

## ANNIVERSARY ADDRESS AT BLENHEIM

PALACE 23rd JUNE, 1962.

*By David Green*

---

AT Blenheim we have no ghosts. We had one once (the fat shade of Dean Jones), but some eighty-eight years ago he was exorcised when Sir Winston Churchill chose to be born in one of his rooms.

No, we have no ghosts but what we do have is voices: some loud, some gentle, some harsh, some sentimental; and nowhere are these voices more clamorous, more insistent than in this room, the long library.

From the far south of it, from that statue "as white as snow just fallen" we hear the voice of a queen: "For if ever you should forsake me," she tells the Duchess of Marlborough, "if ever you should forsake me, I would have nothing more to do with the world but to make another abdication; for what is a crown when the support of it is gone? I will never forsake your dear self, Mr. Freeman, nor Mr. Montgomery, but always be your constant faithful servant; and we four must never part, till death mows us down with his impartial hand."

And from there too comes another voice, a good deal more businesslike, which tells us: "I am going to Rysbrack to make a bargain with him for a fine statue of Queen Anne. It will be a very fine thing and tho' but one figure will cost me £300. I have a satisfaction in showing this respect to her because her kindness to me was real and what happened afterwards was compassed by the contrivance of such as are in power now."

These speakers are distinct enough (they were strong-minded people), but perhaps just a little faint to us because of their distance in time. Far nearer to our own day is a voice from the other, the northern end of the room. It is the eighth Duke of Marlborough, the present Duke's grandfather, who for his voice to posterity chooses the Willis organ: "In memory of happy days and as a tribute to this glorious home we leave thy voice to speak within these walls in years to come when ours are still."

Between these voices, between the two ends of this long room, lie some two hundred years and a babble of other voices, from Vanbrugh's to Sir Winston Churchill's, who have made themselves heard in it since. Built as a picture gallery and soon turned into a library, this apartment in its mixed history, its adaptations, is typically English. In the First World War it was a hospital ward, in the second a dormitory for Malvern

College and later an office or a series of offices (you never saw such a mess) for at least two Government departments. One of them was a long time going, after the war, and I remember telling the late Duchess that an old mason who once worked for the ninth Duke on these terraces here had just said to me, "If the old Duke was here, he'd shoot them." She said, "Nonsense, they're keeping the tapestries warm." And so they were. To heat the house then cost, I was told, £2,000 a year. What it costs now I dare not think.

It was in this room too that Lady Randolph Churchill was dancing or watching the dancers when Winston-to-be made it clear that he was impatient to enter the world. He has since declared: "At Blenheim I took two very important decisions: to be born and to marry" (he proposed in the grounds). "I am happily content with the decisions I took on both those occasions."

It is a state room and a family room, a living room. From the very first Sarah was determined to live in it and to enjoy looking out into the park. When she heard that Vanbrugh was planning to block her view with an orangery she was upset and said so. "Madam," replied Vanbrugh, "you cannot see all things from all places." However, he gave way; and this much to her satisfaction for, as she said, "Poets, painters and architects have very high flights, but they must be kept down."

And this is Vanbrugh again (he knew of course that thrift was Sarah's goddess):

"... there is not one part of it that I don't weigh and consider a hundred times before 'tis put in Execution, and this with two ends, one of trying to do it better, and t'other of giving it some other turn that may be as well and yet come cheaper. And 'tis this that makes me when I am here avoid all Company and haunt the Building like a Ghost, from the time the workmen leave off at six o'clock till 'tis quite Dark, and in a word . . . 'tis very seldom that I am not Earnestly Employ'd in Studying how to make this the Cheapest as well as (if possibly) the Best Hous in Europe, which I think my Lord Duke's Services highly deserve."

But what is this plaintive voice we keep hearing from other parts of the room? A disillusioned voice, the voice of a man who has taken it hard: "I cannot help thinking of Blenheim, which I hope your Grace will excuse in me . . ." Yes, that is Nicholas Hawksmoor writing to Sarah Duchess of Marlborough. He goes on, "I presume Mr. Mansfield [Isaac Mansfield, the plasterer] has near upon finished great part of the Gallery [that is this room] by this time and I hope to your

Satisfaction. . . . It will be a room of distinguished beauty if rightly managed and on the other hand it may suffer much if it is not finished with skill." In another letter to the Duchess Hawksmoor writes of his concern for Blenheim, "like a loving nurse that almost thinks the child her own" and adds: "I cannot help wishing to know in what manner the undertaker will finish this work, lest I should be quite disappointed when it is done in the thoughts I conceived of it."

