

Churchill at Bladon

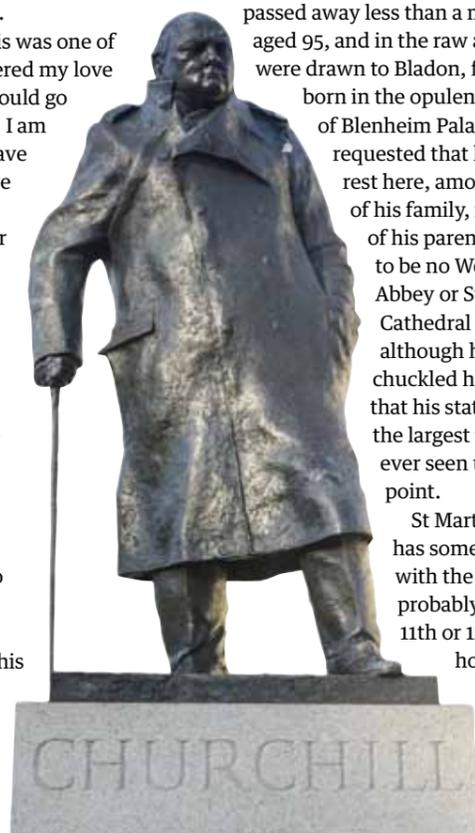
'Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill, 1874-1965';
simple words writ large on a mighty block
in a quiet village churchyard

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I first came here, to Bladon, as a young boy, short of trouser and wide of eye. I was approaching eight years of age when Churchill died in January 1965, 50 years ago, and I think I was still of junior school vintage when we came here, probably on a coach trip, for we had no car. It might even have been in 1965.

I like to think that this was one of the occasions that fostered my love of history, a subject I would go on to teach and to love. I am sure someone would have explained to me why we had to stand in revered silence at this place. For those older than me, World War Two was just 20 years distant and the granite speeches still reverberated; as unyielding as the stone bearing his name.

Later in life I met a man, my late father-in-law, who fought for Churchill. It was true to say that, for the war leader loved his Desert Army, which gave him his first victory of the war. The battle was El Alamein and my father-in-law, Sgt Arthur Bean, was there. Of Churchill's many speeches my personal favourite is



Bronze statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square, London, by Ivor Roberts-Jones

this: "After the War when a man is asked what he did, it will be quite sufficient for him to say, I marched and fought with the Desert Army." It was said for my father-in-law and others like him.

When I next returned to Bladon it was as an adult and I was accompanied by my dear wife, Val. Her dad, the old soldier, had passed away less than a month before, aged 95, and in the raw aftermath we were drawn to Bladon, for Churchill, born in the opulent surroundings of Blenheim Palace, had requested that he be laid to rest here, among the graves of his family, including those of his parents. There was to be no Westminster Abbey or St Paul's Cathedral for him, although he may have chuckled had he known that his state funeral was the largest the world had ever seen up to that point.

St Martin's in Bladon has some ancestry too, with the first church probably built in the 11th or 12th centuries, however, dilapidation resulted in a request from the parishioners to build anew, which means that



Winston Churchill's grave at Bladon

today's church dates only from the early 19th century. It has the look of something older. The then Duke of Marlborough paid for the building materials. The lych gate, which takes you into the churchyard, was added towards the end of the century.

The graveyard seems jam-packed with Spencer-Churchill graves, with only the Dukes themselves laid to rest in the chapel at Blenheim. After his state funeral, Churchill's body was taken by train to Handborough Station (Hanborough today), fittingly hauled by a Battle of Britain Class locomotive, No 34051, 'Winston Churchill'. What else could it have been? From there the cortege moved on to Bladon, where the pomp of London was followed by a contrasting private burial service attended by relatives and close friends. There was something fitting about this, for in Churchill's call to arms in WW2 when he talked of fighting in fields and streets, and fighting in the hills, he was inspiring the nation to fight for every last corner of this nation. Here now was Churchill buried in his own small corner of England.

Bladon epitomises what we were fighting for, a little village just outside Woodstock, replete with village pump, an old malthouse with tall 15th century chimneys and mullioned windows and quaint cottages. You have to walk the short, steep climb to the church, which is good; it gives you time to think and there is much to think about here.

One downside of being buried among his people is that the grave is accessible to all, and, as such, has eroded badly over the years. This has led to both replacement and then restoration of the stone. I doubt that



The Spencer-Churchill graves

Churchill would have minded. He quite liked being the centre of attention. The grave though looks good today and was surrounded by flowers on the day we visited. It was a spring morning and there were narcissus and primroses.

One feeling I had, stood once more by the pugnacious war leader's grave, was pride, pride in him, in my late father-in-law and in my country. I recalled a map I had seen as a child, showing the state of Europe in 1940 after the German Blitzkrieg had rolled through France and the Low Countries. Nations were either neutral, occupied or allies of Germany. One nation stood defiant and it was this one. Churchill personified a nation's resistance and he led by example, travelling 150,000 miles, as he worked tirelessly to achieve ultimate victory. His final journey of all brought him here to a churchyard in Oxfordshire, a peaceful solitude, far from the corridors of power, overlooked by a simple church tower surmounted by four pinnacles.

Churchill wasn't popular all the time, of

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course; how could any politician be that? He has oft been referred to as 'the greatest living Englishman', though and today's crop of minnow politicians do not bear comparison with a man who fought at Omdurman, was ambushed in the Boer War, brave enough to cross the floor of the Commons, correctly called the Munich appeasement, 'a total and unmitigated defeat', 'walked with destiny' in WW2, won another term as PM at the age of 77 and let's not forget those other talents of orator, artist, writer and even bricklayer! Above all else, however, he was a patriot. So was my

father-in-law. We played 'I vow to thee my country' and 'Jerusalem' at his funeral. Churchill would have nodded in approval.

Leaving Bladon, we needed a lunch stop and headed for Blenheim Palace. It seemed the right place to go. Impressive as Blenheim is and historic as it may be, a gift to John Churchill, the 1st Duke, from a grateful monarch, Queen Anne, for martial endeavours of an earlier era, this is not where I sense our greatest Englishman. That is back at Bladon, a quiet piece of England, where a man chose to be buried amongst his people, the last of our great orators, with a supreme command of English, who promised us nothing more than 'blood, toil, tears and sweat'. I salute both him and the men who fought for him, including my own father-in-law, passed away over three years now and still sadly missed. When will we see their like again?

References:

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