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# 1

## HAWKE'S RISE TO LEADERSHIP

### Formative influences

EDWARD HAWKE lived from 1705 to 1781. His father was a barrister of Lincoln's Inn who died in 1718. Very little is known of Hawke's early years. He had a sister called Frances who married the son of a bishop. But a feature of Hawke's life is the lack of anything like the fund of private documentation that illuminates the life of his tactical inheritor, Horatio Nelson. However, the tenuous strength of Hawke's naval patronage compares quite closely with Nelson's. It stemmed from his mother's brother, Colonel Martin Bladen who was a Member of Parliament, a commissioner of trade and plantations from 1717 to 1746, and an ally of Sir Robert Walpole, prime minister from 1721 to 1742. Bladen had strong West Indian interests to which were added vast plantations through his second marriage in 1728.<sup>1</sup> This was a time when the politically influential classes were increasingly committed to the belief that Britain's future lay in colonial expansion and the growth of trade. This called for a strong navy, and Bladen's influence underlay the length of time that Hawke spent in the pestilential West Indies between 1720 and 1743.

Hawke entered the navy as a volunteer on 10 February 1720 and learned his seamanship the hard way. Serving in the small frigate *Seahorse*, he experienced tempestuous weather in the West Indies in December, when the ship's mainmast was blown out. This was a station where seamanship was at a premium. Hawke passed the essential lieutenant's examination on 2 June 1725. It is indicative of the strength of his backing 'interest' that he did so at the prescribed minimum age, whereas those favoured by exceptional patronage often undercut it by a year or two. He then had to wait a further four years before he received his lieutenant's commission by appointment to the *Portland*

<sup>1</sup> See the article on Bladen by R.T. Cornish in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

(Nelson had to wait one day!). In the meantime, on 3 June 1725, Hawke went on board the *Kinsale* of 40 guns and cruised off the coast of West Africa, still only rated an able seaman. But of course he was ‘a young gentleman’, as he had been from his time of entering the service in 1720. The naval records shed little direct light on Hawke’s formative influences, but they do show under which officers he served. The fact that he served, if only for a month, in the *Leopard* (50) at Spithead, under the command of Captain Peter Warren, would turn out to be significant in view of Hawke’s major appointment in August 1747. Hawke was in the *Leopard* with Warren towards the end of 1729, soon after being finally made a lieutenant.

A year and a half unemployed on half-pay in 1730–1 was followed by appointment as fourth lieutenant in the *Edinburgh* (64), and then first lieutenant of the frigate *Scarborough* (24), possibly at the request of her captain, Thomas Durell, with whom he had served as a volunteer and midshipman from 1720 to 1725. None of his former service, however, would have entitled him to the golden opportunity for advancement that followed when he was sent to Jamaica as first lieutenant of the *Kingston* (60), flagship of the commodore, Sir Chaloner Ogle. This step must have been due to the growing influence of his uncle, Bladen. The sickly West Indies was a sure path to promotion for the lieutenants of the flagship, and Hawke was no exception as within three months he was appointed master and commander of the sloop *Wolf* (10). For various reasons, Hawke was lucky in his command of the *Wolf* (April 1733 to March 1734). Firstly, there was health. Hawke’s predecessors in command of the *Wolf* had successively died in less than a year, but Hawke did not. Secondly, she performed her escort duties around the Jamaican coast, protecting trade from the Spanish *guarda-costas* throughout the hurricane season, normally experienced between July and October, without having to face a hurricane. However, after Ogle further promoted him to post-captain in the *Flamborough* (24), the recurrent task of refitting at Port Royal was followed by a trade-protecting cruise, taking him around the eastern end of Jamaica to Port Antonio. The annual hurricanes were not yet due, but on 1 July, when anchored off the Island of Ash, the frigate was subjected to the full force of a tempest. Her masts and the bowsprit were broken and she suffered much other damage. A jury foremast was erected and rigged, and a mizzen topmast served as a temporary foretopmast. On 6 July, Hawke brought his ship into Port Royal and set about refitting her. Having experienced similar events on earlier service in the West Indies, he knew exactly how to cope. No ship under his personal command as a captain was ever lost at sea. As an admiral, even during the prolonged close blockade of Brest in 1759, he lost no ship from his fleet until two were wrecked inside

Quiberon Bay. This record testifies to the quality of his fleet seamanship as captain and admiral.<sup>2</sup>

On 5 September 1735 the *Flamborough* paid off at Portsmouth. Being quite junior as a captain, Hawke went on to half-pay at 6 shillings a day – cut the next year to 5 shillings. On 3 October 1737 he married Colonel Bladen's niece, Catharine Brooke, in the chapel of Somerset House. Before the peace ended, they had already lost a young daughter to illness and a second daughter died soon after. By then, on 30 July 1739, with Britain on the verge of war with Spain over *guarda-costa* seizures in the West Indies (the War of Jenkins's Ear), Hawke had returned to Portsmouth and taken up his new command, the *Portland*, of 50 guns. Bladen and his second wife looked after Catharine at this time.<sup>3</sup>

The *Portland* was an old ship. She had been rebuilt at Portsmouth back in 1723 and Hawke had already sailed in her when first commissioned in 1729. Writing to the Admiralty in September 1739, he knew that he would be escorting convoys of merchantmen to and from Barbados. Drawing on his considerable knowledge of refitting in the area, he recommended that, during the hurricane season, he should be allowed to refit the *Portland* at Boston. It would be good for the men's health. Masts and yards were cheaper at Boston than they were at Antigua. Hawke was lucky not to be involved with Vernon, especially when in 1740, his former patron Sir Chaloner Ogle, now a rear-admiral, was sent out to reinforce Vernon with twenty of the line and transports containing General Wentworth's army. The subsequent joint expedition to Cartagena was a notorious disaster.

