

**ROBERT BLAKE — HIS BIRTH AND PARENT-AGE — EARLY ASSOCIATIONS — HIS STAND AGAINST RELIGIOUS PERSECUTIONS — PARLIAMENTARY CAREER — HE ENTERS THE NAVY — DISTINGUISHED EXPLOITS — THE GALLANT ADMIRAL'S DEATH AND BURIAL — HIS WILL.**

THE history of Bridgwater is inseparably connected with that of Robert Blake, one of the greatest of England's naval commanders. He was born in this town in August, 1599, the register of St. Mary's Church showing that he received the rite of baptism on Sept. 27 of that year. The house where he was born, and in which he passed his youth, and in which when at home he lived in the full blaze of his renown, still stands in what was formerly a part of St. Mary-street, but now appropriately known as Blake-street.

It is an old and interesting structure, two stories high, built of blue lias stone, with walls of immense thickness, heavy stone stairs, oak wainscots and decorated ceilings ; altogether a habitation of Tudor origin, and of unmistakable importance in those times. The gardens, bounded by Durleigh brook, the River Parret, and the highway, were about two acres in extent. Though it stood within a few steps of the Church, and the Cornhill, the mansion nevertheless enjoyed a complete rural seclusion, while the windows looked over a wide expanse of valley away to the sunny slopes of the Quantock Hills.

It was in this secluded garden, by that old stone bridge among the ships, native and foreign, which at times lay in the stream and under the guns of the grim fortress, that the ruddy-faced, curly-headed boy, Robert Blake, played with his brothers and sisters (he was the eldest of 14 — twelve brothers and two sisters). From his father's garden, where fruit trees mingled with flower-beds, scented plants with vegetables for the kitchen, he could daily see the extraordinary flow of tide known as the bore ; and the conversation of his father, Humphrey Blake, "*one of the most active of Severn merchants in the latter part of the 16th century,*" and of his father's friends, probably contributed in no slight degree to fix his young mind on the sea and its affairs. On his return from his voyages doubtless many were the tales of perilous encounters, chance escapes, and valorous deeds which the elder Blake had to tell his friends and children during the dark evenings of winter, or as the latter clustered round him in the warm sunshine in the old summer-house in the garden.

The successful merchant in those days had a life of peril and adventure ; he manned his own ship and sailed with his argosy, and had to hold his own against or keep out of the way of the unscrupulous and at times most formidable corsairs. Such stories were no doubt a part of the food on which the imagination of young Blake, silent and thoughtful from his childhood, was fed in the old mansion at Bridgwater.\* The rudiments of a more regular education he obtained at King James's Grammar School, then considered one of the best foundations of the kind in England. This edifice has long since disappeared, but by a curious coincidence it was replaced by another school of similar aims and character, which was for some years conducted in the house in which the Admiral was born. At school he made decent progress. The bent of his ambition led to the field of literature, and such were his attainments that at sixteen he proceeded to Oxford, and matriculated as a member of St. Alban's Hall, in 1615. He afterwards removed to Wadham College, and completed his education, taking several honours.

In the meantime unsuccessful speculations, and maritime ventures had almost brought ruin on his father. In the ninth year of his residence at Oxford, and in the 27th of his age, Robert was called to his father's bedside, and after a severe struggle with his wishes and inclinations gave up his long cherished idea of a literary career, took up his abode in the old house at Bridgwater as the actual head of the family. His father died in November of the following year, and when affairs were settled, and Plainsfield (an estate at Over Stowey, the inheritance of the Admiral's mother) sold, an income remained of about £200 a year. On this sum the elder brother successfully achieved the task of rearing, educating and placing the whole of the long family, and had the satisfaction of seeing them do well in life.\*\*

