Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill (1874 – 1965) – a brief background

After an early career as a soldier and war correspondent, Churchill was elected as a Conservative MP in 1901, but joined the Liberals after the Conservative Party split over free trade. Having served as President of the Board of Trade, Home Secretary, and First Lord of the Admiralty where he helped modernise the navy, he returned to the army, serving on the Western Front, in 1916. Back in Parliament in 1924, he served as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Stanley Baldwin’s Conservative government. After the fall of the government in 1929 he did not hold office for a decade, his so-called ‘Wilderness Years’. He warned of the threat of German re-armament and returned to public life as First Lord of the Admiralty on the outbreak of the Second World War.

In May 1940 he became Prime Minister, replacing Neville Chamberlain and leading the newly-formed National Government. In his first speech to the new Administration he declared: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.” And concluded with: “Come then, let us go forward together with our united strength.” Both are examples of the brilliance of his oratory. Winston Churchill became a patriotic icon, exemplar of leadership and a national inspiration during the Second World War. Defeated in the post-victory 1945 general election, he argued strongly for Western unity against the threat of Communism. He was returned to office in 1951 and finally retired in 1955, aged 80.

Churchill’s leadership qualities earned him a vast international following, especially in the United States where he was given the singular honour of being granted honorary US citizenship (in 1963) and in 1999 became the first Briton to have a US warship named after him. He has been portrayed on the postage stamps of 150 nations.

Chartwell, the family home in Kent, which he purchased in 1922, was where he was able to relax and enjoy family life and the company of friends. It was there that his lifelong love of the land and animals found fulfilment on his smallholding, which included goats, pigs, birds and butterflies. His other interests ranged from painting to bricklaying, but it was writing which provided the constant thread throughout his life and a source of income. In 1953 he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature.

In the course of his lifetime Churchill received thirty-seven orders, decorations and medals including Companion of Honour (1922), Order of Merit (1946), and Order of the Garter (1953). He died on 24 January 1965 and was given a state funeral, the first commoner to be so honoured since Gladstone in 1898. He was also the first commoner to be portrayed on a British coin – the 1965 crown or five shilling piece.