

HOME



Two-year-old Mary and her father at Chartwell, 1924.



Chartwell as Churchill first saw it.

The death of one's child is not something from which any parent can ever entirely recover. Still, in abject sorrow, Churchill tried. By January Clementine was again pregnant. She gave birth on the morning of September 15, 1922, to a daughter, Mary, an abiding consolation.

Churchill's great nurturing distraction, however, now became a house called Chartwell. Henry Harding had first shown it to him the year before, in July 1921—a derelict, ponderous, redbrick edifice of Elizabethan origin, with little charm but magnificent views. Churchill had instantly fallen in love with Chartwell's panoramic placement overlooking the rolling Weald of Kent. Kent had been Mrs. Everest's birthplace. Early on, she had instilled in him a mystical love of the county.

Chartwell Manor was vacant in July 1921. It was also just about to go to auction at a reserve price of £6,500 that Churchill considered too steep. He remained enamored, however. After the property failed to sell, in September 1922, he revisited it.

Churchill was initially offered first refusal on buying Chartwell at an asking price of £5,500. He countered with an offer of £4,700, insisting that the house needed a lot of work, as indeed it did. But the owner—Captain Archibald Campbell-Colquhoun, an old Harrow schoolmate of Churchill's, as it turned out—would not budge. Churchill called Sir Frank Howard himself, of Knight, Frank & Rutley, to the Colonial Office, for a face-to-face in which he used every argument he could think of to drive the price down, but failed.

Clementine initially shared her husband's enthusiasm for Chartwell. Then she grew apprehensive. The house was damp and infected with dry rot. Clementine recognized that it would practically have to be gutted and rebuilt from the ground up. Churchill knew this too—it was a job he was anxious to lose himself in. And so, without informing her, five days after their daughter's birth in September, he made a new offer: £5,000 for the house and its eighty acres. On September 24, 1922, the offer was accepted.

Looking back, Clementine Churchill regarded this as the only time in all of their marriage when her husband was not honest with her. Churchill, however, was in love with a house that existed as much in his head at this point as on land. He could see with absolute certainty how perfect Chartwell would be, once he brought his plans for it to fruition.



Churchill at Chartwell, January 1946.



Chartwell today.