

Churchill Goes on Tour

Written by Billy Mayer

Many fellow Churchillians, avid historians, and adventurers have experienced the important landmarks that encapsulated Winston Churchill's historical preeminence; however, few have visited all of the major sites in a compressed time period. As part of my fellowship awarded through the National Churchill Library Center and the ICS, I embarked on a massively packed two-week trip to visit the historic Churchill sites and conduct research for my master's thesis on Churchill's historical inspirations. After conversing with Tim Riley, Director of the National Churchill Museum of America in Fulton, Missouri, I decided to create a travelogue to share and reflect upon my experiences at these Churchillian hotspots. During my trip I visited the Churchill War Rooms in London, travelled to Chartwell-Churchill's estate, drank champagne with Andrew Roberts, collaborated intensively with Director Allen Packwood at the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge, and concluded my adventure with a visit to the National Churchill Museum of America in Fulton, Missouri.

Only a week after stuffing my face with turkey on Thanksgiving and finishing up my third term at Hawaii Pacific University, I embarked on my Churchillian pilgrimage traveling thousands of miles from a small island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean to London, England. I must say I was *not* prepared for the dreadfully cold weather of the United Kingdom. Flying over in board shorts, a coconut bra, and hula skirt was most likely one of the poorest decisions I have made since the 1915 Dardanelles Campaign. But surprisingly unlike the many brave souls that stormed Gallipoli, I arrived and survived the brutality of the British weather systems. To be honest, it was almost refreshing traveling to place in the world that changes seasons and temperature.

Once I finally adapted to the harsh British winter weather, my first destination was small concrete hole in the wall. And no, it was not for fish and chips or Indian curry. It was literally a concrete hole in the wall where some of the most important decisions of 1940 were made when Winston became Prime Minister. These were the Churchill War Rooms. Thanks to Justin Reash and Lee Pollock's generosity at the NCLC, I was gifted a private tour of the War Rooms with former Director Phil Reed. I entered the dark bunker entrance very conspicuously located near No. 10 and awaited Director Reed's arrival. I had no idea what to expect except that I would get to spiritually interact with Churchill during his finest hour. As I awaited Director Reed's arrival, I almost felt as if I were hallucinating; my mind was flashing. The hundreds of tourists walking by me had transformed into military personnel and aides storming around the bunker as the ceilings explosively shook above me. I was so confused. One man approached me and said, "Soldier, Churchill's waiting." I glanced up and a puff of smoke hit my face like a historic whirlwind; I saw the silhouette of an overweight gentleman in a top hat who, in the most distinct and identifiable voice, said "Mr. Mayer?" I sloppily mumbled, "Um... Mr. uh.. Prime Minister...?" The voice had a changed, "I'm sorry? Mr. Mayer? I am Phil Reed, former Director of these War Rooms." Shaken from trance, I arose, greeted Mr. Reed, and followed him into the War Rooms. We walked straight past the War Cabinet Room and I remember mentioning how similar it looked to the scenes in *Darkest Hour*. I figured we would stop and talk about the room,

but we didn't and I was disappointed when all of a sudden Mr. Reed pulled out his keys and opened the historic entrance to War Cabinet Room and we not only stepped *behind the glass* but *into history*. Again, I was overwhelmed by the Churchillian energy and spirit as my eyes glanced over this amazing room. The square conference table still had important documents scattered about it and Churchill's chair sat at the helm like Nelson at Trafalgar. Mr. Reed and I spoke about the history and construction of the room when he unexpectedly invited me to *sit* in Churchill's chair. I slowly walked over, slid the chair out, and sat down when a rush of wind streamed through the room. I heard a man yell out "Winston, what are we going to do?!" I looked up from my lap and every chair had been filled by the similar military personnel I had saw previously at the entrance to the bunker...and they were all looking at me intently. I saw the support structures of the bunker shake and shiver from the bombs exploding above ground. "Sir, if we are not going to negotiate with Herr Hitler, what is our policy", one man questioned. "How are we going to evacuate our boys from Dunkirk?" Historically adept, I glanced around the room inquisitively, firmly grasped the arm rests, leaned forward and said "to wage war... we shall never surrender. Send all the boats, and not just the military ones... we are bringing our boys home." I returned to reality and Director Reed pointed out the indentations on the arm rests of the chair. The right side was scarred by Churchill's ring and the left his fingernails. Running my own hands over these indentures, I felt his spirit, his stresses, his toils, his tears, and his sweat. Upon leaving the room, I felt Churchill watching me from his chair and smirking almost as if he approved of my obsession with him.

