



Robert Blake

Private, Connaught Rangers

Death 1884 Egypt

You might wonder why, In Harleston, we are commemorating the death of a man from an Irish Regiment; in fact, 'Harleston' man Pte Robert Blake had started off in the 94th Foot Rgt. and been co-opted into this the newly formed Irish Rgt.s when his original regt. had been amalgamated with the 88th Foot.

In 1881, the British government sanctioned the formation of several new infantry regiments in Ireland and, in an effort to raise the profile of the armed forces as a whole, allowed the new units to fashion close ties with their local areas. Renmore Barracks in Galway was identified as the Home Depot of a new regiment, which amalgamated the 88th and 94 regiments of foot, and was known as the Connaught Rangers. The regiment developed a reputation for both ferocity and unruliness; it was uncharitably nicknamed 'The Connaught Footpads' and officers serving with the regiment in India during the 1880s remarked that 'drink was the besetting sin of the Connaught men',¹

I came across an account of Pte Blake, who has otherwise been largely long forgotten in a report of a local reserve's annual supper dating from the year after his death²

Capt. Edwards next proposed the toast of "The Army, Navy and Reserve Forces" and in the course of his remarks paid a high tribute to the bravery and prowess of our soldiers and bluejackets in the Soudan Campaign. Many valuable lives had been lost, and amongst the number he would refer to a soldier most of those present knew as a Harleston man. He meant Private Blake, of the Connaught Rangers, of whom he (Capt. Edwards) could personally speak as a true specimen of the British Soldier.

Some research turned up details of medals awarded to this young soldier during campaigns in both South and North Africa.

SOUTH AFRICA 1877-79, 1 clasp, 1879 (1304 Pte. R. Blake, 94th Foot);
EGYPT AND SUDAN 1882-89, 2 clasps,
The Nile 1884-85, Abu Klea (1304 Pte. R. Blake, Conn. Rang.);

¹ <https://www.galwaydecadeofcommemoration.org/content/topics/na-connaught-rangers>

² The Ipswich Journal's 1885 report of the local reserve's annual supper

KHEDIVE'S STAR 1884-6,

Pte Robert Blake was following the footsteps of his father, another military man, into the Army. As so many sons of soldiers did at the time, he looks to have started off his career at the grade of Drummer. Drummers could enlist at the tender age of 10 but this was more a device to get soldiers' boys on the pay roll and with rations whilst receiving early training than it was a way of getting lads out on to the battlefield.

In Blake's case, when he appeared in the 1871 census in the Aldershot Barracks, he was 19 – definitely a man not a boy!

11	Causes Smith	do	27	do
12	Robert Blake	do	19	Drummer 94 th Regt
13	...	1

Pte Blake was indeed truly heroic, reading around the details of the relief of Gordon would indicate that he was in the 2nd Battalion and as such would have been part of a Camel Mounted Infantry Unit – not a creature we see many of in the Waveney Valley. No doubt his father was extremely proud of at least this child an account of whose military adventures is inserted below³

'Private R. Blake was the son of Robert Blake, of the 94th Foot. He embarked for South Africa with the above regiment [94th Foot] on the S.S. *China*, on the 26th February, 1879; went through the Zulu campaign, including the battle of Ulundi, 4th July, 1879, Commander Lord Chelmsford; also the capture of Sekukuni's stronghold on the 28th November, 1879, Commander Sir Garnet (now Lord) Wolseley. After serving at various small stations in Africa, he marched from Lydenberg with the 94th, under Lieutenant-Colonel Anstruther, Commanding, when on their way to Pretoria they were attacked by the Boers, on the 20th December, 1880, at Brunker's Spruit. There were 250 British before the attack, and when it ended "all the Officers were wounded, between thirty and forty men were killed, and between seventy and eighty wounded."

On returning with the regiment from South Africa in April, 1882, Private Blake was quartered at the Curragh for a short time, until proceeding on detachment with his master, Lieutenant (now Colonel) John Hasluck Campbell, whose servant he was, to Haulbowline. The regiment then went to Fermoy till the end of 1883. In September, 1884, he was one of the 24 non-commissioned officers and men selected for the Mounted Infantry, under the command of Lieut. Coldstream James Carden, 94th Foot (2nd Connaught Rangers), to proceed to Egypt to take part in the relief of General Gordon. He acted as servant to Lieut. Carden from the time of leaving England till he was wounded at Gubat. In a letter received from Capt.

³ Biographical details are taken from Dr Payne's published catalogue

Carden he states: "It was while we were halted on our way to the Nile, two days after Abu Klea, that he was hit. He was close to me, firing over a biscuit-box, when he received a bullet wound through the top of his head, and he just fell forward without a groan. He was brought down to the Nile the following day, but never recovered consciousness. The brain could be seen where the bullet entered, and the doctor said it was hopeless from the first. He was buried on the banks of the Nile at Gubat. A better soldier never stepped." (Information received from Capt. C. J. Carden, 2nd Connaught Rangers.)



