

Letters of Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, on the Column of Victory at Blenheim

By ANGELA GREEN

THE letters which are printed below were written by Sarah Churchill to the Oxford mason, William Townesend, between 1727 and 1731, when he was employed on work at Blenheim, principally on the Column of Victory, with an additional letter of 1732. Townesend's partner, Bartholomew Peisley, died in August 1727; the first letter, written in April 1727, does not mention him and it is possible that he was no longer working. William Townesend's grand-daughter, Mary, married the Reverend Thomas Stevens, Rector of Bradfield in Berkshire and grandfather of the founder of Bradfield College. These letters were recently placed in the Berkshire Record Office at Reading by a descendant, Mrs. Ward, with whose permission they are now printed. Other letters to Townesend from Sarah Churchill were published in the *Transactions* of the Birmingham and Midland Institute (1884-85) in 1887, by W. J. Churchill as 'Some Unpublished Letters of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, relating to the Building of Blenheim Palace'. Four of those letters, written in 1730, form part of the same series of instructions on the lettering and erection of the Column as the letters of that year now printed.

The Column of Victory was erected under the direction of Lord Herbert. The first of these letters is concerned with his supervision of the Column itself while the later letters deal with the marble blocks forming the dado on the four sides of the base, on which the inscriptions were carved.

The letters are not in Sarah Churchill's hand, though signed by her; in the case of the seventh the postscript is in her own hand. Her habit of using an amanuensis has no doubt contributed to the impression which the letters convey of the spoken rather than the written word.

Dating is Old Style and has been left as written. The Berkshire Record Office reference number of each letter has been given in a footnote. Punctuation has been slightly altered and modernized in a few places.

ANGELA GREEN

Mr. Townesend

April 4, 1727¹

I have this day receiv'd a Letter from my Lord Herbert, who says it is absolutely necessary for you to send him a Section of the Pillar & Pedestal according to the Measures propos'd in the Contract. To explain this throughly [sic], my Lord does not mean one with only the Gross Measures; but what is requir'd, is, that every course of Stones, together with the Binding Stones, may there appear answerable to the scale. This he desires you would do immediately, & before you begin the Pillar.

I hope I shall soon have a Proposal from you concerning the Marble Tomb.²
I am

Your Friend
& Servant
S. Marlborough

Endorsed: For

Mr Townesend
Mason at Oxford

by way of London
Free
Sunderland.

Jan. 31. 1727³

I give you many Thanks for your Letter, & your Directions for making the Inscription. I would by no means give you the Trouble of coming to Town sooner than you like yourself, for I am not well, & you have given me such an exact Account, that there is no occasion for your coming sooner than your own Occasions call you. I was pleas'd at your Fancy in writing the Letters, & am

Your Friend &
humble Servant
S. Marlborough

Endorsed: For

Mr Townesend
Mason at
Oxford.

July 6. 1729⁴

I have been in search of marble ever since I saw you & am now promis'd to have it to my Satisfaction. I send you the Plan of the Dado, which shews the Sizes of the marble & the manner in which the Pieces are to be put together, which I am told is necessary for Strength. I hope to send the marble soon to Oxford,

¹ Berkshire Record Office: D/ESv(B) F 30/1.

² The chapel tomb, by Rysbrack, was under discussion for several years before work was actually started on it, as Mr. David Green has kindly told me.

³ D/ESv(B) F 30/2.

⁴ D/ESv(B) F 30/3.

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and I desire you would by the first opportunity return me the Plan, & let me have your opinion of it. I am

Your Friend &
humble Servant
S. Marlborough

The superficials of the Dado of the Pedestal is 710 feet, but allowing an Inch for the Grooving the Joyns together, will make 733 feet superficial of Statuary Slab, 3 Inches thick.

The Reason for making the marble of different Breadths, is, because the Breadths of the Blocks of marble differ very much, & some of the best Statuary is in the narrow Blocks.⁵

S.

Endorsed: For

M^r Townesend
Mason in
Oxford.

Oct. 24. 1729⁶

S^r.

I have receiv'd a Letter that the marble for one Face was sent on Friday last to your Brother⁷ and I hope he has sent it to you & that you will proceed upon it as fast as 'tis possible. I am assured that I shall have the other three Faces, which will be better marble, very soon. But one will serve to begin with. I am

you[r] Friend &
humble Servant
S. Marlborough

Endorsed: For M^r Townesend
at

Mason
Oxford.

Frk.
Manchester.⁸

The next letter in this collection follows two, of 13th and 16th April 1730 respectively, which were published in 1887.⁹ That of 16th April refers to a copy of the Act of Parliament which Townesend had sent for approval and to the intention to write to him again before he required the copy to work from.

