



BOROUGH OF BRIDGWATER

IN COMMEMORATION OF
ADMIRAL ROBERT BLAKE

(1598 - 1657)



from LORD HYLTON,
HER MAJESTY'S LIEUTENANT FOR THE COUNTY OF SOMERSET

ROBERT BLAKE was one of Somerset's greatest sons. Born and bred in Bridgwater, he was educated at Oxford and thereafter led the life of a quiet country gentleman until his 40th year, when he was returned as a Member for Bridgwater to the Short Parliament of 1640. In the Civil War he served the Parliamentary side with great distinction at Bristol, Lyme, Taunton and other battles in the West Country. At the age of 50 he was called upon to go to sea and to reinvigorate the Fleet, then in a state of disaffection and weakness. As "General-at-Sea" his disinterested patriotism and ardent support of the Parliamentary cause, great courage and tactical skill brought him his greatest glory. The stories of his defeat of the great Dutch Admiral Tromp after two years of fighting; his boldness and daring at Tunis and Santa Cruz de Tenerife and his death at sea within sight of Plymouth will always be remembered, especially in the County of Somerset.



Photo : Douglas Allen

Statue of Admiral Blake at the Cornhill, Bridgwater



Photo : Douglas Allen

from THE WORSHIPFUL THE MAYOR OF BRIDGWATER
(ALDERMAN W. OSCAR COATE, J.P.)

IT IS WITH GREAT PRIDE that the Borough of Bridgwater commemorates the three hundredth anniversary of the death of Admiral Robert Blake, General-at-Sea. This great man was born in the town and would have wished to end his days here but after his last great victory he did not live to see his birthplace again. It must have been a great disappointment to our ancestors in Bridgwater that they were denied the privilege and pleasure of welcoming home their hero.

Tribute is paid elsewhere in these pages to his industry, his patriotism and his devotion to the Navy, and as Mayor of Bridgwater I am pleased that this generation should remember with pride, as previous generations have done, the tremendous contribution which Blake made to the naval traditions of our country.



Commemorative Plaque in Westminster Abbey, designed by Frank Dobson, R.A., whose original drawing has been kindly lent to the Museum by the Leicester Galleries.

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Portrait study by Karch of Ottawa

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from THE FIRST SEA LORD, ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET
EARL MOUNTBATTEN OF BURMA,

K.G., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E., G.C.V.O., D.S.O., D.S.C.

IT IS NOT GIVEN TO MANY MEN to be a vivid memory 300 years after their death. But Robert Blake, the tercentenary of whose death falls on 7th August this year, is one of the naval immortals. He is one of those whom we mention in the same breath with Drake, Hawke, and Nelson; and of him we remember not only his great naval battles against Tromp and de Ruyter, but also his untiring work in organisation and administration of the English fleet. With him the Navy began to approach more nearly the supremely efficient fighting force which it later became, and it is on the foundations which he laid down that those who came after could build so strongly and securely.

If Robert Blake was one of our greatest sailors, he was also one of our greatest Englishmen. "I will have you know, and the whole world know, that none but an Englishman shall chastise an Englishman," he wrote to the Governor of Malaga who had taken action against an errant English sailor. This was Blake's creed, and he had the skill, the means and the fortitude to maintain it wherever he went with his fleet.

He died, as probably every great sailor would wish to die, on board his flagship in sight of Plymouth Sound while returning home from his most resounding success at sea. The most precious memory we have of him today is perhaps not so much of his naval skill, which was great, but of his chivalrous character and unselfish patriotism in a period when the destiny of England was in the making.



Photo : A. F. Brown

The Blake Memorial Window in St. Margaret's Church, Westminster. The three lower lights show respectively: Blake at Malaga, his body rowed up the Thames in state from Greenwich to Westminster Abbey and the re-interment of his body in St. Margaret's Churchyard.

The original design for this window can be seen in the Admiral Blake Museum.



from VICE-ADMIRAL SIR GEOFFREY BLAKE, K.C.B., D.S.O.
THE FIRST SEA LORD has given you a message which pays a great tribute to the memory of Robert Blake. Should any of you be in London this year I would suggest that you take the opportunity of visiting Westminster Abbey. There, you will find the Memorial Tablet to Robert Blake, which, as the senior Naval representative of the Blake family, I had the honour to unveil in 1945. The inscription on the Memorial reads as follows :—

