

By Fiona Sanderson

HENRIETTA SPENCER-CHURCHILL
AND ENGLISH COUNTRY HOUSES

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Lady Henrietta Spencer-Churchill, celebrated interior designer, spoke to Fiona Sanderson about her family seat, Blenheim Palace, and the true essence of English style and interiors.

What defines your own personal style?

In the home, I like comfort and practicality. My homes are not show houses as I don't want them – or me – to be on show when I entertain, or have family or friends to stay; they are a place to switch off (which is rarely achieved!) As I spend so much time travelling, it is critical to be organised and know where everything is and be able to shut the door and not worry. But I do love antiques and objects, and I am certainly not a minimalist!

What defines your style as an interior designer?

Classic Design with emphasis on respecting the style and architecture of the house, whilst ensuring practical use of the space and services and design that are suitable for the 21st Century.



What are the key characteristics of a British stately home?

Leaking roofs, draughty windows and damp! But all gracefully concealed. They are understated yet comfortable and sometimes with eclectic furnishings, which still make any visitor feel welcome! From an architectural point of view – usually large, grand but well-proportioned rooms, with beautiful architectural detail. Often, the setting is as important as the house so views from the inside out are picturesque and impressive.

How would you describe quintessentially British design? Does it exist?

It is understated yet elegant, often achieved by homes or furniture being handed down from one generation to another, thus retaining character. Any old home that has been over-modernised loses its character and once it has been stripped out, it is difficult to put back. My motto is "Retain And Restore," rather than "Rip Out And Replace."

What architectural qualities do you look for in a property? What can be added for maximum impact and value?

Good proportions, and good natural light. Depends on if the house is listed or not, as to what you can change or add – such as hardwood floors, hardwood polished mahogany doors, panelling (either wood or painted), cornices, and an elegant fire surround makes a nice focal point.



Who or what is your greatest influence?

I get my inspiration from old houses both in the UK and abroad, especially from an architectural standpoint. For details and furnishings, it often depends on my client's requirements. I also take inspiration from books, both old and new, of which I have a lot!

What is your greatest achievement/proudest moment?

The project I enjoyed the most and the one that gave me the biggest chance of being creative was a large new-build house in Scotland, which took about 3 years to design and complete, and I really felt that I had left a certain amount of my stamp on it! Hopefully, it will still be there in 300 years time and enjoyed. My proudest moment is seeing my 2 sons achieving great success in their chosen fields, which luckily is different to mine!

Favourite British artists, past and present?

John Singer Sargent and Alfred Munnings for past – I am not keen on contemporary art.

And your favourite British architects?

Many Georgian architects, mainly Palladian and Regency style, Sir William Chambers, William Kent, John Nash and Gibbs.



What led to the collaboration with Maitland Smith?

I carry out quite a lot of Interior Design projects in the USA and had wanted for some time to design a range of furniture and had talked to a few companies, but Maitland Smith seemed like the perfect match. They produce high quality products and their factory in the Philippines has talented craftsmen and the ability to create pieces using a variety of materials and techniques.

