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Welcome to VANBRUGH300: Celebrating Sir John Vanbrugh, 300 Years On



Welcome to the first VANBRUGH300 newsletter and thank you for signing up to follow this year-long celebration of one of Britain's most original and influential figures. This year, we will be sharing stories, themes, events, and discoveries from across the country as we celebrate the life and work of Sir John Vanbrugh. This first edition is published to coincide with Vanbrugh's birthday, the 24th of January, and offers an introduction to the man, his legacy, and the festival ahead.

Architect, Playwright, Soldier, Spy

Architect, playwright, soldier, spy, courtier, diplomat and garden designer: there are many ways to encounter the remarkable Sir John Vanbrugh through 2026, his tercentenary year.

Sir John Vanbrugh was no ordinary figure. Born in 1664, he lived a life shaped by adventure, political intrigue, creativity, and audacity. All qualities that would later define some of the most extraordinary buildings in Britain.

Long before he designed Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace, Vanbrugh had already lived a remarkable life. He travelled with the East India Company to Surat, saw action as a naval officer, became involved in the political turmoil surrounding the Glorious Revolution, and was arrested in France at the age of just 24 as a suspected spy. He spent several years imprisoned, including time in the Bastille, an experience that seems only to have sharpened his wit and strengthened his resolve.

On his return to England, Vanbrugh emerged as a leading playwright, celebrated for his witty and controversial comedies. This was before turning, with astonishing confidence, to architecture. Though he had no formal training, his buildings helped define the English Baroque, combining drama and movement on an unprecedented scale. Criticised in his lifetime but admired by later generations, Vanbrugh was eventually hailed by Sir John Soane as "the Shakespeare of Architects," a title that still resonates today.

[Discover more about Vanbrugh on our dedicated Biography page](#)



What is VANBRUGH300?

VANBRUGH300 is a nationwide festival celebrating the life and work of Sir John Vanbrugh. It brings together six of the great houses he designed, alongside museums, churches, scholars, and communities, to explore his life, work, and enduring influence.

Supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and delivered by the Georgian Group in partnership with the houses, VANBRUGH300 places learning and access at its heart. A major strand of the programme offers [free educational experiences for primary schools](#), including visits to Vanbrugh houses with subsidised travel, ensuring that children from a wide range of backgrounds can engage with Britain's architectural and cultural heritage.

Through exhibitions, lectures, performances, and events, the festival invites everyone, from first-time visitors to lifelong enthusiasts, to rediscover Vanbrugh as a creative force whose legacy still shapes the landscape today.



Six Houses, One Extraordinary Legacy

Explore six extraordinary houses taking part in the celebrations, with a programme of exhibitions, lectures and weekend events bringing Vanbrugh's legacy to life.



Castle Howard

Vanbrugh's first major architectural commission, designed for his friend the Earl of Carlisle. Castle Howard announced a bold new style in English architecture, combining grandeur, drama, and movement in a way never seen before.



Blenheim Palace

Designed as a national monument and a ducal residence, Blenheim Palace is Vanbrugh's most famous and controversial work. Monumental in scale and ambition, it represents the height of his architectural confidence and theatrical vision.



Kimbolton Castle

Here, Vanbrugh transformed a medieval castle into a striking classical mansion for the Duke of Manchester, blending strength and elegance while carefully preserving the site's historic character and commanding presence within the landscape.



Stowe House

Vanbrugh contributed to the early development of Stowe, particularly its garden buildings, helping to shape one of the most influential designed landscapes in Britain.



Grimsthorpe Castle

At Grimsthorpe, Vanbrugh reshaped an existing house into a powerful Baroque statement. Its imposing façade remains one of the clearest expressions of his architectural imagination.



Seaton Delaval Hall

Often described as Vanbrugh's masterpiece, Seaton Delaval is bold, austere, and uncompromising - a dramatic culmination of his architectural ideas and one of the most powerful houses of the period.

[Explore the festivities on our dedicated What's On page](#)

Dates for your Diary

- 14 February – [Blueprints of Power](#) opens at Blenheim Palace
- 4 March - [Vanbrugh: The Drama of Architecture](#) opens at Sir John Soane's Museum
- 26 March - A [commemoration service](#) held at St Stephen Wallbrook

This is just the beginning. To explore the full programme, learn more about Vanbrugh, and keep up to date with events across the year, visit [Vanbrugh300.co.uk](#). We're delighted to have you with us as we celebrate an extraordinary life and legacy.

[Explore the full programme at Vanbrugh300.co.uk](#)



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