

[Room one]

# The Spencer Family Tree

## Spencer Women

The Spencer family is one of Britain's aristocratic dynasties. The Spencer Earls enjoyed wealth and political power, they were collectors and patrons of the arts. But this room is not dedicated to Spencer men but to Spencer women who were born or married into the family.

For over three hundred years, the Spencer family has included extraordinary women who helped shape the culture of their age. Unique amongst these was Sarah Jenyns, 1660-1744, Duchess of Marlborough, whose friendship with Queen Anne gave her access to political power, and whose business acumen made her one of the wealthiest women in England. Her daughter married into the Spencer family, and Sarah herself was the Spencer's single greatest benefactor, leaving them her art collection and her huge landed estate.

Other Spencer women established themselves at the heart of the Golden Age of 18th century British culture. Georgiana Poyntz 1737-1814, with her husband the first Earl Spencer, built Spencer House, one of London's most important town houses. Exceptionally well-read, Georgiana became a painter and collector in her own right, commissioning works from Flaxman, Reynolds and Zoffany. Her close friends included the actor, David Garrick and the French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau. Both she and her daughter Georgiana Spencer, 1757-1806, Duchess of Devonshire were also innovators in the world of fashion. Their images, painted by Reynolds and Gainsborough, not only shaped British fashion but defined a sense of national style that was imitated all over Europe. Well educated and independent, they counted amongst their protégés and friends, politicians and playwrights; architects and painters, actors, composers and musicians.

In the 19th century two Spencer Countesses continued the role of the political hostess, Lavinia Bingham, 1762-1831, and Charlotte Seymour, 1835-1903, created salons for the major political figures of the day. It was a role however that did not survive into the 20th century. Cynthia Hamilton 1892-1972, wife of the 7th Earl Spencer (Diana's paternal grandparents), devoted her energies to charity and community service work. It is within these traditions that Diana Spencer should be placed.

