



CHURCHILL AT LULLENDEN

Winston Churchill had been appointed as First Lord of the Admiralty in September 1911. He held this position until May 1915 when he was forced to resign after the disastrous campaign in the Dardanelles and Gallipoli, which he had championed. Prime Minister Asquith then appointed him to the relatively powerless position as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. His unpopularity in government circles combined with scathing criticism of the Dardanelles Commission of Enquiry forced him to resign this position in November 1915. Consigned to the political wilderness, and despite still being an M.P., he decided to seek redemption by serving at the Front.

He travelled to France on 18th November to re-join the Oxfordshire Hussars yeomanry division as a Major, but he never served with them. On arriving in France he was attached to the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadiers, then in training, to familiarise himself with trench warfare. On New Year's Day 1916 he was transferred to the 6th Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers as their Lieutenant Colonel. He commanded the battalion in the trenches near Ploegsteert in Belgium from 27th January to 6th March. They were then moved into reserve and he was able to take some leave back in England. He was destined never to return to the Front. Parliamentary business kept him in London until early May at which time the depleted 6th and 7th Battalions of the Royal Scots Fusiliers were merged. The Colonel of the 7th Battalion was the more senior and thus Churchill was surplus to requirements. He took this opportunity to return to full time politics.

The Churchills had lived in number of different town houses since their marriage in September 1908 but they felt that the properties lacked something, land. Clementine, having often stayed with friends and family on their country estates, especially wanted a country house of her own, with a garden. The search for a country house started in Autumn 1916 through Lofts and Warner. They identified Lullenden in Dormansland; although it is possible that his attention was first drawn to the property by Herbert Spender-Clay, whose own Ford Manor estate abuts it. Churchill and Spender-Clay were contemporaries at Sandhurst and, as young officer-cadets, had spent weekends together at Lingfield races and at Ford Manor.



A view of Lullenden about 1910

Lullenden was an ancient timber framed building then owned by Percy Sharman, a music teacher and professional violinist, who was selling the house because his wife suffered from asthma and found the place unhealthy. It had the date 1694 carved on one of the fireplaces, but was obviously much older, probably fifteenth or even fourteenth century. It had a large dining room, a smaller dining room, a good sized drawing-room, a glorious hall with a crown post and double height ceiling, a study, eleven bedrooms, three bathrooms and a capacious barn. There was six acres of garden, fourteen acres of woodland, sixteen acres of arable land and forty acres of pasture and rough grazing. The farm offered rough shooting for pheasant and partridge. It was secluded and private; lying down a winding drive with the house was invisible from the nearby lane. It also had a small lodge and two cottages. There was no mains water or electricity.



The garden in the 1920's

The asking price for the property was £5,500 and a further £1,500 for Lullenden Lodge. The purchase was funded by the Trustees of Lord Randolph Churchill's estate and a ten year mortgage and was completed in February 1917. The lease was in Clementine's name although they were jointly responsible for the ground rent. In April 1917 a tennis court was contemplated and a mains water line was installed.

In order to make progress on improving the land Churchill also arranged to hire three German prisoners (called Nicholas, Bernhein and Rosenburg) for four months at 25/- a week on drainage work and 'trenching a field for potatoes'. However, they were soon removed as they proved to be ineffective and neighbours objected to the presence of Germans in the village. He was unsuccessful in his attempts to employ local labour and had to make do with Robert Leigh, a very old and crippled man, and two boys.

Churchill was appointed a Minister of Munitions in late July 1917. This resulted in him spending considerable amount of time in France and allowed him to observe, at the Battle of Cambrai in November, the first use of the tanks he had so strongly championed.