Poor Hawksmoor, as Vanbrugh called him. He was so often to be disappointed. No silver spoon for him, no accolade. On the contrary, if ever a genius was born under an unlucky star and with an inoperable chip on his shoulder it was Nicholas Hawksmoor, without whom, as he himself testified, the builders of Blenheim, in the early days at least, all of them put together would not have been able to stir an inch.

Indeed, in the history of British architecture Hawksmoor provides the classic case of frustration, the architect ever plagued as he said with the vile distemper of the gout, whose projects never leave the drawing-board or if they do he seldom gets credit for them; and Blenheim provides the classic whodunit.

Who, in short, was the architect of this great house? Why John Vanbrugh, as every schoolboy knows. Yet we have Hawksmoor reminding the Duchess, "There's none can judge so well of the design as the person who composed it. Therefore I should beg leave to take a convenient time to slip down. . . ." True, he is referring there only to this room and not to the house as a whole. In the Hawksmoor sale there were more than fifty plans of Blenheim. Most of them have vanished and of those that are left none of importance is signed. We have Hawksmoor drawings for ceiling-mouldings in the state rooms. We have his signed project for a delightful bridge to lead out of the gardens just here into the park. It was never built. So much is lost. Vanbrugh's painting of Woodstock Manor (the way he meant to preserve and romanticise it), and his "large and intelligible model in wood" of the palace itself: all gone.

We can stand in the north forecourt and gaze at the clock tower and at the chimney towers. . . . That diagonal must surely be Hawksmoor's? And look at that balustrade—didn't he use just that sort of guilloche to link the towers of Westminster Abbey, and again at St. Mary Woolnoth? Very well, let us give him his due at last, let us own that much of Blenheim, both inside and out, is Hawksmoor's. Part of Vanbrugh's rich mantle thus falls upon him, but in this belated redistribution must we strip Jack naked? And indeed were Jack here