For some considerable time after his return from college his time and talents were chiefly occupied with the care of his aged mother — who outlived her husband thirteen years, seeing her youngest son Alexander arrive at the age of manhood — and in the education and settlement of his brothers and sisters. But he was a keen observer of public events, a politician by nature and early training; and as the action of the Court became suspicious to the Protestants and menacing to the nation's civil liberties, he bent the whole force of his genius to create and-organise in his native county a party of resistance to its measures. Nor was

this task very difficult. Commercial habits and superior education had already given a strong Liberal bias to the men of that district, and the instinct and ancient and unreasoning loyalty which still grew there were rudely disturbed by the King's friends. The policy of Laud, carried out in the immediate vicinity of the town, finding its victims in men generally respected, gave force and edge to the keen invective of the future Admiral. Nor was the spur of private resentment long wanting. Bishop Pierce, who, after an interval, succeeded Laud in the See of Bath and Wells, resolved to put down the famous lectures with a heavy hand, and suspended Mr. Devenish, the minister of Bridgwater, for preaching as usual a lecture in his own church on market day, and using a short prayer. But not satisfied with an act of authority, which put an end to a system followed by the\* Church from the days of Elizabeth, Pierce attacked the churchwarden, Humphrey Blake, and enjoined him to do penance for the crime of not presenting Devenish for ecclesiastical censure. A bold remonstrance against these and similar prosecutions of the power exercised by the courts of conscience was signed by many leading Liberals of Somerset, and by Robert Blake, one of the first. The remonstrants prayed the King to put an end to religious persecution and inveighed against the popish rites and ceremonies which Laud was then trying to introduce into the Church. Two Puritan divines, Devenish and Norman, were the Chief clerical leaders of the movement in Bridgwater. But their young lay ally was its real leader ; by his genius and activity the powerful local influence of the Stawells and Wyndhams, both ultra-Royalist families, were thrown into the shade, while a commanding position was obtained for the new opinions.\*\*\* The King having in his resentment against the Scots summoned the two Houses to meet again after a separation of many years, the most Liberal men of the middle and upper ranks were returned for nearly all the large towns. Blake was sent up as a Member for Bridgwater, when he first met with Vane, Hampden, Cromwell, and other leaders of the reform party. His legislative labours were, however, of the briefest duration, this meeting of the House being that which is known in history as the "*Short Parliament*," Charles having dissolved the House in a fit of anger at the continued and dauntless refusal of its members to grant him money to fight the Covenanters. Robert Blake was not at first returned as Member of the

next Parliament, but was defeated at the poll by Col. Wyndham, governor of the Castle, but in 1645 he was elected for Taunton,

After the King had dissolved the "*Short Parliament*," Blake returned to Somerset, and began, with the aid of his young and fiery brother Samuel, to count his friends and prepare arms and horses. His was one of the first troops in the field, and both the horse and foot played a conspicuous part in the first action of any importance in the West of England. Before the field was occupied by large armies he scoured the country around Bridgwater with his local intrepid dragoons, "*rousing the spirit of his friends, carrying terror to the hearts of his enemies, and levying contributions of money and horses on all towns and hamlets known to be disaffected to the national cause.*" He distinguished himself at Bodmin, and Lansdown, and for his services at the siege of Bristol he was appointed Lieut.-Colonel to a body of Militia 1,500 strong. With this force he made a rapid dash into Bridgwater in the hope of surprising the castle and securing the town for the Parliamentary cause. But Wyndham was on the alert, and rather than court defeat Blake pushed on to Lyme, which he gallantly held against the attacks of Prince Rupert.

On the 8th July the same year (1644) he obliged Colonel Reeves, the Royalist Governor, to give up Taunton; and he held that town throughout the sieges by Colonel Wyndham and Col. Lord Goring, until July 13, 1645, when the Royalists withdrew, apprehensive of the approach of Sir Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell, who just afterwards laid siege to Bridgwater.

Four years later, on the 18th April, 1649, being then at the age of 50, our hero set his foot for the first time on the deck of a ship as the commander, and from that moment until the hour of his death no man in England thought of contending with him for the first place as a seaman. The common sailors regarded him with an enthusiasm which bordered on idolatry, and every man spoke well of him, while those against whom he fought considered him the perfect model of a knightly foe.