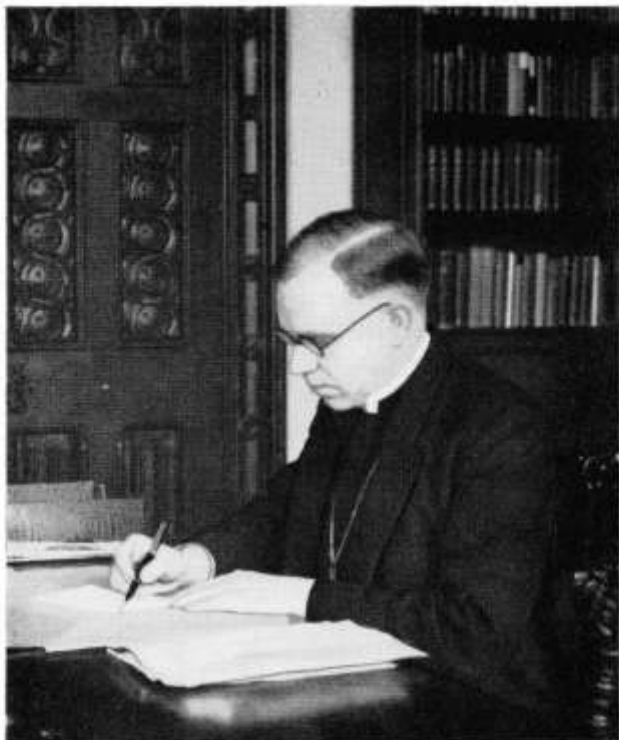
“ In memory of Robert Blake, Admiral and General of the Fleet, who trusting in God and in the valour of his countrymen, wrought great victories for England at sea and worthily maintained the honour of the nation.

He was born in 1598 at Bridgwater and died during his last voyage home on 7th August, 1657.

One who desired no greater worldly happiness than to be accounted honest and faithful in his employment.”

You will recollect that Admiral Blake was buried in Westminster Abbey in Henry the Seventh's Chapel with great pomp and ceremony after lying in state at Greenwich and being conveyed by barge up the Thames to Westminster. On the restoration his tomb was desecrated and all that remained was a small flagstone in the Nave to show where he was buried. At the request of the Blake Memorial Committee, presided over by the Earl of Sandwich, the Dean of Westminster kindly allowed this Memorial Tablet to be erected. The inscription, which I have quoted, is a worthy tribute to this heroic sailor and soldier, whose family were natives of this town and whose death, which occurred three hundred years ago, we are now commemorating.

from THE RIGHT
REVEREND THE
LORD BISHOP OF
BATH AND WELLS
(H. W. BRADFIELD, D.D.)



ADMIRAL BLAKE was a true son of Bridgwater and of Somerset, who served not only his county but his country faithfully and well in his day and generation.

He was born of a family notable in the annals of Bridgwater, and received his education at Wadham College, Oxford, which has its own peculiar and unique association with this county. He was intended for a professional career, but largely as a result of the turbulence of the times in which he lived he found himself serving in the Navy. This was providential for England: the record of his service afloat gave to the British Navy a position and importance which has never since then been more than momentarily relinquished. In the eyes of naval historians his record is comparable to that of Drake and of Nelson.

After his arduous years of service he asked nothing better than to return to Bridgwater and the West Country, and to enjoy the Poldens and the Quantocks and his home town of Bridgwater once more. But it was not to be, and his life came to its end as his fleet returned to Plymouth in 1657.

It must be a proud moment for the Borough of Bridgwater and the County of Somerset to commemorate the 300th Anniversary of the death of this great Englishman and great sailor, to whose foresight and exertions our own day and generation must still owe much.



from THE
WORSHIPFUL
THE MAYOR
OF TAUNTON
(COUNCILLOR
R. F. WINCKWORTH,
J.P.)

Photo : Regent Studios, Taunton

I AM HAPPY to have this opportunity of paying tribute to the memory of Robert Blake, a native of your town and a great Englishman. His courage and daring, his honesty and blunt straightforward manners, and his passionate support of the cause of freedom and justice, have been—and will always remain—an inspiration to the people of these islands.

You can proudly claim him as a Bridgwater man. We share your pride in that he was also a man of Somerset. Moreover, he has a secure and glorious place in the history of our town. His successful defence of Taunton during the Civil Wars, against overwhelming odds, and with the town little more than a heap of ruins, was a turning-point in that great struggle for democratic freedom; and true, I like to believe, to what is finest in the character of the Somerset man.