Nile at Gubat. A better soldier never stepped." (Information received from Capt. C. J. Carden, 2nd Connaught Rangers.)

Whilst Pte Robert Blake was enlisted as a Drummer Boy by 1871, his father the Beccles born Sgt. Robert Blake, his wife Deborah, twenty-one-year-old son, Edward and a 10 years old daughter Annie were living on Harleston Common in one side of a double dwelling that has now been demolished and replaced by a modern Bungalow.

I have found all I can on Pte. Robert Blake and his military career so it seems right to look at the back ground of this lad who died and was buried so far from home.

Blake's father Sgt Blake was a Chelsea pensioner who we find living in Puddingmoor Beccles in 1851 with wife Deborah and their first son Edward, aged only 1. Already 33, he was about a decade older than his wife. When Blake had first enlisted in Beccles in 1839, he was then a tailor but was pensioned out after almost 8 years' service with the 9th Foot (aka the Norfolk Rgt) due to his inability to continue to cope with the climate in the East, where he had spent all bar the first 10 months of his service. His discharge papers show that he was actually in the Garrison Town of Meerut when he was deemed no longer fit for service; 11 years later in 1857, the Indian Mutiny broke out in this town, rocking to its core the established perception of relationships between the Indians and the agents of the British Empire.

By 1861, the family had grown somewhat and, whilst still in Beccles, Pensioner Blake was also working as a Cowman whilst his wife was charring. The family now consisted of the parents and Edward (10), Thomas (9), our hero to be Robert Jnr (8), Mila (7 – short for Amelia) and Deborah Jnr (9 months). I suspect Hannah, Martha and Elizabeth who were all born and died in Wangford in the years between the births of Amelia and Deborah may well have also belonged to this branch of the Blakes.

26-10-47/46

HER MAJESTY'S  REG'T. OF *South*

Whereof *South* is Colonel.

[Place and date] *Harlestone 21 September 1841*

PROCEEDINGS OF A REGIMENTAL BOARD, held this day, in conformity to the Articles of War, for the purpose of verifying and recording the Services, Conduct, Character, and cause of Discharge of *No. 1365 Private Robert Blake* of the Regiment above-mentioned.

President. *Major*

Members. *Adjutant*

THE BOARD having examined and compared the Regimental Records, the Soldier's Book, and such other Documents as appeared to them to be necessary, report that *No. 1365 Private Robert Blake* by Trade a *Sailor* was BORN in the Parish of *Beeches* in or near the Town of *Beeches* in the County of *South* and was ATTESTED for the *South* Regiment of *Foot* at _____ in the County of _____ on the _____ at the Age of _____ that after making every Deduction required by Her Majesty's Regulations, the SERVICE up to this day, which he is entitled to reckon, amounts to *Seven* years, *340* days, as shewn by the detailed Statement on the 2nd page; during which period, he served Abroad *France 16 days* years, viz. _____ at *Ant. India from 21 Aug 1839 to 30 Sep 46* years, *7-30 day* in _____ years;

and further, that his DISCHARGE is proposed in consequence of *efficiency* *and disability from Private and is recommended for change of Private*

[In cases of Disability, the Regimental Medical Officer will write his Report on the 3rd page hereof.]

With regard to the CHARACTER AND CONDUCT of *No. 1365 Private Robert Blake* the Board have to report, that upon reference to the Defaulter's Book, and by the Parole testimony that has been given, it appears that *his character has been good*

[Give the particulars required by the Adjutant General's Circular Letter, 29th Sept., 1838.]

By 1871 Robert was claiming to be 58 not 53 and a pensioned recruiting Sgt., an illiterate one as evident Robert Buckenham's enlistment papers! Robert Buckenham was from a brawling, thieving larger-than-life family (with the women giving as good as the men) who had been embedded in Harleston for centuries. When Buckenham joined the Army, signing on in 1871 for 12 years, he was actually signed up by Pensioner Recruiting Sergeant Robert Blake⁴ who was just as illiterate as his new recruit, both signing the papers with an X. According to the military records, Robert was destined for the Royal Artillery. In that same year, 1871, the War Office records Blake Snr as a 'Promoted' Paid Pensioner Recruiter Private at the Peterborough Depot, digging deeper he is actually described as being 'Stationed At Harleston and Norwich During the June Quarter 1871.'