⁵ The marble blocks are arranged in rows of two or three on each of the four sides of the dado, with a total of ten blocks on each side.

⁶ D/ESv(B) F 30/4.

⁷ John Townesend (d. 1742). He worked in London, where his mason's yard was at St. Paul's Wharf; see R. Gunnis, *Dictionary of British Sculptors*, (London, 1953), 398.

⁸ The Duke of Manchester, who signed the frank, was husband of Sarah Churchill's granddaughter, Isabella Montagu.

⁹ *Transactions of the Birmingham and Midland Institute* (1884-85), pp. 12-13.

ANGELA GREEN

April 21. 1730¹⁰

I give you many Thanks for your Letter & Explanation concerning the Stones, which I understand now very well, & am very glad to find that you are prepared for writing the third Act of Parliament,¹¹ which I now send you, & desire to have it done according to the Instructions & alterations made upon it by Mr. Stephens. That Act of Parliament I like better than any, and therefore think it very material to have the Letters as big as they can be, I mean that the Lines should not be so close together as to make it difficult to read. What alterations I have made in the Act, as you sent it me, will gain Room enough to make it in the manner that I shall like. In some of the Lines you'll observe the Words are very much huddled together, and therefore I desire you'll look the whole carefully over, before you write any thing upon the Marble, & order the Lines differently where there is occasion, which may very safely be done, without taking up any more Room, I mean without making any more Lines. And besides the reasons I have given, I really like it better to have it without those Breaks. I beg of you to make all the Haste you can possibly in this, & likewise to prepare the Marble, as far as you have it, for the second Face. I am promis'd to have ready very soon the Marble that is wanting for the fourth Face. To compleat the whole four Faces there requires to be sent to you twelve Stones, which you shall have as soon as 'tis possible. I desire you would let me know when the Letters will be writ upon the third Face, that I may send Mr. Stephens before they are cut. And as soon as they are perfected you may put up the first & the third, and go on as fast as you can with preparing what you have. For I am under the greatest Impatience to have the whole finish'd; who am

Your Friend &
humble Servant
S. Marlborough

I don't send the Copy of the Act which you writ the other from, because your own is so thoroughly [sic] corrected.

You can't mistake how the words at the Bottom are to come in, which the two Stars direct.

There is no endorsement on this letter; probably it was enclosed in a wrapper with the copy of the Act.

The next letter which survives is dated nearly four months later.

Tunbridge Wells
August 15th. 1730¹²

It was with a great deal of Satisfaction that I receiv'd your's concerning the Marble and am very glad that you like it. And I hope you won't loose one Minute's

¹⁰ D/ESv(B) F 30/5.

¹¹ The third Act must be that of 1706 which entailed the Honour, manor and park of Woodstock and also Blenheim House on the Duke of Marlborough's descendants. Extracts from it are carved on the west face of the dado, with extracts from another Act of the same year, settling a pension on the Duke. The east and north faces are inscribed with abstracts of the Acts of 1704 and the south face with Lord Bolingbroke's panegyric.

¹² DE/Sv(B) F 30/6.

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time upon a Supposition that I may alter the Inscription, for I have try'd to do it, but find 'tis impossible to do it better than as you have it. I shou'd be extreme glad if you wou'd let me know, when you think the two remaining Inscriptions will be ready for Mr. Stephens's Correction. And likewise after that is done, how long 'twill be, before I may have the Satisfaction of seeing them upon the Pillar. I am very sincerely,

Your Friend and
humble Servant
S. Marlborough

Endorsed: For
 M^r Townsend
 Mason at Oxford
 by London.

The next letter follows two of those printed in the *Transactions*¹³ and written on the 26th and 30th October 1730, on the words of the inscriptions, which were presumably being cut at Oxford and carried to Blenheim when finished. It had been expected that this would be even earlier than October, which may explain the precipitancy with which Townesend appears to have acted in at last sending the marble in unsuitable weather.

Jan. 24. 1730.¹⁴

Mr. Clarke has told me that all the Marble is gone to Blenheim, which I should have been extremely pleas'd to have heard, if it were not for the apprehensions that every thing which has been put up, or may be put up, in such weather as this, will infallibly tumble down in a little time. 'Twould be a great Satisfaction to me to hear from you by the first opportunity upon this matter; who am

Your Friend &
humble Servant
S. Marlborough

Every body tells me that the marble must not be put up till tis certain that there can be no frost, & a building for the queen¹⁵ is deferrd for that reason.¹⁶

Endorsed: For M^r. Townesend
 Mason at Oxford
 Free
 Ste: Fox¹⁷

¹³ pp. 13-14.

¹⁴ D/ESv(B) F 30/7.

¹⁵ I have been unable to find a building which would fit this description.

¹⁶ This postscript is in Sarah Churchill's hand.

