scoundrels, snobs and gold diggers (the better to keep the roof overhead, and to gild the plasterwork lilies). And yet the arrogant mythology of the place

worked. If the owners were, at best, ordinary men and women, it was often hard to notice, given the ostentatious way every stone & dared their majesty. At least once in 300 years, Blenheim also redeemed itself by producing someone worthy of the place. Winston Churchill, one of the greatest heroes of the 20th century, was born at Blenheim, the grandson of a duke, and he got his sense of destiny there. "We shape our dwellings," he once wrote, "and afterwards our dwellings shape us."

*John and Sarah Churchill were well matched. He rose from poverty to the peak of power by demonstrating shrewdness at court and on the battlefield. She was equally shrewd when it came to manipulating others. Both craved money, power and fame. Blenheim's ostentatious excess fed their egos but also fueled envy and contempt.*

So when I returned recently to learn more about Blenheim, where salespeople now dine at corporate banquets and Sly Stallone held his wedding reception (the public rooms have rented for as much as \$22,000 an evening), it was with mixed feelings--awe, envy, regret for faded grandeur, and a dollop of democratic delight in tales of aristocratic folly. It turned out that the Churchills' own staff now tell these tales as gleefully as anyone, if only to give the 250,000 or so tourists who troop through each year good value for the \$14 price of admission. "To read the history books," the guide was saying as we entered a room lined to its 20-foot ceiling with old family portraits, "you would never want to meet such an avaricious couple. Anything and everything was for sale." He was talking about John and particularly Sarah Churchill, the first Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, who built Blenheim.

Maybe because Blenheim's history dwells so lovingly on two great men, John and Winston, it's striking how much the fortunes of the Churchills have actually depended on women. The family got its first big break in 1666 largely because John's sister Arabella was, as one historian put it, "the Duke of York's doxy." Their father was an impoverished Dorset gentleman; yet the family managed to secure a position in the royal court for the pale, gangling 16-year-old Arabella. She became mistress to the Duke of York, younger brother to King Charles II, and bore him several bastard children, by which time she had apparently used her sway to get John a place in the duke's retinue. There, in the splendidly debauched circumstances of that court, John eventually caught the wandering eye of the king's own mistress, Barbara Villiers.

According to the story historians generally credit, Villiers was entertaining Churchill one night in her bedroom (at the site that is now 10 Downing Street) when King Charles came to call. Churchill leaped out the window, for which Villiers later thanked him with a lavish gift of GCP5,000. People still debate whether, as one local put it, "he got the money for jumping into her bed or out of it." Villiers herself never said, except to complain that she gave it "for very little service done." In any case, John Churchill prudently invested the gift in a life annuity paying him GCP500 a year, and thus began the fortune on which the dynasty at Blenheim would be founded. Villiers also paid the standard bribes required to get Churchill, who was distantly related, valuable positions in the court and the army. A contemporary remarked that "a man who was the favourite of the King's mistress and brother to the Duke's favourite... could not fail to make his fortune."

But it was Sarah who really set the Churchills onto the paths of glory. In her portrait off the main hallway at Blenheim, she appears as a beautiful young woman with fine, golden hair, rosy cheeks, a lower lip like a velvet pillow, and hard blue eyes. "Her with the fury heart and fairy face," as one poet put it. Sarah was a member of the royal court but played her hand differently from Arabella and Barbara. She yielded nothing to John Churchill's passionate entreaties until he broke down and asked her to marry.

John and Sarah were a thoroughly modern couple, always on the make. She kept her job as an attendant to the Duke of York's daughter Princess Anne and was proud to earn her own money. On the surface, the job consisted of little more than tending to royal whim, trading gossip and gambling at cards (Sarah often thriving at Anne's





expense). But Sarah was beautiful and witty, and the hapless young Anne adored her. Whatever Sarah wanted, Princess Anne eagerly gave. As Anne's father, the Duke of York, became King James II, soon to be succeeded by William III and finally by Anne herself, what Sarah asked for and consistently got was advancement for her husband. The couple was ultimately earning GCP65,000 a year from their various titles and positions—roughly \$11 million today.