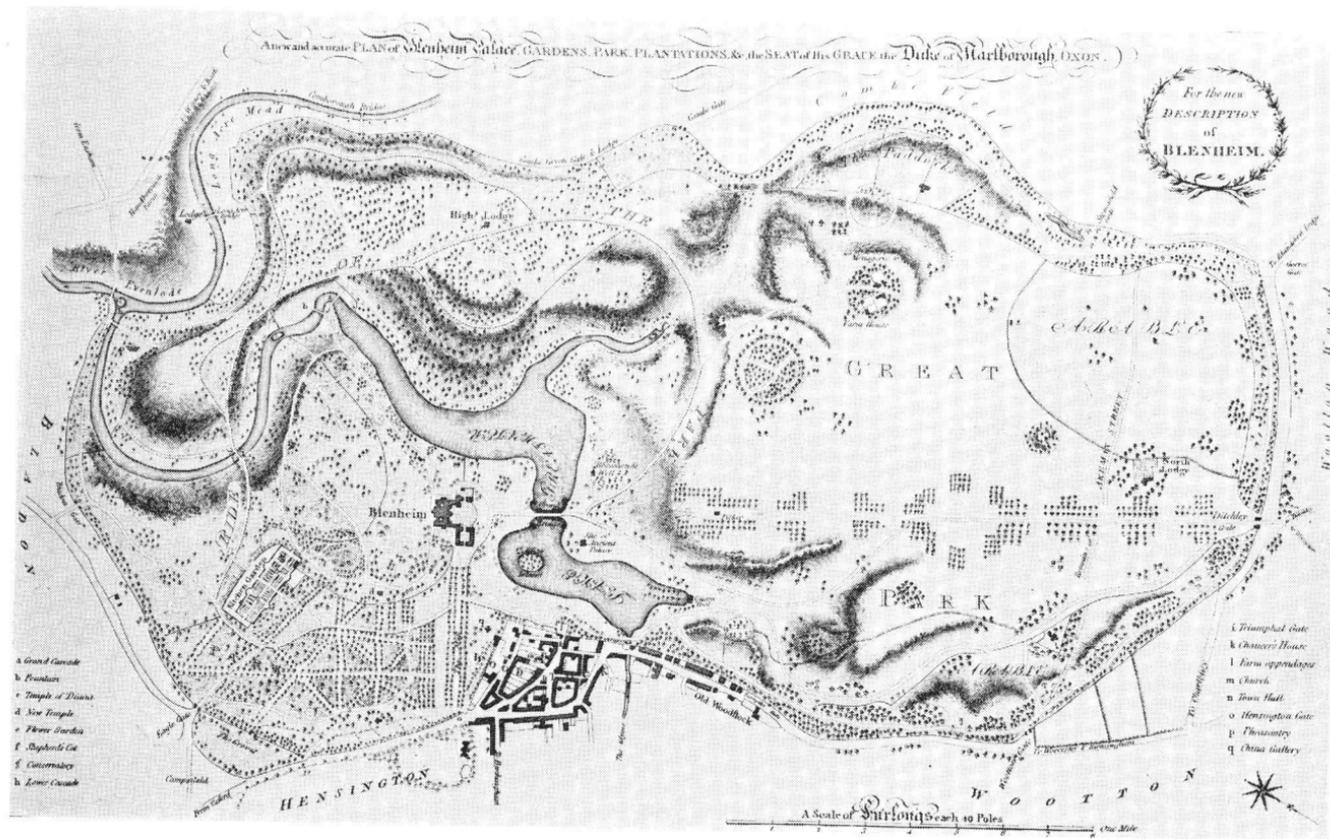


FIG. 2. Plan of Blenheim Palace (from "A New Description of Blenheim, 1806).

(who knows? perhaps he is) I feel certain he'd give a very compelling account of himself.

If Adam delve and Eve span, who was then the gentleman? Bedevilled as they were, I'd say neither of them. Theirs was the classic precedent for the now timeworn plan of always blaming the nearest person even if it's only a snake—it's a plan that often works very well, a very human plan but not perhaps, as we understand it, gentlemanly. It was in fact in just such a way that Hawksmoor tried to pin his bad luck on Vanbrugh when he (Hawksmoor) grumbled to Sarah, "And I served always for half or less than what they allowed Sir John, although I had ten times the fatigue."

As it happened, Vanbrugh was the gentleman and that, in those days, had quite a lot to do with his getting the job. Vanbrugh was a member of the Kit-Cat. Hawksmoor was not. At the Kit-Cat Vanbrugh met the Earl of Carlisle and became his friend and architect. And it was Vanbrugh's model of Lord Carlisle's Castle Howard, you remember, which so impressed Marlborough and made him decide to use the same architect.

Vanbrugh's architecture has been called emphatic as an oath. We see it at Seaton Delaval. We see it here—the only complete or nearly complete Vanbrugh house to have escaped (touch wood) a disastrous fire. Vanbrugh's personality, in its way, was on the same scale as Marlborough's, and its impress is still stamped on his buildings in tiers of roundheaded arches, in bold ruscations and gargantuan keystones. At times it seems—looking, for instance, at the roofscape and that fantastic and yet triumphant broken pediment above the north portico—there was nothing he would not dare to attempt. Does it matter who did his homework?

Who, then, is the architect? He who has the vision or he who knows how to translate that vision into stone? With painters perhaps it is a little more straightforward, but not much. In pursuit of Grinling Gibbons and those who influenced him I have lately had occasion to study Rubens. In a gallery at Antwerp I bought postcards of two Rubens madonnas, one surrounded by flowers and vegetables painted by Pieter Brueghel, the other—the Garland Madonna, now at Munich—with flowers by Jan Brueghel. It was not till I got them home and compared them that I noticed that in the later painting Jan Brueghel had, in his wonderful garland, incorporated two clumps of lilies and tulips lifted bodily from the first. Who then painted the Garland Madonna? Rubens? Jan Brueghel? Pieter Brueghel? All three perhaps. And so I think it is with Blenheim.

To be able to name one man and one alone would be tidy and convenient; but if we name the inventor, or the man we think was the inventor, how are we to be sure his ideas were his own—or does that really matter? While Blenheim was building, Vanbrugh was studying Palladio (he left his copy in Strong's shed). For the north portico, as Sir John Summerson has shown, he almost certainly adapted a design of Scamozzi's . . . But no, if we follow this path we shall find ourselves in something worse than Rosamund's labyrinth. "The originality which we ask from the artist is originality of treatment, not of subject. It is only the unimaginative who ever invent. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes and he annexes everything." So said Oscar Wilde.

