

When the Moon Was High

Churchill's Wartime Visits to Ditchley Park

By Mike Montagu

The trigger that led to Prime Minister Winston Churchill's use of Ditchley Park as an alternative weekend retreat to Chequers between late 1940 and autumn 1942 was a visit to Germany in 1934 by Ronald Tree, a Conservative MP and Ditchley's new owner. Tree travelled to Germany on his own initiative only weeks before the Night of the Long Knives (Hitler's elimination of the Brownshirts) and returned sufficiently alarmed and appalled by Nazism and the belligerent nature of the country to spur him into joining the anti-appeasement faction of the Conservative Party in Parliament. Primarily led by Churchill, the group grew to include Anthony Eden. Whilst Tree notes in his memoirs that he was not close to either figure, his own new alignment did bring him into their sphere, particularly regarding Eden, who became a frequent house guest of Ronnie and his wife Nancy. And so Ditchley would become an occasional but important part of the most critical phase of Churchill's steering of wartime strategy.

Churchill made one weekend visit to Ditchley as the Trees' guest before the war, but very little is known of the misdated

(or lost) weekend Churchill spent there just sixteen months before Germany invaded Poland. The house party group is captured in a photograph in the Trees' scrapbook, but is wrongly dated, an error only recently exposed by Ditchley staff obtaining the couple's guest book, which reveals the correct dates to have been 7–9 May 1938. The specific purpose of the weekend visit is not recorded, but the presence of Eden (Foreign Secretary until his resignation three months previously) points to a gathering at least partly political in nature. The inclusion of Brendan Bracken, Churchill's protégé and a future member of his Cabinet, makes this even more likely. The other guests included Viscounts Gage and Erne, both Lords-in-Waiting to King George VI. Gage was also a government whip in the Lords. They might have been invited to provide insight on sentiment towards rearmament versus appeasement at the Palace and in the upper chamber. In any case, the war came.

As the Blitz intensified in the second half of 1940, the Prime Minister's official country residence at Chequers was thought too vulnerable from the air, especially when the moon was full. When a bomb landed

near the house in October on the same night that Churchill's daughter-in-law Pamela went into labour with her only child, matters were brought to a head. A new weekend retreat had to be found. Pressure, particularly from the Service Chiefs of Staff, was brought to bear to select alternative accommodation for the Prime Minister on weekends "when the moon was high." Whilst a house in Worcestershire had been allocated previously, the convenience of Ditchley, with its relative proximity to London, comfort, beautiful setting, and generous hospitality, persuaded Churchill to opt for the latter. Despite its high-society profile before the war—a thousand guests had once been hosted at the famous Red and White Ball in June 1937—Ditchley's physical location was discreet and not easily accessed.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Thus, it came to pass that in early November 1940, Tree was ambushed in the House of Commons by a prime ministerial aide and whisked to Churchill's private office to be informed of the PM's intention—articulated as a request—to spend the coming weekend at Ditchley. A military despatch rider carried a



ABOVE

Ditchley Park in Oxfordshire; Image: www.ditchley.com

message to Nancy that she would be hosting an important guest and accompanying staff before the week is out. She only learned the principal guest's identity when the Prime Minister's car pulled into the circular drive at the front of the house.

That inaugural weekend established the tempo and structure of the majority of

Churchill's remaining eleven weekends at Ditchley, which only came to an end once the air threat from the Luftwaffe had waned. Quite unlike Eleanor Roosevelt, Nancy personally found Churchill to be a very easy guest.¹ While weekends away from London afforded essential relaxation from the pressures of office, however, the War Cabinet

still had to function and react to events. Time had to be found for correspondence, including with US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and General Secretary of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin, as well as drafting speeches. All this took place while the house would be full of staff, senior officials, and a number of social guests.