We then moved to the map room, again stepping behind the glass and into history. Phones of all colors littered the room and a large map hung on the back wall. As I approached the map, I noticed the thousands of pushpin holes across the Atlantic Ocean. Mr. Reed informed me that those holes were the remnants of the naval convoys' movements worldwide. In an iconic photo, I picked up one of the phones to pose for Mr. Reed, when a voice broke the silence. "Sir, German U-Boats are attacking convoy RB off the coast of Iceland. Track them at pinpoint alpha." I swung around to see the mannequin that was before frozen in time, moving and applying pins to the map I had just examined. Phones continued to ring, and I placed mine back on its base returning me to Mr. Reed's company. I now understood what people meant when they said you can go and relive history. The final stop on this magnificent tour was to Churchill's broadcasting office. It was here that both he and Clementine gave speeches and once famously remarked: "Therefore we must regard the next week or so as a very important period in our history. It ranks with the days when the Spanish Armada was approaching the Channel, and Drake was finishing his game of bowls; or when Nelson stood between us and Napoleon's Grand Army at Boulogne..." Again, Mr. Reed graciously allowed me to sit in his chair in front of the old BBC microphone. As I sat down, a red light blinded me, my eyes forced to adjust to a darker room, a lamp the only source of light. The red light was a recording signal, I laid my finger on the microphone and it crackled and fed back. A speech sat on the desk in front of me with the date September 11, 1940 and I immediately knew I had returned to the Finest Hour. I grasped the microphone and continued the speech: "We have read all about this in the history books; but what is happening now is on a far greater scale and of far more consequence to the life and future of the world and its civilisation than those brave old days." The red light faded into darkness and I returned to the bright room of 2019, Mr. Reed now officially confused and probably somewhat

concerned for my wellbeing took me to the museum and let me off my leash to go explore the world of Churchill.

Although I may have over dramatized my experience at the War Rooms, I want to highlight what an important historical experience this was. To start my trip with this tour set the stage for what was to come next and engulfed my mind, body, and soul into Churchill and his life experiences. To learn and appreciate history is to live in the experiences of those that you are studying. It is important to not only see the sights but experience them. Put yourself in the place of Churchill in 1940 as I did above, and it completely enhances the experience. You are not only hungry for more information, but it drives you to think critically and consider the lessons learned and not learned as well as the consequences of specific events along the historical timeline. With this experience under my belt, I was ready to step into the personal life of Churchill at Chartwell.

Visiting Chartwell was like entering into an entirely different Churchillian universe. No longer surrounded by concrete, the sounds of war, or controversial British politics, I stood in front of the Chartwell gift shop looking out on vast green hills, a beautiful pond full of swans—some of which had ancestors that befriended Churchill. As I approached the main house, I strolled past Churchill's favorite koi pond and saw a hefty man bent over tossing some crumbs into the water. I called out to him, "Excuse me sir, I don't think you should be doing that." He looked over his shoulder and chuckled... "Not to worry, I am just feeding my friends." I rubbed my eyes, tired from my travels and the man disappeared. I swore I had seen Winston again. At precisely 11:00, the front doors of Chartwell creaked open and the first docent welcomed us in. Thanks to the further kindness of fellow Churchillians, Nicole and Katherine, I was invited to see parts of the house that were closed off for refurbishment. This included Churchill's iconic study and bedroom. As part of my thesis, I am investigating Napoleon and Nelson's historical influence on Churchill's wartime leadership; therefore, I naturally wanted to see the busts Winston kept of them on his desk. The Napoleon bust was bold and Roman-like while the Nelson one was smaller, colored, and less-intimidating. Was this symbolic? Like Drake before him, did the size of Nelson's bust characterize eventual British victory over the Romanesque Napoleonic forces? Upon walking into his bedroom, I immediately felt a familiar presence. Glancing over towards the bed, I saw Winston sitting up, puffs of cigar smoke floating upward towards the paintings of his parents above his bed. He was eating breakfast and sipping a glass of champagne. I remember him telling me: "Hehe, I could not live without champagne you know? In Victory I deserve it. In Defeat, I need it." As he placed his glass down on his tray, he faded back into his sheets as I made my way down to the croquet lawn. I walked down the trail along the lawn and envisioned Winston walking with Clemmie and Randolph, Rufus trotting alongside them, smiling, laughing, and enjoying the best life had to offer. We always witness Churchill in the heat of the moment, he, loving the thrill of the chase, on the battlefield or in Parliament. But spending time at Chartwell immediately after the War Rooms really puts his life into perspective. He lived in two very different spheres and seeing this side of him was particularly enjoyable especially when I entered his art studio.

