

# Refining HISTORY

Henrietta Spencer-Churchill talks to **Oonagh Turner** about Georgian architecture, her classical style and the influence of growing up at Blenheim Palace



**T**he eldest daughter of the 11th Duke of Marlborough, Henrietta Spencer-Churchill has an understanding of classical English country house interiors few can match. Her family seat, Blenheim Palace, is regarded as one of the most significant Baroque houses in the country and was the birthplace and ancestral home of Winston Churchill.

Turning her hand to interiors, much like the 1st Duchess of Marlborough, Sarah Churchill, who had great influence in the interiors of the palace in the early 18th century, it's no surprise that her style is refined, elegant, and embraces the history of a home. "I love architecture, the historic houses, the antiques, the decoration," she says. "And I suppose I've had this drip-fed into me without really realising."

Spencer-Churchill studied at the Inchbald School of Design in Belgravia. "It made me appreciate the finer points of detail, it taught me draftsman skills. It was focused on design, not fabrics and colour. I absolutely loved it."

After Inchbald, her first job was working for Diana Hanbury, who ran her interiors

studio, The Tarrystone, from Surrey. Spencer-Churchill remembers her first day clearly. "She made me go to a flat in Pont Street and measure the windows for curtains. We hadn't been taught this and I must have been there for hours, measuring every single part of the window possible. She was typical old school! But I was thrown in at the deep end." Today, Woodstock Designs has just turned 40, and the design house remains as in demand as ever, working out of Spencer-Churchill's shop in Woodstock.

The pillars of her style are antiques, furniture, fabrics. "I'm a great collector, but I have far too much stuff," she says. "I have absolutely hundreds of pictures, prints, watercolours oils. I just buy what I like." Antiques, or pieces of furniture, she believes, give a focal point, perfect for a classical room. "I have this thing about making a composition in the room. You might have a lovely console table with a piece of art above it and then a pair of lamps flanking it – it's about thinking about sections of the room."

For wallpaper, Spencer-Churchill opts for Thibaut for patterned and Farrow & Ball for plain. For fabrics, it's GP & J Baker, Turnell & Gigon, and Tissus d'Hélène for more unusual prints. In terms of palette, the designer is drawn to blue. "I find it so peaceful, although I know a lot of people are afraid it. I think some people are often afraid of expressing their own self, but a house should express yourself."

Respecting the period of a house is of paramount importance to the designer. "I'm a great one for preserving the style, but also bringing it into the 21st century. You've got to be sympathetic. It drives me mad when someone rips out original features. It's about working with that rather than pulling it all apart."

Despite being surrounded by the



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opulence of Blenheim since aged 12, Spencer-Churchill's main architectural interest lies with the Georgian period. "It's my love. It's easy to live with and very refined," she says. "Within the Georgian style, I love the Regency period. It's those lovely, classical straight lines, the windows and proportions. It's simple. My philosophy is about letting that architecture speak for itself."

Back at Blenheim, Spencer-Churchill's favourite room is the Saloon, with its Louis Laguerre murals and Baroque features. "It conjures up memories of family Christmas dinners there." On the private side, it's 'The Grand Cabinet'. "It's full of family portraits and we use it for after dinner drinks or bridge. Needless to say, it's beautifully elegant in blue."

[spencerchurchilldesigns.com](http://spencerchurchilldesigns.com)

#### CLASSICAL STYLE

**Clockwise from top left:** Henrietta Spencer-Churchill. A London drawing room with chinoiserie panels that inspired the colour scheme; Entrance hall of a Baroque house with custom carved gilded pelmet; The kitchen of a new build house, painted in Spencer-Churchill's favourite shade of blue