A few days later the Surrey Mirror published the following report "The new Minister of Munitions, Mr. Winston Churchill, had a very narrow escape in a somewhat serious motoring accident which happened Monday, August Bank Holiday. Together with his wife, Winston Churchill left his residence, Lullenden, Dormansland, in his motor brougham, with the intention of proceeding to London. The chauffeur was driving. On reaching the four cross roads, near The Crossways, the residence of Dr. Davey Walker, it appears that another private motor car approached from the "blind" turning, and struck Mr. Churchill's car full broadside on with such violent force- that the vehicle was thrown over on its side. Fortunately, the brougham was closed and the cushions protected both Mr. and Mrs. Churchill, who, except for being rather badly shaken, did not suffer injury. The chauffeur was slightly hurt, but the car much damaged. The occupants of the other colliding car also escaped injury- As soon as they could obtain another car Mr. and Mrs. Churchill resumed their journey and the damaged car was subsequently removed on a lorry. The scene the accident is a very dangerous spot, as there a 'blind' road leading to the crossing, and it is practically impossible for anyone driving over the other road to see if another vehicle coming. There have been many narrow escapes of mishaps. From time to time representations have been made with a view to inducing the Automobile Association to put up one their special warning notices, but to the present without success. Now that well-known member of the Government has had such a narrow escape perhaps some steps will be taken in the matter.

In February 1918 Lullenden was inspected by the Godstone District War Agricultural Committee, who were very critical of the state of the land. This resulted in Churchill receiving a demand from James Murray, Chairman of the Surrey War Agricultural Committee, that 11.755 acres in two fields be broken up and cultivated properly as arable land with essential food crops. Churchill declared that he was willing to comply but was unable to find appropriate employees, either labourers or further prisoners of war. Eventually, through his government contacts, he was able to obtain soldiers from the British Army. These were members of the Agricultural Companies formed of soldiers who were not fit to serve overseas. Five men (Privates R.S Hunt, W.G. Fielder, A.B. Ward, F.J. Morbey and J. Holt) under the command of Capt. Halliwell Hollis were sent to work for Churchill at Lullenden at the end of April 1918. They built a cowshed and pigsty, and allowed ten bullocks, a horse and cart and two sows to be purchased.

The horse and cart were essential for transporting coal and other goods from Lingfield station. The horse was old war horse that had served in France. One day, when being driven by Clementine, it took fright on seeing a steam roller. Clementine thought that it may have mistaken it for a German tank because it charged. The horse was unhurt but the cart and Clementine's knee were damaged.

At this stage Churchill was living at the Ministry of Munitions returning to Lullenden at the weekend, when he was not in France. His brother's wife, Goonie, had moved to Lullenden with her sons, Johnny and Peregrine. The elder children were taken to school in Dormansland by pony and trap as Churchill worried about the danger on the road, what he called 'the motor car tyranny'.

In the immediate aftermath of the armistice Churchill was appointed a Minister of War and Air in the newly elected government.

By the autumn of 1918 the workforce had been strengthened by the addition of more prisoners of war, despite the unease of neighbours. Their main task was to improve the fencing under supervision of British soldiers. Despite this staffing continued to be a headache until Robert Leigh was replaced by Jeffrey in March 1919. However Churchill was finding the cost of maintaining the property excessive, particularly as he and Clementine were rarely there due to other commitments. This led him consider to consider disposing of the property.

In March 1919 Ian Hamilton and his wife visited Lullenden for lunch. They were in the process of looking for a country residence and found Lullenden worthy of serious consideration. Ian Hamilton wrote to Churchill offering to rent the property for a year but Churchill replied that he thought it should be for a minimum of three years. Hamilton was concerned about the financial commitment involved in renting for three years or the outright purchase of the property. Meanwhile his wife, after further visits, had grown fond of the property and wanted to proceed with its purchase. Hamilton told his wife that he would make an offer of £10,000 for the property including all the livestock. His wife took him at his word and proceeded to conclude a deal with Clementine, without informing her husband. The Churchills finally left Lullenden on 1st November 1919.



Photograph of the Churchills moving out from Lady Hamilton's diary. The painting is the Sir John Lavery portrait of Winston in uniform now hanging in Chartwell.

Lullenden was not the only property in the RH7 area owned by Churchill. In June 1955 he purchased a stud at Newchapel where he kept his racehorses. He expanded the stud purchasing Laylands Farm, an adjacent property, in 1963 and then in January 1964 a small adjacent paddock. His final property purchase, in March 1964, was also in the RH7; the purchase of 23 Baker's Lane for staff accommodation.

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Source:

Churchill & Chartwell – The Untold Story of Churchill's Houses and Gardens by Stefan Buczacki

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