



## Vanbrugh's Greatest Houses

An architectural journey 300 years since his death

**3–9 July 2026 (MM 107)**

7 days

Speaker: Sir Charles Saumarez Smith

A wonderful survey of Vanbrugh's career, from Seaton Delaval and Castle Howard to Blenheim Palace and Greenwich.

Our lecturer is architectural historian and leading Vanbrugh expert, Sir Charles Saumarez Smith.

Planned to commemorate the tercentenary of Vanbrugh's death combining some of his grandest projects with the lesser-known.

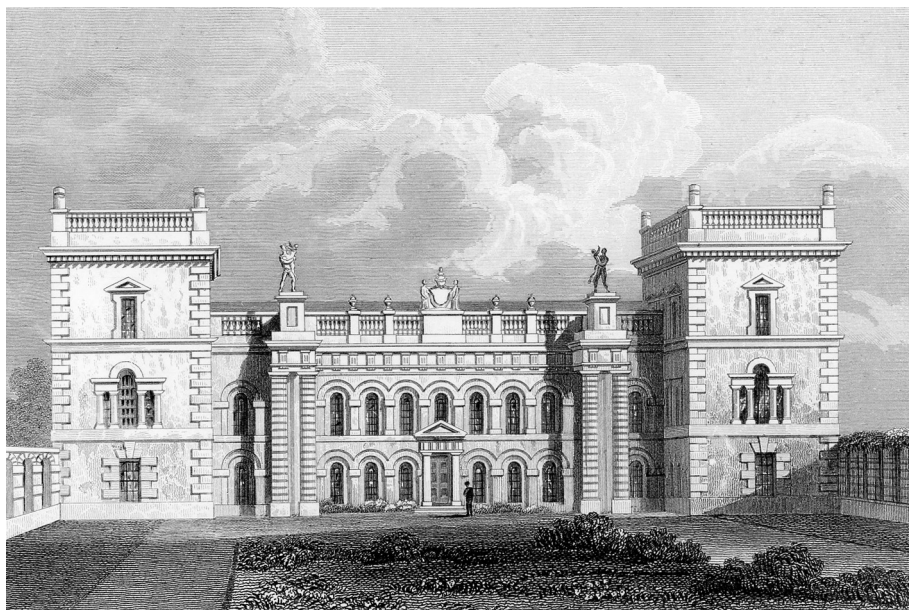
Many special arrangements including curator-led tours and private openings.

One of Britain's greatest architects, Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726) is responsible for some of the country's most magnificent large houses – among them Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace. Marking the tercentenary of his death in March 1726, Sir Charles Saumarez Smith leads a celebration of this remarkable man and his achievements, in a special tour featuring several 'behind the scenes' arrangements.

We will look closely at the circumstances of their design, their architecture – interior and exterior in most cases and Vanbrugh's contributions to their garden design, placing each house in historical context. Blenheim Palace, for example, commissioned by the Duke of Marlborough in January 1705 to celebrate his victory at that battle a few months before, was hated by Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, and became the subject of long-drawn-out arguments between her and Vanbrugh over its design and cost, ending up in a legal battle in the House of Lords.

Besides his work as an architect, Vanbrugh had a remarkably adventurous life. Travelling out to India as a young man, serving in the army under James II, he was captured by the French, who believed him to be a spy, and served four years in French prisons, ending in the Bastille in Paris. He later became a successful playwright and designer and manager of the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket, where Handel's early operas were first performed. He was appointed Comptroller of the Office of Works shortly after the accession of Queen Anne in 1702.

The tour begins at Seaton Delaval, one of Vanbrugh's most powerful designs, near the coast east of Newcastle, and completes at



*Grimsthorpe Castle, 18th-century engraving*

Greenwich, where he built a small fortified castle for himself at the end of his life. Our speaker, the author of the latest biography, *John Vanbrugh: The Drama of Architecture* (November 2025), could not be better placed to bring this subject vividly to life.

### Itinerary

#### **Day 1: Newcastle, Seaton Delaval, York.**

The coach leaves Newcastle Central Station at 1.30pm and takes you straight to Seaton Delaval. On an open site outside Newcastle, Seaton Delaval was the last of Vanbrugh's magnificent mansions. Innovative management followed its acquisition by the National Trust in 2009. Continue to York where two nights are spent.

**Day 2: Castle Howard.** One of the great houses of Europe, Castle Howard was begun in 1701 to designs by Vanbrugh. Begin the day with a curator-led tour of the garden temple and mausoleum before free time to explore the fine collections of artworks, furniture and grand gardens.