*Originally built over marshland, the grand bridge at Blenheim was the source of constant friction between Sarah and architect Sir John Vanbrugh, who had an even more elaborate scheme in mind, which she quashed.*

*The noted landscape architect Lancelot "Capability" Brown created the lake by damming a stream sometime after the bridge was completed.*



Unlike many beneficiaries of royal favor, John Churchill went on to earn it. When a visitor walks through the courtyards of Blenheim

Palace, it's easy to interpret the elaborate ornamentation as just so much baroque excess, or as the theatrical result of employing a former playwright, Sir John Vanbrugh, as the architect. But Blenheim was never meant to be merely a great house nor a grand theatrical set. It would be more accurate to think of it as the world's largest trophy case, celebrating John Churchill's many successful hunts on behalf of Queen Anne, and the head on the wall belongs to the French king Louis XIV.

"Look over the archway," my guide was saying as we stood in front of the palace. "Do you see the statue of a cockerel trying to rise with its wings spread? It's the emblem of France. But the British lion is holding it down and methodically tearing it to pieces." And the flaming finials on the palace towers? "Hand grenades," the guide said. The flames represent the Duke of Marlborough's coronet, atop a stone sphere symbolizing his power, both bearing down on the three leaves of a fleur-de-lis, the symbol of Louis XIV, "upside down in defeat." The guide did the math: "Where are four finials on that tower, and there are four towers, so the image of the Duke of Marlborough defeating France is stated 16 times." Like many trophy cases, this one leaves little to the imagination.

*The grand allegory on the ceiling of Blenheim's Great Hall, painted by Sir James Thornhill in 1716, shows John, the first Duke of Marlborough, kneeling in front of Britannia. Nearby, a winged figure displays a large plan from the Battle of Blenheim while Hercules and Mars look up worshipfully.*



But neither did John Churchill. As commander of the British forces during the War of the Spanish Succession, from 1702 to 1711, he defeated the army of Louis XIV not once but ten times. He was a brilliant leader, adept at negotiating treacherous politics on the home front, attentive to the care and feeding of 120,000 soldiers in the field and, above all, shrewd and surprising in battle.

One afternoon in one of the state rooms at Blenheim, I heard a tourist remark on the fine clothes Churchill seemed to be wearing in a tapestry he commissioned to commemorate one of his victories. "Did they really go into battle dressed like that?" she asked, and the guide answered, "They didn't do much fighting. The common herd did the fighting." Generals only fought, he said, "when they got caught." But this is unfair to Churchill, whose style of command kept him in the thick of battle, occasionally even at the head of a cavalry charge. Once, when he was mounting his horse, a cannonball killed the man standing beside him. In another battle, one of his captains wrote that on the brink of a dubious attack, "The Duke of Marlborough (ever watchful ever fight) rode up quite unattended and alone, and posted himself a little on the right... whence he had a fair view of the greater part of the enemy's works. It is quite impossible for me to express the joy which the sight of this man gave me at this very critical moment."

In the beginning of the war, all England felt the same way, particularly after a great victory at Blenheim on the Danube River in 1704--the first time the British had defeated the French in more than 50 years. Queen Anne (no doubt encouraged by Sarah) chose to honor her triumphant general by giving him her royal park at Woodstock. Parliament agreed to build him a great house there, to be called Blenheim. But the construction was to prove an almost endless fiasco. The Churchills committed every sin of every nouveau riche who ever built a McMansion. They quarreled with the architect, cheated the workmen, placed grandeur above comfort and wildly overspent. Like so many homes of the nouveaux riches, Blenheim also entailed a teardown--indeed, one of the egregious teardowns in history.