Upon entering his art studio was, again, like entering an entirely new Churchillian universe. From wall to wall, ceiling to floor, his paintings of all varieties produced a plethora of different emotions both visually and mentally. Dark, light, happy, sad, bold, sweet, beautiful, ugly, mysterious, curious and so much more. He was by no means a single-minded painter. Hounded by his black dog, I wonder if these paintings characterized all the different feelings he was coping with during his time in the Wilderness. And of course, sitting on the easel in the front foyer was a respectable painting of his Father. Seeing this in person really helped personify and relive Churchill's conversation in *The Dream*. Just as I have had my moments with Churchill both at the War Rooms and Chartwell, it was very easy to see him sitting down and speaking with his father about the tide of affairs since he passed. More humorously is what lays above the exit of the studio. A mounted bull head looked down upon Churchill while he painted. Gifted to him from a Spanish Matador, the bull was unique because it had white fur in the shape of a "V" on his forehead. The Matador wrote, "From one warrior to another." Originally, the bull was in the main house but was forced to the studio when Clementine demanded its removal!

Experiencing both of Churchill's worlds back to back offered a distinct picture of who is was as a being. Whether he was Churchill the war leader, Churchill the painter, Churchill the politician, or Churchillian the family man, he lived in two distinct worlds that are often overlooked for the big picture. Having the opportunity to see these sites one after the other makes it easier to distinguish Churchill's personal life from the political-military one. For Churchillian historians, it is probably easier to understand these two spheres, but for popular audiences it is very blurred. I highly recommend visiting the War Rooms and Chartwell together to understand these important perspectives.

Next on my journey was a visit to Andrew Roberts where I was able to witness where *Walking with Destiny* took shape. Walking up the stairs to his lovely abode with a less than desirable bottle of champagne in my hands, he opened the door and welcomed me warmly. In just a couple of steps into his home, we were at his Churchillian study where all the immense crusade had taken place. The walls were covered in historic documents signed by both Napoleon Bonaparte and Churchill. Sitting in the corner under a elegant display case was Churchill's blue and white polka dot bow tie he acquired at an auction sometime ago. Then before I was prepared, he dropped a six-pound rock into my hands...but this was no ordinary rock. This rock was a cannonball from the Battle of Waterloo. If you thought I had immersed myself into history and this point, you can imagine sharing this experience with Dr. Roberts himself! We jogged up two flights of stairs where I was surrounded by a massive library and lounging area. Excitedly, he showed me the new release of the Dutch version of *Walking with Destiny*...a worldly book indeed! By this point, my sad champagne has warmed significantly, and he proceeded to pull out a Churchill favorite, Pol Roger. This was to be a classy and educational evening.