The success of this first visit was reflected in Churchill's keenness to return the following weekend: "high moon or no high moon."² His second arrival at Ditchley, however, was delayed due to his reading in the car of an intelligence alert of a major air raid that evening, which prompted him to turn back to London—the assumed target. In fact, the raid on the night of the 14th and 15th of November proved to be on Coventry, where Nancy Tree was one of the first to arrive on the scene early on the 15th, with the YMCA mobile canteens she sponsored providing refreshments to victims, volunteers, and the emergency services. On her return the following day, Churchill, by then at Ditchley, questioned at length his weary and grimy hostess on what she had seen.³

A Typical Stay

Weekends mostly began with the Prime Minister's arrival late Friday afternoon in time for a cup of tea or large whiskey-soda in the library before a lie-down ahead of dinner. Churchill was easy to please regarding food and drink, including his particular taste for Pol Roger champagne.⁴ Nancy notes that Friday evenings were always interesting because the party would often be small and more intimate, and conversation would be more casual and less about the war and affairs of state.⁵ Churchill's wife Clementine joined him at Chequers for all but one weekend—her absence pointedly avoiding an unwelcome, self-invited guest, Sir Samuel Hoare,

a leading appeaser before the war and then serving an unofficial exile as Ambassador to Spain. The Churchills' youngest daughter Mary was also present most weekends.

Churchill usually rose between 8 and 9 am but would not leave his room (always the Yellow Room, now Bedroom 4) until noon. After a large breakfast, he perused the newspapers before working on his boxes from his bed (a replica sits in the room today) with a secretary in attendance.⁶ He would then lunch downstairs, lingering at the table, if in a good mood, and talking into the afternoon, before working with his Private Secretary in Nancy's sitting room (then the Chinese Room, now the Tapestry Room). Around 5 pm, Churchill would retire for a nap and emerge for dinner at about 8:30. If delayed, he would send a message to start without him. There would usually be twelve to fourteen people for Saturday dinners, with Fridays and Sundays composed of more intimate gatherings.⁷

Whilst the Churchills decided the guest list (the Trees' only condition governing his use of Ditchley) Nancy Tree always placed the guests, with Churchill on her right and any guest of special interest, such as key Roosevelt envoy Harry Hopkins in January 1941, within immediate conversational reach. Occasionally, social guests whom Churchill liked were included in the Saturday evening gatherings.⁸ At times these included Freda Dudley Ward (mistress of the

Prince of Wales before he met Mrs. Simpson) and Daphne Straight (daughter of the Earl of Winchilsea and married into one of America's richest families). An eighteenth-century Kneller portrait of the Countess Winchilsea and Nottingham hangs in one of Ditchley's formal drawing rooms. At dinner Churchill's mood tended to reflect the latest reports; bad news would result in his barely saying a word, but Ronald Tree noted that even in a good mood he could be hard to talk to.⁹

After dinner, Churchill and the male guests would sit for a long time over brandy and then rejoin the ladies at around 10 or 10:30 pm, the main conversation really got started. On many weekends, however, this was interrupted for a film (or two) in the library. To these screenings, the Prime Minister sometimes invited his Marlborough cousins from nearby Blenheim Palace. Any particularly important discussions that arose would be taken to the Chinese Room (now the Tapestry Room) for twenty to thirty minutes, but Churchill would then return to the library for further casual conversation and imbibing. The ladies would gradually retire, and the men would usually get to bed around 2 am. This could easily be later though, as happened when Hopkins was being wined and dined along with a diet of Churchillian grandiloquence to impress upon him Britain's desperate need for American support in the war.¹⁰

Weekends tended to conclude with Sunday being a repetition of Saturday, albeit with some change in dinner guests, and with Churchill returning to London the following morning in time for the afternoon Cabinet meeting at No. 10.