Vanbrugh, like Wren, like every good architect, annexed ideas and knew how to use them. "His endeavours," says Stephen Wren of his grandfather, "were to build for eternity." Vanbrugh's, on an only slightly less heroic scale (I am thinking of St. Paul's) were the same.

I have mentioned fire. I have just mentioned St. Paul's. And now in passing I wonder if I might ask you to make a quick and simple test. Consider how, in the last war, firemen and firewatchers risked their lives—and successfully—to save St. Paul's. Now if (though heaven forbid) such circumstances occurred again, which London building, erected since the war, would you wish a man to risk his life for? To me they look not merely characterless, that is obvious enough, but strangely temporary. I leave the thought with you, though I fear it is not a comfortable one. Vanbrugh and Wren called themselves not architects but surveyors. Their nearest modern equivalents, with a few bright exceptions, appear to be not architects but engineers.

To the heap of evidence on this huge whodunit of Blenheim I would add but one last scrap and that comes, like quite a few good things, from Blenheim's croquet-boxes—well, perhaps not quite literally croquet-boxes, but from old wooden chests very like them. It's a large drawing by Hawksmoor for a high obelisk with a gilded star at the top. We know all about it because in one of the cases in this room there's a long manuscript by Hawksmoor headed *Explanation of the Obelisk*, and since he was never allowed to build it (my Lord Herbert took it out of his hands and "conducted" the Column of Victory) we have of course all his plans for a whole series of alternative projects. But quite the liveliest thing in the whole business comes, as we would expect it to come, from Sarah. Marlborough, in old age, thinking to himself as it were on paper, has jotted down: "I have now changed my mind as to the place where the obelisk is to stand, having

found out two others that are better. One is at the entrance of the avenue that leads from the bridge. The other is upon the ground on one side of the bridge where King Henry the II's house was. That I believe would please Sir John [Vanbrugh] best, because it would give an opportunity of mentioning that King whose scenes of love he was so much pleased with. And the obelisk being to be very large, I don't know whether it would not be right to put some inscription to preserve the memory of that building, such a one as Mr. Pope might give a very pretty turn to, to show how much . . ." But these last lines are crossed out and Sarah has spikily written above them: "But if there were obelisks to be made of what all our Kings have done of that sort, the country would be stuffed with very odd things." I might add (though I digress unpardonably) that a plinth designed by Sir William Chambers has, in memory of Woodstock Manor, recently been moved to the site Marlborough suggested, north-east of the bridge.

But the scrap of evidence from the croquet-box is still beside me and what intrigues me is that on the back of Hawksmoor's obelisk drawing (and they seem to have been as thrifty with their paper as were the Brontës) we find two more drawings: one almost certainly by Hawksmoor of a shell-headed doorcase for the Saloon, to be carved by Gibbons, the other a doodle—it deserves a no more dignified name—of two lions mounted upon a hugely keystoneed, rusticated arch. It is no more than a quick scribble. These are not Landseer lions. Indeed they would be less at home in Trafalgar Square than, shall we say, guarding the imperial palace at Peking. Yet in this quick nervous sketch we instantly recognise the genesis of the lion-grotesques flanking the tower arches in the north forecourt. They are carved by Gibbons. They are fantastic. They are brilliant. They are, I am convinced, Vanbrugh's.

On the subject of croquet-boxes I must say it was exciting, when the Duke first allowed me to look where I pleased, to dig down into large chests which had not been disturbed for at least a century. One of the first things I came upon was Lancelot Brown's plan for making the lake. With the Duke's permission I lent it to Miss Stroud, who was surprised and grateful and wondered in which corner of the Muniment Room she could have missed it. But it wasn't in the Muniment Room at all (though it is now); it was in a corridor leading to a lavatory. The same went for these drawings by Thornhill, one of them very imposing, for his murals in the Saloon. The tragic thing about Sarah's quarrel with him is that her gain (Laguerre was a few pounds

