

Introduction

Robert Blake portraits at [The National Portrait Gallery](#).

Robert Blake at [Westminster Abbey](#).

Mention the British Navy and everyone's heard of Francis Drake and Horatio Nelson but **Robert Blake**? Yet in his lifetime, Blake was a national hero, first as a soldier in the Civil War and then as a naval commander. When he died he was given a prestigious state funeral.

He was one of the first English naval commanders to keep a fleet at sea through the winter. He was amongst the first to develop the technique of naval blockade and amphibious landing. Twice he destroyed fleets in harbour under the guns of shore forts. It was Blake's destruction of the Spanish fleet at Santa Cruz de Tenerife that prompted Nelson to say "*I shall never be the equal of Blake.*"

Robert Blake was above all a leader of men. All commentators are agreed that he was the one English naval commander of his age that could get his captains to obey him. He achieved the love and respect of his men without recourse to the brutal sanctions that were to become the stock in trade of the eighteenth century Navy. In everything Blake maintained humility, humanity and a total dedication to duty. He is the unsung midwife of the British Navy.

Blake Museum celebrates him and the town in which he grew up.

Early Life

Robert Blake, born in 1598, was the eldest child of the large family of well-to-do Bridgwater merchant and landowner Humphrey Blake - both Robert's father and grandfather had been mayors of Bridgwater, and two of his younger brothers were later to fill that office.

A restless man, who loved Bridgwater but could never settle in it, Blake spent most of his life away from the town. His father sent him to get the education of a gentleman at Oxford University, first at St. Alban's Hall and then Wadham College, where he tried and failed to establish himself in an academic career.

Robert lived in Bridgwater for a time after his father's death in 1625. Then, for about ten years, he seems to have been absent from Bridgwater. He may have tried to establish a business in Dorchester - a merchant named Robert Blake was active there around 1629-30. He may have worked at Schiedam in Holland as overseas agent for the family business. Or he may have been living quietly as a Somerset country gentleman at Puriton.

In April 1640 King Charles I called his first parliament for eleven years and Robert Blake was elected as one of the members for Bridgwater. He was one of many MPs committed to cutting back the power of the king. However, the King soon dissolved the short parliament before Robert could make his mark. Blake was not re-elected to the parliament called in November 1640, supplanted by another candidate of higher social status. Up until 1642 Robert Blake's career had been a series of false starts. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Blake found his vocation.

Civil War

Blake joined the Parliamentary Army of Sir John Horner and became a captain in Alexander Popham's regiment. At the defence of Bristol in 1643, he earned a reputation as a determined fighter. He fought on after the parliamentary commander Fiennes had surrendered the city and Prince Rupert, the Royalist commander, was minded to hang him. Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, he was sent to defend Lyme against the royalist army of Prince Maurice. Though not the senior officer, it was Blake who directed the stubborn defence of the town, which saw off far superior numbers.

Blake moved on to Taunton in the late spring of 1644 to raise a new regiment for parliament. The new regiment, in turn, was dispatched to join the army of the Earl of Essex, leaving Blake as Governor of the town with a makeshift force of 1,000. Between October 1644 and July 1645, Taunton endured three sieges, successively blockaded by Edmund Wyndham, Governor of Bridgwater, Sir John Berkley and Lord Goring.

By the end of his heroic defence of Taunton, the town, with the exception of the castle, was all but destroyed and the people starving - but the news had made Blake a hero in London. In November 1645, Blake went on to besiege and capture the last Royalist stronghold in Somerset, Dunster Castle, which surrendered in April 1646.

By the end of the First Civil War Blake was an established figure in the new hierarchy. Governor of Taunton, again MP for Bridgwater, his name appears in both parliamentary and county committees of the time. Staunchly anti-royalist, he was nevertheless a man of conservative social and religious views - typical of the Presbyterian establishment of the time. The growing differences between the army and parliament were an embarrassment to him. He took no part in the trial and execution of the King in January 1649.

General-at-Sea

Less than a month later, Blake was appointed one of three commanders of the English Navy with the title General-at-Sea.

His two colleagues were also men of the South West. Edward Popham, a close friend, was from an important landed Somerset family. Richard Deane, a Devon man, was the commander of the artillery in the New Model Army.

