

THE STORY OF THE REAL DUKE OF MARLBOROUGH

John Churchill 1650-1722 The 1st Duke of Marlborough

The story of John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, and Blenheim Palace is extremely interesting and unique. Both were created for John Churchill as rewards for his services to both crown and country. John Churchill was born in 1650 near Axminster in Somerset. His father was Sir Winston Churchill who had been a Cavalier during the civil war (1642-8). When Oliver Cromwell and the Roundheads won, the estate and much of the family wealth was confiscated.

John Churchill began a career in the army at the age of 17, when, as a page to James, Duke of York, he was impressed with watching the soldiers. He soon enlisted as an ensign in The Kings Regiment of Foot Soldiers. In 1675 he met and married Sarah Jennings, Maid of Honour to The Duchess of York. Ten years later The Duke of York succeeded to the throne and became King James II. By the age of 38 Churchill had become a Lord and a Lieutenant-General. He was also good friends with James II's son in law The Dutch William of Orange. It was with Churchill's help that William succeeded to the throne, This was because James II wanted a Roman Catholic monarchy and Churchill was a staunch Anglican. He was rewarded the following year with the title Earl of Marlborough.

In 1701, the English and their allies were fighting Louis XIV and the French. Louis XIV had broken a pact made between him and William III and Churchill had been sent to teach him a lesson. A year later William III died after being thrown from his horse. His sistein law Queen Anne continued to reign. It was in this year that Churchill won an important campaign against the French. On his return to England he was offered a Dukedom. At first he didn't accept it as he felt that the Queen was being too generous and also that he didn't own an estate large enough to befit a Duke. However he deeply respected the Queens wishes so he eventually accepted.

On the 13th August 1704, the Duke and his army ambushed a French army camp. This happened just outside a small village called Blenheim situated in what was then known as Bavaria, now Germany. He was victorious in this battle of Blenheim, as it became known. The French losses were immense and France was no longer able to maintain it's hold over Europe. On his return in 1705, there was rejoicing and processions in Marlborough's honour. There was more to come, In February 1705 Queen Anne, with the consent of Parliament, made the Duke a grant of the Royal Manor of Woodstock, in Oxfordshire, with around 16,000 acres of land. With this land and a further gift from the grateful crown, he was able to build a property grand enough to commemorate his victory over Louis XIV.

During the battle of Ramillies, after Blenheim, the Duke was involved in a near death experience. Whilst his equerry was helping Marlborough onto his horse, a cannonball fired by the French, flew between his legs and sheared off the equerry's head.

By January 1712, Queen Anne had had arguments with Sarah and the Duke, and between that and a change of political party leading parliament, Marlborough was dismissed from all his official positions. Marlborough began living in Blenheim Palace in 1719 even though the building was not finished. He had very little time to enjoy it as, in June 1722 he suffered a massive stroke. There was no hope or recovery and on the 26th June he died peacefully.