His first naval exploit was in the Irish Channel, whence he pursued Prince Rupert to Portugal, though without success. His after career is a matter of general history — his victories were as brilliant as they were numerous, and his warfare with the redoubtable Van Tromp (who put to sea against him with a broom tied to his mast-head, vainly boast-

ing that he would sweep the English from off the seas) are too well known to need recapitulation. A splendid account of his naval career will be found in Hepworth Dixon's "*Life of Robert Blake*," to which we have been indebted for much of the foregoing information. For his valuable services to the Commonwealth Parliament voted £500 to be spent in purchasing a rich jewel to be given him as a mark of honour and respect.\*\*\*\*

The gallant Admiral's death is pathetically described by Hepworth Dixon. "*After completing negotiations at Salee, by which Blake, without shedding a drop of blood or firing a gun, the crowning act of a virtuous and honourable life' accomplished, the dying Admiral turned his thoughts anxiously towards the green hills of his native land. The letter of Cromwell (of thanks and congratulation), the thanks of Parliament, the jewelled ring sent to him by an admiring country, all reached him together out at sea, together with instructions which allowed him to return home with a portion of his fleet.*

"*When the ships rolled through the tempestuous waters of the Bay of Biscay, he grew every day worse and worse. Some gleams of the old spirit broke forth as they approached the latitude of England. He enquired often and anxiously if the white cliffs were yet in sight. He longed to behold once more the swelling downs, the free cities, the goodly churches of his native land. But he was now dying beyond a doubt., Many of his favourite officers silently and mournfully crowded round his bed, anxious to catch the last tones of a voice which had so often called them to glory and to victory. Others stood at the poop and forecastle, eagerly examining every speck and line on the horizon, in hope of being first to catch the welcome glimpse of land. Though they were coming home crowned with laurels, gloom and pain were in every face.*

*At last the Lizard was announced. Shortly afterwards the bold cliffs and bare hills of Cornwall loomed out grandly in the distance ; but it was now too late for the dying hero. He had sent for the captains and other great officers of his fleet to bid them farewell; and while they were yet in his cabin the undulating hills of Devonshire, glowing with the tints of early autumn, came full in view.*

"*As the ships rounded Rame Head, the spires and masts of Plymouth, the wooded heights of Mount Edgecombe, the low island of St. Nicholas, the rocky steeps at the Hoe, Mount Batten, the Citadel, the many picturesque and familiar features of that magnificent harbour, rose one by one to sight. But the eyes which had yearned to behold this scene once more were at that very instant closing in death. Foremost of the victorious squad-*

*ron, the St. George rode with its precious burden into the Sound, and just as it came into full view of the eager thousands crowding on the beach, the pier-head, the walls of the citadel, or darting in countless boats over the smooth waters between St. Nicholas and the Docks, ready to catch the first glimpse of the hero of Santa Cruz, and salute him with a true English welcome, he in his silent cabin, in the midst of his lion-hearted comrades, now sobbing like little children, yielded up his soul to God."*

The national love and admiration expressed itself in the solemn splendour of the funeral rites. A new vault was made for the reception of the body in Henry VII.'s chapel, Westminster Abbey, and the remains of the renowned Admiral were lowered into it amid the tears of a nation. To their eternal shame the Stuarts afterwards disturbed the hero's grave. By a royal command, issued in 1660, by Charles II., the unobtrusive vault was torn open, the embalmed body dragged out, and cast into a pit in the Abbey yard! "*Good men looked aghast at such an atrocity. But what could the paramour of Lucy Walters, Barbara Palmer, Kate Peg, and Moll Davies know of the stern virtues of the illustrious sailor? What sympathy could a royal spendthrift have with a man who, .after a life of great employments and the capture of uncounted millions, died no richer than he was born? How could the prince who sold Dunkirk and begged a pension from Versailles feel any regard for a man who had humbled the pride of Holland, Portugal and Spain, who had laid the foundations of our lasting influence in the Mediterranean, and in eight years of success had made England the first maritime power of Europe? A hole was dug for the reception of those hallowed bones near the back door of one of the prebendaries of Westminster — and the remains of Cromwell's mother, of the gentle Lady Claypole, and of sturdy John Pym, were all cast into the same pit. How lightly Englishmen should tread that ground!"*

In a characteristic will the Admiral divided his property, .and like his brother and grandfather, left a bequest to his native town. It ran as follows