To appoint landsmen to naval commands was quite usual at the time. Only Popham had previous naval experience. More significantly the three were officers and were to share command. At this point the Navy was regarded as unreliable, even disloyal. In 1648, some ships had deserted to the Royalists. Warwick, the parliamentary commander, had a reputation of inaction. What were needed were leaders who were men of action and proven administrators; above all men who could be trusted by both parliament and the army to get the job done.

Pursuit of the Royalists

Blake and Deane spent their first weeks in office issuing orders to make the Navy a reliable fighting unit again. Then, they were off to deal with Prince Rupert's royalist squadron, which they shut up in Kinsale, in southern Ireland. Only one of the three Generals-at-Sea could be spared to continue the blockade - two were needed for other duties. Blake, chosen by lot, stayed out into his first rough winter at sea. He took to his new life and turned down the offer of a very senior military command in Ireland. Twice bad weather drove Blake's squadron from Kinsale. On the second occasion, in October 1649, Rupert escaped and headed for Portugal.

In March 1650 Blake sailed with a fresh fleet to deal with Rupert. The latter had sought safety in Lisbon, where King John of Portugal was sympathetic to the royalist cause. On arriving, Blake attempted to force his way up the River Tagus, only to be fired at by the forts defending Lisbon. He retired to blockade the entrance to the river. To mount a full-scale attack on Rupert in harbour would precipitate war with Portugal so Blake had to content himself with prolonged diplomatic negotiations to persuade King John to force Rupert out to sea.

Rupert made a bid for freedom only to be forced back by Blake. In September, Rupert made a second attempt to break out and there was a direct confrontation between the ships of the opposing admirals. Again, Rupert retreated behind the safety of the Portuguese forts. A week later, Blake's ships were able to attack and capture a number of the incoming Portuguese Brazil fleet. In this action, Robert's brother Captain Benjamin Blake, commanding the *Assurance* distinguished himself.

Shortage of supplies and water forced Blake to abandon the blockade of the Tagus and sail south to Cadiz. Here he encountered a potentially hostile French squadron. Stories of his capture of one of them (the *Jules*, a more powerful ship than Blake's) are part of Blake folklore.

Rupert took the opportunity to slip out of the Tagus and into the Mediterranean, thinking Blake had gone home.

When Blake heard the news, he gave chase. In early November part of Rupert's fleet was forced into Cartagena. Blake was not to be frustrated, as he had been at Lisbon, and wrote directly to the King of Spain. Believing they would be handed over by the Spanish authorities, the royalist ships made a dash for freedom. The attempt was botched and the royalist ships were wrecked. Rupert sought safety in a French port. Though Blake never caught him the royalist admiral was no longer a serious threat.

A few royalist strongholds remained. In 1651 Blake led an expedition to the Scilly Isles, where royalist privateers were preying on both English and Dutch vessels. The English government decided that Blake should take the Scilly Isles before the Dutch did.

Blake ordered an attack on the island of Tresco, the key to the capture of the main island. Winds and currents made the first attempt at landing a failure. Despite having narrowly escaped death from an exploding cannon, Blake directed the second successful landing himself. A month later the Royalist commander, Sir John Grenville, surrendered on generous terms.

The Channel Islands also harboured royalist privateers. Blake was sent with an expedition against Jersey, the most strongly held of the islands. Winds and currents again proved difficult. In worsening weather and fading light Blake sent the boats ashore in a combined landing led by seamen, including his own cousin, Captain William Blake. The royalist positions crumbled and it was only a matter of time before Sir George Carteret surrendered, though not before William Blake's ship was driven onto shore, and wrecked with the loss of all hands.

Mediterranean

In August 1654, the indispensable Blake was sent out to the Mediterranean. France and Spain were at war in Naples. Opinion at home in the corridors of power was divided between those who wanted a confrontation with France for the consistent support that country had given the Royalists and those who favoured war with Spain, the policy which had been traditional since Elizabethan times. In any event, it was in England's interests to see the war between France and Spain prolonged, since while it continued neither was a threat to England.

It is not clear what Blake's precise orders were. There was much secret correspondence between Cromwell and Blake, but we can only guess at its content. It seems that, while Penn was to be sent with an expedition, the "Western Design", to attack Spain in the New World, Blake was to patrol the Straits and the Western Mediterranean to frustrate French actions against the Spanish in Naples and to be on hand should war on Spain be declared. An obvious objective of Blake's mission was to seize the Spanish treasure fleet that came annually from the New World. In a situation of undeclared war the whole mission was a delicate one. It is not surprising that Blake, the most experienced and trustworthy of England's admirals, was given the task.