Sgt Blake's discharge papers

We know that Blake was in Harleston by 1869 when he appears in a court case⁵ when family discipline seemed a bit more of a struggle for Blake than military life

Robert Blake pensioner, of Harleston, was charged on a warrant with abusing and threatening Lydia Coleman, of St. Stephen's. In consequence of the discrepancies in the evidence of complainant and a witness she called, the case was dismissed, complainant having to pay any expenses that were incurred. If the statement made by the defendant be true, his is a case deserving much sympathy. In addressing the bench, after complainant's evidence had been heard, he stated that Lydia Coleman kept a brothel, and that she had seduced his daughter, who was but a mere child, from her home (*I suspect this to be Amelia, who would have been either 15 or 13 depending on what records you look at*) and led her into scenes of the most infamous vice. In fact, child as she was, she had become so

⁴ Living on the Common at this point – see dwelling 531!

⁵ Norfolk News June 1869

degraded that he could call her nothing but a beast. The complainant had also induced his boy to leave a situation where he was earning 8s or more a week, and to visit her house. These things nearly crazed him and he went the other day to complainant's home and demanded to know what had become of his daughter and in reply complainant told him that if he did not get out of her house, she would knock him down with the poker. He did then threaten to strike her if she touched him, but he denied using any abusive language or threatening her any further than he had just stated. In reply to the magistrates as to the reason he did not answer to the summons that was served upon him, defendant stated that he was so upset by the conduct of his children that he could not attend the court.

Searching out Lydia Coleman in the 1871 census, it appears she and her husband, Charles (a former fishmonger) was running the Peacock Public House⁶ - many of the Norwich public houses were indeed used for arranging 'assignations' but there is no specific evidence of this being true of The Peacock. According to the Norfolk Chronicle, the warrant on Blake had actually been served the previous November, 7 months before the case was heard. His refusal to attend resulted in Blake being taken into custody. In court, he stated that he had gone to search for his daughter and threatened the complainant when he could not find the girl and further said 'the complainant had been the means of ruining his daughter, and that a lady had put her into a "Home" from which, however, she left the same day and returned to the complainant's house. He also charged her with 'encouraging his son to form an improper intimacy with her'. No wonder he was upset.

Whatever the truth of the matter by 1881 Lydia and Charles Coleman had left Norwich to live with their married daughter and family in West Ham Essex whilst Robert Blake continued with the less martial pursuit of Milkman, although not entirely in control of his herd.

Robert Blake, of Harleston, cow-keeper, for allowing two cows to stray on the 23rd July, was fined 1s and costs.⁷

Perhaps Blake's tendency to let his cattle to stray that led to Robert Raven of Redenhall being charged with

Unlawfully and maliciously cutting and maiming a heifer, the property of Mr Robert Blake of Redenhall, dairyman, at Mendham, on the 21st ult.⁸

The case was sent up to the Quarter sessions.

⁶ And had been since 1868, Charles Colman having taken over the license from his assumed father George Colman, who in turn had been there since 1856 - <http://www.norfolkpubs.co.uk/norwich/pnorwich/nchpec.htm>. In '61 and '51, Charles and Lydia had been working and living in the Norwich Fishmarket

⁷ Norwich Mercury 3 Aug 1881

⁸ Norfolk Chronicle 1 Apr 1882

Bad luck continues to dog the family, Edward Blake, literally, runs away with the circus meeting his untimely end in Yorkshire a year or so before that of his brother.⁹

Harleston News Fatal Accident. —a few days since a young man named Blake, whose parents reside in this town, lost his life through doing a thoughtful act. The deceased was in the employ of Messrs. Bostock and Wombwell¹⁰, whose menagerie was travelling in Yorkshire, and when driving one of the huge caravans forming part of the establishment, he noticed some children playing in the street, and therefore drew to one side to avoid them but unfortunately, he ran unto the wall by the roadside and Blake was jammed between it and the van, death being instantaneous. The parents of the unfortunate man were communicated with and were informed that the proprietors would see that the deceased be interred in a fit and proper manner.



Circus Wagon - in this shot being pulled by an elephant¹¹

An alternative version¹² both gives more detail and differs slightly, describing how the wagons were travelling from

‘Kirkburton to Halifax when descending a slight incline near Fenay Bridge Railway Station the horses started trotting. Blake ran forward to check them, but was crushed to death between the van and the wall at the side of the road’

The newspapers of the time indicate that this was part of an extended tour of the Yorkshire district. The Sheffield Independent details

the man in question as Edward Blake, groom.

The excerpt above mentions ‘one of the huge caravans’, quite how huge and unwieldy such a caravan could be is difficult to imagine but the following excerpt from the mid-19th Century may help: -

During the transit from Colchester to Ipswich, an accident happened to one of the Wombwell’s caravans in which the large male elephant is confined...the caravan,

⁹ Thetford & Watton Times of 2 Jun 1883

¹⁰ Also toured this area – presumably that was when Blake joined - Wombwell began to buy exotic animals and put them on display in Soho. In 1810 Wombwell's Travelling Menagerie began to tour the fairs of Britain. By 1839 it totalled fifteen wagons, and was accompanied by a brass band.

