

Winston Churchill in the Midwest

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by Cathleen Nine

President Harry S. Truman introduced Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a gymnasium in Missouri on March 20, 1946. Churchill's famous remarks that day changed the course of history, coining the phrase "the Iron Curtain."

The Winston Churchill Memorial and Library, a national historic site, is located on the campus of Westminster College in Fulton, Mo., where Churchill made his "Iron Curtain" speech. The site is dedicated to Churchill, the bold prime minister of Great Britain, who made his mark on world affairs before, during and after World War II.

The historic site combines the impressively rebuilt Church of St. Mary and the Virgin, Aldermanbury, designed by the famed British architect Christopher Wren, with the Winston S. Churchill Life of Leadership Gallery. The gallery is a museum that illustrates personal events in Churchill's life, as well as the historical events of his lifetime.

On the grounds of the memorial, there is clearly a theme of the special Anglo-American relationship and the legacy of the Cold War. A statue of Churchill stands proudly by a piece of the Berlin Wall looking out on the street as if reassured that his work to end tyranny is now done. The view is further enhanced by the chapel, which rises above the Life of Leadership Gallery.

Access to the chapel is from the gallery, and visitors will not want to miss the state-of-the-art museum which was renovated for the 60th anniversary of Churchill's speech on campus. The gallery, which is often staffed by students at Westminster, offers a detailed glimpse into the man who would go on to be called the "British bulldog."

The gallery explains how the small college in Missouri became the location of arguably one of the most important events of the Cold War. The college also continued to be a site of speeches by famous leaders: Margaret Thatcher in 1996, Ronald Reagan in 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev in 1992, and Lech Walesa in 1998.

The bulk of the gallery is about the life of Churchill, with other elements mixed in the displays. A magic lantern projector gives the guest a visual of the beginning of Churchill's life, and throughout the gallery are copies of original letters that put a personal spin on the display.

One letter is from Churchill's father, expressing disappointment in his son for poor grades. Although Churchill did not excel in school, visitors can see that he was talented in other ways. An original painting by Churchill, who Picasso thought showed real artistic talent, is on display, as well as excerpts of different pieces Churchill wrote as a journalist during the Boer War. Another interesting artifact is the felt hat and dispatch case the prime minister used during the war.

The strength of Churchill's leadership is presented through original audio, in which he encouraged the British in "their finest hour." There are several video presentations focusing on Churchill and the historic events of his time. In each section of the gallery, a different part of Churchill's life is examined along with the experiences of everyday men and women.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the gallery is melding the man with the times and the larger story of humanity. Another triumph for the museum is its clever interactive stations and design. At one point in the gallery, visitors can stand in Churchill's footsteps and gain his perspective on Hitler, at a time when others viewed Hitler as harmless.

Visitors interested in getting the complete experience can wander up the winding staircase from the gallery to the church. The Church of St. Mary and the Virgin, Aldermanbury, was destroyed in the Blitz of London.

The church is thought to have been the place of worship for William Shakespeare and is where the poet John Milton was married. In 1975, what was left of the church was sent over to Westminster as a memorial to Churchill and a link between the United States and Great Britain.

Guests can explore the beautiful interior of the church by sitting in wooden pews or standing on the steps of the altar. Large windows and pristine white walls create a peaceful aura for weary travelers. In the front of the church, the pulpit is an intricately carved piece of art that was given to the church after Sept. 11, 2001, by the city of London, another sign of the special relationship between Britain and the United States.

The gym where Churchill gave his famous "Iron Curtain" speech is not far from the memorial and library. The gym is still used by students, and a plaque outside commemorates the speech. Westminster College is a hidden gem in the Midwest, a place where the "lion-hearted man" spoke and changed the world.