The presence of Blake's fleet in the Straits did indeed prevent French reinforcements reaching their Mediterranean fleet and deterred the Portuguese from sending their fleet to help the French. On hearing of Blake's arrival in the Mediterranean, the French expedition to Naples retired to Toulon. Blake's first objective had been achieved.

Having been frustrated in one foreign war, Blake now intervened in a second. The Turks and Venetians had been fighting a long war in Crete. The Sultan had sent a squadron to Tunis to persuade its Moslem ruler to throw his fleet behind the attack on Crete. It was not difficult for Blake to find an excuse to attack any Moslem ruler in North Africa, for part of his remit was to free Christian slaves held on the Barbary Coast.

In April 1655, Blake, on his own initiative, attacked the Turkish squadron sheltering at Porto Farina north of Tunis. The larger English ships engaged the shore forts while the frigates went inshore. Boarding parties soon swept away all opposition and all eight Turkish ships were burned. In a confined harbour, with an unfavourable wind, the English ships got to open sea by the novel expedient of 'warping out', i.e. pulling on anchors dropped outside the harbour before entry.

Though the opposition had been feeble and English casualties light, it was a tactic that Blake was to use again against the Spaniards in what was a classic assault on a fleet in harbour. It was just as well that it had been an unequivocal victory, for Blake was almost certainly exceeding his orders. In the event Cromwell was pleased. The victory speeded up the treaty with the neighbouring Moslem power of Algiers and the wholesale release of English, Irish and even

Dutch prisoners who had been held as slaves.

Blake, now free to pursue the Spaniards, set off for the Straits where a large Spanish fleet had put to sea. In August Blake sighted the Spanish fleet off Cadiz but did not attack. The swell was too high so that the lower gun ports could not be opened; his orders were not explicit. Were these Blake's excuses, or did Blake know that the Spaniards were not destined for the West Indies? Cromwell was furious. Blake was ordered to remain out to await and ambush the Spanish Plate fleet. He was in no condition to do so. His ships were "foul" i.e. encrusted with marine growth below the waterline, from being out too long in a warm sea, and therefore slow and unmanageable. Short of food, water and other necessities, and with the crews discontented, Blake took the decision to return home in September.

Blake did have some important successes to show, whilst Penn, who had returned from the West Indies the previous month, had less. In the event Blake's show of strength against the French did spur the French to make a treaty with England.

Dutch Wars

For many years, England had been at odds with Holland over worldwide trading rights. The simmering quarrel boiled over into war in May 1652 when Blake's fleet clashed with that of Tromp off Dover. The Anglo-Dutch War was Blake's real baptism of fire. He and the other English commanders were inexperienced in comparison with Dutch admirals such as Martin Tromp, Michiel de Ruyter and Witte de With. In the conflict the Dutch could not afford to give way, so dependent was their country on overseas trade. Control of the English Channel was hotly contested in a series of huge bloody battles. The scale of the fighting was greater than that with the Spanish Armada. Hundreds of ships were involved and there were terrible casualties.

In numbers the fleets were evenly matched. The Dutch ships were more manoeuvrable but carried lighter fire-power, usually mounting brass guns, as did other European navies at the time. The English ships drew more water and mounted heavier iron cannon. In the treacherous shallow waters of the Narrow Seas the Dutch had the advantage, but where an English ship could close with one or more Dutch vessels in deep water the English ship always carried the day.

Blake was sent to intercept the Dutch merchant fleet from the East Indies off the Shetland Islands. Bad weather struck. Blake kept his fleet intact but the Dutch were scattered to the winds. Briefly the Dutch commander Tromp was in disgrace, and command passed to the brave but unpopular de With. Meanwhile the Dutch Admiral de Ruyter had been sent down the English Channel to accompany the incoming West Indies fleet. In September, having got the better of Ayscue's squadron and given Penn's squadron the slip, de Ruyter neared home. De With brought his fleet out to escort him.

Blake's fleet met that of de With and de Ruyter on 28th September. More by luck than judgement the English ships got among the Dutch, where their superior fire-power did great execution. The Dutch retreated to the safety of their harbours. The Battle of the Kentish Knock revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the English fleet in a large action. Vice Admiral Penn had run aground, Rear Admiral Bourne and Captain Badiley had been left dangerously exposed. Blake and his colleagues still had much to learn.

