

# ICOMOS

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES  
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES  
CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS  
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ ПО ВОПРОСАМ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕСТ  
WORLD HERITAGE LIST N° 425

## A) IDENTIFICATION

Nomination : Blenheim Palace and Park

Location : Oxfordshire

State Party : United Kingdom

Date : December 23, 1986

## B) ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That the proposed cultural property be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria II and IV.

## C) JUSTIFICATION

On August 13, 1704 John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough, with the help of Prince Eugène, won a decisive victory over the French and Bavarian troops at Blindheim, near Höchstädt. As an expression of the nation's gratitude Queen Anne bestowed on him the royal property of Woodstock, one of the oldest royal properties set in the heart of a forest, rich in game, 13 kms to the north west of Oxford.

Not so far from the site of the castle which, from Ethelred II (979-1016) to James II (1633-1701), was visited by a great number of kings, and which held Queen Elizabeth prisoner in 1554, a new palace of colossal dimensions was built between 1705 and 1722, as the engraved inscription on the facade of Flatstaff Lodge reminds us.

The palace commemorating this victory, whose name became anglicized as Blenheim, covers an area of 3 hectares. An initial donation of 24,000 pounds, which was confirmed by Parliament, enabled the first part of the work on this outstanding site to begin.

The direction of the work was entrusted to an ex-soldier named John Vanbrugh who was better known for his talents as a playwright than for his gifts as a builder. However, from the beginning he realized the need to collaborate with an experienced architect, Nicholas Hawksmoor in this case, a disciple of Wren, whose talent was already evident in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, Hampton Court and Whitehall.

The construction of Blenheim Palace, which was severely criticized by Voltaire who described it as "a great mass of stone with neither charm nor taste", was completed by the Duchess Sarah, in memory of her husband, but it is in no way a reduced model of Versailles, as were so many other palaces of the 18th century.

The main interest of this building is precisely the authenticity of its national character: indeed such elements as the military trophies which adorn the pediment above the portico, the Column of Victory, the decorative and figurative rhetoric of the tapestries and painted ceilings, all exalt the triumph of the English armies over the French.

The term "English baroque" has been used when speaking of Blenheim, but this ambiguous and inadequate expression only goes to prove the difficulty art historians have in defining this unclassifiable building. The symmetrical plan, with its classic-type spatial organization, is combined with an original elevation which, nevertheless, is not without reminiscences of the past: there is something anachronically defiant in the square towers which stand at the four corners of the main building with their distinct medieval influence. The complex structure of the upper floors is reminiscent of the Elizabethan period. The eclecticism of Vanbrugh, a theatrical taste for scenographic effects which result from the heterogeneous architectural forms used, make Blenheim a pre-Romantic monument whose historical importance cannot be underestimated.

The innovative character of the Palace (less apparent in the luxurious apartments and ceremonial rooms) is accentuated by the conception of the park whose original lay-out dates back to Vanbrugh who regulated the course of the Glyme and created the Great Bridge, a veritable Palladio-style viaduct, which was never completed (it should have been crowned with towers and arcades). However, it was more especially during the period between 1764 and 1774 that "Capability" Brown, one of the most famous English landscape gardeners, turned this classical park into a wonderful artificial landscape by the creation of two lakes which lie on either side of the bridge. During the course of the second half of the 18th century, Gothic style (High Lodge and Park Farm in 1768) or Neo-Gothic style buildings (William Chambers' Temple of Diana, 1772-1773; John Yenn's Temple of Health, 1789) were built.

In what remains of the family property of the Dukes of Marlborough (the room in the Palace where Winston Churchill was born in 1874 can be visited) the evolution of the park has not been held back by conservation measures and its present state owes much to the transformations which were undertaken by the French landscape architect, Achille Duchêne, between 1908 and 1930 on behalf of the 9th Duke. These transformations have notably lessened the historical interest of the property which, nevertheless, retains its remarkable character.

ICOMOS is very much in favor of including Blenheim Palace on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria II and IV.

- **Criterion II.** By their refusal of the French models of classicism, the Palace and Park illustrate the beginnings of the

English Romantic movement which was characterized by the eclecticism of its inspiration, its return to national sources and its love of nature. The influence of Blenheim on the architecture and the organization of space in the 18th and 19th centuries was greatly felt both in England and abroad.

- Criterion IV. Built by the nation to honor one of its heroes, Blenheim is, above all, the home of an English aristocrat, the 1st Duke of Marlborough, who was also Prince of the Germanic Holy Roman Empire, as we are reminded in the decoration of the Great Drawing Room by Louis Laguerre (1719-1720).

In virtue of this criterion, just like the Residence of Würzburg (included in 1981), and the castles of Augustusburg and Falkenlust in Brühl (included in 1984), Blenheim is typical of 18th-century European princely residences, a category which is still under-represented on the World Heritage List.

ICOMOS, May 1987