When the situation in the town was most desperate, and the enemy called upon him to surrender, Blake's reply was that he had four pairs of boots and would eat three of them before he surrendered. Such lighthearted acceptance of fearful odds is now regarded throughout the world as characteristically British. What we should remember on this occasion is that it is men like Robert Blake who have made it so.



from THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE EARL OF SANDWICH

IT GIVES ME GREAT PLEASURE to contribute a word or two on the occasion of the Tercentenary of Admiral Robert Blake. I am especially interested in this great man owing to the fact that my ancestor Edward Montagu, afterwards created Earl of Sandwich by King Charles II, was chosen by Cromwell to serve with him as Joint Admiral in 1656, the year before Admiral Blake's death. Some years ago the Cromwell Association conceived the idea of a memorial being set up to Admiral Blake's honour in Westminster Abbey and I was asked with Admiral Keyes to serve on the Committee. I had the good fortune to secure the services of Frank Dobson, the well-known sculptor, to carry out the work, a picture of which is shown in this book. The Admiral's chief memorial, however, is of course the proud history of the British Navy, to the building up of which he may be said to have given the first contribution.

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

- SATURDAY,
15TH JUNE, 1957. Open-air Dance in Blake Gardens, 8 p.m.—Midnight. Band of the Somerset Light Infantry. If wet, the dance will be held in the Town Hall.
- SUNDAY,
16TH JUNE, 1957 3 p.m. Service of Commemoration to be held in the Parish Church of St. Mary, Bridgwater. The Bishop of Bath and Wells will give an address.
4 p.m. (approx.) Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey Blake, K.C.B., D.S.O., will lay a wreath at the foot of the statue of Admiral Blake in the Cornhill.
4.15 p.m. (approx.) Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey Blake will take the salute at a March Past of Service units and uniformed organisations.
- MONDAY,
17TH JUNE, 1957. 11 a.m. His Worship the Mayor will unveil a Diorama showing the Battle of Santa Cruz and open a Special Exhibition at the Blake Museum.
12.45 p.m. Civic Luncheon at the Town Hall, preceded by a Reception by the Mayor and Mayoress.
2.30 p.m. Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey Blake will open the Blake County Secondary School.



Blake Gardens

Photo : S. W. Palfrey

ROBERT BLAKE OF BRIDGWATER (1598-1657)

IN THE PROUD ANNALS of British naval history the name of Robert Blake comes second only to that of Nelson. He may be regarded as the founder of the British naval tradition. For he was given the task of organising the Commonwealth navy, which starting from scratch, was developed into the most formidable striking force the world had yet seen. Undoubtedly the regulations which governed this vast new fleet and the tactics which were devised for its captains to follow, were largely the work of this rugged genius. His whole career is one long story of devotion to duty and tenacity of purpose.

There is little in his early career which points to his great future. The Blakes came originally from Tolland near Taunton. Some of them crossed the Quantocks and farmed at Plainsfield and at Wembdon. Robert's father was a merchant in Bridgwater. The boy was born in 1598 (he was the eldest son in a large family) and was eventually sent to Oxford University. His education was cut short, however, by his father's death in 1625 which compelled him to come home and take over the business. Although nothing certain is known of the next few years of his life, it seems reasonable to suppose that he learned to handle a ship (his own) and that he travelled abroad. This at least would help to explain why Cromwell suddenly appointed him to take over the navy at the close of the Civil War.

In peace time Blake had already won the esteem of his fellow townsmen for he was their M.P. in 1640 (in the Short Parliament)—but unlike John Pym (who was born at Brymore House, Cannington) his career was not to be in the sphere of politics. Blake was a man of action and when the Civil War broke out he took command of a company. He distinguished himself in dogged defence, first in a fort at Bristol, then in charge of the little sea port of Lyme Regis, and finally in the long and heroic defence of Taunton. A lesser man would have given up Taunton when he saw the townsmen starving and the houses battered to ruins. But when he could not hold the ruins, he retired into the castle and hung on grimly with faith in his cause. "We are resolved to the last drop of our blood to maintain the quarrel we have undertaken," was his uncompromising answer to the summons to surrender. And his cause triumphed.

In the hour of victory he was appointed one of the "Generals at Sea" and his first task was to take command of the handful of ships which had come over to the Parliament. With them he proceeded to chase Prince Rupert off the sea—a hunt which took him to the Mediterranean. Then he seized the Scillies—a formidable task, involving what we should now call "combined operations." Then as the great ships came out from the busy shipyards he found himself at the head of a new and powerful fleet, with which Cromwell challenged the naval might of the Dutch Republic. The Dutch admirals were all in the first rank of naval commanders and were confident of holding control of the seas.

