



The Spencers: A Personal History of an English Family

Charles Spencer, Earl Spencer

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Best known in recent history for Lady Diana Spencer, who became the Princess of Wales when she married Prince Charles in 1981, the Spencer family has had close ties to English royalty for at least 500 years. Indeed, Diana's grandfather claimed that "the word Spencer derives from the Norman word for Steward, or Head of Household: 'Despenser,'" and that their ancestor was steward to the household of William the Conqueror in 1066. While historians have debated both sides of this particular family legend, it is indisputable that from the early 16th century Diana's forebears had moved beyond their origins as sheep farmers to forge intimate connections with the English court.

In addition to generations of Spencer barons, earls, and dukes, there were politicians and poets, courtiers and clerics, soldiers and scoundrels. There was an earlier Lady Diana Spencer, who nearly married the Prince of Wales in 1730 and who, like the modern Diana, died tragically young. Sir Winston Churchill was a Spencer; for generations his family name was hyphenated as Spencer-Churchill. The history of the family is alive with many other fascinating characters: from Henry Spencer, who gave Charles I the astonishing sum of £10,000 on the eve of the Civil War; through the scandalous society beauty Georgiana Devonshire, daughter of the first Countess Spencer, who sold her kisses for votes in favor of Charles James Fox; to George John, the Second Earl, owner of the greatest private library in Europe and patron of Horatio Nelson.

In many ways the story of the Spencer family is really the story of England-or at least of the English aristocracy. Using archives and documents previously unavailable and incorporating his personal experiences of the family, Charles Spencer offers a fascinating, rich, and illuminating social history.

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