¹¹ Source of photo unknown

¹² **Bradford Daily Telegraph** 25 May 1883

to which was attached twelve horses, on nearing the side of the road, got into a drain as high as the axletrees and tilted nearly over on the side nearest the fence. It was fully expected that the weight of the enormous beast within would force the caravan over, in the event of which a cottage close to the spot and in the line of the impending mass must inevitably been thrown down. The elephant, also, would probably have met with his death. Every means was taken to extricate the caravan from its situation. Twenty-six horses were attached, but the mass lay for some time immovable. At length by perseverance and a judicious application of power the caravan was liberated, and despatched safely ... though not until after a delay of many hours'¹³

Some weeks before Edward Blake's tragic, if heroic, end there was another untoward incident with his travelling circus which, as in this case ended without injury to any party, has a decidedly comic tinge to it. Some weeks earlier, whilst in Grimsby, one of the bears had escaped after being exhibited in the Market Place on a Saturday night. At about two am, a passing fisherman informed, the rather incredulous beat bobby, about the escapee. On investigation P.C.Pawson (ho-ho) discovered a hole in a caravan and, shortly after, Bruin, strolling about the market place. The keepers turned out in force and cornering the creature in a yard, watched it jump through the window of a Mr. Rubenstein. Mrs. Rubenstein, on spotting large numbers of men flitting about with lanterns declared there must be a fire, Mr. Rubenstein was about to run downstairs, presumably into the arms of the bear in his kitchen before discovering, just in time, the real source of all the to-do. Several keepers followed the bear into the kitchen, one unlocked the outside door and they chivvied him out again and back to his cage, expecting him to walk up a gangplank into it. In spite of being poked with sharp two-pronged forks, he resolutely refused to do so until a bright spark removed the plank and the exhausted creature quietly climbed back into his refuge!

Whilst her older brothers had embarked upon their adventures, Blake's youngest daughter Mary Ann married an iron moulder's assistant Charles Smith, presumably working at Knights on the London Road and the young couple were starting their married life at the parents! The couple baptised Ethel and Annie Elizabeth in 1884 during one of the periodic chasings up of unbaptised children - three other children from the Common were also baptised on the same day.¹⁴ A Charles Robert Smith of Harleston Common, 11 weeks old was buried¹⁵ in Oct 1884. The very next entry in the burial register was his grandfather Robert Blake buried age 77 (although 67 would make more sense), 9 days after his grandson and probably still unaware of the death of his son and namesake Pte Blake. Blake had only just retired from the milk round at this point - putting it up for sale just a month before his death¹⁶

¹³ Norwich Mercury 18 Dec 1841

¹⁴ The Johnsons from 536

¹⁵ Special Burial Service Act 1880 indicating the family could not afford a funeral

¹⁶ Norfolk News 27 Sep 1884

To Cow Keepers. FOR Sale. Milk Walk¹⁷. Cows, Hay Implements, &c., Valuation if required. —Apply, Robert Blake, The Common, Harleston

Another advert goes into more detail, apparently Blake had 4 cows, a tiled building and dairy implements as well as haystacks.

Much as Blake and his wife Deborah seem to have lost a swath of children, so the same continued with their daughter Mary Ann, now Smith. A 'Loshier' was baptised by the couple in 1886 a year after her birth, whilst young Charles Henry baptised 1887 survived only 8 months dying in May 1888 but were all listed as of Harleston Common. By 1891 the family, had moved off to Lincolnshire where they settle, appearing in censuses up to and including 1911.¹⁸

In this last census the Charles and Mary Ann Smith nee Blake report that of their 5 children, 2 were dead; this matches with the two little boys who died in Harleston and the three girls that survived. Smith proudly proclaims that he is working for Messrs R Honnsby & Sons, Agricultural Implements, Gas and Oil Engineers. This was a well-established business, at the cutting edge of farm machinery development. During World War one, they concentrated on munitions and shortly after combined with another local firm.¹⁹

An interesting family: Blake may have returned to his home town after his spell in the Army and stayed in the area, but his children seemed to have itchy feet with even his daughter heading off to pastures new. By 1891, the widowed Deborah Blake is living by herself on Mendham Lane with her occupation (and presumably income) given as nil, she died shortly after in 1892, aged 76 probably taking with her the memories of two sons who died heroically, the shame of a wayward daughter (though it seems she had taken up domestic service by 1881) and the sadness of losing other of her children in their child hood.

¹⁷ Selling a well established round - which he appears to have done on foot rather than with Pony and Trap!

¹⁸ 1891 - Hedley Rd Grantham, 1901 - 25 Annes St New Somerby, 1911 - 8 Belvoir Ave Harleston Road!

¹⁹ Wikipedia.