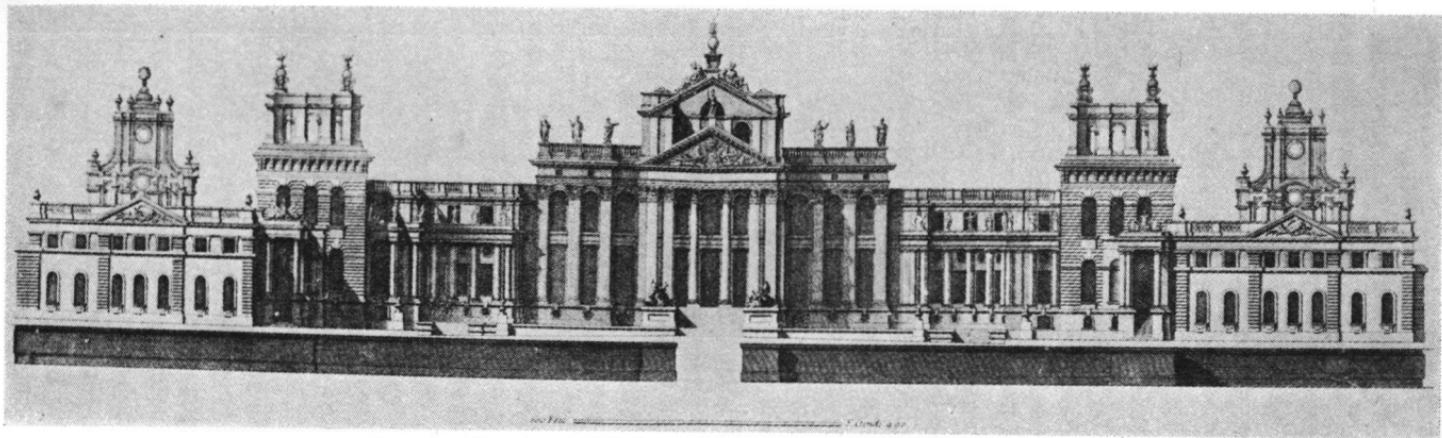


FIG. 3. Elevation of Blenheim Palace (*Vitruvius Britannicus* Vol. I, 57).