However the dangers of the sea asserted themselves after Hawke's visit to Boston in 1741. On 14 December, he was, as he wrote to the Admiralty, well on his way back to Barbados when,

there being a great sea from the S and SSW, with a large swell from the westward, and the wind blowing very hard, making two great hollow seas running in a different manner, occasioned the carrying away of all my masts; and the ship, notwithstanding she was very well caulked all over at Boston, made a great deal of water with her working.

Noting that the stumps of the masts had turned to dust from dry rot, Hawke set about getting jury masts rigged. Then, for about three weeks, the wind

<sup>2</sup> R.F. Mackay, *Admiral Hawke* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 5–6, 10–12; and see our Chapter 2 below.

<sup>3</sup> Mackay, *Admiral Hawke*, pp. 12–14; ODNB, 'Martin Bladen'.

faded away altogether. Hawke finally reached Barbados on 11 December 1741. 'But, thank God, I lost not one man.'<sup>4</sup>

The final remark is characteristic of Hawke. Although never lacking in aggressive spirit, it is also fair to describe him as a godly man who cared deeply about his ships' companies.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, when it came to his officers, he showed an equivalent sympathy and concern. In July 1741, before going from Barbados to Boston for the refit, Hawke wrote in his own hand (something not otherwise found in that particular volume of Captains' Letters written to the Admiralty) as follows:

My second Lieutenant, Mr. Richard Chadwick, having been very ill almost ever since he left England, with an ague and a fever, and very often incapable of doing his duty for a considerable time together by reason of his low and weak condition ... has made me take the liberty, upon advice from the surgeons of this place, to give him leave to go home for his health.

Intent not only on doing his best for Chadwick but also on dealing tactfully with their Lordships of the Admiralty, Hawke continued,

I humbly hope that he will not incur their Lordship's displeasure by quitting his ship, as he is a very good officer and is both ready and willing at all times to do his duty, when he is well; but he is one that has been a long time in the West Indies, first and last, which has impaired his health very much. I beg pardon for this liberty and hope their Lordships will forgive what I have done, as it was with no other view but to preserve a good officer for His Majesty.<sup>6</sup>

Hawke thus demonstrates what would characterise him as an admiral. As a captain of no particular standing, he risked incurring the Admiralty's disapproval by backing someone whom he rated 'a good officer for His Majesty'. He handled the matter tactfully. Subsequently Chadwick returned to the West Indies. On 8 March 1748 he was Knowles's flag captain at the capture of Port Louis, a French base on the south coast of San Domingo, but he died on 9 June.<sup>7</sup>

When he returned to England in 1743, Hawke found that Colonel Bladen was not only politically intact as a commissioner of trade and plantations,

<sup>4</sup> Mackay, *Admiral Hawke*, p. 16. Hawke's 'captain's letters' to the Admiralty are in TNA PRO, Adm. 1/1881–2.

<sup>5</sup> See index references under 'Hawke' to 'Other personal qualities' and 'Humanity, compassion' in Mackay, *Admiral Hawke*, p. 365.

<sup>6</sup> TNA PRO, Adm. 1/1882, Hawke to Admiralty, 10 July 1741.

<sup>7</sup> Clowes, *The Royal Navy*, III, pp. 133–4; D. Syrett and R.L. DiNardo, eds, *The Commissioned Sea Officers of the Royal Navy* (Aldershot, 1994).

despite the fall of Walpole, but was on good terms with Admiral Philip Cavendish, the only sea officer on the new Board of Admiralty. The First Lord was the Earl of Winchelsea, a politician pure and simple, so Hawke was lucky that Cavendish was still in office when he was appointed on 14 June 1743, after three months of well-earned recuperation on shore with his wife, to the command of the *Berwick*. This was a new ship of 70 guns. Exactly one month later, Cavendish was dead.<sup>8</sup> Hawke and Nelson alike were fortunate in securing advancement just before the death of their patrons!

As he read out his commission on the quarterdeck of the *Berwick* at a decisive turning point of his career, what influences had moulded Hawke's leadership qualities? He had served at sea in dangerous waters long enough to be an expert seaman, but the captains he had served under were fairly undistinguished. Only Warren would excel later, and Hawke had served with him for just a month. Hawke acknowledged those who had helped advance his career by naming his first son Martin Bladen Hawke and his third son Chaloner, but while Sir Chaloner Ogle had made a reputation in the 1720s hunting down pirates on the coast of Africa, he had no experience as a fleet commander to impart to the young captain. More likely the model for young officers of the 1720s and 1730s was George Byng who had risen from bankrupted gentry parents to be first Viscount Torrington, Admiral of the Fleet and First Lord of the Admiralty (1727–32). Byng had commanded in the last great naval victory at Cape Passaro in 1719 when he chased a Spanish fleet to destruction, capturing 11 ships and destroying three more out of a total 21. The writer and spy John Macky described Byng as 'one of the best Sailors in England and a fine Gentleman in every Thing else, ... understands all the several Branches of the Navy thoroughly...'<sup>9</sup> Byng's professionalism, spirit of aggression and the rewards he gained from it provided a fine example for ambitious officers to emulate, and Hawke, like Byng, was to win his peerage after a similar great pursuit to destruction at Quiberon Bay.

<sup>8</sup> J.C. Sainty, *Admiralty Officials 1660–1870* (London, 1975), p. 115; D.A. Baugh, *Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 68–72; Mackay, *Admiral Hawke*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> J. Hattendorf, 'George Byng (1663–1733)', *ODNB*; *Memoirs of the Secret Services of John Macky*, ed. 'A.R.' (1733), p. 175.

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