Yet when war broke out in 1652 they were worsted by Blake in their first three encounters: in the Downs, in the North Sea, and off the Kentish Knock. At Dungeness he suffered his only defeat. Small wonder, for after taking on odds of two to one he found that half his ships had refused to go in. After the battle there was some plain speaking and some ruthless pruning. Even his own brother Benjamin was dismissed. Never again did one of Blake's captains shirk the tasks he was expected to do. In 1653, attacking with renewed strength, Blake mauled a great Dutch fleet all the way up the Channel from Portland to Beachy Head where it disintegrated. But Blake was badly wounded. His great spirit forced him to accompany Monk who beat another Dutch fleet off the Gabbard. But when the final action was fought against Tromp (his great Dutch rival) Blake was trying to recuperate his strength, lying in his house at Knowle, just outside his home town. Soon he was to gaze

across the fields at the spire of St. Mary's church for the last time. In spite of his failing health he put back to sea and accomplished two further great tasks which were demanded of him.

The first was to smoke the Barbary pirates out of their strongholds in the Mediterranean. This he did—so that British ships might go upon their lawful occasions. The attack on Porto Farina 1654 became a classic in the annals of naval warfare. The second was to humble the Spaniards in 1657. At Santa Cruz in the Canaries he again forced his way under the guns of land defences and seized the Spanish treasure fleet. This blow crippled the Spanish finances and practically ended the war.

But Blake's last battle was fought. He had worn himself out in the service of his country. Setting course for home he died at sea—within sight of the English coast off Plymouth.

So ended a chapter of British history—a chapter of which Bridgwater is rightly proud. The statue of Blake which was unveiled on the Cornhill on October 4th 1900, is surely a fine tribute to his mighty spirit.

J. F. LAWRENCE.

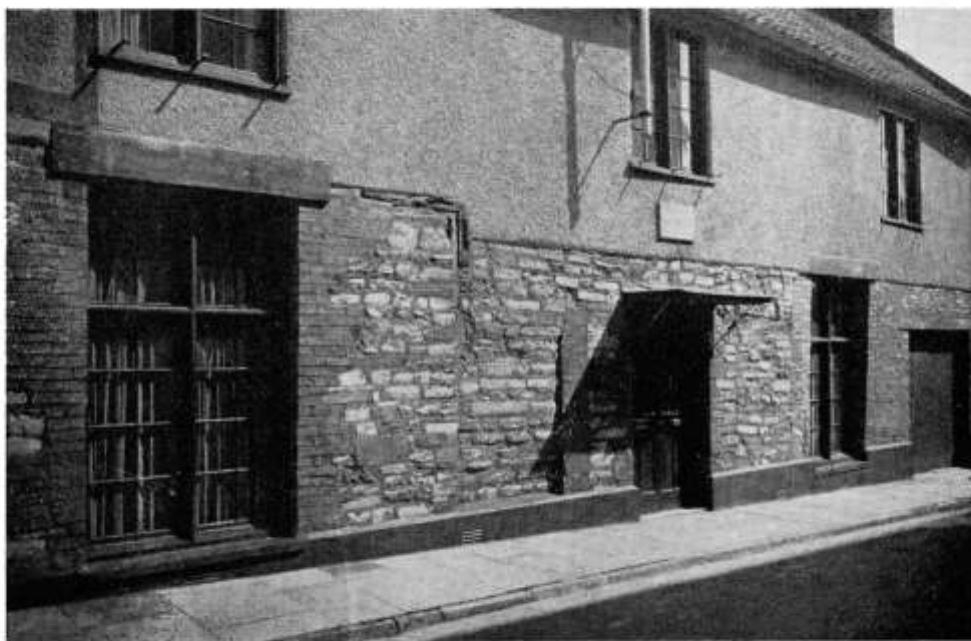


Photo: S. W. Palfrey

Admiral Blake Museum, reputed to be his birthplace

THE BLAKE EXHIBITION

THE EXHIBITION WILL BE FOUND in the Admiral Blake Museum which was opened in 1924. The building itself is of considerable interest because local tradition has always insisted that Blake was born here. It appears to be a sixteenth century house but later alterations have made it impossible for us to imagine it as Blake would have seen it. Nevertheless some of its original features have been preserved. On the walls of the Blake Room are several graffiti done on the original plaster. They are evidently the work of children and one recalls that Blake was one of a very large family. The drawings represent ships, a spinning wheel, a horseman, and a high-heeled shoe. Recently the removal of a cupboard revealed several more drawings of shoes, a date (1620), and a large drawing of a man in Stuart dress.