The spiraling cost of the war and the expansion of the fleet gave the government cause for concern. Some of those in power thought that now the Dutch had been defeated, the war could be ended. The result was that Blake's fleet became much depleted. The seamen's loyalty was in doubt because they had not been paid. Those ships Blake had under his command near Dover had not been refitted. In November Tromp, now restored to command, put to sea to escort a merchant fleet down the English Channel. His warships outnumbered those of Blake by two to one. Blake's captains advised against engaging the Dutch. Blake ordered his fleet to shadow the Dutch fleet as it sailed southwards, but off Dungeness the two fleets clashed. Blake's own ship became detached from the main battle, and the ships at the rear of Blake's fleet failed to engage. Darkness brought an end to the action, but not before the English fleet lost two warships. The Dutch got their merchant fleet away safely and, in effect, now had control of the Narrow Seas.

The defeat of Dungeness brought bitter recriminations. Blake insisted on a court of enquiry and offered to resign. Six captains, including his brother Benjamin, were disciplined. In the event Robert did not resign and four of the six

captains (including Benjamin Blake) were eventually reinstated. The real lessons of the Battles of the Kentish Knock and Dungeness were learned. New Fighting Instructions and Sailing Instructions were drawn up. The scope for individual captains to interpret their orders began to be curtailed. The use of hired-armed merchant ships was discontinued, since these could not always be relied upon in the heat of action. A new disciplinary code, the Articles of War, was adopted. A new Admiralty Committee was appointed. At Blake's insistence, the pay of the seamen was raised and prize money increased. Parliament voted money to re-provision the fleet.

In February 1653 Tromp began to escort the incoming Dutch merchant fleet up the English Channel. The English admirals were determined to prevent the Dutch making home port. However, the Dutch fleet found the English fleet squadrons scattered and sailed in to take advantage. Blake and Deane in the *Triumph* were hard pressed in the middle of the fighting, while Penn's squadron vainly tried to come to their aid. The prompt action of John Lawson, Blake's Vice Admiral of the Red, saved the day and justified the reorganisation of command after Dungeness.

Monck's squadron arrived and, in deep water off Portland, the English fleet pounded the Dutch warships, whilst Monck's frigates chased the Dutch merchantmen. The battle continued for two days up the Channel as Tromp tried to bring his charges home, until eventually he was forced to seek safety in shallow waters under Cape Griz Nez where the English could not follow.

It was a victory, but not as complete as it might have been. The casualties on both sides were terrible. At least five Dutch ships were sunk, and one flag officer and twelve captains killed. A news sheet of the time gave a graphic description of the captured Dutch prizes that arrived in English ports:

The English suffered too, particularly on the *Triumph*, Blake's flagship. Amongst the eighty casualties on this ship alone were its Captain and Blake's secretary, both killed, and Blake himself, grievously wounded in the thigh. Infection set in and Blake was put ashore. Ignoring the advice of his doctors, he returned to work at the Admiralty. In June, he gathered a makeshift squadron and went to the aid of Monck who was engaged with the Dutch fleet off the Gabbard Shoal.

Blake's arrival had a considerable psychological effect - the sight of his flag raised a cheer in the English ships and convinced the Dutch to seek the safety of shallow water.

Blake's health broke. He was not expected to live and there was speculation about his successor. This time it took his body longer to recover and he was absent from the final conclusive victory over the Dutch at the Battle of Scheveningen in July 1653.

Last Voyage

Blake had scarcely returned from his previous voyage when he was named to lead a new expedition against Spain. Blake, whose health had been steadily deteriorating, was not fit for sea and asked for a colleague to share his responsibilities. Cromwell appointed one of his close supporters, Edward Mountagu. The two shipmates were very different. However, Mountagu, though much younger and of aristocratic birth, was eager to learn from the dour and ailing republican and quickly charmed his way into the older man's affections.

It was important to get the fleet to sea. There was discontent in the Channel fleet. To prevent any mutiny, money was voted to pay the seamen's arrears and Vice Admiral Lawson, the focus of the discontent, was named second in command of Blake's expedition, to get him out of harm's way. However, Lawson and three captains resigned rather than sail for Spain.

The fleet sailed in March 1656. Blake and Mountagu contemplated an attack on Cadiz and the seizure of Gibraltar, but these ideas were abandoned. Soon the problems of supplying the fleet again became urgent. The English government succeeded in making a treaty with Portugal, thus giving the English friendly ports from which to supply the fleet. Concluding the treaty was not without difficulties. There was an attack on the English representative in Lisbon. Blake and Mountagu waited with increasing impatience for the promised compensation for losses sustained as a result of Portuguese actions in 1650, when Blake had last

visited Lisbon.