One morning at six, I walked out to Blenheim. It was cold. The young leaves of a chestnut drooped down, soft and tender as the wings of newly emerged damselflies. Doves hooted softly in the branches, and wood pigeons took off with a sudden pulsing of wings. The palace was just a vague mass in the fog as I passed under its walls and headed down across the great bridge to the far side of the lake. Here, a royal lodge once stood, and English kings back to Ethelred the Unready came to hunt and misbehave. It was "One of the Most Agreeable Objects that the best of Landskip Painters could invent," according to the architect John Vanbrugh. But Sarah Churchill wanted it down.

*After John died, Sarah commissioned the marble monument that rises above his tomb in Blenheim Chapel. The duke is depicted as a Roman military hero rising up to the heavens. Sarah, top, fight, gazes at him while the figure of History, lower left, records the duke's achievements, and Fame, at fight, trumpets his glory. A dragon representing Envy and Spite lies crushed beneath it all.*



Throughout the construction, she and Vanbrugh waged a second battle of Blenheim. He had his workmen make a show of demolishing parts of the buildings around the royal lodge when Sarah came to visit. Then he rebuilt them when she went away again. In the 11th year of construction, she complained that Blenheim was still "a chaos which only God Almighty could finish." Sarah ultimately fired Vanbrugh, had the royal lodge torn down on her own and used the rubble for fill.

The political climate of that day was astonishingly venomous, and as the war dragged on, the Churchills often got the worst of it. Not content to ridicule John for his well-known love of money, for instance, one critic

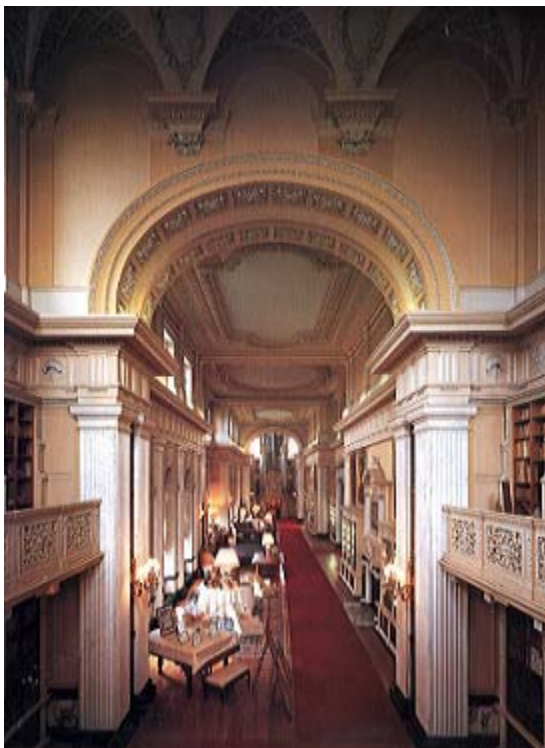


falsely accused him of sending his officers to certain death so he could profit from selling their commissions. Even in that harsh context, Sarah's own rhetoric stood out for sheer rancor. She quarreled with almost everyone. She also became increasingly heavy-handed in her efforts to force the Churchills' own political inclinations on Queen Anne. When the queen balked, and ultimately came to depend on another of her attendants, Sarah circulated the rumor that her rival was "a slut" and a "dirty chambermaid," who had won the queen's heart through the "Conduct and the Care of some Dark Deeds at Night."

Not surprisingly, the Churchills fell out of favor. In 1710 their political adversaries came to power. Funding for Blenheim Palace was soon cut off, and the unpaid workers were left to starve. The Churchills eventually went into exile, to return only when George I succeeded Queen Anne in 1714. They did not actually move into Blenheim Palace, which they completed partly with their own funds, until 1719, and John only lived to spend part of two summers there. By then, he was a stroke-addled old man.