**Day 3: Chatsworth, Rutland.** Though not designed by Vanbrugh, Chatsworth is not only one of the grandest country houses in Britain but also an extraordinary treasure-house of art and furnishings, brilliantly presented as refurbishment continues. It dates largely from

around 1700 and the 1840s. A tour is followed by some free time to revisit the house and to explore the gardens. Continue to Rutland and stay overnight.

**Day 4: Grimsthorpe Castle, Kimbolton School, Woodstock.** Home to the Willoughby de Eresby family since the 16th century Grimsthorpe Castle is Vanbrugh's last masterpiece. A Tudor house with Georgian interiors, the façade and Great Hall are by Vanbrugh. Now a school, Kimbolton Castle was rebuilt after collapsing in 1707 with Vanbrugh as architect and murals by Pellegrini. Continue to Woodstock for the first of two nights.

**Day 5: Blenheim Palace, Ditchley Park.** Blenheim Palace, the country's greatest Baroque building, is the outcome of a huge sum of money given in 1705 by a grateful nation to John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough. After a private visit to the state apartments there is time to enjoy the gardens and the 'Capability' Brown park. Ditchley Park, designed by James Gibbs on the basis of existing designs by Francis Smith of Warwick and then adapted during the course of construction by Smith and with work on the interiors by William Kent and Henry Flitcroft.

**Day 6: Greenwich, Westminster.** Founded by Mary II in 1692, the Royal Naval Hospital for retired sailors incorporates parts of a palace,

Vanbrugh's Greatest Houses  
continued

and with such architects as Jones, Wren and Vanbrugh became the greatest group of Renaissance and Baroque buildings in Britain. Free time with the option to walk to the top of Greenwich Park to see Vanbrugh Castle on Maze Hill, designed for Vanbrugh's family. First of two nights in Westminster.

**Day 7: Kensington Palace.** The tour ends with a private visit to Kensington Palace. Begun modestly, it was extended for William and Mary and the first two Georges by leading architects. The orangery was designed by Hawksmoor and later enhanced by Vanbrugh. Return to the hotel by c. 1.00pm.

*Please note that some appointments cannot be confirmed until early 2026.*

## Lecturer

Sir Charles Saumarez Smith did a PhD on Castle Howard at the Warburg Institute, published in 1990 as *The Building of Castle Howard*. Since then, he has been Director of the National Portrait Gallery (1994–2002), the National Gallery (2002–2007) and Secretary and Chief Executive of the Royal Academy (2007–2018). Since leaving the Royal Academy, he has gone back to architectural history as the Royal Academy's Professor of Architectural History (2019–2023), writing a monthly column on architecture for *The Critic*, publishing *John Vanbrugh: The Drama of Architecture* (Lund Humphries, 2025) and acting as co-curator for an exhibition on Vanbrugh, to be held at Sir John Soane's Museum from March to June 2026. He is a Trustee of the Garden Museum and the Castle Howard Foundation, a member of the curatorial committee of the Design Museum and an Honorary Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge.

## Practicalities

**Included:** travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 1 lunch and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions and donations for gardens and houses; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

**Accommodation: York (2 nights): The Grand, York ([grandhotelyork.co.uk](http://grandhotelyork.co.uk)):** the former headquarters of North Eastern Railway, the hotel retains many original features. It is a few minutes on foot from the railway station and the Minster. **Rutland (1 night): The Barnsdale ([barnsdalerutland.com](http://barnsdalerutland.com)).** A four-star hotel housed in an extended old farmhouse close to Rutland Water. **Woodstock (2 nights): The Feathers Hotel ([feathers.co.uk](http://feathers.co.uk)):** a boutique hotel in a former townhouse in the heart of Woodstock and very close to Blenheim Palace. **Royal Horseguards Hotel, London ([guoman.com/royal-horseguards-hotel](http://guoman.com/royal-horseguards-hotel)):** a 5-star hotel just off Whitehall, made up of the National Liberal Club and its apartments. The style is that of an international hotel and bedrooms are comfortable with all mod cons. *Single rooms throughout are double for sole use.*

**How strenuous?** Unavoidably, there is quite a lot of walking on this tour and it would not be suitable for anyone who has difficulties with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Coaches can rarely park near the houses, many of the parks and gardens are extensive, not all the houses or hotels visited have lifts. Some days involve a lot of driving – average distance by coach per day: 76 miles.

**Group size:** between 10 and 22 participants.

**Combine this tour with:** *Gardens in the Highlands*, 24 June–2 July 2026.