"*The last will and testament of me, "Robert Blake, written with my own hand-as followeth :—First, I bequeath my soul into the hands of my most merciful Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, by Him to be presented to His heavenly Father, pure and spotless, through the washing of His blood which He shed for the remission of my sins, and after a short separation from the body, to be again united with the same by the power of His eternal Spirit, and so to be ever with the Lord.*

"*Item, unto the town of Bridgwater I give one*

*hundred pounds to be distributed amongst the poor thereof at the discretion of Humphrey Blake, my brother, and of the Mayor for the time being.*

*“ Item, unto the town of Taunton I give one hundred pounds to be distributed among the poor of both parishes at the discretion of ; Samuel Perry, once my lieutenant-colonel, and Mr. George Newton, minister of the Gospel there, and of the Mayor for the time being.*

*“ Item, I give unto Humphrey Blake, my brother, the manor of Crandon-cum-Puriton, with all the rights thereto appertaining, to him and to his heirs for ever.*

*“ Item, I give unto my brother, Dr. Wm. Blake, three hundred pounds.*

*“ Item, unto my brother George Blake I give three hundred pounds ; also unto my brother Nicholas Blake I give three hundred pounds.*

*“ Item, unto my brother Benjamin Blake I give my dwelling-house, situate in St. Mary-street, Bridgwater, with the garden and appurtenances, as also my other house, thereto adjoining, purchased of the widow Coxe ; likewise I give unto him all the claim I have in eleven acres of meadow and pasture (more or less) lying in the village of Hamp, in the parish of Bridgwater, lately in the possession of the widow Vincombe, deceased.*

*“ Item, unto my sister Bridget Bowdich, the wife of Henry Bowdich, of Chard Stock, I give one hundred pounds, and to her children, of the body of Henry Bowdich aforesaid, I give the sum of nine hundred pounds, to be disposed among them according to the discretion of Humphrey, William, George, Nicholas and Benjamin Blake aforesaid, my brothers, or any three of them.*

*“Item, unto my brother Smythes, goldsmith, in Cheapside, I give the sum of one hundred pounds.*

*“ Item, unto my nephew, Robert Blake, son to Samuel Blake, my brother, deceased, I give the gold chain bestowed on me by the late Parliament of England; also all the claim I have in an annuity of twenty pounds, payable out of the farm at Pawlett.*

*“ Item, unto my nephew Samuel Blake, younger son to Samuel, my brother, deceased, I give two hundred pounds.*

*“Item, unto Sarah Quarrell, daughter of my late niece, Sarah Quarrell, by her husband, Peter Quarrell, now dwelling in Taunton, I give the sum of two hundred pounds, to be disposed of for the benefit of the said Sarah Quarrell, according to the discretion of Humphrey, Nicholas and Benjamin Blake, my brothers aforesaid.*

*“Item, unto my nephew John Blake, son unto my brother Nicholas Blake, I give one hundred pounds.*

*“Item, unto my cousin John Avery, of Pawlett, once a soldier with me in Taunton Castle, I give fifty pounds.*

*“Item, unto Thomas Blake, son of my cousin Tom*

*Blake, once commander of the Tresto frigate, deceased, now aboard of the Centurion frigate in the service, I give fifty pounds.*

*“Item, all my plate, linen, bedding, with all my provisions aboard the ship Naseby, I give unto my nephews, Robt. and Samuel Blake aforesaid, and unto my nephew, John Blake aforesaid, to be divided between them by even and equal portions.*

*“ Item, unto the negro called Domingo, my servant, I give the sum of 50 pounds, to be disposed of by my aforesaid nephew, Capt. Robt. Blake, and Capt. Thomas Adams, for his better education in the knowledge and fear of God.*

*“ Item, unto my servants James Knowles and Nicholas Bartlett, I give to each of them ten pounds.*

*“ Item, unto the widow Owen, of Bridgwater, the relict of Mr. Owen, minister, I give ten pounds.*

*“ Item, unto Eleanor Potter, widow, I give ten pounds.*

*“All the rest of my goods and chattels I do give and bequeath unto George Nicholas and Benjamin Blake, my brothers aforesaid, and also to Alexander Blake, my brother, to be equally divided among them, whom I do appoint and ordain to be the executors of this my last will and testament. ROB. BLAKE.*