¹⁷ The frank was signed by Stephen Fox, a Member of Parliament, later Earl of Ilchester.

ANGELA GREEN

Feb. 2. 1730¹⁸

All the People that ever I talk'd to upon setting the Marble Faces upon the Pillar, being positively of the opinion that none of the Stones ought to have been set in frosty weather, I am very far from having any Satisfaction in your Letter, & think it is very probable for me to live long enough to see all this Inscription burst & broken down, which is a most grievous Thing to think of. And I take it for granted that the Stones have been put up in wrong Weather; otherwise you would not have taken so much Pains to give me Reasons for doing it; it would have been enough to have said, they were not put up in the Frost. You seem to think that the Iron Cramps are a great Security, as no doubt of it they are; but in a Pillar that was design'd to have all the care taken in every Particular to make it as durable as possible, surely there never was so strange a thing heard of as to choose those few Days in a whole year to put up such a Work that all People think dangerous, if not certain, to receive Prejudice by it. And as this Pillar cannot be seen by any body hardly sooner than the Spring, it is inexcusable in you to have given me so much unnecessary uneasiness as this will be to

your humble Servant
S. Marlborough

Endorsed: For

Mason Mr. Townesend
at
Oxford.

Feb. 23. 1730¹⁹

I have been ill a great while, & am but just now able to say any thing in answer to yours of the 9th of February. I could not see your Brother; nor would it have been any Satisfaction to me if I had, concerning the Marble having receiv'd no Prejudice from being fix'd in the wrong Season of Weather, which nothing but Time & Experience can prove. And, tho', for ought I know, there is a possibility of doing such work without being damaged, by some extraordinary care, which work-men are not very apt to take, surely there could be nothing more imprudent than to do that work when there was but a Possibility of any Prejudice coming to it. And as it is of no use now to have the Pillar finish'd a Month or six weeks sooner or later, I think what you mention of running the Crevices of the upper Course with Plaster between the Marble & Free-Stone, should not be done till there is no possibility of having any Frost. It will be time enough when you come to Town to talk further of the Repairs wanting at Blenheim. I am

S^r

your humble Servant
S. Marlborough

I²⁰ have been told that there is Gravel wanted in several Places about Blenheim, & that there is a great deal of Gravel that was once brought with a Design to finish

¹⁸ D/ESv(B) F 30/8.

¹⁹ D/ESv(B) F 30/9.

²⁰ Postscript to the letter of 23rd February 1730/1.

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the walk from the Porter's Lodge to the wall by the Cottage, where we once design'd to make a way into the Park, & laid down there Load-thick; which, as I never intend to come into the Park that way, will now be of no use. For it is no matter to have the Gravel-walk continue further than it is at present, which, as I remember, turns up to S^r Robert Cocks's House. There is, as I remember, stones laid quite up to the Park Wall where the Cottage stands. But there need be nothing done to that more than is necessary to make the Grass grow, & not to look ugly & unfinish'd, as I think it does now. Pray let me have your opinion of this matter.

Endorsed:

For
Mr. Townesend
Mason in
Oxford
Frk.
Manchester.²¹

The last of these letters was written some eighteen months later, when Townesend was probably engaged on other work, on Oxford colleges.²² The chimney-pieces in the Bow Window Room and the bedroom were by Grinling Gibbons.²³

Marlborough House October the
2d. 1732²⁴

Mr. Townsend,

You wou'd oblige me very much, if you wou'd go Yourself to Blenheim House and make me a Drawing very exact of the Chimney-piece that is in the Bow-Window Room and make Figures upon every part of it, that I may easily see how thick the Marble is in every part.

I desire you wou'd likewise send me an exact Plan of the Chimney-piece in my Bed-Chamber some part of which is Fluted, what I call my Bed-Chamber is the next Room to the Bow-Window Room and has a bl[ue?] Damask Bed in it.

Pray let me have these Plans as soon as you [can]²⁵ by the Post and I have Enclos'd Franks for them. I hope you have finish'd and well all that Mr. Armstrong²⁷ directed. I am,

Your Friend and
humble Servant
S. Marlborough.

Endorsed: For

Mr Townsend
Mason at
Oxford.

²¹ See note 8.

²² H. M. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of English Architects* (London, 1954), 620, etc.

²³ D. Green, *Blenheim Palace* (London, 1951), 283. Both are illustrated in photographs on p. 113.

²⁴ D/ESv(B) F30/10.

²⁵ The letter is torn at this point.

²⁶ Ditto.

²⁷ Col. John Armstrong, who had been Marlborough's Chief Engineer. Soon after Marlborough's death in 1722 the Duchess called in Armstrong to plan canals and a cascade and these were made by William Townesend and his partner, Bartholomew Peisley junior (note by Mr. D. Green).