

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL  
BLAKE MUSEUM



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## H. M. S. BLAKE



74-gun third-rate ship of the line

Four ships of the Royal Navy have carried the name HMS Blake in honour of General - at - Sea Robert Blake who was, until eclipsed by Horatio Nelson, the most famous British naval leader.

The first *Blake*, launched in 1808, was a 74-gun third-rate ship of the line. She was sold in 1816.

The second *Blake* was originally *Bombay*, launched in 1808, renamed in 1819, and broken up in 1855.

A screw driven 91-gun second rate ship of the line was ordered in 1860 under the name HMS *Blake*, but construction was cancelled in 1863.

The third *Blake* was a 12-gun twin screw cruiser, launched at Chatham in 1889. She was of 1900 tons, 20,000 horsepower, and 22 knots speed. Her length, beam, and draught were 375ft, 65ft, and 25ft. In 1889 the *Blake* commanded by Captain Alfred Leigh Winsloe, proceeded to Sierra Leone, and

assumed the duties of senior naval officer during the suppression of the Sierra Leone Rebellion. Six separate columns of troops crushed the rising, and the navy had a little share in the operations. But had the Navy not been ready at hand, and extremely active at the beginning of the disorders, terrible atrocities might have resulted. The *Blake* was eventually converted into a seagoing depot for torpedo-boat destroyers. She served as the depot ship for the 2nd destroyer flotilla of the Grand Fleet and then to the 11th Destroyer flotilla. After the war she was scrapped on the 9th June 1922.



The third HMS *Blake*

HMS *Blake* was a light cruiser of the Tiger class of the Royal Navy, the last of the traditional Royal Navy gun-armed cruisers in the 20th century.

She was ordered in 1942 as one of the *Minotaur* class of light cruisers. They had a low construction priority due to more pressing requirements for other ship types during World War II, particularly anti-submarine craft. *Blake* was laid down in 1942. In 1944, *Blake* was renamed *Tiger*, then *Blake* again in 1945, the year she was launched partially constructed at the

Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Company at Govan, by Lady Jean Blake, wife of Vice Admiral Sir Geoffrey Blake. Construction of *Blake* was suspended in 1946 and she was laid up at Gareloch.

### Construction and commissioning

In 1954, construction of *Blake* resumed, but to a new design. The new design was approved in 1951, but construction did not resume until 1954. She would have fully automatic 6 inch-guns in twin high-angle mounts with each gun capable of shooting 20 rounds per minute, and a secondary battery of fully automatic 3-inch guns which delivered 90 rounds per minute per gun. She would have no lighter anti-aircraft armament or torpedo tubes. Each 6 inch and 3 inch mounting had its own director, linked to a dedicated radar on the director. On 18 March 1961, *Blake* finally commissioned into the Royal Navy, to date the last traditional cruiser to do so. Just two years later, she was placed in reserve.



HMS *Blake* before conversion to a helicopter carrying vessel

### Later career

In 1969 *Blake* deployed to Gibraltar along with other Royal Navy units in order to 'fly the flag' in response to Spanish hostility following the closure of the Gibraltar-Spain border by General Franco. Also in 1969 a Royal Air Force Harrier jet landed on *Blake*. In 1971, she was present during the emotional withdrawal from Malta, supporting the commando carrier *Bulwark*. In 1977 she took part in the Fleet Review of the Royal Navy during the Silver Jubilee celebrations for Queen Elizabeth II, which took place off Spithead, site of many Fleet Reviews.

The cruiser was host to the Westland Wessex HAS.3 helicopters of 820 Naval Air Squadron from June 1969 and these were replaced by the Westland Sea King HAS.1 helicopter in December 1972, continuing until *Blake* was withdrawn from service in 1979, when the ship became the last ship in the Royal Navy to fire a six-inch gun. Her large crew made her an expensive ship to operate and maintain.

### Conversion

From 1965 to 1969, she underwent a major conversion to become a helicopter and command cruiser. This to a reconstruction included replacing the after 6 inch and 3 inch mounts with a flight deck and hangar.



HMS *Blake* after conversion to a helicopter carrying vessel

She also had new radars and taller funnels. She had excellent command, control, and communications facilities installed, and found use as a flagship to task groups. The refit was very expensive; during the conversion a major fire broke out causing considerable damage and raising the costs still further. There were concerns that the money used to convert *Blake*, and her sister ship *Tiger* to helicopter cruisers drained much needed resources better used elsewhere.

### Decommissioning

*Blake* was refitted in 1980, and due to a defence manpower draw-down that resulted in manpower shortages, became part of the Standby Squadron in HMNB Chatham. The advent of the Falklands War led to a rapid ship survey in early April and work was immediately begun to recommission her and sister ship *Tiger* for service in the conflict, but work was stopped on both in late May when it was clear neither could be ready in time to

deploy. Chile showed some interest in acquiring both her, and *Tiger* in June-July, but a proposed deal did not go through for the ships, despite both being in good shape and that a good deal of reactivation work had been accomplished the previous April-May. She was sold for scrap on 25 August 1982 to Shipbreaking (Queenborough) Ltd for £210,000.

She was the last cruiser serving with the Royal Navy upon her decommissioning. On 29 October 1982 she was towed from Chatham for Cairnryan, arriving 7 November 1982.

The ship's bell of *Blake* has been preserved and was on display in Saint Mary's Church, Bridgwater, until 2016, when it was transferred to the Blake Museum, Bridgwater. The vessel's name plate is displayed at the Robert Blake Science College, Bridgwater.

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