Tell us about your new book, *The Life of the House, How Rooms Evolve?*

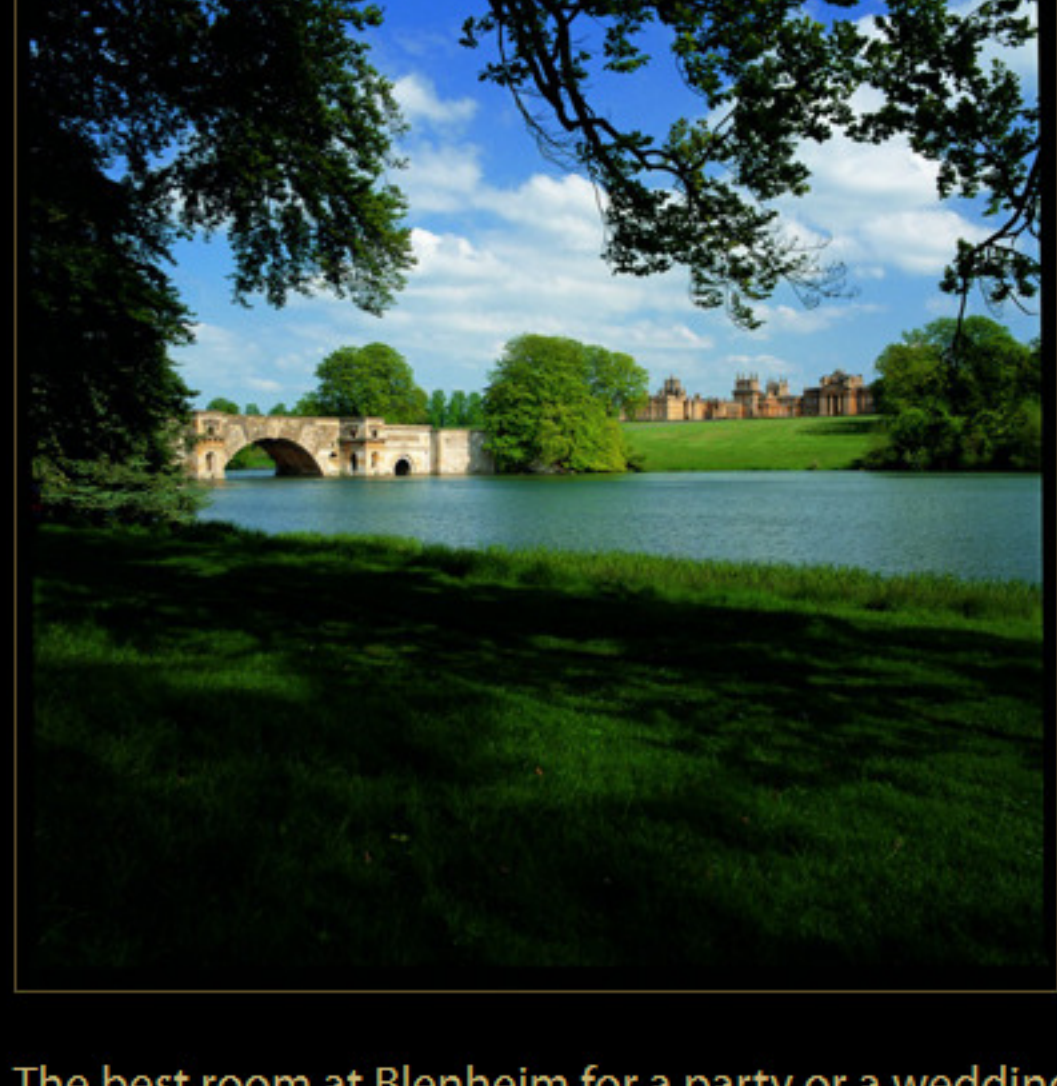
This came about as a result in my interest in how rooms and architecture have changed and evolved over the centuries, from not only an architectural point of view but also from a social history perspective, and advances in industry and technology.

You also have an interior design company in America – do you need to adapt the British style for an American audience?

I try not to, but inevitably you need to adapt to their lifestyles and the way in which the houses are built. Homes tend to be more open plan and less detailed architecturally, therefore the decoration plays a larger part than it does in the UK.

What do you love most about Blenheim Palace?

The roofs – you get an amazing perspective of the complexity of building a house of that size and quality, and really appreciate the work involved.



The best room at Blenheim for a party or a wedding?

That depends on the time of year and budget! The Orangery is beautiful, as you have direct access to the terrace which overlooks the Italian Gardens and South Lawn. Inside the house, the Long Library is perfect for dinner and can hold up to 300 guests, with drinks before in the Hall and Saloon. My favourite is the Saloon as we always have Christmas dinner there, so it brings back happy memories.

What was it like growing up surrounded by such beauty?

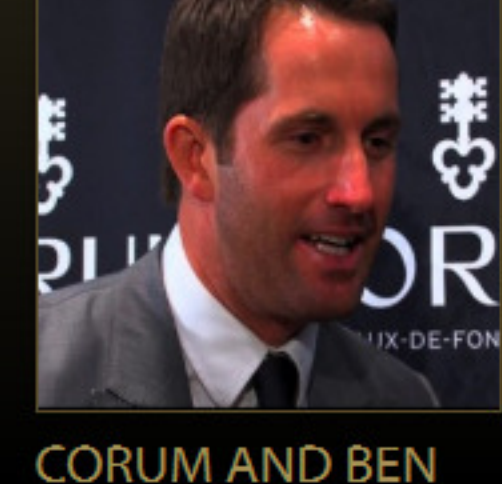
I was lucky enough to spend a lot of my childhood in many beautiful properties. I preferred the smaller Georgian properties as they were more welcoming. Blenheim is imposing and the house can be quite intimidating, although the private side is surprisingly welcoming and I particularly love the park. I guess being in these properties led to my interest and love of architecture and design.

What will you be working on in 2013?

Various properties abroad, including a large villa in Poland, an apartment in Vienna, and house in the Channel Islands. A variety of restoration projects in the UK and a new collection for Maitland Smith and a new rug collection for a US company. Possibly a new book too.

To see more of Henrietta's work, go to www.spencerchurchilldesigns.com.

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