We thoroughly discussed my thesis and made great conversation about Churchill's historical inspirations. Feeding off one another, many fresh and new ideas came to the forefront regarding Nelson and Clemenceau's impact on Churchill. He even offered to sign my copy of *Walking with Destiny*. Luckily, he had already autographed it at the Churchill Conference in DC. About an hour and a half later, well-endowed with expensive champagne and good company he

apologized that he would have to kick me out. More than appreciative, I obliged and gathered my belongings to which he said, “My wife and I are binge-watching a show and we must continue.” Interested, I asked what show? Thinking he might say *Stranger Things* or *Mandalorian* or *The Crown*, I was not prepared to hear that it was a French soap opera haha! Even his show selections are elegant...very Churchillian! Thankful for all of his kindness and generosity, I departed firmly believing that was a very special and unique opportunity that many cannot share. I quickly began to update and change my thesis outline as it is ever evolving and with his help and guidance it has become a stronger road map for my project. With this climatic ending, I bid London farewell as I boarded the National Rail for Cambridge—next stop, the Archives!

Cambridge was just as I imagined it to be—small, quaint town with an enriching history and many secrets within. What surprised me was how modern Churchill College was. Standing alongside its peers, Churchill College was the Eiffel Tower to everyone else’s Coliseum. The origins of Churchill College at Cambridge University are particularly interesting. Thinking it was a college created in commemoration of Churchill, one would think that its programs reflect Churchillian studies of history or leadership. But no, these are a minority on campus. Science, math, and technology encapsulate the heart and soul of Churchill College because Winston had a sincere appreciation for the invention and creation of new and effective technological enhancements. He believed that if he founded a college based on this merit, it could contribute to future discoveries and developments for future generations. However, despite this being the foundational mission of Churchill College, the Archives sit directly in the middle of campus loaded with thousands of primary source documents pertaining to not only Winston Churchill, but many other significant figures.

Before I discuss my initial impressions of the Archives Centre, allow me to share my appreciation for the college dorm accommodations. My room overlooked the Archives and was only a minute walk away making for easy and rapid access to endless amounts of research. The room itself was extremely pleasant with its own thermostat, water boiler for tea and coffee, and a spacious accommodation for an affordable price. Nothing like the dorm rooms in America! This was a five-star hotel compared to the janitor’s closet I lived in during my undergraduate years.

Upon arriving to the Jock Colville Archives Centre, I was initially apprehensive. I had never done archival research before and had no idea what to expect. My professor at Hawaii Pacific University shared some pretty horrifying and ridiculous experiences he had while at both the National Archives in Britain and DC. He made it sound as if all Archives were as bad as his traumatic stories so I treaded carefully upon my arrival, looking for the snakes and enemies I would have to confront over the next week all day, every day. But to my gracious surprise, there were no snakes or enemies, just flowers and friends. My initial impressions of the archival staff at Cambridge was very flattering. I do not think I met all sixteen Archivists on the team, but those that I did went above and beyond the call of duty to make my experience worthwhile and enjoyable. The registration process was rapid and within an hour of arriving, I was already requesting documents from the stacks. Before I dug up anything first, I was warmly greeted by the Director of the Archives, Mr. Allen Packwood. A master Churchillian and incredibly

friendly, he invited me to his office for coffee to discuss my thesis project. We talked for about half an hour and shared some really important insights about the direction of my research and how I best should utilize my time at the Archives. He recommended several collections to me, shared some of his vast knowledge about my subject, and became a strong ally that I could rely on during and after my time at the Archives. In fact, by the end of the week he had not only taken me to lunch at the fellows' lounge but invited me for drinks and dinner on Friday night in Cambridge so I could experience the town and food within. After this experience, I could firmly declare that every Churchillian I had encountered thus far on my trip had been sincere, kind, supportive, and massively generous with their time and resources. I was beyond thankful for my experiences thus far and felt right at home during this deepening research project.

