



# The Victories of Versailles

*Renowned historian of France and the French court, Philip Mansel (see review, The Sun King, previous issue), looks at the homage paid by England's country houses to France's triumph of style during the reign of Louis XIV.*

**B**y 1682, when Louis XIV made Versailles his principal residence, it was the largest and most glamorous palace in Europe. Partly because they were nearer, English people, more than other foreigners, flocked to admire the palace, the parks and the sight of the royal family dining in public or attending mass in the royal chapel. In 1701, John Northleigh described

Versailles as, 'The most beautiful palace in Europe.' The garden, 'far surpasses anything to be seen of this kind in Italy.' The Galerie des Glaces was, 'the noblest that I ever beheld in my life.' Fifty years later Lord Chesterfield told his son Philip Stanhope to visit Versailles: 'an hour at Versailles...is now worth more to you, than three hours in your closet with the best books that ever were written...'



A Boulle cabinet in the High Pavilion Anteroom



Sevres china bought c. 1830

After the peace of 1814, there was a second wave of admiration for the style of 'Louis Quatorze', a phrase then just entering the English language. Prince Puckler Muskau complained in 1828: 'Everything is now in the revived taste of Louis the Fourteenth, decorated with tasteless excrescences and excess of gilding'. 'Louis Quatorze' panelling, sculpture or furniture can be seen in the 'Elizabeth Saloon' created by the Duchess of Rutland at **Belvoir Castle**, at the Duke of Wellington's country house at **Stratfield Saye**, and in the Waterloo Gallery which he created at **Apsley House**. Cultural and commercial links outweighed the years of war. The number of English houses influenced by Louis XIV and Versailles suggests that Francophilia is just as much an English trait as Francophobia. 🇫🇷

Versailles was so greatly admired for its elegance and splendour that, despite the many wars fought between France and England, it became a model for English houses. Ralph Montagu, Duke of Montagu, ancestor of the Dukes of Buccleuch, knew it well; he had been Charles II's ambassador to Louis XIV. In 1693-5 his house at **Boughton** became an island of French taste in Northamptonshire. The north wing has a French-style façade and an enfilade of five state rooms, named after the gods of Olympus, like the apartments in Versailles, with ceilings by the French painter Louis Cheron and floors of 'parquet Versailles'.

They were created with the help of the Huguenot designer Daniel Marot, who had previously worked for Louis XIV. Marot and other French Protestant refugees, such as John Pelletier the furniture-maker, spread the Louis XIV style as effectively as English visitors to Versailles or the King's relentless propaganda in books and prints. Boughton is also filled with furniture by Louis XIV's cabinet makers,

such as Boulle and Gole, and surrounded by a system of canals and a Grand Etang inspired by Versailles.

Louis XIV's pleasure pavilion at Marly, beside Versailles, inspired the architecture, decoration and gardens of another ducal palace, **Chatsworth**, supervised for the Duke of Devonshire by Nicolas Huet in 1687-1707.

Celebrating the Duke of Marlborough's victories over Louis XIV, **Blenheim Palace** was started in 1705. Unlike Vanbrugh's extravagant exterior (surmounted by a bust of Louis XIV, taken from the gates of Tournai), the interior has many echoes of Versailles, which the Duke had visited as James II's ambassador in 1685. At Blenheim Louis Laguerre, who also worked at Chatsworth and another Versailles-inspired ducal palace, Petworth (1688-93), frescoed another enfilade of Versailles-style state rooms in England. Louis XIV won a style victory in the palace which commemorated his military defeat.

**Goodwood** in Sussex is perhaps the most French of all English country houses. It still contains portraits of the mother of the first Duke of Richmond, Louis XIV's agent Louise de Keroualle, whose rooms in Whitehall had been the centre of government in the last years of her lover King Charles II, as well as Sevres especially ordered from the French royal porcelain factory by the third Duke of Richmond in 1765. The original Hyacinthe Rigaud portrait of Louis XV's chief minister Cardinal Fleury, given to the second Duke of Richmond, dominates the 'Tapestry Room', hung with creations from the French royal factory of the Gobelins, and lined with French furniture by Louis Delannois, upholstered in Lyon silk. Indeed few English country houses do not contain some French books, pictures, pieces of furniture or Sevres; a happy few, like Newby and Welbeck, boast entire rooms hung with Gobelins tapestries.

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French dance steps in a contemporary manuscript