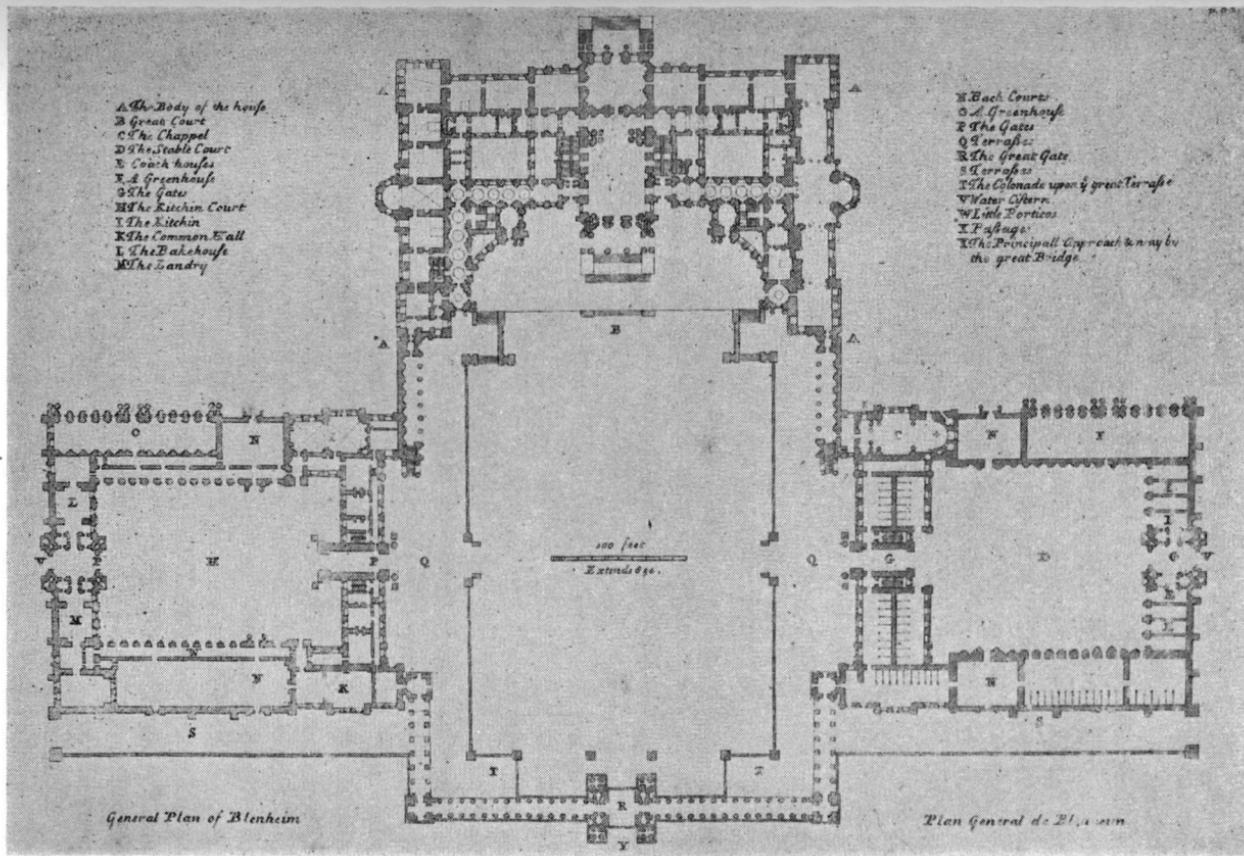


FIG. 4. Plan of Blenheim (*Vitruvius Britannicus*, Vol. I, 62).

cheaper) is our grievous loss, for we might have had something as noble, though of course on a smaller scale, as the Painted Hall at Greenwich; if not in the Saloon, then in this very room and on this ceiling.

On the back of one of his sketches—a capriccio—Thornhill writes in his own hand (though the verse itself is attributed to Evans) the famous where-d'ye-sleep-or-where-d'ye-dine poem. We all know it of course, but I think it bears repetition:

“See, sir, here's the grand approach,  
This way is for his Grace's coach;  
There lies the bridge and here's the clock,  
Observe the lion and the cock,  
The spacious court, the colonnade,  
And mark how wide the hall is made!  
The chimneys are so well design'd  
They never smoke in any wind.  
This gallery's contrived for walking,  
The windows to retire and talk in;  
The council chamber for debate,  
And all the rest are rooms of state!”

“Thanks, sir,” cried I, “'tis very fine,  
But where d'ye sleep, or where d'ye dine?  
I find by all you have been telling  
That 'tis a house, but not a dwelling.”

These and much else of the kind were in chests and boxes, and in the same lowly corridor there was a cupboard. Now as every such rummager knows, cupboards are to croquet-boxes as print is to manuscript. Nothing more exciting than a laundry-bill was likely to come out of it. However I continued to rummage and eventually, under layers of dust, I found a file of typed letters. Whoever heard of a typed letter being anything but dull? Yet these were different. They concerned the making of these water terraces, in the nineteen-twenties, by the ninth Duke of Marlborough, and they were letters passing between himself and his French landscape-architect Achille Duchêne. Frankly, I found them not only interesting but at times entertaining.

If the ninth Duke's son is within earshot I hope he will forgive my saying that in his capacity of garden-maker his father vividly reminds one of his contemporary, Sir George Sitwell. The same Olympic attitude; the same faith that mountains could and must be removed;

the same intolerance of obstacles of every kind. Thus and only thus is or was the impossible in gardening brought about.

"The problem for Monsieur Duchêne," the ninth Duke told his architect, "is to make a liaison between the façade of Vanbrugh and the water line of the Lake made by Brown. To reconcile these conflicting ideas is difficult. The difficulty is not diminished when you remember that the façade of the House is limited and the line of the Lake is limitless. As an example, if you turn your back to the lake, and look at the façade, your parterre, basin etc., is in scale to the façade, but if you look at the same parterre from the rotunda to the Lake it is out of scale with the panorama." And then, characteristically, he adds, "I cannot close these remarks without a philosophic reflection. Whether you modify your Plans and your decoration or whether you do not, try and inspire in them a feeling of joyousness, for joy means the birth of everything: of spirit, of hope and aspiration. With that tinge of melancholy in your temperament you are inclined to be sombre and therefore severe. Vanbrugh had faults but panache. Monsieur Duchêne is faultless but he must also remember to be Human." Great stuff.