The Guests

Ditchley accommodated many guests over the two years, the most significant and important being the aforementioned Hopkins (a polar opposite in character to Churchill), who made his first visit in January 1941. Additionally, favoured staff and key War Cabinet members would frequently be in attendance, including Brendan Bracken, Jock Colville, Anthony Eden, Duff Cooper, Charles Portal (Chief of the Air Staff), General “Pug” Ismay (chief military assistant to Churchill), and Oliver Lyttleton (President of the Board of Trade), as well as Frederick Lindemann, known as the “Prof,” the Prime Minister’s personal friend and scientific adviser.¹¹

Duff Cooper was a favourite of Churchill’s, and close to the Trees, despite his limited success as Minister of Information, a role he assumed in 1940 with Ronald as his PPS. As Tree had done in 1934, Duff Cooper came to realise the threat posed by the Nazis during a trip to Germany with his wife in 1933. He subsequently resigned as First Lord of the Admiralty in September 1938 after the Munich capitulation.¹² Under Prime Ministers Baldwin and Chamberlain, Cooper fought

for rearmament, support for which was a common thread with Churchill’s favourites.

Hastings “Pug” Ismay was a key figure with a “personal and official connection” to Churchill.¹³ Yet, despite Nancy Tree recalling that Ismay was often a guest, he does not appear in the photographs in the Trees’ scrapbook or the pages in the end section containing signatures of each weekend’s guests (which do include those of David Niven and Nancy’s cousin, the actress and comedienne Joyce Grenfell) which were photocopied from the visitors’ book.¹⁴ Ismay was married to a cousin of Ronald’s and had become a close friend of the Trees over the years. A possible reason for his absence from the visitors’ book was that he, like other senior military personnel, likely called on the Prime Minister as circumstances demanded rather than stayed over as a weekend house guest.

One of the most significant figures who fails to feature in the Trees’ scrapbook is John “Gil” Winant, successor to the hostile and unpopular Joseph Kennedy as American Ambassador to the United Kingdom from March 1941 to April 1946. Throughout his time in the UK, Winant, an old friend and political associate of Averell Harriman, was frequently invited to Chequers and Ditchley, often alongside the latter, who, having been sent to London in tandem with Hopkins with the injunction from Roosevelt to “recommend everything we can do, short of war, to keep the British Isles afloat,” played

a leading role in setting up the Lend-Lease program, which Congress created in March 1941. Both men had an intimate impact on the Churchill family.

Winant (unhappily married) conducted an affair with the Prime Minister’s daughter Sarah and improbably developed a close friendship with Clemmie. At the same time, Harriman (also married) had a significant romance with the Churchill’s daughter-in-law Pamela, who was then just twenty and the same age as her lover’s daughter.¹⁵ Many years later Pamela and Harriman were married. Whether Winston or Clemmie ever knew of or suspected these liaisons has remained open to speculation, but their son Randolph Churchill certainly believed his parents knew about the relationship his wife Pamela had with Harriman and challenged them openly on it. In her recently published biography of Pamela, Sonia Purnell has little doubt on the matter.¹⁶ Furthermore, Purnell’s earlier biography of Clementine asserts that Sarah’s affair with Winant was an open secret in Churchill circles.¹⁷

Other guests not mentioned in the Trees’ scrapbook included various female socialites. Mrs Dorothea Head, wife of an MP as well as a descendant of the fourth Duke of Marlborough and daughter of the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, was one such omission. Due to Ronnie’s appointment in the Ministry of Information, American journalists such as Edward Murrow (for a time another

DITCHLEY PARK 1940-1942

WINSTON CHURCHILL & J. FORRESTAL, SECRETARY OF U.S. NAVY
WITH OFFICER & GUARD OF OXON & BUCKS REGIMENT .
[THE TROOPS SLEPT IN THE WING OF THE CHAPEL] .

ABOVE

Image: Ditchley Park Archives

of Pamela's lovers), Mary Welsh (future wife of Ernest Hemingway), Helen Kirkpatrick (of the *Chicago Evening News* and a London neighbour of the Trees), and Ben Robertson also often visited Ditchley, although not all of them crossed paths there with Churchill.¹⁸