The exhibits illustrate various phases of Robert Blake's career. His connection with Bridgwater is seen in the photograph of the entry of his birth in the Parish Register, and in the original Receipt for £100 which he left to be distributed amongst the poor of the Borough.

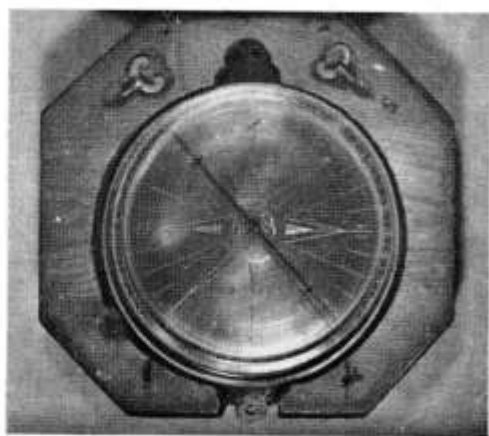
There is a good collection of photographs of Blake portraits. It should be remembered, however, that modern historians think that there is only one genuine portrait of the Admiral. This is a miniature which belongs to the National Maritime Museum.

Blake, as a Colonel in the Puritan Army, played a conspicuous part in the Civil War. The exhibition includes plans of some of the sieges in which he took part.

Most of the exhibits, however, deal with his career at sea—and rightly so. There are engravings, prints, and facsimiles showing pictures of the battles which he fought, plans of naval actions, and early views of Lisbon. There are also portraits of leading naval commanders and rulers of the Commonwealth Period.

The Compass is probably the most treasured possession of the Museum. According to family tradition it is Blake's own compass. It is certainly a ship's compass of about 1650—a thing sufficiently rare in itself.

There is a very fine scale model of the type of ship which Blake sailed.



Blake's Compass

Photo: R. C. Sansom

Another important exhibit is a silver medallion struck in Holland to honour Blake's great rival Admiral Tromp. It is a very fine example of an art which flourished with great vigour in the seventeenth century.

One or two original letters (Orders signed by Blake) can be seen on the walls. Photographs of other documents (presented by the National Maritime Museum) will also be displayed during the Tercentenary Celebrations. The National Maritime Museum have also lent two prints of portraits of Blake and one of the Battle off Portland, 1653.

The Blake Exhibition—*cont.*

The diorama which was constructed for the Tercentenary Exhibition shows Blake's final action at Santa Cruz.

In 1657 the Commonwealth honoured Blake with a state funeral. There was a procession of barges from Greenwich to London. This is the subject of a stained glass window at Westminster. A preliminary window constructed by the artist, Edward Frampton (1889), is included in the Exhibition.

J. F. LAWRENCE.



Interior of Museum

Photo: Douglas Allen

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THE DEATH OF ADMIRAL BLAKE

(August 7th, 1657)

Laden with spoil of the South, fulfilled with the glory of achievement,
And freshly crowned with never dying fame,
Sweeping by shores where the names are the names of the victories of England,
Across the Bay the squadron homeward came.

Proudly they came, but their pride was the pomp of a funeral at midnight,
When dreader yet the lonely morrow looms;
Few are the words that are spoken, and faces are gaunt beneath the torchlight
That does but darken more the nodding plumes.

Low on the field of his fame, past hope lay the Admiral triumphant,
And fain to rest him after all his pain;
Yet for the love that he bore to his own land, ever unforgotten,
He prayed to see the Western hills again.

Fainter than stars in a sky long gray with the coming of the daybreak,
Or sounds of night that fade when night is done,
So in the death-dawn faded the splendour and loud renown of warfare,
And life of all its longings kept but one.

" Oh! to be there for an hour when the shade draws in beside the hedgerows,
And falling apples wake the drowsy noon;
Oh! for the hour when the elms grow sombre and human in the twilight,
And gardens dream beneath the rising moon.

" Only to look once more on the land of the memories of childhood,
Forgetting weary winds and barren foam:
Only to bid farewell to the combe and the orchard and the moorland,
And sleep at last among the fields of home! "

So he was silently praying, till now, when his strength was ebbing faster,
The Lizard lay before them faintly blue;
Now on the gleaming horizon the white cliffs laughed along the coast-line,
And now the forelands took the shapes they knew.

There lay the Sound and the Island with green leaves down beside the water,
The town, the Hoe, the masts, with sunset fired—
Dreams! ay, dreams of the dead! for the great heart faltered on the threshold,
And darkness took the land his soul desired.

HENRY NEWBOLT.

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