

Sir Winston Churchill: The greatest Briton?

1874-1893 Birth and childhood: Video transcript

His birthplace was in the Palace of Blenheim at Woodstock built by the nation for his great ancestor, the first Duke of Marlborough. It was the grandest country house in England. It boasted an organ room that could have served as a cathedral. It celebrated military triumph; but away from the state apartments and tapestried saloons Winston was born in a Victorian room on the ground floor. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill was one of the most brilliant politicians of his age. He was Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons. He fought to modernise the Tory Party. He failed at the last to achieve his political ambitions and he died still comparatively young, a deeply disappointed man. His mother Jenny Churchill was an American by birth. She was both lively and beautiful and men used to say she had the most musical voice they had ever heard.

His first appearance in the press was typically ahead of his time. But although he was born to especial privilege the story of his childhood reads no differently from that of other little boys of prosperous Victorian families. He went to a private school where he did not do very well. He went to Harrow where he in no way distinguished himself except for a certain impatience of authority. He had a lifelong friend in Sir Shane Leslie:

Sir Shane Leslie:

I believe I must be only person now alive who barely remembers Sir Winston as a school boy. I have a photograph of a group taken in Brighton in 1889 – Sir Winston's mother and my mother and their third sister showing all the cousins. And of course, our great employment there was being drilled in Winston's army. There was some eight of us and the gardeners' boys. It was an army that never changed its commander and for the ranks there was no promotion.

Extract from BBC obituary of Churchill narrated by Richard Dimbleby