Dropping In

An unscheduled guest in May 1941 contributed to what became perhaps the most dramatic Ditchley weekend of all. The drama already included the abrupt end of Mary Churchill's first engagement in the face of Clemmie's opposition to her marrying so young. She was

just eighteen at the time. The Prime Minister, meanwhile, was preoccupied by the devastating air raid of the night of the 10th and the 11th, a year to the day he began his premiership. The attack, the largest the capital had endured so far, resulted in record casualty figures and caused serious damage to the Palace of Westminster, effectively

destroying the Commons chamber. Yet a further element contrived to disrupt Churchill's weekend, however, with the wholly unexpected arrival of Rudolph Hess in Scotland. The Deputy Reichsführer attempted to reach the Duke of Hamilton (who knew, vaguely, an acquaintance of Hess) in the vain hope of precipitating an armistice between Britain and Germany, so as to neutralise Western Europe prior to Hitler's planned invasion of Russia in June. The Duke met Hess and promptly flew south, insisting only he could brief the Prime Minister. Arriving at Ditchley after dinner, the Duke had a short conversation with Churchill, witnessed by Air Minister Archibald Sinclair, in the Velvet Room.¹⁹ The Prime Minister, however, soon got bored with the report and temporarily dismissed the Duke with the words, "Well never mind Hess for the moment, I'm going to see the Marx Brothers."²⁰ Later, the Duke was interrogated in the library by Churchill at some length, his chief concern being the possibility of a hoax involving one of Hess' doubles.

Churchill's regular stays at Ditchley came to an end in September 1942, by which time the threat to Chequers and London had much diminished. He returned only once more—on 7 March 1943. Clemmie was spending a quiet weekend there, taking a break from a rather grumpy Winston recovering from pneumonia, who, lonely and feeling down, asked to come over for Sunday lunch.²¹ He drove over from Chequers with Elizabeth

Layton, one of his most loyal personal secretaries, and was greeted by Diana Cooper upon his arrival.²² Tree recalls that the only other guest was American actor Philip Reed, not known as a regular at Ditchley. Despite being ill, Churchill had the energy to discuss Anglo-American relations, even bringing up his idea, first mooted to President Roosevelt's son James at Chartwell in 1933, of a joint US-UK currency after the war, sketching out a proposed symbol for such an idea.²³

Churchill's departure for the last time in the late afternoon concluded a period of intense and critically important activity for both Churchill and Ditchley in which it might be said that Ditchley played a key role in and helped shape Churchill's finest hour.

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Endnotes

1. Robert Becker, *Nancy Lancaster: Her Life, Her World, Her Art* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 249.
2. Douglas J. Hall, "History Lives at Ditchley and Bletchley," <https://winstonchurchill.org/old-site/learn/learn-learn/history-lives-at-ditchley-and-bletchley/>
3. Ronald Tree, *When the Moon Was High* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 138. Tree adds that Churchill, after listening to Nancy's account, at once decided to motor to Coventry that afternoon. She attested to this as well in a quote found in Becker,

- p. 249.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
5. Becker, p. 249.
6. American Relations at Ditchley on Smartify app: The Bed from the Yellow Room / Churchill's Bed.
7. Tree, p. 133.
8. Becker, p. 249.
9. Tree, pp. 133–34.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
12. Bradley J. Tolppanen, "Great Contemporaries: Duff Cooper," <https://winstonchurchill.hillsdale.edu/alfred-duff-cooper/>
13. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. I, *The Gathering Storm* (London: Cassell, 1948), p. 507.
14. Becker, p. 252.
15. John Pearson, *The Private Lives of Winston Churchill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 388–90.
16. Sonia Purnell, *Kingmaker: Pamela Harriman's Astonishing Life of Power, Seduction and Intrigue* (London: Virago, 2024).
17. Sonia Purnell, *First Lady: The Life and Wars of Clementine Churchill* (London: Viking, 2015), p. 250.
18. Becker, pp. 260–61.
19. Becker, p. 257.
20. John Harris and Richard Wilbourn, *Rudolf Hess: Treachery and Deception* (London: Jema, 2016), p. 272.
21. Tree, p. 151.
22. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. VII, *Road to Victory, 1941–1945* (London: Heinemann, 1987), p. 357.
23. Tree, photo opposite p. 145 and pp. 151–52.