Duchêne was delighted. "Je suis très content de voir tout l'intérêt que vous prenez vous-même au travail que nous avons entrepris et il me semble que c'est moi-même qui suis le propriétaire qui fait exécuter les travaux!" But there he had gone too far. "You are the Architect, I am the Duke," he was told. "You must be sure that your measurements are correct . . . I hold you entirely responsible. . . ." At a later stage the Duke was distressed to find his French architect enriching the terraces in the manner of Le Nôtre, when all along he thought he had made it clear that it was Bernini's spirit which must reign there with Vanbrugh's, just as it was the model for Bernini's rivergod fountain which was to be given pride of place. Experts sped to Rome to check every stone of the great fountain in the Piazza Navona. At times the Duke felt elated, at times exasperated. In 1928 he wrote to Duchêne: "After so many years it is tiring that I cannot make you realise that movement is essential in any decoration which you desire to employ on the Terraces. . . . The drawing of the Console which you have sent me is in the style of Gabrielle and I fear is not in harmony with the baroque of Vanbrugh."

There was every kind of difficulty and frustration. There were crises. There were bi-lingual rages. There were seemingly needless complications, not the least of them the Duke's insistence that the water-terraces be fed not with the waters of the lake, so conveniently

near, but from the all but mystical spring at Rosamund's Well on the far, far bank. It meant piping the water through the middle of the lake to its western extremity before pumping it up by ram to the terraces outside these windows.

When the water was there, Duchêne wanted it to be moving. The Duke did not. "Bear in mind," he said, "that the situation is grandiose. Limpidity of water is pleasing and possesses a romance. You have got this effect in the basins and in the large area of water contained by the Lake. Be careful not to destroy this major emotion which Nature has granted to you for the sake of what may possibly be a vulgar display of waterworks which can be seen at any exhibition or public park. Turn all these matters over in your mind when you are at rest in the evening, for it is only by thought, constant thought, and mature reflection that artists have left their great works for the enjoyment of posterity."

The Duke could be despotic. He could also be magnanimous and when at last, in 1929, the long struggle ended in victory, he wrote warmly: "Pray tell Monsieur Duchêne that the ensemble of the Terraces is magnificent and in my judgment far superior to the work done by Le Nôtre at Versailles. The proportion of the house, the Terrace and the Lake is perfect." For when the Duke looked out of these windows, and looked again, he realised that Duchêne had had a trump up his sleeve all the time. "It is certainly a stroke of genius," the Duke told him, "bringing the water line up to the first terrace. I certainly should not have thought of this idea myself and I doubt any English architect would have."

Even so the ninth Duke, perceptive and dedicated though he was, to some extent I believe misinterpreted Vanbrugh's intentions for this west front. For would not Vanbrugh have leapt at the chance to contrive a tremendous cascade, as at Saint-Cloud, the wonder of Europe, dripping with frostwork and river-gods, foaming and cavorting its way from the grotto he planned for the undercroft beneath this floor down the whole side of the hill till it hurled itself into the lake? Two months before the death of Marlborough, Hawksmoor, with whom Vanbrugh must have discussed the project, wrote to the Duchess: "I hope your Grace will not forget that you have a Cascade in the most proper Situation. When the Kings of England had the House in their possession there was always a great piece of water or a Lake of water near Old Woodstock or near the Queen's pools . . . I cannot but own that the water at Cannons, the Duke of Chandos's, is the

main beauty of that Situation and it cost him dear, but your Grace may have a Greater beauty with much less Expence."

Well, the long cascade was not to be, though there are lesser ones and we must be thankful for what we have, which is much, not only here in the house and on the terraces but in the gardens and pleasure grounds and in the park, an enchanting world in itself. And that today is its chief fascination, its seclusion. For when sick in heart and sick in head—and more especially sick of the mess they are making of Oxford and most of Oxfordshire—one wanders into the park: to the bridge, to Rosamund's Well and beyond, one finds that tranquillity which, in the mad-rush world outside—time-ridden, speed-ridden, fear-ridden, noise-ridden—is a thing at once rare and despised. The place is timeless. The hour striking gently from Langley Bradley's clock means nothing more than a soothing voice from the eighteenth century. Nor do the seasons here count for anything much; we ignore them. Come here late in the autumn, you'll find stockdoves still nesting within Vanbrugh's bridge (and is that Hawksmoor's? I think not), and house-martins still feeding young in the mud-cradles they sling beneath his monolithic keystones. Blenheim has its own time and its own weather. It has, too, its own ideas of entertainment: no candyfloss, no jukeboxes, no swingboats, not even a zoo; but if visitors feel disposed to pay half-a-crown for a largish slice of British history, well, here it is.