When I first met with Mr. Packwood, he took me behind the scenes and showed me the vaults where all the pristine and original material is kept. Based on what I saw, I can guarantee you that if a future enemy decided to execute Blitz Round II, the Archival documents would be secure. While back in the stacks, he showed me two very impressive collections. One was Churchill's Napoleon book collection, one of which contained an original autograph. The other was Churchill's original red locked box that he used to read secure messages during the war. Based on these two items alone, I knew I was going to uncover a lot of information while at the Centre. I will not bore you with a day by day exploration of my discoveries, but I will mention that the diaries of his private and literary secretaries are incredibly insightful on the man they worked for. If I were to pick three of my most favorite discoveries while researching here, the first would probably be Admiral Horatio Nelson's Prayer Book. I had heard the stories about it and knew that Horatia Nelson's granddaughter gifted to Churchill in 1954, but to hold this piece of history that Nelson kept with him up until his victory and fall at Trafalgar was staggering. Seeing the message from Emma Hamilton inscribed on the cover was purely exhilarating. Just to say I held something that *both* Nelson and Churchill had held was historically magical. The second item was very unique. On my last day at the Archive, I began to search for unique memorabilia and came across Churchill's Boer War Wanted Poster. Inscribed were the words: "Churchill—Wanted Dead or Alive". Quite chilling to see. It almost felt as if I were in the Wild West. His twenty-five-pound bounty would have been worth close to 4,000 pounds today. The last item was particularly sentimental. A teacher had made a large scrapbook containing many of the major articles written during Churchill's funeral and after reflecting on the man and his lifetime. She intended to create it to share with her students so that Churchill's memory and legacy was preserved. This remains a very important goal today as we know oh so well! Reflecting back on my time at the Archive has been pleasant. The support I received was nearly overwhelming and I am excited to return for future projects. There is one more act of kindness, I'd like to share. On my last day, I had been pulling books off the shelf to complete my last bit of research for my historiography. Surprisingly, I discovered that the Archive Centre did not have Jonathan Rose's *Literary Churchill*. Director Packwood was shocked to hear of this and said it must be added to the library. About two hours before my departure, he comes strolling in to tell me that he had rode his bike home to pick up the book for me so I could skim through it. What a guy! Really put the cherry on top to complete my experience at the Archives. Early next morning, I would bid England farewell, but not Churchill. Several connections later, I ended up

at Columbia Regional Airport, snow on the ground, 19 degrees Fahrenheit (-7 C) only thirty minutes outside Fulton, Missouri, a Churchill hotspot.

My arrival in the freezing Midwest was much warmer than one could imagine. I had initially feared that I would have to either walk or taxi to Fulton, but a Churchillian was there to save me. Director of the Churchill Museum of America, Mr. Tim Riley shuttled me to Fulton as we had a deep Churchillian discussion about my project and the *secrets* of Fulton. As I began to see the signs that we had entered Fulton's city limits, I had yet another out of body experience. Thrown from Mr. Riley's vehicle, I was sitting atop the back of an open sedan almost like a ghost in between Truman and Churchill. It was March 5, 1946 and we were en-route to one of Churchill's biggest speeches in history. I chuckled as the car pulled to the side of the road. Churchill had asked the driver to stop because he could not light his cigar in preparation for the large crowds awaiting his arrival. Fulton was exactly how you would imagine; a small midwestern town, in the middle of nowhere with one main street, one major bar and a collection of small gift shops. Imagine hosting 25,000 people in a township as small as this. I returned to reality as we had reached my hotel for the evening. Upon checking in and arriving at my room, I was surprised to find a gift bag from the Director and a welcome note to Fulton. Churchillians are the NICEST people, I swear I have never been catered to this much in my entire life. I felt extremely special especially when I realized he had given me authentic pieces of the actual Berlin Wall (a specialty you can purchase at the Museum Gift Shop).