*“ Signed and sealed aboard the Naseby, March 13th, one thousand six hundred and fifty-five, in St. Helen's-road, in the presence of Roger Buttons, J. Hynde, John Bourne, Antho. Farming.”*

The probate copy of the great Admiral's will is now in the possession of the Rev. N. T. H. C. Ruddock, a descendant, who also owns the estate at Puriton mentioned in the will. Mr. Ruddock also possesses a number of relics of his famed ancestor, including the robe in which he was baptised (a very handsome and unique affair, of coloured silk, edged with silver filagree), and his christening cap, of silk and velvet, the size suggesting that as an infant the Admiral possessed a fine head.

There has occasionally been some talk of erecting a monument or memorial to the gallant Admiral in his native town, but as yet nothing has been done. Strangers invariably express surprise that there is no public recognition of a hero who did so much for his country and reflected so much glory on his native town. Taunton possesses a splendid bust of the Admiral, the work of the sculptor Baily, provided by public subscription, and placed in the Shire Hall. On the pedestal is the following inscription, from the pen of Hepworth Dixon

ROBERT . BLAKE,  
Admiral and General at Sea, Born at Bridgwater 1591, Died off Plymouth 1657.

Lyme,  
Taunton,  
The Downs,  
Tunis,  
Santa Cruz.

In 1888 a movement was inaugurated in London for the purpose of providing a memorial to the celebrated Admiral. The idea was well taken up, and St. Margaret's, Westminster, has since been enriched by a stained glass window. It has three large figure subjects, surmounted by canopies wholly in silver-white glass, with ruby back-grounds. The inscription beneath the window runs as follows :—

TO . THE . GLORY . OF . GOD . AND . TO . THE .  
MEMORY . OF COLONEL . ROBERT . BLAKE . ADMIRAL  
. AT . SEA . AND . CHIEF FOUNDER . OF . ENGLAND'S  
. NAVAL . SUPREMACY . DIED . AUGUST 7TH . 1657 .  
EJECTED . FROM . HIS . GRAVE . IN . THE . ABBEY and  
. BURIED . in . ST. . MARGARET'S . CHURCH . 1661.

There are, or were, four or five so-called portraits of Blake.

One hangs in the Town Hall, Bridgwater, but it is very generally regarded as a copy. It bears the following inscription : “ *The original portrait, by Adrian Hanneman, a pupil of Vanduyck, is at Harford Hall, Norfolk, the seat of the Fountaine family. Copied by permission by W. Baker for Henry Westropp, Esq., who presented to the Borough of Bridgwater, 1862.* ” It represents a young man, with moustache and beard, dressed in black velvet, over which falls a broad white collar, edged with lace. Another picture, given by the late Colonel Kemeys-Tynte, M.P., in 1848, is also supposed to represent Blake, in armour, with a skull-cap on his head, and one hand resting on a helmet. But this bears not the slightest resemblance to the other, and no importance is attached to it. Another portrait is in Greenwich Hospital; it was painted about 1828-9, and is of course only a fancy sketch. A third occupies a position in Wadham College, Oxford (where Blake remained some time), and is probably an original, though its history cannot be traced. A fifth was formerly in possession of Joseph Ames, the antiquary, who had it engraved in 1740, but what became of the original is not known. Hepworth Dixon, after mature consideration, chose Ames' plate to illustrate his- “ *Life of Robert Blake.* ” Dr. George Cordwent, of Milverton, possesses what he himself and many others regard as an authentic portrait, and it is a remarkable fact with regard to the latter that there is a striking resemblance in it to at least one of the

Admiral's lineal descendants. It bears date-1652, and in the near “ offing ” is a ship of war of the period.



\* Clarendon, vi., 41

\*\* Hepworth Dixon's *Life of Robert Blake*.

\*\*\* Laud's *Diary*, 34; Laud's *Remains*, ii., 67; Clarendon, vi., 41

\*\*\*\* This jewel, nearly two hundred years later was purchased by King William IV, for one hundred and fifty guineas.