A voice missing from among those we heard at the beginning of this long and rambling talk, now ending, was the voice of Marlborough himself. "About his achievements," writes his descendant, Sir Winston Churchill, "he preserved a complete silence, offering neither explanations nor excuses for any of his deeds. His answer was to be this great house. . . . It certainly gives us an insight into the recesses of his being." It is a house who runs may read—well no, who walks, who peers, who pauses. You remember Louis XIV's own account of how one should show and be shown the gardens at Versailles. Every few steps there is a pause, he insists upon it, in tribute to the planners and craftsmen. We too must not be hurried. From the tops of the finials, where Marlborough's coronet is mounted upon a fleur-de-lys reversed, to the battle-tapestries in the staterooms, commissioned and dictated by Marlborough himself, the house has a voice like no other; while architecturally it has drama and inevitability: qualities we shall find in few buildings today.

And how about *living* in a monument? What in this functional age, is it like? For myself, I live in a cottage, but I think I can say this much



FIG. 5. Blenheim Palace, c. 1806.

—an Englishman is not to be under-estimated, and an English Duke, standing six foot four, can take much in his stride. Yet clearly the burden is heavy, the expense of upkeep (the buildings, apart from their courts, cover four acres) vast and restoration on a huge scale now essential. To build Blenheim called for courage, and courage is still needed to live in it and to restore it. And now this, you may anxiously think, must be the cue for a silver—no, a gold collection. Let me hasten to say that nothing so distressing will occur. In his address to the Society last year Lord Scarsdale observed, "I will say first with regard to the care of monuments or monumental houses of size, that if you have not got someone who feels himself dedicated to look after that house, at whatever cost, at whatever personal sacrifice, then you are on a very bad wicket indeed." At Kedleston, at Blenheim, at Chatsworth and at many another great house, I am thankful to say, owners are of this mind and have this sense of responsibility. As my old and respected friend Tom Rayson will tell you, there is here a commonsense arrangement whereby the Duke doubles any grant the Government allows for restoration and rebuilding, and Rayson then gets on with the job. Well, perhaps it's not quite as simple as that, but since we have this distinguished architect with us, he is fair game for your questions as we go round. The restorations are very much his province and except for two very brief comments I shall be more than content to leave them to him. The first is simply this, that when disposed to feel shocked at Vanbrugh's practice of cramping stone with iron (a practice at the root of much of the trouble here), we may like to remember Wren's rejoinder to Talman, about Hampton Court. Talman claimed that certain piers were "all hollow and cramped with iron to keep them together". Wren said that what was done for greater caution ought not to be maliciously interpreted.

My second and last comment is this. One day in the north fore-court I found a stone-carver at work on the Grinling Gibbons trophy heading the eastern colonnade. The trophy was so far gone, he was having to recreate it entirely from solid blocks. It's a biggish thing, eight feet eight inches high and twelve feet long, the same front and back, bristling with pikes and muskets, armour and cannon-balls, kegs of gunpowder, captured standards and so on. Gibbons charged £40 for carving it in 1709. Well, this young man, a pleasant ordinary looking chap in a red beret, had reached a tricky stage. He was carving an embroidered drum-cloth (it had a tasselled fringe and the Louis XIV emblem of the sun), which had to look as though gently stirred by the wind. To Grinling Gibbons this was nothing out of the ordinary,

but—well . . . “How on earth d’you do it?” I said. By way of answer he handed me a faded photograph. I’d say it measured three by four and was taken at a time when people were still asking themselves if photography had come to stay. The result? You may care to look at it as you go. The Duke, I may say, took the trouble to go and congratulate the mason himself.

I said that would be my last remark and so it is. There is but the briefest of codas and it is not mine but Defoe’s. He is writing of St. Paul’s (finished in 1711 while Blenheim was still building), but what he says applies equally to Blenheim:

“For ’tis easy to find Fault with the Works even of God himself, when we view them in the Gross, without regard to the Particular Beauties of every Part separately considered . . . but when these are maturely inquired into, then we fly out in due Admirations of the Wisdom of the Author from the Excellency of his Works.”