



BLenheim PALACE

A Royal Connection

Sarah Jennyns was born in 1660 at a time when the majority of women in England were denied the opportunity to be educated, work in professional fields such as law or medicine, or indeed to perform anything other than manual jobs inside or outside the home. For many women, regardless of social standing, the only hope of avoiding a life of poverty and discomfort was to find a suitable husband.

Sarah Jennyns proved herself to be the exception to many rules of the day; she maintained her honour whilst at Court – despite the advances of many of the young men attracted by her beauty and wit. In 1678, she secretly married John Churchill, for love rather than for convenience. Sarah saw in John Churchill, a young soldier who would fulfil her ambition for status and wealth and he obliged by achieving the highest military rank of the time under Queen Anne – that of Commander of Land Forces and Master-General of the Ordnance; a rank which was to bring with it many honours and rewards – not least the title, Duke of Marlborough, and the funds and land upon which to build Blenheim Palace.

During their marriage and whilst Churchill was on campaign, Sarah looked after her husband's affairs and remained a constant companion to her childhood friend, Queen Anne. Sarah was consulted by the Queen upon matters of state, but pregnancies, miscarriages and menstruation (the comings and goings of Lady Charlotte as they referred to it) also reflected the intimacy and openness of their early friendship.

Queen Anne's affection for Sarah was such that she sought to reward her at every opportunity – a ride together through Windsor Great Park resulted in Sarah's being appointed to the post of Ranger and also having the use of Windsor Lodge – the marriage of Sarah's four daughters saw the Queen gift each of them £5000, the honours were endless. The Queen took things a step further - to cement the friendship and to avoid Sarah and her husband having to defer to her, Anne suggested they use pet names for one another. Sarah and John were duly addressed as 'Mr & Mrs Freeman', Anne chose 'Mrs Morley' and eventually Sydney Godolphin, Lord Treasurer and great friend of the Churchills, became 'Mr Montgomery'. This served to put the four of them on an equal footing at a time when Court protocol was strict and jargon was flowery and effusive to say the least.

In addition to her duties at court, Sarah had numerous houses to staff and maintain (almost 30 at the time of her death in 1744) and four daughters and many grandchildren to find suitable spouses for. As with many things, Sarah was a great success in her matchmaking attempts – the one match in which she was thwarted was when she attempted to arrange a

marriage between her favourite granddaughter, Lady Diana Spencer, and the Prince of Wales. Prime Minister Robert Walpole, wishing to prevent Sarah becoming the power behind the throne as she had been during Queen Anne's reign, promptly put a stop to her plans and Diana was married instead to John Russell, Duke of Bedford.

Sarah was interested in all things medical and would rush to the bedside of ailing friends and relatives, to nurse them at any opportunity. She was a great believer in the healing powers of asses' milk, jelly of heartshorn and calves' feet. When the Duke had the first of his strokes, she decided to try a new remedy to relieve his condition and sent for vipers from France, so that they could be,

'boyl'd in the Duke of Marlborough's broth...[to] mend his blood and take off the lownesse of his spirits...'

Unfortunately, others who had already followed this advice found that the broth tasted so disgusting that it did more harm than good.

Success can bring with it many things – including unpopularity. Sarah's single-mindedness and determination was such that she had no qualms about speaking her mind and expressing her opinion. This didn't always make her popular and she famously fell out, or was involved in endless litigation, with many people including her daughters Henrietta and Mary, an assortment of grandchildren, John Vanbrugh, architect and creator of Blenheim Palace and, most disastrously of all, Queen Anne.

Sarah was able to vent her feelings about family members who had offended her by exercising her not inconsiderable writing skills in the 'Green Book - An Account of the Cruell Usage of my Children'. Sarah wrote the book with 'reluctance' and 'only for particular friends' so that they could be made aware of her sufferings and to earn their shocked sympathy.

Her falling out with the Queen was a far more public affair. Sarah prided herself on being 'useful to her family' and when she learned that some cousins on her father's side by the name of Hill, were living in relative poverty, she decided to find suitable positions for them where she could. One of them, Abigail, was working as a servant in Sir John and Lady Rivers household in Kent so Sarah found her a place at Court and 'used [her] in all regards as a sister' – even nursing her through smallpox. When Abigail Masham, as she later became, supplanted Sarah in the queen's affections, Sarah may well have come to regret her nursing skills.

Relations between the Queen and Sarah became increasingly strained and things finally came to a head on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral. The two women were there to attend a celebration of the Duke of Marlborough's latest victory; the Queen was not wearing the jewels that Sarah had put out for her. They bickered and Sarah was heard to tell the Queen to shut up! It was just a step too far. Consequently, Sarah was stripped of her privileges and position at Court and, despite the Duke pleading Sarah's cause, Anne refused to grant her an audience in which she might state her case and ask for the Queen's forgiveness.

Sarah and her husband were obliged to leave the country in 1712 and they remained in virtual exile until after Anne's death in 1714. The Marlboroughs then returned to England with the blessing of the new king, George I, the Duke was reinstated as Captain-General and Sarah continued to build not only her immense personal wealth, but also her husband's beloved Blenheim Palace.