After John's death (a clockface on one of the towers marks the exact moment), Sarah seldom came back. But she lived another 22 years and continued to furnish Blenheim with further monuments to John's glory, including a huge marble statue that still dominates the family chapel. It depicts him as a Roman military hero, rising to the heavens, with Sarah gazing up at him worshipfully, his young sons disporting themselves below, while the figure of History records his achievements with a quill pen, and Fame trumpets his glory down through the ages, their combined weight crushing a dragon of Envy and Spite. The Churchill family pews face this statue at point-blank range. A visiting artist once remarked that the chapel provides little incentive for them to divert their attention to thoughts of God. "No," the ninth duke supposedly replied, "the Marlboroughs are worshiped here." I found myself feeling almost sorry for them.

One afternoon I heard a member of the palace staff ask a colleague, "Are the privates open today?" using that oddly off-color jargon for the Churchill family's private apartments, which visitors can tour for an additional fee. They were. "Because this is a private residence," the guide began, as we stood in a long, vaulted hallway, "there are lots of personal knickknacks around. Love them if you like. Hate them if you like. But no fingerprints." Under glass, a guest book lay open to June 27/28, 1936, when the country house weekend was still a fixture of aristocratic life. The left page was given over to a single signature, Edward R.I. (Rex Imperator), and the right to a dozen or so other guests, among them Wallis Simpson and her husband Ernest, along with Winston and Clementine Churchill. Serious company.



*Blenheim's ornate library occupies a single gallery 165 feet long. Although it displays numerous paintings and sculptures, probably the most striking feature is the Willis organ visible here at the far end of the hall.*

The privates were of course also serious living space. But like the rest of the palace, they felt oddly impersonal. The books in the sitting room were the usual coffee-table fare, Edwardian Portraits, The Fauves, Impressionism, each exactly where it lay when I'd visited a year or two before. On her bed, the duchess had some pillows decorated by a daughter. Also precisely as before. It seemed as if the owners themselves had to be careful not to leave fingerprints on the objects in their own display case.

I met the 11th Duke of Marlborough, whose staff refers to him as "His Grace," on a subsequent visit. He was a tall, thin fellow in his 70s, genial, with slightly protuberant blue eyes and wavy gray hair combed neatly back, dressed in a hand-sewn double-breasted suit with the gold chain of a cigar-cutter looped through the buttonhole on his lapel. I asked him what it had been like to grow up at

Blenheim, back in the 1930s. He recollected riding around the basement (or undercroft) on his bicycle. He also recalled that his father, the 10th duke, used to drive around in the garden in an old sports car, an Austin Six perhaps, while the kids chased him on their bikes and tried to pelt him with tennis balls. I think this may be the single most appealing thing I have ever heard about any of the Marlboroughs in their entire 300-year history. The duke also admitted that he had not actually visited all of the 187 rooms in the palace, merely "the majority of them."

*In one of the triumphant stone carvings that adorn the archways of the palace, the mighty British lion subdues a hapless French cockerel.*



It did not particularly bother him that John and Sarah Churchill still had their fingerprints everywhere on both the private and public Blenheim. They were too distant in time to matter much. But he beamed with pride at the memory of the only two people in 300 years who had been strong enough to step out of John and Sarah's shadow. Both were in some sense outsiders. Consuelo Vanderbilt was an 18-year-old American in 1896 when her ambitious mother forced her to marry the ninth Duke of Marlborough for his title. Winston Churchill, though born into the family, was the son of a younger son, and thus a sort of discard, heir apparent only until Consuelo could give the ninth duke a son of his own.

Consuelo was a "dollar duchess," the most prominent of the many rich American brides imported to rescue the fading aristocracy. She brought the family a dowry of \$2.5 million in railroad stock, which provided the basis for restoring Blenheim to its former glory. By then, the Churchills had long since begun charging visitors an admission fee to help pay for maintenance and repairs.