It became clear that there would be no dynamic strike against the Spanish fleet and a long blockade was in prospect. Frustrated, Cromwell ordered some of the ships home. Blake tightened the blockade. He sent squadrons to attack Vigo and Malaga. Finally, in September part of a small incoming Spanish treasure fleet was intercepted by Stayner's squadron and captured. Mountagu came home with the larger ships and the treasure, while Blake stayed out through the winter to maintain the blockade and await the arrival of the next Plate fleet. His health was failing, the winter weather was bad and the fleet was short of supplies, but in February 1657, his patience was rewarded with the news that the Plate fleet was approaching. His captains clamoured to give chase. Blake would have none of it. Twice he forestalled them. Only in April, when he was certain that the Spanish treasure ships were at anchor at Santa Cruz de Tenerife in the Canary Islands, and that neither the Spanish battle fleet in Cadiz nor a marauding Dutch squadron under de Ruyter would go to their aid, did he give the order to abandon the blockade of the Spanish coast.

The Spanish ships at Santa Cruz were anchored under the guns of the shore forts. Blake used the same strategy as he had employed at Porto Farina. He selected thirteen larger frigates to sail inshore to attack the ships at anchor, while the remainder of the fleet, including all the more powerful ships, engaged the guns of the shore forts. The captains asked that Stayner lead the attack.

The Spanish resistance was much stiffer than that encountered at Porto Farina. Stayner's ships had to suffer withering fire as they slowly manoeuvred into position to make best use of the superior English gunnery. Once the English did open fire, they made short work of the smaller Spanish ships. The larger Spanish ships were soon caught in the crossfire of Stayner's inshore squadron and the main fleet under Blake in the bay. One by one the other Spanish ships were boarded and set on fire.

It now remained for the inshore squadron to warp out against the wind. Against orders five captains attempted to leave with prizes. Three times Blake ordered them to desist before his order was obeyed and the Spanish ships were fired. All the English ships, many of them badly damaged, managed to drag themselves to safety.

It was Blake's last and greatest victory. The entire Spanish squadron of sixteen ships was destroyed under the guns of their own shore forts, at a cost of two hundred English killed and wounded. More importantly it was a victory for caution, clear planning and discipline. Blake left little to chance, and stubbornly resisted his captains' clamour to chase pell-mell in search of prizes. Earlier he had not the judgement or the control of his captains to achieve this. This was the mature Blake - authoritative and authoritarian - whom Nelson (who failed in a similar attack on Santa Cruz) admired.

In July 1657, the dying man was allowed to return home. His one wish was to set foot on English soil once more. Though his ship, the *George*, was diverted to Plymouth, the old man was not to get his wish. He died as the ship entered Plymouth Sound on 7th August, issuing instructions to the last to help his comrades left blockading the coast of Spain.

Secretary of State Thurloe wrote: *"A very worthy and brave man is gone and a faithful servant of his highness"*

Blake's body was embalmed and carried on his nephew Samuel's ship to Greenwich to lie in state. From there it was taken up the Thames to London in a long procession of barges for a grand state funeral and buried in King Henry VII's Chapel in Westminster Abbey.

In Memoriam

A solitary, shy man, who only relaxed in the presence of a few familiar friends, Blake's letters reveal a man of action obsessed with getting things done. He could not play the courtier, but could write with authority to kings. He never married and was uneasy in the presence of women. A devoted public servant, his work was his testament. He never betrayed the confidence his various public masters placed in him. His relationship with his wayward captains was sometimes tempestuous but he wore them down and made them obey him. His men adored him. A devout, if rather austere, Christian, he died at peace with his God.

Blake's body, together with those of twenty or so others of the great and good of the English Republic, was not destined to remain in the Abbey. After the Restoration of the Monarchy, King Charles II had them disinterred and reburied in an unmarked common grave in St. Margaret's Churchyard, Westminster. So began a deliberate attempt to bury the achievements of the English Republic and to wipe out the memory of Robert Blake.

Regrettably this almost succeeded, for Blake has never achieved the recognition he deserves. But in the end his achievements, and those of his colleagues, do shine through, for during the Interregnum the English Navy established itself as a world power. The organisation of the Navy that Nelson was to inherit was laid; the traditions were set. And central to all that was Robert Blake