After a much-needed night sleep, I arose ready and willing to tackle the Churchill Museum and Fulton's Iron Curtain. In a one-horse open sleigh...I mean sedan...we rode to Westminster College and the historic church where the museum was located. Uniquely the museum was built into the undercroft of the church. On the outside of the museum, there are two very remarkable Churchillian masterpieces. The first which sits slightly to the left of the museum entrance is a magnificent bronze mold of Churchill during his iconic speech at the college. The second was a majestic piece created by Churchill's eldest granddaughter Edwina Sandys called *Breakthrough*. Sculpted out of pieces of the Berlin Wall, the physical manifestation of the Iron Curtain, Sandys carved the silhouettes of a man and woman *breaking through* the infamous east and west barrier. As I entered the museum, I was almost underwhelmed at what I saw. I could not imagine what a museum solely dedicated to Churchill's famous Cold War speech could contain, but I was in for a massive surprise. Mr. Riley welcomed me into the Clementine Churchill Reading Room...yes this museum is an Archive too! Though not as organized at Cambridge *yet*, there are so many unique and fascinating documents pertaining to the enormous preparations that Fulton and the State of Missouri undertook for Churchill and Truman's arrival on March 5, 1946. After settling in, a knowledgeable and friendly tour guide named Tyler Oberlag took me on my next Churchill adventure to explore the museum. In a particularly unique exhibition, the museum had Churchill's draft speech, "The Sinews of Peace" on display with a video recording of that day in the background.

From here, Tyler took me up the stairs to see the inside of the church and wow what a historic site! This church was no ordinary sanctuary though. Conceived in the year 1189, it originated in London, England but burned down in the Great Fire of the 1600s. It was later

rebuilt but destroyed again by the Nazi Blitz in 1940. This time however, instead of rebuilding it, action was taken to have its remains taken and rebuilt in Fulton at West Minister College, the site of Churchill's famous Iron Curtain speech. Considered the world's biggest jigsaw puzzle, the Truman, Eisenhower, Kenney and Johnson sponsored project slowly reconstructed this Medieval church. On the second floor sits a beautiful organ but with opposite color black and white keys. Tyler told me that when the original organ burned in 1940, the heat of the flames made the organ bellow and scream...a quite unsettling sound to hear among the German bombing. Overall, the church was a magnificent site to experience but is definitely in need of some Churchillian TLC.

Returning the museum in the crypt below, I did not expect to find much else until Tyler took me on a journey throughout Churchill's life. From Omdurman to the Iron Curtain and the Dardanelles to 1940, the crypt zigzagged from room to room and expanded ever more deeply into Churchill's life. This museum was *not* solely dedicated to the Iron Curtain experience but Churchill the man and his life experience as a whole. Each room had unique activities and learning interactions to teach you about Churchill's saga and some incredibly fascinating videos about the him and the rise of the Nazi Regime. By the time I finished walking through the museum, I had a stronger understanding of Churchill's role in history and had a new appreciation for the man. I commend the Museum's efforts for the development of their exhibits, they all were so well put together and can offer a massive amount of insight to those wanting to learn about Winston Churchill. Though geography is Fulton's biggest dilemma, I guarantee you all that this museum is well-worth the pilgrimage it takes to get there. If you are feeling "wanderlusty" and you can choose to visit London or Fulton, pick Fulton. London is so much easier to get there and will always be a tourist hotspot. Fulton, on the other hand, is quite unique and more of an "off-the-beaten" path kind of destination well-worth the visitation value. However, my story does not end here...the climax of my Fulton visit had yet to come. The next day Director Riley personally walked me up to the President's Office (previously his home) where Churchill disembarked from his open sedan. Only a few more steps and I walked up the steps into the Westminster Gym where the speech took place 73 years ago. I glanced to the left of the entrance where a plaque read "This is the site of Winston Churchill's Iron Curtain Speech." Another whirlwind struck me as I stepped into the past. There were so many people. The gym overflowing with guests coming from all over to here Winston speak. I pushed my way through...my vision fading in and out between 2019 and 1946. From an empty basketball court to a packed gymnasium, I looked up and saw Churchill taking the stage. As bold as ever he declared: "*From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.*" The crowd roared as I returned to present day. I stepped up to where the stage originally was and deeply felt Churchill's presence and aura around me. This was the perfect end of a perfect trip that encapsulated Churchill from his youth to the Iron Curtain. In a compressed period, I was able to see the majority of the Churchill sites. This allowed me to get a more complete picture of the Churchill, his character, leadership, history, and personality. I am sincerely thankful for the opportunity to pursue my research through the NCLC Fellowship and grateful to all of the fellow Churchillians for their endless kindness and generosity in this great endeavor. *Mahalo nui loa* and *warm aloha*.

Billy Mayer