Soon after their marriage, Consuelo's husband informed her that her role was to be "a link in the chain." His grandmother admonished her to produce a male heir promptly, "because it would be intolerable to have that little upstart Winston become duke." Consuelo in fact produced two sons, "an heir and a spare," as she put it. Winston apparently did not mind. His own mother, Jennie, was not a rich American, but even so he found in Consuelo an able conversationalist and a lifelong friend. She was in truth far better educated than her highborn husband and, despite her own vast wealth, more down-to-earth. On being confronted with the first duke's ubiquitous effigies, the words that came to her mind were "pompous vanity."

*The Ninth Duke of Marlborough and his Duchess, Consuelo Vanderbilt, posed with their sons for John Singer Sargent in 1904.*

One of the treasures of the palace was a 100-pound silver centerpiece depicting the first duke on horseback, bending down to write a dispatch informing Sarah of his victory at Blenheim. Consuelo used this centerpiece as a cache-marl, or "hide-the-husband," positioning it so she would not have to watch her own lugubrious duke fiddle with his dinner. And when she decorated their house in London, Consuelo placed an image of John Churchill at one end of the hall, and at the other, her own ancestor, Commodore Vanderbilt, so the two of them could glower at each other like rival pirates. The marriage ended in divorce. But Consuelo's son and grandson, the 10th and 11th dukes, have kept her portraits hanging everywhere in the palace, tall, swanlike and looking every inch as if she still owns the place.







Unlike Consuelo, Winston revered the great duke. As a young man, he wrote a four-volume biography intended to restore Churchill to his rightful place, with Wellington and Nelson, among England's greatest heroes. But Winston also managed to make Blenheim a shrine to himself. With the Churchill family's preternatural knack for tending the fires of its own glory, he arranged to get himself born at Blenheim—not in some awkward bedroom upstairs but in a suite just off the main entry that could conveniently become a national monument.

It would be hard to exaggerate the influence of Blenheim, with all its pomp and privilege, on Winston's life. He was baptized in the Blenheim Chapel, cherished his childhood visits and used the palace as bait to lure his future wife, Clementine. ("I think you will be amused by Blenheim," he wrote, badly stretching the limits of upper-class understatement.) He proposed marriage when he and Clementine were seated on a bench in a temple on the palace grounds, and they passed their honeymoon at Blenheim. At the same time, Winston never suffered the crushing burden of Blenheim. He drew inspiration from it without ever paying the price of upkeep.

*Although he grew up at Blenheim in the 1930s, the present occupant of the Churchill family's private apartments at Blenheim, the 11th Duke of*

*Marlborough has still not visited all 187 rooms.*

Winston spent two formative years immersed in the first duke's papers in the Blenheim archives, and he often wrote to Clementine in the same words with which John had addressed Sarah: "My dearest soul." In September 1940, with the Battle of Britain about to begin, Churchill came to Blenheim, in the words of one historian, "to draw strength and inspiration from its stones.... He spent the afternoon crawling about the Long Library floor, marshalling his fifteen hundred toy soldiers into the winning formations of the battle of Blenheim, while his cigar smoke curled upwards, and armour-clad John Churchill looked on approvingly from his marble plinth."

The palace staff had warned me that the Winston Churchill exhibition off the main hallway at Blenheim was dated and in need of renovation. But I found it powerful. Not for the photographs or the other memorabilia. What moved me was simply the voice playing over and over in the background, weary and implacable, guiding his fellow citizens through the darkest hours of World War II: "We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

The slow, deliberate cadences on the tinny newsreel soundtrack seemed to resonate with the unshakable power of Blenheim and with the achievements of John Churchill, who also once liberated Europe: "You ask what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory! Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival." I left the palace by way of the massive front door, with Winston Churchill's speeches still resounding in my mind. Churchill himself would have been too discreet to say it out loud, but it seemed to me that Blenheim had, in the end, served some worthy purpose, and he was the living proof of it.

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Photographs by Michael Freeman who has photographed 30 **SMITHSONIAN** stories over the past 20 years.